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Going with the Flow

Performance Art and Mass Culture

Philip Auslander

[E]very performance ultimately meets the video screen, where the demystified subject is frozen and dies. There, performance once again encounters representation, from which it wanted to escape at all costs and which marks both its fulfillment and its end.

—*Josette Féral (1982:173)*

To graduate from the art world into real life—into television or into video discs, into feeding the industries that in turn feed the art and allow artists to live on revenue from their own work—has been the goal of many young artists now performing [. . .].

—*RoseLee Goldberg (1984:75)*

These two quotations encapsulate virtually the entire history of American performance art over the last 20 years or so, the transition from the generation of conceptual performers to what Goldberg has called "the media generation" of performers (1988). Whereas the earlier generation was concerned with the body's raw, physical presence, the current generation is more concerned with the word than the body. Whereas the earlier work is austere, often threatening in its emphasis on physical risk, and largely eschews theatricality and concern with audience, much current work is marked by a return to versions of narrative and characterization, and appropriations of the conventions of stand-up comedy and other popular entertainment forms. One of the major concerns of performance in the late '60s and early '70s (the era of body art and conceptual performance) was to serve as an alternative to the work of art as commodity; many current performance artists happily embrace the commodified world of mass entertainment.

The relation of the new work to photography, film, and video is intriguing in itself. The function of these media in earlier performance was primarily documentary—an ephemeral performance would be photographed or taped to serve as a record of its occurrence. This record could be exhibited or even sold in galleries and thus functioned as a sort of commodity by-product of an art form that itself intentionally resisted

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commodification. Féral notes the irony in the fact that conceptual performance constructed its own history by means that are antithetical to its integrity as performance: "With the help of the video camera with which every performance ends, it has provided itself with a past" (1982:175). Today, videos, photographs, and sound recordings, which represent the commodification and objectification that conceptual performance resisted, are no longer documents of ephemeral performances, but often constitute virtual performances in themselves. Douglas Crimp has in fact argued that performance has become the informing epistemology of much contemporary visual art (1984). Cindy Sherman's movie-still photographs of herself, which often reproduce typical screen representations of women, do not document a performance, but constitute a performance which exists only in them. In his early videos, especially those he made with his dogs, William Wegman plays on the whole idea of performance documentation by producing technically unsophisticated videos which have the look of crude documents made on the spur of the moment, but are in fact records of carefully rehearsed events which could never be duplicated in a live performance. Wegman also plays on the whole idea of "the demystified subject," for it is a bit difficult to determine the status of the dog as performing subject in the economy of desire that Féral sees as constitutive of theatricality. Like performance, these performative modes of recent visual art are merging with mass culture and entertainment. Jenny Holzer, for example, is reportedly exploring ways of translating her textual art into the format of the 15-second television commercial (see Howell 1988:127).

The rapprochement between performance and entertainment described by Goldberg has been fairly successful. Thanks in large part to public and cable television, at least some performance artists have gained considerable mass exposure. Performance is a staple of PBS's "Alive From Off Center"; Eric Bogosian and Spalding Gray have had cable specials, as has Ann Magnuson, whose performances derived from television initially. All three also have fledgling careers as film actors because of the notoriety they have gained as performance artists.

Other cultural institutions besides television are engaged in the dissemination of performance as entertainment. Laurie Anderson's performances occupy the cultural position of rock music more than of performance art, as do the records she has made for Warner Brothers. One can see Wegman's videos on "Saturday Night Live," or at the museum. Gray's *Swimming to Cambodia* has been available, in different forms, at the Performing Garage in New York's Soho, in more mainstream theatres, in movie theatres, and at local video and bookstores. Bogosian too has published his performances in book form; Anderson, like Gray, has translated her performance works into both film and print. Work that we once might have expected to find only in vanguard cultural contexts is now available in both vanguard and mass cultural contexts.

This is hardly the first time that experimental performance artists have participated in mass cultural entertainments; even the Living Theatre appeared in its share of commercial films. But the assumption behind such crossovers was always that they were merely expedient, a way for oppositional artists to finance their "real," socially critical work. As Goldberg has suggested, neither the distinction between the expedient work and the real work nor the need to justify the former in terms of the latter exists for the current generation of performance artists (1984). The present relationship between art performance and mass culture is one of mutual support—each "feeds" the other.

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1. Ann Magnuson in her 1987 Cinemax special "Cinemax Comedy Experiment: Ann Magnuson's Vandemonium." Eric Bogosian stands at the rear. (Photo by Paula Court)

In making these observations, I am not suggesting that these artists have necessarily "sold out" or that performance art has become the current equivalent of Hollywood's Schwab's soda fountain; anyone who has ever had to support her/himself as a performance artist will attest to the continued marginality of most performance (see Burnham 1986). Several performance artists have foregrounded their new-found marketability in their work. In *United States,* Laurie Anderson draws attention to "the highly sophisticated (very expensive) state-of-the-art gadgetry" she uses in her performance, making a point of saying "this stuff does not grow on trees." The next segment of the performance sees her negotiating with Warner Brothers Records:

> And I said: Listen, I've got a vision. I see myself as part of a long tradition of American humor. You know—Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Porky Pig, Elmer Fudd, Roadrunner, Yosemite Sam [all Warner Brothers "artists," of course].
> And they said: "Well actually, we had something a little more adult in mind."
> And I said: "OK! OK! Listen, I can adapt!" (1984).

