Sample lecture notes from Contemporary Performance Art (Fall 2025)

Week 1— Performance Art: Engaging with the real

Day 1. Tuesday, September 3: Introduction to the course & Contextualizing Performance

> "Story telling and embodied practices are central components of Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Embodied practices situate the body as a tool through which ways of knowing and being are articulated in movement, gesture, and orality. Within the diverse and distinct Indigenous nations across the Americas, histories have and continue to be recorded, enacted, and remembered through the performative act. Performance, then, is and has always been the living archive of Indigenous nations. Stories performed are the documents of Indigenous histories – and furthermore, they resist the erasure of Indigenous experience executed by the apparatus of settler colonialism; by the archive, the academy, and the museum." Carla Taunton, "Performing Sovereignty: Forces to be Reckoned With," in *More Caught in the Act: An Anthology of Performance Art by Canadian Women*

> "(O)ne must always refer to the histories of the emergence of performance art in plural so as not to fetishize notions of its origins, specific practices, locations, and authorship. Performance practices change—be they artistic, political, or ritual—as much as the works they produce. While recognizing the power inherent in naming and claiming, it is important to recognize that what has been called 'performance art' has roots in many artistic forms. However, it transcends these limits, bringing together many elements to create something unexpected." Diana Taylor, *Performance*, trans. Abigail Levine (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 46.

Our course is about performance art as it is studied and taught in Western art history departments. What do we mean by performance art? Some other terminology used to describe the phenomena we will be studying are body art, live art, embodied practice, or action art, all of which, despite having different nuances that we will explore, emphasize the centrality of the body to the practice.

Diana Taylor, the author of today's reading and a renowned scholar in performance studies, provides a capacious definition of performance, describing it as an ontology (a way of being) and an epistemology (a way of knowing). Performance can intervene in and offer new constructions of the real. Performance as a product, collected and preserved is also a record of the past.

Performance is a broad category of phenomena that extends well beyond what we would describe as theater. Its definition is radically unstable and therefore dependent on its framing. Performance studies as a field can then be understood as the study and practice of framing. Thinking of performance as framing helps us see the way that a theatrical proscenium visually frames the stage action of a performance. This architectural feature also frames the off-stage of the performance which equally participates in the performance scenario. What is off-stage, left out of the field of theater is politics, protest, self-presentation, religious ceremonies, rituals, and more.

What is included in performance studies is the relations that are created during the performance between the artist and the audience members and between the audience members themselves, which can be a critical component of performance art, as was the case in Marina Abramovic's 1974 performance *Rhythm 0,* planned as a six-hour long endurance piece where the artist invited her audience to use one of the 72 objects that were placed on a table in front of her naked body. The objects varied from a feather, a rose, perfume, and honey, to a pair of scissors, nails, a scalpel, a gun, and a bullet. The performance ended when one audience member inserted the bullet into the gun and guided Abramovic's hand, now holding the gun, to her head, only to be interrupted by another audience member who realized that the artist might die.

Not all performance art takes place before an audience – those that necessarily take place before an audience are described as live art. A heated debate around performance is about its documentability. Some theorists, like Peggy Phelan, assert that the essence of performance is its ephemerality and therefore once documented, performance seizes to be performance. In *Unmarked,* Phelan writes: "Performance clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital."[1] What she is emphasizing is performance's anti-institutional and anti-capitalist foundations which is a tendency we will trace while we are investigating the art historical origins of the practice in avant-garde movements. Diana Taylor also captures performance art's avant-garde characteristic, which is described in Oxford Languages as both "original" and "ahead of times" by highlighting that "(b)reaking norms is the norm of performance art." In the art gallery setting, performance art resists both a strictly visual regime and the objecthood of artworks while referencing both- we will investigate this further in our lecture on minimalism.

Performance art is both archival, in that it produces and in the process relays knowledge, and it refuses the archive in its anti-materiality. According to Phelan, performance is stored only in memory, which is necessarily subjective and thus is not subject to claims of validity or accuracy. Phelan continues: "To attempt to write about the undocumentable event of performance is to invoke the rules of the written document and thereby alter the event itself." She is taking a deconstructivist and intertextual perspective here, where reading the performance in itself can be construed as a performance that births new understandings of reality, as well as new realities. So

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[1] Peggy Phelan, Unmarked (London: Routledge, 1993), 146.

what you will be doing as you write about performance art in your assignments and contribute to the field is to transform reality.

An important point needs to be made here. As Rebecca Schneider reminds us, conceiving of performance as nothing more than an act of disappearance neglects to acknowledge the role performance plays in cultures where knowledge is transmitted via non-material means, through oral histories and performances which by definition are repeatable. That it is not recorded, or recordable, does not mean that performance is not archival. It just is not archival in a limited, material sense.

Contemporary performance art is often a radical, insurgent practice that draws attention to ongoing sociopolitical issues that affect day-to-day reality.

