

THE PREPARATION BEFORE THE ACTION  
*AN ANALYSIS ON THE ELEMENTS THAT SURROUND AN ACTION IN  
PERFORMANCE*

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## The Preparation Before The Action

Performance art arose in the 1960s as a visual art form from the so-called 'happenings' that were taken place in that period. In those early experiments, the element of standing still was important since those events, created by visual artists in New York, took two-dimensional images as their starting point to create work from (Howell 2). So, by taking stillness as a base, the first performance art works in history had been made.

The importance of stillness has been further underscored in the practice of people employed in the performing arts, like theatre, as well. Stage director Robert Wilson is known for his employment of inaction in his plays. In *Medea*, Wilson created a scene in which the lead singer was standing still for the duration of a whole song while other players were moving around her. Although the lead singer was worried at the time of not getting enough attention, Wilson ensured her that if she knew how to stand still, she would be noticed by the audience (Holmberg 147). Giving space to an actor to have stage presence without any movement or without saying a word is a recurring element in Robert Wilson's work. Also, Janos Pilinszky argues in his book *Conversations with Sheryl Sutton* that the delay of action is more effective than the actions that unfold a story plot, implying the importance of stillness over the actual action of a performer (Pilinszky).

In present timing, Marina Abramovic, has developed her own Abramovic Method to prepare someone into being present in time and space by being still and observing and anticipating what will happen. Initially, this method was created exclusively for artists to prepare themselves for the creation of art works, but now this method is open to the general public, as anyone who is willing to learn to be still can take part in her institute (Abramovic 372).

The example from the source of Howell illustrates the importance of stillness and preparation in the creation of performances since it explains how performance art came into being in the first place while the cases of Wilson and Pilinszky show how inaction is being seen as an important element in performative works. Besides, the example of the creation and use of the Abramovic Method underscores the ongoing social and artistic relevance of preparation and stillness for artists as well as anyone who is willing to learn to be still in particular in the present day. This paper will focus primarily on the act of being still in performances, the preparation before the actual action can take place and the empty time in between actions. Hence, the research question is:

### ***How are performance art works being set up around the actual action?***

As Anthony Howell mentions in his book *The Analysis of Performance Art*, performance artists often go with the feeling that they begin with a lack of something. This is because, as opposed to artists in other disciplines, like video makers who start with a camera or painters beginning with a canvas, they mostly do not have tangible objects to go from. However, as Howell mentions as well, one should not forget that performance artists use the body as an instrument and that elements, such as time and space are as tangible as the camera of a filmmaker (Howell 6). Therefore, the research question can be split up into these three elements of body, time and space. So the sub questions that follow from the research question are:

1. *What do performers do with their bodies before or in between their actions?*
2. *How do performers work with the element of time before or in between their actions?*
3. *How do performers use the space before or in between their actions?*

Since the audience is an important element in performance art works as well, I do believe that taking the anticipation of the audience into account is also very important. When the notions of body, time and space will be covered individually, the audience's anticipation in relation to these elements will be written about within these chapters as well, since the audience's anticipation is for a big part dependent on how performers use their body, or work with the elements of time and space.

This paper will go on by answering the sub questions per chapter, one by one, before arriving at the conclusion of the main question itself. The initial focus will be on performance art, although elements from the performing arts, such as acting, theatre or music will be touched upon as well to further deepen this study when necessary.

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## Body

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Anthony Howell sees stillness as empty time into which to pour a performance, just like a painter uses a canvas onto which to pour a painting or a musician using silence into which to create a piece. Hence, stillness for a performer is like a canvas for a painter or silence for a musician. In musical compositions, silence or stretches of silence define how the actual music is being interpreted by the listener. In the same way, stillness or stretches of stillness before or in between performative actions underline how the actual actions of a performer are being interpreted by the watcher (Howell 6). It should be noted that the definitions of silence and stillness differ from each other. In many English dictionaries, silence is defined as the absence of sound, whereas stillness is the absence of movement or sound. While musicians work primarily with sound, performers work with both sound and movement. The performer usually uses his or her body to create either sound or movement, so the physical body is seen as the instrument. Also, physical movement in many cases generates sound. For instance, when a performer takes a step forward, the movement of that step generates sound which may or may not be loud enough to hear, but the sound is there.

