

Instantaneousness and Performance

Submitted for fulfilment of MA Practising Theatre and Performance 2011

Nik Wakefield

Churn Cottage  
Hale Lane  
Painswick  
Stroud  
GL6 6QF

07575 379 246

[Nikolas.Wakefield.2011@live.rhul.ac.uk](mailto:Nikolas.Wakefield.2011@live.rhul.ac.uk)

## **Table of Contents**

3	Summary
4	Introduction
7	Chapter One – A Critique of <i>Art and Objecthood</i>
23	Chapter Two – Absorption and Theatricality
43	Chapter Three – Instantaneousness and Endlessness
64	Conclusion
66	Bibliography

## Summary

This dissertation aims to investigate how theatre and performance manifest instantaneousness. Through analysing art criticism, theatre and performance this dissertation reveals the capability of theatre to construct multiple temporalities, whether they be endless or instantaneous. Manifesting these temporalities emerges through the relationship of the artwork and the spectator that may be described as theatrical or absorbing. This framework is inspired by Michael Fried's 1967 article *Art and Objecthood*. Thus chapter one first contextualises the article and then performs a close reading in which Fried's writing and several of his respondents' work is analysed. Chapter two explores the framework of the theatrical or absorbing beholder relationship as it relates to the medium of theatre through analysing postdramatic practice and theory. Chapter three advances the arguments concerning temporality from *Art and Objecthood* by using them to analyse works of performance art. It is shown that theatricality, absorption, endlessness and instantaneousness are contested terms that may be used to describe sensibilities, aspects, qualities, situations and moments of artworks. Rather than being strictly theatrical or absorbing, theatre and performance are often partly one and the other. Similarly, both theatre and performance are capable of emerging temporalities that may be endless in one aspect but instantaneousness in another. This dissertation thus aims to clarify the ways theatre and performance, through theatricality and absorption, manifest endlessness and, most importantly, instantaneousness.

## **Introduction - Instantaneousness and Performance**

This dissertation aims to investigate how theatre and performance manifest instantaneousness. The term instantaneousness comes from Michael Fried's controversial work of art criticism from the 1960's entitled *Art and Objecthood*. It describes a quality of painting and sculpture that is perpetually complete. The artworks that Fried found to have 'instantaneousness' were the paintings and sculpture of high modernism.<sup>1</sup> In the essay, these works are contrasted with minimalist works that take on an 'endlessness' through creating a 'theatrical' relationship with the beholder.<sup>2</sup> This dissertation refers to the most recent publication of Fried's 1967 article from his 1998 collection titled *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*. This version of the essay has been only partially edited by Fried for publication and thus applies a career of more than thirty years of art criticism and art history as reinforcement to his original arguments, as well as including a lengthy introduction that offers some biographical information in addition to reflections upon such history.<sup>3</sup>

Respondents to *Art and Objecthood* usually take issue not with Fried's characterisations of minimalism and modernism but with his value judgments; casting the later as authentic and the former as degeneration. The degree to which critics take issue with Fried vary from Stephen W. Melville's mild acceptance to Grant H. Kester's definite contrast.<sup>4</sup> That the essay applies to visual art but uses the word theatre to describe such works initially causes rhetorical issues for applying Fried's frameworks to theatre. What Fried meant by the word theatre is thus an important element of this dissertation because it is fundamental to his formulation of the possibility of instantaneousness. In terms of time, the fact that theatre is essentially a durational medium of art does not exclude it from being capable of manifesting various temporalities. These various temporalities, in successful works, are often organised into rhythms that vary and sometimes reach points of completion. Sometimes works of theatre and performance are even organised around temporal constructions that build toward moments of instantaneousness. What is at stake in

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 167.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 166 and 157.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 1-74.

<sup>4</sup> See 'Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory...' by Stephen W. Melville and *Conversation Pieces* by Grant H. Kester.

exploring instantaneousness is making positive use of the frameworks presented in *Art and Objecthood*. This dissertation seeks to emancipate Fried's terminology and allow it to be adopted, built upon and applied to theatre and performance in order to produce a greater comprehension of artistic practice.

The study of time in theatre and performance has the potential open up critical boundaries that have emerged through the prominence of discourse that is focused on space. The focus on space has led to, but is not limited to, taking for granted that the primary sense through which theatre is to be experienced and analysed is vision. As opposed to opticality, time has no congruent sensual link; it is experienced through a synthesis of senses and made conceivable through consciousness. This complex situation of sensual understanding and conscious conception is the data of time and the structure within which theatre and performance occur. Therefore taking up time along with space as a primary focus of analysis within theatre and performance may allow for a more thorough understanding of aesthetics and artworks.

In chapter one, *Art and Objecthood* is closely read and contextualised. The essay is historicised into its tempo-cultural location and its predecessors, Fried's influences, are noted and explored. Of these Stanley Cavell and Clement Greenberg play the most prominent roles. A close reading of the essay itself draws upon academics that have responded to *Art and Objecthood*, especially those with an interest in time. Pamela Lee's book *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* figures heavily, a chapter in *Conversation Pieces* by Grant Kester marks one of the most vehement retaliations to Fried's essay, but it is perhaps Stephen W. Melville's article 'Notes of the Reemergence of Allegory' that most inspires this dissertation's sense of utilising *Art and Objecthood* rather than arguing against it. Such a close reading reveals that Fried links theatricality to temporal emergences, in so much as it becomes necessary to arrive at instantaneousness via theatricality.

Chapter two takes Fried's binary of theatricality versus absorption to task through analysing elements of the theatre of Wooster Group and Robert Wilson. The analysis relies heavily upon theoretical frameworks from Hans-Thies Lehmann and Maaïke Bleeker, while taking the earlier cue from Melville that Robert Wilson's tableaux

make up the bridge between painting and theatre that Fried could not have realised in 1967.<sup>5</sup> This chapter also explores the terms theatricality and absorption, seeking to diversify each term into an adaptable and flexible framework, capable of being modelled for specific areas of analysis. Most importantly, chapter two seeks to deconstruct the boundary between theatricality and absorption, making intersections possible and showing how both are invariably reliant upon each other.

Chapter three builds upon the frameworks of theatricality and absorption to reveal the way instantaneousness and endlessness emerge, this time within the performance of Tehching Hsieh and Christopher Burden. Henry M. Sayre's *The Object of Performance* and Jeoraldean McClain's *Time in the Visual Arts* offer useful frameworks for understanding how time, performance and documentation interact. This chapter seeks to identify the ways in which these successful artworks construct temporalities. As in the previous chapter, this chapter attempts a harmonisation of terminology, in which instantaneousness and endlessness are allowed their full range of meaning, which makes possible the production (from within an artwork) and reception (from outside an artwork) of both. Endlessness and instantaneousness are temporal qualities, constructed in the composition of the artwork, that emerge and are produced. As time continues forward the artwork is free to produce new temporalities.

---

<sup>5</sup> Stephen W. Melville, 'Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory', 77

## Chapter One – A Critique of *Art and Objecthood*

### Nineteen Sixty-seven

Michael Fried first published *Art and Objecthood* in *Artforum* magazine in a summer issue dedicated to sculpture in 1967. In the 1960's *Artforum* was edited by Phil Leider, a supporter of Fried's work. The two met through a mutual friend Frank Stella, a Modernist painter Fried became close with while in his undergraduate studies at Princeton University in New Jersey<sup>6</sup>. Leider and Fried went on to become friends although Leider would leave the magazine and the art world in 1972.<sup>7</sup> *Artforum* Volume 5 June 1967, the issue in which *Art and Objecthood* first appears, had for its cover a photograph of Larry Bell's "Memories of Mike", an empty glass cube. Bell's cube being on the cover marked the issue as a site of criticism that was seeking to find frameworks and vocabularies for talking about the materially minimal sculpture that was beginning to take a hold of the art scene in both London and New York in the mid 1960's.<sup>8</sup> This period of conceptual innovation may not have been so controversial had it not coincided with the social upheaval that was simultaneously erupting on the streets of America and Europe. Together the social, empirical and critical context that surrounded *Art and Objecthood* contributed to its production and reveals its wider implications.

The social context of nineteen sixty-seven is multifaceted, broad and well known. America was actively engaged in fighting the War in Vietnam while many at home were protesting it, including Muhammad Ali who refused military service and Martin Luther King Jr. who spoke out against the conflict. The Beatles' "Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" and easy access to psychedelic drugs such as LSD and acid fuelled the 'Summer of Love'. Nineteen sixty-seven would set the stage for the student riots in Paris the next year and much of the political action around that time indicates a political willingness to stand behind issues. This level of grassroots

---

<sup>6</sup> Fried majored in English at Princeton (class of 1959). He went on to become a Rhodes scholar at Oxford and completed his PhD at Harvard University. He painted in his early years and wrote poetry throughout his life. Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Leider published Fried's PhD on Manet in *Artforum* on its own in a special issue in 1969. Ibid, 12-13.

<sup>8</sup> Pamela Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s*, 40. Lee credits the PhD dissertation of Gwen Allen, who researched how the covers of *Artforum* effected and reflected its contents. This research has since appeared in *Artists Magazines: An Alternative Space For Art*, MIT Press 2011.

political agency had previously not been a part of the social climate to the extent that it was then becoming.

In California a new protest called the 'be-in' was made popular and other similar events happened across America.<sup>9</sup> A be-in references the Sit-in protest that the Civil Rights Movement often enacted to protest segregation. People of colour would enter restaurants or other public locations sign-posted 'white-only' to simply be present in the space. It recalled the action taken by Rosa Parks years earlier to sit in a section of a public bus that was intended for whites only. The sit-in was a form of non-violent protest that made its political statement through breaking invisible spatial boundaries, and its non-violence contrasted the outwardly destructive riots that went on in Detroit and elsewhere in 1967. But the non-violent be-in represented an even less outwardly active form of protest. Coming out of hippie ideology, the be-in was merely a call to be. It was a grouping for grouping's sake; it brought people together to do nothing more than bring people together. The be-in was 1967 counterculture's 'minimal' protest.

Also in 1967, Michael Fried was dividing his time between New York where he was writing *Art Criticism* and Cambridge, Massachusetts where he was working as a research fellow at Harvard.<sup>10</sup> Later that year he would move to London to work on his PhD, but it was in the spring that he wrote *Art and Objecthood*.<sup>11</sup> Between the summer of 1966 and the autumn of 1967 Fried would produce more *Art Criticism* than he ever had before or ever would again.<sup>12</sup> For modernism and minimalism these years were equally productive. The painters and sculptors whose work Michael Fried most admired, Anthony Caro, Jules Olitski and Kenneth Noland all were at high points in their career. Reflecting back on this period Fried makes a point of explaining that the modernist outlook was positive, as opposed to what some mistakenly read as a tone of pessimism toward the future as a result of a trend towards minimalism.<sup>13</sup> The artists who practised its philosophy, Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Carl Andre and Tony Smith, also theorised the trend through their own writings. But

---

<sup>9</sup> Henry Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde Since 1970*, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 10.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> During this period Fried wrote 'four essays and several shorter pieces'. *Ibid*, 11.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

both modernists and minimalists were creating and showing innovative and successful art works and were being written about by their own respective groups of critic-supporters.

