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## The New Uses of Performance

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During the last thirty years, we have seen a proliferation of the use of the word “performance.” A recent Google search for the word produced more than 630,000,000 results in English alone. In many cases, the word is used synonymously with **capability, achievement, execution, or output.**

Sunglasses, sneakers, computers, cars, drones, and military systems boast of their performance qualities. Business managers are, according to one ad, “the greatest specialists in Human Performance.” There are training programs for the optimi-

zation of athletic performance.” Sikorsky Military Systems claims that “no matter the mission . . . our goal is to supply state-of-the-art aircraft and the mission systems to maximize their performance.” Do people or things behave or deliver in accordance with their potential, their promise? Across the board, it’s “perform or else!”<sup>1</sup>

The challenge, performance theorist Jon McKenzie (U.S.) argues, “is to connect the performances of artists and activists with those of workers and executives and, further, with those of computers and missile systems.” How is it—he asks us—“that performance comes out of the end of the 20th Century as a form of artistic resistance, as well as the dominant practice of business organization?”<sup>2</sup>

I would add politics to this mix.

Political advisers know that performance as **STYLE** (rather than **ACCOMPLISHMENT**) generally wins elections. Advisers ask whether a performance is effective or memorable, not whether it corresponds to verifiable facts. They know that a political performance needs to impel and move the public to action (for example, to vote) or, many times, to nonaction (not to judge their leaders by their actions). They train their candidates to learn their roles better than any actor does. The candidates rehearse and prepare. The gestures, style, and affect of charismatic politicians can produce concrete effects. **The public may respond more intensely to how a candidate looks and what she does than to what she says.**

Although the image of a leader is a mediated product, the public demands that this image reflect its own values, ideals, and



HAPPY



SAD



SURPRISE



ECSTASY



RAGE



AMUSEMENT



JOY



VERY ANGRY  
AT B.P.

DARYL CAGLE  
MANBC.COM

4.1 Drawing by Daryl Cagle. [www.politicalcartoons.com](http://www.politicalcartoons.com)

aspirations. People want to be able to identify with him or her. “Evita loves us.” “Bush is a regular guy, like me or my neighbor.” When a politician doesn’t show emotions, she strikes us as distant, ineffectual—“not one of us.”

Cases in which style leads to electoral results demonstrate that performance, however much it is rehearsed and staged, can have “real” results, including devastating ones. **Performance is not judged in terms of TRUE/FALSE; BEING/PRETENDING. INSTEAD, THE AFFECTIVE IS THE EFFECTIVE.**

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Mexican theorist Rossana Reguillo has noted the move toward the depoliticization of politics through a politics of passion that exceeds (and rejects) traditional institutions.<sup>3</sup> The politics of passion explains the resurgence and even centrality of the body in politics. But unruly acts and passions cannot be limited to the “outside”—they cross ideological and structural bounds, showing the fears, anxieties, prejudices, and hopes that animate the attitudes and actions of the state itself. While usually commentators assign affect to the opposition, characterizing those outside established political systems as irrational or angry, what Freud observed just after World War I remains true today: “It would seem that nations still obey their passions far more readily than their interests.”<sup>4</sup>

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In Mexico in 2006, millions of people jammed into the Zócalo (Mexico City’s central square) to protest the fraudulent election returns. For fifty days, people slept there in tents and



4.2 Anonymous at Occupy Wall Street, 2012. Photo: Diana Taylor



4.3 Andrés Manuel López Obrador. From the archives of *La Jornada*

4.4 (*opposite*) El Planton, Zócalo, Mexico City, July 2006. Photo: Diana Taylor

clogged the main boulevard of Mexico City to demand a recount. As part of the nonviolent resistance, Jesusa Rodríguez organized over three thousand performance acts to call attention to the group's claims for legitimate democracy. A performance coup of sorts happened when Andrés López Obrador, the candidate who "lost" the fraudulent election, was sworn in as the "legitimate president" in a "pretend" inauguration—"pretend," that is, in relationship to the "real" one that was outperformed as illegitimate.

The "real" official swearing-in could not be celebrated in a public place for fear of popular outrage. Rather, it took place during a four-minute ceremony in the midst of a congressional brawl.

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But the megaperformance, the living and cooking in open tents in one of the world's largest cities, enacted a vision of participatory democracy and a safe shared space that in Mexico has never in fact existed.



