Performance,
 a Personal History

I

After a century of hybridization in the arts, the concept of “performance” has come to the forefront of contemporary thought on art and culture. The word “performance,” whether it describes a live event or personal acting-out; the features of a car, a perfume, a sound system; and whether it refers to history or therapy or the act of mourning, now shapes contemporary thinking about people and things. Some of the chief preoccupations of our time—namely, spectatorship, identity, memory, the body—are framed within the terms of performance. Offering a vocabulary of human action that can be used to shape a view of the world and its events, performance is the condition to which American culture increasingly aspires. Who doesn’t want to be an American “idol”? Reality TV shows have brought to the culture the national theatre America has always lacked.

The borders delineating art, culture, and commerce, art and entertainment, and experimental art and popular culture, have been blurred for a long time. Likewise, the separation between visual and theatrical arts has become less pronounced. Museum shows on post-war American art have increased the attention given to performance, video, dance, and sound as part of a larger view of visual culture and spectatorship. To give some performance history perspective, works by Yvonne Rainer, Robert Wilson, Laurie Anderson, Meredith Monk, Joan Jonas, and The Wooster Group are included regularly in museum and gallery shows here and abroad, along with documentation of happenings, Fluxus, performance art, and independent cinema, highlighting their artworld values.

Probably the first group of contemporary American theatre artists whose work demonstrated so openly the commingling of the visual arts, dance, and theatre worlds were Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, and Mabou Mines, whom I had written about in the late seventies in The Theatre of Images. These artists, soon to be joined by The Wooster Group, were shaped equally by the European modernist heritage and the new American arts and pop culture of the post-war period.
This theatrical generation had created a theatre that was not based on conventional drama and dialogue. Instead it elaborated the idea that there are many more languages of the performance experience than a text could provide, and that the performing body, space, sound, objects, and images could also be considered as types of language or text. It was understood that the visual image had its own rhetoric. This way of working inspired an interdisciplinary approach that could encompass theatre, music, dance, painting, photography, video, sculpture, and architecture. Thirty years later, it has been absorbed as a basic vocabulary in the new media and new music-theatre—two important new directions in New York performance. In the recent work of such different artists as Cynthia Hopkins, Les Freres Corbusier, and Big Dance Theatre, the impact of Foreman and The Wooster Group was highly visible; the imprint of Wilson’s style on opera and theatre in the U.S. and abroad has been evident for some time; and Lee Breuer brought to the Dollhouse another exceptional Mabou Mines encounter with a classic.

It would be impossible to measure the impact that two major inspirational figures, John Cage and Merce Cunningham, have had in the last half-century on artists, whether in dance, music, theatre, performance, or video. The powerful Cage/Cunningham model, articulated by Cage in his prolific writings and compositions, is founded on the principle that there are no centers, only multiple perspectives on a field of events, each creating its own “right to space.” Music, movement, and design can exist in space as autonomous elements, each with its own vocabulary, even created separately and in isolation from each other. What this vision unfolds is essentially a new ecology for the arts.

Recent commentary on the growing interest in sound art and electronic music, enhanced by new technologies and the availability of world music on the Internet and through distribution by alternative record companies, reflects a certain triumph of Cage’s transcultural belief that the whole world “sounds.” And Cunningham, who continues to cross new frontiers in the creation of computer-generated dance and dance for video, approaching ninety years of age, proves that to be innovative and cutting-edge does not mean necessarily to be young. You have to be worthy of certain adjectives. The masterful last collaboration in 1994 with his long-time partner, entitled Ocean, illumines the paradoxical classic and modernist exchange at the heart of Baudelaire’s dream of a modernity worthy of one day taking its place as antiquity. Who cannot imagine the Cunningham dancers spiraling around the cracked shards of a ceramic vase left in the ruins of our civilization would such pieces remain?
The artists who emerged under their tutelage did so in a period of cultural liberalism when, in addition to open-minded audiences and critics willing to educate themselves in new art forms, there was genuine support and encouragement of experimentation in the arts at the national and local levels. In addition, an arts structure devoted to expanding artistic resources, eager funding organizations, and a network of European festivals and commissions welcomed them. Several generations of risk-taking artists generated a high performance energy—stimulating, provoking, and critiquing one another in a vigorous exchange.

What mattered was how an individual experienced a work of art. Emphasis was placed on the perceiving subject, rather than the work as an embodiment of any single, fixed meaning. That is not to say that a work had no meaning, only that it is different for each spectator. Artists valued the play of thought, artistic process; the feeling for real space and real time. Audiences were often turned inward to the private rather than to the social realm. Except in the period when works more overtly protested the Vietnam War, whatever politics existed was framed mainly as a politics of consciousness. Feminism and other emancipatory movements were soon to change all of this. Women have been prominent figures in American performance history from the sixties on, not only in more traditionally women-centered arts such as dance, but in the new democratizing technologies of video as well. They proposed many of the terms of understanding and engagement, eventually influencing the turn from the formalist to the activist, from the impersonal to the autobiographical.