In *Swimming to Cambodia,* Spalding Gray recalls various of his experiences auditioning for television and films. One anecdote, which perhaps encapsulates an aspect of the relationship between vanguard and mass culture, involves a representative from "Late Night with David Letterman" calling Gray and saying, "David wants to know what's going on with that funny guy behind the table downtown. And he wants to know, Spalding, if you could *say something funny to me over the phone*" (1985:67). Obviously

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such self-conscious references to the artist's participation in a commodity economy can be read as either ironic or self-serving.

Whether performance remains marginal or gains mass exposure seems to have little to do with the nature or content of a particular artist's work. Even performance work that cannot for whatever reason be showcased in its own cable television special can still find a home in a variety format, such as the recent "Mondo Bizarro" special on HBO, hosted by Bette Midler, herself a performer whose background includes a long stint on the margins. The relative success of performance in the mass media attests to the ability of a mass-mediated culture to convert almost anything into "entertainment." If a particular mode of performance cannot be marketed on television as high culture or mass entertainment, it can still be recuperated as oddity or freak show. Admittedly, it is hard to imagine Hermann Nitsch or Karen Finley doing cable specials. But given that cable television, in its network and local access forms, has provided venues for such ostensibly antisocial cultural expressions as pornography and fascist political rhetoric, one wonders if there really is a content which exceeds television's institutional tolerance.

Goldberg's conflation of the "real world" with the television industry thus gives a very clear picture of the culture that performance art now engages, a culture in which the economy of mass communications has a decisive impact on artistic production, and in which the distinction between "high" or even "vanguard" art and "mass culture" is no longer clear, from either the producers' or the consumers' point of view. At this moment in cultural history, when one literally can obtain the same cultural object at The Performing Garage in Soho, at the neighborhood video store,[1] at the museum, or on network television, any clear-cut distinction between "advanced" art and mass culture has become untenable. I believe that the situation of performance today is extraordinary, for the recent incursions performance has made into mass culture are not questions of the unannounced absorption of its aesthetic strategies by mass-market art forms, the pattern that the "mainstreaming" of vanguard aesthetic innovations usually follows. Rather, performance works are presently available under their own names in a variety of cultural contexts oriented toward different cultural markets.

Commentators who saw in earlier performance art an aesthetically and politically radical alternative to both theatre and mass entertainment are discouraged by these flirtations of performance art with commodity culture. Linda Frye Burnham takes solace in the idea that there are still "performance artists of all generations who oppose theatrical and cabaret performance," whose "work cannot be termed entertainment in any traditional sense (nor can it be easily consumed, digested, and swallowed by the Conspiracy)" (1986:45–46). Ultimately, Burnham argues, performance can retain its integrity only by choosing to remain on the margins. Burnham's idealism is admirable, and might lead one to conclude that postmodernist performance work like Anderson's and Gray's simply lends itself too easily to cooption to be taken seriously as alternative art.

But, as Jeanie Forte observes in a recent essay on feminist performance art, even performers who do not exactly "go commercial," whose work would seem far too radical to be coopted easily, and who have not achieved anything like the degree of mass cultural acceptance that Anderson and Gray have, can find themselves in a compromised position as soon as they venture even a short distance from the margin. Forte cites Karen Finley, whose "being catapulted into a higher degree of visibility hastened her

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assimilation into a more commercial audience. In venues other than New York, beer-drinking fraternity boys came to see the naked woman shove yams up her ass and throw obscenities at the crowd. Her work became reinscribed in the fetishistic process associated with striptease or live sex, and not at all the feminist or subversive strategy that theory might endorse" (1988:234). What is the limit past which marginality gives way to marketability? The questions Forte poses are important ones for those concerned with the practical politics of performance:

> [J]ust how much does the work retain any potentially subversive impact once it has achieved commercial viability? To what extent do those commercial endorsements render any radical politics impossible? Yet, if performance artists are doomed to relative obscurity, playing only to audiences of "the converted," how will societal consciousness be raised (or abrased) on a larger scale? Should this even be a conscious goal? (1988:234).

These questions admit no easy answers. It is equally facile, and equally incorrect, to insist that performance work automatically loses its subversive potential (if it can ever be said to have possessed such potential) when it enters a mass cultural context as to insist that its new-found position inside of mass culture places performance art in the perfect posture to undermine it from within. In any case, as Forte also points out, performance artists themselves welcome their new opportunities: the general trend in performance art at the moment is away from the margins, toward greater exposure. "In general, the mid 1980s has brought about a regrouping, perhaps in response to a reactionary political climate, perhaps in the perceived failure of 1970s strategies to achieve more measurable, visible effects" (1988:233).

It may be that the questions Forte poses must be addressed from a new perspective. The assumptions underlying Burnham's and Forte's observations derive from the traditional theoretical opposition of vanguard culture and mass culture which sees mass culture as necessarily "hegemonic" and only vanguard culture as potentially "non-" or "counterhegemonic."[2] As Dana Polan, Tania Modleski, Andreas Huyssen, and others have argued in detail recently, such a dichotomy ignores the fact that there are few distinctions one can make at the levels of form, content, even, possibly, ideology between current vanguard and mass-cultural work. So, on the one hand, a "highly mainstream artform" such as television may bear "the very same formal traits which are often taken to constitute a challenge to the mainstream" (Polan 1986:170)—disruption of narrative, refusal of closure, etc.