Besides distinguishing silence from stillness, Howell makes a clear distinction between time and stillness, with time being durational, and stillness, when used in a performative context, being physical (Howell 6). Thus, when applied to performance art, stillness is a physical state of the body of a performer.

Anthony Howell also notes that performance art has always had more affinity with visual art than theatre (Howell 4). According to him, this is because in performance art as well as in life modelling, the same skill of being still needs to be adopted by the human body. Anthony Howell notes that being or becoming physically still may be classified into three subcategories being stillness as a state, arrested stillness and the breaking out of stillness.

The first subcategory of stillness, stillness as a state, is the subcategory of stillness that deals with being in one state of mind from beginning to end. It is adopted in durational performances since they generally require being in the same state of mind for a long time, often even during the whole duration of the piece. The state of mind of the performer in durationals might start before the public arrives or end after the public leaves. The Abramovic Method is primarily teaching techniques in order to prepare the human body into being in this particular state of stillness.

The second subcategory of stillness, arrested stillness, is a type of stillness that is often employed in theatres when for instance one performer stops his action on stage to witness the other performers. It is common on stage, especially in conventional theatre, that one person moves or talks, while the other performers are watching him or her and thus being in a state of (arrested) stillness. By being in arrested stillness, and even physically being turned to the performer who moves or talks, the performer being still gives space to the other performers to do their thing. Also, the still performer, with and without his body language, guides the audience towards the new focus point, therewith creating more clarity for the audience as to where to look at.

Lastly, breaking out of stillness is an action that occurs after effort has been exerted by the performer. Anthony Howell states that this type of stillness can be linked to rebirth and thus may imply a transition from one state of mind, or one action to the other. In this transitional period, nothing actively happens, but the stillness in between is needed to prepare the performer and the audience for what is to come in the next part of the performance (Howell 1-2).

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## Time

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Usually, in performance art analysis, works have a starting time and are divided into sessions. The timing of the sessions is being ruled by the clock. The performer or the audience being early, late, or exactly on time, may be important, depending on the goal of the performance. When a performance has undefined timing, this undefined timing might be accentuated by random intervals of interruption which are operating during the period of the performance, but are not part of the performance itself. These intervals may be caused either by the performer or by external factors. For instance, someone in the audience may interrupt a performance session. This interruption may end a performance, but the performance may also go on after that (Howell 165-166). An example of a performance with undefined timing that was ended by an interruption is *Doomed* by Chris Burden where Burden was laying down behind a plate of glass that leaned against the wall. In the performance, there was also a clock that recorded the duration of the piece. Burden did not specify for how long he would be laying there and the performance ended when after 45 hours one of the museum staff members placed a pitcher of water next to him because he was concerned of his health. After that action by the museum staff, Burden walked away and smashed the clock, meaning that the interference was the catalyst for the end of the piece.

Usually, performative works are divided into a series of transitions. This series of transitions is seen from the point of view of the audience and it is something that some performers work with in the creation of their pieces. First of all, there is a beginning, a starting image that has an impact on the audience. After the beginning, there is an analytic period where the audience describes what is being seen. The analytic period is followed by expectation, in which the audience is expecting the original image to alter in one way or another. Usually the expectation of the audience is broken by the performer, as we are conditioned that some deviation of our original impression will surprise us. If the expectation of surprise is not fulfilled, then the audience might get bored. Some theatre makers, such as Robert Wilson, are able to extend these expectations for hours, by being able to use small alterations within that long time period, to keep the audience enthusiastic. As the audience keeps getting rewarded by courses of events, the attention is being held. In classical drama, this continuation of surprises is finally followed by a 'Catharsis', which is the final conclusion of the piece after the audience is released from their expectations (Howell 167-168).

In some cases, performances are ongoing lifestyle improvisations and are processes without a clear distinction of transitions as is being described above. In these cases, clock-timed intervals are important to certify what is being done (Howell 168). In *Seven Years of Living Art*, performance artist Linda Montano wore one colour for a year, changing that colour after a year, which is an example of that. Another example of a performance that is more of an ongoing lifestyle improvisation is *I Like America and America likes Me* in which Joseph Beuys locked himself into a room with a wild coyote for three days.

