

Thinking out loud: About performance art and my place in it*

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A letter to Tony Whitfield in preparation for Just Above Midtown's *Afro-Pop* catalogue interview is O'Grady's most self-conscious to that point. Experiencing a lack of clear precedents for her work, in it she attempts to theorize her relationship to performance art and the paucity of role models, and to face the question of the audience for black avant-garde art.

I AM NOT A PERFORMANCE ARTIST

I have a problem with the name "performance." That's what Vito Acconci called the things he did, which came out of Erving Goffman's theories, and I suppose historically we are stuck with it. But my own work has so little to do with "performance" and "self-presentation" that I may soon stop performing and write and direct my pieces exclusively.

If pressed to describe what I do, I'd say that I am *writing in space*. I guess that comes from being trained as a writer (I went to the Iowa Writers Workshop, etc.). But I was never able to accommodate to the linearity of writing. Perhaps I'm too conscious of the stages I've lived through and the multiple personalities I contain. I think I'm also too aware of the interstices between consciousness and the unconscious: I have a dream journal that goes with my day journal, and it now has 175 totally recalled dreams with elaborate responses to them. The fact is, except for the lyric poem, writing is the art form most closely bound to time; but to layer information the way I

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perceived it, I needed the simultaneity I could only obtain in space.

I haven't stopped writing or thinking literarily; but for now, performance is the way I write most effectively. To me, *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* is actually a didactic essay written in space, while the form of *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* approximates that of a book — a family photo album, interlaced with personal reminiscence and ritual. And, to overextend the metaphor, there is a sense in which *The Dual Soul* is a duo of short stories, *Rivers*, *First Draft* is a folktale, and *Indivisible Landscapes* an epic poem. But now I think I'm getting pretentious. I don't know what form *Fly By Night* (the performance I'm doing at Franklin Furnace on Feb. 10) will take, because I haven't written it yet. But I'm already working on a novel-in-space, my next big project after *Indivisible Landscapes*.

I also think visual artists and writers who've gone "live" have moved into a dimension where our native vocabularies no longer apply (no wonder we're usually incoherent!). Visual artists, in venturing out from space-bound art forms into the area of time, are as ill at ease and inept in dealing with sequentiality as a writer like myself is in handling space. And what's more, neither of us has the time or desire to master the vocabulary of the dimension that is new to us. We're too busy "grokking" on the ways the new dimension is modifying our original vocabulary: in my case, the ways in which space transforms the possibilities of narrative. We may even fear that mastering the new vocabulary would make us miss what's most vital and important in the amalgamation we are now uncovering. This is why I insist on calling my work "amateur." And I question whether well-trained, accomplished performing artists who use mixed media can have the common denominator I've just described here.

"Performance," as I conceive it and as it most interests me, has nothing to do with a simple multiplication of media. In its most profound sense, "performance" is a matter of artists shifting *dimensions*, putting themselves at risk by changing their accustomed relation to space/time. For all that dancers, mimes, musicians, and stand-up comedians have been taking advantage of the audiences that performance artists have softened up for

them by doing pirouettes and taking pratfalls in a now crazily disoriented space/time, the relation of these other artists, both to the audience and to space/time, remains the same. Dancers, for instance, who use multi-media are adding new props, but they are still trained bodies moving in space, no matter how outrageously. This is why they offer more audience satisfaction and are more traditionally successful than artists and writers doing performance. And why they are much less interesting.

To me, "performance" artists are explorers, primarily motivated by the sense of play. They leave to others the production of perfect artworks. At its best, "performance" is dedicated to uncovering possibilities, to enlarging what is known about both old and still-unnamed art forms. I think the high point of performance by *visual* artists came in the late 60s and early 70s, with the work of Smithson, Oppenheim, Acconci, and Piper. Although feminist agit-prop performance of the mid-70s was politically exciting, it had almost nothing to do with the disinterested exploration of art forms.

I suppose the reason I still find "performance" a viable mode is that performance by *writers* (and I'm excluding Acconci here) has up to now accomplished so little that's theoretically or artistically exciting. I'd like to discover new lands of narrative, lands whose shape I won't be able to imagine until I get there. If there's any time left, I'll try to explore and map the territory.

I HAVE MANY INFLUENCES, BUT NONE THAT I CAN FOLLOW

Perhaps because I think of myself more as a live writer than a live artist, I haven't found any influences I could incorporate directly. But there have been lots of inspirations. Lucy Lippard's book *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* hit me like a bolt of lightning. It made me see for the first time that "I could do that too." And whenever I read an issue of *High Performance* I still tingle with the original electricity.

But intellectually, the most solid and long-lasting inspirations have been the works of F.T. Marinetti, Tristan Tzara and André Breton. And Duchamp, of course, who subsumed them

all. I do feel that Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism, though encapsulated in art history, are movements the 20th century hasn't come to grips with. And they are still conductive. I know this from gauging students' reactions when I teach my course at SVA. As for me, I never go far without re-touching base with those guys. Fortunately, there's a long way to go before the "law of diminishing returns" sets in with avant-garde literature the way it has in avant-garde visual arts, and to some extent in avant-garde theatre. I like those old guys for their warrior spirit.