On the other hand, mass culture itself has emerged as a site of possible resistance to the mainstream. In her essay on slasher films, for example, Tania Modleski observes that certain forms of mass culture are becoming "increasingly adversarial": "Many of these films are engaged in an unprecedented assault on all that bourgeois culture is supposed to cherish—like the ideological apparatuses of the family and the school" (1986:158). One striking example of mass culture serving a valuable political function, though not precisely an adversarial one, is Huyssen's account of the impact of the American television miniseries "Holocaust" when it was broadcast in West Germany. In Huyssen's view, "Holocaust," which many American viewers saw as trivializing the historical events it represented by conveying them in the limited, sensationalistic format of the miniseries,

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enabled Germans to confront their history in a way that previous, more experimental dramas had not succeeded in doing (1986:94–114).

We should hesitate, therefore, before concluding that entrance into a mass-cultural context is in and of itself a sign that performance art is compromised as a critical practice. Indeed, several critics writing on the performance artist who has had the greatest success in the mass-cultural context, Laurie Anderson, point, admittedly somewhat hesitantly, to a progressive content in her work. Forte entertains the possibility that "Anderson's gender-bending appearance and performance style continues to evoke a deconstructive process, however subliminal" (1988:234). Craig Owens argues that in *United States,* Anderson momentarily effects communication between "divergent series"—male and female, emission and reception, sexuality and language. Owens stresses the fragility of this communication, but concludes that it is "at least [. . .] a beginning" (1984a:55). Fred Pfeil also sees, in a different moment of *United States,* a fragile, momentary emergence of "a new sense, a new kind of relationship to the Real, which neither I nor Laurie Anderson nor anyone else in the hall was as yet able to live or name" (1988:400). The emphasis on subliminality, the taking of first steps, and the value of a single moment in these descriptions signals the difficulty of assessing the political potential of postmodern performance, the sense that we may require a new concept of the political in art to make sense of this work.

One reason for this difficulty is that these descriptions are all based on the traditional critical procedure of reading a single work for its political or social content, in relation, perhaps, to a real or imagined audience, but separate from the cultural context in which the work itself appears (Huyssen's account of "Holocaust" in Germany points up the importance of one kind of contextual study). Polan has recently suggested that such a procedure is itself inadequate to grasp today's cultural reality, noting that:

> [W]e need to understand how each text, and each moment in each text, is part of a larger *intertextuality*—pieces in a montage that robs each piece of any enduring sense or value. In this perspective, each part of mass culture needs to be studied as part of that flow that Raymond Williams suggested was part of the specific operation of commercial television. Flow involves the transcendence of meaningful units by a system whose only meaning is the fact of its global non-meaning (1986:183).[3]

Here, Polan invokes Raymond Williams's well-known concept of "flow," which Williams considers "the central television experience" (1974:95). Williams suggests that there are three levels of flow on television: the overall flow of an evening's programming on all available sources; the flow of images and topics, including any commercials and announcements that may appear, during a particular period of time on a particular programming source; and the flow of specific words and images within any programming sequence, again including commercials and announcements (1974:86–118). Williams indicates that the effect of flow can be disorienting: the interposition of "real" and "fictional" images (news items interspersed with commercials, for example); the appearance of the same visual styles, even the same actors, in both programs and commercials; and the intercutting of scenes from different films, can blur critical distinctions (1974:91–92). Jane Feuer, who emphasizes that television narratives cannot be seen as self-enclosed narratives separate from the overall flow of pro-

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gramming, provides a further example of the disorienting potential of flow: tie-ins between television movies and news programs, in which an issue treated as fiction in a movie may be followed by a news program which treats the same issue as real (1986:105).

Williams has recently reemphasized the impact of flow upon the content and meaning of the individual work: "I have always argued that [commercials] don't interrupt the programs, they help to constitute them" (in Heath and Skirrow 1986:15). While watching the network telecast of the film *The Killing Fields* recently, I was struck by a sequence in which a segment of the film ended as the main character, the Cambodian Dith Pran, who was doing enforced agricultural labor under the watchful eye of the Khmer Rouge, grabbed surreptitiously at a tiny lizard, which he killed and stored away to eat later. This moment was followed by a commercial for breakfast cereal. Clearly, the meaning that emerges from such a sequence is neither that of the film nor that of the commercial, nor the sum of the two meanings. It is also not at all clear that the commercial simply supercedes the film in meaning, or that the meaning of the entire sequence is that television can convert anything into a sales pitch. Rather, the sense of the sequence is relational: the meaning (or, more likely, *meanings*) lie in the juxtaposition of two very different discourses. Polan carries Williams's concept of flow beyond its application to television, suggesting that it may serve as a good description of our culture as a whole, a culture in which any particular cultural manifestation is part of an extended and disorienting "montagist social text" (1986:183), a culture whose blurring of distinctions extends out from television programming to encompass entire cultural discourses. This is the culture *of* television understood *as* television, a culture defined in large part by the impact of mass media. Richard Schechner has codified that impact in a way that accords with Williams's and Polan's observations: "A world that was securely positional is becoming dizzyingly relational" (1985:322).