Anthony Howell also notes that repetition makes time smaller for the viewer whereas inconsistent events make time bigger. When significant events happen, the audience wakes up, gets a rush of adrenaline and thus time is magnified. On the other hand, when actions

are on repeat, the audience usually gets bored and the idea of time may shrink. Performers can work with this by extending repetition or monotony. A long period of monotony can serve as a good introduction for a surprise. For instance, if the audience is lulled into boredom and out of concentration, a surprising event will cause a rush of adrenaline which is greater than it would be if the audience would be alert already (Howell 177-178). Besides, performers can also decide to perform offbeat by deviating from the expected repetition. This happens often in performances by musicians, but this notion can also be extrapolated into performance art. David Byrne has stated that by singing way off the beat, Willie Nelson and George Jones increase the character of their performance and it also magnifies the sense that they are conveying a story, making them distinctive performers (Byrne 51).

Also, for both the performer as witness, the first action is always more important than the actions that follow from it. This is explained by the argument that the first action is more repeated than subsequent actions. Also, since all actions that follow grow out of the first action, the first action has the most emphasis for both the performer as well as the watcher. Furthermore, with the first action being done, the spatial environment and everything within the environment, like objects on the stage, of the performance becomes noticeable for the watcher, meaning that the first action causes the performance to take shape. The magnitude of the significance of the first action is only met again when a surprising inconsistent event happens (Howell 181).

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## Space

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Usually, performance art does not follow the conventions of a normal theatre. In a traditional theatre space, there is usually one stage which is the only space in which a situation is being presented and from which to experience the piece. This is further underscored by positioning the chairs where the public sits on facing the stage, which is usually a set principle in the architecture inside of the theatre building itself. This preconditioned framework limits the way in which to experience a piece. In performance art, the way we see things is usually dependent on the point of view of the spectator. So, after watching a performance, the spectator may want to see that same performance again, from a different perspective, because that might change the way in which the performance is being interpreted (Howell 184). Spectators might decide to walk around the performance to change perspective, there might be chairs, or no chairs, and the chairs can be taken away or repositioned in a more easy way than inside a theatre room, where the chairs are usually built in. The location wherein performance art works are usually performed, such as galleries and museums, are often 'white cube' spaces built for temporary exhibitions usually lasting for a couple of months, which are broken down after those months in order to make space for the next exhibition being presented in that particular room. The empty room within the white cube space enables more flexibility than a theatre and therefore the conventions of space and vantage point are much more easier to play with in white cube performance art than in theatres. To sum up, the freedom of the public to choose their own vantage point from which to watch a performance is an important element in performance art, which makes this artform distinguishable from conventional theatres in architectural structures theatre was made to perform in.

However, some theatermakers also give the public the freedom to choose their own vantage point. If we look at site-specific theatre compared to theatre in theatre halls, there is usually more spatial freedom for theatre makers to play with the positioning of the public; this freedom and flexibility within site-specific theatre is comparable to that of performance art in museums and galleries. In site-specific performance art outside of the white-cube, an example being the work *Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing* by Francis Alys where he is pushing a large block of ice through Mexico City until it melts, the spectator is free to choose the vantage point from which to watch this performance and also being free to walk along with the performer should that intention be there. Hence, both in site-specific performance art as well as site-specific theatre, the vantage point of the spectator is an element that is more taken into account than in theatre halls.

So, the following table, illustrating the usual differences regarding the spatial positioning of the public in contexts of theatre and performance can be drawn now:

Artistic discipline	Inside conventional architectural structure	Site-specific/Outside conventional architectural structure
<b>Performance Art</b> (conventional architectural structure: museum, gallery)	Flexibility for public of choosing their vantage point. Interpretation of piece might change after changing vantage point	Flexibility for public of choosing their vantage point. Interpretation of piece might change after changing vantage point
<b>Theatre</b> (conventional architectural structure: theatre)	Vantage point for public is usually set	Flexibility for public of choosing their vantage point. Interpretation of piece might change after changing vantage point

Taking this table into account, there are exceptions to this rule of course. For instance, there are rare cases where theatre pieces inside theatres also give the spatial flexibility to the public of choosing and changing vantage points. An example is Dutch theaterduo Boogaerdt/Van der Schoot with their work *Bimbo* about the influence of visual culture on society. In their installation, that was presented inside a theatre building, they placed the public in front of tv screens. On those screens, actions were being shown that were happening live behind their backs. The public was given the freedom to look back and see the actual happenings, or to continue watching it from a screen

Besides positioning the public, the position of the performer is also taken care of in performances. The performer might decide where to be in the space and might question the notion of being seen at all. Vitto Acconci masturbated below his audience in *Seedbed* and Stelarc creates performances where he hovers above his spectators.

