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## CONTINGENCY AND IMPROVISATION IN PERFORMANCE ART FROM THE 1970s TO THE PRESENT

In the following article I discuss two main topics: the first is contingency and its role in performance art, or how an accident or unexpected event may influence a performance. I focus not on obvious technical mishaps which result from a lack of experience of either an artist or curator, but on mistakes which have a creative potential.<sup>1</sup> The second part addresses the question of improvisation: how performance artists use it and what it means to improvise in performance art. I use artists' statements as primary sources, and I use concrete examples of performances that have either been described in literature or that I have witnessed myself.

In his book, *Happening*, Tadeusz Pawłowski wrote that "contingency causes an anti-principle which ties various elements of the work; its role is to free the artist from the limitations imposed by the conventions that have held sway over the art process – the choice and way of composing elements which form a given show." He also mentions that "Using contingency is not limited to a happening or event, but comprises the entire field of contemporary art."<sup>2</sup> In turn, Alessandro Bertinetto listed the following features of an artwork: an artwork is unique, like the rule that it follows while being produced; it is original

(new and somehow unpredictable) and creativity can be judged only in retrospect. Artwork is contingent, and its production involves the risk of failure because nothing – no plan, no rule – assures its success. The perfection of an artwork cannot be judged by comparison with a model of perfection (i.e. with a canon or rule). An artwork is perfect if the rule of its production is singular to the extent that it coincides with the work. An artwork is unrepeatable and at the same time exemplary. Other artworks cannot imitate it as a product (imitations would be mere copies). Therefore, there is no such thing as an error in art.<sup>3</sup>

### Coincidence? I don't think so...

Contemporary performance artists, however, are not eager to associate their work with contingency. When recalling a KONGER group performance at Zakład nad Fosą, (Wrocław, Poland, 1984), one of its members, Peter Grzybowski (1954–2013), wrote:

Apart from me, also Władek Kaźmierczak, Artur Tajber, Kazimierz Madej and Marian Figiel were performing. My role for KONGER in Wrocław was about carrying

bottles across the room and slowly putting them into a hanging black garbage bag. When the bag was full, it finally dropped onto the stone floor and the glass inside smashed. Once in a while, I kept bumping into Władek, who was running towards the line along which I was walking. Therefore, the concept of KONGER had many features of a **happening**. The whole action was accidental, sometimes even abstract, but the basic condition of the presence of performance artists during the performance was kept.<sup>4</sup>

So, for Grzybowski the fact that contingency played a big role in this performance could have been a reason to define it not as such but as a happening. The presence of performance artist during the performance was for him the only reason to call it a performance, but the artist is also present in case of happening, so it was the element of improvisation that made him doubtful about how to classify KONGER's activity.

Aiming at perfection eliminates contingency, and performance artists often confabulate *post-factum* that an accidental event or the reaction of viewers was planned or spontaneous. If something unplanned happens during an action which changes the original scenario, fellow performance artists console the artist that it looked as if it was pre-planned. As early as 1934, John Dewey explained this phenomenon in *Art as Experience*:

Usually there is a hostile reaction to a conception of art that connects it with the activities of a live creature in its environment. The hostility to association of fine art with normal processes of living is a pathetic even a tragic, commentary on life as it is ordinarily lived. Only because that life is usually so stunted, aborted, slack, or heavy laden, is the idea entertained that there is some inherent antagonism between the process of normal living and creation and enjoyment of works of aesthetic art.<sup>5</sup>

Removing the gap between art and life was one of the primary principles of performance art when it first emerged, hence actions such as Tom Marioni's *The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends is the Highest Form of Art* (1970), in which he invited his sixteen friends to come to the Oakland Museum in California and drink beer with him. Since 1973 he has continued his work in his studio.<sup>6</sup> A classic example of totally improvised work in which art and life intermingled was *One Year Performance* (1983) by Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh during which they lived together tied with a rope for a year. They confessed in an interview for *High Performance* that they had worked out their own method of communication.<sup>7</sup> The recent and ongoing professionalization of the genre, however, seems to have eliminated the possibility of making mistakes or improvising.

