

Against Convenience

Petra Sterry in conversation with Frazer Ward, Professor, Department of Art, Smith College

Petra Sterry (PS): In your book "No Innocent Bystanders"¹ you examine the role of performance art and in particular the role of the audience in detail. In your research, you analyze the different roles of the audience by taking a closer look at the work of some selected performance artists, and it turns out that there is not one definitive role for the audience. So what expectations should we have of an audience?

Frazer Ward (FW): I think artworks shape expectations for how audiences might react. This is perhaps clearer regarding performance art, where there may be quite specific demands—to participate in certain ways, either physically (you must sit here), or affectively (when the work attempts to shock, for instance)—though I think it's also true of static works. Artworks may also presume a standard response mode (framed by institutional conventions), which they then try to disrupt. That said, there's no guarantee that audiences will do what anyone asks. An instance I refer to in my book involved Abramovic's reperformance of her own work, *Thomas' Lips*, at the Guggenheim in 2005, when as Abramovic started on a second round of cutting the shape of a star in her stomach with a razor blade, a young woman, audibly upset, called out, "You don't have to do this." Where the original performance in 1975 (which had a political context in relation to then-Yugoslavia) might have set up an ethical testing zone, challenging viewers' expectations of what was acceptable in the name of art, in 2005 even that effect had been spectacularized. So one way (though of course not the only way) to read the young woman's intervention was as a protest against the way that the reperformance emptied out the original and seemed to presume an audience that would observe the spectacle from a distance.

PS: Even if you cannot tell in advance how the audience will react, it is in a way framed from the start. This is what is special about this medium: the audience is often drawn into something. The here and now is a point that also applies to the audience. With regard to his work, Chris Burden spoke of those present as "primary" audiences, and those who were not there but would read about it later as "secondary" audiences. Therefore, the reactions of the audience who are present are relevant—you mentioned the reaction of a young woman in Marina Abramovic's reperformance at the Guggenheim. It would be interesting to find out the intention of the young woman called out "You can stop. You don't have to do this." Was she worried about possible injuries to Marina Abramovic? Did she perceive the performance as a mere artistic spectacle that she rejected and therefore walked out of early? Did she feel uncomfortable because she feared that it could get out of control and that no one else in the audience would react? It would be interesting to clarify her

¹ Frazer Ward, *No Innocent Bystanders: Performance Art and Audience*, DARTMOUTH COLLEGE PR, 2012

intention with regard to her expectations of the situation. This in turn would be interesting in terms of what role she saw herself in. And finally the question from the perspective of third parties. It is about an art context, as well as about framing: how did the young woman and everyone else in the audience play his or her role, for example in view of ethical, social, or philosophical questions? It leads me to think about what constitutes an audience. Is it a number of different individuals who, due to their interest in the same event, are in the same place at the same time? Or is it a community? I think that if you analyze the term *community* more closely, you can see that this term often remains undifferentiated in art, in contrast to its use for political or social issues. I'll come back later to why I wouldn't use *community* unconditionally.

FW: For me, after Burden, the primary audience is the people who are there: they can be framed sociologically, after Haacke and Bourdieu, and they are framed institutionally—conditioned, surveilled, and expected to behave in certain ways. Performance art, at least historically, has put the audience and expectations about how it should behave under pressure. One aim of this was to expose institutional framing, to ask the audience to misbehave, so to speak. But beyond that, I think performance put pressure on ideas about what audiences might become: I don't want to dismiss what performance might have to teach us about witnessing and shared witnessing, but I think it also teaches us to be wary about ideas like *community*. Community tends to be invoked piously, as though an artwork that generated a community around itself must be inherently good. But I take very seriously Iris Marion Young's assessment that the invocation of community typically represents nostalgia for an idealized, small scale, face-to-face social grouping that was in fact inherently exclusive—it defined itself against what it excluded. And I think the generation of performance artists of the 1970s were also suspicious of this. Of course there are absolutely necessary tactical uses of community for political purposes, especially among racially or otherwise marked groups who are oppressed for their difference (ironically enough, posited as a threat to the "wider community"), but in other contexts it seems to me it is often an exclusive formation posing as an inclusive one. So I agree, *community* should not be used unconditionally.