### **Phenomenology**

As has been shown, the context which surrounds *Art and Objecthood* reveals that Fried's arguments for modernism over minimalism should not be seen as anything other than for what they are; his own opinion. This is not meant to devalue Fried's project of explaining and evaluating theatricality versus absorption. It is rather to answer from this early stage the issue of phenomenology versus ontology (and locate the article within a historical context in which it was important to make a stand for what one believes in, especially for young people - Fried was not yet thirty when he wrote *Art and Objecthood*). To begin explaining the critical context in which *Art and Objecthood* appears, it will be useful to first note that Fried had a copy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's recently translated *Phenomenology of Perception* and Fried's experience of Anthony Caro's sculpture could only be understood with phenomenology for Michael Fried himself.<sup>14</sup>

‘[A]lthough Caro's sculptures, being abstract, in no way depicted the human figure, they nevertheless seemed to me to evoke a wide range of bodily feeling and movement. In this connection I appealed to the writings of [...] Maurice Merleau-Ponty [...] [W]hen I first saw *Midday* or *Sculpture Seven* in Caro's garden I felt I was about to levitate or burst into blossom. But Merleau-Ponty provided philosophical sanction for taking those feelings seriously and trying to discover where they led [...]’<sup>15</sup>

So it is that some who read *Art and Objecthood* miss an important point Fried makes by saying that - ‘It is as though one's experience of the latter has no duration-not because one *in fact* experiences a painting by Noland or Olitski or a sculpture by

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 28.

David Smith or Anthony Caro in no time at all, but because *at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest*.<sup>16</sup> There are two issues in this passage, one is that Fried's phenomenology is cloaked in the appearance of fact as a rhetorical tool of persuasion, and another that Fried is dealing with how the artwork manifests its own time as opposed to a more contemporary relational perspective that seeks to aestheticise the experience of the artwork, which is of course temporal. So instead of reading too deeply into Fried's use of rhetoric, *Art and Objecthood* should rightly be placed into a historical context in which such persuasive rhetoric was common. It is without question that Fried seeks to persuade the reader of his correctness as Grant Kester notes, but it is questionable whether Fried was attempting to downplay one kind of art or lionise another.<sup>17</sup> During this period of history it was programmatic to 'take a stand', but now such rhetoric may easily be seen through to utilise the productivity of Fried's personal opinion through correctly placing it into a phenomenological paradigm. Doing so displaces Fried's frameworks to allow them the freedom to do more than they could in *Art and Objecthood*. Fried aims to isolate the experience of art inside the artwork itself all the while admitting that as a human being, one's perception of any artwork will of course be durational. Fried even answers the call that he ignores the beholder in *Art and Objecthood*, saying that people must think 'I believed and perhaps still believe that modernist works of art exist or aspire to exist in a void. But I didn't and I don't.'<sup>18</sup>

The second issue has to do with the focus of criticism. For Fried and for Modernism, that the artwork has a beholder is less important than the quality of the artwork set apart from the beholder. Since 1967 much has changed in art criticism and art practices that foreground the beholder and her experience of an artwork. Installation art for example may 'activate and de-centre' the spectator.<sup>19</sup> Claire Bishop brings up Michael Fried as a route to Rosalind Krauss, whose own work demonstrated how minimalism had revealed the phenomenological aspect of perceiving art.<sup>20</sup> It would be a mistake to view the way Krauss reads Merleau-Ponty as quintessential; an arbitrary hierarchy placed upon a multiplicity of viewpoints, each with their own strength of

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 167.

<sup>17</sup> Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community + Communication in Modern Art*, 49.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 32.

<sup>19</sup> Claire Bishop, *Installation Art*, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 53-54.

application. Both Krauss and Fried were students of phenomenology and their writings manifest different applications of Merleau-Ponty's frameworks. That artwork after the 1960's has moved away from abstract expressionism and toward more relational modalities may be read as a denunciation of *Art and Objecthood*, but perhaps it is rather proof that Fried illuminated the paradigm shift he noticed away from one kind of art (he liked) towards another (that he did not like).<sup>21</sup> While Krauss does evidence that phenomenology may explain the trend towards minimalism, what she and others seem to miss is the phenomenology at work in *Art and Objecthood*, which will be returned to below. First the critical context for the essay will be explained in further detail.

At the time of writing, Fried's most important influence was Clement Greenberg, or so he thought. 'When I wrote *Art and Objecthood* I was a Diderotian critic without knowing it.'<sup>22</sup> If Fried didn't know Diderot was an important thinker for him when he was writing art criticism in the 1960's, he certainly did know of some others who had influenced him. In the introduction to the 1998 volume *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, the picture Fried paints of himself writing art criticism in the 1960's is one of a young, busy and passionate man who is deeply inspired by those around him. While at Princeton, 'Greenberg was the only art critic we valued and wanted to read.'<sup>23</sup> Greenberg's *After Abstract Expressionism, Recentness of Sculpture* and other writings published in the *Partisan Review* set the theoretical groundwork for Fried's early criticism.<sup>24</sup> If Greenberg was the older art critic the young Michael Fried looked up to, Susan Sontag was the contemporary Fried looked down on. What he saw in *Against Interpretation* was all that was wrong with bad art and bad art criticism – a theatrical sensibility.<sup>25</sup> Fried's interest in philosophy found its outlet in another contemporary, Stanley Cavell. Cavell is a professor of philosophy at Harvard whose

---

<sup>21</sup> The trend toward an aesthetic of the relational (Nicolas Bourriaud, 2002) may be evidenced in the emergence of installation art (see Claire Bishop 2005) and dialogic art (Grant H. Kester 2004).

<sup>22</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 2.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Fried would later take issue with a distinction Greenberg made, a dialectic between art history and art criticism, in which the difference between the two is that the former is non-judgemental. This dialectic will be returned to later, as it was one of the reasons Fried moved intellectually away from the influence of Greenberg in the late 1960's. It also has a bearing on how *Art and Objecthood* may be read now, forty-five years after its original publication.

<sup>25</sup> *Art and Objecthood* published in *Minimalist Art*. The footnote to *Art and Objecthood* that may be found in the editions published in the 1960's in which Fried dismisses Sontag was omitted from the essay for the 1998 publication.

writings collected in *Must We Mean What We Say?* make the most important contributions to Fried's notion of theatre. A footnote of *Art and Objecthood* even mentions a conversation between Fried and Cavell.<sup>26</sup> In *Must We Mean What We Say* Cavell uses Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* and *King Lear* by William Shakespeare as provocations for analytic philosophy that moves from aesthetics to linguistics and even to early notions of performativity, as Cavell was a student of J.L. Austin.<sup>27</sup> As further exploration of Fried's influences will feature as integral to the close reading of *Art and Objecthood*, the focus now will move onto Fried's essay and the arguments contained therein.

### **Reading History**

Pamela Lee begins her book *Chronophobia* by admitting that her close reading of Michael Fried's *Art and Objecthood* will not be the first and nor will it be the last; Lee points out that the essay must be read in a new way in order to understand how Fried works with time.<sup>28</sup> For the project of understanding how instantaneousness may be developed as a transdisciplinary aesthetic concept it is necessary to closely read Fried's essay and evaluate the secondary sources that have responded to Fried. Of these secondary resources, some date back to the 1980's (Stephen W. Melville's *Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory*) and some are as recent as a few years ago (*Chronophobia* and *Conversation Pieces* were published in 2004). Before going into the essay itself it is first necessary to examine the dialectic between art history and art criticism that Clement Greenberg theorised which Fried took issue with. This exploration is important to this dissertation because it offers the critical optic through which *Art and Objecthood* is viewed – as art history. In the introduction to *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* Michael Fried points to his initial admiration of Greenberg and then their eventual split. The dialectic between criticism and history would be one of the issues upon which the two would disagree, although it would be one Fried attempted to reconcile forty years later in the same introduction.

---

<sup>26</sup> See footnotes 15 (p. 170) and 23 (p. 171-172) in Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*.

<sup>27</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, Acknowledgments xiii.

<sup>28</sup> Pamela Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time and Art in the 1960s*, 42.

Fried ends his extended introduction to his edited collection with a section entitled 'Art Criticism and Art History'.<sup>29</sup> In it he evaluates the Greenbergian dialectic between the two kinds of writing and reveals how his own writing evolved from criticism to history. He explains that his own art historical writings, *Absorption and Theatricality*, *Courbet's Realism* and *Manet's Modernism* were all informed by his earlier criticism in pieces such as *Shape as Form*, *Three American Painters* and *Art and Objecthood*. Greenberg, on the other hand, impressed upon the young Fried 'that the art historical approach was inherently non-judgemental and therefore antithetical to criticism.'<sup>30</sup> What Fried attempted to do in the end of his introduction seems to be more than merely acknowledge the distance between the Fried of the 1960's and the Fried thirty years later; it shows how his art criticism made his art history possible. It also shows how looking back on his criticism through the lens of his historical writing (and the secondary responses to his criticism) he sees that the criticism stands the test of time because it offers the historian relevant data upon which to understand the creative and critical climate of the past.<sup>31</sup> This relevant data is of course the judgements of value Greenberg implies is the job of criticism, especially for modernism. What then becomes an issue is the transformation through time of how criticism is historicised and what bearing both have on aesthetic evolution.

All of Fried's writings from the 1960's, *Art and Objecthood* (and its diverse responses) included, deserves to be viewed now, some 45 years later, through a historicised optic, in order to lift the shining pieces from its tangled mass. This is where the value of use may be found in the essay. For his part, Fried in his awareness of the phenomenological paradigm made no claims to objectivity.<sup>32</sup> He even went as far as taking issue with Clement Greenberg's notion of objectivity as a 'consensus over time.'<sup>33</sup> If Fried was sceptical of history's objectivity, his viewpoint was shared with Stanley Cavell, who in musing over the success and quality of certain arts mentions that '[a] familiar answer is that time will tell. But my question is: *What* will

---

<sup>29</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 47.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 16-18.

<sup>33</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Can Taste Be Objective?', 22-23, 92. From endnote 9 in Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 55.

time tell?'<sup>34</sup> Perhaps nothing more, Cavell might say, than what the present might tell. Stephen W. Melville's response to *Art and Objecthood* quotes this same passage from Cavell and then goes on to state that the pitfalls and fortuity of the present demands the critic's word.<sup>35</sup> What is at stake then is that time can only tell what has been told in the present. The critic then is yet another data supplier for the historian. If the historian is at risk of adopting the bias necessary for criticism it is easy to see why Fried's whole project might become suspect (as if the historical project about theatricality was another way to prove that *Art and Objecthood* was right). It is with this historicised optic that this project now moves onto a close reading of Michael Fried's *Art and Objecthood*.

### ***Art and Objecthood***

The close reading that follows moves through *Art and Objecthood* chronologically in order to reflect the conceptual framework of the original. Fried's main arguments in this essay concern the inauthentic fate of literalist art if it subject itself to theatrical endlessness and therefore forsake presentness and instantaneousness.

Isolated above the body of text that makes up *Art and Objecthood* is a quote from Jonathan Edwards. In it he explains that the world shows itself continuously as a series of new moments, each with a freshness that evidences the inventive work of God.<sup>36</sup> Immediately Fried glosses his philosophical stance on temporality which is discrete time; a series of instants. The quote sends two messages, the first pertains to the ontology of time whereas the second mines the first for its theological implications. Fried will return to theological terminology for his final sentence and his respondents have attributed to these bookends a moral stance Fried attaches to the communicative modalities presented in the dialectic between minimalism and modernism.<sup>37</sup> For now the importance of the quote will be read in the light of its concern with temporality. Fried's percipient reading of the link between appearances and temporality as a problem of theology, and philosophy; immediately flags time as, for him, the most important feature of the relationship between art and objecthood.

---

<sup>34</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say*, 188.

<sup>35</sup> Stephen W. Melville, *Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory*, 86-87.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 148 (quoting Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, 329-330).

<sup>37</sup> Pamela Lee, *Chronophobia*, 37.

Pamela Lee reveals the corollary preoccupation with discrete time in both Edwards, as a protestant, and Fried as a modernist.<sup>38</sup>

Another of Edwards' themes, ideology, carries on into Fried's essay. He begins his own text by observing that the 'ideological'<sup>39</sup> project of minimalism is inherently concerned with basic conditions of sensuousness. This is why Fried prefers to call minimalist art 'literalist'<sup>40</sup>. This sensuous condition, Fried argues, amounts to minimalism's disdain for illusion in favour of making unified sculptures. Sculptures that are shape (and therefore for Fried, 'hollow'<sup>41</sup>), as opposed to sculptures (or painting) that contain shape. The idea of a container is useful for understanding Fried's position because of the value attributed by Fried, Greenberg and others to a work of art's medium specificity. In addition to material prescriptions each medium also brings along with it particular treatments of time.<sup>42</sup> The medium of painting requires a container for that which will be within it. The rectangular canvas is for Fried only a container, and a container is nothing more than an object. Minimalist sculptures are objects because they are empty containers.