One of a few Polish performance artists who openly admit that they make mistakes during their performances is Piotr Wyrzykowski, who wrote:

Performance art means placing yourself in a situation of stress and uncertainty: designing an uncomfortable situation for oneself so that getting out of it as a "winner" would be impossible. A performance cannot succeed. A performer cannot be successful. He/she may impress but not become a "champion" of a situation. In performance art the most important thing is making mistakes as they build an experience and guarantee the development of form. Performance should not be repeated. Periodicity wears out performance artists' emotions. Gestures become too certain and obvious. The mastery that results from practice becomes an enemy of the "clumsiness" of the language of performance art unless the artist decides otherwise.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, very often a mistake makes the entire performance. One of the most spectacular mistakes in performance art history was Chris Burden's *Shoot*, performed in Los Angeles in 1971. The artist asked his friend, a sharp-shooter Bruce Dunlap, to merely scratch his arm with

a bullet. The audience was supposed to witness what they could normally see on TV. Burden drew a line on his skin, but they never rehearsed the performance. When the bullet went through the artist's arm, he was in shock, but the fact that it was an accident was not officially revealed until Burden admitted so in the movie *Burden* (2016), which was filmed by Timothy Marrinan and Richard Dewey not long before his death. So, this performance art icon was a result of an accident.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, an accident added to the dramatism of Władysław Kaźmierczak's performance *Crash* at WRO Festival Monitor Polski in 1994. The performance took place in a TV studio. The artist climbed a structure consisting of two columns made of a few black cubes, between which glass panes were inserted. He was supposed to stand on top and swirl a light bulb on a rope, holding a bucket with water in the other hand. A video of the police's absurd pacification of a spontaneous demonstration of young people who were celebrating the first day of spring was displayed on a small monitor. A microphone at his mouth was connected to the sound system, so his gasping was heard through loudspeakers. At the end the artist was supposed to jump down between the columns and smash the glass panes, but one of them had fallen down and its edge was facing upwards, so the artist would have risked his life if he had jumped down. The columns started to move apart from one another, so it was more and more difficult for the artist to maintain his balance as his legs were more and more stretched apart. After a few minutes of struggling, he managed to jump down without hurting himself, but the entire piece was far more dramatic than planned.<sup>10</sup>

Other examples follow. Blair French recalls a performance by Australian artist Tony Schwensen, who:

inhabited the space for one hundred hours, dressed in blue overalls, framed by the Beckettian slogan "Hopes None Resolutions None" writ large on one wall, while on another was "Love It Or Leave It" – the aggressively jingoistic catch-cry of Anglo-Australian rioters of

Sydney's Cronulla Beach in late 2005. [...] Schwensen had originally planned to process one hundred liters of salt water through a hand desalination pump, whilst also processing a more internal liquidity – as ever-increasing numbers of empty water bottles were strewn across the space, so rose the levels in his urine containers. However the pump malfunctioned on the first night, leaving the artist with little to do but simply exist in space, pace the gallery, banter with the occasional interlocutor, and attempt to ignore the large numbers of late-night visitors banging on the gallery windows [...]. The initial one hundred hour period was followed by a further week in which another monitor was placed in the space, screening in real time those seemingly interminable one hundred hours again, in real time. [...] nevertheless the forlorn weight of the 'failed' performance (that was, in turn, the crux of the its success) was magnified in this dogged, one-to-one revisitation of a state of absence in presence.<sup>11</sup>