PS: Yes, exactly. I think community also has to do with a group or a unit and can exaggerate the characteristics of a group, namely when it is no longer about the individual. You quote Iris Marion Young, who takes the critical view that the ideal of the community also requires the subjects to be transparent to themselves and to others. In this respect, I actually find some of the performances from the '70s very illuminating because they pose the question of the behavior of the individual in a group or in society. It is the exaggeration of the group that often bothers me about the idea of togetherness. I am also interested in the role of the audience from a personal experience: At the end of the '80s, when I was a young art student, I took part in a performance by an artist couple, which was performed at the Secession² in Vienna, and again a bit later as part of an art

2 „Damenmord“, *Junge Szene Wien '87*, Secession, Vienna (1987)

symposium at another institution³. While it took place in darkness in the Secession as agreed, the second performance was carried out very different, but without letting me know about the change, or asking me for my consent in advance. I sat on a dark stage, but then the lights went on slowly but steadily. At first I thought it might be a technical mistake. Completely naked and full of fear, I repeatedly looked at the lighting technician, indicating that he should switch off the light. But soon I realized that he did this deliberately. Soon the stage was fully lit, but I was paralyzed and in an all-encompassing horrible fear and could no longer move my legs. It took some time before I was able to regain my capacity to act, but somehow I got off the stage before the play was over. For many years I had no words to describe this fear, the shame, the helplessness. It was only many years later that I knew that I had had a dissociation as a result of this profound fear. And this brings me to my observation: At the first performance at the Secession, this event was framed as art. The second time, when it was performed at the other location with modifications not discussed with me before, it was sexualized violence and abuse of power. But no one in the audience vetoed it. So: is the art community a convenience community? A sensational community? Or one that is afraid of individual and inconvenient decisions? I had noticed that some of the audience seemed to be concerned, and in their eyes I could read something like compassion, while others seemed bored, and some whistled and jeered. But nobody took any action. A single person from the audience came to me immediately afterwards in the dressing room and said, visibly concerned: "I'm so sorry for what happened." I think there were other compassionate spectators who just didn't have the courage to end this. Other viewers may never have realized that they had been made accomplices, perhaps even involuntarily. Structures should always be questioned, I think. Especially in this example, I would like to call the justification that one has to "see it in context" a context euphemism. And by the way, this does not only refer to art; it applies to all areas of life where something is wrongly justified by the circumstances, by the specificity of the situation, the place, the perpetrator.

FW: That sounds like a really horrible experience. I have argued that performance artists quite often set up ethical testing zones, typically but not only by putting their own bodies at risk, or in situations that seemed to demand an intervention from the audience. Or would, if they were not framed as art (this is, if you like, the institutionally-critical aspect of performance). You can go back to Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* to see this, or works by Marina Abramovic, Abramovic/Ulay, Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, Adrian Piper, Pope.L., Tehching Hsieh. Abramovic, Acconci and Burden also occasionally put other people in those situations, Burden notoriously in *TV Hijack*. In those cases, where there is a higher degree of manipulation of other people, there tends also to be a more obvious reliance on spectacle. This goes not only to your question about what kind of community the art community might be, but also opens onto a discussion about whether it's possible to make the case that the works are engaged in any kind of critical reflection on conditions "external" to art,

³ „Damenmord“, *Das Wiener Sommersymposium*, Vienna (1987), performance venue Moulin Rouge, Vienna

or whether they are simply continuous with them (put simply, does a given work of art have something to say *about* socially sanctioned violence, or does it just participate in that violence, as spectacle). The same kind of discussion can be had in relation to more recent works by Vanessa Beecroft or Santiago Sierra, among others. The experience you recount, where you were violently manipulated without consent, would seem to highlight the calculations that artists must make in terms of their responsibilities toward collaborators, and especially any harm that might come to them. Which is to say that performance imposes, or should impose, ethical requirements on artists, as well as audiences. Obviously, in the case you describe, the artists failed to meet such requirements, so the work collapses into spectacle and abuse—although it's not clear that the audience was able to read it as such. That seems to return the audience to the position of relatively passive consumers that performance arguably sought to disallow, although its efforts in that regard have been ambivalent. In this context, community seems like a negative construction, a counterweight to engagement. In the end, although the "artworld" is an identifiable network of social organization, I'm not sure that we can or should separate the "art community" from broader social groupings of which it is a subset.

PS: You have aptly analyzed the case I have described: If a work collapses into spectacle and abuse, it is difficult for the audience to recognize what message is being conveyed, and they remain passive consumers. If the spectacle involves or even overlays abuse, critical thinking is required. For everyday life we demand active civil courage; in art we limit ourselves to critical reflection. I think the spectacle is a relatively simple form for attracting attention. It can also more easily conceal possible weaknesses in the content of a work. Manipulation is an effective stylistic device that should be used intelligently. The institutions are in a dilemma: Should they interfere with artistic freedom at all? Where's the limit? There is a risk that this will be done at the expense of the freedom of art, or that institutions will patronize artists or censor them. I think art should have something to say about socially sanctioned violence. If art only participated in violence, as a spectacle, then a very crucial aspect would be missing for me: namely the claim of content—questions of the social, the philosophical, etc., which an artist asks through the work. Art doesn't have to provide answers. I think it has to ask questions. If this is not accomplished, the work is not convincing. The question of implementation is crucial. Something bombastic that is implemented with a lot of effort may still not get to the point and remain indefinite. Nevertheless, I wonder why institutional critique is not popular. If the institutions are committed to art, they can only win if they promote exchange and discourse, right? How do you assess the reluctance of the institutions?