This leads to the next argument in *Art and Objecthood*, which identifies presence (through shape) as the quality of modernist painting and sculpture that is void in minimalism through its objecthood, which for Fried amounts to the condition of non-art.<sup>43</sup> Stephen W. Melville points this issue towards a modernist dialectic between the mere and the pure.<sup>44</sup> A minimalist artwork then is mere - merely an object, whereas a modernist artwork is pure - purely whole and present. Modernism's indifference to the beholder has been characterised as the Adornian ideal by Pamela Lee.<sup>45</sup> This ideal involves artworks which are both completely recognisable and simultaneously other-worldly. Minimalism is concerned with 'this insistence on surrendering presence - of any kind - to its permeation by something other than itself'.<sup>46</sup> Thus the container

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 148-149.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 148.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>42</sup> Pamela Lee, *Chronophobia*, 52.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 152.

<sup>44</sup> Stephen W. Melville, *Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory*, 80-81 and 91.

<sup>45</sup> Pamela Lee, *Chronophobia*, 43.

<sup>46</sup> Stephen W. Melville, *Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory*, 80.

being empty highlights the beholder's experience rather than itself. It is this manifestation of shape as object rather than shape within object (that through focusing on phenomenology rather than ontology) that causes Fried to write that the literalist project is inherently against art.

Then Fried introduces the term 'theatrical' and defines it as 'an object in a *situation* – one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*'<sup>47</sup>. The ostensible opposition between ontology and phenomenology is now at the heart of the issue of how an artwork presents itself to the beholder. Grant H Kester notes that this opposition is typical of Fried who often appears to answer questions of phenomenon with answers of objects and vice versa.<sup>48</sup> Theatricality for Fried means that the artwork at once 'distances' the beholder by creating a situation that 'belongs' to him.<sup>49</sup> Fried even writes of this as minimalist objecthood manifesting a kind of stage presence, that Lee observes as enacting a temporal stance of unfolding.<sup>50</sup> This is of course opposed to the modernist artwork that absorbs its beholder through belonging only to itself, the opposite of theatre. Theatre is here used as a mode for painting and sculpture; it does not refer to the discipline. Fried will later return to theatre as a discipline, and its own fight against modal theatricality. Before that he moves on to detail how minimalists achieve theatricality, which involves the artwork taking on not only object like characteristics but moving further away from medium-specific modernism towards presentations of what could be seen as nature. For Fried, the forms of literalism become 'biomorphic'<sup>51</sup>.

This leads Fried to believe that literalism is fundamentally concerned with anthropomorphism or at least naturalism.<sup>52</sup> During the 1960's a particular model of nature was becoming increasingly adopted. This was the recursive and autopoietic theory of 'systems'.<sup>53</sup> Lee writes at length about how systems theory affected art in the 1960's. Essentially, nature became theorised as a system that was self-generating

---

<sup>47</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 153.

<sup>48</sup> Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, 55-56.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 154.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 155 and Pamela Lee, *Chronophobia*, 51.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 157.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 157.

<sup>53</sup> Pamela Lee, *Chronophobia*, 39.

and self-organising, in so much as rather than dissolving into disorder (entropy), the world was always finding balance.<sup>54</sup> If the passage of time brings order, it is easier to understand why minimalism manifested endlessness. It also makes more sense why modernism might have a stake in artworks that exist outside of time if they are cast within an entropic system that through time becomes increasingly disordered. But a paradigm shift was already taking place when Fried wrote *Art and Objecthood*, and his essay is in retrospect merely a marker along the pathway left by the contest.

Fried's claim which follows seeks to divide art into two sectors between work which is 'fundamentally theatrical and work that is not.'<sup>55</sup> This dialectic would later make up the major project of Fried's historical writing in *Absorption vs. Theatricality*, *Courbet's Realism* and *Manet's Modernism*. In that study, he makes no value judgments on either, but it is clear that in *Art and Objecthood* Fried is advocating for art that absorbs the beholder. Even more emphasised is his disdain for theatricality, which is what has provoked so much of the critical responses to the essay that are, for lack of a softer word, harsh. Responding under the framework of the Greenbergian critic, especially from within Performance Studies, provokes the vehement trashing of the value judgements in *Art and Objecthood*. This perspective misses the opportunity of Fried's frameworks, the two most useful being between theatricality and absorption and the other a matter of temporality between instantaneousness and endlessness.<sup>56</sup> Adopting the critical optic of the Greenbergian historian rightly disallows a historical displacement of the essay in which a contemporary reader mistakenly takes Fried's opinions to be pertaining to the art of today. Such a displacement causes misreading to occur because the movements Fried was naming have been replaced with other movements and perhaps more obviously the terms Fried used have undergone transformations in meaning. Very few have argued that Fried was wrong about what he saw; more often respondents seem interested in proving the backwardness of Fried's value judgments. This enterprise, of all the possible responses to *Art and*

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 65-66.

<sup>55</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 157.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 167. It may be that a Bergsonian intensive versus extensive framework could be applied here but this is beyond the scope of this project.

*Objecthood* forty five years later appears to be the least fruitful as since the 1960's the art world has clearly taken a performative and durational turn.<sup>57</sup>

To return then to the issue of theatricality vs. absorption, Stephen W. Melville rightly points to the fact that whether a work of art is seen as absorbing or theatrical depends on when in history that artwork is being seen.<sup>58</sup> In the essay, theatricality for Fried is defined as a situation in which the artwork appears to have an awareness of being seen.<sup>59</sup> Absorption, on the other hand, is defined in no clear terms. Rather, absorption for Fried seems to involve the artwork having the ability to 'compel conviction' in the beholder, conviction of the success of the artwork in relation to art history.<sup>60</sup> Fried himself noticed this while working on the historical project some years after writing *Art and Objecthood*.<sup>61</sup> This observation carries with it the implication that theatricality itself is dependent upon the historical (and perhaps social) context within which the artwork emerges and the historical context in which an artwork is beheld (if an artwork is lucky enough to survive history). Kester further observes that the binary requires revision due to the advancements made since the 1960's, advocating for a third possibility – dialogic.<sup>62</sup> Artworks may become dialogic when they neither distance nor compel conviction but rather feedback and facilitate communal encounters between beholder and artwork.<sup>63</sup> What all this amounts to is that the dialectic should not be applied methodologically as an 'either/or' situation. It is more useful to determine *when* an artwork is or *when it is not* theatrical, absorbing or dialogic. Taken further this is to mean that artworks may compel conviction along two temporal modalities, the historical and the present.

For Fried, the border between phenomenology and ontology is not entirely inflexible. As his essay moves on to discuss a particularly theatrical experience described by Tony Smith, the argument for absorbing art starts to take shape, in distinctly phenomenological language. Writing of Anthony Caro's sculptures Fried explains

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>58</sup> Stephen W. Melville, *Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory*, 67.

<sup>59</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 153.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 165.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 50.

<sup>62</sup> Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, 58.

<sup>63</sup> Pamela Lee, *Chronophobia*, 52.

that modernist sculpture defeats objecthood through ‘imitating [...] the *efficacy* of gesture’.<sup>64</sup> This argument for Kester rings out as an argument to separate aesthetic success from ‘history, culture or politics.’<sup>65</sup> This imitation happens within painting and sculpture through their ability to transcend time, which for Kester creates moments of ‘*sensus communis*’; a theory that is inherently phenomenological about a communal experience of linked sensuous embodied experience.<sup>66</sup> It is obvious that they are linked and perhaps the word that more accurately describes the overlap is ‘imbricated’. In a rhetorical flourish, Michael Fried begins section seven by making ‘a claim that I cannot hope to prove or substantiate but that I believe nevertheless to be true’. This claim pertains to theatricality and absorption, and they are, as Michael Fried saw it, ‘at war’ with each other.<sup>67</sup>

As the essay turns toward its culmination, temporality becomes the crucial point for Fried’s essay. In order to get to time Fried departs from his language of theatricality vs. absorption or conviction, and turns to describing literalist works almost temporally but still spatially as *endless* and ‘endlessness’ being ‘central to both the concept and interest of objecthood.’<sup>68</sup> Endlessness calls up for Fried the objecthood of literalism, and here of course Fried is not casting minimalism as anthropomorphic because of inevitable mortality. Pamela Lee points to a kind of agency of minimalism in Fried’s language that may be construed as another manifestation of literalism’s *naturalist sensibility*. Lee explains the endlessness of the minimalist artwork as ‘a time that is at once proleptic and endless.’<sup>69</sup> The reading is crucial because the artwork is waiting before and sticks around after the beholder is gone. The endless literalist art object is playing in time. It waits and acts out with agency upon the beholder. It plays a game of active time. Endlessness is theatrical because it disrupts clarity of relationship between beholder and artwork through its transformation in time, exponentially complicated by the fact that this transformation may go on ‘ad infinitum.’<sup>70</sup> That an artwork may endlessly change is potentially disastrous for criticism. It is possible that

---

<sup>64</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 162.

<sup>65</sup> Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, 49.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 50, 57-58.

<sup>67</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 163.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 166.

<sup>69</sup> Pamela Lee, *Chronophobia*, 44.

<sup>70</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 166.

instantaneousness and endlessness pertain more to criticality than actual aesthetic qualities, and this will be returned to in chapter three of this dissertation.

The examination of endlessness leads to the purely temporal term ‘duration’ as Fried makes a claim of what is the worst aspect of minimalism; the manifestation of unlimited durationality.<sup>71</sup> It is in this mess of duration that Pamela Lee rightly sees what makes Michael Fried *chronophobic* – that ‘explicit in the reception of minimalist sculpture [...] is the way in which the staging of the object was a temporal unfolding violates a reading of the work of art as static, as ontologically secure’.<sup>72</sup> This recalls her reading of Krauss’ work on medium that sets temporal rules of engagement, but it also does much more.<sup>73</sup> Fried’s binary attempts to fortify a fine line between two apparently oppositional temporal concepts, endlessness and instantaneousness. This dialectic deserves the same treatment that absorption vs. theatricality received, which is to say that works of art set their own gauge and oscillate between these two states. The difficulty here is that both endlessness and instantaneousness deal fundamentally with the passage of time in that both disrupt the regular human perception of duration. If instantaneousness describes no time, and endlessness describes all time, being able to define which is the correct ontological description for a work of art seems futile, if not outside the limits of epistemology.<sup>74</sup>

It is now that Fried gathers all his persuasive rhetoric to defend the art that he finds so great. It is all in terms of temporality that modernism finds its most compelling quality – that of ‘instantaneousness’, which is defined by the artwork’s ‘continual and entire *presentness*, amounting [...] to the perpetual creation of itself’.<sup>75</sup> So there it is.

---

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 166.

<sup>72</sup> Pamela Lee, *Chronophobia*, 51.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>74</sup> A possible digression for further study but beyond the scope of this dissertation - Endlessness and instantaneousness cancel each other out because they both present impossible temporalities. What may be the defining factor between these two states is motion. Motion may only be possible in an endless state, but this again is problematic because of the organisation of time in cinema. Deleuze defined cinema as the ‘movement image’ and this automatic time structuring displaces motion as a condition upon which endlessness might rest. If motion alone cannot be the condition, the condition of motion may be, and this condition of motion that creates endlessness or instantaneousness has to do with either automatic or manual motion. This is to leave open a metaphysical problem created by temporal ontology, which is to say that there is as yet no hard and fast rule when it comes to studying what exists through the passage of time. *Art and Objecthood* is not directly concerned with metaphysics, but sometimes the language attempts to reach such heights.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 167.

