

Staging Philosophy
Intersections of Theater, Performance,
and Philosophy



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Humanoid Boogie

Reflections on Robotic Performance

Philip Auslander

Some people say it with flowers, some people say it with Lloyd's.
 But you don't find many trying to say it with humanoids
 —THE BONZO DOG BAND, "Humanoid Boogie"

Sergei Shutov's *Abacus* (2001) in the Russian pavilion of the 49th Venice Biennial International Exposition of Art (June 10–November 4, 2001) was a frequent subject of discussion during the press opening for the exhibition, which I attended in my capacity as a critic of the visual arts. *Abacus* consists of over forty crouching figures draped in black, which face an open door and pray in numerous languages representing a multitude of faiths while making the reverential movements appropriate to prayer. Nearby video monitors display the texts of the prayers in their many alphabets. People at the opening talked of the "performance" in the Russian pavilion; a journalistic colleague, knowing that performance is the main subject of my research and writing, asked me whether I considered the piece a performance. I blithely answered yes, realizing only later that I had taken a position I needed to consider further.

The reason for both my colleague's question and my own desire to think more about it is that the figures performing in *Abacus* are not human beings—they are robots programmed by a computer to engage in *dahvening* (Jewish prayer) movements accompanied by the recorded sounds of ecumenical prayer. Given that the figures are machines, not human beings, some might argue that the piece should be considered an animated sculptural installation, not a performance—it is described as an installation in the Biennale catalog.

(The figures could also be considered automata, or the whole system

could be seen as a playback device, possibilities I will consider shortly.) I prefer to think of it as a performance, however, not just because I believe that machines can perform but also because to view a piece such as *Abacus* as a performance by machines yields rich possibilities for its interpretation.

At the most basic level, the question “Can machines perform?” can only be answered in the affirmative. After all, the primary meaning of the verb *to perform* is simply “to do.” Inasmuch as machines (or human beings) do things, they perform. Moving from that basic level to the context of art practices, however, the definition of performance proves to be context-specific, not universal; it changes according to the particular aesthetic form and tradition under consideration. What it means to perform a piece of classical music is not the same as what it means to perform jazz, and neither musical definition of performance is applicable to the theater, dance, or performance art. One crucial area of difference is the assumed relationship of the performer to the text being performed: the relationship of a classical musician to the piece is not the same as that of a jazz musician to the music she performs, for instance, and the respective relationships of actors to dramas and dancers to choreography put still other variables into play.

If the definition of performance is context-dependent, so is the determination of what counts as a performer. To the question of whether the robots in *Abacus* should be considered elements in a sculptural installation, automata, parts of a playback system, or performers in their own right, I offer an inclusive response: they are all of these things. Credible arguments can be advanced for each of these identifications, and the categories are not mutually exclusive (an automaton could be an element in an installation or part of a playback system, for instance). How one chooses to describe the robots depends primarily not on their intrinsic properties but on the artistic tradition to which one wishes to assimilate them. In this essay, the artistic tradition in which I ultimately will place the robots is that of performance art.

Brief considerations of the *Abacus* robots as parts of a playback system or automata will help to shed light on what is at stake in my identification of them as performers. In his estimable study of musical performance, to which I shall refer repeatedly here, Stan Godlovitch discriminates the playback of a recording from a performance: “The playback is no more a performance than the photograph is the thing photographed. . . . In a recording, I hear an acoustic image of a performance given necessarily at some past time.”¹ From a technical standpoint, *Abacus* is indeed an elaborate

playback device: the robots and sound system function to make the playback of the computer program apprehensible to an audience in a way analogous to a CD player's converting information on a disc into audible music. But *Abacus* is not a playback device of the kind Godlovitch describes because the actions of its robots do not re-create a prior performance: although *Abacus* is a representational work, it is not a record of a gathering of black-garbed figures that took place at some earlier time. As a playback device, *Abacus* is, in this respect, what I have called a technology of production, not reproduction.²