When I began to frequent the avant-garde arts scene in the early seventies, one could still see many Cage/Cunningham events and the Judson dancers who had elaborated a new post-Cunningham dance aesthetic; Philip Glass was giving concerts Sunday afternoons in a Tribeca warehouse, where all of his audience in the world easily fit. The filmmaker/performer Jack Smith, who has been an enduring influence on so many New York artists, showed off his strange brilliance in polymorphously sexual films and highly personal and eccentric slide shows and plays. In the new center of the arts downtown—the Manhattan district known as SoHo—Trisha Brown's company was dancing on the rooftops of its landmark buildings and George Maciunas gave Fluxtours on the main thoroughfare, West Broadway. I even participated in one of them in 1976, reading Virgil's Book IV of the Aeneid in front of a prestigious gallery building, 420 West Broadway. Meredith Monk offered performances in her loft. The kind of work characterized as "theatre of the ridiculous"—by John
Vaccaro, Kenneth Bernard, Ronald Tavel, Charles Ludlam—cleverly exposed the dark side of the American psyche and its infatuation with images, celebrity, and the language of “ready-mades,” aligning itself with the new glam-rock club scene. Reza Abdoh carried on their legacy before his untimely death.

In the visual arts world, the new forms, called “performance art” and “video art,” were attracting crowds in the galleries and alternative spaces, with works of Vito Acconci, Carolee Schneemann, Mary Lucier, the Kipper Kids, Michael Smith, Robert Ashley, Adrian Piper, Charles Atlas, Robert Whitman, and many more too numerous to mention. Everywhere, young dancers were starting up companies. Cross-overs of art, music, video, and performance packed the local clubs and bars. Artists and audiences weren’t afraid to define themselves as “avant-garde” because to do so signified an experimental mentality and an attitude of opposition to mainstream culture. But, it was already possible to see that elements of this work linked up with mass culture, especially in a social climate where the worlds of art, business, and politics were becoming increasingly intertwined.

The influence, not only of electronic media, but also of dance, independent film, conceptual art, process art, body art, minimalism, and earthworks was exuberantly present in the “downtown” Manhattan centers, particularly in SoHo and the East Village and elsewhere below Fourteenth Street. This performance activity generated a dialogue with modern art and theatre movements. And while artists wanted to create an “American” art distinct from the European, in the post-war period the performance world of the visual arts was characterized by a great feeling of internationalism. American, European, and Japanese artists, working together, organized worldwide festivals, performances, and conferences focusing on censorship and the politics of liberation, several events taking place in London. In the U.S. and in Europe curators continue to organize expansive histories of performance and visual art, particularly happenings and Fluxus, more frequently incorporating the work of artists of the West, Asia, and Latin America. This globalizing project is long overdue.

As early as the mid-sixties artists had begun to collaborate with scientists and engineers, led by Billy Klüver, in the fusion of art and technology, introducing the discoveries from their experiments in special programs and festivals, such as Nine Evenings: Theatre and Engineering, in 1966, and EAT (Experiments in Art and Technology) the following year, which involved influential artists of the era, such as John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, James Tenney, Deborah Hay, David Tudor, and Lucinda Childs, though often in experiments
that proved disastrous. Where once these patterns of work and organization were identified with avant-garde culture, now they have become part of the mainstream, as the products and interchanges of the entertainment and communications industries demonstrate. Recently, The Builders Association used the Dynovision software created by IBM for Alladeen and collaborated with dbox for Super Vision. A new program known as Face-to-Face animates one of Ralph Lemon’s drawings in Come home Charley Patton.

Long before them an example of this transmutation is the career of the acknowledged father of video, Nam June Paik. In the sixties he created the technology for a culture that would give itself over to speed and the globalization of imagery. He more than anyone is responsible for the now-familiar walls of multiple-channel videos with their split-screen rapid sampling of world images and sounds. This border-crossing, high-tech model, drawn from the progressive wing of the arts and organized around performance ideas, has brought us closer to an understanding of contemporary culture and society. It moves toward the kinds of knowledge our globalized Internet consciousness is demanding that we embrace.

What a surprise I had some years ago when I thought I heard a section from Meredith Monk’s work Recent Ruins underscore a stock market commercial on Sunday morning television. In fact, it was her music. And who cannot fail to hear as well the influence of Philip Glass in so much of the music we hear all around us, on television and in film, including the recent Notes on a Scandal. More than three decades ago, Glass had to start his own record company because no one would record him. He had to put together his own ensemble because no musicians would play his work. He was back to driving a New York City taxicab the day after the landmark opera Einstein on the Beach, which he created with Robert Wilson, closed at the Metropolitan Opera, that November of 1976. Now his sound is simply the sound of our time.

What we have been witnessing is the gradual transformation of the media and popular culture, which has absorbed non-traditional artists and their ideas into the entertainment business, television, advertising, and film. Likewise, entertainment has long begun to take the place of art, confusing the terms of audience engagement. If previously the downtown arts community functioned as a subculture, opposed to the exigencies of the marketplace and populist demands, and reveling in its own intellectual rigor, advanced forms, and vocabularies, by now many of the terms of contention have become irrelevant for younger generations. In the last two decades especially, many artists and
audiences have turned toward more activist goals; and, at the opposite pole, “accessible” became the keyword. For quite some time distinctions between a great deal of performance art, solo performance, and stand-up comedy have not been so clearly drawn. In fact, solo performers such as Spalding Gray, Eric Bogosian, and Sandra Bernhard—who eventually made Hollywood movies—came out of the alternative arts scene. Much of what now passes for new work is influenced by television comedy.