The artwork hides nothing, it asks nothing, it gives everything and is doing so always, time and time again. Time is removed from the equation, ‘not because one *in fact* experiences a picture by Noland or Olitski or a sculpture by David Smith or Caro in no time at all, but because *at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest.*’<sup>76</sup> Fried famously ends by saying that most of the experiences of our lives are the opposite of this and that ‘presentness is grace.’<sup>77</sup> And is that so wrong? Could it not be that this is one form of aesthetic success? For something to show itself completely, expecting nothing and purely (to adopt Melville’s framework) being is surely uncommon, unique and using religious terminology perhaps is not an outrageous stretch, especially when it is considered that the concept of the sublime arose out of theology? But perhaps this goes too far towards sentimentalism, as there is still matter to mine, as Pamela Lee in working through Cavell’s *The World Viewed* comes across his version of Fried’s instantaneousness, which is ‘the instance’. Lee reads Cavell’s instance as the ‘total thereness’ of art.<sup>78</sup> As has been noted above, Fried and Cavell were particularly mutually inspiring. It is not difficult to see how their texts influenced each other. The instance or instantaneousness each provide a framework for how a work of art succeeds, and what is especially interesting about this success is its reliance upon temporal disruption. The instant that time changed, where perception was renewed, through the beauty of the work of art.

In what is perhaps the most moderate response to *Art and Objecthood*, *Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory* by Stephen Melville attempts to find the bridge between painting and theatre in tableaux.<sup>79</sup> For Melville, the artist whose work most effectively practices along this seam between the two disciplines (is also the one he believes is the artist who is the most direct descendant to Antonin Artaud, Fried’s relevant text for theatre that seeks to defeat theatre) is none other than Robert Wilson.<sup>80</sup> Perhaps somewhere (or sometime) in Wilson’s tableaux is the critical point where theatre starts becoming instantaneous, where it can begin to compel conviction. When it becomes a full container. What is granted to Wilson’s work through the reading above is that the frameworks presented in Michael Fried’s *Art and*

---

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 167.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 168.

<sup>78</sup> Pamela Lee, *Chronophobia*, 59.

<sup>79</sup> Stephen W. Melville, *Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory*, 77.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 77.

*Objecthood* may be used to describe dynamics of theatre. If one may get past the terminology (such as using the word theatre to describe playing for attention and/or distancing), then theatre has as much to gain by paying attention to Fried as painting. Instantaneousness is the moment when an artwork presents itself completely to the beholder, unveils all its mysteries, and pries its own self outward, until the distinctions between content and form are meaningless, and the beholder is simply subject to the raw power of perpetual creativity.

## Chapter Two – Theatricality and Absorption

### A Process of (Re)Presentation

Using the previous chapter as a guide to the concepts presented in *Art and Objecthood* it will be shown that the divide between theatricality and absorption is artificial in theatre for two reasons. First and most simply, the medium specificity of theatre is such that it contains within its phenomena a heterogeneous collection of interdependent media; each requiring analysis singularly and together as a whole. The second argument is revealed in the complexity of theatricality itself. Within theatre studies viewpoints differ on whether theatricality is primarily a productive or receptive phenomenon. Thus the methodology for analysing theatricality and absorption involves three points of analysis; the performance as a whole, the multiplicitous aspects of that performance and the duplicitous process of the production and reception of images, signs and affect.

The relevant performance practices for analysing theatricality and absorption for this project are works from Wooster Group and Robert Wilson. For the last forty years both have created productions that place their creators at the forefront of their craft because of, among other reasons, their ability to redefine theatricality. Wilson's *Einstein on the Beach* is an emblematic moment of theatre history; it established a new sensibility for the stage that was based in visual and aural imagery not limited to words. Wooster Group is perhaps the only company that rivals Robert Wilson in creating conceptually innovative and challenging artistic practice that has redefined the way theatre is made and received; but with Wooster Group it is their quintessentially postmodern sense of theatricality that singles them out. Elements of work by Robert Wilson and Wooster Group will serve as the focus of the analysis of theatricality and absorption.

The relevant theoretical texts for examining theatricality and absorption begin with works by Hans-Thies Lehmann and Maaike Bleeker and branch out to include other academics. Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre* is important because it offers a vocabulary for work that eludes dramatic criticism, including work such as that analysed here which has 'post'-oriented sensibilities. *Visuality in the Theatre: the*

*Locus of Looking* by Maaïke Bleeker applies an optical approach to the analysis of theatre, and refers to Fried's Diderotian analysis of visual art as a way of apprehending performance in a particular chapter that serves the arguments of this dissertation. Also useful is Greg Gieskam's examination of how video fits into theatre. Josette Féral and Erika Fischer Lichte investigate theatricality in the writings of Elizabeth Burns, Michel Bernard, Joachim Fiebach and others. Analysing the theatre practice of Robert Wilson and Wooster Group through these critical frameworks will show how theatricality and absorption operate together within the production and reception of performance (and it will set the groundwork for developing how instantaneousness occurs in theatre which will make up the final chapter of this dissertation). Now elements of the theatre of Robert Wilson and Wooster Group will be examined for their ability to redefine theatricality and absorption in order to understand how they may operate together. The following six sections are organised around aspects of the discussion of theatricality and absorption, and therefore the arguments contained therein follow a winding path through the theatrical practice. What this is intended to achieve is a sense that theatricality and absorption hover around elements of work by Robert Wilson and Wooster Group, both whose work is driven by the investigation of these concepts.

### **Wooster Group and Robert Wilson: Source Text and Performativity**

Performance composition for Wooster Group is best described as collage. Textual material is brought together and formed into a whole using purely the company as the unifying element. Of their approach to what happens in their theatre, director Elizabeth LeCompte explains the inspiration coming from a book called *Envisioning Science by Visual Presentation*.<sup>81</sup> Before knowing what kind of work the company would produce, LeCompte imagined performing simple scientific experiments. Such experiments would do no more and no less than demonstrate the laws of physics.<sup>82</sup> This methodological approach to theatre making carries over into all the productions by the company. The work is concerned with presenting the processes and elements of the world in controlled circumstances. If each production is thought of as a simple experiment, then the objects that make up the variables and control are subjected to a

---

<sup>81</sup> David Savran, *Breaking the Rules: Wooster Group*, 47.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, 48.

process of transformation through their juxtaposition. In this way, David Savran writes of the textual material of Wooster Group as ‘objects’ of five orders; recordings of documentary material, previously written prosaic and dramatic texts, pre-recorded sound and video, architectural constructions from the previous work and improvised ‘action-texts’.<sup>83</sup> Savran explains that these sources are then simply put together in a process that retains their singularity through the juxtaposition to the other texts. What this compositional process produces in performance is an experience of ‘misrepresentation’ because it deconstructs the very medium specificity of theatre – theatricality and performativity.<sup>84</sup> These two terms are rarely applied in the same context through the critical battering theatricality receives and the scholarship of the past twenty years that has made performativity so fashionable. Rather than buying into what is an unnecessary terminological fracture, the two can be clearly seen to work together.

Today I am convinced that the opposition between performativity and theatricality is purely rhetorical, and that both are necessarily enmeshed within the performance. [...] Performativity is at the heart of what makes any performance unique each time it is performed; theatricality is what makes it recognisable and meaningful within a certain set of references and codes.<sup>85</sup>

Here Josette Féral creates a framework that reveals the process of performance. Maaïke Bleeker, who uses different terminology for the same process but seeks to examine another side of the coin, echoes it. For Bleeker, ‘internal focalisation’ is a process of performance that causes the audience to abandon ‘the observer’s position in the auditorium and imaginatively [project]ing oneself onstage.’<sup>86</sup> On the other hand, ‘external focalisation’ brings attention to the act of seeing the performance. In this way, internal focalisation is a by-product of performativity, and external focalisation is produced through theatricality.

In works by Wooster Group, performativity is the process by which information emerges into space and theatricality describes the systems of communication that

---

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 50.

<sup>85</sup> Josette Féral, ‘Forward’, 5.

<sup>86</sup> Maaïke Bleeker, *Visuality in the Theatre: The Locus of Looking*, 28.

allows that information to be received. The actors bring the audience into their experience through their highly skilled performances, and the texts and objects that they are dancing and speaking are offered with a peculiar clarity that dislocates the appearance of truthfulness. This clarity affords the text an autonomy that is purely theatrical; but the application of such theatricality through the process of performativity is exactly what makes works by Wooster Group absorbing. The actors confront the material with a vulnerability, an ‘idiocy’<sup>87</sup> that allows the audience to do the same. Bleeker describes how this process absorbs –

Absorption describes the context in which the seer takes the position or point of view presented to him or her, and does so without giving it a second thought. The effect achieved is in a way similar to the ‘taking up’ the position of a character represented on stage or empathising with a performer convincingly presenting him- or her-’self’. The result is a sense of directness, closeness and immediacy. We are invited, momentarily, to forget the relationship between ourselves and the other we are seeing. It is as if we experience directly what the other feels, seeing the world through his or her eyes.<sup>88</sup>

This process of absorption Bleeker describes is notably evoked in several of Robert Wilson’s works where the performance has been composed directly through accessing the images and text from a deaf-mute child or a young man with brain damage. One of Wilson’s early works, *Deafman Glance*, came from the wordless images inside the head of Raymond Andrews, a teenage boy Wilson adopted in the early 1970’s. The production is a journey through Andrews’ mind. Stefan Brecht explores how the images create affect through their sympathetic theatricality.<sup>89</sup> It presents the anxieties and longings of a young man in all their fantastic visuality. The audience is invited to see the world through Andrews’ eyes, and the production absorbs both internally and externally, as performative and theatrical. A human-size frog sat a picnic stands and jumps across the table, a mother stabs a young boy after giving him a glass of milk and a silver nude glides through the trees. Performed with a coolness that is a trademark style of Wilson’s theatre and a sign of the postdramatic, the action of these

---

<sup>87</sup> Andrew Quick, *Wooster Group Workbook*, 53. This is a note given by director Elizabeth LeCompte to actor Kate Valk.

<sup>88</sup> Maaïke Bleeker, *Visuality in the Theatre: The Locus of Looking*, 33.

<sup>89</sup> Stefan Brecht, *The Theatre of Visions: Robert Wilson*, 83.

moments becomes absorbing and generates affect because of the lack of emotion in the performers.<sup>90</sup> Thus the theatrical external focalisation, Andrews' mental experience, is the very system through which the performativity of the acts onstage produce the absorbing internal focalisation, allowing the audience to feel what Andrews' feels.

Contrast *Deafman Glance* with *A Letter For Queen Victoria*, in which Robert Wilson constructed a piece of theatre from the architectural constructions of words and sounds inside the mind of Christopher Knowles, a young brain damaged man with whom Wilson was friends. The text bears little relation to either the grammatical rules or poetic aesthetics of drama, nor does it relate to the colloquial vernacular of everyday speech. The words are arranged by Knowles in peculiarly formal arrangements that eschew logical sense. In this production, the coolness is contrasted by an 'overheating'<sup>91</sup> of screams and rapid-fire monologue that deconstruct language down to its ability to communicate as sound. Wilson built time into rehearsal for the performers to talk with Chris Knowles, to imitate him and attempt to see the world the way he did.<sup>92</sup> The radical structuring in Knowles' mind was what appealed to Wilson.<sup>93</sup> It prompted a visual-textual process of performance composition that could present the form and content of Knowles' thoughts and experiences. In a similar way to *Deafman Glance*, *A Letter to Queen Victoria* and the other productions on which Wilson collaborated with Knowles absorbs the audience into a theatrical 'textscape' through the external focalisation of allowing the audience to see through the eyes of Raymond Andrews and Christopher Knowles through performative internal focalisation on the experience and affect of these unique world views.<sup>94</sup> The most specific example of how the process of focalisation manifests in the work of Robert Wilson occurs in the prologue to *A Love Letter for Queen Victoria*, in which Christopher Knowles announces -

---

<sup>90</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 95.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 95.