Whereas it is easy enough to agree with Godlovitch that the playback of recordings of prior performances is not a performance in itself, the question of whether *Abacus* generates a performance is not clear-cut even when it's seen as a playback device. To define the problem, I propose the following test, which I admit is not scientific. Whereas one might wish to record a performance, one would have little reason to record the playback of an existing recording of a performance except to produce a copy of the source recording. (A sound recording rerecorded during playback or a film or video shot from the screen during projection or playback—one way in which bootleg videotapes of films are produced—would be examples of such copies.) If *Abacus* were a playback device of the kind Godlovitch describes, one that provides access to a record of a prior performance, then a recording of its playback would constitute only a copy of another recording. This clearly is not the case—a video recording of *Abacus* in action is not merely a copy of the computer program it plays back. It is, rather, a record of the behavior of the robotic figures made as that behavior unfolded—the robots' real-time activity is the prior performance captured on the video. A video recording of *Abacus* is therefore interesting and valuable for precisely the same reasons that a recording of any performance is interesting and valuable. This suggests, albeit indirectly, that *Abacus* is more like a performance we might wish to record than a device for playing back a recorded performance.

Reproduction, then, is one of the issues at stake here, which I have addressed by discussing the possibility that *Abacus* is a playback device. Agency and its delegation are also central issues that can be broached by discussing *Abacus* in relation to puppetry. In differentiating automata from puppets, Steve Tillis argues, "The distinguishing characteristic of the automaton is that its movement possibilities are 'closed.' With puppets of all kinds . . . the nature and duration of each movement is open to the control of the operator."³ Within these parameters, the robots in *Abacus* are

certainly automata rather than puppets: they are not manipulated in real time by an operator but controlled by a computer. All the operator has to do is set the apparatus in motion by initiating the program. Tillis goes on to say that automata should be considered “kinetic sculpture[s]” rather than puppets, implying, I think, that automata should be excluded from an artistic tradition associated with performance and assigned to a special category within an artistic tradition associated primarily with static objects. His underlying argument is that to qualify as a performance, an event must be spontaneous rather than programmed. Performances, this argument suggests, put human agency on display, even when the agent is hidden, like some puppeteers. Automata, on the other hand, are cases of what Jane Goodall calls “transferred agency,” in which agency is delegated to machines by human beings whose work is completed before the machine undertakes its actions. Goodall suggests that cases of transferred agency fuel “cultural anxiety” about technology’s potential to usurp human authority, perhaps even human identity.⁴ Most traditional definitions of performance reflect this anxiety in their emphasis on liveness and implicit resistance to the concept of machine performers.⁵

Before going any further, I want to make it clear that although I clearly do wish to make a case for seeing machines as performers, I am not proposing that machines can perform in all of the ways that human beings can. One element common to most traditional definitions of performance is an emphasis on the agency of the performer as the interpreter of a text of some kind and an artist who expresses something of her own through interpretation. In his discussion of musical performance, which he defines as a skilled activity, Godlovitch makes a useful distinction between two categories of skills a performer may possess: technical skills and interpretive skills.⁶ Whereas “Technical skills [in the case of music] involve causing objectively determinable and (often) quantitatively measurable acoustic effects. . . . Interpretive skills involve aesthetic effects for which no obvious quantitative measure exists, and typically emphasize ‘expression.’”⁷ Although it may be difficult in practice to distinguish moments in a performance that reflect the exercise of purely technical skills from those that entail interpretive skills, especially from the audience perspective, Godlovitch’s distinction between the two is analytically valuable. Transporting Godlovitch’s analysis from the musical context into the present one, I would argue that the robots in *Abacus* possess technical skills since their actions cause the effects that constitute the content of the piece. (I realize, of course, that Shutov, the artist who created and programmed

the robots, is the root cause of their actions. Nevertheless, the robots themselves are the proximate cause—through their movements, they create the effects the audience sees.) Using a musical analogy, it might be tempting to argue that Shutov is the performer and the robots are his instruments. The problem here is that since Shutov is not present to play these “instruments,” it is not his technically skilled physical manipulation of them that is the immediate cause of the piece’s effects. In terms of the musical analogy, Shutov is more akin to a composer who depends on the technical skills of musicians to make his piece available to an audience.⁸

Although I insist that robots can possess technical performance skills, I will not claim that robots can possess interpretive skills. This, it seems to me, is the crucial distinction between robotic performers and human performers: although robots are capable of executing technical assignments, they lack consciousness, intelligence, and emotions—all the ingredients that presumably contribute to the development of interpretive skills. It is for this reason, more than because of technical limitations, that there is currently no machine capable of presenting a performance of the *Kreutzer Sonata*, *Hamlet*, or *Swan Lake* that would pass muster with the relevant audiences. And there probably will never be one.⁹

