

The Awful Child.

Prefix.

"Perplexed student at art seminar: If you can't give me truth give me facts, and if you can't give me facts give me gossip. "

O.K. this started as a letter until I thought I was becoming a permanent paid up member of the League of Disaffected Letter Writers to Journals Everywhere.

At that point it could have stopped; however a compulsion persisted to address some of the issues raised by both the article "Critics and Doormats" and by the problematic siting of the whole performance kit and caboodle. The issues that bemuse me are twofold: The position and placement of Performance Art in its cultural context, and the language of its critical discourse, the second of which I am already transgressing. However, the concern here is to consider some aspects of the first while trying to keep a sly eye on the second.

An Over-Extended Metaphor

The child of mis-matched parents, Performance Art (named some say by Miller out of Nutall), is heir to an uneasy alliance between modes of representation, the title itself conferred as if the parents (read: practitioners) were hopeful of providing a family background (read: history) which would ensure that the infant made its way in the world supplied with the proper references which at least would lead to an accountable place within the institution of arts patronage. It seems that at all costs the child must be circumspect and responsible, in spite of those blots on the escutcheon (blemished emblems) which feature in its pre-history. After all its forbearers were to be found lurking in the melancholy allegoric presentations of the Court Masque, the Grand Entrance and the Tournament. In these events the dominance of a scenario of Power (even when at the overthrow of Royalist pageantry the same mode is established in "the name of the people") implies both the suppression of meaning and the scopic

dominance of the spectacle, the reading of whose codes provides a collusion with Destiny. Even the libidinous spaces of fairground or circus have been carefully located as fringe excesses just outside the civic decencies of the city. It is both in relation to these modes and in the attempts to subvert them that the Awful Child has had to negotiate a living. In the eclecticism of the times it may have ransacked some of the devices inherent in these practices in order to formulate current procedures, namely in the relationship with the spectator and the quasi-narrative mapping of objects as signs to be read in a spartial sequence, and in the hermetic procedures of this reading which both permits and controls an interweaving of private and public meaning in the architecture of events. The primary rebuttal of this strategy has been articulated by Jean Jacques Rousseau in his letter to d'Alembert on Spectacles wherein he proposes the spectacle of spectators themselves whereby an authentic voice (as opposed to the rhetoric of the actor) would be that of the crowd inscribed upon the empty place. Such are the child's dramaturgical ancestors. Its predecessors in the sphere of visual arts intermingle precisely in this context of an architectural and optic allegory, whose practice was to establish a precise and visually maintained order of representation which supported the ritual distance of events produced at Court, and placed them within a unified frame.

Earlier ways (and those outside Western culture) had been different, particularly with regard to the experience of the viewer. The multiple actions and the piling up of structures which is an obvious feature of mediaeval pictorial convention implies a very different pattern of movement from the recipient, who is presumed to be active within the site. However at none of these times had our child been born. A more immediate lineage is to be found within the confines of the historical avant-garde and the procedures of modernism which lead eventually to both the need to name and thus to define the critter, a problem child precisely because it represents the tail end of a tradition which desperately tries to promote it as a front runner.

Down and Out in Paris and New York (and other places).

"Modernism" might be seen as the production of aesthetic investment in a period of late capitalism and thus as an enterprise which insists on re-defining the speculator as one who not only determines the maintenance of value but also, in the name of individualism, proposes the utopian and non-utilitarian worth of the investment. This currently is an acceptable viewpoint, but one which oversimplifies complex structure of the movement. It is more valuable to acknowledge the variety of strategies which kept modernism alive as an issue long after its short initial impetus, when many of its leading practitioners (Picasso for instance) abandoned its original revolutionary premise for one which supplied a seemingly endless commodity of decorative and interchangeable forms. The early impulse of modernism was to establish a radical discourse with established modes of representation, and to establish a movement with great potential for the critical deconstruction of dominant ideology in the real hope of establishing a non-hierarchical distribution of pictorial means (precisely in the introduction of "collage" as a visual re-ordering which could displace the centre-point). By the mid 1920's this programme had been partially eroded by the re-establishment of the artist as Master, and the master-work as a particular kind of property. The battles of modernism were waged between the determinism of Stalinist and Fascist populism and the liberal belief in the value of Mankind (rather than plain man) and the freedom of individual creativity. It is in this context that the various manoeuvres of dada and surrealism must be seen. In both movements the incorporation of popular entertainment conventions, and the constant vying for a superior position between their literary and visual exponents continued to exemplify an internal crisis in modernist practice. This is nowhere more apparent than in the uneasy liaison between the official surrealist group and the French C.P. It is impossible to ignore the dichotomy of endeavouring to both maintain a closed system of art and a popular voice of activism, which created the need to establish a means of representation where performance could provide a mediation between these opposites. It is here that the first attempts to define a "performance art" are to be located.

