

FROM HAPPENING TO PERFORMANCE

*Tadeusz Pawlowski**Differences and Similarities*

The presence of the artist who in front of an audience personally carries out some actions is a feature shared by both manifestations of contemporary art mentioned in the title, and at the same time one of their important constitutive characters. There are more such common features; also, performance co-existed for some time together with happening, pushing it out gradually from the scene of world-art. In the face of such similarities and connections the more surprising are the essential differences which separate performance from happening. These differences refer to basic aims and functions as well as to artistic means used to realize them. Happeners strived to change the world : to make more humane the existing framework of social life; to abolish authoritarian conventions and customs which impoverished interhuman relations. They hoped to achieve this aim by penetrating the objective social world with their artistic actions. To make the actions maximally efficient it was necessary to integrate art in real life, to abolish the dividing line separating them. That is why happeners often carried out their actions at public places, frequented by great numbers of people : on busy streets and squares, at railway stations, airports, etc. Also at places where phenomena of common life provoked happeners' protests, because of their absurdity or cruelty, e.g. at slaughter-houses, in slums, at places of exuberant wealth. In their effort to assimilate art to real life happeners admitted chance as a factor determining their artistic decisions, because, as they say, life is also governed by chance. Happening should not have a plot, nor should it represent or express anything; it should have features of real, objective actions, like those we meet with in common life situations. That is why it is sometimes

described as a manifestation of the most consequent realism. Happeners stressed this particular feature of objectivity by handling objects, sometimes a great mass of them. They were not objects especially produced for the spectacle, but taken from everyday life, often found on dumping grounds of contemporary civilisation : industrial waste, worn out articles of mass production, etc. In its striving for the maximal objectivity happening equalized the function of objects with that of human participants, who are objects, too. As a further step happeners abolished the artificial borderline, as they say, between themselves and the audience. They wanted to shock members of the audience out of their role as passive consumers, and to stimulate them to autonomic, creative participation. The audience so transformed was then to influence broader social groups. This was an essential element in the happeners' attempt to transform human attitudes and interpersonal relations, for it completed the direct influence of happening with an indirect one.

This objectivist-extrovert attitude of happening was directed toward the external world and aimed at its transformation. The program of action based on it exerted considerable influence upon art and social attitudes; and even contributed to the evocation of political unrest in Western Europe. However, the basic aim -- transformation of the principles of social life remained an unfulfilled myth. The disappointment was great and implied far reaching consequences in the sphere of artistic and social aims to be put forward in art. These consequences were drawn out fully by performance which slowly took the place of happening. The impossibility to change the objective phenomena and processes of social life by way of direct artistic actions was clearly realized. Moreover, it was understood that the status and position of the individual in contemporary mass-society has deteriorated to a degree which threatened to annihilate entirely the individual's autonomy. To defend this value became the most important task. The objectivist-extrovert attitude, discredited as inefficient, was replaced by an opposite attitude of the subjectivist-introvert character. Not society and general regularities of social life, but the individual took the central place in the interest of performance art. Desperate attempts to rescue what still remained of the individual's integrity and authenticity advanced to the most urgent undertaking. Correspondingly, the artistic means used by performance have undergone suitable changes. Unlike happening, performance does not

strive to obliterate the borderline between art and life; it does not put stress on using objects, on operating a great mass of them. The role of the minimum of objects used in performance is subordinate to that of the performer. One does not speak any more about equality of these two constituents; on the contrary, the special role of the human individual and its uniqueness is stressed. Descriptions like "the individual existence", "the highest value", "the sacrum" or "the center of the world" come up in discussions about performance with reference to the individual. As a rule, a spectacle is carried out by a single artist, not by a group of artists, as it often was the case with happening. Also, no attempts are made in performance to transform the audience into active participants, for such attempts can easily turn into manipulation which threatens those values in the individual, the defence of which is the aim of performance.