<sup>92</sup> Stefan Brecht, *The Theatre of Visions: Robert Wilson*, 271.

<sup>93</sup> Laurence Shyer, *Robert Wilson and his Collaborators*, 80.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, 81. The works of Robert Wilson which involved Christopher Knowles are at least "The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin", "A Love Letter for Queen Victoria" and several "Dialogs" – performances featuring Wilson and Knowles together onstage.

The concept of 'textscape' comes from Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre*, pages 148-150.

We're doing the four acts Act One Act Two Act Three  
Act Four  
We're doing the play  
We're doing "A Love Letter For Queen Victoria"  
We're doing the four acts  
We are in the theatre  
We are in New York  
We are at the theatre in Manhattan  
in New York  
in the world  
in the world  
in the world  
in the world  
in the world.<sup>95</sup>

### **Robert Wilson and Wooster Group: Scenography, Container and Landscape**

Sequences and correspondences, nodal and condensation points of perception and the constitution of meaning communicated through them (however fragmentary it may be) in visual dramaturgy are defined by optical data. *A theatre of scenography* develops.<sup>96</sup>

Thus Hans-Thies Lehmann secures the visuality of postdramatic theatre. In productions by both Wooster Group and Robert Wilson, scenography performs as much as any other theatrical element. Scenography is no backdrop or mere set or setting. It is the plane, field and 'landscape' that hold the stage action. Robert Wilson's theatre is unmistakably visual and he is called a designer as much as he is called a director due to his method of composition. 'When designing a production, Wilson begins by organising space through the field of forces generated by the tension between vertical and horizontal, between striving and stability.'<sup>97</sup> He sketches out the piece in charcoal before setting to work in rehearsal. The work of the performers comes from image. For a production of *King Lear*, '[g]athering the actors round, he ceremoniously unrolled the four-by-twenty-four foot sheet: "This is our

---

<sup>95</sup> Laurence Shyer, *Robert Wilson and his Collaborators*, 69-70. Written by Christopher Knowles and Robert Wilson for the prologue to *A Love Letter for Queen Victoria*.

<sup>96</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 93.

<sup>97</sup> Arthur Holmberg, *Robert Wilson*, 84.

production,” he announced. The scroll – Wilson calls it a story board – contained a picture for each of the parts he had divided the play into.<sup>98</sup> What occurs in performance is what Wilson calls ‘constructions in time and space.’<sup>99</sup> Their visuality reveals an architectural approach to theatre making. Wilson came to theatre from the worlds of architecture and painting, and it is easily seen how those disciplines inform his work.<sup>100</sup>

Returning to painting as a way to inform the visuality of theatre, Maaïke Bleeker points to Michael Fried’s exploration of Denis Diderot’s theoretical framework in which a third form of absorption aside from the obscured or absent beholder is explained, an absorption into landscape, or for Fried the ‘pastoral conception’ of absorption.<sup>101</sup> In this construction of absorption the beholder is ‘truly absorbed in the work of art’ because of its ability to persuade the beholder that it presents an objective view of the world not obfuscated by the problems of subjectivity. Bleeker is interested in the ability of this framework to explicate the absorption into the ‘textual landscapes’ of postdramatic theatre, but here it may describe a more pragmatic process, in which the audience is figuratively pulled onto the stage. The landscape stage describes the space through which actors in a Wilson play slowly cross on horizontal and diagonal lines. A repeated occurrence in Wilson’s works, in *The Life and Death of Marina Abramovic* slow right to left crosses were contrasted with a performer sprinting across along the upstage wall and such length of movement implied a space of greater width than the stage itself. This movement through the landscape stage stretches the theatrical space. In that production, the visual lines of the performers inscribed the seemingly extending landscape of the stage in such a way as to pull the spectator into its space and time.

Such absorption onto the landscape of the stage recasts the spatial logic of the auditorium in such a way as to recall the idea of the container from the last chapter. In the last chapter the container referred to the relationship between objecthood and

---

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 77.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 80.

<sup>100</sup> Katharina Otto-Bernstein, *Absolute Wilson*. Also Arthur Holmberg, *Robert Wilson*, 80. ‘Architecture, the most abstract and geometric of the arts, creates space. [...] To understand the geography of Wilsonland, one must begin where he begins, with the articulation of space.’

<sup>101</sup> Maaïke Bleeker, *Visuality in the Theatre*, 36.

shape. It described a situation of the artwork in which it becomes a container that is shape or is alternatively filled with shape. A container may be empty or full, but the theatricality of literalism fore-grounded the container itself and dramatised its apparent emptiness. If the landscape of the stage is a container, its contents, rather than its own outward shape, are readily visual. But such easy characterisation of the visual situation of spectatorship is confronted by the scenography of Wooster Group. Their platform stage with its metal bars and tracks constructs another container within the space of the performance. This set is the starting point for their new works, and its construction is a material metaphor of the way Wooster Group composes performances from the musical, televisual and textual media that is 'in the room'.

'Each rehearsal period begins with the almost ritualistic act of laying out the set design of the previous work and re-orientating it in some kind of way. [...] In this sense, each new Wooster Group set is as a kind of palimpsest, where the clean straight lines of metal and light are, in fact, built on top of the scar tissue of all the previous works.'<sup>102</sup>

This container of their set, which is reused time and time again, is crucial to illuminating their commitment to treating the theatre as a space to confront. Andrew Quick writes of Wooster Group's ethos as a system of confrontation, in which biographical and dramatic texts, theatrical forms and filmic ready-mades are 'housed' and performed outside representational and hermeneutic systems of production and reception.<sup>103</sup> For Wooster Group, confrontation is a route to absorption. The space of their productions engrosses the spectator's attention through producing a 'visual dramaturgy'<sup>104</sup> that is able to contain the layered sources of their works. Thus the container is full of media and performance, absorbing in its fullness.

### **Robert Wilson: Tableau and Painting**

In *Einstein on the Beach*, a four and a half hour work without intermission first performed at the Theatre Festival in Avignon in nineteen seventy-six, images emerge onstage at a 'glacial pace'.<sup>105</sup> It is 'constructed around three visual motifs: the train,

---

<sup>102</sup> Andrew Quick, *Wooster Group Workbook*, 269.

<sup>103</sup> Andrew Quick, *Wooster Group Workbook*, 270-272.

<sup>22</sup>Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 93. 'Visual dramaturgy here does not mean an exclusively visually organised dramaturgy but rather one that is not subordinated to the text and can therefore freely develop its own logic.'

<sup>105</sup> Mark Obenhaus, *Einstein on the Beach: The Changing Image of Opera*.

the trial, the spaceship.’<sup>106</sup> These three images visualise the iconic repetitive (sonic) minimalism of Philip Glass’ score and provide the spatial arrangements for the movement and dance of the piece. Rather than summarising the work, as three critics have felt the need to,<sup>107</sup> this dissertation will examine several tableaux from the production, measuring the ability of this theatre production to, as Stephen W. Melville writes, ‘count for painting-in a way that it cannot for itself.’<sup>108</sup> Melville attributes this possibility to tableaux with its roots in the writing of Denis Diderot, returned to by Michael Fried. Maaïke Bleeker examines this concept as both Fried and Diderot seeking ‘fully realised *tableau*’ but sees a distinction between the ‘obscured’ beholder relationship in Diderot and the ‘absent’ beholder in Fried.<sup>109</sup> It need be made clear that Fried’s absent beholder is phenomenological; Diderot describes the matter of fact situation of the theatre. In this way both are possible simultaneously as qualities of absorption.

The first tableau consists of a crane and a two dimensional, life-size train crossing the stage as performers add themselves to the picture. First a dancer moves along a diagonal, another enters reading a newspaper, three make a triangle out of string, a painting drops depicting another train in a snowy landscape and the image is completed. Although the dancer moves quickly, her repetitive movements suspend the flow of time. Repetition in the works of Robert Wilson creates this effect by shattering the dramatic condition of ‘wondering what is going to happen next’. Established repetition clues the audience into the fact that the image they see contains a strictly choreographed motion through space without variation. This lack of variation prompts a settling of perception, in which the stage tableau becomes able to *contain motion*. Performed repetitive motion in this way is able to condense duration into an instantaneous unity in the way repeated brushstrokes on a canvas make the shape of a given line more striking in action painting.

---

<sup>106</sup> Arthur Holmberg, *Directors in Perspective: The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, 12.

<sup>107</sup> See Maria Shevtsova, *Robert Wilson* (92-112); Stefan Brecht, *The Theatre of Visions: Robert Wilson* (316-359) and Arthur Holmberg, *Directors in Perspective: Robert Wilson* (9-18).

<sup>108</sup> Stephen W. Melville, *Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory*, 77.

<sup>109</sup> Maaïke Bleeker, *Visuality in the Theatre: The Locus of Looking*, 34-35. This obscuring or absencing of the beholder is what creates absorption.

In Act III, a second tableau of the trial begins the same way as the first; two judges, stenographers typing on invisible typewriters, old Einstein with a violin and a large white bed centre stage illuminated by two white globes. In this section a female Einstein speaks a text written by Christopher Knowles (a long-time collaborator with Wilson whose contribution is explained in more detail below) beginning with the words ‘I feel the earth move’.<sup>110</sup> The repetition achieved through movement in the train tableau now emerges from the stenographers who sing ‘1 2 3 4’ over and over throughout the scene.<sup>111</sup> With very little movement, this tableau ‘appears to decentre or deconstruct the play of mere presence or pure presentness.’<sup>112</sup> This moment achieves a painting-like presentness through its alarmingly formal stillness; only the monologue and nearly imperceptible changes in light develop through time. The image is fully there; complete.

Towards the end of *Einstein on the Beach*, a three-story panel of lights makes up the control room of a spaceship. Wilson himself performs a dance with two torches that reaches a frenzy of movement paralleled by Glass’ music. Again the numbers ‘1 2 3 4’ are sung and the lights of the control room visualise each digit. The grandeur of the light panel has the effect of creating a stage image that is two dimensional, so that even the dance by Wilson that moves along a diagonal appears with a remarkable flatness. As the scene reaches completion, an explosion sends the stage into darkness, and the two female ‘Einsteins’ crawl from the rubble of the destroyed ship. The space has already been established as two-dimensional, and the flatness of the stage picture containing the dancers’ movements have ‘unequivocally identified the tableau as the meeting ground of painting and theatre.’<sup>113</sup> Writing of Wilson’s tableaux, Hans-Thies Lehmann explains that –

In painting the frame is part of the tableau. [...] Framing effects are produced, for example, by special lighting surrounding the bodies, by geometrical fields of light defining their places on the floor, by the *sculptural precision* of the gestures and the heightened

---

<sup>110</sup> Arthur Holmberg, *Directors in Perspective: The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, 16.

<sup>111</sup> Mark Obenhaus, *Einstein on the Beach: The Changing Image of Opera*.

<sup>112</sup> Stephen W. Melville, *Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory*, 78.