No “downtown” artist had achieved what Laurie Anderson did, by mid-career moving into mainstream culture, to bring performance art values to the rock music world. Not long ago she became NASA’s first “resident artist.” At the same time, in deference to the interplay of artistic vocabulary and cultural politics, “performance art” came to be called “performance” and “video art” was designated “video.” By the eighties, the mention of “art” in the description of these forms had made them seem, well, too arty when, in fact, they were now redefined in more culturally activist terms and goals.

Of course, throughout the twentieth century artists themselves have worked to undermine the notion of “Art,” long before contemporary theories appeared on the scene to shift it to the periphery. But many artists and critics now express regret at the disregard of artistic values and historical lapses in discussions of art, in addition to the confusion of history and nostalgia on the part of younger generations, particularly as the narratives of this period are starting to take shape and aging artists are concerned with their legacies. It seems we are not quite ready to “un-art” ourselves so completely as Allan Kaprow had proposed.

Notwithstanding, the increased cross-overs and the dividing lines between high and low culture, tradition and experimentation, and avant-garde and mainstream, can be highly troublesome for unprepared audiences and institutions. One of the striking characteristics of the American scene of recent decades is the naïveté of non-traditional artists and institutions, and their lack of a coherent cultural policy, in the struggle of the so-called “culture wars.” Vanguard culture cannot pass as mainstream at the national level, especially when public monies are involved, and the subject matter is sex or religion. The confrontation of public opinion, government policy, and artistic imperative over the highly-charged sexual content in the work of Karen Finley and Robert Mapplethorpe, and Andres Serrano’s Catholic blasphemies, proved to be a public relations and funding disaster for the arts in an era characterized by political conservatism, pietism, feminist backlash, the infantilization of culture, and the AIDS crisis.
By the end of the century, it had lead to the near dismantling of the National Endowment for the Arts, which has been, to all intents and purposes, vastly disabled. The use of public monies in relation to community standards was played out in the courts. The result of the widespread politicization of American art (from both the left and the right) led to an impoverished arts ecology whose most pronounced features can only have been the demoralization of artists and fragmentation of audiences, the compromise of artistic and funding institutions, and unrelenting distortion and promotional hype, all of which proved unsettling. The persistent conservative attacks on the Public Broadcasting Service is an enduring legacy of this state of affairs.

II

Though there are artists involved in the permanent emancipatory desires of art, given the turn in our time toward the scar, the wound, trauma, and even masochism, we are compelled to address the uneasy questions raised by more disturbing sexual, psychological, and social actions. When does a performance become unwatchable? What will we refuse to look at?

One of the most heartrending events in New York in recent years was the gallery show of photographs of lynchings in the South and Midwest which occurred in the first half of the twentieth century. Not only do they depict the deaths themselves, but the huge crowds who watched what were called “spectacle lynchings” and later bought postcards of the events to send home or to keep as souvenirs. Decades removed from our own time and accusations of exploitation, the photographs function as both political history and the history of cultural spectacle. Surely, these audiences of all-too-ordinary citizens must be some of the most debased of modern times.

In a seemingly merciful though quite disturbing live context, a few years ago Dutch television featured an assisted suicide in its evening programming. The California performance artist, Bob Flanagan, before his death, had his slow, painful deterioration from cystic fibrosis documented in a film called Sick. He also spent several weeks in bed in a hospital room which he created for his performance and installation at a few museums around the country. An account of Flanagan’s difficult everyday life has been published in his Pain Journal.

Several years ago, in a controversial 1994 essay widely criticized, New Yorker dance critic, Arlene Croce, attacked the ethics of dancer Bill T. Jones’s new work, entitled Still/Here. It had been created with the participation mainly of
terminally ill individuals who appeared on video in the work. Explaining why she refused to see a performance of what she termed “victim art,” Croce wrote:

I understand that there is dancing going on during the talking, but of course no one goes to Still/Here for the dancing. People are asking whether Jones’s type of theatre is not a new art form. Dying an art form? ... Jones is putting himself beyond the reach of criticism. I think of him as literally undiscussable.

Before you think the issues are clear-cut, here is another way to look at the conjugation of performance and illness. A dozen years ago the Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York displayed large photographs taken by the visual artist Hannah Wilke, with the help of her husband, documenting her own terminal cancer (lymphoma). She had died the year before. Photos were shown of the feminist artist and performer, known for her beauty, now bald, and striking seductive fashion poses which she had parodied more than a dozen years earlier. Others exposed her body ravaged by chemotherapy, a few strands of hair substituting for a once dark, rebellious mane. Still more showed her with a blue blanket framing her sad face, like a Madonna in a Renaissance painting. In an ironic modern context, her Duchamp-inspired cages of medicine bottles were featured and her sculptures of female genitalia installed on the gallery floor. The name of the gallery exhibition, if one can call it that, was marked by Wilke’s signature word play: it was titled Intra-Venus.