Performance concentrates attention on the individual and its existential and psychological problems. The individually acting artist reflects upon himself, strives to get deep into the sphere of the irrational. It is precisely in the instinctive and the irrational that he tries to find the last refuge for his autonomy and integrity. In a natural way the attention shifts to the body of the artist. For, it is the body which is the substratum for the subconscious and the instinctive; it is through the body that we experience our existential problems: of life and death, of autonomy and dependence. The body of the individual artist is therefore put to trial, sometimes to a cruel one, that transgresses the vague line which separates the normal from the pathological. Those are extreme situations that make it possible to know oneself, to find out what are the possibilities and the limits of one's body and psyche; thus, by nearing the death one can reach more fully for life. It was hoped that deeper knowledge of everything that is individual in the human being will make it possible to achieve the principle aim - to save what still remained of integrity and independence of the individual; to restrain the all-powerful mechanisms of mass-society which subdue the individual by way of their uniformity-imposing influence, e.g. through mass media. Sometimes this process of getting to know oneself, of putting oneself to trial took on the character of "organic work": through knowledge of one's own body and psyche to gain influence upon people's attitudes and interhuman relations. Such is the society as are the individuals of which the society consists - this postulate, even if not stated explicitly, seems to underlie the above sketched

program.

The Variants of Performance

The foregoing comparison of happening and performance could give the impression that each of these domains of art is something homogeneous, distinguishable by a specific set of characters. However, this would be a simplified picture. Both happening and performance comprise, instead, a number of varieties¹. Taking as the basis of division the meaning and function of performance, I have differentiated the following variants :

1. Actions in which the individual and his problems are the central point of interest. The individual is indeed the fundamental point of reference in all of the variants, but here he is the subject of direct interest.

2. Actions which reflect upon the course and meaning of the evolution of mankind.

3. Here various aspects of life in contemporary mass-society are subject of reflection and criticism.

4. Actions of autothematic character. Art and the artist, and their relations to society are here the subject of interest; as well as artist's reflection and researches on phenomena related to creation and perception of art : processes and mechanisms of perception, space and time, behaviour and its relations to environment, etc.

5. Actions aimed at evoking specific experiences in reference to archetypes, myths, philosophic or religious systems, or some occult or para-psychological phenomena, etc.; they may involve large audiences, the aim is then not to communicate a message, but to create a chance for common experiences amongst large crowds of similarly experiencing people.

These variants have been distinguished with regard to problems which dominate in each of them. It is, of course, possible that every variant may contain clues, characteristic of some other variant.

In their actions performers use freely all kinds of materials, techniques, and means of expression. They even raised the freedom of means-selection to a purposefully formulated postulate, and pleaded, like happens, for interdisciplinary character of art and against all established rules of creation. They grounded this postulate in the artists' need of spontaneous, authentic expression. According to performers, care for purity and homogeneity of means, observation of rules, etc., exerts a restrictive, braking effect upon the

creative process. That is why many of them rejected such currents in contemporary art as Conceptualism or Minimal-Art.

The above distinguished variants of performance differ with regard to means. Taking these differences as the basis of division, one could split each variant into further sub-groups, differing relative to the means used or ways of their application.

In some of the five variants, though particularly in the first one, a special role is played by the body of the performing artist. At present the body has undoubtedly lost the central position which it held earlier. For instance, Vito Acconci, one of the classics of Body-Art, who was in the early period obsessed with his body and psyche, has subsequently turned into a radical interested in politics. He is now attracted by fashionable cultural and social problems, by the problem of power.

The body of the artist became a new means of artistic expression or exposition. However, what comes to the foreground is not representation, but rather engaged experiencing of one's body, subjected to severe, sometimes cruel experiments. Such actions, it was expected, give the artist a chance to know himself and to gain control over his body and psyche. The most intimate problems of the psychological and bodily spheres were thus radically disclosed.

A number of Body-Artists aim to know "the language" of the body, to get through to the original, autonomic, spontaneous reactions of the individual, to purify them from distortions caused by various external factors, like cultural conventions, mass-media, etc. These researches were often accompanied by desperate efforts to replace the social mask with the truth of individual expression. Can such endeavours be successful? Or do we confront here an unreal myth? Does not rejection of culturally conditioned masks leave us with the void, as it is the case when we strip off the layers of an onion? Is not an attempt at discovering the true features of individuality a construction of another social mask, conditioned by the tendencies and values accepted in contemporary avant-garde art?