If machine performers are limited to a repertoire that requires only technical skill and not interpretive skill, that may be less of a limitation than it seems. Although the definitions of performance arising from the context of the traditional performing arts generally entail notions of interpretation and expression that exclude machines from being considered performers, the history of each of the performing arts yields examples in which human performers have been called upon to exercise their technical skills but not their interpretive skills. (I shall refer to this kind of activity as “technical performance.”) In principle, such pieces could be performed either by human beings who are not using their potential interpretive skills or by machines that simply lack such skills but possess the requisite technical abilities. W.B. Worthen has analyzed the use of “modernist puppets and automata, and the more widespread machining of live performers in twentieth-century theatre,”¹⁰ tracing the history of that impulse from Gordon Craig, the Italian futurists, and Vsevolod Meyerhold through to Antonin Artaud, Samuel Beckett, and Robert Wilson. The Tiller Girls dance troupes, founded in the 1890s by Manchester businessman John Tiller, who brought Taylorist methods of mass-production into popular entertainment, are an example of technical performance from the realm of popular entertainment rather than avant-garde art.

Something equivalent to Taylor's scientific selection, based on measurement, was involved in [Tiller's] choice of personnel. The four children who were to feature in the first showpiece were to be as near identical as possible in height and build. In order to emphasize the idea of multiple copies, he gave them all identical dolls and choreographed a geometrical pattern of synchronized movements, in which they were drilled from morning until late at night.¹¹

Eventually, multiple troupes of Tiller's interchangeable performers executing standardized choreography toured the world.

It is not difficult to find examples of performance in which human performers are employed primarily for their technical skills and asked to cede a substantial part of their agency to someone else without referring either to the modernist avant-garde or such distinctive phenomena as the Tiller Girls. The orchestral musician, as described by musicologist Christopher Small, is such a case:

The musical skills that are required of a professional orchestra musician are without question of a high order: in a good orchestra substantial mistakes in the notes are rare and breakdowns almost unknown. At the same time those skills are very specialized and fall within a limited range, consisting of technical dexterity, the ability to sight-read and to respond rapidly to the notations and to the conductor's gestures, as well as those of attuning one's playing to the ensemble. . . . Even longer-term musical thinking is left to the conductor. I remember my astonishment at being told by a respected orchestral double-bass player that when he played a concert he read his part measure by measure and often could not remember the measure he had just played.¹²

I have quoted this passage at length to emphasize that Small clearly describes symphonic musicians' performance skills as *technical* (dexterity, sight-reading, rapid response, coordination) rather than interpretive in nature. (If one thinks of interpretation as a hermeneutic procedure that involves relating parts of an object to the whole, then the bassist Small describes cannot be engaged in interpretation since he performs each measure with no awareness of the previous measure or the next one.) As Small indicates, the meaning and expressiveness of the piece are left to the composer and the conductor; the musicians' task consists solely of producing the required sounds. Orchestral section players are similar to Tiller Girls in

that they are asked only to execute someone else's interpretation of the musical text.¹³

Other conventional cases come still closer to the Tiller Girls than the symphonic musician because they include an invariant repertoire as well as the demand that the performers exercise only one set of skills. Classical musicians, whether soloists or section members, are not usually called upon to play the same music night after night, or even season after season, but the players in Broadway pit orchestras and Las Vegas show bands frequently are. Again, the emphasis is on technical skills—musical directors and conductors control the interpretations of the scores; the musicians' job is to replicate their instructions as exactly as possible at each and every performance. Like Tiller Girls, symphonic, pit orchestra, and show band players are asked primarily to use their technical skills to make someone else's aesthetic choices apprehensible to an audience.¹⁴

It is interesting in this context that Godlovitch describes performance skill, in part, as "the ability to produce and re-produce certain results on call."¹⁵ Since a performer who does something only once and cannot repeat it is not of much value in the traditional performing arts—or in most realms of human endeavor—the ability to "duplicate a result" is a measure of skill. We ask of human performers the same reliability that we demand from machines and measure their skill in those terms. In that functional sense, the musicians I have been discussing are not very different from Shutov's robots, yet we would not normally refuse to call them performers.¹⁶