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In the United States, the Tea Partiers, Birthers, Occupy Wall Street groups, and many others perform their politics rather than simply voting for them every four years. At times political enactments become extremely heated and theatrical. Responding to one such moment, Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show* called for a “Restore Sanity Rally” on the Mall in Washington, asking the 70–80 noncrazed percent of the population to “take it down a notch.” One of the signs for that rally was **“I disagree with you, but I’m pretty sure you’re not Hitler.”**<sup>5</sup>

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The performance of politics takes place within specific contexts and scenarios that create their corresponding subjectivities.

We usually think of bodies as central to performance, as protagonists and agents of social change and artistic intervention. We must accept, however, that performance also functions within systems of subjugating power in which the body is simply one more product. Colonialism, dictatorships, patriarchies, torture, capitalism, religions, globalism, and so on, construct their own bodies.

The human body has changed (again, and always . . .).

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**THE BODY**, yes, but what body? Whose body? How does “the body” get constructed?



4.5 David Lozano (Colombia), *Marca y ego: Oficios para el cuerpo*.  
Hemispheric Institute Encuentro, Bogotá, Colombia, 2009

The 1950s body of Evita is very different than the muscular, enhanced body of Madonna playing the role of Evita in 1996. A New York Health and Racquet Club ad featuring a wimpy man with long hair reminds us that in the 1970s “only cars had muscles.” **In late capitalism, the body is both the consuming subject and the object of consumption.** It’s a thing we have and a thing we are, a product of systems of regulation (see **PERFORMATIVITY**). While this has always been the case and people have always internalized the roles into which they were inducted at or before birth (as Simone de Beauvoir notes, we are not born women, we become women), the external controls seem increasingly obvious. The consuming subject subjects itself to objectification—people starve themselves to fit the image of the Photoshopped bodies of the anorexic models

in ads. The body is a project. It can be worked on and perfected. A cover of a women's health magazine promises: "Your Best Body Ever! Get It Now! Keep It Forever!"

**In self-consuming capitalism, "You" exist only as representation, one more thing in the accumulation of goods and cultural capital.** "Tell me how you shop and I'll tell you who you are, whether in Shanghai or San Francisco," writes Roger Cohen in "Premiumize or Perish."<sup>6</sup> It's not just the handbag that's for sale, it's the image of You: "You can now order regular M&M's online with an image of your face on them."<sup>7</sup>

In our capitalist vocabulary, **YOU** is an object. **YOUIFICATION** is the process of becoming an object.

The desires and personal aspirations we call our own can be produced by a *desiring-machine* quite distant from (and sometimes in violent conflict with) our own good.<sup>8</sup>

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Rocio Boliver (Mexico) makes evident the violence that forges the construction of the feminine in a society in which beauty, as an image of perfection, transforms people into grotesque and dehumanized beings.

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**Economic performance, sexual performance, the performance of “the body,” discursive performance, technological performance, political performance, aesthetic performance: these phenomena work together, interconnected to such a degree that it’s difficult, if not impossible, to understand one without the other.**

4.6 Rocío Boliver (*La Conjelada de Uva*), *Mascarillo rejuvenecedora*, 2013. Photo: Alfredo Beltrán



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The performances of capitalism differ from those of totalitarian or authoritarian dictatorships. In the “**concentrated**” spectacle of military dictatorships, as Guy Debord observes, power is made visible, identifiable.<sup>9</sup> It has a face and a name.

In contrast to this concentrated power, the “**diffuse**” spectacle of late capitalism, which Debord discusses, is much more difficult to locate and identify.<sup>10</sup> This power resides everywhere, in our products, in networks of circulation, in the behaviors and desires that belong to the illusory world of success that capitalism renews daily in our social imaginary.

The “**integrated**” spectacle combines the concentration of power in a few identifiable people and corporations with the diffuseness of its effects. Who is responsible for what?

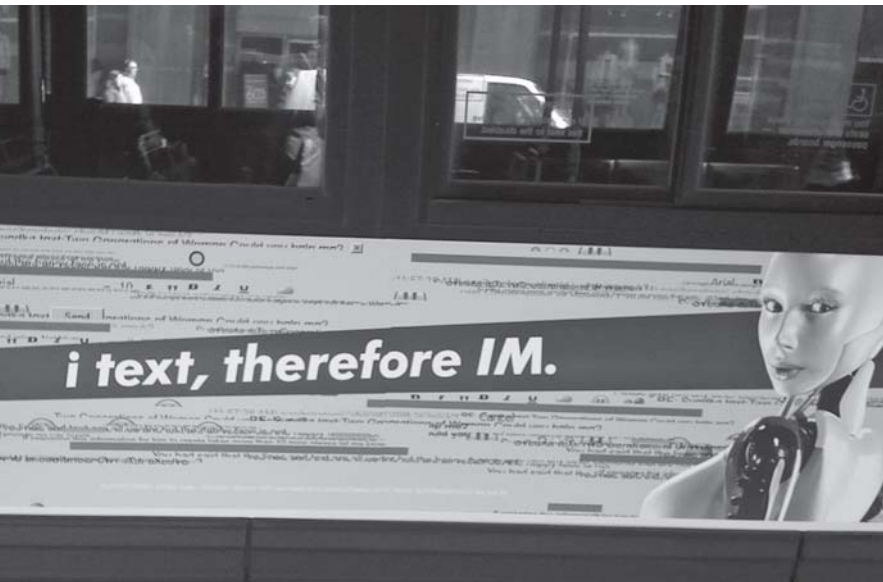
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Performance, according to a Mercedes-Benz commercial, “isn’t about doing something well . . . it’s about doing **EVERYTHING** well.” Here the car does the doing.