Therapeutical action was another purpose of Body-Art. Sometimes it was based on Utopian assumptions relating either to the possibility of therapeutical influence of Body-Art, or to general psycho-physical regularities upon which such influence must be founded. Body-Art fights for the liberation of the body, of its needs which had been suppressed by various containing influences on the part of society or culture. The question arises whether indeed all cultural constraints of this kind limit the sovereignty of the indi-

vidual, and are therefore something harmful which should be avoided? Perhaps the removal of some of the constraints results in effects which contradict the intended purpose, and thus lead to even worse constraints? As far as I know, such questions have not been considered in Body-Art.

The variety of ways to expose body is rich; they can be ordered with regard to a number of pairs of opposing properties :

1. Analytical exhibition which addresses the intellect versus narcissistic exhibition to be received on the principle of visual pleasure.

2. Psychophysical manifestation of body (e.g. Acconci, Bruce, Pane) versus symbolic use of it (e.g. Vautier).

3. The use of body as substratum of individual, existential experiences versus a-individual and anonymous use, for instance with the aim to discover or expose general patterns of "Body-Language" (e.g. S. Burton).

4. The use of body as an object or material differs from all previously distinguished ways of exposition (e.g. body lying on grass in an action by Gina Pane : *A Hot Afternoon*, 1968).

The last way of using body is characteristic of the happening, and is one of the features which distinguish it from performance. It is worth while to call attention to the difference between Body-Art and performance on the one hand, and the Vienna Actionism, on the other. The Vienna-Actionists (H. Nitsch and others) used body in connection with ritual, myths and archetypes; which is not typical either for Body-Art or for performance².

Let me now refer to actions which illustrate some of the distinguished variants of performance; further examples will appear in the sequel.

The first variant (the individual and its problems) is a compound category which comprises several types, depending on the main purpose of a given action : 1. to get to know one's body and psyche; 2. to save the autonomy and integrity of the individual; 3. the struggle of the individual with his lot; efforts to find the ultimate values and the meaning of existence; 4. actions in which reflection on the artist's own biography is an essential element.

Here are some examples which represent these types : Vito Acconci (e.g. *See Through*, 1969)³; Gina Pane (e.g. climbing bare-foot a ladder with its rungs bristled with sharp nails); Orlane (the artist confronts -- measures herself with -- cultural institutions, like famous buildings of historic value, fashionable museums or theatres,

using her body as a unit of measure); Jean Clareboudt (the struggle of the individual to find the value and meaning of existence, Lyon 1981); Reindeer Werk (Tom Puckey and Dirk Larsen; they involve the audience into actions intended to remove the layer of socially imposed patterns of behaviour, and to reveal what remained of the authentic and the spontaneous); Roland Miller (e.g. *The Landscape of Living Space*, Lodz 1979); Rose Garard (dispute with her own biography, installation, Lyon 1981); Carolee Schneeman (psycho-social problems of sex and symbolic of sex, Lyon 1981); Jürgen Klauke (problems of sex and of transvestity).

Second variant — reflection on the course and meaning of the evolution of mankind : Peter Trachsel and Ernst Thoma, Lyon 1981; Cornelia Balceroviak, Lyon 1981; Christina Kubisch and Fabrizio Plessi, Lyon 1981 — some problems in this action fall under variant 3.

Third variant — critical reflection on life in contemporary mass-society : Nigel Rolfe, Lyon 1981; Klemens Golf, Lyon 1981; Roberto Taroni, Lyon 1981; Marina Abramovic and Ulay, Australia 1981; Heinz Cibulka, Lyon 1981.

Fifth variant — “Fest für Leda”, 1977, by Antoni Miralda and others. The action involves large audience; Jared Bark, “Krishna Concrete”, Kassel 1977;⁴ Natalia L L, “Pyramid”, Wrocław 1979 : the aim of the action is to detect and experience the influence of the architectonic form of pyramid upon the process of dreaming.