Example: Rebecca Belmore video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YhWkrHDZue4 (The artist speaking at the Global Feminisms event at the Brooklyn Museum in April 2010) 13 minutes

"All of Belmore's work asserts the rights of Native women to define their bodies, their situations, and their own political identities. Belmore's work decolonizes and then re-politicizes her own body to make the body a site for activism and embodied theory."[2]

Belmore's performances— played out through her physical presence on the stage or in other public spaces and the articulation of her perspective— counter both "colonial myths about the euphemistic 'disappearance' of Indians" and the harsh realities of the disappearances of Indigenous women in Canada.[3]

Many of her performance pieces are site-and-time-specific. In an interview with Daina Augatis, Anishinabe artist Rebecca Belmore recalls that in the 90s the political ground shifted for First Nations people when during the "Oka crisis" the Canadian military turned its military power against the Mohawk people. As a result of the government's efforts to manipulate public opinion, the media was saturated with "the image of 'angry Indian,'" which contradicted the death toll of the "Oka crisis."[4] Belmore's own angry response was to create a conceptual performance where First Nations peoples could speak directly to the earth through a large megaphone. Between 1991 and 1996 the megaphone and the performance it came to represent titled *Ayum-ee-aawch Ooomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother* traveled to reserve communities, small towns, and urban centers, echoing the voices of Indigenous peoples across Canada.

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[2] "Playing Indian in the Works of Rebecca Belmore, Marilyn Dumont, and Ray Young Bear," American Indian Quarterly 38, no.4 (Fall 2014): 495.

[3] Cheryl Suzack, Shari M. Huhndorf, Jeanne Perreault, and Jean Barman, *Indigenous Women and Feminism: Politics, Activism, Culture* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 189.

[4] Daina Augaitis and Kathleen Ritter, eds. *Rebecca Belmore: Rising to the Occasion* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery), 42.

Provocation is at the core of Belmore's art. For her first performance in 1987 during the Duke and Duchess of York's visit to Thunder Bay, Belmore wore a red velvet dress poignantly called *Rising to the Occasion.* The artifact at first sight appeared like a Victorian gown until one noticed the beadwork on the bodice and the buckskin fringe amongst other juxtapositions that drew attention to the failure of the Canadian government to recognize the legitimacy of the First Nations people whose land it continues to exploit.

Since then Belmore consistently responded to political injustices in ways that are performative, whether it materialized in video, photography, or sculptural form. As such, another characteristic of Belmore's art is, as Augatis observes, the "constant presence" of the body, which is, even in its absence, "used consistently to signify resistance, labour and endurance."[5] Exemplified by her 1991 performance *Creation or Death: We Will Win*, where she ascended up a winding staircase with her hands and feet tightly bound by a symbolic red cord, Belmore often utilizes her body as a stand-in for racialized people to represent political resistance and wilful determination against the oppressive functions of the hegemony.[6]

Belmore uses her body to amplify the voices of women who can no longer be heard. The many missing and murdered Indigenous women whose disappearances have failed to be investigated in Canada is a subject she often addresses in her performances as the Canadian government makes little progress in addressing the crisis. In *Vigil* (2002) she inscribed the names of missing women on her arms, yelling out each name after which she drew a rose, with its thorns, through her closed lips. She then wore a red dress and nailed it to a fence, ripping it to pieces in her efforts to break free from the pole while a black truck played "It's a Man's Man's Man's World" in the background.[7]

Day 2. Thursday, September 5: Realism as an art movement and the historical avant- garde

We addressed in our last lecture Diana Taylor's assertion that "(b)reaking norms is the norm of performance art." Today we look at the relationship between the the art historical avant-garde, particularly the avant-garde ambition to coalesce art and life, to start tracing the foundations of performance art as a contemporary art practice that exists today. We begin by the emergence of the realist movement in art history which coincides with the development of photography as an artistic medium.

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[5] Augaitis and Ritter, *Belmore*, 9.

[6] Augaitis and Ritter, *Belmore*, 10.

[7] Augaitis and Ritter, *Belmore*, 106.

Photography was developed in France and England around the same time, in the late 1830s. The first versions of photographs came in the form of calotypes and daguerrotypes. The former was initially of lower quality but was less costly and generated negatives whereas the latter had higher quality with sharp detail on a shiny surface (a piece of metal that has been treated in some way usually with silver gelatin) but produced only one copy.

Photography was from this point forward expanding technologically speaking, creating opportunities for artists to create photographs outside the studio. As time went on cameras became portable and more user-friendly when initially they were extremely clunky and costly. In fact, when it first came about, photography was considered a science rather than an art form and there was a lot of controversy about whether it was or was not an art form, a controversy that resulted in court in France where it was decided photography indeed was an art form.
Here is the oldest daguerreotype photograph in existence titled *Still Life in Studio* by Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, from 1837.

When we look at this piece we can see the influence of still life paintings; the artful arrangement of inanimate objects, different objects conveying a unitized meaning, and clear light force, there is certainly a reference to the brevity of life and we also see a variety of different textures and tones. There are a lot of very dark highlights and shadows and we also see different textures for example the woven texture of the flask. This piece represents what photography can do at this time, which is to capture these very controlled settings with high contrast. The photograph is a celebration of light, mediated through the means of symbolism. What are some symbols people spot here?