We live in a world saturated with models and instructions for success: **the how to of performance**. How to get people’s attention, how to triumph, seduce, command . . . Everything, it seems, has become a symbolic extension for “our” idealized bodies. Bodies (ideally, of course, the boring-already naked women and men) are used to sell us everything else. At the same time, though, this system sells us bodies and fantasies far removed from our own. The technological body is the new human body, eroticized, “designed to thrill” according to an



4.7 Military junta, Argentina, 1976. Photo: Guillermo Loiacono



4.8 The new cogito: i text therefore IM. Photo: Diana Taylor

Audi commercial.<sup>11</sup> Ideals of beauty and human prowess have been melded with the cyborg—the bionic is *en vogue*.

**According to our society of the spectacle, then, the body is a thing you can acquire, train, perfect, design, display, and preserve into perpetuity. The human body has been converted into a project to be realized, one more performance within a system of representations mediated by new digital technologies. Intersubjectivity is possible only through technology.**

**The new cogito: I text therefore IM.**

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Ricardo Dominguez and the members of the Critical Art Ensemble argue that, even as we celebrate this power of self-definition, we feel anxiety brewing:

*This anxiety emerges less from the curious no-position of having no fixed attributes, but more from the fear that the power driving this reinvention resides elsewhere. One senses that there are hostile, external forces, rather than one's own powers, that construct us as individuals. This problem becomes more and more complex in the context of our techno-culture, in which people inhabit virtual theatres that are foreign to their daily lives yet, at the same time, have an enormous impact on them. Abstracted representations of the self and the body, separated from the individual, are simultaneously present in many locations, interacting and recombining with others, all beyond the control of the individual and, many times, in ways that harm them.*<sup>12</sup>

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As Paul Beatriz Preciado notes, “the changes in capitalism that we are witnessing are characterized not only by the transformation of ‘gender,’ ‘sex,’ ‘sexuality,’ ‘sexual identity,’ and ‘pleasure’ into objects of the political management of living [. . .] but also by the fact that this management itself is carried out through the new dynamics of advanced technocapitalism, global media, and biotechnologies.”<sup>13</sup>

**At the same time, new technologies clearly offer us new options for developing non-normative subjectivities.** Performance artists like Stelarc (Australia), among others, have experimented with radical interventions on their bodies.