In my view, her last work did not seem at all exploitative because Wilke was a celebrated artist who in the seventies worked in forms known as “body art” and “conceptual art.” She had used her body, in glamorous and teasing come-ons, to comment on the use of the female body in fashion, film, and visual art. Well-versed in the styles of modern and post-war art, she appropriated them in her feminist discourse with art history. Wilke photographed herself in provocative quasi-narrative cinematic frames, predating similar strategies by younger artists like Cindy Sherman and Valie Export, and she created video works of “female” gestures using her own face and hands and sculptured body parts. She covered herself with tiny “found” objects in the Starification series, which alluded to the marking of the female body by social codes. Like a number of women of her generation, the artist established rights for the freedom of the body in performance at a time when private and public realms were more rigidly observed.
Wilke’s art confronted issues of cultural writing on the body and its commodification. Savvy and wise-cracking, throughout her career she defied common attitudes surrounding performance and sexuality and woman as icon. Seen against this artistic past, then, as a form of documentation her last photographs exhibit a sublime will to truth. They are the ultimate expression of her body art. Wilke was fully experiencing her death as an artist, just as she had been fully present in its most life-affirming artistic moments. In the end, she had the courage to follow the assumptions of her aesthetic to their absolute end, bringing body art as close as it can come to the tragic mode.

This is an approach to art that I have referred to in other contexts as “autobiology.” I had first used the term to describe the work of the Los Angeles-based artist Rachel Rosenthal, who linked the aging of the Earth and the aging of her own body in eco-performances centering on Gaia theory, plate tectonics, environmental pollution, and nuclear war. Feminist performers have been at the forefront of addressing the taboo of the aging performing body, in Wilke’s case even documenting her own corporeal deterioration and death.

At the end of 2005, another performance artist who ignores the boundaries of life and art, Linda Montano, witnessed the death of her father whose chief caregiver she had become after his stroke a few years earlier. The ritualistic unfolding of this entire process—perhaps performance art’s contribution to the probing family dramas of psychological realism—she called “Dad Art.”

To be honest, performance has gone to places I never could have imagined when I started seriously thinking about it as a graduate student, and just before the founding of PAJ, in 1976. We have come so far from distinguishing between art and life, the personal and political. And yet, the performing body is real and it is really there. What we have been witnessing in the arts in recent years is, I believe, a return to authenticity—to the real, the documentary. In drama, there is a new stripped-down realism of which the playwright Richard Maxwell is the chief exponent, and in visual art, a return to the hand, to drawing, alongside the new technologies and monumentalism. This development comes after years of so-called “postmodern” irony, which is too self-indulgent and alienated an attitude for the world we now inhabit. Certainly one of the most pronounced directions of contemporary drama is the use of Greek tragedy as a source, exemplified in such recent diverse works as Peter Sellars’s Children of Herakles, John Jesurun’s Philoktetes, Charles L. Mee’s rewriting of several Greek plays, and the video/performance of Joan Jonas, Lines in the Sand, which took as its
starting point the myth of Helen of Troy, based on H.D.’s work. Perhaps it was Heiner Müller who had led the way toward rethinking contemporary history backwards through the classics with his fierce visions drawn from Euripides and Seneca. Pasolini worked in the same political terrain.

But even as the heat of life and death matters compels our attention, makes us slow down, simultaneously the constant sensory overload hurries us with tremendous speed in another direction, like Benjamin’s angel caught in time. Everywhere, the privatization of experience challenges the temptation to make everything public. In a world that has become performance space, and where image and reality, spectators and actors cross realms freely, what makes one experience, artistic or otherwise, more important than another? And can we still understand the differences between states of being?

Contemporary American audiences take for granted the cross-fertilization of dance, theatre, visual art, music, and pop culture; the self-assured use of imagery, technology, mediated voices; multiple identities, cross-dressing/cross-gendering. They feel at home with the confluence of American/African/Asian/Latin sounds and styles. The proliferation of tastes defines the new fusion cuisine in cities well. Now at the start of a new century, this non-traditional, and largely artistic, model serves as a point of departure for new ways of understanding and interacting in the world: intertextual, intercultural, intermedial.

III

The performance culture that is America transforms everything into some form of actor-spectacle equation. Can one differentiate any longer between an installation, a theatre set, a window display or interior design? In SoHo, my Manhattan neighborhood, the fluidity of spaces is borne out in designer clothing boutiques, with their minimalist sculptured lines and flat-screen attractions, and the big glass windows of its restaurants, where those dining are simultaneously looking out and being looked at, in a new kind of interface. On the street I’ve noticed that everyone’s gestures seem so much bigger these days, their responses to ordinary events so highly exaggerated, as if they know they are being watched. Probably some of them are wearing copies of the clothes of television characters, now available for sale online as a form of “shopping-enabled entertainment.” Even all the gallery- and museum-going these days seems a kind of performance social. One of the most fascinating developments in the triumph of the urban sensibility is—let’s call it the “performance marvelous.”
By that I mean the celebration of the individual as a staging ground of multiple decentered parts, as repository of excess feeling, the self as a work-in-progress. This is what is understood to be “contemporary.”

If at emotionally-heightened moments people used to describe their lives as being like a film, now the same situation is framed within the context of performing. The difference is this: in the film metaphor, a person described him or herself as a “character,” that is, someone part of a larger narrative, whereas in the performance scenario, one sees oneself as a “celebrity” of sorts; here there is no narrative context, only a repertoire of morphing positions, playing around. A significant development in the entertainment and communications industries is to blur the distinctions between performers and spectators, artists and celebrities, in the new democracy of spectacle. Strangely enough, the many reality TV shows centered around dancing, succeeding in business, building a house, getting rich, and finding a partner demonstrate that people don’t even care if they perform badly, lose, or are humiliated on national television by a panel of “judges.” In the performance marvelous, the idea is to be noticed, applauded, rewarded for effort. If once all the arts aspired to music, today longing is directed toward the state of performance. As an essential point of reference, performance contributes increasingly to the analysis of culture, and, at the individual level, redefines itself as a medium of self-empowerment and vainglory.

