Speaking of Bodies: Performative Practices, Visual Arts, and Art History

Laura Iamurri

Translator: Phoebe Clarke

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Speaking of Bodies: Performative Practices, Visual Arts, and Art History

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- 1 In *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005), Marina Abramović formulated the problem of a history of performance in her own terms. Her project, which took place at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, planned to perform a new piece after six evenings during which she restaged six historical performances (including only one of her own, *Thomas Lips*, along with works by Vito Acconci, Joseph Beuys, Valie Export, Bruce Nauman and Gina Pane). As Marina Abramović writes in her memoirs, this reenactment was a way of showing these works to an audience who had never seen them, as well as initiating a discussion on the “conservation” of performance pieces and the documents referring to them, the acknowledgement of copyright and the limits of the reinterpretation.

- 2 In 2010, *The Artist is Present* was “an important opportunity to show a large audience the potential of performance: this transformative power that other arts don’t have”¹. In 2005, on the other hand, *Seven Easy Pieces* was the performed demonstration of a real concern for the fate of this crucial contemporary art practice². By intending to propose a model for future reenactments³, Marina Abramović also questioned performance art, wondering if it could be approached in the same manner as a musical composition or a dance piece when entrusted to other performers than its creator.
- 3 Marina Abramović belongs entirely to art history. From her education at the Fine Arts Academy in Belgrade to the majority of her works being displayed in galleries and museums, her whole history took place within spaces and networks of contemporary art. From her debut, characterized by an extreme simplicity and a practically absolute focus on her body, to the sumptuous celebrations of the past few years, all of her work is linked to institutions of art. It is thus even more fascinating to read her memoirs alongside texts that are set in an blurred space, where bodies remain the center of attention but the connections and intersections of performative practices, visual arts and/or art histories develop on different levels.
- 4 It may seem surprising that art history could offer keys to understanding the history of moving bodies, be it through assimilation or opposition. However, it is precisely on the theories of Aloïs Riegl and Aby Warburg that Zasha Colah, the curator of *Body Luggage*⁴, based her analysis of the “migration of choreographic signs”. Even though the play on words with “body language” is obvious, *Body Luggage* also alludes to the much more painful fate of those whose only luggage is their body. Hilde Holger’s story is a good example of this. Forced to leave Vienna in 1938 after the invasion of Austria by Nazi Germany, Hilde Holger was an innovative figure for modern dance. Her ties to the expressionist milieu, and especially to female dancers, like Gret Palucca and Gertrud Tenger, were at the center of the revision of choreographic language, and made her a pioneer of the renewal of “movement art”.⁵ In India, where she lived for 10 years before moving back to Europe, she studied local dances. Hilde Holger, along with the other individuals featured in *Body Luggage*, highlights the methodological questions of this study. Thanks to the dancers’ photographic archives (including those of Holger and Tenger), it was possible to recreate an assemblage of images capable of documenting the work on bodies and on the organization of movements through space. Researchers needed a keen awareness of the visual and historical artistic grammar to study these sources. This is why this study appealed to Aloïs Riegl and Aby Warburg, with their unusual ideas and their otherness regarding the traditional frames of art history. Riegl reassuringly offers the possibility of creating an inherent visual way of reasoning, whereas Warburg’s *Pathosformeln* and their migrations still represent the generative strength of a multidisciplinary reflection.
- 5 The series of studies gathered by Céline Roux under the title *Corps critiques* [critical bodies] shows two ongoing processes in choreographic theory. On the one hand, the assimilation of categories and transmission modes developed within contemporary art practices; and on the other hand an increased trust placed in the physical and mental spaces of artistic creation, as well as in the ways it unfolds, through archives, exhibitions, retrospectives, museums and libraries, for example. The separation between “the space-time continuum of the work’s effectuation and of its reception” (p. 36), now operated by several dancers, reminds Bruce Nauman’s first performances in his studio, which were filmed and shown during screenings at the end of the 1960s.⁶ The very idea of a Dance

Museum, like the one that Boris Charmatz is planning in Rennes, shows to what extent the boundaries between performative practices and the devices traditionally connected with art have become porous. In turn, performative practices question museums and contemporary art, whether it be regarding the use and reinvention of architectonic spaces, their relationship with various audiences, or their attentiveness and availability to welcoming different requests. It is worth recalling that the year 2017 is also the 35th anniversary of Vidéodanse at the Centre Georges Pompidou: much has changed since the first screenings, and performance art is now part of the regular programming of many institutions.