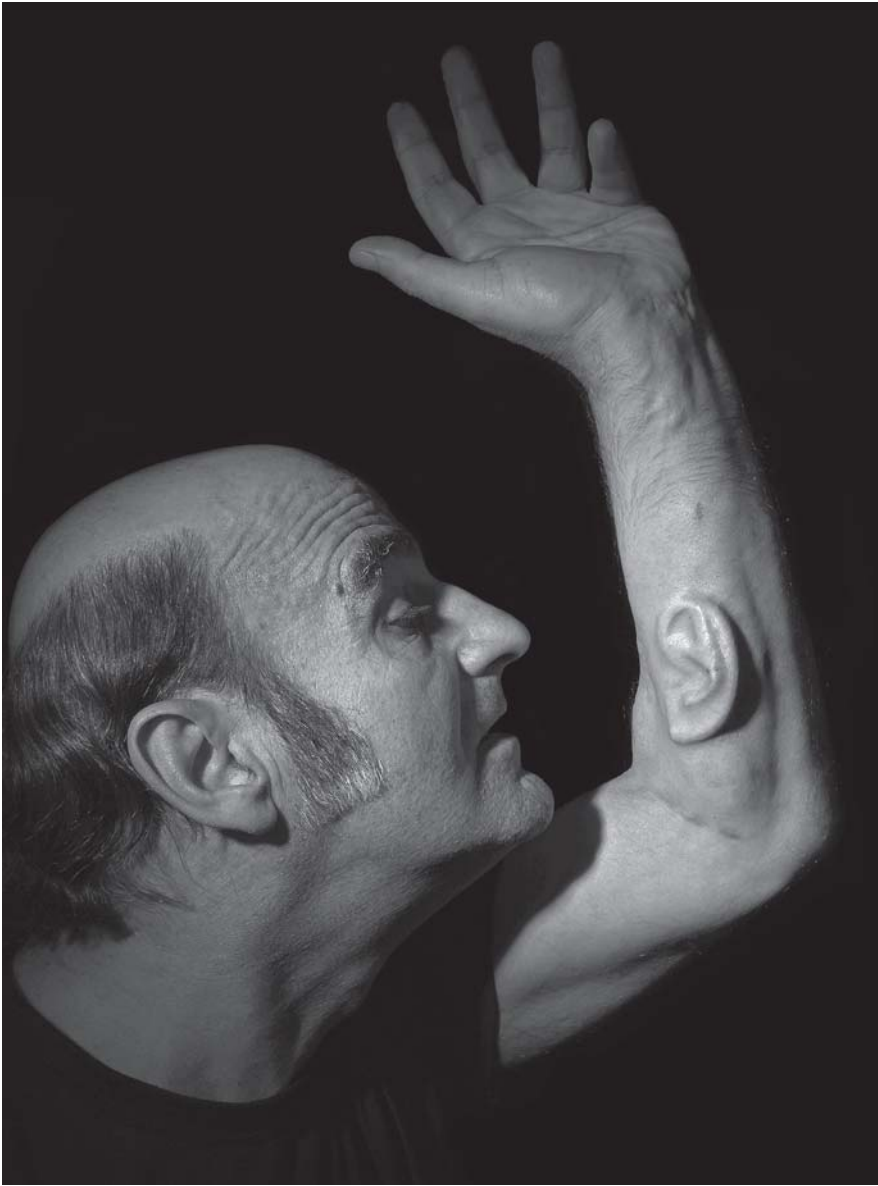
Stelarc added an ear to his body with plastic surgery; he added an arm with electronic cables; he has externalized internal parts of his body using yet other technologies.

He explains:

*The body has been augmented, invaded and now becomes a host—not only for technology, but also for remote agents. Just as the internet provides extensive and interactive ways of displaying, linking and retrieving information and images it may now allow unexpected ways of accessing, interfacing and uploading the body itself. And instead of seeing the internet as a means of fulfilling out-moded metaphysical desires of disembodiment, it offers on the contrary, powerful individual and collective strategies for projecting body presence and extruding body awareness. The internet does not hasten the disappearance of the body and the dissolution of the self—rather it generates new collective physical couplings and a telematic scaling of subjectivity. Such a body’s authenticity will not be due to the coherence of its individuality but rather to its multiplicity of collaborating agents. What becomes important is not merely the body’s identity, but its connectivity—not its mobility or location, but its interface.*

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4.9 Stelarc, *Ear on Arm*. London, Los Angeles, Melbourne, 2006. Photo: Nina Sellars



Artists Micha Cárdenas and Elle Mehrmand (U.S.) use digital technologies to challenge traditional forms and norms of sexual identity:

*In technésexual, the performers enact playful, erotic scenes in a physical space and project into virtual space, using apparatus to extend the reach of their hearts to publics in the room and in Second Life. They connect the two realities through audio, and explore the liminal spaces between these overlapping spaces. Technésexual opens debate around multiple sexualities beyond restrictive LGBT categories (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender) and of homo/heterosexuality. The mixing of realities creates a parallel to the experiences of the artists themselves, one that mixes genders and sexualities. The virtual worlds like Second Life facilitate the development of new trans-real identities, permitting ways of relating to each other that we have yet to imagine.<sup>14</sup>*

**Technological transformations offer  
new obstacles and new opportunities  
for expression.**

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4.10 Micha Cárdenas and Elle Mehrmand, *Technéssexual*. Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, 2000. Photos courtesy of the artists

## We live simultaneously in various temporal states and various spaces of performance.

It is not only the body that has changed. **Our sense of space has also been altered.** The digital has become an extension of the human body. **We live simultaneously in a “real” world and a “virtual” one.** This is not only an effect of the Internet. Members of the most marginalized communities in the Americas have cell phones to communicate with their loved ones abroad. They send birthday videos and organize parties to share important events with those who have “crossed over”—undocumented border crossers, in this case. They live across various spaces and time zones simultaneously.