How is one to sort out the various meanings generated by the concept of “performance”? Neither public nor academic discourse differentiates with any degree of refinement between performance as an ontology and performance as gestural attitude, or performance in social space and performance on the stage. The word “performance,” then, is used interchangeably to describe actors playing characters or those doing performance art. It is also called upon to characterize everyday human behavior, ritual, or social interaction. In something of a historical paradox, the often-scorned actor is now the symbolic figure of liberation. Today vast numbers of people want to document personal thoughts and acts for the purpose of disseminating information, images, and texts about themselves on the Internet, which is becoming a chief means of building what is called a “community,” when it is actually an undifferentiated “mass.”

The great freedom everyone can agree upon in America is the freedom to make yourself up, to be self-made. As an act of self-creation, of possible transformation and imagination, role-playing and constructing oneself as a character has the power to turn anyone into a work of art. On a subliminal level, ordinary people understand that the artist is the last free person in contemporary society.
Intriguingly, the cultural turn that joins the aesthetic realm to the public realm has made representation into a rights issue: every performing body is now a legislative body. In this sense, performance can be viewed as a form of speech. This merging of bourgeois mentality with the protean yearnings of the artist links modernity and its worship of subjectivity to the mass cultural values of democratic pluralism. The idea of performance has become so much a part of contemporary discourse that modernity and theatricality now seem indivisible as organizing themes of the last one-hundred years.

Performance acts allow one to create any number of new images of oneself—in effect, to rewrite one’s life and to reshape reality at will. But looked at from another perspective, the individual who is unable to break through to an inner self is fated to recast him- or herself in the image of what is socially or peer-sanctioned behavior and opinion. Roles, performances, the image, the mask, the mistaking of the celebrity for the artist—these are large themes to grapple with. Some of them have been with us for hundreds of years. The idea of the theatrum mundi has been expanded to incomprehensible proportions. There is much to be learned from the problematic and profound nature of performance, especially its philosophical implications. The freedom, even euphoria, of self-willed performance acts may be inherent in democracy, but it has led to the cultivation of fascism as well. Twentieth-century history has shown that societies are drawn to theatrical expression at moments of profound identity crisis and myth-making. What we need is more careful thinking about categories of spectatorship and performance, not their uncritical celebration. Where is all of this acting-out behavior leading us?

If it is important to understand the differences between the performing self in daily life and the life of a performer in the theatre, to that task must be added the performer on the Internet, in the era of MySpace and YouTube. What does “live” mean any longer, in relation to the physical body of the performer, instant feedback, telepresence, and forms of mediated presence? And how should we consider the performing body in comparison to the body on a video monitor, or the no-body of a virtual performer? What are the differences between digital reality and theatrical reality, the varying conditions of the real, the performative, the virtual? What defines representation, reproduction, or re-enactment? And what of the varieties of time—real and not-as-real—in the intermingling of the ontological, the social, and the digital? We are now asked to consider our lives as “post-human.” There is even the possibility of a Second Life which offers unimaginable license for new narratives. Or LiveJournal where anyone’s life can
become an open book for the Internet “community.” Or Flickr, where you can show your photos to the world in an ongoing documentation of your life. How ironic that in our age dramatic form has lost its stature as a reflection of the human drama, even as today there is such craving for stories—preferably someone else’s. And what of the “friends” online who take the place of real friendship in the actual community where one lives and works or goes to school? Where are the theatre writers who can describe how human beings exist in the world today? Where are the new species of criticism that can analyze the levels of reality experienced in contemporary life, and how they may shape our common acts of seeing and listening?

In recent years, the digital arts have been proliferating in media lounges and media evenings created in galleries and universities, helping to introduce the public to the latest developments in computer systems, digital artworks, and projects. Likewise, they take place in major museums where installations, Net art, photography, and video are increasingly impinging on the exhibition space of painting. But the idea of the digital has been generating more excitement than much of the actual work itself. There are those who ask if a lot of the digital art isn’t to some degree the redoing of familiar ideas in a new technology.

Even still, much of the discourse around forms of media reveals a direct link backwards to familiar themes from the histories and practices of modernism and the avant-garde, whether on the subject of utopia, the role of the state, or language experiments and hypertext. The renewed interest in sound, suggested by examples of sound art and installations lately in museums and galleries, has demonstrated the enduring legacy and prophetic nature of the Cagean worldview. Indeed, his early proclamation of “distribution” supplanting ownership, when joined to the “library of sounds” at the center of his artistic practice, encapsulates a vision that helps to define the new varieties of perceptual experience and artistic creativity. The audience is regarded as a collective intelligence.

