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Act now. Don't act that way. It's just an act. Stop acting out. We were caught in the act. It was an act of God. As a verb the word *act* contains multiple definitions: to do something, to exert agency, to function. Alongside these meanings are others that suggest artifice, subterfuge, and masquerade: to pretend, to stand in for, to play a role. As a noun *act* can refer to the thing done, a piece of legislation, a section of a theatrical production, a pretense. Originally used in fourteenth-century legal contexts (as in a decree or record of law), the term had taken on dramatic attributes by the fifteenth century, signaling exaggerated behavior or showy comportment. An act of a performance designates distinct temporal and conceptual segments as they unfold onstage. Samuel Beckett indicates the importance of a bipartite segmentation in the very title of his play *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts*. When the artist Paul Chan staged Beckett's play in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2007, he retitled it *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans*, de-emphasizing the work's two-part structure and instead underscoring

the site of its performance.

Few three-letter words contain as much ambiguity or gesture toward such directly conflicting notions. An act of Congress cements rules into law and operates with regulatory force. But to “put on an act” within the sphere of lived experience is to cloak oneself in artifice, to affect a guise, or to engage in simulation. As Alice Rayner has noted in her book *To Act, to Do, to Perform: Drama and the Phenomenology of Action*, the word *act* slides between the presumed field of the political “real” and the realm of the pretend.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes those distinctions productively blur: in 1987 the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power consciously crafted its acronym, ACT UP, as an implicit directive to others to join its dissent, to speak out about the HIV/AIDS crisis, to participate in educative street demonstrations, queer organizing efforts, and spectacular bodily interventions.

Within twentieth-century art history, the term *action art* has several distinct connotations. It was first widely circulated in 1952 by US art historian and critic Harold Rosenberg to describe abstract expressionist paintings by the likes of Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock. Rosenberg described the canvas as “an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or express an object, actual or imagined.”<sup>2</sup> This corporeal method of painting—what Allan Kaprow referred to as “the so-called dance of dripping, slashing, squeezing, daubing”<sup>3</sup>—has been recognized as a forerunner to the performance-based use of the term *action art*, also called live art or body art to indicate that it takes as its primary medium both time and the physical presence of the artist.<sup>4</sup> Paradoxically, some of these “action artists” have investigated the tactic of *not acting*. In Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece*, first performed in 1964, she sat on a stage and invited the spectators to cut off her clothes. Here Ono complexly set a relationship in motion within a designated set of rules—Rosenberg’s “arena”—utilizing the audience as actants and her own body as something to be acted upon. Though such events de-emphasize the materiality of art, many actions produce remains; the hybrid status of such objects (from leftover props to documentation) was illustrated in the 1998 exhibition “Out of Actions.”<sup>5</sup>

In some respects, since the 1960s *act* has become a threshold word between conventional theatrical works meant for the stage and performance art that desires to blur the boundaries between art and life. These are works in which there is a rejection of notions of character or

script and a refusal to embody some other persona. The Guatemalan artist Regina José Galindo, in her performance *Angelina* (2001), dressed as a domestic maid every day for one month but otherwise conducted her life “normally.” She observed how others reacted to her in this strongly gendered outfit of working-class labor, reporting that by the end of the piece’s duration she had been so persistently ignored and insulted that her self-esteem was “in the garbage.”<sup>6</sup> In such works the “act” of acting is purportedly stripped away—or is it? What other types of dissimulation does Galindo’s occupational drag invoke?

- 1 Alice Rayner, *To Act, to Do, to Perform: Drama and the Phenomenology of Action* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).
- 2 Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” *Art News* 51 (December 1952): 22.
- 3 Allan Kaprow, “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock” (1958), in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 2.
- 4 Amelia Jones, *Body Art / Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).
- 5 “Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979,” curated by Paul Schimmel, Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998.
- 6 Regina José Galindo, interviewed by Francisco Goldman, *BOMB* 94 (Winter 2006).

#### FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

- AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), “Stop the Church Action,” December 10, 1989.
- Paul Chan, *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans*, free outdoor performances in the Lower Ninth Ward and Gentilly, November 2007.
- Regina José Galindo, *Angelina*, Guatemala, 2001.
- Sharon Hayes, *In the Near Future*, 2005–. In New York, London, Warsaw, and Vienna, Hayes has carried signs with slogans borrowed from past protests.
- Allan Kaprow, *Yard*, 1961. Original version at Martha Jackson Gallery, New York.
- Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece*, 1964.

*Mark Russell, founding director of the Under the Radar Festival at the Public Theater, New York, was artistic director of PS 122 for more than two decades.*

Theatricality is the expert deployment of theater and all of its weapons: the projected voice, exaggerated gestures, pratfalls, florid costumes, chorus lines, curtains, painted flats, painted faces, beginnings, middles, ends, the gun on the table that is going to go off. Theater.