Even though technical performance is the bread and butter of professional performers in many categories, including actors who perform in long-running plays and the musicians I have been discussing, the fact that much of the actual performing in conventional, Western genres is highly routine and "machined" is often overlooked in favor of the individualistic, interpretive aspects of performance. "Perhaps," as Goodall suggests, "the performer and the machine have some strange affinity that draws out cultural anxieties about becoming automatic."¹⁷ Godlovitch's description of how we define skill in performance may provide the key to that "strange affinity"—by equating performance skill with the ability to reproduce results reliably, we implicitly define performance skill in machinic terms. The fact that we also habitually emphasize the interpretive over the technical in performance may be a defense mechanism, a way of not having to confront the anxiety-producing possibility that because the very concepts of "performance" and "performer" often entail the ability to reproduce the

same effects on demand, they implicitly blur the distinctions between human beings and machines.¹⁸

Thus far, I have discussed *Abacus* in relation to the traditional performing arts in order to examine the implications of identifying robots as performers. But since *Abacus* plainly does not belong to any of the traditional performing arts (that is, it is not a work of theater, dance, music, or even puppetry) there is no reason to continue discussing it in that context. The context of performance art, a constellation of performance genres pioneered largely by visual artists rather than performing artists, seems the appropriate one in which to consider a work that was presented as a sculptural installation in a major, international venue devoted to visual art, yet may also be a performance. In the aesthetic context of performance art, the definitional picture is quite different than in the traditional performing arts. Whereas the traditional performing arts emphasize interpretation and expressiveness as central characteristics of performance (even though that emphasis overlooks the realities of many performers' lives, as I've suggested) performance art can involve a multiplicity of types of performance ranging from those found in conventional music, theater, and dance to others in which expression and interpretation are much less important. Technical performance is a noteworthy theme in the ongoing history of performance art as its practitioners seek to distinguish it from theater and the other performing arts.

Writing about one of the earliest genres of American performance art, the Happenings of the late 1950s and early 1960s, performance theorist Michael Kirby coined the term "nonmatrixed performing" to describe a kind of performing he considered specific to Happenings and to distinguish it from acting. Essentially, nonmatrixed performing is a task-based, nonrepresentational genre of technical performance. The matrices to which Kirby refers are the contexts of fictional time, place, and character that frame conventional acting. In nonmatrixed performing, the performer does not represent anything other than herself, doing whatever she's doing, wherever, whenever, and in whatever situation she's doing it.¹⁹ This performer is not called upon to interpret a role or be expressive in the ways that actors are: "he is not expected either to project the subrational and unconscious elements in the character he is playing or to inflect and color the ideas implicit in his words and actions."²⁰ The only thing asked of the nonmatrixed performer is "the execution of a generally simple and undemanding act" such as sweeping the stage.

In keeping with the idea that the Happening is a form of visual art,

Kirby suggests that the performer is used in Happenings primarily as an element in a visual composition that unfolds in time and space. The performer is asked to surrender his own agency to that of the artist who created the Happening: he “does not work to create anything. The creation was done by the artist when he formulated the idea of the action. The performer merely embodies and makes concrete the idea.” In addition to stating that the nonmatrixed performer offers no interpretation of the act she performs, Kirby clearly describes the necessary skills as technical ones: “Nonmatrixed performing does not eliminate the factor of ability, however. Although the walking section of *Autobodys* [a Happening by pop artist Claes Oldenburg], for example, could be performed by almost anyone, the prone hopping of *The American Moon* [by Robert Whitman] would be difficult or impossible for many people to do well.” Kirby also emphasizes the technical in his equation of the performer in Happenings with theatrical technologies: “the performer frequently is treated in the same fashion as a prop or a stage effect.”²¹

Because nonmatrixed performing consists of the more or less mechanical execution of tasks designated by someone other than the performer and does not call upon the performer to interpret a text or be self-expressive, it models a kind of technical performance in which both human beings and machines can engage. Although the figures in *Abacus* are representational in that they depict human figures, those figures are not matrixed: they do not represent specific characters in a particular fictional time or place apart from the venue in which they are shown. Rather, they are nonspecific, black-clad bodies. Because it is not necessary that they actually pray (whatever that may mean), only that they appear to do so, their actions also may be treated as nonmatrixed and task-based. Human performers could produce the same effects as the robots simply by carrying out the artist’s instructions—the piece does not require that they enact characters who are praying or that they actually pray themselves, only that they move in a certain way.