We have yet to see how the world of theatre may be infused by digital media. In the future, how will what I call “mediaturgy” define the new performance? If a decade ago there were relatively few theatre artists exploring these forms in live performance, the move toward media is now one of the most evident trends in theatre downtown, though much of it replicates mass entertainment styles, rather than creating a new conception of performance. The Wooster Group continues to explore performance style as a rhetorical form, demonstrated in their latest work, *Hamlet*. The Builders Association, a theatre generation or so later, had a virtual character share the scene with live actors, teasing the idea of liveness.
in their recent Super Vision. For quite some time, developing technologies have influenced the making of dance for live and virtual performance, using motion-capture, animation, and other imaging techniques, as in the work of Paul Kaiser, Marc Downie, and Shelley Eshkar, with Merce Cunningham, Bill T. Jones, and Trisha Brown. As for film, the public has yet to understand the growing impact of digital film editing and the movie-going experience, which is changing the very texture of viewing.

Sometimes it seems as though our reliance on the realms of knowledge, consciousness, and memory has given way to information systems and emergent realities, and self-expression to interface. The concepts of live, real, and virtual have changed the way we relate to time, which, like space and the text, has collapsed in the digital world. Many of the subjects addressed by artists and by the popular press have special significance for performance as a paradigm of contemporary human interaction.

The digital culture is so new that we are still at a point of raising questions about what is called “interactive” or “performative” in the current vocabularies. Numerous myths about interactivity abound. What will the future of art be? For many, there is also the question of facing the prospect of learning new tools and languages of communication in the move away from literary culture, and its assumptions, to visual culture. Critics are persuaded to re-educate themselves in the developing forms of artistic expression and to evolve new criteria in response to new works. This is a daunting task in any age, even more so in the demands of turning from the real to the virtual and to unforeseeable modes of perception.

How does one distinguish between the territory of art as an expressive medium and interface as art? What of the erasure of professional fault lines between artists, scientists, and technicians, and between art and science? Many artists cannot realize their visions without working with scientists or engineers. The digital arts are so new that there isn’t any established critical discourse or terms of engagement. We’re all feeling our way in this undefined territory: What am I seeing? What am I hearing? How does it differ from older modes of feeling?

Still very much a new field of serious study, performance thinking lacks a coherent history that is capable of synthesizing a century of theatre and visual arts achievement, and the new mass media and communications industry, into a larger philosophical whole. No history of visual art performance can ever be complete without incorporating the knowledge of theatre history and criticism, shaped by hundreds of years of intellectual scrutiny and debate. And, by the
same token, theatre ought to be more conversant with art history, especially the performance dimension of installations, video and digital art, and photography. As performance is increasingly integrated into museum shows constructing the histories of arts activity of the last several decades, it is time that the two different histories of performance that now exist—one in the artworld and the other in the theatre—are brought together for an integrated approach to research. Surely, in the years to come there will develop a more comprehensive view of performance history, so that in time the concept of performance can take its place in the history of ideas.

IV

I had the occasion in recent years to collect the interviews and dialogues with American performers, playwrights, composers, video artists, and critics from more than two decades of Performing Arts Journal, which is now in its thirtieth year, for publication in a book entitled Conversations on Art and Performance. Many of the topics of these contributions anticipated contemporary thought in ways that now seem prophetic. Even subjects that once were the provenance of art, have lately come to the forefront of American social thought and cultural policy. What surprised me was that in so many of these conversations the artists and thinkers referred to as touchstones of ideas and ideals are repeated over and over. In theatre—Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Stanislavsky, Pirandello, Stein, Brecht, Beckett, Artaud, Genet, Grotowski, Brook, Williams, Shepard; in visual art—expressionism, surrealism, Duchamp, Picasso, Pollock; in music—Mozart, Wagner, Stravinsky, Weill, Boulez, Cage; in dance—Balanchine, Graham, Cunningham, Judson Dance Theatre; in philosophy—Marx, Freud, Wittgenstein, Foucault; in letters—Thoreau, Rousseau, Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Barthes. And always, the Greeks and Shakespeare.

In any given period serving as a context for discussion, a marked consensus flows around what is important to speak of, and why. Remarkably, and for the most part, traditionalists and avant-gardists, I learned, claim the same artistic heritage. What is also apparent is how much artists learn from each other and how essential aesthetic values and their own work processes are to them. In every sense, the historical continuum their chosen art form inhabits still retains its significance. If the Western canon has been under assault in the university and in arts institutions, the artists themselves unashamedly declare allegiance to surprisingly stable canons.
And, for all the theoretical issues circulating around us, artists and intellectuals, inspired by their constant exposure to art, are largely oblivious to it, educating themselves, as always, in artworks. What is the nature of the performance act? Where does language reside? Performers are still struggling to understand the ecstasy of presence, writers want desperately to live inside words, and everyone is concerned with the varieties of time and space.

What is it that they speak of? In the early years of PAJ major preoccupations were consciousness and process, the potentiality of performance space, research and experimentation, the divorce of literary and theatrical culture, and the alienation of theatre from intellectual life. There was talk of the decline of playwriting and the stultification of regional theatres, discomfort with the notion of the “theatrical” in art and theatre worlds, and excitement at the appearance of performance art. There were plenty of inquiries: What is performance space? How does one see? Why is acting not the same as performing?

Over the years the conversations turned from space to text and play to fragment, from the modernist heritage to postmodernism, from group to solo, from art forms to arts funding, from the situation of the object to subject positions, from process to pedagogy, from art to culture, from play to pain. Power, representation, transgression, violence, ritual, gender, race, autobiography, censorship, and the critiques of representation, the image, and the canon were now the subjects that filled new dictionaries of ideas.