Mid-to-late 19th century:
The mid-1850s witnessed rebellion and revolution, which was a viewpoint epitomized by the ideologies of the Romantics, who were seeking individuality and freedom from perceived or actual oppression. At this time a new idea called positivism was emerging, continuing off the curtails of the Enlightenment, which essentially states that all knowledge is empirical and comes

from proven theories. So there is a desire for what is known and what can be proven. Realism is heavily influenced by positivism, which itself holds what is real and tangible important. As such, Realist painters sought to depict scenes and phenomena that could in fact be experienced with the five senses. Unlike Romantic artworks which are extreme, emotional, and fantastical, Realistic paintings tended to be more tangible works that incorporate subjects that are familiar to most viewers, unlike the romantic period where the subject matter is quite strictly defined (aristocrats, kings, upper class, patrons who can afford the artworks, etc. and, angels and similar mythical and religious scenes). What was depicted until Realism was interesting, elegant, or "educational" subject matter such as beautiful human figures, famous people, events from myths, and history.

Subject matter of realist works on the other hand frequently includes the lower echelons of society such as peasants, sex workers, etc. as well as tasks and everyday activities that might be considered commonplace or mundane. Rather than any one person it is rather the social condition that is depicted. The scenes depicted are not glamourized but are honest and frank, depicted still with sincerity and respect that is not always detectable in the depictions of members of the upper class. The colour palettes include earth tones in both the figures and landscapes, which unifies the compositional elements as one. People themselves are a part of the landscape itself, the idea that people come from the earth. There are a lot of landscape paintings from this period which was not a popular subject matter in the preceding Romantic period.

Most artists at this time were still very committed to the salons, prestigious spaces where artworks would be displayed. In these salons, artworks that would look quite similar would be piled on top of each other, and many artists found them to be very stuffy and were also quite bored with this conventional method of displaying artwork. They demanded space for their artworks as well as an appreciation of their uniqueness. This is how galleries came about, with which we are familiar today. Galleries have open spaces for spectators and aren't nearly as crowded as the salons. The exhibitions in galleries also aren't juried as are salons. So the artists start becoming more liberal with their style and with the subjects they are choosing to depict.

The Stone Breakers by avant-garde artist Gustave Courbet (1849) is a concretely realist work that depicts two anonymous stone breakers, intended to be a narrative of poverty. The faces of the men aren't clearly depicted, they could be anybody. Stone breaking is a very menial and labour-intensive job. The piece was created in reaction the terrible work conditions where people weren't guaranteed safety or regular pay and the ensuing series of large-scale labor strikes starting in 1848. The painting is monumental, meaning very large, which elevates the commonplace event that is depicted to a historical scale to increase its socio-critical impact. For the painting, Courbet hired two stone breakers whose disparate ages were intended to show that people were born into and died in poverty, a commentary on the cyclical nature of the lack of class mobility that was exhausting people. The original painting was destroyed and today we have a photo reproduction.

In France, Courbet led the art movement called realism. Here's another painting by him that was considered scandalous due to its subject matter, which is as real as real gets: death. *A Burial at Ornans* is a painting from 1849–50 where the artist depicted a funeral he attended in his hometown. A painting of actual but ordinary townspeople on a huge canvas previously reserved for religious or historical paintings. The somber materiality of the humble funeral contrasts with other historical depictions of the subject of death, where the matter is perceived and depicted as inextricable from God, religion, and the afterlife and is sensationalized accordingly.

What is the difference between Courbet's painting and Velazquez's? Both are very realistic looking but the one of the Madonna cannot have been real, so the term we are looking for to describe the "realism" of this painting is actually naturalism.

Naturalism means to portray the form as it really is, in a natural setting, being very accurate with precise detail. As we have seen, realism is more than just form, it is about the subject matter as well. Courbet's works are both realistic and naturalistic.

Here's an example that is not naturalistic but is realistic by Honore Daumier (1808-1879). Daumier's lithographs are full of social satire, as exemplified by Gargantua (Gargantua, 1831 - Honore Daumier) which depicts King Louis Philippe as a fat giant consuming all the riches from the people and in return dropping lots of documents, titles, and awards. Daumier published this caricature in response to the tax policies of the monarch and his ministers and was imprisoned for six months as punishment. He also sculpted many portrait busts of politicians with an eye for political social satire. Similar to Courbet, Daumier also portrayed the daily life of the commoners.

Our next image is Olympia by Manet from 1863, which is the narrative of the sex worker. Manet was an unconventional artist who did not like the classical conventions that were favoured by the Salon at the time and created works that intentionally flew in the face of Salon conventions. Luncheon on the Grass – scandalous.

Manet intended for the narrative of his painting to be very obvious, and there are many hints in the painting about the woman's occupation. "Olympia" was a common pseudonym for sex workers at this time in France. The black cat, which is associated with promiscuity in Western art, the orchid in her hair: flowers, which are the sex organs of plants, signifying female sensuality. There is also the fact that the figure is purposefully undressed, rather than artfully nude. She is still wearing one slipper, and has pieces of jewelry, giving the impression that she is deliberately naked. The other lady in the painting: in Western paintings unfortunately oftentimes women of colour were used as props to denote a figure that was less civilized or a figure that was hyper-sexualized. So we see a lot of black people in Modernist harem paintings as the hyper-sexualized figure. The black woman is pictured at the right bearing flowers likely from a client while Olympia disregards them and instead stares at the viewer. The black woman is wearing clothes that were out of fashion indicating that she is supposed to represent the counterpoint to the supposedly more attractive, and white, sex worker. She is more of a symbol than an individual, representing hypersexuality which was a common racist stereotype for Africans at the time. The figures are clearly separated which is indicative of the segregationist French colonial mindset.