These tools have accumulated through years of theater history as techniques to tell stories, to hook audiences on an experience and lead them through it. They are the simple manipulations that theater makers use to get a group of people to participate in the creation of an event. When we say that an event has “a theatricality” to it, it has stepped outside our daily existence and lifted us up into the tawdry hallowed halls of theater.

Often *theatricality* is a dirty word. It underscores the lie of theater, the artifice at its core, which is one reason why it is banned, censored, or distained. The theater is lying. Those lies unearth truth, however, that we could not see otherwise. This can be upsetting to those invested in maintaining their own version of truth or suspicious

of anything that is not easily understood or verifiable. It's a dangerous business.

Theatricality is made of transgressions, interruptions in time. Playing with real time and the heightened time of a theater experience, letting them collide and explode into quarks of wisdom, feelings, or unique points of understanding. These are often mysterious, inexplicable explosions—the dark matter of theater.

It is also the glittering paste bauble that lures us to the experience of theater. How many of us were first hooked on Broadway musicals before moving to the harder stuff? My own gateway drug was the record of *West Side Story*; from there it was a slow slide to *Gypsy* to *Marat/Sade*, and then I was a goner. Theatricality can be an avenue for those cursed or blessed with an outsize personality or a different perspective. There is a place for you in the theater; the tools are free and available.

When I think of theatricality, I think of the performances of Ethyl Eichelberger, the great drag star of the Ridiculous Theater Company and later of her own miniature epic pieces. Ethyl knew her theater; she had incredible technique. She was trained as a classical actor and played Hamlet in her youth, before being whisked away by Charles Ludlam and his merry band of outlaw thespians. Ethyl's performances were outrageous in their glitter and camp. She rewrote classic works in rhyme, adding songs, short films, and makeshift sets of her own design. They had a power that touched all who experienced them. Here was a tall man in a wig, a painted face, glitter, and a thrift shop dress, playing the accordion and singing his text and songs, breaking the fourth (and possibly a fifth) wall to comment on current politics or whatever was happening in the room. Nothing could be more ridiculous or so able to surprise us with the truth. We were laughing and crying.

Ethyl performed often at PS 122 in the midst of the AIDS epidemic. There was a righteous rage coming from Ethyl, and we joined her in song, straight and queer alike, singing together: "We are women who survive, scratch us we bleed, we will fight fight fight to live another day!" We needed those ridiculous theatrical trappings to believe again in a brighter world. We needed to shout out our anger, not just saved for ACT UP rallies but coming from a darker place in our souls. We needed to take the scare away and to feel part of a community—at least in that room—which Ethyl was able to wrap up masterfully with her glitter,

boas, and teetering heels into a glorified present.

There are other, perhaps more subtle strategies for theater than Ethyl's. Though most arrive at the same place—a shared moment. We are constantly looking for ways to make the theater experience more “real” and immediate. But whatever approach we take, a drag queen in full effect, an actor baring raw emotion, a TED talk, a lecture in a classroom, actual sodomy onstage, or a performance artist engaging her audience one-on-one, we have crossed into the realm of theatricality.

Welcome to the theater.

#### FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

Ethyl Eichelberger, *Leer*, 1985.

Charles Ludlam, Ridiculous Theatrical Company, New York, established 1967.

Reggie Watts, TED talk: “Beats that defy boxes,” 2012.

Rotozaza, *Etiquette*, 2007–. Two people perform this work together, unnoticed, in a public place, with instructions given through headphones.

Ontroerend Goed, *Internal*, 2007.

Taylor Mac, *The Be(a)st of Taylor Mac*, 2007.

Tg STAN, *JDX: A Public Enemy*, 1993/2014.

*Simon Dove, an independent curator and dance educator, is co-curator of “Crossing the Line,” the annual trans-disciplinary fall festival in New York.*

Gardening, not architecture.

—Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt, *Oblique Strategies* (1975)

Virtuosity is popularly considered to be a display of great technical or physical skill. A virtuoso musician or dancer is someone who exhibits a dazzling mastery of an instrument—the violin, the turntables, the voice, or in the case of the dancer, the body itself. Evolving from the Latin noun *virtuosus*, which had to do with moral virtue, the term *virtuosity* no longer suggests a kind of good deed but instead indicates a rare, and therefore praiseworthy, display of extraordinary human capability.

In the performing arts this has led to an almost fetishistic pursuit of the “most virtuosic,” as determined by competitions, in everything from spoon playing and ballroom dancing to classical piano and violin performance. Competitive dancing is a huge industry in the United States, and television shows like *Dancing with the Stars* and

*American Idol*, which involve the whole audience in voting for the “best” performer, have been some of the most popular broadcasts over the last decade. The *American Idol* season two finale, in 2003, claimed more than thirty-eight million viewers.