The Problem of the Definition of Performance

I have already called attention to the compound character of this concept. This results in serious methodological difficulties which have to be reckoned with in all attempts at formulating an adequate definition; adequate with regard to the present use of the term in discussions about contemporary art. In particular, it is inadmissible to single out arbitrarily only some of the realizations referred to by the term “performance”, and to recognize them as its “true” extension. Such an operation is methodologically sound only if its author has pointed out that the existing extension is not scientifically useful; and that, moreover, the new extension he has stipulated fulfils such condition of usefulness⁵.

The present extension of the term “performance” results from the evolution the art of performance has gone through in the seventies. A review of its contemporary state was presented at the “Third

International Symposium of Performance Art", Lyon 1981. One could there observe that many actions of to-day differ considerably from the early realizations. In this original model a single artist carries out some actions in front of an audience, using the minimum of materials, sometimes only his own body. The actions were simple, of non-professional character. In the focal point stood the engaged experiencing of the artist (which could transmit to the audience), and not presenting or communicating. The action dealt with psychosocial and existential problems of the individual. Often, they were intimate matters of the internal life, of sex and of sex-transformation (transvestity), of relations between the sexes; efforts to get through to yet undistorted layers of psychological and bodily reactions in order to strengthen autonomy and integrity of the individual. The performers of to-day deviate considerably from the original model. A single artist is often replaced by a pair or a group of artists, even though the groups are usually small. Only exceptionally, e.g. at a vernissage, the artist meets his audience directly. Otherwise the contact is indirect, through the medium of film, video or photography, which also furnish documentation of the original actions. The mediation of the contact takes on various forms, depending on the intention of the artist. Sometimes the artist simply is unable or does not want to repeat his original action, and is satisfied with a mediated contact. At other times it involves his conviction of basic unrepeatability of actions; every attempt at a repetition results in an action essentially different from the original one. However, unlike in happening, the postulate of unrepeatability was rarely put forward in performance; the majority of performers repeated their actions several times. Mediation of the contact may also result from changed aim and function of performance. Direct contact opens the possibility of interaction between the artist and his audience; but it can also impede the artist in his efforts to concentrate upon himself, and on intensive experiencing of his action. If the aim of the artist is not interaction, but intensive experiencing, the camera is the only direct witness of his action. In all three cases mediation of the contact implies the use of technical means to register the course of the artist's action. In the third case there appears an additional, important element; it changes the character of the action and subsumes it under a different variant of performance.

Restraint in the use of means and materials, limitation to the minimum, so characteristic of the early performances, were later often rejected. This is particularly visible in actions of para-theatrical

groups, in the use of ballet and music; in street actions resembling carnivals or rites, where the aim is joint experiencing in a mass of people who behave and experience similarly; in autothematic actions with the use of a complicated technical outfit, where the theme is art and its relations to society. Many performances of to-day have lost the unprofessional character, so typical of early realizations. They require professional knowledge and techniques of various domains of art, or advanced informations about historical or theoretical problems of art. Also, the range of themes dealt with in the early performances has been broadened considerably. Intimate psychological and existential problems of the individual have been supplemented by a large spectrum of subjects; their division into five thematic groups has been presented above.

The evolution of performance, as outlined sketchily, explains, why the totality of realizations referred to by this term does not make up a homogeneous set, distinguished by a conjunction of properties common to all such realizations and only to them. It follows that the usual equivalence $A \text{ is } B$ will not do for an adequate definition of performance. To give an adequate reconstruction of the existing use of the term "performance" its definition must have a different, more compound structure.

Before I proceed to give an outline of such a structure, I should like to refer to an interesting attempt by Helena Kontova to give a definition of performance of the equivalence type. She writes :

"The essential thing is to use the minimum of materials (sometimes only the human body in space) in order to create the maximum of stimulation and engagement in an open-structure situation, difficult for realization".⁶

This description forms the definiens of an equivalence definition of performance; at least I received it this way. Kontova has caught in it certain essential features of performance; however, the description does not render adequately the existing usage. I think the extension established by this description partly overlaps the extension corresponding to the actual usage. This means that there are actions which meet Kontova's conditions, but do not belong in the extension "performance"; and vice versa – such that belong in the extension, but do not meet the conditions. Indeed, Kontova's description corresponds most closely to the early performances; although even here the introduction of some additional features would be necessary to narrow somewhat the extension set in her description.⁷