However this is to run ahead, since the moment of articulation for the art/life duality was undoubtedly the '60's. Before arriving at the Post War (W.W.II) peregrinations of the art world it is possible to define two main strands of development in performance, the one deriving from those experiments beginning with Mallarme and the location of language in space, an enterprise whose literary strata includes Tzara, Breton and Marinetti. The other strand stemming from the plastic experiments of constructivism and its practitioners early involvement in a theatre concerned with the formal codification of space and movement as a kinetic element in pictorialism. The work of Oskar Schlemmer at the Bahaus is exemplary of this endeavour. Together with kinetic experiments at the Bahaus, Germany in particular provided a climate where the encouragement of callisthenics (a movement which ironically fulfilled both the Nazi criteria for displays of health and strength, and the Popular Front's Sponsorship of the people's spectacle) became a basis for a burgeoning dance movement exemplified by Mary Wigman, who in turn had her example in Isadora Duncan. Elsewhere it was in the area of ballet that the interaction between art and performance became most clearly acceptable to the enlightened consumer, doubtless a member of the audience for "Parade". It is, here, following the example of Diaghilev that the decorative possibilities of the liaison became scandalously approachable. The theatre of the spoken word was more concerned to pursue means of revitalising classics or in the continuation of genres such as melodrama and farce. At such points that it takes over popular forms it is to accommodate them in its own elitism. Cabaret, street parades, sports all became fuel to artistic endeavour which inserted them into the cultural locations of museum and opera house. The use of an unspecific and other-wordly mis-en-scene stemming from the theories of Gordon Craig led directors such as Copeau to produce spectacles of stupendous religiosity which found their culmination in the Nuremberg Rally of 1937 and its coda in the architecture of the Rockefeller Mall at Albany, New York. After the suppression of experimental theatrical activity in Russia, Brecht almost alone of legitimate Theatre practitioners faced the inherent disjunctions in trying to work out a practice which addressed both modernism and political needs. Obviously there are many cross-overs including the area of expressionist drama, which includes the work of Kokoschka for example, and indeed in the resurfacing of allegorical modes within such work. Given the coexistence of these concerns it can be seen that the continuance of the figurative

tradition was one where the performer (who might well be seen to have transgressed the space of the model) was welcome. Above all these rearrangements implied questions about the site of the spectator, a concern which was to haunt the arts until the '70's and which Duchamp was to use as the basis of one of his few public lectures. "The Creative Act" where both the problem of closure and the revisionism of history are acknowledged. "The creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. This becomes even more obvious when posterity gives its final verdict and sometimes rehabilitates forgotten artists". By 1957 when he gave the lecture at Houston Duchamp had publicly given up artmaking, while true to his dictum that work should become secret he continued to construct "Étant Donnés", which when revealed in 1969 disrupted current critical discourse (what could be said of it!) and formed an exemplary work for what became known as "post-modernism". But between the initial concerns about art as a closed system and the endeavour to preserve formalism as one means amongst many in the open market, the hiatus of World War II realigned the boundaries of western art.

The Scattering of the Scene.

The breaking apart of Europe in the late '30's led to the immigration of artists who had in one way or another embraced modernism. Art serves the dominant ideology and in Germany and in Russia the sanctioned mode of representation was again figurative and naturalistic. Britain, both by virtue of its closeness to the European troubles and possibly because modernism had never found much comfort in a country where art was still largely defined by the academy and by the crafts movement, gathered a few of the displaced, but more made their way to the then neutral and distant shores of America. Other reasons than a safe distance made the U.S.A., an attractive settling ground, some of them are obvious, some more or less suppressed. (For example, the implicit anti-semitism in much of British Government policy from '36 to the late '40's). Links had been forged with America from as early as the Armoury Show of 1913, and tours of

European companies and by individual artists in many media had continued through the '20's and early '30's. The popular myths of America were potent in Europe throughout the period, and expatriates were well known in the art circles of Paris and Berlin. America too had a tradition of assimilation of immigrants into the materialist structure of its society. The de-secularisation which is to be seen in the development of American art forms, in dance for instance, may be largely due to this successive settling of the country. The International Art Market, and indeed International Style, was to become well established in the New World. America offered a recognisable and similar form of patronage to that of the major European dealers, art investors and critics. By the early days of the War, Britain was beginning to establish a different system of public support, which eventually in the advent of the brave new world was to be transformed into the Arts Council. Perhaps the most important effects of the split from Europe can be seen in the connection that was quite soon made with modern dance in America, and the virtual extinction of this activity in totalitarian Europe. Lucinda Childs has suggested, in the course of an interview, that this constitutes a central difference in the post-war development of performance arts on the two continents, with America further developing links between the fine arts and dance, and Europe being more influenced by language and the theatre.