While this broadly socially celebrated idea of a great performer as a master of technique is a highly reductive notion of artistic accomplishment, it pervades education and training institutions, where the overwhelming emphasis is still on developing a high level of physical skill and technical competency. Such a narrow notion of art practice tends to overlook questions of intention, content, and context and diminishes the arts to an entertaining display of human capability—a “wow” moment, thrilling but ultimately offering nothing more than a sideshow to the more important things in life. It feeds the notion of the arts as entertainment, as distraction, as marginal and ultimately dispensable.

However, many artists are now working in an increasingly broad range of social or performative contexts. Their work interrogates its context, which in turn defines or redefines all aspects of the work: the role of the space itself, the nature and type of performers, who participates, and who is the intended audience, as well as who commissioned it and why. All involved must evaluate what they bring to the work and what they intend to achieve. In other words, the intention behind the work determines the kinds of competencies or skills required. They may be traditional dance or instrument-playing skills; they may be leadership or coaching skills for the participants; they may be specialist experiences such as rock climbing or conflict resolution.

There is a new kind of virtuosity here. It is not a specific skill set for all circumstances; the skill is in the receptivity of the artist, the ability to respond to the intention, context, and content of the work itself. The intention of the work often demands a specific or unique creation process to achieve the optimum approach. If the work involves nonprofessionals, who are they, how are they recruited for the project, and what particular needs do they have? How does their involvement impact the way the piece is developed? All these elements have an immense impact on the work itself, and they require all involved to consider these issues, including the audience. We all become more aware of what we expect or need from an arts event or performance and therefore become more reflective in our response. The needs of a particular idea or way of working may require a diversity of forms or

materials, and these also may be new to the artist.

This analytical approach is particularly apposite for artists working in socially engaged practice, but as audiences experience the powerful impact of work that is formed in this way, they demand a similarly complex reflexivity in all their experiences with the arts. This changing practice affects the way new work is commissioned, curated, and produced. It affects the way the arts are supported or funded, and knowledge, experience, and understanding based on past practice may no longer be the most appropriate basis on which to evaluate or to support emerging artistic practices. It also demands that education and training institutions reflect deeply, and urgently, on how they need to change curricula and pedagogical approaches to equip young artists with much broader skill sets, flexibility, and awareness to make compelling work in this way.

Virtuosity now is the artist's ability to courageously and imaginatively respond to the multiple demands of intention, context, and engagement. Virtuoso artists are highly attuned to the world we all inhabit, and their skill is in helping us imagine how much better it could be. The arts can then take on a much more critical role in activating us all as individuals and as citizens—a virtuous role indeed.

#### FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

600 Highwaymen, *The Record*, 2013.

“Crossing the Line,” annual festival of transdisciplinary artists in NYC each fall, produced by the French Institute Alliance Francaise.

Rosemary Lee, *Square Dances*, 2011, and *Boy*, 1995.

Rimini Protokoll, *100%*, 2008–.

Ivana Müller, *Partituur*, 2011, and *We are still watching*, 2012.

Rachid Ouramdane, *Surface de Réparation*, 2007.

Thomas Lehmen, *Schreibstück*, 2002.

Jérôme Bel, *The show must go on*, 2001.

*Sabine Breitwieser, formerly chief curator of media and performance art at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, is director of the Museum der Moderne, Salzburg, Austria.*

Choreography is understood as a sequence of movements and their composition, usually in dance, but more recently the term has been applied to the creation of scenarios in general. Choreographers take on a creative double role as authors and directors; their material consists primarily of people. In ancient Greek tragedy, *choros* described the demarcated dance floor and ultimately the song, dance, and commentary of those performing. In the eighteenth century, *chorégraphe* (French for “dance” and “writing”) described someone who recorded dance steps in writing. From dance notation emerged the task of “composing” movement—that is, mere recording became a creative act. This transition was augmented by a collective process of rehearsal, giving recording a lesser role. The notion of choreography was an important element of experimentation in modern and postmodern dance. In collaboration with visual artists such as John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg in the mid-1950s, Merce Cunningham introduced the idea that composition could be entrusted to the principle of chance and,

beginning in 1991, even to a computer program. In the first half of the 1960s the artists of Judson Dance Theater, including Yvonne Rainer and Steve Paxton, and others, such as Simone Forti, swore off virtuosity and instead drew their movements from the everyday.