At the center of thought: the palpable body, the mediated voice. When is a man a woman? When is the body a text? The emphasis shifted from experience to interpretation, from art to theory, from the impersonal to the political, from high culture to pop, from invention to anger, from joy to trauma. Increasingly, performance space came to be regarded as public space and the individual as social construct. Artists were called “cultural workers” or “activists” and critics considered their writing “performing.” The body, once celebrated as the site of pleasure and freedom, was now analyzed as a repository of disease, pain, death, and contested being. These are powerful themes, which raise disturbing epistemological questions about the ever-expanding lyric of performance and an aging avant-garde.

The contrast of attitudes in the last three decades was brought home to me when I began teaching contemporary performance and observed the difficulty students demonstrated in understanding the use of the nude body, even the innocent fun and sexual exuberance, that characterizes much performance of the sixties. More interesting is the case of the pioneering feminist performer
Carolee Schneemann. Contemporary attitudes toward female nudity and heterosexuality have often found themselves at odds with her work because of her sexual politics. Students were sometimes embarrassed at the nudity and ecstatic heterosexuality. Some of them determined that Schneemann was being used as a “sexual object,” whereas she valued herself as an “image-maker,” an artist in control of her own body as subject. In fact, much of her early work had less to do with feminist concerns than with her highly-developed art-historical knowledge and work as a painter. In the context of her time, Schneemann considered her gestures as liberating acts.

One of the most significant changes that occurred between the mid-seventies era in which I began the work of PAJ and my own writing, and the climate of today, is the displacement of critical activity from its organic development out of the experience of art to its institutionalization in academia. Similarly, the lack of interest on the part of many trained in theatre to concern themselves with drama is a great loss to the profession. And the use of theatrical or performance events themselves as a springboard for overarching theories or cultural commentaries has led often to distortions of performance history as well as diminished critical thought. In fact, this trend has produced two theatre cultures. Even though we have all learned a great deal from the new scholarship, certainly many students, artists, and closeted faculty dissidents are tired of the hyperactive theorization and lumpy prose. It is propped up by an outdated view of the publishing industry and marketplace which can no longer support the demands of university degree programs and a faculty promotion system based on academic publication ideals now increasingly forced into trade publication exigencies.

I would like to see graduate programs train more students as archivists and translators as a response to the proliferation of personal historical materials that so many artists and theatres own (especially in view of the influence of the post-war avant-garde), and to counter the scant interest in works in translation by publishers. What is also needed is the kind of books theatre critics and scholars used to write before the turn to theoretical dissertations: namely, histories of theatres and institutions and studies of writers or groups. It is difficult to believe but there is no history of La MaMa or of the Judson Poets’ Theatre or The Ontological-Hysteric Theater or any substantial studies of Off-Off Broadway; nor are there any experimental theatre or performance art histories that equal the depth of the traditional theatre history books (however much they are scrutinized now), hardly any biographies of artists outside the mainstream,
or monographs of serious authors. With few exceptions, such as the new history of Caffe Cino, they are out of favor, like writing about plays. The absence of such theatre literature is a tremendous loss for the profession that only grows more apparent with the teaching of contemporary performance and drama.

V

I wonder if there exists any longer the freedom to value and to write about a work of art for its own qualities—for the sheer pleasure of it. Even as art is overwhelmed by social realities, critics and artists are beginning to speak more about their spiritual practices, too. Many American artists follow a Buddhist path. Given the spiritual dimension of modernism and the artistic traditions of the ancient, medieval, and Renaissance worlds, we are overdue for a progressive discussion of religion and art to counter the extremes of reactionary cultural views that have generated so much controversy over artworks. Yet, this is a difficult subject for many because there is no sufficiently developed vocabulary of the spiritual in the commentary on contemporary arts. Our more political era has turned away from ideas of “transcendence” and “sincerity” which attach themselves to any discussion of religious and spiritual matters. People are uncomfortable with the idea of religion itself and prefer to speak about spirituality. Understandably, there are the New Age connotations of which many are skeptical. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore so many artists across generations, art forms, and religions who treat spiritual feeling in their work, such as Bill Viola, Meredith Monk, Lee Breuer, Shirin Neshat, Bill T. Jones, Theodora Skipitares, Alison Knowles.

Contemporary music had moved in the direction of creating spiritually expressive composition more than three decades ago. Whether in search of the sublime or in reaction to serial music, many composers working today in the Western tradition (often under the influence of Eastern art or philosophy) have turned toward new forms of sacred music. Among them are Henryk Gorecki, Osvaldo Golijov, Arvo Pärt, Sofia Gubaidulina, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Wynton Marsalis, John Zorn, John Adams. Similarly, theatre directors such as Peter Sellars and Robert Wilson have staged chamber operas around the lives of saints.

In the world of drama as well, many playwrights, including Maria Irene Fornes, Erik Ehn, Adrienne Kennedy, Tony Kushner, and The Wooster Group have shown an interest in religious subject matter and iconography. Many of
their plays are rich in figures of God, Jesus, saints, and angels, and in scenes of heaven and hell. Instead of the sermonizing of much contemporary American drama, liturgical and scriptural styles of speech and prayer, biblical and saints’ writings, characterize these plays, which tend toward allegory, epic, and parable. A decade ago I gathered together some of them in an anthology entitled *Plays for the End of the Century*, with the specific intent of calling attention to this largely unacknowledged contemporary tendency.