It may, then, be worthwhile to try to understand postmodern performance as part of the dizzyingly intertextual mass culture it seems determined to enter, rather than as a set of individual texts which somehow respond to social contexts from which they are detached. Most often, performance art is discussed in a "high art" context, usually as part of the history of visual art; more occasionally, as part of the history of theatre. In the remainder of this essay, I would like to sketch a few ideas that result from seeing current performance art as a form of mass culture which, like the culture it is part of, has taken on some of the salient characteristics of mass media, especially television, in its modes of discourse, and in its relation to other cultural discourses. I chose, for several reasons, to focus on the work of Laurie Anderson and Spalding Gray, whose work exemplifies the "crossover" from vanguard to mass cultural status that many current performance artists seem to hope for. Both Anderson and Gray possess impeccable "downtown" credentials, yet have achieved a significant level of success on television and in other mass-cultural arenas. The relationship between their work and television is not obvious at the level of content, as it is in the work of, say, Ann Magnuson or Eric Bogosian, whose relationship to television and other mass media is largely one of image appropriation, often with satiric or parodic intent. That Anderson and Gray work in different, in some ways opposing, styles permits me to make some generalizations about postmodern performance art without limiting those generalizations to one type of performance or to treat the polyglot term "performance art" monolithically.

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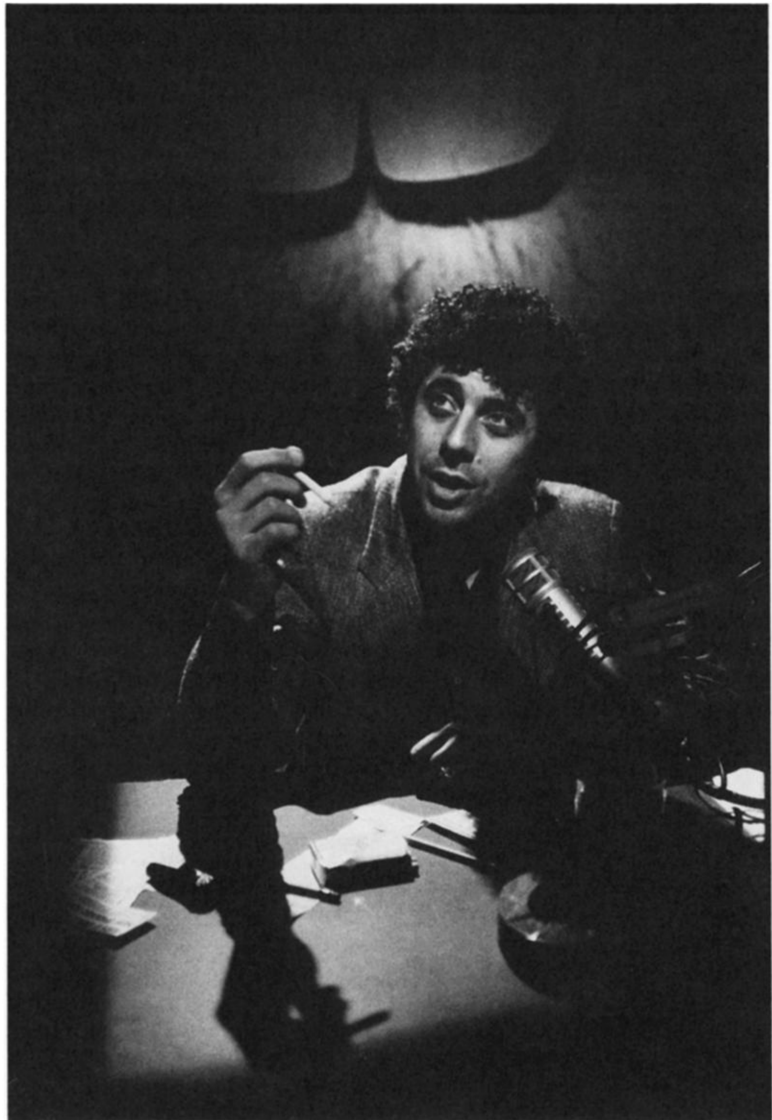

2. Eric Bogosian, a performance artist whose images are often appropriated from television and other mass media, in his 1987 Talk Radio *at the Public Theatre in New York. (Photo by Paula Court)*

Consider the following description of a performance:

> Each individual bit [. . .] may have a certain sense, a certain message [. . .], but the whole effect of the show comes from the incongruous confrontation of each bit with the other, the ongoing flow that forces each scene to give way to the next.

Taken out of context, this passage sounds like a description of a Wooster Group or Squat Theatre performance, even of a piece by Robert Wilson or Richard Foreman, or perhaps of a Laurie Anderson concert. In fact, it is Polan's description of "The Tonight Show" (1986:182). As Polan emphasizes, the meaning or content of any particular segment within the flow is subsumed by the whole experience, which is indeterminate in meaning, or perhaps finally meaningless. This seems to constitute a useful description

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of the discursive strategies of much performance art—Féral in fact defines performance as "the absence of meaning" (1982:173).