Back to Olympia – she looks annoyed that the viewer has come in unannounced into her space. The figure is very flat, with no particular contours to define her body, this is all created by this

very stark, non-contrasty light. This lighting is not supposed to be flattering, depicting a warm and inviting scene, instead, she is questioning the presence of the intruder. By looking at the viewer, she is both acknowledging the viewer's gaze and rejecting it. In addition, her hand is curled over her crotch, she is obviously in control of her body, blocking her assets from view. The painting is painted in an impasto technique, the image is quite sketchy and there are a lot of parts that aren't blended in. Painting in this manner that is less soft and less idealized was a characteristic of the avant-garde painters at this time.

Now let's expand on the notion of the avant-garde, which, as you might have noticed, is one of the key terms for today's lecture, and how it relates to contemporary performance art. As art historian Jennie Klein writes in *Histories and Practices of Live Art*, "Part of the appeal of performance/live art has much to do with its ability to signify romantic ideas that were first associated with the historical avant-garde in the early twentieth century, such as individual agency, psychic/spiritual transcendence, the (suffering or stoic) body and a revolutionary counteraction against the stultifying culture of the middle class. The 'idea' of performance/live art – whether it is motivated by action or a desire for a heightened spiritual state – invokes a collective desire/nostalgia for a time when art and politics were inextricably entwined and the act of making art was a radical gesture."[8]

The avant-garde started emerging in the mid-19th century around when realism as an art movement was taking prominence. The avant-garde is a tendency that deviates from the norm, a tendency that is non-conventional. You've probably encountered the term in the field of fashion. Avant-garde means in French the vanguard which is a military term used to describe the front line of an army moving into battle. Artists were compared with these soldiers, or rather, compared themselves with soldiers, as they were often a group force, challenging long-established concepts and ideas about art and fighting an entrenched establishment. Avant-garde is used to refer to artists who deviate from the norm in some way that is very obvious and very intentional. Avant-garde artists challenge and provoke their audience sometimes through satire. In their lifetime they are often regarded with hostility, a reaction from society to anyone who pushes accepted boundaries. The avant-garde is often censored as well, as we have seen in the case of Darmier. What is avant-garde is not easily discernable since it is historically contextualized. For example, an artist's expressionist style might have challenged the prevailing styles and authority of the time but reads very differently to the contemporary eye. For example in one of the recommended readings for today, "Realism(s) of the Avant-Garde: An Introduction" by Moritz Bable, it is stated that it is commonly accepted that one of the greatest achievements of 20th-century avant-garde movements was doing away with realism in its various forms. So why have I been referring to Courbet, Daumier, and similar artists as avant-garde artists? It is because of the way I understand the avant-garde and its engagement with "the real." One attribute of the avant-garde that we emphasize is that it is anti-establishment. As I have mentioned, realist artists were becoming disillusioned with the salons where artworks have traditionally been displayed

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[8] Jennie Klein, "Developing Live Art," in *Histories and Practices of Live Art* edited by Deirdre Heddon and Jennie Klein (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 12-13.

and were looking to move their work outside the salon into the galleries, which were a novel, alternative space for art at the time.

An important characteristic of the avant-garde is the desire to merge art and life, which in the case of the realists manifested in their selection of subject matter, as well as their rejection of pictorial techniques, like perspective, which prefigured the many 20th-century definitions and redefinitions of modernism. Realism is broadly considered as closely associated with modernism because of its literal conviction that everyday life and the modern world are suitable subjects of art and also because it stands in opposition to modernism because modernism often rejects naturalistic representations.

The goal of the avant-garde is to have a significant social impact on the lives of the individuals who engage with the artwork, radically shifting the course of their thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors that align with hegemonic worldviews. As Babler notes, before it was replaced by movements such as Magic Realism and New Objectivity, "the avant-gardist claim to realism, of course, was bound to a promise, the promise that these new forms would indeed eventually change the basic principles of our perception, and thereby our worldview and, finally, our lives and societies." (6)

Let's look at what established art historian Peter Bürger says about the avant-garde in his germinal book *Theory of the Avant-Garde* to further shed light on why I classify realism as an avant-garde movement in its own historical context.

Peter Bürger writes about the reception of avant-garde artworks: "The recipient of an avant-gardiste work discovers that the manner of appropriating intellectual objectifications that has been formed by the reading of organic works of art is inappropriate to the present object." So one cannot read the object with the frameworks that are readily available to them with which they have read conventional art. "The avant-gardiste work neither creates a total impression that would permit an interpretation of its meaning nor can whatever impression may be created be accounted for by recourse to the individual parts, for they are no longer subordinated to a pervasive intent. This refusal to provide meaning will direct the reader's attention to the fact that the conduct of one's life is questionable and that it is necessary to change it. Shock is aimed for as a stimulus to change one's conduct of life; it is the means to break through aesthetic immanence and to usher in (initiate) a change in the recipient's life praxis."

Praxis is a significant term here that describes the practical application and exercise of theory. https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/praxis#google_vignette: 1. practice, as distinguished from theory; application or use, as of knowledge or skills 2. convention, habit, or custom 3. a set of examples for practice.