FW: You wrote, "For everyday life we demand active civil courage; in art we limit ourselves to critical reflection." This seems pertinent for the current moment, in which it is being demanded of museums that they do more than critically reflect: the pressure being applied to museums' boards about trustees whose wealth is seen to be derived from unethical, and especially, racially injurious

sources, might be seen as a call for institutions to demonstrate active civil courage. As might pressure on museums to rethink their exhibition and collection strategies, and their hiring processes. These movements represent activist instances of the institutional critique that emerged in the 1970s. So the short answer to how we assess the reluctance of institutions, at least in the US where they are not primarily state-funded, is financial, although it is also connected to the exclusivity of their boards, and to the disconnections between different levels of museum workers and their boards. This demonstrates the continuities between institutions and the systemically racist societies within which they have developed and continue to operate. We (whoever "we" are) are not quite so directly demanding of artists, which suggests that critical reflection retains value, although the controversy over Dana Schutz's painting at the 2017 Whitney Biennial, for example, suggests that there is an appetite for calling out works of art that are understood to appropriate imagery for spectacular purposes, something else that situates art in relation to systemic racism and injustice. So I would say that there are newly pointed versions of institutional critique that are popular, which attach themselves to social movements beyond the artworld, and which institutions resist because they are committed to the version of art that represents the interests of their investors, and are late to the game and bewildered by the new demands. Of course, there are individual actors within museums, etc., who have been working all along to shift things from within, so you still need to think about networks within networks, as well as the more obvious narrative.

PS: I also believe that changes tend to come from social movements. The art world is comparatively rigid, and in any case an individual has to do a lot more persuasion to be heard. Even if one believes that the art scene in Austria is not so heavily dependent on the pressure of the donors, since there is also state funding for culture, there are also parameters within the institutions that contribute to a certain inertia within the system. Vienna is somewhat remote from the international art world, although there is a vibrant art scene here, with artists who are undeservedly not on the international radar. New things usually meet with acceptance only if they have already established themselves elsewhere. And one must not forget that Austria is also a small country. It is therefore important to make oneself visible internationally. I would like to see more courage on the part of the institutions to address uncomfortable issues, but there is also a lack of self-criticism. Back to dealing with sexualized violence in a precarious area such as the arts: for me, it was a strange experience to see what creative arguments those in charge come up with when it comes to the question of whether their institution is dealing with an unpleasant topic such as sexualized violence in the art world, or with a work that broaches this subject. In the work *Elastic Punch* I dealt very comprehensively with the inner states and emotions that go along with such an exceptional situation. In their ignorance, which is more or less a refusal, the calculatedness of the institutions is also evident. They want a spectacle, publicity, a person with a high profile, good attendance figures. And the consideration of whether one could cause trouble for one's own clientele and its members probably plays a role as well. How sexualized or sexual

violence can feel, that the person affected can still develop strength again or break down because of it: all these considerations contain more than just one level. There are artists who act in a publicity-effective way, others are more comfortable with argumentation, and then there are others who can speak better through their work. And some statements on this subject certainly require a greater effort of attention on the part of the recipients than others, or they don't offer the spectacular effect of calling someone out. I do not want to be misunderstood: the culprit must be held accountable. But sometimes it seems to me that the public wants to deal with the issue by stringing names together. And although this satisfies an emotional need, it does not change the underlying structures. Is calling out and canceling the only solution in a democracy? I say no. The question also arises as to whether it does full justice to the concept of civil courage. Not for me. I think the issue is more complex and needs space for artistic expression as well as a culture of debate. It is not only the institutions that have to act beyond economic considerations in this respect. We must be able to expect more of society and of the individual, namely a willingness to pay real attention and to engage in debate. And that also means that our criticism should start with the convenience society—and by that I also mean institutional framing. For I would like to state in conclusion that art is neither an entertainment format nor a pious common experience.

FW: I think that one of the things you are pointing to here is that art has different constituencies that want or expect different things from it. Some people do want entertainment, others do want piety, and both groups are able to find what they want, sometimes in the same places. And as you say, one response recently has been to call out or cancel, which can become an end in itself. Increasingly, it seems, artists must operate both within the rigidities of the artworld and its familiar institutions, but also at a remove from it, which is no easy task. We will have to see whether the cumulative effects of the social movements and the global pandemic ultimately go toward more open structures, or business as usual.

This conversation was conducted by email in August 2020