



Three Notes on the Behavioral Turn

by Judith Rodenbeck

1. “Strips of history”

This young century has seen the rise of an art genre devoted to a particular kind of performative repetition: the redo. This ranges from the complex reactivation of disused practices or discourses within a formal frame of citations to more straightforward museological redos, both of which have been productively explored by Marina Abramović, first in her remarkable restaging of seminal works of body art in 2005 (*Seven Easy Pieces*, Guggenheim) to the equally attentive representations by her students to her own oeuvre in the tellingly nominal retrospective, *The Artist is Present*, at the Museum of Modern Art in 2010. Abramović’s stated motivation—to ensure the legacy of a canon of performance works precisely *as embodied* (a repertoire) for future generations—by no means exhausts the potential framing of the performance archive. Indeed, we might consider, as possible conceptual bookends to such an archival impulse, two other recent projects: at UC Riverside in the spring of 2009, endurance artist Julie Tolentino initiated what became a two-year collaborative project of “physically archiving” (her words) the work of her colleague Ron Athey by performing an edgy doubling-in-delay (as he performed *Self-Obliteration #1: Ecstatic*, Tolentino repeated Athey’s actions in situ as *The Sky Remains the Same: Archiving Athey’s Self-Obliteration #1*); while in April 2012 the Museum of Modern Art in New York presented a multi-voiced near-neutral delivery of unedited transcripts from Guantanamo Bay in *Combatant Status Review Tribunals pp. 002954–003064: A Public Reading*, the performance pendant to the recently purchased collaborative 10-channel video installation, *9 Scripts from a Nation at War* (2007) by Andrea Geyer, Sharon Hayes, Ashley Hunt, Katya Sander, and David Thorne.

Tolentino’s project demarcates one limit-case for the “storage” in physical memory of charismatic body art. While complicating the charged masculinity of its “original,” it also retrieves, reanimates, and recodes the original shock that attended the reception of Athey’s work in the age of AIDS. *Combatant Status Review* provides an equally historical shock, though here, through the blandness of its readymade language and the numbness of its delivery, the shock lies in the doubled acknowledgement of, in Hannah Arendt’s famous formulation, the “banality of evil”: the transcripts are actual, those detainees are *still* at Guantanamo, and such bureaucratic demonstrations of sovereign authority have come to define the very core of citizenship.

A search for the term “redo” turns up a series of scientific and economic failures, as well as failures of memory, followed by the forensic dramatics of the courtroom and the tastefully renamed golfing farce of the “mulligan.” That is, the redo is predicated on a failure of some sort, and in this vernacular sense it is not just supplemental but reparative. Presenting the illusion of historical recovery, it is parallaxic, even



Al Held, "The Big A," 1962. Courtesy of the Al Held Foundation.

The Held Essays on Visual Art

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With the generous support of the Al Held Foundation, the *Rail* is pleased to present the following as one of the Held Essays on Visual Art, a series of texts that take on the state of our contemporary visual culture and take aim at the many received ideas that march under the banner of "art and politics."

allegorical. In a Žižekian formulation, the writer Tom McCarthy notes that "Reenactment induces a unique logic, splitting in two the very act of doing: you're doing something while you're simultaneously not 'doing' it but rather citing, quoting, laying down a 'marker' for another event that this one isn't."¹ Artist and critic Melanie Gilligan posits several possible factors prompting these redos: the "radical diffusion of performativity itself," as objects become performative and performances become objects, the post-Warholian performance expected of artists, art-based projects involving social situations, or an attention to the activation of the spectator. Finally, she notes, "performance is valued for its potential to reimpose a desired immediacy, albeit one often accompanied by caveats acknowledging the ubiquity of mediation."²

Gilligan has already done much of the heavy lifting here (as have critics like Sven Lütticken and Inke Arns), and I don't want to "redo" those discussions of redos.³ Rather, I'd like to take an oblique tack through a brief and partisan history of performance to ask: What millennial urgencies prompted this proliferation? Can we restage experience? What new histories might the redo reveal? And what problematics reside at the very core of performance? I won't be answering all of these questions, but I do want to flag here that one provocative response to the

last question has to do with charisma, understood not just as "presence" or "stage presence" but, more fundamentally, with the charismatic nature of authority—including the authority of the past—and in this case the past of performance, now understood as "just doing my job."⁴