The relation of any individual image to the whole of an Anderson performance could be characterized by the concept of flow, even in the way longer segments are punctuated by shorter ones. Owens has described Anderson's work in terms very similar to the succession of images, each meaningful in itself, that yield to a larger sense of meaninglessness in Polan's description of "The Tonight Show": "[Anderson] is not concerned with ambiguity, with multiple meanings engendered by a single sign; rather, two *clearly defined but mutually incompatible* readings are engaged in blind confrontation in such a way that it is impossible to choose between them" (Owens 1984b:219–20).[4] Pfeil analyses Anderson's song, "O Superman," in related terms:

> [T]he lyrics of "O Superman" and the electronically distorted timbres of Laurie Anderson's voice alter abruptly, without transition. [. . .] Despite these inexplicable shifts in speaker and tone, we may sense the slim possibility of a narrative of sorts, but Anderson is an expert at tempting us with such mirages and then erasing them (1988:386).

If the discursive structure of an Anderson performance can be compared with that of a television talk show, the narrative structure of Gray's monologs is very close to that of the television serial. Like the typical serial, the recent monologs feature a central couple, Gray himself and Renée Shafransky. The recurrence of these characters makes it possible to follow the successive monologs the way one might follow the lives and adventures of a couple on one's favorite soap opera. Like those on the nighttime soap, these characters are essentially static; as Feuer notes of characters on continuing dramatic serials, "they perpetuate the narrative by continuing to make the same mistakes" (1986:112–13). Spalding is always afraid of commitment, seeking out utopias in unlikely places, naive in practical, worldly matters. Renée, on the other hand, seems always to be demanding commitment of one kind or another, trying to keep Spalding grounded in the real world, and far more aggressive and pragmatic in her dealings with that world than he is. As a couple, Spalding and Renée seek what every television serial couple seeks—"integration into a happy family"—but the need to continue the flow of narrative prevents the story from ever achieving any kind of stable closure (Feuer 1986:113). The possibility that these characters will ring yet one more change on their characteristic behaviors in yet another somewhat different set of circumstances must always remain open, accessible to the flow, conducive to "television's dual ideological compulsions: the need to repeat and the need to contain" (Feuer 1986:114).

Anderson's quasi- or antinarrative structures strongly resemble the flow of television programming in their successive negation of stable meanings and in their creation of an "endless antivista of unrelated presences, surfaces, voices, in an autoreferential succession without consequence" (Pfeil 1988:386). Gray's more straightforward narrative style, like the television serial, remains static and essentially conservative in that it permits no change in the characters or their basic relations. However, we cannot ignore the different circumstances under which information and narrative are presented in television and performance art. Unlike television, "live" performance is still framed by its occasional nature: we have to go somewhere to see Anderson or Gray in person, and the experience is bounded

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by that specific effort. Live performance is not continuous with our everyday experience the way television, whose flow of programming spills over into "household flow," can be (see Altman 1986). However, this frame has been rendered porous by the spillover of performance art into cultural settings other than the live performance. Anderson's and Gray's respective live performances exist side by side with the films, videotapes, records, and books derived from them—each object takes its place in the overall *cultural* flow described by Polan.

As Polan suggests, this flow robs each individual object of its specific value and meaning; when the same object is available in several mediated forms, the meaning of each one as an experience is likely to derive from its relation to another. When I referred above to the recordings and books as "derived from" the live performances, I was privileging the live performance as the origin and source of the other cultural objects, to which they inevitably refer. It is not at all clear, however, that such a privileging accords with the cultural facts. One assumes that a spectator might buy the book in order to be reminded of the live performance, but in the case of *Swimming to Cambodia,* the spectator might buy the book in order to be reminded of the film, or vice versa, referring one mediated version of the performance to another. The fact that Gray's transcribed monologs have been reviewed as literature suggests that their link back to performance is not necessarily irrevocable.

Discussing the relationship between rock concerts and recordings, Adam Parfrey has argued that "the live concert recapitulates and reemphasizes the recorded text (which must have an *a priori* existence if the concert is to be successful). [. . .] The live concert, then, supports the recorded text, advertises its presence, and holds congregation with the text's believers" (1985:218). Parfrey is right about rock concerts. Presumably Anderson, whose recordings resulted from her performances, has already encountered audiences whose primary interest is in a reification of her recorded texts. It is not, however, implausible that Gray, whose performances do not occur within the cultural context of the rock concert, has encountered audiences whose interest in his performance derives from their experience of Gray on film or videotape, or in print, and who also see the live performance as a reification of a recorded one. In such cases, the traditional privileging of the "original," "live" performance over its "adaptations" is reversed and undermined: the recorded performance has become the referent of the live one.

Unlike the television executive who wanted Gray to be funny over the phone, I am not suggesting that there is no difference between Anderson or Gray live and in mediated form, only that the live performance has no greater or different cultural authority than its "adaptations."[5] I would further argue that in the marketplace of cultural commodities, the live performance and the tape, despite their phenomenological differences, do have fundamentally the same thing to sell: the performer's persona. Here is another link with television, which depends for its authority on persuasive personae, like the "personalities" on talk and game shows, and most particularly, on the news (see Morse 1986 and Schechner 1985). Here again Anderson's and Gray's respective artistic practices are quite different: the persona Gray has created through his performances is overtly autobiographical, narcissistic, possessed of a defined personality. Anderson's persona, on the other hand, is a nonpersona, a straight-man or, as she has said herself, a "moderator between things" (quoted in Rockwell 1983:126). These personae are not confined to the performance context, or even to its adaptations, but are highly mobile within the cultural flow.