Two other pieces on exhibit at the Venice Biennale provide further examples. Max Dean and Raffaello D’Andrea’s *The Table: Childhood (1984–2001)* is described by one of its creators as “a fully autonomous robotic table” capable of movement through a confined gallery space.²² I will paraphrase the action for which it is programmed from the catalog and render it as an instruction: “Select a viewer and attempt a relationship with that person.” The robotic table does this by following a chosen person through the space and performing movements that are meant to be ingra-

tiating. Because a successful execution of the action that underlies *The Table* does not depend on factors like which spectator is selected and followed, exactly how the spectator reacts, and so on, the choices the table makes exemplify the kind of noninterpretive decision that can be taken either by a human being or a machine.

I am not saying, of course, that a hypothetical human performance of this piece would be similar to the performance of the robotic table, only that both robots and human beings are capable of giving performances that reflect the underlying programming. Expressed as a simple verbal instruction, this programming sounds very much like the score for a Fluxus performance, for instance, or a performance by Vito Acconci.²³

The Table is a particularly interesting case because the performer, whether machine or human, is called upon to make certain choices—the exact shape of each iteration of the piece depends on which person the performer chooses to follow, that person’s reaction to being courted, and so on. In this respect, the robotic table contributes much more to defining the performance than Shutov’s praying figures. The case against seeing the table as a simple playback device is therefore even stronger than that for *Abacus*—not only is there no originary performance that the table’s actions re-create, but each iteration of the table’s performance is different.²⁴ The question this piece prompts in relation to my analysis here is this: Do the decisions the table makes transcend technical performance to become interpretive? To suggest that they do would be to impute interpretive skill—and therefore intelligence—to the machine; I shall argue that even though these choices determine what happens in a given performance of the piece, they are not interpretive choices.

Kirby points out that certain choices are left open to nonmatrixed performers in Happenings, but he describes these choices as insignificant: “If the action is to sweep, it does not matter whether the performer begins over there and sweeps around here or begins here and works over there. Variations and differences simply do not matter—within, of course, the limits of the particular action and omitting additional action.”²⁵ He emphasizes the triviality of the performer’s choices, even going so far as to say that because the scenarios for Happenings determine less of what happens in the performance than theatrical playscripts, “the differences in detail are greater between two successive performances of a Happening than between two successive performances of a traditional play, but, again, these variations are not significant.” Despite Kirby’s insistence on this point, he does not explain what he means, and his claim seems counterin-

tuitive. Inasmuch as the performer's choices determine what the audience experiences in any given iteration of the piece, they certainly are aesthetically significant. Kirby does not deny this; he actually implies it when he allows that some performances of Happenings are of higher quality than others.²⁶ What Kirby seems to mean is that the decisions left open to the nonmatrixed performer yield variations that are insignificant because they fall within the range of action designated by the artist who constructed the Happening. As long as that is the case, the performer cedes agency to the artist and functions only to concretize the artist's intentions, not to interpret the piece. If a performer in a Happening were required by the artist to hammer a nail, certain decisions might be left open to the performer: what kind and size of hammer and nail to use, what position to assume while hammering, how forcefully to hammer, and so on. It is beyond doubt that the particular choices made would have a major impact on the audience's experience. Nevertheless, these are merely the decisions the performer needs to make in order to carry out the action at all, the same decisions needed to hammer a nail in "real" life—they do not constitute an interpretation of the action comparable to an actor's interpretation of a role or a musician's interpretation of a piece. To return to the musical analogy for a moment, the decisions left open to performers in Happenings are comparable to an instrumentalist's technical choice of fingering to play a particular note. Different fingerings produce different visual effects for the attentive spectator, but do not amount to interpretive decisions.

The kind of activity required of a human performer of *The Table* would be highly comparable to Kirby's nonmatrixed performance. The robotic table is programmed with a repertoire of movements from which it selects in response to input from the audience. Since it lacks consciousness, its choices are not interpretive, but functional. A human performer of this piece could be called upon to make decisions within a specified range, in the manner of Kirby's nonmatrixed performer. The human performer would be given a repertoire of movements analogous to those for which the table itself is programmed (categorized, as they are for the table, as attempts to get attention, salutations, pursuing and fleeing movements, etc.²⁷) and told that she could use any or all of them in response to appropriate viewer behaviors but could not introduce her own movements. The performer would also be instructed not "to inflect and color the ideas implicit in his words and actions," to quote Kirby once again. Just as the table cannot leave the gallery space even if the object of its attention does, so too could a human performer be told not to do so. In such a case, even

though the performer would make choices on the fly during the performance, the range of possible choices would be circumscribed in advance by the creator of the piece and therefore reflect the creator's interpretation of the situation, not the performer's. An audience might be inclined to view a human performer's act of ingratiating him- or herself to spectators and pursuing them as implying that the performer is doing more than just following instructions, but audiences are always free to infer whatever meanings they wish from the performances they see. Those meanings need have no direct relationship to the underlying causes of the performed images the audience interprets.²⁸