2. Parallax

To answer my first question directly, performance art has direct and still living-roots in experiments of the 1950s and 1960s—a temporal, indeed biological fact that overdetermines contemporary interest in restaging works from that era. In the 1960s, performance art encompassed a range of complex and often wholly irreconcilable practices, from neo-shamanism to social sculpture, from interior and highly personal actions to collective and even public or civic projects, from body-based live actions to pieces done for photographic witness rather than a live audience. Venues as constricted as the concert hall and the closed gallery, or as open and dispersed as the atmosphere, durations as brief as a cough or as extended as a hypothetical infinity, provided the physical and contextual parameters. Manipulations of time and space along with the problems of textuality (in the form of the score) and physical presentness define this live art, as does the imbrication of a witnessing audience.⁵ Participation from the outset was a problem—and therefore a workable variable or parameter. Unlike social ritual or traditional theater, performance foregrounds and even animates, as content, the topological relation of the audience to the

work and the self-reflexivity of participants. In the early days these became thematics that yielded a range of participatory possibilities, from the immersive to the contemplative. Because live projects were ephemeral they didn't just emphasize, valorize, or pressurize presence, they problematized its futurity—memory and gossip serve as the archives of many of the most influential projects.

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The historical parallax in which we view forms of performance produced nearly 50 years ago provides the opportunity to reflect on shifts in art historical and critical practice, and especially on discourse. To borrow Hal Foster's gloss on parallax, "which involves the apparent displacement of an object caused by the actual movement of its observer. This figure underscores both that our framings of the past depend on our positions in the present and that these positions are defined through such framings."⁶ Such a double view on history necessarily complicates any simple evolutionary model, and in particular the oft-cited remark by Marx that history arrives first as tragedy and then, in repetition, as farce. Today participatory art is hot, triggered in part by the retheorizing of art's relation to community in site specific and social practices. This signals a renewed engagement with politics, but it also bespeaks a strange melancholia, itself symptomatic of the way in which performance art as a genre hardened at its center into the charismatic monologue, the vaudeville slapstick, or post-painterly spectacle.

3. History lessons

Happenings were clearly tied to John Dewey's notion of "art as experience." But as I have argued elsewhere, the behavioristic "naturalism" of method acting was also conceptually key, and this behaviorist modality arguably forms a repressed critical kernel of the Fluxus "experience."⁷ In suggesting this role for behaviorism in these early, ephemeral time-based works I am also suggesting that the redo (as reenactment) was built into performance at its core. Indeed, performance theorist Richard Schechner coined the expression "twice behaved behavior" as a cognate of "performance": whether simulated (or real) rituals, monologues, or relationally aesthetic suppers, the awareness of self as performing subject is already devoted to teasing out relations between model (behavior) and copy (behaved). By extension, what Schechner calls "strips of behavior" can be manipulated, disassembled and reassembled, and "restored," quite apart from causal sources.⁸

As a propaedeutic we can turn to the project that the British artist Rod Dickinson presented in February of 2002: a meticulously staged replica of one of the most notorious behavioral experiments of the 1960s, Stanley Milgram's study of "obedience to authority." Dickinson's *The Tenth Level* took place at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Glasgow on two consecutive evenings and was accompanied by an extended lecture series on topics relevant to the study of authority and control.⁹

Stanley Milgram's "obedience to authority" study ran for about five years (July 1961 through 1966) in a psychology laboratory in New Haven, CT. The experiment began with an advertisement placed in the local paper asking for volunteers to participate in a learning study at Yale. "We're trying to find out whether punishment helps people learn," announced the brief. Nearly 1,000 people volunteered. Once the subjects were selected they were asked to come to Yale and were told the experiment would not take more than an hour. In the lab they were introduced to two figures: another participant like themselves and a "scientist." Participants were then asked to choose either the role as the teacher or the learner. In

this role-play, the teacher administers the punishments in response to the learner's ability or inability to memorize sequences of word pairs. The punishment was an electroshock, beginning at a mild 15 volts and increasing to 450 volts, with the intensities of voltage marked from "Slight Shock" to "Danger: Severe Shock" and, finally, to the ominous "XXX."¹⁰

In the experiment's results, 62.5 percent of the subjects continued to administer shock to the maximum voltage. Milgram's experiments concluded that human beings are innately submissive when they are commanded to do harm to others.