When Stelarc performed his *Ear on Arm Suspension* (Scott Livesey Gallery in Melbourne, 2012), he did not predict that the metal ropes with which he was suspended would spin when his body was lifted. This meant that the performance was even more painful and could not be finished easily, but it also built more tension.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes accidents or unexpected elements are more subtle: during the *Multiple Portrait in Mirrors* performance by Władysław Kaźmierczak during Fort Sztuki in Kraków (1994), the artist first posed in front of mirrors while playing Richard Strauss's waltzes from a tape recorder. When he stood up on a table and smashed a mirror on his head, a piece of the mirror fell directly on the "stop" button and stopped the music immediately, adding to the dramatic effect. Sometimes accidents are more playful. When Paul Panhuysen performed his *No Music for Dogs* at the Castle of Imagination Festival in Bytów (Poland) in 1998, a dog showed up during the piece, so next day he decided to play *Music for Dogs*. Unfortunately, no dog appeared the next day to listen.

Sometimes we can observe an unpredicted “failure” which forces the artist to change his/her subsequent performances. When Peter Grzybowski failed to hit his vein when he performed at the BMP Performance Space in Brooklyn (performance *Code Orange*), he decided that he would no longer drip blood during performances for fear that he would not be able to do so with success. This changed the way he structured his performances from then on. Dariusz Fodczuk makes an interesting point about how making mistakes is necessary to progress in art, which is reminiscent of Dewey’s approach quoted above:

If we narrow down the problem [of making mistakes] to technical or formal issues, the case seems to be quite simple. Mistakes, faults and lapses, even though they are inevitable, one can always correct them, draw some conclusions from them. Posing theses, experimenting, drawing conclusions and correcting previous assumptions is a rational way of progress. In such a process an error becomes a step in one’s development. It is much worse, however, if for example as a result of blackmail, we do not dare to sail into waters other than the ones controlled by those who have power over us. If we are afraid of losing a source of income – a fee, a grant, a job, pocket money from our parents etc. – and instead of undertaking the risk of new challenges or experiments we polish the form and as an effect minimize the number of errors and mistakes – we don’t leave our comfort zone. Then there arises the question of whether achieving such perfection is progress or stagnation, whether it is development or training in obedience.<sup>13</sup>

### **To improvise or to not improvise?**

As mentioned above, performance artists admit that they improvise during their actions only with reluctance for the fear of suspicion that their performance is only a stream of consciousness,

not a pre-planned action. Most artists believe that the artwork must be controlled by the artist – accepting the “dirt” of life would mean that it is not an act of creation but an accidental co-existence of the context of place, time and the reaction of viewers. In my project “What is performance art?”, in which I asked artists for their definitions of performance art and published them at <http://livinggallery.info>, the word “improvisation” did not appear even once in the responses.<sup>14</sup> Also, in Anthony Howell’s performance art practice “manual”, improvisation shows up only in the context of education and workshops (or group performances).<sup>15</sup> Theodor Adorno was critical of improvisation in jazz as he said that it limits imagination because artists then only repeat known motifs. Allan Kaprow expressed similar doubts in *Excerpts from ‘Assemblages, Environments & Happenings’* (1966).<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, who (unlike Adorno) liked jazz, on the one hand wanted to believe in improvisation, but on the other did not believe it possible to achieve since the viewer is unable to distinguish contingency from a pre-planned action when he/she does not know the original scenario.<sup>17</sup>

Alessandro Bertinetto wrote:

For the main features of improvisation – among them: contingency, situationality, irreversibility, unrepeatability – contrast with the aim of creating enduring artworks intended to be offered to aesthetic contemplation that has no connection with or function in practical life. Conversely, due to its performative character, improvisation can invite participation, not only contemplation: therefore, it seems to have a special capacity to excite the audience, moving them to action, freedom and even anarchy.<sup>18</sup>