Whereas *The Table*, performed at the Biennale by a robot, could be performed by a human being, Nedko Solakov's *A Life (Black & White)* (1999–2001), performed by human beings, could just as readily be undertaken by machines. The catalog description reads "Black and white paint; 2 workers/painters constantly repainting in black and white the space walls for the entire duration of the exhibition, day after day (following each other)." (One painter paints the walls black; the other follows and paints the same walls white, and so on.) Because all three of these pieces are based in simple, nonmatrixed actions that can be executed effectively either by machines or human beings and because their impact does not depend on decisions made by the performers (as Kirby indicates, the performers' actions are only concretizations of the artist's choices even when the performer is allowed some latitude in the selecting specifics), it is not necessary that the actions be carried out by human beings in order that the pieces be considered performances. Whether a person or a robot undertakes the actions, these events are recognizable as performances belonging to the tradition of performance art.

Having argued that the events discussed here are characterized by nonmatrixed performing, a type of performance that can be undertaken by both human beings and machines, and that it doesn't matter to their constitution as performances within the tradition of performance art which type of performer is involved, I hasten to add that it does make a substantial difference to the interpretation of the pieces. Far from suggesting that human agency makes such pieces richer in meaning, I propose that machine performance, acknowledged as such, provides the deeper object of interpretation. The reason is simple: because machines generally can be viewed as surrogates for human beings or metaphors for human concerns (indeed, what else could they be?), a piece performed by a machine usually can be interpreted in the same way as the same

piece would be if performed by a human being. (This is true even for a performance featuring an apparently nonanthropomorphic machine such as *The Table*, which is subtitled “Childhood” because its creators see the object as reenacting the human developmental process.) The question of what it means to have the actions that define the piece performed by a machine provides for a further, enriched level of interpretation. In the Biennale catalog essay on *Abacus*, for example, Sergei Khripun reads Shutov’s piece as a conciliatory gesture “bringing alienated and even confronting confessions together,” while noting at the same time that religious belief both unites and divides people—“the paradox that humankind has faced throughout its history.”²⁹ It is interesting that this humanistic interpretation makes no reference to the fact that the piece is actually performed by machines; Khripun treats the robots as transparent representations of human beings whose own ontological status and materiality are irrelevant. I am not disputing Khripun’s interpretation; I am suggesting that acknowledging that machines perform the piece would add another layer of interpretation by inviting the critic to consider what it means to have machines serve as surrogates for human beings at prayer. What does the metaphoric use of machines signify in this particular context?³⁰

In his catalog essay on Solakov’s *Life (Black and White)*, Daniel Kurjakovic suggests that the piece is “an allegory of the abysmal, Sisyphus-like futility of human action.”³¹ This interpretation is certainly available when human painters perform the piece, but I would argue that it is equally available if the piece were to be performed by robotic painters. The futility of the robots’ actions would almost inevitably be seen as metaphoric for human existence. Addressing the further question of what it means to deploy robots in the senseless task of continually repainting walls would open up other areas of interpretation that might enhance or expand this reading. Is it just as ironic, in an existentialist sense, for a human being to program a robot to undertake futile and meaningless work as it is to assign that work to other human beings? Or does the use of a robot displace the futility of existence onto an entity that does not suffer from experiencing it, thus suggesting a path of liberation for human beings through a somewhat perverse use of technology? There are many possibilities for interpretation that arise from defining such a piece as a performance undertaken by machines and addressing directly both the ways in which the machines can be seen as metaphoric humans and the implications of using a machine in the particular context of the piece.

NOTES

A much shorter version of this essay was commissioned by *Art Papers* and appeared in volume 26, no. 1 (January–February 2002) under the title “Humanoid Boogie: Robotic Performances at the Venice Biennial.” The epigraph to this chapter is drawn from lyrics from a song by Neil Innes as reproduced on the sleeve of The Bonzo Dog Band, *Urban Spaceman*, Imperial LP 12432 (1968).