<sup>113</sup> Craig Owens, *Robert Wilson: Tableaux*, 115. Accessed in Stephen W. Melville, *Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory*, 74.

concentration of the actors that have a ‘ceremonial’ and thus again framing effect.<sup>114</sup>

Stephen W. Melville notes that the tableau is the ‘seam along which modern theatre and painting have been historically bound to one another.’<sup>115</sup> While his article offers up a useful investigation of *Art and Objecthood*, Melville does not delve deep enough into theatricality and absorption to make further use of his article necessary (his project rather concerns the idea of the allegory as a postmodern conceptual sensibility). The theatre that manifests the flatness and presentness of painting has the potential to absorb the beholder into a complete and fully realised image. Robert Wilson’s theatre, as will be shown later through his use of light, is inescapably visual, to the point of becoming two-dimensional. The title of Stefan Brecht’s book on the director is *The Theatre of Visions: Robert Wilson*. More convincing is the fact that reproductions of Robert Wilson’s work come in primarily two forms, images of the sketches he uses to create the productions and wide-angle photographs of the productions themselves.<sup>116</sup> In the thirty-four-page program for the most recent of Wilson’s works, *The Life and Death of Marina Abramovic*, twelve full pages are devoted to photographs of the work. The first full page of text in the program is titled ‘Listen to the Pictures’ and briefly explains the aesthetic of Wilson’s work. It depicts him as ‘primarily a painter’ and quotes the director himself who says of his work ‘Go as you would to a museum, as you would look at a painting,’ Wilson says, ‘you just enjoy the scenery, the architectural arrangements, the music, the feelings they all evoke. Listen to the pictures.’<sup>117</sup>

### **Wilson: Light and Production/Reception**

Twenty minutes before the beginning of *The Life and Death of Marina Abramovic*, when the house opens – three Doberman Pinschers roam the stage, sniffing large bones, while three masked bodies lay motionless atop coffins. A dim reddish light pervades, but three spotlights cause the whiteness of the masks to appear to illuminate their own brilliance. *The Life and Death of Marina Abramovic* immediately applies

---

<sup>114</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 151.

<sup>115</sup> Stephen W. Melville, *Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory*, 77.

<sup>116</sup> The idea of the primacy of photographic documentation of Wilson’s work is indebted to the advisor of this dissertation, Dr. Andrew Filmer.

<sup>117</sup> John O’Mahony, *Listen to the Pictures* in the program for Manchester International Festival production of *The Life and Death of Marina Abramovic* July 2011.

light as its operating principle. ‘In creating stage images, the crucial element in Wilson’s alchemy of the eye is light. [...] Light gives Wilson’s mages their distinctive character.’<sup>118</sup> The light seeming to come from the masks is obviously an illusion though, the masks are on the faces of bodies and the light is clearly coming from above. It is the production of light from the grid behind the proscenium and reflection from the masks that causes the brightness. It is also the bodily reception of the spectator who perceives the luminosity of the masks and imagines the light being generated from within the fullness of their shape. Such use of Fried’s language here is deliberate; it is the light in the theatre of Robert Wilson that *absorbs* the spectator more than any other theatrical element (perhaps excepting his masterful play with time). The light is produced onstage and physically received through the eyes; it is firstly a bodily absorption (the term is being used here to further unpack the word, but what is being described here is a purely physiological process). ‘Through light Wilson enables the eye to perceive the formal elements of composition as a harmonious whole.’<sup>119</sup> Attaining such harmony involves a studied technique, as the lighting sequence in a production by Robert Wilson is uniquely sophisticated. A production lasting ninety minutes may have over four hundred distinct lighting cues.<sup>120</sup> These sequences become affective and able to generate meanings through the clarity and specificity of their scope. The lights in a Wilson production are never clumsy, and a rear projection screen glowing with colour and bright white light commonly frames the action from behind. ‘He often uses this wall of light upstage to backlight actors or objects and emphasise the silhouette (line and primary shape reign supreme in Wilson’s aesthetic).’<sup>121</sup> It is this strict sense of order that determines the visuality of his productions.

The rear projection screen for *The Life and Death of Marina Abramovic* was a unifying element of the performance. It was the source of all the stories and images that were produced onstage. Throughout the performance it became purple, red, blue or yellow, and it often had a horizontal stripe of white either at the bottom or near head-height of the performers. Its wholeness as an image had a strange effect on the

---

<sup>118</sup> Arthur Holmberg, *Directors in Perspective: The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, 121.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

four-dimensional performance that absorbed the scenography and the action of the stage into its flatness. Doing so achieved an autonomy for the performance and this effect produced a particular form of ‘immersion’ (similar to absorption but again without Fried’s conception of absorption which includes not only compelling conviction but also standing up to history) for the spectator. This was a case of dual immersion amounting to the back wall taking in the performance and both thereby immersing the spectator. This kind of absorption, immersion, recalls the effect of the tableau explored above (both light and tableau make such an effect possible; recalling Melville’s ‘seam’ along which painting and theatre overlap) and sets a dynamic for spectatorship that has pertinent implications on theatricality. If the beauty of the work is potentially absorptive, the active spectator begins to move figuratively forward. The artwork’s ability to absorb is directly related to the willingness of the spectator to enter into it. In successful theatre this moving forward is simultaneous to being pulled in by the work. This back and forth relationship questions the terms of spectatorship.

It is the complex situation of production and reception that marks a crucial aspect of theatricality. While debate around its definition provides the potential for innovation, one aspect remains central to most all understandings of theatricality; that it is concerned with an exchange between a work of art and a beholder (in theatre this could be recast as between performing bodies and watching/listening bodies). In this vein theatricality is recurrently referred to as involved in the processes of production and/or reception.<sup>122</sup> In each of their introductions to theatricality both Josette Féral and Erika Fischer-Lichte draw on Joachim Fiebach’s response to Elizabeth Burn’s book *Theatricality* in which –

Fiebach concludes that there can be no single criterion for a general definition of theatricality beyond the fact that that it is a process of production whose product is ‘consumed’ and which vanishes within the process of being produced.<sup>123</sup>

---

<sup>122</sup> Josette Féral, “Forward”, 6.

<sup>123</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte, “Introduction: Theatricality: A Key Concept in Theatre and Cultural Studies”, 3.

This provocative definition raises issues of economy and power within the theatrical situation and questions theatricality's ability to apply to painting, but most importantly it activates the spectator. Even if Fiebach is incorrect as to his characterisation of the mode of reception involved with theatricality, the important point he makes is that beholding and spectating are actions that may be solely *generative* and have effects upon the work of art. Erika Fischer-Lichte involves this active spectatorship into a theory that depicts performance as a situation of transformational communication that she calls the 'autopoietic feedback loop'.<sup>124</sup> The actions of the audience provide stimulus to the performers at the same time as the performance materialises. Theatricality and absorption in this light must be understood as a cooperative process.

### **Wooster Group: Blackface and Distance**

Moving away from Robert Wilson, now focusing on Wooster Group, a white actor in blackface is dancing and swishing an oversize bottle of booze. He speaks in the affected vocalisations typical of American minstrel performance, with its 'th' as 'd' and words spelled ending in 'er' sounding like they end in 'uh'. It is abrasive, uncomfortable and offensive while also being purely a form that Wooster Group happened to be interested in at the moment. Director Elizabeth LeCompte explains that the blackface appealed as a literal boundary between performer and audience as a way to create 'distance'<sup>125</sup>. The company was of aware of its potential to offend, but underestimated its eventual impact that included a reduction of government funding.<sup>126</sup> Often Wooster Group explores a juxtaposition of text from one cultural location and a theatre language or movement vocabulary that has no apparent connection to the text, even for the artists themselves.<sup>127</sup> The text that co-existed with the blackface performance in *Route 1&9* was Thornton Wilder's modern canonical American play *Our Town*. Making decisions such as these, Wooster Group are effectively becoming a machine of cultural transformation, appropriating elements of ethnic aesthetics from all over the world and reproducing them as a citational and yet original work.

---

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, *The Transformational Power of Performance*, 38-39.

<sup>125</sup> David Savran, *Breaking the Rules: Wooster Group*, 26-27

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>127</sup> Elizabeth LeCompte, Interview in *Twentieth Century Performance Reader*, 273.

Blackface elicits immediate affect and response in American spectators, where the contemporary entertainment industry can find several archetypes in the Uncle Tom shows and minstrel troupes so popular throughout the country in the 19th century and beyond. Here in the UK, where this dissertation is being produced, blackface has had a different history and will produce very different reactions in the audience. In Germany it was not the blackface but the television monitors that caused the audience to react violently to *Route 1&9*.<sup>128</sup> It would not be impossible to make a case against Wooster Group themselves having become cultural consumers without understanding and respect for history of oppression. Such a reading ignores the artwork itself though and such sociological analysis is not the concern of this dissertation. Rather, these specific cultural references call attention to how Wooster Group engages with theatrical forms, such as blackface, which results in producing successful instances and relationships of theatricality and absorption. These instances of theatricality and absorption run alongside the potential for offence inherent in such a blatantly controversial artistic choice. This is to say that as blackface contains within it the potential to offend or not depending on the cultural location of the audience, its status and emergence of theatricality and absorption equally depend upon the audience, who will be located in a particular demographic, which is a point originally illustrated by Elizabeth Burns in her 1970 book *Theatricality*, which is returned to by Josette Féral in her writing on theatricality and Maaïke Bleeker when she examines how absorption emerges in theatre.<sup>129</sup>

If Wooster Group had hoped to create distance through the use of blackface it needs to be determined whether theatricality is contingent on distance. If that is so, distance may produce theatricality and be produced by theatricality; or if not then distance may function to absorb the audience.<sup>130</sup> It allows them to apprehend the artwork singularly

---

<sup>128</sup> David Savran, *Breaking the Rules: Wooster Group*, 28.

<sup>129</sup> Maaïke Bleeker, *Visuality in the Theatre: The Locus of Looking*, 22 and 35.

<sup>130</sup> The word 'audience' is used in this section although the theatre being discussed is not necessarily based on aural experience. It is particularly apt though to use that word when writing about Wooster Group as Elizabeth LeCompte has explained that rather than composing visually, stage images often come into her head from seemingly nowhere, and with eyes closed she will compose and rehearse performances using hearing as the primary sense of reception. From Elizabeth LeCompte in 'The Southbank Documentary of Wooster Group'.

and immediately without being inveigled into a critical dialogue, which determines how theatrical or absorbing the blackface used by Wooster Group in such productions as *Route 1&9*, *The Hairy Ape* and *Emperor Jones*. Josette Féral points to Michel Bernard's concept of theatricality as the most successful because it defines theatricality as 'the result of a series of cleavages [...] aimed at making a disjunction in systems of signification.'<sup>131</sup> Now as distance is the marker figuring within theatricality such spatial terms will be appropriate. It would seem also that the emergence of distance between beholder and artwork is for Fried a factor to such works becoming theatrical. Logically then, absorption as an opposite would be the impossibility of distance between beholder and artwork, even if the artwork is spatially as grand as a landscape. Taking up this framework, if the black face used by Wooster Group is a device that seeks to distance the audience, then that moment is theatrical. Theatricality has emerged through producing distance – the blackface makeup acts as a spatial fog between the audience and the true face of the actor.

Wooster Group's blackface as a theatrical device may distance the spectator to a place within which she has lost sight of the human subject. The actor onstage is theatricalised to such a degree that she is no longer seen as an actor, as a performer; what the spectator perceives is the image, movement, affect and sound of blackface. Wooster Group actor Kate Valk is unseen beneath her makeup. The effect such distance from the actor but toward the form produces is one that may begin to have a similar effect upon the audience as that of a painterly absorption of the beholder. The theatrical object of blackfaced Kate Valk, whom fifteen minutes into *The Hairy Ape* is no longer recognisable as herself, has the effect of the spectator losing a critical distance from which to view the work. Perhaps such a remove of critical distance, into a place more dominated by feeling is still best characterised in Fried's framework of the theatrical. It brings with it the effect of muting criticality. On the other hand, though, presentness brings with it the immediate criticality that with the case of blackface reveals the beauty of form and codification that specific to minstrelsy, and

---

It should also be explained that in this dissertation the words audience, spectator, beholder and seer may be used interchangeably but specific to the context as with the word 'audience' above. Fried used 'beholder', Bleeker adopts the term 'seer' and others vary accordingly to the context in which the name for the bodies engaged in receiving artworks is most appropriate, as will be done here.

<sup>131</sup> Josette Féral, 'Forward', 10.

thus the immediacy of the blackface is present to the beholder, and can absorb her in its theatricality.

