

A History of the Ephemeral

RoseLee Goldberg

When Pablo called me in New York on Monday night and he said somebody, I think, broke something and he couldn't make it; would I step in and be on this panel? I actually looked at his list and it says *Myths of Permanence and the Ephemeral*. And I thought, ah, once again they left out the whole history of the performance art. It's a hundred year history, and I felt obliged to step in because indeed we do have to talk about the history of something that doesn't exist. The history of the ephemeral.

In fact, I'm always asked this question: How do you write a book if you weren't there? My answer is, were you at the Battle of 5 de mayo? Were you at the Battle of Waterloo? What do we do with history? How many people were really there? Another question I'm asked in that regard: How many people have really seen this Duchamp everybody is talking about today? How many people have had the chance to touch the wheel? Or have seen half of the things that they study about Le Corbusier? We don't see, in fact, most of these things. We know the language very, very well. We know the history; we have sat through many, many lectures. We have fallen asleep in many, many lectures. We have heard lots of wonderful stories; myths about the people who built those buildings, who painted those paintings. But we have not seen those paintings; we have not seen those buildings. So, indeed I throw back the idea that this notion of the ephemeral where we don't talk about the history of performance because we weren't there is, actually, an excuse. And a very poor excuse for looking carefully at the poetics of the sociology, at the content. How does the artists think? Who's sleeping with whom? Who likes somebody else? What is the thinking behind the making of the work?

Thank goodness for all the last thirty years of the changes! We have now a much more politicized kind of Art History; it's not the dopey kind that, I was hearing, still exists in Mexico, where women study Art History while they find a husband. We don't think of Art History that way anymore. So, indeed, to the ephemeral! I love the quote from Donald (Kuspit) that the history, I will say of performance, is dreams and how to rewrite them. It's about having a good imagination. It's about trying to get in the shoes of the actual people who are making it and imagine what it's like to be there.

So, as Thierry (de Duve) said, and explained so carefully, he has the responsibility of being the historian who writes the theory to give it back to the world, the world of Art History, in an accessible and articulate manner. As historian of the present, of the now, I have one obligation: to delve into what happened in all the present moments of the last 100 years, to really examine what those presents are about. He said, and I'm just taking the funny end of it, that he prefers to write about living artists as though they were dead. I like to write about dead artists as though they were alive. I like to think—I tell my students always when I take them back in time to history—of this or that artist as somebody you are arguing with over a good beer, or a coffee. This is whom you should be arguing with.

Art History is not something we simply can forget about in the American context. So, just pretend that the future is here with us, today. Change clothes! Only remember that all artists should be well dressed. It's a very good piece of advice. But if they were here, sitting at this table, one painter, one musician, one poet,

one sculptor, one lunatic—the poet is also a brilliant, brilliant publicist, with a lot of money (and it helps to have a lot of money if you are an artist!), they would say: wake up! Get the hell out of this museum! They are filled with cemeteries, with rotten buildings, with rotten paintings! Get out of there! Don't sit back! What is your future? What are you making? What do you care about? Where is the future of all of you under thirty? Which is where they address the Futurist Manifesto, where they tell everybody under thirty: wake up! Don't look back! This is what I call early *Drum&Bass* music. They tackled every possible discipline.

My job is to bring this kind of history to life because it never stands still, because it is about a question. We're always asking that question. I'm just going to take you through some of the pictures that all this references, to people who have done things in the past, this work for me is as present as can be. It still talks to us, it yells at us, and it has a lot of value.

I'm talking here to Oskar Schlemmer, I'm asking him how he made this extraordinary, wonderful piece of glass, a costume for a glass ballet. It would be terrific tonight to be able to include such a piece of architecture, body architecture in Cabaret. And I hope we all end tonight's sessions singing "in Cabaret, on Cabaret"... somebody has to know the words. These are the kinds of things I look at as an historical reference, especially when I am depressed, wandering through Chelsea, and seeing all this grown-up art that looks like... somehow reminds me of Paris in the 60s, when you looked through the window but you didn't go into the store because you kind of felt you knew what you were going to have to look at.

Entr'act, an extraordinary piece of 1924 made for a ballet by Picabia with Erik Satie, with Duchamp playing a part; Man Ray was seeing the film. Ways to irritate the public, ways to irritate each other, ways to think how not to be dead in the world. How to keep things alive. To create this wonderful piece of film. You see Duchamp and Man Ray. This leads me to ideas about how we look at history. But this wonderful piece of film that was actually projected in-between the two acts of *Relâche*, which also has a marvelous story... Do we see art like this today? Do we see art this refreshing? "Come to the Cabaret old friend, you'll see what's going on tonight."

So we move ahead very quickly into some of the other images. Again, just to talk about how to think about writing about the history of performance. This, in a sense, is the theme of this very, very brief talk today. It's really to provoke you: what do we need to think about? What do we need to refer to? How do we find a language? How do we find a reciprocal language? A language that enters into this kind of social milieu, this milieu that is also looking for an activism that is also trying to interpret artists who don't like to work in one medium, artists who are also thinkers, and painters, and writers, and sculptors who don't want to be restricted, who don't want to be told by critics, or anybody else, what kind of work they can make.

And a thing to think about, perhaps, in the second half of the twentieth century, performance is really the new figuration. Perhaps this obsession with the body was the new figuration. When everybody else was doing abstract painting, these guys or some of them guys will aggravate the suffering feminist. We are looking here, of course, at Yves Klein in this horrible set of abusive artwork—but very elegant and

sexy. Getting his models and simply slathering them with paint and then dragging them around in this piece of canvas while having a nice orchestra playing. And of course, not to forget, the very interesting, well-dressed audience who are watching.