1. Stan Godlovitch, *Musical Performance: A Philosophical Study* (London: Routledge, 1998), 128.

2. Auslander, “Live from Cyberspace, or I was sitting at my computer this guy appeared he thought I was a bot,” *Performing Arts Journal* 24, no. 1:21. Strictly speaking, this statement should be limited to the visual aspect of *Abacus*. Since the sound of the prayers emanates from a conventional sound recording, the audio portion of *Abacus* functions entirely in the way Godlovitch describes and is exempted from the claims I make in this section.

3. Steve Tillis, “The Art of Puppetry in the Age of Media Production,” *TDR* 43, no. 3 (1999): 192–93.

4. Jane Goodall, “Transferred Agencies: Performance and the Fear of Automatism,” *Theatre Journal* 49, no. 4 (1997): 442.

5. David Z. Saltz’s analysis of interactive computer art is a case in point, given that he defines performativity as a characteristic of “all art forms in which live human behavior constitutes the aesthetic object” (“The Art of Interaction: Interactivity, Performativity, and Computers,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55, no. 2 [1997]: 119). Since I am arguing here that robotic figures whose behavior is not live, and who certainly are not human, can be seen as performative, I clearly disagree with that definition. Later in the essay, Saltz does imply that a computer can function as a performer (124), but says in a footnote that in such cases, the computer “enters into the dramatic scene with the [human] performers as an agent in its own right” (127 n. 21). Saltz’s distinction between human performers and computer agents here echoes his earlier claim that performativity requires the presence of human performers. I am perfectly happy to use human behavior as the standard against which to define performance and performativity, but I am arguing here for seeing at least some kinds of performance as possible for both humans and machines.

6. Glossing Diderot and Meyerhold, Joseph Roach similarly breaks down theatrical acting into two internal processes that he calls habit and consciousness: “Habitualization of corporeal motion enables the actor to gain conscious control of the entire process and all its effects. Paradoxically, the feeling of spontaneity is achieved by the rigorous transformation of action and gesture into unconscious automatisms. The key here is the active retention of the alert consciousness—the administrative ghost in the reflex machine—as the sovereign creative executor” (“The Future that Worked,” *Theater* 8, no. 2 [1998]: 24).

7. Godlovitch, *Musical Performance*, 54.

8. As Godlovitch (*ibid.*, 102) points out, a number of modern composers have fantasized about technologies that would enable them to do without performers and thus allow them not to have to deal with other people’s interpretations of their work. W. B. Worthen, “Of Actors and Automata: Hieroglyphics of Modernism,” *Journal of*

Dramatic Theory and Criticism 9, no. 1 (1994): 3–19, discusses a parallel desire on the part of modernist theater directors.

9. To address the question of whether there will ever be a machine possessed of interpretive skills would be to venture into the artificial intelligence debate, an issue that lies outside the scope of my discussion here. I am assuming throughout this essay that the machines I discuss do not possess anything that could meaningfully be called intelligence.

10. Worthen, “Of Actors and Automata,” 7–8.

11. Goodall, “Transferred Agencies,” 450.

12. Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 69–70.

13. This analysis leads me to disagree with Noël Carroll, who seeks to distinguish live theatrical performances from film screenings by arguing that “it takes artistry and imagination to embody an interpretation, whereas film performances require nothing more than technical competence” (*A Philosophy of Mass Art* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998] 213–14). Although I find Carroll’s description of performers as embodying interpretations felicitous, my point here is that even in the traditional performing arts, such embodiment results more frequently than we are wont to admit from the exercise of technical competence, not artistry and imagination. I’m also emphasizing the idea that there are many occasions on which performers on stage do not engage in acts of interpretation but in technical performances embodying existing interpretations.

14. Most pop and rock musicians are also expected to present the same performances of the same songs night after night, perhaps for the entire length of their careers (think especially of those who work the oldies concert circuits). They are more like classical soloists than like pit band players in the sense that the interpretations they repeat are likely to be their own. But unlike classical soloists, most pop and rock musicians are not rewarded for offering fresh interpretations of their repertoire.