Such constructions may be seen as convolutions, but a clarification may help to further elucidate the problem. That theatricality may immediately become absorbing is a reality of the situation of spectatorship. With a durational art form, the sensibilities that dominate within the work evolve throughout our viewing it. What was at the outset absorbing may by the middle become theatrical, and by the end become fully instantaneous. This problematizes the binary of theatricality vs. absorption in its very absoluteness. The adaptability of theatricality is directly related to temporality, because artworks are ‘in fact’<sup>132</sup> beheld in duration. Depending on which medium the artwork happens to be (whilst acknowledging the interdisciplinarity deeply entrenched in contemporary practice) it may also emerge and become more or less absorbing throughout its own duration. So theatricality and absorption are in a constant process of construction and demolition. This is not to say that at any one moment the construction of theatricality is no less valid than its previous absorption. The spectator has within his mind the tools to realise the effect of the artwork’s communicative apparatus, and the framework suggested here is a model on which the summation of theatricality is measured from a critical distance that relies upon autonomy to announce a position of spectatorship as able to reveal the levels of theatricality and absorption within a given work of art. With the blackface used by Wooster Group, what first may be theatrical because of its offensiveness, may later take on a formality that has an immediately perceivable beauty; then become absorbing by removing any distance between the spectator and the form of blackface. To clarify, this is to say that the relationship between the spectator and the actor remains theatrical, whereas the relationship between the spectator and the blackface is one of absorption.

### **Wooster Group: Video and Essence**

The use of live and recorded video in productions by Wooster Group is as integral to their brand of theatre as is their company of actors who have worked full time since

---

<sup>132</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 167.

the late 1970's; since *Route 1&9* every single production has employed video.<sup>133</sup> In *Staging the Screen: the Use of Film and Video in Theatre*, Greg Gieskam surveys the practices that have employed such media onstage and devotes a chapter to Wooster Group. Through tracing the history of this technology, he finds many artists and companies throughout the early twentieth century who explored video and confutes the popular opinion that Wooster Group are the originators of theatre's use of video, while still acknowledging that they have made a particularly important contribution; the use of live video.<sup>134</sup> 'Live' being the important difference, and the crucial aspect that relates to why the use of video in the theatre practice of Wooster Group has important implications on theatricality and absorption in their works.

In *Postdramatic Theatre*, Hans-Thies Lehmann points to the company's use of video as a way to illuminate the 'production'<sup>135</sup> of theatre, which creates a 'co-presence' of the theatrical and fictive elements of performance and the performers themselves in such a way as to allude to the very theatricality that is part and parcel of the essence of theatre itself.<sup>136</sup> If it seems strange that Lehmann sees in Wooster Group a link between the essence of theatre through the use of media and technology thought traditionally separate from the essence of theatre, one need only trace the historiography of theatre machinery to see that technological developments within theatre are a continuous part its development. Film and video are not unlike painted scenery. Both function in a variety of ways and have been implemented using a plethora of methodologies that perform alongside the other elements of theatre. In works by Wooster Group, video adds another level of representation onto the collage of elements that make up their productions. It does not dominate but is also not subordinated by other aspects. This 'parataxis' of theatrical means is one of the most important and recognisable traits of postdramatic theatre.<sup>137</sup>

If in postdramatic theatre the elements of performance become no longer reliant upon a literary text to dominate representation, the essence of theatre is foregrounded as a non-literary event. For Wooster Group, the use of video does not indicate a hidden

---

<sup>133</sup> Greg Gieskam, *Staging the Screen*, 80.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid*, 95.

<sup>135</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 169.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*, 168.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid*, 86.

desire in LeCompte to direct television. The use of televisions onstage in her productions is one of many constituents of the company's aesthetic (and therefore perhaps have become a part of theatricality as the essence of theatre). The essence of the productions by Wooster Group is not easily definable, and merits volumes of research that this dissertation is unable to concern itself with. What is of importance to the study of theatricality and absorption is the way in which Wooster Group's non-hierarchical performance methodology, typical of the postdramatic, may also lead to a characterisation of the essence of their theatre practice – theatricality. Seeing their work this way identifies the value of the contributions Wooster Group has made to the history of theatre practice. It also responds to the now out of date but still relevant modernist interest in revealing essences of artistic disciplines; a critical practice crucial to Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. Identifying the essence of painting secured its autonomy as an art form and gave the critic clear boundaries from within which to respond to artworks. Doing so created frameworks for what was an immediately successful work of art; one that absorbs the beholder. Such immediate absorption relied upon the critic to historicise the artwork instantaneously; a critical act made impossible if the artwork has no identifiable essence. In their study of the relationship between theatricality and modernity, Anne-Britt Gran and Diane Oatley rightly reveal that,

What is strange is that a development of theatricality as the essence of theatre would satisfy Fried's own perception of modernism, and he could leave the theatrical theatre with great peace of mind, because this theatricality would belong solely to the theatre.<sup>138</sup>

It is thusly evident that the essence of works by Wooster Group is their own theatricality. Theatricality here begins to take on a meaning not only of being aware of being seen, but more so the sensibility in Wooster Group that seeks the purest manifestation of form. But also this theatricality contains a temporal requirement that is duration. Wooster Group could not make works out of time. Their productions may simultaneously be functioning within multiple durations (as a result of their parataxis of theatrical means) but all aspects of the theatre are functioning, as in they materialise and remain transformative, as opposed to a homogenous emergence (as in

---

<sup>138</sup> Anne-Britt Gran and Diane Oatley, 'The Fall of Theatricality in the Age of Modernity', 257.

painting). Here durationality and theatricality are intertwined and together provide the apparatus that enables their works to absorb. To adopt Fried's constructions, absorptive moments of instantaneousness emerge 'not because one in fact experiences a'<sup>139</sup> play by Wooster Group as instantaneous, but because the theatrical means make it appear as such. In "House/Lights" a moment occurs in which Faust/Elaine (played by Kate Valk) does a handstand, dress open at her bra, with legs spread out in a 'V' with her ankles held by Dog/Johnny (who is performed by Ari Fliakos) and Boy/Nick (who is Roy Faudree). Mephistopheles/Olga (played by Suzzy Roche) stands behind holding Valk's legs. With a dumbfounded expression, her face is seen just above Valk's pelvis, while above and behind them the very same image of Roche's face through Valk's legs is seen live on a television. What has previously been seen on the monitors has been footage from John Moiwra's *Olga's House of Shame*, but now this live feed backgrounds the immediate performance, and by automatising (or systematising) the performance it allows the construction of the image to be released from the beholder's focus. The monitor presenting Roche's expression framed by Valk's thighs is self-actualising in that it has meaning on its own; but its recursion with the performed action instantaneously solidifies the theatricality of the gesture, absorbing the spectator in the beauty of theatre.

---

<sup>139</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 167

## Chapter Three – Instantaneousness and Endlessness

### Time in Time

In the third chapter of this dissertation the concepts of instantaneousness and endlessness will be investigated as theatricality and absorption were in the previous chapter. If it is now possible to think of theatricality and absorption as poles between which a work of art moves between, then not far from that movement is a similar spectrum that measures the temporalities emergent in an art work. This dissertation will take what was described in *Art and Objecthood* as two opposing concepts and reveal the way artworks manifest both. This task is of interest because it delves into a territory that most criticism tends to marginalize: how an artwork has (within its structure, affective potentialities and meaning generation) the capability to construct multiplicitous temporalities. The temporalities that will be focused on in this project are endlessness and instantaneousness, as they are aptly described in the work of Michael Fried and these terms will emerge as frameworks that can be explored both through phenomenology and ontology.

Having established precise definitions of the terms within the context of *Art and Objecthood*, this chapter will move on to discuss artworks that have a particular relevance to time, namely the performances of Chris Burden and Tehching Hsieh. Chris Burden is an American artist who in the nineteen seventies made works that tested the abilities of his body, a trajectory which led him to create ‘Shoot’, a performance that took less than a second to perform. This apparently simple work involves the performer, Burden, being shot in the arm at close range. On the other side of the temporal field is the Taiwanese-American artist Tehching Hsieh who between nineteen seventy-nine and nineteen eighty-six completed a series of performances all entitled ‘One Year Performance’. As the title suggests, Hsieh performed an action over the duration of a year, for example, staying outside or living in a cell. In the work of both artists, such remarkable feats of dedication are of interest especially to this dissertation not only because they are examples of very short and very long performances, but also, and perhaps more to the point, each is revealed fully in the utterance of the work. A performance in which the artist is shot in the arm; a performance consisting of an artist punching a time card and having his photo

taken every hour of the day for an entire year- both instantly make themselves available to criticality.

In order to analyse these performances this chapter will build upon the investigation of *Art and Objecthood* and the exploration of theatricality and absorption. This chapter seeks to investigate the interdependencies of these terms and frameworks in order to understand instantaneousness and endlessness in performance. To do so, it will mostly draw upon the critical works previously mentioned but will also analyse works that respond to those sources and deal with time specifically. Both Henry M. Sayre and Jeoraldean McClain have written works that respond to *Art and Objecthood*. In *The Object of Performance*, Sayre addresses Fried's frameworks as they relate to performance. McClain's article *Time in the Visual Arts: Lessing and Modern Criticism* explores how artworks construct temporalities.

### **'Shoot'**

On the left side of the frame Christopher Burden stands with his arms strangely held away from his body. On the right, fifteen feet away from Burden is a friend of his, holding a rifle aimed at Burden. Seconds later the friend fires a bullet into Burden's left arm. He moves quickly toward the camera and checks the wound. He is ok. The blurry video documentation of Christopher Burden's 1971 performance 'Shoot' ends.<sup>140</sup> The performance happens in seconds.

Three years earlier Burden was making minimalist sculpture while pursuing his undergraduate studies at California's Pomona College.<sup>141</sup> His sculptures were large tunnels made of plastic or fabric sheeting stretched over metal frames, some longer than two hundred feet and eight feet tall.<sup>142</sup> Although they were only intended as a sculpture to be looked at, these works created what was at the time a relatively unexpected situation; the people who came to see them entered the interior of the sculpture. The artworks reacted to the introduction of human presence, and Burden joined in. He found that if he ran from one end to the other, the fabric would billow out in front of him and then collapse behind. The sculpture was activated by human

---

<sup>140</sup> Chris Burden, 'Shoot', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26R9KFdt5aY> 01/08/2011

<sup>141</sup> Robert Horvitz, *Chris Burden*, 5.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

presence, and Burden became interested in what his presence might be able to do in relation to his work.<sup>143</sup> Burden began making sculpture and apparatuses he could interact with, and the objects became smaller and smaller in scale until he was left with only his own body.

Throughout this three year evolution is a unifying principle that can be found within all of Christopher Burden's art: a basis of single and simple premise.<sup>144</sup> The premise builds upon the previous piece through refining the manifestation of a similar idea, or sentiment behind the work. Many artists' careers can be read in this way. From the beginning a problem or question instigates an enquiry that produces practice. This practice evolves along a trajectory that may produce wildly differing manifestations while still reflecting the original intention. For Burden, this driving idea revolves around questions of firstly the experience of being alive but also amorality, complicity, endurance and violence. Through these thematic consistencies, each of his performances ties in with one another and is made more meaningful through their alliance with the other works. Burden's artwork remains important not necessarily because he crawled through fifty feet of broken glass or joined two live wires into his chest, but because these works all evidence an artist impelled to materialise the experience of life lived through artworks that are produced from this kernel of an idea.<sup>145</sup>

The central premise of Christopher Burden's work reveals itself through three different types of performance.<sup>146</sup> The long works usually consist of Burden enduring an experience for a prolonged and fixed duration, such as 'White Light/White Heat' in which he lay fasting on a shelf above the eye-line of those who attended the gallery for three weeks. These works of lengthy duration expose Burden's body to extreme situations and like his early sculptures activate the audience into a role in which their complicity to witness the act becomes an element of the artwork itself. The next kind of work is an image-based situation in which Burden positions himself within an architecture that creates meaning. A well known work of this type is 'Transfixed',

---

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>145</sup> The artworks mentioned are Burden's 'Through the Night Softly' and 'Doorway to Heaven', respectively.

