

Performance Art

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Performance art has its roots in early movements, such as: “Futurism, Dada and Surrealism” (theartstoryorg, 2017). Before any artwork was presented, Italian Futurists held a series of evening performances during which they read their manifestos. Some of these manifestos instructed painters to “Go out into the street, launch assaults from theatres and introduce the fisticuff into the artistic battle” (Goldberg 16). Marinetti, in his manifesto ‘Dynamic and Synoptic Declamation’, gave instructions on how to perform. The purpose of giving instructions was to liberate potential performers from old techniques. Marinetti wrote that you had to “despise the audience” (Goldberg 16). This is quite a clear origin to performance - it shows a group of people getting together performing, and it shows a base for what performance art developed into. Though this may seem clear, Angie Hobbs, Miriam Griffin, John Moles, and Melvyn Bragg discussed the idea (In Our Time 2005) that Antisthenes and Diogenes in Ancient Greece practiced a form of performance art, and this is true, the Greeks did perform. However where do we draw the line between performance art and performing arts such as plays? Or are they, in essence, the same thing?

Performance art is defined as, “Artworks that are created through actions performed by the artist or other participants, which may be live or recorded, spontaneous or scripted” (Tate, 2017). However, this is a very open definition that could easily incorporate works like plays performed at the theatre, or experiences like the Berlin Dungeons which “Follows the story of Berlin's darkest history through 11 live shows” (Thedungeons.com, 2017) and includes audience participation. Does this count as performance art as well, or is it simply a tourist attraction? What really counts as performance art and why? And why does theatre seem more commercially available than performance? Are we uncomfortable with performance art as a species because of how it exposes our emotions? Because of what it reveals about us?

The definition supplied by the Tate is vague at best. As performance art was only accepted as an art form in the 1970s (Goldberg 7), perhaps it hasn't had time to define itself properly. A lot of art forms do have quite vague definitions, however they do also tend to follow rules and have a time period they

belong to. The origins of performance art are hard to pinpoint as it is hard to say exactly what the rules are, and if there are actually any rules to begin with. It is a very free medium.

The main difference, I think, between performance art and other performing arts, is the singularity aspect of performance. Performance arts tend to only present one artist, and the show shows some kind of personal journey or realisation of that artist. I have come to this idea based on seeing a number of performance works, namely: *Break Yourself* (Brand dir, 2016) - a one woman show based on identity; *The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment* (Pinchbeck dir, 2016), a one man show based on an artwork by Ilya Kabakov showing the artist's journey into space; and *Fear* (Blonska dir, 2017), a one man show based around a journey through life. While this is admittedly a small sample field, all the performances do look at a personal journey - and all included interacting with the audience.

Marina Abramovic, who is incidentally also known as the "Grandmother of performance art" (Wordpress.com, 2012), has created a large number of performance art works, and is probably the best known performance artist of all time. The general public has probably seen some of her work at some point - even if they don't recognise it as hers. Since the beginning of her career in the 1970s, Marina Abramović has been the leading artist in performance as a visual art form. She regularly explores the physical and mental limitations of the body, using the "body as her medium" (Guggenheimorg, 1975). A number of her works have left her injured.

Rhythm 0 (1974) was the final work in a series of 5 works (the *Rhythm* series), performed by Marina Abramovic between 1973 and 1974. These works were used to test endurance of the body and the mind. There are two works by Abramovic both entitled *Rhythm 0*, an installation piece shown currently in galleries, and a performance piece of the same name that took place at Studio Morra in Naples in 1974 (Tate 2017). *Rhythm 0* (the installation) involved having seventy two objects, including "a gun, a bullet, a knife..." (Tate 2017), on a long white table; as well as 69 slides that are projected onto the gallery wall showing images from the original performance. On the table is a description of the original performance piece in 1974. The slides document this performance and the objects replicate the original props used. Abramovic's original instructions accompany the work:

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“Instructions.

There are 72 objects on the table that one can use on me as desired.

Performance

I am the object.

During this period I take full responsibility.

1974

Duration: 6 hours (8pm–2am.)

Studio Morra, Naples” (Tate 2017)

In the original performance piece, visitors to the museum were invited to use any of the objects on the table on the artist, for a six hour period. Marina Abramovic stated, “The experience I drew from this work was that in your own performances you can go very far, but if you leave decisions to the public, you can be killed.” (Ward 2009). Her work was centred on body endurance, pain, and submission; as well as having a social experiment aspect – exploring collective action and responsibility. Anything could happen to her, and as such, there was a high degree of personal risk.