While organizing and controlling human figures is a fundamental principle in scenic art forms, primarily in the fields of dance and theater, that practice is not conventional in modern visual art, in which painting and sculpture appear as autonomous art forms. Conventions, however, have changed. By considering architectural space in art, artists such as El Lissitzky in *Prounenraum* (Proun room, 1923) made the organization of the art object in space and its encounter with the viewer a major factor in their work. One could say that artists started to choreograph their artworks like actors in a theater play in space. In *Triadisches Ballett* (Triadic ballet), which premiered in 1922 in Stuttgart with music by Paul Hindemith, Oskar Schlemmer had already grappled with questions of the relation of the object to space, trying to overcome the static nature of plastic works with dance. The expansion of fine art to include forms and mediums with intrinsic temporal elements—music, language, moving images, objects, and people—radically changed the concept of art. This also affected art’s relationship to audience and the site of art reception. In 1916 artists in the circle of Hugo Ball—including Hans Arp, Emmy Hennings, Marcel Janco, and Tristan Tzara—started their “cabaret” at the artist’s bar Voltaire in Zurich under the motto “Everybody is welcome.” What began as a protest movement against World War I turned into an art form with far-reaching consequences, including the international Dada movement. In 1958 the so-called Wiener Gruppe (Vienna group) of Friedrich Achleitner, H. C. Artmann, Konrad Bayer, Gerhard Rühm, and Oswald Wiener performed their *1. literarisches cabaret* (First literary cabaret) at the Alte Welt (Old world) artist association in Vienna, demonstrating their idea of artistic choreography in the repressive cultural climate of the post-World War II period. These and many other historical events gave the impression of a broadening of rigid single-discipline art forms, accompanied by a departure from established art institutions. The following year, Allan Kaprow used detailed written instructions (scores) to transform visitors to his *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* (1959) at New York’s Reuben Gallery into participants in an interactive environment. When asked in 1967 what he expected a museum of his time to be, Kaprow declared, “an educational institute, a computerized bank of

cultural history, and an agency for action.”<sup>1</sup> In performances disguised as museum tours, like *The Public Life of Art: The Museum* (1988) and *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk* (1989), Andrea Fraser used institutional markers such as sponsor boards to tell a museum’s social history.

Once conceived as a place for preserving, displaying, and mediating artifacts that represent culture, the museum has shifted its focus significantly in recent decades to orient itself toward its publics. As a provider of services, the museum now sees itself as a site of cultural experience. In this changed economy of space and time, it is no longer only the authors of art who determine the form of an artwork’s encounter with its audience. A major role in planning the choreography of an exhibition is now played by marketing strategists (What is a good lead image?), visitor services (How do I organize maximum visitor flow?), and, above all, museum management. The relatively new and strong interest in theatrical, performance-based, and improvisational art forms may be attributed in part to the fact that exhibitions designed for a wide audience bring with them a certain arbitrariness.

The trend of institutions staging events in their spaces for a mass audience at times stands diametrically opposed to the desire of artists to push the limits of experimentation and creativity. Conceiving their own choreography gives artists the opportunity to regain some control over their work and to arrange their work in space as well as its encounter with the audience according to their own visions. But what if the choreography of performers, which includes the audience, has itself become part of the experience industry? In the summer of 2011 the art collective Grand Openings installed an enormous calendar in the atrium of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, publicizing its thirteen-day program of scheduled performances titled *Return of the Blogs*. The program unfolded as a compendium of performance types that drew from everyday life and art, including restaging of historic works, lecture-performances, dances, songs, rock concerts, and workshops, as well as weddings (both fictional and real) and flash mob–style mass participatory events. The artists exposed themselves in their “museum workspace” to an audience hungry with expectation; in the process, they also confronted their own nonpresence and nonaction.

Translated from the German by Michael Shane Boyle.

1 Allan Kaprow, in *Allan Kaprow* (Pasadena, CA: Pasadena Art

- Museum, 1967), 3.  
2 The participating artists were Ei Arakawa, Jutta Koether, Jay Sanders, Emily Sundblad, and Stefan Tcherepnin.

FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

- El Lissitzky, *Prounenraum (Proun Room)*, 1923.  
Gottfried Schlemmer, *Das Triadische Ballett*, 1922.  
Wiener Gruppe, *1. Literarisches Kabarett*, 1958.  
Allan Kaprow, *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, 1959.  
Simone Forti, *Dance Constructions*, 1960–61, including *Rollers*, *See-Saw*, *Huddle*, *Slant Board*, *Hangers*, *Platforms*, and *Accompaniment for La Monte's 2 Sounds and La Monte's 2 Sounds*.  
Andy Warhol, *Dance Diagrams*, 1962.  
Yvonne Rainer, *Trio A*, 1966.  
Julius Koller, works from the “Anti-Happenings” series, including *Tennis*, 1963–71, and *Ping Pong*, 1970–71.  
Dan Graham, *Body Press*, 1970–72.  
Gordon Matta-Clark, *Tree Dance*, 1971.  
Andrea Fraser, *Museum Highlights*, 1989.