- 6 On an international level, the establishment of the “Media and Performance Art” Department at the MoMA in New York, in 2009, as well as events, that same year, devoted to Simone Forti and Yvonne Rainer, acted as landmarks in the convergence process⁷. The celebration of these female performance artists and choreographers rewrites, to some extent, the history of performative practices. Anna Halprin, Simone Forti and Yvonne Rainer are the protagonists of an important book, published on the occasion of the *Radical Bodies* exhibition, supervised by Ninotchka Bennahum, Wendy Perron and Bruce Robertson.⁸ Through a collection of well structured articles and accounts, as well as an outstanding visual documentation, *Radical Bodies* shows the beginnings and the developments of practices which literally transformed the perception of bodies in the 1960s, and not only those of professional dancers. In addition to the usual narrative, that places John Cage and Merce Cunningham at the origin of the performative wave, *Radical Bodies* emphasises the importance of a sort of “Californian school”, which was built around the figure of Anna Halprin, and where Forti and Rainer were trained. The latter two figures’ moving to New York, the creation of several groups at the Judson Memorial Church, the fluidity of relationships and the spirit of complete renewal in body training techniques, all the way down to the very idea of choreography, were at the root of a complete transformation. Robert Rauschenberg’s, and especially Robert Morris’s, active collaboration on some works staged during the decisive years of the decade, shows to what extent the physical presence of the artist embodied the convergence of performative practice and visual arts.
- 7 This is at the heart of the ambitious book that Elise Archias devotes to Vito Acconci, Carolee Schneeman and Yvonne Rainer. Through the various contact zones between the history of the different arts, she seeks to demonstrate the importance of performers in regard to modernist and post-modernist aesthetics, by emphasising the echoes within contemporary history and politics, which are noticeable, for instance, in the everyday nature of the gestures and the objects transposed onstage.
- 8 With the exception of Céline Roux’s work, which is not illustrated, all of these books demonstrate the importance of photographic documents. *Body Luggage* and *Radical Bodies*, in particular, are based on a collection of images taken from the archives of photographers and performers, the key source of any discourse on performative practices and the tool for the transmission and survival of these ephemeral art forms. Abigail Solomon-Godeau’s book is even more valuable in this respect, as it offers a guide for understanding the photographs and their political issues. *Photography After Photography* is a collection of articles published over the course of the last 20 years, all of them bearing the mark of her acute intelligence and her feminist gaze. Questions related to gender and history are always at the heart of her discourse, which examines subjects as diverse as the “invention” of Vivian Maier, torture in Abu Ghraib, the “cleansing” of Robert

Mapplethorpe for his exhibitions in Paris in 2014, and the passing of time in the work of Cindy Sherman all the way up through its reception.⁹ Abigail Solomon-Godeau continually questions and guides the reader towards an understanding of underlying power relations at play in photography, criticism and the writing of history.

NOTES

1. *Walk Through Walls: A Memoir*, New York: Crown Archetype, 2016, (ed. by Marina Abramović and James Kaplan), p. 298. Cf *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 14 March-31 May 2010 (curator: Klaus Riesenbach).
2. *Marina Abramović. Seven Easy Pieces* (9-15 November 2005), New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (curator : Nancy Spector).
3. "I wanted to propose a model for the future for reenacting other artists' performances", excerpt from *Walk Through Walls: A Memoir*, *Op. cit.*, p. 278
4. *Body Luggage: Migration of Gestures / Migration von Gesten* (Graz Kunsthaus, 24 September 2016-8 January 2017) was organised on the occasion of the Steirischer Herbst festival in Graz.
5. "Movement art" was the name that Hilde Holger chose in place of "dance" when she moved to Bombay. Cf. Colah, Zasha. *Body Luggage: Migration of Choreographic Signs*, in *Body Luggage. Migration of Gestures / Migration von Gesten*, Berlin: Archive Books, 2016, p. 103-144 (ed. by Zasha Colah).
6. Bruce Nauman's notable pieces are for instance the series *Art Make-Up* (1967-68), and *Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square (Square Dance)* (1967-68), shot on 16 mm; and the successive *Wall/Floor Position* (1968) and *Pacing Upside Down* (1969), which were videotaped.
7. Roux, Céline. *Pratiques performatives / Corps critiques : critique 1-10 (2007-2016)*, Paris : L'Harmattan, 2016, p. 245
8. *Radical Bodies: Anna Halprin, Simone Forti, and Yvonne Rainer in California and New York, 1955-1972*, Art, Design & Architecture Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara, 14 January-30 April 2017; Vincent Astor Gallery, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullnan Center, New York Public Library for Performing Arts, New York, May-August 2017.
9. The title of this article, "The Coming of Age" (Solomon-Godeau, Abigail. *Photography after Photography: Gender, Genre, History*, Durham (NC): Duke University Press, 2017, p. 189-206) is an explicit reference to Simone de Beauvoir's book.