If we translate it to the reality of performance art, improvisation can be associated with the ability of an artist to react to the destruction and chaos caused by the public when it participates in an action. A good example could be the performances by Non Grata group from Estonia in which they invited the public to destroy

a car, or participatory performances by Dariusz Fodczuk. Sometimes it can also be associated with the ability to overcome the audience's reluctance to interact, like in the case of Dariusz Fodczuk's first interactive action *Game*, which was performed at the Castle of Imagination Festival in Sopot (2000) and in which he tried to convince people to get naked. No one did. But an unwelcome interaction might as well ruin the piece. During the InterAkcje festival in Piotrków Trybunalski, the Croatian artist Siniša Labrović

started his performance naked to the waist, with a whip in his hand. [...] Finally, he started to whip his back with single strokes and only after a while did we realise that the number of whipping strokes depended upon how many members of the audience left the gallery. The public faced a difficult choice – to stay till 'the end', whenever that might be, or leave, because the performance had to end anyway. When a verbal persuasion from two 'ordinary' members of the audience didn't help, two women performers decided to interact. Natalia Wiśniewska (Poland) stood passively behind his back, but when this action did not achieve anything, then Julia Kurek (Poland) hugged him from behind so that he couldn't whip himself without whipping her, too. Most of the audience left at this point, but since Julia Kurek did not discontinue her interaction, the performance lasted for another 2,5 hours. The end of the performance was surprising: all remaining spectators hugged the artist and dragged him out of the Gallery. This simple and powerful action that touched the subject of empathy, also aimed to provoke anger in the audience as a result of the element of blackmail that the artist used. Unexpectedly, the action turned into a struggle to terminate the performance event.<sup>19</sup>

Improvisation does not mean a lack of performance structure or a total lack of "scenario." Since the 1990s, performance artists have also improvised

using computers, interfaces, sensors etc. These interfaces can be complex, such as Stelarc's latest project *RE-WIRED / RE-MIXED: Event for Dismembered Body*, through which viewers directed his movements remotely through an online interface.<sup>20</sup> In a book about improvisation in various media, we can read the following:

[...] hypermedia such as this offer the artist a way of presenting an entity through which the audience has to navigate actively. These hypermedia embody the concept that the audience is at least the co-creator of the work. Members of the audience have to make their own choices, and because they will not be able to grasp in advance the implication of every choice they make, they will have to improvise with the material.<sup>21</sup>

An interface may also be much simpler and operated by the artist him/herself, e.g. Peter Grzybowski used software that gave signals to the artist to perform a certain activity but in an accidental sequence.<sup>22</sup> He recalled his performance from InterAkcje in 2012 (entitled *Evidence*):

The action consists of moving on stage in view of a video camera, gesturing and slowly manipulating objects which I typically use, such as a computer monitor, lit light bulbs, newspapers, books or cans. They are manipulated by either carrying or dragging them along the stage, repositioning them by shifting and dropping them on the floor, or hitting or rubbing them against each other. It is in part improvised and adjusted to the existing environment. The video camera records the action and the video feedback is simultaneously projected on the screen. It is accompanied by a background soundtrack.<sup>23</sup>

So, improvisation may be a planned activity that an artist imposes on him/herself when reacting to unpredicted situations or when the structure of a performance is undefined or is associated with

unpredicted reactions of viewers or other witnesses of the action; it may also be associated with trans-like mental states due to sub-consciousness processes. Improvisation during a performance piece means revealing the creative process, which allows the audience to understand it – to get to know the structure of the action and the idea of the artist. Improvisation is anti-institutional and anarchic, and therefore it is political. By improvising, artists get closer to life, to the social and political situation – they comment on it and change it. To conclude, as Alessandro Bertinetto (following Hans-Georg Gadamer's thought) wrote: "In such improvisational practices, art is intended not as a mirror of reality, but rather as a tool for transforming it."<sup>24</sup>