The objects that could be ‘used on her’ were chosen to represent both pain and pleasure, “roses, knives...” (Tate 2017). Abramovic said that this was “one of [her] most extreme pieces” (Marina Abramovic Institute 2016). She wanted to see what the public would do to her, and how people acted when they knew they would not have responsibility for their actions. At the start of the performance not much happened - the audience “played” (Marina Abramovic Institute 2016) with her and gave her flowers. The audience started off kind. The photo shown below (Fig 1) shows her near the midpoint of her performance, and the audience took photos of her. Then as the performance progressed, they began to cut her with razors and push thorns into her. They poured oil on her head. They cut her clothing. “One participant actually licked her blood” (Johndoppcom, 2014). The performance almost ended when the audience members got too aggressive and the artist ended up holding a loaded gun against her own head, breasts exposed, and bleeding from a head wound. The gun was removed and

the performance continued to when it was supposed to end - at which point, Abramovic “started moving forward...everybody ran away, could not confront” (Marina Abramovic Institute 2016).

Obviously a main feature of Rhythm 0 is the audience. This piece would not work without an audience. This is true of all performance works - the audience needs something to react to, or to use as a prop or extra character. I suppose a main difference between performing arts and performance art is you are more likely to be hurt in performance art, as you are exposing an aspect of yourself. That may be your body (in Rhythm 0), or your secrets and intimate thoughts being explored - as in other performance pieces. Your emotions are seemingly always on the line.



Figure 1. 1974, Marina Abramovic during performance piece.
Accessed: 22 April 2017. Accessible at:
<http://stooffi.com/2013/02/marina-abramovic-rhythm-0-1974/>

“Fear” is a one man show performed and written by Gareth Clark, and directed by Agnieszka

Blonska. I went to see this performance in Falmouth recently. This show presents one man's fears though life. These fears are ones we all recognise, "When I was a child I was afraid of the dark" (Clark 2017). This is the first fear mentioned, and it is something we have all feared at some point. We follow a clear narrative that allows the audience to witness the vulnerability of a male performer laying himself bare – both literally and figuratively (stripping down to his underwear in one segment). The show is about constructed fear, and shows this through dark humour and powerful storytelling.

The performance starts with Gareth Clark in a crocodile mask, slithering around the back of the stage behind the word fear. It's creepy, and it seems to be watching you. In the talk afterwards Clark says that the mask was used because he was scared of crocodiles as a child. The mask is removed, and Clark takes on this child persona, to tell us about his childhood fears. We hear about how "everything was dangerous", and how "puppies and sweets were traps" (Clark 2017). He combined fears we all know and remember and lies we recall too from our parents, who told us things like if you don't wash and you hurt yourself, the doctors won't treat you. Fear of God is evident - Clark was "told that god was everywhere and always watching." He interacts with the crowd, making them laugh and sitting within them, but they are not essential not in the way the audience is essential in Rhythm 0.

He now acts older, in his teens. He says he's "afraid to tell the truth" (Clark 2017), and he hides things from his parents, fearing discovery. We start to see him talk about more real world fears, not just the dark - we hear about war. In 1982 he sees footage of the Falkland wars on television, and thinks, "Fuck that I'm not doing that." War is something he is scared of. Of course, as a teenager he is told to be scared of sex and not to get a girl pregnant, since "it will ruin your entire life."

In the last and longest section, he is an adult and life is “all about money.” He laments about mortgages, and terrible jobs that he hates. He takes drugs, dances and talks about how “football and lunchtime save him” (Clark 2017). He talks about Facebook, and how social media always makes it seem like there is always something better going on somewhere else, and how we can’t know who our real friends are anymore. He references stuff that happened in the 1980s again. For example he talks about being scared of Russia, and being told to “think about his future while being reminded that he probably won’t have one” and how the “fight used to be somewhere else and we could forget about it.” Then Brexit comes up, and other politics, and how we’re always being watched and listened to so “They” can control us. Us against “Them”. He’s scared of getting old, and erectile dysfunction, and says my favourite line in the performance: “how disabled would I be if I couldn’t fuck.”



Fig 2, 2017, Gareth Clark during performance piece. Accessed 23 April 2017. Available at http://www.mrandmrsclark.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/T1_2995.jpg

At the end, Clark puts the crocodile mask back on. With his voice muffled, he addresses the audience for the last time. “I haven’t got any children, it’s too late now, I sometimes feel that this makes me selfish because I don’t really love anyone or anything unconditionally, it ... removes me from the cycle of love and hope. Well it’s best not to dwell on it really.” The last line is interesting, it essentially means not to think about it, and ignore it. This is sort of what we tell ourselves when we’re afraid.

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I decided to look at Fear and Rhythm 0 because of how different but similar they are. One is scripted, one is not; one the audience creates the artwork, the other they stand by. One by a male, the other a female. However both address a deeper meaning in society, looking at how fear shapes us. Fear of everything through life, and fear of other humans. Both are vulnerable, both let themselves be laughed at and stripped down to their bare bones for the sake of art, and this is the difference between performance art and performing arts.

Word Count: 2010

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