Once again, you know, the point back and forth here is—and I don't stop at the pure Art History lecture—what happens in the telling of Art History. How on earth does performance get left out over, and over, and over again! And even today, if I weren't here, it would be left out again! We don't know this history. We do not understand how it invades, how it kind of creeps in and how it is often the germ that makes the pearl. It's often the place where ideas originate. Certainly in this little neat and tidy Art History as we know it: the Dada, the Surrealists... ideas often began sitting on the floor, with a good Pernod and some coffee. That's where these ideas often start, and this is the kind of history that I feel endlessly on a mission, endlessly waving a flag to say: pay attention! There is another part of this history that we keep leaving out. It's educational. It's about the world of the ideas. It asks questions. It never settles. It is forever radical. It is always actually very young.

I discovered this: whenever I go and lecture, I think my body is going to show up my age, and it's not; it is all about very young artists looking for another way of getting in, another way of approaching—and not just getting into the high-end of the art world—of finding other ways to express their ideas.

So, back to the concept of figuration, we have Manzoni thinking it a waste of time to bother making sculptures or drawings rather than just signing the model instead, which would save you a lot of time.

We go from that to, again another suffering feminist: Yoko Ono, of course, in the early 60s, making the public think and deal with this idea of what happens when a woman puts herself in front of an audience. (We can watch these views of people coming up and taking a pair of scissors.)

We will move through the images. I'm not going to stop to describe them. They are pretty iconic, and by now I've showed you many of them. But we are looking through this different way of these different visual images. What I really want to end up with today is to say: how do we read these pictures? How can we learn to look at these photographs? The document is not merely a document. In archaeology you take a little chard, a piece of a vase that's found in some ancient room, and people create entire civilizations around it. How, then, do we look at the images that have been left over from performances? How do we not confuse them with the performance but indeed recognize how much they suggest, how much information they carry? Learn to scan them, again, the way you were taught to in Art History iconography, taking bits of pieces. And learn to really, really look and use your eyes to investigate the kind of information we are talking about.

We learn to look these images and say this is 1970, this is feminism, and this is an exploration of the body in space done consciously. This is about the way a woman takes apart a certain kind of methodology and deals with her own individual background. We move on to artists working with their bodies, creating images. Again, let's not forget for one moment that these are visual artists. This is what happens to me

every time I scan through endless, endless pictures of what performance artists have constructed. The starting point is that they are visual artists, and even when they don't think they're doing it, they come up with images that we've never seen elsewhere. Images that really are strange are unpredictable, unrelated to the kind of art in historical Formalism but pictures, nevertheless, that play back into Art History.

We can not forget for a moment the role of performance in creating the kind of work that we are looking at in the last thirty years. The early Cindy Sherman... Cindy Sherman was doing performances; she would show up at parties looking like some kind of strange housewife from New Jersey in 1978. Her early work was about that live performance. She then decided to use those performances to construct very, very interesting photographs, and the rest is history. Photograph, as we know it in the last twenty-five years has become this kind of dressed-up demonstration. The kind of central performance, with the figure in the middle, having nothing to do with the issues the photographer usually thinks about: the dark room, the lighting, and those kinds of concerns.

Robert Longo moving between performance and the drawing. These endless connections between artists thinking in more than one discipline. Artists thinking in the spaces between. Art wants to express itself about different issues that don't come through so easily in a drawing or a piece of sculpture.

As we move through this again, just little notes reminding you of the kinds of visual imagery coming out of the art world in the last ten or fifteen years. They come directly from live performance. The kinds of constructions, and how the whole documentation idea has shifted. We are now looking at artists who are amazingly savvy and have the sensitivity to create pictures from performances. They follow so closely the concept, and yet they still function as extraordinary images. Is this about the marketplace? Not quite, not yet. Although obviously there is a reality too: performance artists need money to make their art, they need money to feed themselves, they need money to feed their families, it won't be on the scale of the other issues we've been talking about.

I would still rather see an image like this, with the kind of tragic politics that Tania Bruguera carries for all of us, and have this image, rather than have people say: "well if you weren't there, it doesn't matter, you cannot use this image." For me this image conveys a massive history with it. A great deal of content that we condense, start to unravel.

To end, we'll see visually seductive pictures that have come out of performance, that have a different kind of formality and, yes, a place—in another kind of way—in the market.

But then you go to China, and you come to Mexico, where I've noticed an enormous amount of performance. And South America. And in China there is someone like Zhang Huan turning to performance, once again, because it's provocative, it's ephemeral, it can't be imprisoned. (Often artists are imprisoned.) It is a way, as Zhang Huan called it, of self-torture. It was a way for him to actually deal with this issue of how to take a political regime. How do you take the repression and suppression and misery as a human being living in Beijing through the 80s? How do you turn this into some kind of artwork? And the tragedy of

seeing this work when I was in a lecture in Japan, just after the Abu Ghraib pictures were first made public! This was also quite, quite shocking. And the last image here called *How to raise a mountain by one meter*.

One more art historical note, because I think it's important. Back to this idea of the old-fashioned style method of Art Historians, how they compare, "contrast and compare" it becomes very, very interesting when you start to do this with performance. Take Chris Burden and put him next to some other full frontal, close-up violence and all kinds of things get revealed as much about these two earlier paintings. By the way were looking at Burden, the two things come together. Or the naked model and the dressed people around the naked Klein. Or in this case, a final image of Rodin and Hannah Wilke... We need to say no more, just put these two pictures together and we start to arrive to another kind of performance history, another kind of contemporary history. One that is ephemeral, and yet demands our attention.

Thank you.