As we've discussed, the shock value of Realist artworks in part comes from the monumental size of the paintings that depict subject matter that has historically been deemed as inferior to what was conventionally depicted in art: the privileged and the mythical. The sight of mundane

activities and individuals portrayed in large-scale canvases at the time would be quite shocking to the viewer. The scale of these Realistic paintings proposes and promotes a shift in the viewer's perspective on what and who is considered to be important and valuable in society, offering an alternative, non-hierarchical positionality of the commoner, the worker, the everyday individual to the viewers who themselves might be one. This is the promise of realism that Babler identifies in her text and the mission of the avant-garde as explicated by Peter Bürger. It is in such artistic choices that resistance to hegemonic worldviews that are historically contextualized in sexist, racist, colonial, and ableist practices takes place.

Greenberg, Modernist painting" Realistic, naturalistic art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art; Modernism used art to call attention to art. The limitations that constitute the medium of painting – the flat surface, the shape of the support, and the properties of the pigment -- were treated by the Old Masters as negative factors that could be acknowledged only implicitly or indirectly. Under Modernism, these same limitations came to be regarded as positive factors and were acknowledged openly. Manet's became the first Modernist pictures by virtue of the frankness with which they declared the flat surfaces on which they were painted."

On week 3, after we have gone over the origins of performance art in Ancient Greek theater and philosophy we will continue our investigation of early avant-garde movements, namely Dadaism and Futurism, where the shock value of performative works are purposefully amplified to rattle the consciousness of the viewers and compel them to engage in socially impactful behaviour.

Week 2— Theater, Affect, and Contemporary Performance Art

- Day 3. Tuesday, September 10: Ancient Greek Origins and Contemporary Response–ability
- Day 4. Thursday, September 12: Emotional Distance in Theater: A comparative Study

In week two we will discuss ancient Greek theater and modern theater (of the Western world).[9] Examining the different theoretical positions of thinkers as vast as Plato, Aristotle, Bertolt Brech, and Antonin Artaud, we will explore how affect can have a liberatory or limiting function on stage, and in contemporary performance art.

The goals of this week are for students to

1) contemplate whether and how there might be a difference between theater and contemporary performance art
2) reflect on an audience's, and their own, ethical responsibilities and response-abilities in confrontation with sensitive or disturbing imagery or performance
3) consider the distancing effect of screens when engaging with such material, as has become common practice

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Week 3 — Early Avant-Garde Movements in Modern Art History

Day 5. Tuesday, September 17: Dadaism & Futurism (Italian and Russian)

We have addressed the notion of the avant-garde in the context of realism in our first week together. Today, we will consider two (or more like three) other avant-garde movements, Dadaism, Italian Futurism, and Russian Futurism.

Traced as one of the origins of performance art by established art historian RoseLee Goldberg, Futurism is a multiple-manifestoed Italian and later Russian movement that was prominent in the

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[9] Why only the western world (or the global North, or the not-subaltern)? I am aware that I might be advertising the same old white male stale material that has become the norm, the yardstick with which to judge and condemn "others" since the colonization period, under heteropatriarchal hegemony. Scholars and thinkers today are making imminent and vital progress in decolonizing academia and the public consciousness. Unfortunately, because the most accomplished schools in Türkiye teach a western perspective in the English language (so as to produce "modernized" graduates, a topic I intend to expand on in my thesis in relation to Vanessa Machado de Oliviera's ideas on modernity and Guillermo Gomez-Pena's on multiculturalism, which I discussed in my dissertation proposal), my field of expertise happens to be the western art historical canon.

early decades of the 20th century.[10] Between 1909 and 1925, Futurism became a catchphrase for a broadly felt desire for cultural renewal characterized by high expectations from technological developments and a rejection of traditional cultural institutions such as museums which they referred to in their founding manifesto as "cemeteries."[11]

The stream of manifestos published by Marinetti and his collaborators attest to their contempt for realistic artistic styles that were predominant in the performance spaces surrounding them. In *The Meaning of the Music Hall* Marinetti wrote: "We Futurists are profoundly disgusted with the contemporary stage because it stupidly fluctuates between historic reconstruction (pastiche or plagiarism) and a minute, wearying, photographic reproduction of actuality."[12]
Futurists were also dissatisfied with the uninvolved attitude of the audience of realist performances and more generally, the Italian public during this period. They believed performance to be the "surest means of disrupting a complacent public."[13] To counter the numbing effects of what they described as "passéist theater", the Futurists came up with controversial ideas such as gluing members of the audience, unbeknownst to them, to their chairs, selling the same ticket to multiple individuals, even physically assaulting women by pinching them, to force audience members to partake in the performance, albeit involuntarily.[14]
As we discussed in the first week in light of the words of Marxist art historian Peter Bürger, Futurists, paving the way to avant-garde movements that followed them, used shock "as a stimulus to change one's conduct in life; [as] the means to break through aesthetic immanence and to usher in (initiate) a change in the recipient's life praxis."[15]
The first Futurist play was "Poupees Electriques" or "Electric Dolls," a play about a bourgeois couple and their lookalike robots which was interrupted by Marinetti reciting his manifesto. The play was not received well, but as would become typical of the Futurists, Marinetti responded to the boos and whistles with genuine gratitude, since their reaction befit his ideal of a rattled audience. The show ultimately ended in a riot as would become typical of Futurist evenings.[16]

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[10] Rose Lee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2014). Original print way earlier.