The following facts have to be taken as a starting point in any attempt at an adequate definition of performance. Performance is not a homogeneous phenomenon. The extension of this term does not consist of one uniform set of realizations, but of a family of subsets, connected by only partial similarities. "Performance" is an open concept to be defined partially by a set of partial definitions: most often they give only sufficient or only necessary conditions for the application of the term "performance". Every sufficient condition corresponds to a variant of performance. A necessary condition sets up criteria, the lack of which excludes a given realization from the set of performances⁸.

To obtain concrete partial criteria for performance we have first to distinguish a number of its potential definitional features. Suitable combinations of those features make up partial criteria which establish particular variants of performance. Taking advantage of the foregoing analyses, I have distinguished the following set of seven pairs of opposing properties :

1. The performer and at the same time the author of an action is a single artist — is a small group of artists.

2. The performer (the group) appears directly before the audience — the contact is mediated, e.g. through film, video, or photography.

3. Realization uses the minimum of materials — the materials used decidedly exceed the minimum.

4. Realization has a non-professional character — realization presupposes professional knowledge of some fields and skill in using suitable technical outfit.

5. The role of the audience is limited to perceiving and experiencing — the performer (the group) involves the members of the audience in active participation, joining their reactions as an integral part in the spectacle.

6. The action does not realize any formal-expressive structure — a structure of this kind appears in the action.

7. Chance is not used to determine the course or the shape of the spectacle — at least some aspects of the action are determined by chance.

The first elements in pairs 1 — 7 are typical of the early performances. The remaining elements dominate often in later actions. The active participation of the audience and the use of chance appear in certain realizations, but only rarely; this is one of the differences between happening and performance. Besides, even if chance or

active participation of the audience appear in a performance, their function is somewhat different from that they have in happening; in performance their use is not bound with the intention to abolish the borderline between art and life. The presence of a formal-expressive structure can be found only exceptionally. An example is the already mentioned action by J. Clareboudt, Lyon 1981; anyway, so have I received this engaging spectacle. No particular feature in pairs 1 — 7 is a necessary condition of performance.

This can easily be seen; for instance, it is not necessary that the action be carried out by a single performer, it can be done by a small group of them; neither is direct presence of the artist. The case is similar with other features. On the other hand, one can obtain necessary conditions by suitable combinations of those features; an example is any disjunction of properties appearing in the pairs 1 — 7. This is logically evident in some of the pairs, e.g. in 6 and 7, for one element is there the logical complement of the remaining one, and therefore their disjunction must appear in any performance. Further necessary conditions are found among some negative properties, e.g. the absence of a fable.

None of the features in the pairs 1 — 7, or a combination thereof, makes up a sufficient condition of performance. To obtain such a condition, we must have recourse to the properties of performance, characteristic of some of the five variants here distinguished.

Not all features which were here distinguished or discussed are definitional properties of performance, i.e. properties ascribable to performance on the strength of terminological stipulation. Many properties appertain to performance on the strength of empirical connections. The absence of a definitional property in a realization excludes it per definitionem from the extension "performance". The case is different with empirical properties. The absence of such a property in a realization does not speak for its exclusion from the extension "performance"; it only falsifies the supposed empirical relationship between performance and the property in question.

Some Partial Criteria for Performance

Many early performances, but also some later, actions fulfil the following sufficient condition :

Realization in which a single performer appears directly before the audience; using the minimum of materials he presents some existential or psycho-social problems of the individual, as defined in variant one. The aim is to evoke the maximal engagement in the performer and in the audience, without, however, involving the audience in active participation. The realization has a non-professional character, does not create any formal-expressive structure, and does not admit chance as a factor co-determining the shape of the action.

The examples are some of the actions by such artists as Gina Pane, Vito Acconci, Günter Brus, Marina Abramovic, or Zbigniew Warpechowski.