Aesthetically, for ideas as oppose to inspiration, there have been far fewer places to turn to. I suppose the work that's been most helpful, particularly with respect to the treatment of dream-based material, has been Robert Wilson's (I've never seen it but I've read about it in depth) and Ping Chong's. Wilson shows what could be accomplished with unlimited time and funding, while Chong helps me see what is do-able here and now. I like the cleanness of their visual presentation, their layering of conscious and unconscious material, their grasp of myth and folktale, and especially in Chong's case, the willingness to take intellectually difficult approaches. They give me permission to do what I would have done anyway. If nothing else, it's convenient to be able to say to someone who's never seen or doesn't know how to place my work, "Have you seen anything by Robert Wilson? His *Deafman Glance gave Rivers, First Draft* permission to be." Or, "Ping Chong is the artist my work is closest to in intention, though not in style." That's glossing it, of course. It establishes a false lineage that makes people feel comfortable and gives me courage. If those others are out there, then I can't be crazy. But the fact is, my work has always proceeded out of its own necessities. I didn't know anything about either Wilson or Chong until after I did *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline*. And I'd never heard of either of them when I wrote *The Dual Soul*.

Personally, though, the two artists who've been most important to me are Vito Acconci and Adrian Piper. Acconci, not because of his work (which I find bullies and manipulates the audience in a way I consider fascist), but because of the guts he had as a poet in declaring himself as a visual artist. Knowing that Acconci had been In the Humanities Department at SVA, had been teaching the same First Year English course that I was

teaching when he nominated himself a "performance artist," and that he had got the art world to take him seriously, was critically important to me. It fed into my own "I-can-do-anything-and-succeed" brand of arrogance.

But Piper's example has been the primary one. Although her "Catalyses" are totally beyond my temperamental capability, they were the pieces that most impressed me in Lippard's *Six Years*. I'd circled them three times because they were the most radical art project of which I could conceive. But years later, in 1980, to accidentally pick up an old copy of *Heresies #8 (Third World Women)* and read her "Political Self-Portrait #2" and discover that she was black, and that her socio-cultural experience was a duplicate of my own — I can't tell you what an effect that had on me! Not only could I admire her work, but here was a woman I could completely identify with as a black/white artist, or as Adrian prefers to say, "grey." We've disagreed with my use of the word "mulatto": I believe in wearing the badges of oppression proudly. But black/white, grey or mulatto, whatever you call it, from that moment, my acquaintance with Adrian Piper and her brilliantly provocative art helped me stop feeling alone. Sadly, there have been too few opportunities to see it. I really only know what I've seen reproduced.

WHO IS THE AUDIENCE?

Work can't exist alone any more than the artist can.

There's a wonderful passage in Heidegger where he speaks of the need for "preservers," that combination of presenters, critics, and audience required for the work to come into *existence*, into *being*, after it has been created by the artist. He describes that group's function as "preserving the work, as *knowing*" (my emphasis).

I take that to mean that it's a matter of who understands the work, who needs the work in order to *be* themselves. Right now, my goal is to discover and create the true audience, and something tells me that, for a black performance artist of my ilk,

this will take a many-sided approach. Because I sense that the true audience may be *coming*, not here now, I try to document my work as carefully as I can. It may seem odd for a performance artist to be concerned with the preservation of the work. But despite my devotion to the fluidity of performance, its privatistic and ephemeral aspects have never interested me much.

Instead, I'm concerned about the future audience of the work, about those who *will know*. In this regard, I've received solace and encouragement from a passage in Heidegger I'd like to quote in full (God knows, with his peculiar diction Heidegger is difficult enough to understand in context, and out of context, probably impossible. But if you just think of his words as poetry, I think you'll get what he means). It's a passage that gives philosophical underpinning to something I intuit. . . that the work requires an audience who, whether or not they are *like me*, can see what I see. For Heidegger, those who preserve the work *know* the work in the deepest way:

This knowledge, which as a willing makes its home in the work's truth and only thus remains a knowing, does not deprive the work of its independence, does not drag it into the sphere of mere existence, and does not degrade it to the role of a stimulator of experience. Preserving the work does not reduce people to their private experiences, but brings them into affiliation with the truth happening in the work. Thus it grounds being for and with one another as the historical standing-out of human existence in reference to unconcealedness. Most of all, knowledge in the manner of preserving is far removed from that merely aestheticizing connoisseurship of the work's formal aspects, its qualities and charms. Knowing as having seen is a being resolved; it is *standing within* the conflict that the work has fitted into the rift. (emphasis mine)

Of course, preservation at this level is difficult for any artist to find. Such *standing within* can only be achieved through the profoundest identification with the work: not just with its form, but with its content as well. And it's precisely this sort of identification that is hardest for the avant-garde black artist to come by. For one can only succeed in *knowing* at this depth if one is seeking to know his/her *self*.

My experience has been that the audiences for my pieces have been typically elite, with a fairly good mix of both black and white artists and intellectuals. But though a large cross-section have liked and appreciated the work, the most multi-dimensional “knowing” hasn’t come from a formal eye or a grounding in avant-garde art forms (although both may be requisite). It’s come from the intellectual and emotional need to find a “home in the work’s truth.” Those who’ve understood the work best have been primarily women, particularly such black women as the critics Gylbert Coker and Patricia Jones.

But I don’t take this as a permanently limiting condition of the work. The problem as I see it is simply that, so far, the context of black art hasn’t been broad enough for either whites or blacks to become so familiar with it that they can cross the barriers of race and sex to seek themselves — the way anyone can in a Jewish novel, for instance, or even in a Merce Cunningham dance concert. At the moment, individual black performance artists are still exotic oddities. But already this is beginning to change. Just this season we’ve seen the *Parallels* series of six avant-garde black choreographers at Danspace.

That’s why I find the prospect of the Afro-American Pop Culture performance series so exciting (even if it *does* include dancers and mimes!). The idea of 11 to 13 of the best black performance artists in America being presented at one time, of a context finally being established, makes it possible to imagine a day when we can stop being unique and simply concentrate on doing our work. A day when, finally, the “preservers” will no longer be “coming” but will already be there.