[11] Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Marinetti – Selected Writings*, trans. R.W. Flint (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972), 42.

[12]Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "The meaning of the Music Hall," *Daily Mail*, 21 November 1913, accessed October 22, 2023: https://miraculousagitations.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/marinetti-the_meaning_of_the_music_hall19131.pdf

[13] Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 14.

[14] Boris Groys and Claire Bishop, "Bring the noise: Futurism," *Tate Etc*16 (Summer 2009): https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-16-summer-2009/bring-noise.And Goldberg for "passeist theater"

[15] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984), 80.

[16] Sydney Kellen Conrad, "Futurism and Propoganda: Manifestos, Theaters, and Magazines," PhD diss., (University of North Carolina, 2016): 65.

Futurist evening gatherings, called *serata,* differed from their Enlightenment origins where intellectuals exchanged ideas on political and cultural issues at exclusive *salons*. Futurist *serata* often took place in spaces that were accessible to all social classes. Striving to compress the gap between art and life and to merge the two, as we discussed before, is a central maxim of the avant-garde and is evident in the locations that the Futurists selected for their seratas.
Seratas involved all, readily-available and to be-imagined, forms of performance that characterized variety theater, which describes cabaret, or music hall, championed by the Futurists due to its free and inclusive spirit.[17]

> "The *serata* acted as part of the movement's repertoire because it compelled others to act or react." It did so partly by perpetually introducing "new elements of astonishment," such as the *sintesi*; the synthetic theater.[18]

The conception of Futurist Synthetic Theater was first announced in 1915 in the manifesto published by the same name, written by Marinetti, Emilio Settimilli, and Bruno Corra. A direct contrast to traditional theater, *sintesi* were short, fast, dynamic, and compact.
Sintesi could, for example, fit "the whole of Shakespeare into a single act."[19] They "illustrated the ways in which the Futurists played with time and space by using simultaneity, compression, and intrusion" which corresponded with "the fleeting sensations that made up modern society."[20] By leaving no room for comfortable viewing, they galvanized the audience to affectively engage with their content and form while prompting critical political engagement through the reading of manifestos between series of *sintesi* performances as they were often performed.[21] *Sintesi* "rejected the convention of the fourth wall [which we discussed in the context of Brechtian theater], encouraging performers to address the audience directly and aggressively."[22]

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[17] Conrad, "Futurism and Propoganda," 72; Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 17.

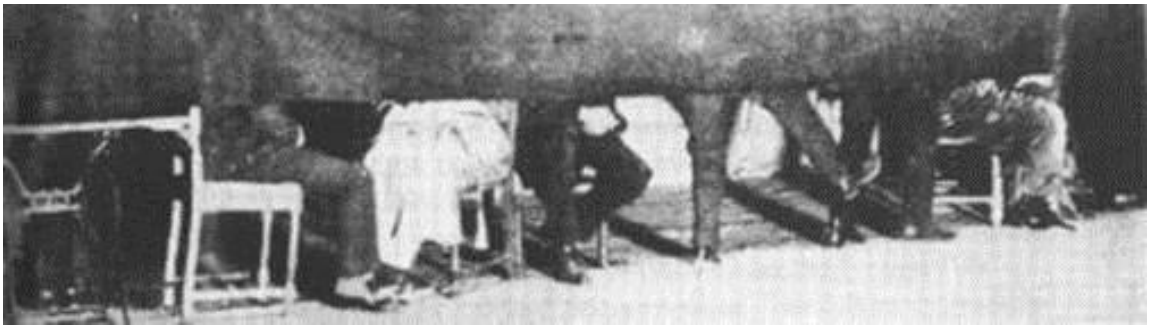
[18] Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 17.

[19] Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 26.

[20] Conrad, "Futurism and Propoganda," 66.

[21] Gordon Ramsay, "Staging Futurism: Time, Space, Place, Pace, and the Performance of Futurist *sintesi,*" in *One Hundred Years of Futurism: Aesthetics, Politics, and Performance*, ed. Gordon Ramsay (Bristol: Intellect, 2017), 189-190.

[22] Robert Knopf, eds., *Theatre of the Avant-Garde, 1890-1950: A Critical Anthology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 163.



Marinetti's *Feet,* 1915, a *sintesi* that consisted of only the feet of the performers and objects.