**We all have electronic or “data” bodies or doubles.** Authorities can access our migration information, our marital status, our health records, our bank records, and much more, simply by consulting a computer, whether or not we ourselves have a computer. The electronic body is more powerful than the body of flesh and bone—we can be denied health coverage, the right to travel, and much else based on digital records. Just ask Critical Arts Ensemble.

At the same time, **we participate actively in this hybrid world.** Many of us have bank accounts with secret passwords, we find our friends on Facebook, and we learn to sing and dance by watching videos on YouTube. We are compelled to participate, but we also participate willingly. What if someone had



4.11 Stephen Lawson of 2boys.tv (Canada), *Phobophilia*. Hemispheric Institute Encuentro, Bogotá, Colombia, 2009. Photo: Julio Pantoja

told me twenty years ago that I would have a device attached to my body that could pinpoint where I was at all times? That it could read my messages even if the device was not turned on? I would have carried on with exclamations about Big Brother, dystopias, and “over my dead body.” Now I cannot live without my cell phone.

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**The digital has forced us to name and delimit the “real.” These days we must distinguish between “real” space and the “virtual,” our life and “second life,” the universe and the digital metaverse. The “flesh” body is not the same as the very powerful electronic data body. “Real time” is not the same as the present. “Live” is not the same as alive. An online community is not the same as a group of people.**

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**As our bodies and sense of self morph, so does much of what counts as embodied knowledge.**

We live, Debord observed fifty years ago, in the society of the spectacle of late capitalism: “The spectacle is the society itself, a part of the society, and an instrument for its unification.”<sup>15</sup>

Since 9/11, the society of the spectacle in the United States has been saturated with talk and images of “terror.” The physical enactment of terror takes place every day, and we rehearse and remember disaster every time we move from one place to another, even if the rituals of preparedness (like the old “duck and cover”) are completely meaningless in terms of se-

curing public safety. At the airport, we are asked to take off outer layers of clothing and shoes and to throw water bottles into the trash. We are scanned, eyed, patted down, sometimes more than once. We perform terror everyday; we incorporate it. I am asked to show my ID to the public safety officer every time I enter my office. The guard never looks at my ID, but my performance of obedience, my willingness to conform to the arbitrary and absurd injunction, proves that I am probably a safe bet for admittance. Still, the barrage of homeland security signs—"If You See Something, Say Something"—caution that we are also being co-opted into a widespread surveillance system where we are asked to be vigilant, to call out the enemy. The scenario is even more powerful for Muslims or undocumented workers who know themselves to be the pretext and the prey. There is no neutral place, no nonwar. The politics of fear governs the willing and the unwilling.<sup>16</sup>

The phantasmagoric war on terror needs, and produces, its own bodies: a "face of the enemy." I have a deck of playing cards with all the bad men's faces on them.

After the release of the Abu Ghraib photographs, stores in the United States started selling sex toys and S&M and Halloween costumes that parodied them. Fashion models were shown hanging in stress position to advertise chic brands of pants. Entire photo shoots in fashion magazines displayed models being violated. These images circulate so readily, in so many contexts, that the political violence gets entangled with eroticism, consent, commerce, and play. The criminal reality is magically evacuated.



4.12 New York City subway campaign “If You See Something, Say Something.”

Photo: Abigail Levine

**We know what is meant by “money laundering.” Here we are confronted with “image laundering.”**

**Images circulate again and again until they lose all political force.**

**Images circulate again and again until they lose all political force.**

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**But performance, unlike Debord’s spectacle, is multidimensional. It offers the possibility of acts of contestation as well.**



4.13 Stephen Lawson in 2boys.tv (Canada), *Phobophilia*. Hemispheric Institute Encuentro, Bogotá, Colombia, 2009. Photo: Marlène Ramírez-Cancio



4.14 iRaq poster by Forkscrew Graphics, Los Angeles, 2004

**We can recontextualize, resignify, react, challenge, parody, perform, and reperform differently. That is the promise of performance—as aesthetic act and as political intervention.**

Human bodies do not simply embody these new spectacular subjectivities; they also activate a critical tension with them. The performance group 2boys.tv (Canada) demonstrates various conditions of the human body: its fragility and vulnerability, Giorgio Agamben's concepts of *Homo sacer* and the nonperson, the body that suffers and dies, the body made invisible, but also the body as the zone of confrontation between political, religious, and economic powers.

Artists like 2boys.tv remove our blindfolds, demanding that we confront our reality.

These defiant performances and images also circulate in the public sphere, making visible the violence that others try to minimize.

**The battle to control actions, bodies, images, scenarios, and explanatory narratives rages on.**