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Anderson has moderated on KCTA's "Alive From Off Center" as well as in her own performances. On the television program, she has appeared accompanied by a short, male, bearded character (played by Anderson herself) whom she describes as her "video clone"—the television equivalent of the electronic distortions of her own voice that she uses in her concerts and recordings. Gray has demonstrated the mobility of a performance persona more extensively. The Gray persona can crop up anywhere—as character and narrator in Gray's monologs, whether live or recorded; as a television or film actor (I would insist here that when we see Gray acting on television or in film, what we are seeing is the Gray persona as actor); as a character in, and the author of, a book. When Gray reviewed the writings of another monologist, Garrison Keillor, for the *New York Times Book Review,* his persona as reviewer was an extension of his performance persona: the scene of the review, a dispute between Spalding and Renée over the value of Keillor's work, is entirely continuous with the scene of the monologs (Gray 1987). In this regard, the Gray persona is no different from that of Pee Wee Herman, who has appeared alternately as a character in live performances, the host of a well-received children's television program, the occasional host of a late-night interview program for adults, an actor and a character in films and videotapes (as with Gray, when Pee Wee Herman acts, it is the persona who acts), the subject of numerous interviews, and a "real-life" contestant on "The Dating Game."

The blending of real and fabricated personae and situations that occurs when performance personae assume the same functions as "real" people in the media has much the same disorienting effect as the flowing together of various levels and types of meanings on television, but on a larger scale. One effect of this flow is that the differences between live and mediated performance have been destabilized, especially for an audience which can obtain the same cultural objects and commodities (e.g., performance personae) in live or mediated forms, or both. In a discussion of the relation of television to live performance and the social realm, Schechner predicts that "There will be more 'in-between' performative genres. In-between is becoming the norm: between literature and recitation; between religion and entertainment; between ritual and theatre" (1985:322). Postmodern per-

3. Laurie Anderson and her video clone introducing a performance for KCTA's "Alive From Off Center." (Photo from video by Paula Court)

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formance is already between vanguard art and mass culture; is it too much to suggest that it can also be between live and mediated performance, at least from the point of view of an audience for which, as Parfrey would have it, the mediated experience is increasingly the referent for the direct one? The further performance art ventures into the realm of mass culture, the more this promises to be the case. It is no longer simply a question of whether or not to go on TV—one may already be there, even in live performance.

So far, my analysis probably has not warmed the hearts of those who are disturbed by performance art's entry into mass culture, for I seem to be suggesting not only that performance has found its way into commodity culture, but that it has become a discourse almost indistinguishable from other mass cultural discourses. Above all, I have suggested that performance's most defining characteristic, its presence or "liveness" (Goldberg refers to performance as "live art"), is on the verge of being subsumed within a cultural flow that renders the distinction between live and mediated performance virtually irrelevant. I do not in any way dismiss such concern, but only reiterate my earlier point that mass culture is no more necessarily repressive than vanguard culture is necessarily liberating.

I shall attempt, however, to recuperate a small space within performance art as a mass cultural discourse as the space of a potentially critical practice. To do this, I shall refer to Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of mass media, discussed in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960). Using the radio broadcast as his example, Sartre emphasizes the ability of mass media to isolate the subject (in this case, the listener). The mass media create collectives in the form of audiences, but the relation of each member of these collectives to each other is a relation of absence rather than presence, despite their common participation in the collective:

> [T]he mere fact of *listening to the radio*, that is to say, of listening to a particular broadcast at a particular time, establishes a serial relation of *absence* between the different listeners. In this way, the practico-inert object not only produces a unity of individuals outside themselves in inorganic matter, but also determines them in separation and, in so far as they are separate, ensures *their communication through alterity* (and the same applies to all mass media) (1960:271).

The mass-media audience exists as a collective only by virtue of each individual member's relation to the medium; that relation in itself ensures that the collective will never be more than a grouping of isolated individuals whose only common bond is their relation to the medium, and who will never be able to respond collectively to the medium. "In this way, the voice [on the radio] becomes *vertiginous* for everyone: it is no longer anyone's voice (even if the broadcaster is named), since reciprocity has been destroyed" (1960:274). Just as the relationships amongst the individuals who make up the media audience will always be defined by separation, so the relation of any individual to the medium itself is one of alterity, regardless of whether or not she agrees with the message being conveyed. Even those who agree with the message will always hear the radio voice as the voice of an Other, just as they can only conceive of their fellow members of the media audience as absent Others (1960:274–75).[6]

At first glance, one might suppose that Sartre's description has little to do with performance art, again because it is a live medium. The audience at an Anderson or Gray performance resembles the traditional theatre audi-