A critical component of *sintesi* was its insistence on simultaneity, which the Futurist manifesto explained "is born of improvisation, lightning-like intuition, from suggestive and revealing actuality."[23] The Futurists condemned extended preparation, and at times, any preparation at all, before a performance, as they believed that the fleeting and chance-based encounters and occurrences of everyday life could only be reflected through acts of similar nature. Accordingly, *sintesi* frequently displayed actions that took place across different spatial and temporal localities simultaneously, which appeared alogical and atechnical to the audience.
"A disturbing fact in Marinetti's biography is that aside from, the novelty ideas in art and being the founder of the Futurism movement he became famous as the author of the Fascist Manifesto (1919) - the Manifest of the Italian Fascism. Shortly after it was issued he left the fascist party and withdrew from politics for three years, but he remained a notable contributor to developing the party's philosophy up until the end of its existence. He was an active supporter of Mussolini and throughout his entire life encouraged Italian participation in wars (you can find the reflections of this in the Futurism Manifesto).
Using his relationship with the party he even attempted to make Futurism the official state art of Italy but failed to do so as Mussolini personally was not that interested in art."[24]

Russian Futurism

Although vehemently denied by Russian Futurists who went to great lengths to obscure Marinetti's influence on their art, mostly due to their opposing views on war and fascism, Italian Futurism had a significant impact in Russia, where the avant-garde, true to their nature, had been calling for the abandonment of old art forms as well as ways of living.[25] Both Italian and Russian Futurists shared a distaste for elitism as well as pacifism and sought to galvanize the public through their performances.

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[23] Goldberg, *Performance Art,* 27.

[24] https://www.angryfishtheatre.com/single-post/2018/06/07/7-futurist-theatre-concepts-and-synthetic-plays

[25] Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 31; Charlotte Douglas, "The New Russian Art and Italian Futurism," *Art Journal* 34, no.3 (1975): 229.

"Russian Futurism was inherently theatrical, and the Futurists themselves worked hard to realize this."[26] In 1913, when Futurism was at its peak in Russia, they organized 'The First Futurist Theatre Productions in the World', which included a wide variety of activities for its members such as lectures, concerts, drawing sessions, twice-annual exhibitions, public debates, and discussions. The Futurists also deliberately theatricalized the individual and private lives of their members, making public appearances on the streets where dressed in outrageous costumes and make-up, they engaged in controversial behaviour that prompted both critique and interest. Theater theorist Robert Leach observes that similar to Italian Futurists who reveled in their audience's reaction against them, "the aim of everything (Russian Futurists) did was to arouse the public and to publicize their cause."[27]

It is important to note that given the radical left political standing of the Russian avant-garde, as well as the highly politized character of the broader movement, their cause did encompass sociopolitical issues and was not limited to the mythos of the artist; their individual artistic genius.[28] *The Storming of the Winter Palace,* produced by director Nikolai Evreinov in 1920, only three years after the October Revolution, is one of the first performances captured on film and is perhaps the most well-known example of Russian Futurist Theater. This mass spectacle, which is a less-than accurate enactment of the October Revolution, involving thousands of performers who performed a range of actions such as ballet, circus acts, and puppet plays, as well as a parade of armoured cars, fireworks, and a cannonball fired from a ship that was observed by hundred thousands of viewers, demonstrates the group's affinity for diverse performances, technology, machinery, spectacle, and ultimately, the Revolution.[29]

Dada

> Dada is not limited to any art. The bartender in the Manhattan bar, who pours Curacao with one hand and gathers up his gonorrhea with the other, is a Dadaist. The gentleman in the raincoat, who is about to start his seventh trip around the world, is a Dadaist. [30]

Originating from the cafes and cabarets of Zurich and Paris where artists, disgruntled by the establishment, convened to explore novel forms of artistic and political theory and practice, Dada

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[26] Robert Leach, *Russian Futurist Theater: Theory and Practice*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 24.

[27] Leach, *Russian Futurist Theater*, 20.

[28] This differs, for example, from the abstract expressionist movement's necessary emphasis on individual artistic genius, which will be discussed in an upcoming lecture.

[29] Nikolai Evreinov & Others. *"The Storming of the Winter Palace,"* (Zurich: Diaphenes, 2016), 205.

[30] Gavin Grindon, "Surrealism, Dada, and the Refusal of Autonomy, Activism, and Social participation in the Radical Avant-Garde," *Oxford Art Journal* 34, no.1: 89.

was an avant-garde artistic movement that swept across Central Europe in the early 20th century.[31] As is often the case with avant-garde artists, Dadaists did not explicitly conceptualize themselves as "a vanguard of artists leading the way, but as artists refusing the role *of* artists."[32] Due to rapid developments in technology and accelerated industrialization, the early decades of the 20th century witnessed a proliferation of extractive capitalist theories such as Taylorism and Fordism which sought to construct the model worker to maximize their efficacy in production, often at the expense of the worker themself.

Dada artists took a stance against this exploitation by refusing work as well as refusing the traditional role of the patronized artist who is only as valuable as their tangible, commodifiable and consumable products. As the quote from the intro to this section suggests, they did this by attempting to discard the concept of artist altogether.[33] They also wanted to discard the concept of art itself, promoting instead an anti-art movement.

As evidenced in the manifesto inscribed by Aragon in the name of Parisian Dadaists, who would later become the Surrealists, which declared: "No more painters, no more writers, no more musicians, no more sculptors… enough of all these imbecilities, no more, no more, no more, no more, no more!", the Dadaist anti-consumerist strategy was a complete refusal of the identity of the artist as producer.[34] This paves the way to artist Joseph Beuys's social sculpture where he proposes that everyone can be an artist and every single moment, an act of creation, as well as Kaprow's Happenings where participants of the event take on the role of the artist. We will discuss Beuys and Kaprow in the upcoming lectures.