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> A rare example of a performance art failure which led to a disaster was a performance by Ko Z (Z Hkawng Gyung), *Self-burning*, in 2011 during the InterAkcje festival in Piotrków Trybunalski (Poland). I described it in detail in: Małgorzata Kaźmierczak, "13th International Performance Art Festival Interakcje (Piotrkow Trybunalski + Warsaw / Bielsko-Biala / Krakow)," *Livinggallery.info*, published electronically 22.06.2011 <http://livinggallery.info/text/interakcje>, accessed 13.01.2020.
- <sup>2</sup> Jerzy Luty, "Demokratyzacja sztuki' czy 'nowa wspaniała kontyngencja'? Estetyka pragmatyczna wobec aleatoryzmu muzycznego," *Dialogi o Kulturze i Edukacji*, no. 1 (2012): 99, 100. Translated by MK.
- <sup>3</sup> Alessandro Bertinetto, "Improvisation and Artistic Creativity," *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics* 3 (2011): 90–91.
- <sup>4</sup> Marian Figiel et al., "Polifonia głosów - KONGER," *Fort Sztuki* 1 (2004): 37.
- <sup>5</sup> John Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 10: 1934 Art as Experience (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 34.
- <sup>6</sup> See: Smart Museum of Art, *Tom Marioni: The Act of Drinking Beer*, podcast audio, <https://vimeo.com/37981379>.
- <sup>7</sup> Allyson Grey and Alex Grey, "One Year Art/Life Performance. Interview with Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh," in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art. A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California, 1996), 778–783.
- <sup>8</sup> Kuba Bielawski et al., "Moja definicja sztuki performance," *Sztuka i Dokumentacja* 1 (2009): 72.
- <sup>9</sup> Eric Kutner, "Shot in the Name of Art," *The New York Times*, published electronically 20.05.2015 <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/20/opinion/shot-in-the-name-of-art.html>, accessed 13.01.2020.
- <sup>10</sup> See the video: <http://video.wrocenter.pl/video/od-monumentu-do-marketu/crash/>.
- <sup>11</sup> Blair French, "Aftermath: The Performance / Installation Nexus" in *Perform, Repeat, Record*, ed. Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (Bristol-Chicago: intellect, 2012), 421–422.
- <sup>12</sup> See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QAHagdSBATM>.
- <sup>13</sup> Dariusz Fodczuk, *Przypadki, błędy, pomyłki*, private correspondence, 15.03.2019.
- <sup>14</sup> See: [http://livinggallery.info/web/projects/project\\_c](http://livinggallery.info/web/projects/project_c).
- <sup>15</sup> Anthony Howell, *The Analysis of Performance Art: A Guide to its Theory and Practice* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 2000), 167.
- <sup>16</sup> Allan Kaprow, "Excerpts from 'Assemblages, Environments & Happenings' (1966)," in *Happenings and Other Acts*, ed. Mariellen R. Sanford (London: Routledge, 1994), 239.
- <sup>17</sup> Edgar Landgraf, *Improvisation as Art: Conceptual Challenges, Historical Perspectives* (New York-London: Continuum Publishers, 2014), 19–29.
- <sup>18</sup> Alessandro Bertinetto, "Performing Imagination: The Aesthetics of Improvisation," *Klesis – Revue philosophique* 28 (2013): 63.
- <sup>19</sup> Małgorzata Kaźmierczak, "InterAkcje under the banner of the audience – 14th International Action Art Festival InterAkcje," *Livinggallery.info*, published electronically 07.07.2012, <http://www.livinggallery.info/text/interakcje2012>, accessed 12.05.2020.
- <sup>20</sup> See: <https://stelarc.org/?catID=20353>.
- <sup>21</sup> Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean, *Improvisation, Hypermedia and the Arts since 1945* (London-New York: Routledge, 2007), 257–258.
- <sup>22</sup> About the so-called probability mechanism, see: Tadeusz Pawłowski, *Happening* (Warszawa: WAIiF, 1988), 114–120.
- <sup>23</sup> Akenaton et al., "InterAkcje2012. Artists' Statements," *Sztuka i Dokumentacja*, no. 7 (2012): 114.
- <sup>24</sup> Alessandro Bertinetto, "What Do We Know Through Improvisation?," *Disturbis*, no. 14 (2013): 13.

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