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ence—a group of people assembled at the same place, at the same time, theoretically capable of responding to the performance in a way that Sartre's serialized media audience is not.[7] While the point is well taken, it is also contingent. For example, the rock concert audience, for whom the referent of the experience is a recording, recapitulates an experience of absence and alterity through an experience one might traditionally have assumed is an experience of presence. Sartre defines presence "as the maximum distance permitting the immediate establishment of relations of reciprocity between two individuals" (1960:270). No matter how physically close two individuals are, theirs is not a relation of presence unless reciprocity is possible. Clearly, no reciprocity is possible between a performer and an audience that perceives the performer's presence primarily as a reminder of his absence, or amongst members of such an audience. Nor is it clear that the work itself promotes reciprocity. Pfeil has described postmodern art (drawing examples from the work of Anderson, Robert Wilson, Talking Heads, and Philip Glass) as creating "a closed solipsistic universe," arguing that the manipulation of codes characteristic of such art leaves the spectator with two possible routes of understanding:

> We may allow ourselves to drift into that space and accept its mutating babble as the very image of consciousness; or we may confront that same babble [. . .] as a distilled representation of the whole antagonistic, voracious world of Otherness, engaged in an endless struggle to engulf, colonize, and devour the self, to scribble its graffiti on our every surface, to precode and appropriate the spot of Being that still permits us to stand. [. . .] But the result of either point of view is that experience becomes a matter of *pure internality* (1988:385).

Like Sartre's mass-media audience, whose collectivity is defined by the very agency which guarantees the failure of the collective, the audience of postmodern art is engaged in a collective experience which converts even the experience of collectivity itself into an experience of isolating internality. I believe that it is this lack of reciprocity in postmodern performance—understood as a relation between audience and performance, not literally as the audience's ability to "talk back" to the performers—that Schechner finds so disappointing in his account of postmodern performance work in "The Decline and Fall of the (American) Avant Garde" (1982:27–29).

The figures on the stage in Anderson's and Gray's works are themselves representations of alterity. In his description of the voice on the radio quoted above, Sartre notes that "the voice becomes *vertiginous* for everyone: it's no longer anyone's voice (even if the broadcaster is named), since reciprocity has been destroyed. [. . .] it produces me as an inert member of a series and as Other in the midst of Others [. . .]" (1976:274). There is no better representation of this social effect and its relation to mediatization than Anderson's use of electronics to distort her own voice into those of her characters. These voices are no longer her own, yet they do not belong to an identifiable Other—they belong to no one; Anderson's voice becomes vertiginous even for herself. Anderson becomes both the radio voice and the listening subject: no reciprocity is possible amongst her various voices because they cannot all exist simultaneously, except through further mediation (recording). Anderson's many voices form an image of Sartre's media-produced collective as a series of Others which constitute a collective only by virtue of their relationship to a medium, which in turn

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determines their relation to one another as a relation of absence. The voices produce Anderson as an "Other in the midst of Others": each voice is but one of the unlimited number of versions of her own voice that can be produced by mediation. Anderson herself, as "moderator," has no "real" voice, assumes no privileged position in the series. On television, Anderson's video clone is an Other which is also her self-in-alterity, with which she coexists only in a medium which constructs both the clone and the "real" Laurie Anderson we see beside him.

Gray achieves the same effect without the aid of literal mediation. Gray, too, is a moderator; Schechner has described his style in the monologs as "very cool—cooler even than Johnny Carson. In fact, Gray is more like a TV talk-show host, a Dick Cavett, than any stand-up comic. Except that Gray's guests are his own personae, his multiple selves" (1982:47). Here again is the voice (self) vertiginous before itself, and vertiginous for the audience as well. Even though Gray is ostensibly present before us in his own person, we get the sense that the figure we are seeing is the performance persona Spalding Gray, which is caught up in a complex and reversible relationship with the performer Spalding Gray. "It has gradually become Gray's chosen lot simultaneously to live his life and play the role of Spalding Gray living his life, *and* to observe said Gray living his life in order to report on it in the next monologue" (Leverett in Gray 1985:xii). This is the self caught up in the reflexive flow of culture-as-television described by Polan, in which it is no longer clear what the differences amongst these various, mediated and nonmediated versions of the self are, or if there are any differences anymore. What Anderson and Gray offer us in their performance personae are representations of the self after it has internalized its own relation to a mediatized environment. Reciprocity with these figures is impossible, for they are not present, even to themselves.

I am clearly not arguing, then, that postmodern performance takes on the trappings of mass culture/mass media but reestablishes the relation of presence, of reciprocity, between itself and its audience that is the antithesis of Sartre's mediatized collective. Postmodern performance offers no antidote to alterity; rather, it accepts alterity as its condition of being. I am arguing that it is important to see the figures of alterity in postmodern performance art as *representations* of the relation of alterity that characterizes mass-mediatized society, not simply as symptoms or products of that alterity. I return to my formulation of the figure of alterity in postmodern performance as a *representation of the self after it has internalized its own relation to a mediatized environment*. In this way, such performance demonstrates the "impossible complicity" Owens sees in postmodernist art that adopts a critical position, "the unavoidable necessity of participating in the very activity that is being denounced *precisely in order to denounce it*" (1984b:235; original emphasis). "Denounce" is perhaps the wrong word to describe the critical element of postmodernist art, an element for which, as I have already suggested, critics have yet to find a vocabulary. Nevertheless, Owens's point is an important one: postmodernist art does not position itself outside the practices it holds up for scrutiny. It *problematizes,* but does not *reject,* the representational means it shares with other cultural practices. In the small space remaining between simply being the self-in-alterity produced by a mediatized culture and representing that self, the space some postmodernist performance occupies, lies the possibility for a critical perspective on the culture of flow.