Performance, due to its ephemeral and arguably non-commodifiable nature, as well as its active engagement with the audience, was the perfect medium for Dadaists who, in their rejection of work, strove to incorporate play into their artistic explorations.[35] Whilst Dada artists were positioned closer to the Russian Futurists in their perspectives on critical issues such as war and gender inequality, they shared a similar interest with the Italian Futurists who wanted to engage and disrupt the public by experimenting with artistic form and content. They repurposed and adapted the performance techniques of the Futurists, including "abstract movement, improvisation, simultaneous and illogical actions, verbal and physical assault on the spectator,

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[31] Günter Berghaus, "Dada Theatre or: The Genesis of Anti-Bourgeois Performance Art," *German Life and Letters* 38, no.4 (July 1985): 293.

[32] Grindon, "Surrealism, Dada and the Refusal of Autonomy," 84.

[33] Berghaus. "Dada Theatre," 300.

[34] Grindon, "Surrealism," 84.

[35] Berghaus, "Dada Theatre," 300; Grindon, "Surrealism," 91.

anti-illusionist scenic design, and the incorporation of popular entertainments, such as cabaret acts and cinema".[36]

As a movement of protest, Dada performances were also influenced by "the language of libertarian nineteenth-century working-class movements, which tended to account for protest and direct action in reactive forms of incitement, provocation, outrage, offense, even after the vogue for propaganda-by-the-deed, dynamite, and assassination had passed." Art historian Gavin Grindon suggests that the Berlin Dada movement is a perfect example of activist art, even though the term was only used once in 1919 by the group themselves because it is distinguished from institutional fine arts as "a material and performative art form of social movement", and because of its tendency "to experiment with these social movement forms."[37]
Despite its radical nature, Dada performances often took place indoors, in front of a paying audience. In 1916, Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings founded *Cabaret Voltaire* where poetry recitals, magic shows, theater plays, dances, and music took the stage on a nightly basis, called soirées, which closely resembled Futurist *serata*. Amongst the many artists who influenced the establishment of *Cabaret Voltaire* was playwright and performer Frank Wedekind, whose performances that included urinating and masturbating on stage were a clear precursor to the well-known example of Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* that challenged the distinction between private and public space.[38] Such 'obscene' acts and remarks were commonplace in Dada performances and were purposed to challenge the sanitized self-image of the Western audience in order to draw attention to the discrepancy between the cruelty of war and the so-called Western standard of logic and rationality.

As Peter Bürger suggests, and we have encountered this quote before, Dadaists' refusal to provide meaning to their artworks and actions and their use of shock as a disruptive element were purposeful decisions on the part of the artists who wished to direct the audience's attention "to the fact that the conduct of one's life is questionable and that it is necessary to change it. Shock (was) aimed for as a stimulus to change one's conduct in life; it (was) the means to break through aesthetic immanence and to usher in (initiate) a change in the recipient's life praxis."[39] Dada artists were explicit about their anti-war stance in every sense. In 1918, Richard Huelsenbeck, who had traveled from Zurich to Berlin to ignite the movement there, yelled to his audience that "the last war wasn't bloody enough", a provocation that followed one from another

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[36] Mel Gordon, "Dada Berlin: A History of Performance (1918-1920)," *The Drama Review* 18, no.2 (1974): 114.

[37] Grindon, "Surrealism, Dada and the Refusal of Autonomy," 92.

[38] Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 50.

[39] Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, 80.

artist, George Grosz, who had just urinated on an Expressionist painting, a genre that was immensely popular amongst the bourgeoisie at the time.[40]

The Dadaists' efforts to challenge predominant art forms were successful. Theater theorist Mel Gordon suggests that between 1918 and 1920 the avant-garde Berlin Dada movement, which contributed no less than thirty theatrical productions and countless undocumented performances, successfully overthrew the dominant theatrical force of Expressionism in Germany and broadly, Central Europe.[41]

So how do these avant-garde movements relate to contemporary performance art, which is sometimes referred to as live art, and resistance?

In "The Politics of Live Art" in *Histories & Practices of Live Art* Deirdre Heddon explains: "Histories of live art (…) tend to forge a politics attached to form and the encounters form enables:

1) The very term, live art, signifies an art practice that locates itself between forms – art, but not as we know it, or theatre, but not as we know it. Live art enacts a challenge to established histories and categories of practice (of art and theatre) and therefore to ways of doing and seeing, and also to ways of packaging, selling , and consuming.
2) Live art, a form that is ephemeral and fleeting, enacts a resistance to the commodified, exchangeable art object, providing a means of bypassing the art market and prompting the establishment of alternative, artist-led venues and networks.
3) Live art, an aesthetics of the present moment, of the here and now, enables an immediate encounter, an event between artist and spectator, troubling habitual relations of production and consumption, activity and passivity."

This is how contemporary performance art, which has historical roots in Futurism and Dada, radically opposes hegemonic practices that invade both art institutions and the larger society.

For our next class make sure that you bring a piece of paper and a pen or a pencil with you as we will be practicing the Surrealist technique called psychic automatism!

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[40] Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 67. Mel Gordon, "Dada Berlin: A History of Performance (1918-1920)" The Drama Review 18, no.2 (1974), 116.

[41] Mel Gordon, "Dada Berlin: A History of Performance (1918-1920)," The Drama Review 18, no.2 (1974): 114.