UNHAPPY DAYS IN THE ART WORLD?
De-skilling Theater, Re-skilling Performance

by Claire Bishop

I.
There can be no clearer example of the risks of re-skilling—the move from one area of disciplinary competence to another—than a comparison between Elmgreen & Dragset’s *Happy Days in the Art World* and Boris Charmatz’s *Musée de la Danse: Expo-Zéro*, both held in November as part of Performa 11. A one-hour play written by the Scandinavian artist duo in collaboration with Tim Etchells, *Happy Days in the Art World* premiered at N.Y.U.’s thousand-seat Skirball Theater. It combined the bleak signifiers of post-war existentialism with deliberately superficial art world in-jokes (the title is an amalgam of Beckett’s *Happy Days* and Sarah Thornton’s gossipy exposé *Seven Days in the Art World*). The artist duo were played by the English actors Joseph Fiennes and Charles Edwards, who animated the script with Royal Shakespeare Company-style *ésprit*, but I was not alone in finding the totality awkward and unconvincing. Yet with its limited run (two nights) and catchy one-line pretext (Beckett meets collaborative artists’ mid-life crisis), the play didn’t need to succeed according to the conventions of theater. The same can be said for almost all of the visual artists who used traditional proscenium spaces during Performa 11, with correspondingly elusive success: Simon Fujiwara, Laurel Nakadate, Frances Stark, Ming Wong, etc.

*Musée de la Danse: Expo-Zéro*, by contrast, was a sprawling three-day installation by French choreographer Boris Charmatz, who relocated himself from a proscenium context to the kind of abandoned space now typical of the visual art biennial: a former school. Five classrooms, together with corridors and storage cupboards, were given over to a flowing, overlapping array of performances by actors, dancers, choreographers, and even a philosopher. Some pieces were on loop, some were improvised, some involved the audience. (On first entering the main room I was asked to lie down, close my eyes, and listen to a dance; I remained there for nearly an hour while Charmatz...
moved around me, swishing, leaping, stamping, and occasionally pausing to address the audience; eventually a friend nudged me to get up as the performance was long over.) With no labeling or explanations, it took time and conversation with other visitors to decipher each work. In the final 20 minutes, Charmatz closed his eyes and chanted Bruce Nauman’s phrase, “Get out of my mind, get out of this room,” improvising an array of violent, near psychotic movements before slumping against the wall with a fragile, barely audible whisper. The November light faded outside the windows and the Musée de la Danse received another ephemeral donation to its collection.

If Elmgreen & Dragset’s play was an example of re-skilling from the white cube to the black box, then Boris Charmatz re-skilled in the opposite direction. Elmgreen & Dragset adopted a conventional theater format, which exposed the paucity of building an hour-long script around in-jokes, while Charmatz’s idea of a museum as the framing device for dance (the least collectable of cultural forms) managed to reimagine the categories of both museum and collection afresh. It also opened to negotiation the difference between amateur and professional competences: that the Musée took place in a former school, with blackboards still on the walls, underscored this pedagogic allusion. But this traffic of re-skilling between white cube and black box is more complicated than a question of transcending amateurism, or simply switching the context for performance. The proscenium is a discourse (immersion), an architecture (the black box), and a structure of spectatorship (ticketed, with a beginning-to-end experience). The white cube, in turn, is also a discourse (of mythic transparency, assisted by the glare of full lighting), and a structure of experience (the autonomy of the viewer), giving rise to different modalities of performance: ongoing presence (like a sculpture) or the loop (as in video).

I am using the term “re-skilling” here, but the more usual word to date has been “de-skilling,” a term from economics to describe the way in which skilled labor is replaced by new technologies operated by semi-skilled workers, resulting in a lower investment in human capital. This process accelerated in the 1960s and 1970s, precisely at the moment when Judson choreographers were rethinking dance as everyday gestures; when Fluxus artists were poking fun at classical music in irreverent scored “events”; and when conceptual artists consciously renounced technical competence in photography. De-skilling entered art discourse in the 1980s, in the context of writing on conceptual art: It denoted the tendency to outsource the production of works of art to workers in “other-than-art fields,” thereby placing the artist in a managerial position.\(^1\) De-skilling was also seen as a critique of aesthetics, now understood as a romantic evocation of unalienated labor and pure sensory experience.\(^2\)

In his recent book *The Intangibilities of Form*, art theorist John Roberts attempts to bring
artistic and economic de-skilling into closer proximity.\(^3\) Roberts uses theories of labor as means to read the avant-garde: The work of art becomes the focal point for redefining skill and the value of manual labor. By adopting an amateur or everyday aesthetic, the avant-garde narrowed the gap between artist and non-artist, eliding professional and amateur. This produces a questioning of authorship that, if taken to its logical limit, implies a death of the artist as traditionally understood. Roberts refers to this process as a “spectralization” of the artist: When everyone can be an artist, what need is there for a specialized body of knowledge? The avant-garde’s desire for spectralization has been the tacit, paradoxical engine behind innumerable attempts to make art more democratic and accessible, and de-skilling has long been the preferred strategy for accomplishing this self-extinction.