Anthony Howell also mentions that the space where the performance occurs in should be seen as a drawing that is drawn by the lines of movement of the performer. So, if a performer walks diagonally across the space, an invisible diagonal line is being created in the mind of the viewer as a linear description of that walk. Howell therefore stresses the importance of not ambling about the space as a performer, unless the goal is to create a lack of clarity by ambling about of course (Howell 185-186).

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## Conclusion

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This paper has primarily focused on the important technical elements surrounding the actual action of a performance, the technical elements discussed being body, time and space. The relevance of understanding how a good performance is built using these elements is supported in this paper with examples of performers, such as Chris Burden, or theatremakers, such as Robert Wilson, who apply different techniques concerning body, time or space to convey their message in a performance. The example of the Abramovic Institute coming into existence in the past decade illustrates how relevant this topic still is nowadays, and how modern day performers still want to be trained on the technicalities of performance art. Since the research question *How are performance art works being set up around the actual action?* has been analyzed in these three separate elements of body, time and space, three separate conclusions will be drawn.

Concerning body, one can say that stillness is a state of the physical body which performers use as a base to create work from. Bodily stillness in itself is important in performance art, because it may underscore the actual actions of the performers and how these actions are being interpreted. Performers use their bodies in three different ways when being still, the three ways being stillness as a state, arrested stillness and breaking out of stillness. Stillness as a state is often employed in durational performances and it implies that the performer is in the same state of mind for a long time. Arrested stillness is common in theatres by actors in order to make space for other actors and therewith giving the audience clarity as to where the focus point is. Breaking out of stillness means that by being still, the performer can work with anticipation and prepare the audience (and himself) for the next action that is to come.

Speaking of time, performers work with either defined or undefined timing, depending on the set of rules that are being set by the performer prior to performing. Also, not the performer, but the public may end a performance with undefined timing by interrupting the performance. Traditional performative works are usually divided into a series of transitions being, as seen from the audience's point of view: beginning, analytic period, expectation and catharsis. If a performance is a lifestyle improvisation like *Seven Years of Living Art* by Linda Montano then there is no clear distinction of transitions and clock-timed intervals are important to define timing. Furthermore, repetition lulls audiences into boredom whereas surprising events stir up adrenaline, meaning that the first action and inconsistent events are seen as the most defining moments in a performance.

When space is analysed, the conclusion can be drawn that in both site-specific as well as white cube performance art, the public is usually free to choose their vantage point, and the interpretation of the piece might change after changing the vantage point. Performers can therefore work with this notion when making a performance. In theatres, it is usually harder to make the public choose their vantage point, as the chairs are often already built-in. Also, the audience usually reads the performance space as a drawing. It is therefore important not to amble about otherwise it might interfere with the travelling actions of the other performers and therefore this might cause unclarity for the audience.

After drawing conclusions regarding body, time and space, some limitations of this paper should be mentioned. Obviously, more elements could be taken into account in this research than the three that are being analysed right now. Elements like clothing and lighting are important for the creation of a performance too. Due to the limitation in time and amount of words, this has not been done in this paper, but it can be taken into account should this research go on in the future. It should also be mentioned that most examples that are being used in this paper focus on performance art from the 1970s and 1980s. The magnitude of performance art has slunk since the 1980s and this discipline has only been started growing in recent years, so not a lot of works have been linked to performance in its technical essence since then. Another reason why mostly 'older' works have been named in this paper is the fact that contemporary performance art is having its current goal to draw attention to political issues, such as race, gender, colonialism or capitalism (Dennis 79-86), hence making 'old' works easier to analyse on technical aspects of performance than the works of contemporary performers. Concerning the link of my research to the practice project there is a conceptual link in the sense that both my research document as well as the practice project are thematically focused on the frames that surround the performance and not so much on the action itself. In the execution of the practice project, because everything had been stripped down to its basics, we were left with almost nothing but the frames that we had written down, which might have given the impression that the performances that we did with De Kunstband were empty. For future projects, it might be good to earlier implement the knowledge that is gained in the research phase in the individual and collective artworks that I make, should this knowledge be useful for these projects of course. Keeping this in mind, hopefully this new knowledge on performance art will also lead to a deeper understanding of the creative decisions that I make while creating future performative artworks.

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