Victory in Europe, Victory in Japan, Onward and Upward.

The nature of these realignments and the changes in those fragile balances between the practice of art and of politics, a balance which had been endeavoured by Breton and by such projects as W.P.A. in the '30's - are complex and can only be broadly noted here. But, it is necessary to outline the social and political differences on both sides of the Atlantic since the accommodation of these in the spector of post-war arts brings us to the point where "performance art" is finally named.

The United States emerged from W.W.II., as a vital, booming, political power. Beginning to enjoy an economic upswing which would have been unimaginable in 1939,

the U.S.A. was able to pursue a national image as defender of freedom and international champion of individualism and Faith in the Future. Since modernism was the only art movement eliminated by both Nazism and Stalinism, it became inevitable that the new liberal bourgeois would assimilate it by default (in the pages of Life magazine) as an example of those virtues which it appeared to exemplify, while preserving the existing conservative system. Pre-war interaction with left-wing politics was eroded both by prosperity and by the ineptness of the American Left in formulating a coherent policy to meet this abundance. The influence of surrealist theory dwindled as their presence faded in the return to Europe. In their place an indigenous theoretical basis for an elitist, apolitical avant-garde was formulated to take the place of the now weary School of Paris. Indeed by the '50's the polemic and praxis of the pre-war art-social movements was virtually silenced. The new all-American artists and critics proposed a liberal art of force, spontaneity, and universality (whereas W.P.A. programmes had directed artists to particular social interventions). In opposition to the Parisian virtues of elegance, craft and closure, the New York School expounded the primacy of rough edges, macho style and utopian optimism. The very stance of Abstract Expressionism, that of the action artist, made it a viable front for Cold War propaganda in the name of Freedom when exploited by the political and now powerful museum establishment. The authenticity of the individual artists resided in their announcement of the near impossibility of description in the visual repertory, the world was beyond recognition, unspeakable in the wake of the Holocaust or unreachable in the hope of Beyond. In place of that endeavour, the post-war American arts pursued a practice based on presence, one which was to prove internationally successful in the promotion of galleries, entrepreneurs and government agencies. By the mid '60's the hard-edge school was able to find wall-space in the offices of multi-national corporations, and the macho style had been modified to include notions of speed, urbanity and calculated casualness which mirrored the corporate style both of operation and dress. To a large degree Europe became the recipient of these legacies from Marshall Aid and the dollar market.

Europe itself however preserved its own notions of representation in spite of the dominant

trend. Flattened both physically and psychically by the pulverisation of the war, and beset with both the problems of re-building national identities and alignments these already shattered countries were to be the battle ground for the Cold War. Ideological issues between East and West which had been suppressed in order to overthrow Fascism again resurfaced, no longer however as local confrontations, but as aspects of ideological intervention from overseas in order to win hearts and minds to either major system. Within this context it is not unreasonable to see the links between, for example, the West German "economic miracle" and the growth of collectors and curators happy to accommodate art from the New World, whilst at the same time laying the foundations for a revisionist synthesis between "abstract" and "european" expressionism to rise on the swell of the international market. The freedoms of modernism had in turn become a means of repressing other art practices, in particular the now politically suspect procedure of figurative representation. In the process of re-establishing itself as a legitimate painterly expression, figuration used the live performer as a step to the rehabilitation of both naturalism and expressionism. In Western Europe there arose an apparent post-war dichotomy between the private funding of the arts and the growth of state subsidy. In Britain the Arts Council became firstly the custodian of national "standards" for the established arts, both fine and applied, and subsequently extended to include "fringe" activities. While appearing to offer an open funding situation, this institutional control of means undoubtedly managed to contain the practice of the arts into acceptable parameters, particularly since the real concerns of the governing bodies are little different from the speculative-market gallery. The main difference from the U.S.A. in funding and development has been in the area of theatre, ballets and opera, where the availability of a relative stable economic base has permitted the growth of a large number of permanent companies, a situation which has no real equivalent in the States. However, the price for this has often been an imbalance of expenditure in favour of the national companies, and the syphoning of experiment into stylistic exercises for the revamping of classic texts. The work in these areas has shown a similar plurality to that in architecture, and in both the resurfacing of allegoric devices has been a notable trend, one which should cause no surprise given the framework in which they operate. The literary bias of the work is

paramount, particularly so in England, and the visual elements more often than not are relegated to an illustration of the written work. Even in the wordless domain of ballet a subtext of melodrama or farce remains for the dance to interpret. Indeed it is particularly in the realms of ballet and opera that underlying figurative and expressionist narrative procedures are to be found.