Further partial criteria can be obtained by modification of the criterion just formulated. For instance, admitting an active involvement of the audience, we get a new variant of performance. We can point to "Seedbed" by Acconci, New York 1971, as an example of such an action. The theme are psycho-social problems of sex juxtaposed with the relations between the artist and the audience⁹.

And now an example of a partial criterion for the autothematic variant of performance. The subject of interest are here the problems as defined in variant four.

Realization in which a single performer appears directly before the audience; he uses a rich stock of means, often a complicated technical equipment, to present some problems characteristic of variant four in order to stimulate reflection on these problems. The action requires professional knowledge about history or theory of art or skill in manipulating technical equipment used. It does not create any formal-expressive structure and does not admit chance to determine any of its aspects.

One can adduce many actions as instances of the above defined variant. Here are some more recent examples: Benni Efrat, film, Lyon 1981; Grzegorz Sztabinski, film, Lyon 1981; Peter Weibel, video, Lyon 1981; Wojciech Bruszewski, video, Lodz.

Here are some examples of a different variant of autothematic actions where only the minimum of simple materials is used: Moguera, Lyon 1981 — art as a factor which refreshes and intensifies perceptive and cognitive powers of man; N. Urban, "Flower Walk", Enschede 1979 — relations between art, artist and society. In this realization comes in the additional factor of involving the audience in active participation¹⁰.

Some critics and art theoreticians consider the appearance of autothematic problems in performance as a symptom of its decay, caused by growing dependance of artists upon galleries, marchandes and patrons of art. Such a dependance, they say, did not exist in the early period of performance when artists organized their actions at various private accomodations or in the open space¹. It seems, however, that this opinion is justified only with regard to some performances of the autothematic variant.

Using the procedure here described, one can obtain additional criteria for further variants of performance.

“Performance”, like other concepts with family meanings, is less useful in discussion and research than concepts fully defined with the aid of the usual equivalence A is B. As theoretical reflection on performance develops, it may become possible to differentiate in the present unhomogeneous extension “performance” one or more smaller, homogeneous sets of realizations. The new terms coordinated to these sets are fully definable with the usual definitional equation. However, such differentiation cannot be carried out arbitrarily. It must be based on a theory of performance or at least essential rudiments thereof; (it could also be a more general theory of artistic phenomena); the aim of the theory being description and explanation of various artistic, psychological, social, etc. functions of performance. The role of the newly proposed definition of performance in this theory justifies then why these and not other definitive features have been selected, and why this and not other set of realizations has been stipulated as the extension of the term “performance”.

NOTES

¹I give a detailed analysis of the happening's features in the paper : *The Concept of Happening*. In : T. Pawlowski, *Concept Formation in the Humanities and the Social Sciences*. D. Reidel, Dordrecht, 1980.

²Compare : Carlo Bertocci, *American Performance Art Week*, Florence, “Flash Art” No 98—99, 1980; Helena Kontova, *The Artists of New Performance*, “Studio News”, January 1981.

³For more information about Acconci's realizations see : Germano Celant, *Dirty Acconci*, “Artforum”, November 1980.

⁴For detailed information about the actions by Miralda and Bark see : Joachim Diederichs, *Zum Begriff "Performance"*, in : *Documenta 6, Band 1, Kassel 1977.*

⁵I analyse the problem of scientific usefulness of definitions and concepts in *Begriffsbildung und Definition*, de Gruyter, Berlin-New York, 1980; see also : *The Concept of Happening*, op. cit.

⁶H. Kontova, *The Artists of New Performance*, op. cit.

⁷I further elaborate and substantiate my remarks on Kontova's description in another paper of mine to be published in Polish.

⁸I give a detailed analysis of open concepts in : *Begriffsbildung...* op. cit.; "Happening" as an open concept is discussed in : *Concept Formation...* op. cit.

⁹For details see : *Germano Celant*, op. cit.

¹⁰For details on this action see : Antje von Graevenitz, *Nikolaus Urban's Recent Performances. "Flash Art"*, 1980, No 94—95.

¹¹See for instance : *Marc Chaimovicz, Performance, "Studio International"*, 1977, vol. 193, No. 985.