II.
In the U.S. in the late 1950s, performance art emerged from the generative union of abstract painting and Cageian composition to mount a critique of traditional theater. At its purest, this art spurned costumes, characters, narrative, rehearsals, and scripts in favor of everyday clothing, instructions, scores, and improvisatory chance. It took place in the actual space-time of the viewer, and these contingencies of location and audience were often factored into the work. The incontrovertible frisson of real life was the steering principle; no suspension of disbelief was necessary because everything was purportedly “real.” This reality effect was perceived as a crucial counterpoint to theater and spectacle, understood as commercial, traditional, and bourgeois. It resulted in visual art performance’s long-standing “anti-theatricality,” a Platonic prejudice against mimesis and illusion. The solution was either to dissolve the space between viewer and performer, or conversely, to expose this division as essential to theater’s ontology (as Brecht had proposed in the 1920s).

It should be stressed here that I am not referring to theatricality in the sense given to it by the art historian and critic Michael Fried, although he has been the most vocal and persistent advocate of the anti-theatrical impulse. When he advised art to “defeat” theater, he intended it to cease flirting with the durational and the intermedial, since this led to medium impurity and an unwanted self-consciousness in the viewer.\(^4\) Today, if we complain that a work of art is “theatrical,” it is not because it is installation, performance, video, social practice, or any number of other intermedial forms that have arisen since the ’60s; rather, theatricality seems to refer to a visible excess of staging, and thus a particularly queasy relationship to mimesis. Yet this line of thinking is premised on a slippage between a space and its discourse, mistaking the black box for theatricality, and its immersiveness for passivity and artifice. Visual art has long drawn upon theatricality as a straw man to bolster its own insistence on authenticity and the reality effect—on being and doing rather than merely representing.

It is fair to say that in the U.S., the 1980s and 1990s were a fallow time for visual art performance: The list of visual artists who performed live was short, and the younger generation was more attracted to the high production values that performing for video and photography made possible (Matthew Barney, Vanessa Beecroft). Visual art’s return to live performance over the course of the 1990s therefore took place via a shift from performance to
the performative: the idea that statements as well as non-verbal actions can intervene in a situation and change the course of events. Performance no longer relied upon the artist’s body and could take place via participatory sculpture (Felix Gonzales-Torres) or activation of the exhibition space (Rirkrit Tiravanija). At the same time in Europe, a generation of young artists began to make performance as a set of task-based instructions outsourced to other people (Jeremy Deller, Annika Eriksson, Elmgreen & Dragset, Santiago Sierra). Performativity and outsourcing enabled contemporary performance art to separate itself from the icky tradition of nudity and bodily fluids that had characterized body art of the 1970s. These new gestures were informal in appearance and democratic in impetus. Inviting non-professionals to be performers also allowed for numerous commentaries on a service economy, in which we are endlessly subject to the performance of affective labor, and a society of surveillance, in which we are constantly on stage. This de-skilling of performance seemed to propose that everyone could be (or already was) a performance artist.

Visual art’s current infatuation with contemporary dance comes into clearer light at this juncture. Dance has been a fellow-traveler of performance art since the 1950s, when Merce Cunningham was key to early crossover experiments at Black Mountain College. Abstract and literal, refusing narrative and characterization, contemporary dance provides a perfect reinforcement for visual art’s critique of theatricality. Yet its austere, pared-down beauty also supplies a plenitude that is missing from so much contemporary visual art performance, with its preference for the non-professional, the authenticity of the unrehearsed, and a tendency to equate aesthetics with depoliticization. The dancer’s body holds a knowledge that cannot be simulated; as such, dance satisfies a yearning for skill and seduction that visual art performance rejected in its inaugural refusal of spectacle and theater (a refusal that, ironically, also characterized the first moments of postmodern dance in the ’60s).

III.
Over the last 50 years, numerous approaches to de-skilling performance have taken place in the white cube and black box by performers trained in both arenas. Unlike amateurism, de-skilling denotes the conscious rejection of one’s disciplinary training and its traditional competences. Crucially, one has to have acquired this training in order to reject it—and this is what differentiates a “de-skilled” performance, such as Yvonne Rainer’s We Shall Run (1963), from an amateur performance in which a jogger runs about on stage. A knowledge has been acquired, and is rejected, but is still perceptible (for example, in our sense of a scored intentionality underpinning the movements). De-skilling, in other words, always requires a re-skilling if it is to convince us that it is more than simply amateur. On the most basic level, this re-skilling is rhetorical: being able to account for, persuasively narrate, and even theorize one’s disciplinary unraveling; consider Marcel Duchamp’s defense of the ready-made in The Blind Man, Andy Warhol’s philosophy (“From A to B and Back Again”), or Sherrie Levine’s savvy theoretical positioning.