Dickinson's restaging is part of an ongoing exploration by the artist into what he calls "belief structures." He has, for instance, restaged sermons by the cult leader Reverend Jim Jones (of "drink the Kool-Aid" infamy), while his most recent collaborative performance (with Steve Rushton), *Closed Circuit* (2010), presents a press briefing pastiche of post-Cold War rhetoric that explores the way "similar declarations have been used by numerous governments—across continents and spanning the ideological divide—to declare and maintain states of crisis and emergency."¹¹ The Milgram project involved extensive research into Milgram's experiment and meticulous recreation of the testing space and the scientific equipment. Most importantly, though, it relied upon the existence of verbatim transcripts and technical documentation of the original experimental sessions—that is, a readymade script, set, and stage design.

Several aspects of Dickinson's work are important to note here: First, the choice of subject itself, which renders explicit a set of concerns that were fully implicated in early performance; second, its relation to repetition and the notion of "twice behaved behavior," which, in Dickinson's version, includes the behavior of an observing audience; and finally, the looping aspects of "participation" it evokes. For Dickinson's project radically theatricalizes an experiment that was already, in itself, a work of theater, foregrounding the forced passivity of viewing and recursively defining "authority" as well as "obedience."¹²

Milgram's experimental demonstration of obedience to authority provided one gloss on the "good Germans" of the 1930s and 1940s and another on what David Reisman called the "other-directed personalities" that were so definitive of 1950s American culture.¹³ But it also had a predictive force vis-à-vis American military involvement in Vietnam, in particular the My Lai massacre, and, more broadly, the fog of that war and the eventual disenchantment with "command and control" technocracy. If its alarming results seemed to reveal something ugly about the average American, the experimental protocol was quickly rendered moot, questioned on the grounds of its own murky, even coercive, morality.¹⁴ Yet today one can find on YouTube several redos of the experiment, not acted but actual, produced for 21st Century viewers: a new, Calvinistic *Videodrome*.

NOTES

1. Tom McCarthy, "Invoking the Invocation," Milgram Reenactment website, www.milgramreenactment.org, accessed 10/10/2009 (no longer available); this is a much tighter version of the essay published as "Between Pain and Nothing" in *The Milgram Reenactment* (Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Academic, 2003), pp. 16-32.

2. Melanie Gilligan, "The beggar's pantomime: Melanie Gilligan on performance and its appropriations," *Artforum* XLV:10 (Summer 2007), pp. 426-433.
3. See, for instance, *Life, Once More: Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art*, ed. Sven Lütticken (Rotterdam: Witte de With, 2005), and the eponymous catalogue essay in *History Will Repeat Itself: Strategies of Reenactment in Contemporary (Media) Art and Performance*, eds. Inke Arns and Gaby Horn (Dortmund: Hartware Medien Kunst and Berlin: KunstWerke, 2006; London: Revolver, 2007), available at http://www.agora8.org/reader/Arns_History_Will_Repeat.html. See also: *RE:akt! Reconstruction, Re-enactment, Re-reporting*, eds. Antonio Caronia, Janez Janša, Domenico Quaranta (Berlin: Editions FP, 2009).
4. For a bracing analysis of this conjunction see: Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2001).
5. Frazer Ward explores the ethico-political dimensions of this topology in *No Innocent Bystanders: Performance Art and Audience* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2013).
6. Hal Foster, *Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), pp. xii.
7. See my *Radical Prototypes: Allan Kaprow and the Invention of Happenings* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011).
8. See Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), especially chapter two.
9. The performance was later repeated in Holland, and a small book was produced, along with a website, documenting the whole. Now entitled *The Milgram Re-enactment*, the piece has since been presented as an "equipmental" installation with real-time video documentation in Warsaw, Prague, Tel Aviv, Sydney, London, and elsewhere.
10. In testing whether subjects could overcome their own moral qualms about arbitrarily doing harm to strangers they had just met, Milgram was following through not only on his own training but also on the more immediate implications of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, which had commenced in Jerusalem in the spring of 1961.
11. See www.roddickinson.net/pages/projects.php; accessed 2/22/2013.
12. And lest I run the risk of casting Dickinson's project as sui generis in its scientific focus, I want to make brief mention of ongoing work by the Polish artist Artur Zmijewski, in particular his *Repetition* (2005), which restaged another, equally notorious behavioral study, Phillip Zimbardo's 1971 Stanford Prison Study. In another project, Zmijewski convinces an Auschwitz survivor to have his identifying tattoo refreshed.
13. See David Reisman, Reuel Denny and Nathan Glazer, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961).
14. Criticism of Milgram rested on the ethical problem of his having deceived his human subjects—indeed, today's release forms for scientific testing of human subjects were derived as a direct response to his experiment.

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by Holly Gavin

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by Anonymous

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by Dustin Illingworth

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