15. Godlovitch, *Musical Performance*, 18.

16. A possible objection to my argument is that since machines are designed and programmed by human beings, human agency always lurks behind machinic agency. Herbert Blau, “The Human Nature of the Bot,” *Performing Arts Journal* 24, no. 1 (2002): 22–24, makes this point in response to Auslander, “Live from Cyberspace, or I was sitting at my computer this guy appeared he thought I was a bot,” *Performing Arts Journal* 24, no. 1 (2002): 16–21. This situation is not reversible, at least not until a machine builds a human being! I am suggesting here, however, that there are performance situations in which human performers are “programmed” by other human beings such that the former’s agency in the performance is not significantly greater than that of a machine.

17. Goodall, “Transferred Agencies,” 442. This cultural anxiety may be compounded by the fact that audiences cannot deduce the inner life of performers from the external manifestations of their performances. As Godlovitch points out, “We certainly have no working theory of the inner mental side of artistic performance. . . . Performers at work may have their minds on any manner of things. In the spirit of professional entertainment, someone performing sensitively may simultaneously be bored to distraction.” (*Musical Performance*, 127). There may be a lingering suspicion

that performance is always potentially deceptive, that what we take to be an inspired performance may actually be a rote, mechanical one.

18. Many theories of performance suggest that repetition is one of the characteristics that distinguishes it from other behaviors. Richard Schechner's definition of performance as "restored behavior" is a well-known example (*Between Theater and Anthropology* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985], 35–116). In Schechner's account, however, performances need not re-create earlier behaviors exactly; his concept entails the possibility, even the probability, of repetition with difference when behaviors are restored as performances. I am suggesting here that many, but certainly not all, kinds of performance involve exact replication of behavior rather than repetition with difference. Those kinds of performance trouble the distinction between the human and the mechanical.

19. Michael Kirby, *Happenings* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1965), is careful not to claim that all the performing in *Happenings* was nonmatrixed; he notes that character, interpretation, and "traditional acting ability" were all employed in some *Happenings*, sometimes alongside nonmatrixed performing (16).

20. *Ibid.*, 14–16.

21. *Ibid.*, 17, 19.

22. Max Dean, "The Table: Childhood, 1984–2001," in *La Biennale di Venezia Esposizione Internazionale D'Arte*, English version, ed. Harald Szeeman et al. (Venice: Electa, 2001), 1:82.

23. See Auslander, "Vito Acconci and the Politics of the Body in Postmodern Performance," in *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1997), 89–97, and "Fluxus Art-Amusement: The Music of the Future?" in *Contours of the Theatrical Avant-Garde*, ed. James Harding (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 110–29.

24. Although the issue of liveness (Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* [London: Routledge, 1999]) is not central to my discussion here, I would argue that the table is not only a performer but also a live performer because it responds to its environment and makes real-time decisions. It is live in a way that the *Abacus* robots, for instance, are not. See Auslander, "Live from Cyberspace," where I argue that chatterbots, software robots that engage in conversation, should be seen as live performers.

25. Kirby, *Happenings*, 17. Kirby indicates that nonmatrixed performing frequently includes an element of indeterminacy, which he distinguishes from improvisation. For Kirby, improvisation demands that the performer make interpretive decisions on the fly, decisions that shape the performance in significant ways. Indeterminacy, by contrast, means that although the artist leaves certain aspects of the performance open-ended, the performer's decisions are neither interpretive nor significant—any decision the performer makes within the parameters established by the artist will yield an iteration of the piece that reflects the artist's intentions rather than the performer's own interpretation of those intentions.

26. *Ibid.*, 19.

27. See Dean, "The Table," 82.

28. For example, Kirby notes in a different essay ("On Acting and Not-Acting," in *The Art of Performance: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock and Robert Nickas

[New York: E. P. Dutton, 1984], 101) that the audience will perceive a group of people playing cards onstage during a theatrical performance as actors pretending to play cards in order to portray characters who are playing cards even if they make no effort at characterization and really are simply playing cards.

29. Sergei Khripun, "Sergei Shutov," in Szeeman et al., *Biennale*, 2:120.

30. The fact that the machines do not tire but can engage in perpetual prayer in a way that human beings cannot (machines are the ultimate "endurance artists") is a dimension of the piece that might be interesting to consider in this connection.

31. Daniel Kurjakovic, "A Life (Black & White): Nedko Solakov's Restrained Allegory," in Szeeman et al., *Biennale*, 1:104.