But re-skilling isn’t just about justifying a repudiation of one’s training, since artists also move between disciplines. When the poet Marcel Broodthaers declared in 1964 that he was “no good
at anything” and would become an artist, he anticipated a tendency that has subsequently accelerated. Today, microbiologists become choreographers (Xavier Le Roy), artists become poets (Kenneth Goldsmith), dancers become artists (Tino Sehgal), as do architects (Alfredo Jaar, Marjetica Potrc), entomologists (Carsten Höller), art historians (Jeremy Deller), and anthropologists (Susan Hiller). Re-skilling isn’t just disciplinary reorientation, it is the bringing to bear of one set of competencies on those of the newly elected discipline. But a re-skilling between visual art and theater will always be the most tense, since the de-skilling of theater is the history of visual art performance.

Some will say that skills no longer matter, that the artist today should be fully “spectralized,” because the truly emancipatory position is to erase the line between professional and amateur. This may be true of new media, but old media like visual art and theater are premised upon spectatorship. That said, the best forms of de-skilling evoke in the viewer something of this spectralization: Such works generate in us not a disdainful “I could do that” but the generative energy of “I want to do that!” This effect is perhaps the most productive engagement with spectacle we can imagine today: Rather than setting up the accusatory binary of critical versus complicit, an aesthetics of de-skilling can keep permeable the boundary between performer and audience, amateur and professional. This oscillation was central to Boris Charmatz’s Expo-Zéro, and it underpins a different trajectory of de-skilling to the avant-garde lineage traced by Roberts, one that is less preoccupied with conceptual maneuvers than with generating in the beholder the desire to make and do—a desire paradoxically indebted to a particular form of amateurism, that of D.I.Y. and punk (“This is a chord, this is another, this is a third. Now form a band.”).

Ideally, the dialectic of de- and re-skilling should allow artists, directors, and choreographers to creatively rethink their output, and in ways that go beyond a mere swapping of context. As viewers too, we need to re-skill, learning to read the ways in which the black box might offer its own critique of spectacle and theatricality. Maybe then, eventually, the discursive fixities of art and theater can become more adventurous in their unraveling, encouraging theater to engage more deeply with concept, context, and audience, while encouraging visual art performance to rethink the duration it currently allocates to its ideas, countenance some rehearsals, and get over its life-long attachment to the reality effect.

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RECOMMENDED ARTICLES

INCONVERSATION

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MARTHA WILSON with Jarrett Earnest

NOV 2014 | ART

Under Martha Wilson’s visionary direction, Franklin Furnace has remained a vital force in the New York art world since 1976, holding fast to its mission of “keeping the world safe for avant-garde art.”

INCONVERSATION

JEFFREY DEITCH with David Carrier and Joachim Pissarro

OCT 2013 | ART

Recently Jeffrey Deitch has been much in the news. He has just returned from L.A. where he held the directorship of MOCA for three years. Within this relatively short span of time, Deitch managed to transform radically the ways we approach museums, whether as insiders or outsiders, and, further even, he may have introduced a seismic change within the Art World proper.

DIVIDING DIVISIONS: What’s at Stake in the Theater vs. Visual Arts Debate

by Alexis Clements

FEB 2012 | THEATER

Performa 11, the biennial of visual art performance, to borrow their insistent term, which took place this past November, opened itself up to an even wider array of artists than in years past.
NewARTtheatre: Evolutions of the Performance Aesthetic

by Jess Wilcox

SEPT 2014 | ART BOOKS

While many familiar with the long and fluctuating relationship between the visual arts and theater may be dubious of the choice of “new” in this publication’s title—artists from the Dadas to Rauschenberg have employed theatrical tropes in their work—its pages capture the questions and concerns of a particular and unique moment within this fraught history.
Performance art is a performance presented to an audience within a fine art context, traditionally interdisciplinary. Performance may be either scripted or unscripted, random or carefully orchestrated, spontaneous or otherwise carefully planned with or without audience participation. The performance can be live or via media; the performer can be present or absent. It can be any situation that involves four basic elements: time, space, the performer's body, or presence in a medium, and a relationship. The re-introduction to the importance of traditional skills also encourages other members in the community to support tradespeople locally, thus relying more on their own resourcefulness. Skill Sharing Fest. Having grown up in a larger city, I’ve got the impression that academic learning and urban agendas have become the only lessons considered important in order for young people to become successful. New organizations have begun to grow out of Transition Town and re-skilling strategies. In the Eastern Shore of Nova Scotia, Canada for example, The Deanery Project hosts many workshops that offer skill-sharing opportunities.