If the reaction from established drama in Europe brought about a vigorous alternative theatre, which included the important theatrical and practical work of Grotowski, in North America the impulse to extend the formal interactions of the arts stemmed more from the visual arts. Even the geography of Manhattan enhanced this; the closeness of downtown urban space made for direct social and working co-habitation. By the early '60's the reaction against the "gestural" excesses of abstract expressionism both in London and New York led to an attempt to bring the excesses of consumer imagery under the control of abstraction, and at the same time led to a bullish art-market both in private investment and in the galleries. The pleasure of excess was that enough fronting and energy (in terms of a fairly general optimism) were available to pursue alternative ways of putting art together. This is not to say that individual practitioners could avoid having to scratch for a living, but both entrepreneurs and the art-public were more mobile in their willingness to accept site specific work and the extension of presence into the realm of performance. In 1961 the equivalent of Oldenbergs "The Store" on East 3rd Street would have been the presence of similar work in Stepney. Together the influence of eastern thought on many of the prime-movers of the period, an interest in communications theory and the spill-off availability of technology formed the right content for happenings and events. Particularly in the still active Fluxus movement was this methodology dispersed. Working on both continents its members provided a link which eventually developed into a steady flow of diverse artists, poets, composers and performers across the Atlantic. (The Living Theatre, for example, brought back to Europe a reworking of much of its Artaudian heritage). In San Francisco and in New York new choreographic developments were being made by Ann Halpin, and by the Judson Dance Theatre, concentrating on non-hierarchical structures, task orientated movement, and non-theatrical gesture; walking, running etc.

Judson in particular, for the brief period of its existence, was a venue where dancers, composers, painters, etc., created a variety of non-matrixed and non-specialised performance. That its particular basis for co-operative structure now seems bound to failure does not invalidate the choreographic discoveries. It does however make clear that the apolitical structure of the modernism from which it grew was unable to sustain group decisions at a point where each practitioner desired to expand their "individuality". It is at this point that "performance art" begins to be named, with the intervention of the performer (often solo) into the art-world, its lofts, galleries, and its publications.

It is time however to question the simplistic view whereby the intervention of the performer into the domain of art automatically forced a closer interaction between "art" and "life" whilst maintaining control of the overall context. Whatever its initial expectations it may well be that the definition of this particular genre within a plurality of art activities has led to a situation whereby painting and sculpture have been re-established as precious artifacts by the very act of separation, the spectator being seen now as one who shops within all the departments of style.

At last, the Christening of the Awful Child.

The growing crisis of containment in modernism and its attempts to include a variety of other means led on the one hand to the need to realign the market structure so that the artifacts of painting and sculpture would survive as original and desirable possessions and, on the other, to the art historical revision of opinion in relation to suppressed modes of representation. It therefore became necessary to denominate a place for that activity in which site and duration were the defining modes. It was thus possible to accommodate the presence of the performer (in this case a non-actor in so much as the role played was of an "authentic self") within the discourse of visual modernism - while as a corollary to this its theatrical enterprise could be defined within those criteria which proposed the re-establishment (however fragmented) of a narrative and figurative revival. In both cases, the dominant institutions for promoting art were quite able to absorb the illegitimate offspring, which was seen to have

justification in history. The common ^{factor} ~~factor~~ in the two families being that of an original and authoritative voice, whether that of a Laurie Anderson on the one hand or a Gina Pane on the other.

I have spoken of these issues of lineage at some length and have largely avoided specific reference to individual practitioners. It seems to me that it is the prerogative of a magazine devoted to "Performance" to fulfil this specific function in the context of those issues which I have tried to delineate. The particular work of practitioners in "performance art" needs to be treated with care and with adequate research and detailed information. It is a sign of immoderate defensiveness to avow that ones relationship is only amongst the partisan. The practical dangers of misrepresentation in an area which (like it or not) relies on public subsidy can do irreparable harm. The issues are clearly not about the constituents of a readership but accuracy of articulation. This is particularly relevant at a time of proliferation in written work on performance. Indeed it becomes necessary to point out that a considerable body of writing now exists on the subject, and much of it is now documented. No doubt it is the aura of a performer/performance which remains after the work. This is contingent on those aspects of modernism which this article endeavours to address.

However I would contend that at this point in its decline the modernist enterprise and its revisionist consorts have indeed made space for the transition between art and life, and in so doing have become a series of imaginative strategies which are best exemplified in the cool appropriation of styles: Bahaus, Futurism etc., in the music business and in the gestural protest of the H.block prisoners. If performance is seen to be the dominant aesthetic model for the '70's, works which literally "took place" and which assumed a priveleged position of the spectator/consumer, then I propose that it is the quality of absence (that bugaboo of representation) which is now dominant. In a post-modern world exemplified by Western Europe and the U.S.A. whose primary means are non-humanist and non-utopian the question of an authentic and original voice is redundant. It is the T.V. screen playing continuously in an empty room which offers a clue for the '80's. In this event the differentiation of categories specified in my prefix cease to carry meaning.

Tory Cairns