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Notes

1. In referring to live and mediated versions of the same performance work as "the same cultural objects," I am not suggesting that there is no difference between live and mediated performance. The cultural relationship of live to mediated performance is an issue to which I shall return in this essay.
2. Andreas Huyssen makes the following observation on the relation of the historical avant-garde to mass culture:

> It was the culture industry, not the avant garde, which succeeded in transforming everyday life in the twentieth century. And yet—the utopian hopes of the historical avant garde are preserved, even though in distorted form, in this system of secondary exploitation euphemistically called mass culture. It seems preferable for cultural theory today to address the contradictions of technologized mass culture rather than pondering over the products and performances of the various neo–avant gardes, which, more often than not, derive their originality from social and aesthetic amnesia (1986:15).

3. Neither Polan nor I suggest that the interpretation of individual works should be abandoned; ideally, the meaning of the work must somehow be constructed through both an intrinsic reading and a consideration of how the cultural flow constructs that particular work.

   The present situation of interpretation suggests the need for such an approach. In his essay on postmodernist art, Pfeil argues skillfully that from a Marxist perspective, postmodernist art possesses no "revolutionary potential" but merely illustrates a "capitalist pathology." He goes on to show that from a materialist feminist perspective, the same qualities which appear pathological to the orthodox Marxist acquire "revolutionary potential" (1988:395). This is but one of many recent examples in which critics have had to acknowledge that interpretation depends an awful lot on where the interpreter sits, a perspective which clearly problematizes the whole question of art as critical practice. While the question of "totalizing" versus "micropolitical" discourses is much too large to take up here, I will at least suggest that Polan's notion of cultural flow may be useful in providing a framework for interpretation that is totalizing, but suggests that the social production of meaning is a complex, frequently self-contradictory phenomenon.
4. The Owens essay (1984b) from which I have quoted here was originally published in *October* in 1980. In another, later essay (1984a), Owens recants this position, calling it "a case of gross critical negligence" because he had not taken into consideration the representation of sexual difference in Anderson's work (1984a:48). In the earlier essay (1984b), he asserts that Anderson sets up "blind confrontations" between "mutually incompatible readings." In the later essay (1984a), he begins to see momentary convergence and communication amongst images he previously saw as purely confrontational. Owens's change of heart is important, but tentative: its tentativeness further points up the difficulty of interpreting images whose relation is defined by flow.
5. In his provocative, conservative estimation of postmodern culture, *The Post-Modern Aura,* Charles Newman states that adaptation, by which he means primarily the adaptation of works of fiction for television, "has become the primary literary convention of the age." He goes on to say: "This development should not be reduced to a question of 'high' versus 'low' art. With the scenario and the adaptation, we are simply dealing with a willfully inferior form of cognition" (1985:129). Although I share Newman's belief that the adaptation is an extremely important cultural convention of our time, I do not think that simply falling back on a privileging of the "original" as cognitively superior to the "adaptation" (and, implicitly, of literary fiction as superior to television or film) enables the critic to understand the actual operation and implications of that convention.

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6. In many particulars, the foundations of Jean Baudrillard's media theory, as defined in his early essay "Requiem for the Media" (1972), recapitulate Sartre. For Baudrillard, the essence of the mass media is that they constitute "Speech Without Response" (1972:169): "they speak, or something is spoken there, but in such a way as *to exclude any response anywhere*" (1972:170). The power of the media derives, in this view, from their ability to speak without ever having to negotiate with a response from the audience. The effect of speech without response is the social isolation of the spectator, isolation which is a function of the form of the medium, not its message:

   > As an extreme case, authority would provide every citizen with a TV set without preoccupying itself with programming (assuming an authority that was not also obsessed by content and convinced of the ideological force of media "persuasion," and thus of the need to control the message). It is useless to fantasize about state projection of police control through TV [. . .]: TV, by virtue of its mere presence, is a social control in itself. There is no need to imagine it as a state periscope spying on everyone's private life—the situation as it stands is far more efficient than that: it is the certainty that people are no longer speaking to each other, that they are definitively isolated in the face of a speech without response (1972:171–72).

   Because the power of the media derives from the socially isolating effect of their form, not their ability to transmit content, neither intervening at the level of content nor taking possession of the media apparatus can turn the media to revolutionary ends. Only a practice that "radically checkmates the dominant form" (1972:184) has value as a counterhegemonic media strategy. In later writings, Baudrillard has extended this analysis to suggest that mediatized reality has superceded "the real" and that the only critical response to a world of simulacra is to undermine the power of forces which seek to impose meaning by refusing all meaning. I am not ready to follow Baudrillard down this path, which essentially removes performance and other artistic discourses which depend for their very existence on *representation* not simulation (or repetition of simulation) from the picture, and denies the value of *any* kind of actively critical practice.
7. Of course, the notion of a "traditional theatre audience" as a certain kind of collective or community can no longer be taken for granted. Herbert Blau has explored this question extensively and provocatively in the two parts of his "Odd, Anonymous Needs: The Audience in a Dramatized Society" (1985/86).

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