Even as contemporary life is lived more and more publicly, and with a diminished sense of the private, individuals have also turned inward. Perhaps the dramatic form, which lags behind in its rhythms and has so much competition with increasingly spectacle-oriented experience, can reinvent itself as an exceptional cultural space. Here one might find subtleties of human acts and concentrated speaking and listening, or the long sentences of complex thought, now disappearing from the public realm. Intertwining the moral and the aesthetic, the plays of Wallace Shawn elaborate the collapse of serious-minded culture with such inflections.

Though anonymous “characters” interface on the Internet in transcontinental messaging, the drama is, still, an alternative to the chatrooms of cyberspace. Drama has to do with knowledge, not information; it is built on dialogue, not chatter. Theatre, derived from the Greek word “theatron”—also the root of “theory”—is a place for seeing, in the sense of illumination, enlightenment. (To browse is not to see.) I must admit to being very skeptical of what is called “interactive” or “performative” in this digital age. The performance vocabulary is extended into more and more concepts, like “liveness” and “live presence” and “mediated presence.” Borders between sectors of human enterprise and habitation are increasingly blurring, posing a great challenge in understanding the differences between varieties of perceptual experience. The new narratives of language and image and media are scattering about the globe in a rhizomatic frenzy. Too many of them are merely duplicating the shallow values of consumer culture.

Often overlooked in the contemporary culture of speed and noise and exhibition is the role of art as a spiritual discipline, a force of inner necessity that compels the artist to search for truths founded in emotional need. There is a fundamental duality of purpose and expectation in the public perception of art. Viewers are less willing to settle for the contemplative experience and would prefer to consider the artist as an organizer of social reality. But even as they engage in the symbolization of experience, artists are also interested in such
matters as solitude, stillness, process, and that place known only to them which Allan Kaprow called a “beautiful privacy,” even as they engage in the symbolization of experience. Some acts are a matter of contingency, intuition, and technical problem-solving. And let’s not forget the sheer attachment of artists to the object and materiality of their creations. What can this work be? How shall I make it? Where will it take me? The idea of self-alteration through the creation of artworks still continues to influence new generations of artists. So does Gertrude Stein’s idea of the play as landscape, which is to say, space as a bountiful field of revelation—a world of spirit. “How a little nature makes religion, how a little religion makes creation,” she observed.

These may sound like simple themes, but they are bound to the profound quest that moves the will towards genuine artistic life. What cannot be overstated is the very real conflict between the desire of artists to make work that reflects their attachment to the world, even to making visionary works, at the same time that many of them have abandoned the moral imperative of previous art practice. In our time, aesthetic, formal, religious, social, and moral values are fiercely undermined. What do we value in art any longer? For some, the answer is to consider all life as art, while others speak of the end of art. Which is it that we want more of: life or art? And are the real and virtual simply different names for the same longing?

One of the issues that concerns me now is whether contemporary theatre is becoming too preoccupied with replicating the global crises of society. In other words, has it become too journalistic—simply compassionate and mournful? At the other end of the spectrum is the new theatre of the uncanny, with its fetishization of trauma, pain, and violence that plays out personal demons and biological necessity, not only in solo performance but in the new dramatic literature unfolding. What is needed now are works of the creative spirit that conceptualize not merely document human behavior, works that address public not only personal concerns, works that are more philosophical and poetic discourse than lamentation, even if they must acknowledge the catastrophic imagination.

A performance leaves behind only traces of itself—a photograph, a piece of videotape, fleeting images coursing through the spectator’s mind. How little they reveal of time, of images and acts; and what of the voice, the face, the arm. How to comprehend the sense of why and when the art of performance is important in the long view of things. What is performance to being and we to it?
When all is said and done, what remains is the mysteriousness and ravishing heartbreak of a form, valued for its ceremony of presence, even as it occasions absence.

This essay represents an ongoing series of reflections that has evolved over a period of several years, originating as a keynote address, entitled “Performance Contemporary,” for the International Theatre Studies Congress “Transformations: Theatre in the Nineties,” Free University/Humboldt University, Berlin, November 1998, and continuing in a revised version as a keynote address for the conference, “Towards Tomorrow,” at the Center for Performance Research, Aberystwyth, Wales, April 2005. Other modified lectures based on the essay were delivered at Princeton University for the Willard and Margaret Thorp Lecture in American Studies, 2000; Justus Liebig University, Giessen (Germany), 1999; the University of Alcala (Spain), 2004; University of Palermo, University of Calabria, University of Rome III (Italy), 2006; University of Exeter, University of Roehampton (UK), and University of Copenhagen (Denmark), 2007. The earliest version was published as “Nachdenken über Performancegeschichte,” in Transformationen: Theater der Neunziger Jahre, Erika Fischer-Lichte, Doris Kolesch, Christel Weiler, eds. (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 1999). The essay was published for the first time in English in PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art’s 30th anniversary issue, Vol. XXVIII, No. 1 (PAJ 82), January 2006. The final version is published here.