<sup>146</sup> Robert Horvitz, *Chris Burden*, 10.

where Burden's hands are nailed to the top of a Volkswagen Beetle, the car rolled out onto the street, revved, and pushed back into a garage. These are not long works; their relationship to time has more to do with how they respond to the cultural context in which they emerge. In 'Transfixed' Burden's attachment to the iconic consumer object will outlive himself. As Jesus died on the cross, faithfully and bodily held by the image of God, so will Christopher Burden die his own death carried by consumerism. The time it takes to die is the suggested duration of 'Transfixed' although it only lasts several minutes. Robert Horvitz suggests that the significance of these performances is their strength as '*tableaux vivants*'<sup>147</sup>. The reading of performance as tableaux recalls its capability to be the seam along which painting and theatre lie and therefore the place where instantaneousness becomes possible. So while the performance lasts several minutes, it evokes the duration of death by crucifixion and does so in an instant. What this reveals then about temporality is that tableaux, one way of structuring performance, theatre and painting, brings about or produces instantaneousness by presenting a 'timelessness' (not in the usual sense of the word but in the matter of fact meaning, in which the passage of time is purely not represented in the imagery).

The third mode of performance Christopher Burden creates can be defined by brief actions usually of a violent nature. 'Shoot' is emblematic of this third mode. In a serious situation Burden subjects his body to a mortal force. Because of their violent nature such performances can only happen in an instant. The moment of performance is a crystallisation of the premise upon which the work is based. Immediately the action happens and is over but importantly the idea and the effects of the action remain. The bullet wound yields a permanent scar. The action of that instant is irreversible. While this remnant remains, it would be impossible for 'Shoot' to happen over and over again in practical terms. Significantly though in the memories of those who witnessed it (and even in those who have only heard of it), the performance is complete when the gun is fired. While the wound will heal, the performance will never change. Through its simplicity, in memory the performance is continually serving its function as an artwork. It simultaneously reveals the fragility and resilience of life through its danger. For the spectator it creates no

---

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, 10.

distance between the act, the intention and the meaning. Immediately and unforgettably ‘Shoot’ shows the spectator its message and that message is fully formed in the sound of the gunshot. In this way ‘Shoot’ is instantaneous.

Now that this work is being described from the point of view of a spectator who has only seen documentation of the event, the concept of distance as it relates to theatricality becomes an important element of discussing the work. ‘Shoot’ on video is mediated by not only the medium by which the performance is viewed, creating a conceptual distance between event and spectator, but also an ever increasing temporal distance that exists between the initial performance and contemporaneity. This is a similar but different kind of distance than what Michael Fried was writing about in *Art and Objecthood*, where the artwork distances itself from the beholder through its scale and thus creates a theatrical relationship. It is also related yet distinct from the distance that the theatricality of Wooster Group’s use of blackface creates between the spectator and the production, containing both actor and theatrical (as in medium) device. The kind of distance that is created in the documentation of Burden’s ‘Shoot’ recalls the spatial separation produced through scale (from Fried) and the lack of ability to empathise (in Wooster Group’s blackface) but it differs in that the distance is produced because the initial artwork is transformed into a different medium.<sup>148</sup> What this distance does, simultaneously, is imply that an event from in the past is being viewed (thus it is distanced away from where the spectator is now) and yet this is the very distance that allows the work to be viewed at all. This is all to say that the distance created by documenting a performance cuts short the potential distance that may have been created had the performance been not documented at all.<sup>149</sup> What Burden has done to make this distance even more opaque is to use methods of documentation that do not fully recreate the event. For example, the video of “Shoot” is grainy and unclear.<sup>150</sup> So the document is referential which reminds the spectator that Burden’s performance is primarily that, a performance. It is not meant to be seen

---

<sup>148</sup> Investigating the importance of documentation in performance is outside the realm of this dissertation. It is brought up because documentation is a practical necessity for many artists’ careers and because most people will inevitably encounter performance through its documentation. All the artworks under discussion in this dissertation were viewed as such, second-hand, except ‘The Life and Death of Marina Abramovic’.

<sup>149</sup> This idea arises not only from the work of Christopher Burden but also from *The Object of Performance* by Henry M. Sayre which will be returned to in depth later on in this chapter.

<sup>150</sup> Robert Horvitz, *Chris Burden*, 14.

on video; and it must be. To see such documentation of an incredibly brief and violent performance is to be distanced from its initial event in such a way as to allow it the potential to repeat continuously, forming yet another aspect of instantaneousness, while compounding the unity of such a piece into a readable whole.

In a similar vein, Robert Horvitz measures the success of Christopher Burden's performances by their ability to form a 'Gestalt' with 'clarity, intensity and strength'.<sup>151</sup> In two ways this arises as yet another quality in a relationship with distance; placing the spectator at a temporal remove allows for a more focused sense of criticality (the trade off is a diminished sense of affect) and in Burden's work, the simple premise and obvious action is able to produce a multiplicity of response from the beholder. So from this distanced remove, 'Shoot', for example, is one piece fully formed and unified, greater than the sum of its parts- the very meaning of Gestalt. What was going on outside the gallery that day, or that evening (it is impossible to tell) does not enter into the meaning of the work. Rather than contextualising it, the distance isolates the work from its historical and cultural context. So the Gestalt contains within it all these factors, and together their unity and power dictates the success of the work. It all comes together immediately and instantaneously, and the Gestalt serves to make the work both meaningful and successful, all the while keeping it from becoming merely topical satire. This distanced Gestalt also provides 'Shoot' the power of being able to mean more than it may have meant in its original performance. Michael Fried's concept of instantaneousness involves the work of art always being new in each moment, and if distance and strength of Gestalt allows the artwork to mean more (or less) through the years of history, then both the documentation, and as a result, the performance emerge repeatedly successful as instantaneous works of art.

Along with unity of Gestalt, instantaneousness emerges in Burden's performance also through a simple process of creating temporal constructions within the structure of the artwork. Horvitz posits that perhaps as a result of his background in sculpture, Burden's work emits a sense of time that is itself *made* as an underlying but integral

---

<sup>151</sup> Ibid, 15.

element of the performance.<sup>152</sup> The time of sculpture is less controlled than the time of performance, with a beginning and an ending. Rather, the time of sculpture is composed of the structurality of the artwork itself, as an expression of form and content. Time is only dependent upon the conditions of the artwork rather than being determined by the beginning and end. In an interview, Burden himself explains that ‘the pieces were about time, a way of marking time.’<sup>153</sup> Time in performance may emerge as a result of incidental or purposeful artistic choices, making possible a kind of *mise-en-temps*, or a *mise-en-scene*-like construction of time. In ‘Shoot’ the performance takes the time of the bullet. This infinitesimal duration is a dominant element and a crucial factor in the piece’s ability to be successful. The near lack of time it takes for a bullet to be fired into a Burden’s body is the same for any bullet into any body. To perform this action is to call up the quickness with which life may be lost. The bullet is fired and the piece has ended; the time of it is singular. Thus the performance constructs a temporal form that is meaningful, in and of itself.

Such a (temporally) short and violent artwork inevitably produces a need to utter it into existence again, for reasons more interesting than but not excluded by its severity as an action. Burden makes no claims about wanting his work to be something people talk about but he must have known prior to performing ‘Shoot’ that word of it would spread.<sup>154</sup> It is a strength that the entirety of the performance can be spoken in one sentence. The utterance is yet another form of documentation that spreads the work to a wider audience. That this utterance may happen in one sentence is yet another emergence of instantaneousness, as the sentence hides nothing of the performance. It explains the basic action entirely; and again the instant holds the power of meaning.

### **Instantaneousness**

It was not only Denis Diderot who theorised a link between beauty and time in art; his contemporary, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, wrote of the ‘pregnant moment’ as an

---

<sup>152</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>153</sup> Chris Burden interviewed by Linda Montano, *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties*, 344. It is interesting that the subject of time came up in Montano’s discussion with Burden, as Montano had completed a ‘one Year Performance’ with Tehching Hsieh in which the two of them were tied together with a ten-foot rope but not allowed to touch.

<sup>154</sup> Robert Horvitz, *Chris Burden*, 4.

alternative to Diderot's 'frozen instant of truth'.<sup>155</sup> Both ideas revolve around one moment, but Lessing's is significant in that it implies that the moment is somehow unfulfilled, that there is more to come. In Diderot's terminology it is solidity that counts. The instant contains neither motion nor the potential for motion because all meaning has crystallised. For Burden's performance it seems that both ideas may be applied to the work despite their significant difference regarding potentiality. Before the beholder has time to consider what it might mean, the sound of the bullet is heard and it has already wounded Burden's arm. The imperceptibly short duration that it takes for the bullet to reach his arm from the gun is fast enough to be frozen (as anyone who has fired a gun knows that you don't see the bullet travel away from the barrel, but the sound, the force of recoil and the effect the bullet leaves on what it hits is enough to know that it was fired). In this way a gunshot is unlike movement and more like a line drawn from the barrel of the gun to its target. This explanation of course goes against the practical physics of the situation that would explain that the bullet moves from the gun to the arm. The point is that the experience of seeing Burden being shot (and this is emphasised by the poor quality of the video documentation) might as well be frozen because of how fast a bullet moves; and yet as a work of art Lessing's terminology also appears appropriate as a way to deal with not only the moment before the gun is shot but also the gap between what 'Shoot' might mean to its spectator and what it is as a basic action. As was stated earlier, the simplicity of the performance as a whole *delivers* meaning and bears response. It is complete in itself all the while being a catalyst of affect, thought and response.

In his *Laocoön*, Lessing contributed a theoretical framework that defined separate mediums of art through their differing temporalities. It held for him that painting and sculpture are 'spatial and simultaneous' while prose, poetry and music are 'temporal and successive'.<sup>156</sup> Thus, like Fried, Lessing attributes the differences between art forms as not only residing in their materiality but also in their temporality. Fried differed from Lessing by attaching a value to one over the other. Lessing's framework fits neatly with the art of the eighteenth century (in which he was writing his criticism) but comes to some trouble when being applied to contemporary art.

---

<sup>155</sup> Jeoraldean McClain, *Time in the Visual Arts: Lessing and Modern Criticism*, 45.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

While some performance may be entirely successive, as in works by Marina Abramovic where she performs a series of actions, much of Christopher Burden's work is more like visual art in that it happens all at once and changes very little in time, even in his works of long duration. So performance may be either spatial and simultaneous or temporal and successive, and it may even be both, as is arguably the case with the performances of Tehching Hsieh, whose work will be discussed in depth further on. It remains significant though that Lessing saw a separation between arts that were primarily of time or, on the other hand, of space.

The concept of time as separate from space can be found most clearly in the philosophical writings of Henri Bergson. In *Time and Free Will* and other works, Bergson writes of time as pure duration that resists even being thought about in spatial terms. He thought of time as an essentially 'intuitive inner experience'<sup>157</sup> that had to do with qualities that are 'intensive' as opposed to 'extensive'.<sup>158</sup> In Bergson's thinking space was outward and extensive, measurable and tactile while time had no sensible quality other than in thought and feeling. Only the soul is capable of knowing time. But the separation of time and space is somehow broken by instantaneousness, which is perhaps an intersection of the two dimensions. Potentially, this intersection of instantaneousness causes a brief but important connection to be made between time and space. Such an experience may happen if the constructions of time and space created within a given artwork such as 'Shoot' are made simply and thoughtfully enough to allow a unity of Gestalt that includes time. It is also entirely conceivable that instantaneousness may occur within even Bergson's purely durational conception of time because within his philosophy time may become more or less intense, even to the point of appearing to stop.

Although in both the writings of Lessing and Diderot time and space are disjointed, the performances of Burden argue for a conception of *four*-dimensionality that is found in *Science l'Hypothèse* by Henri Poincaré.<sup>159</sup> Painting is commonly conceived of as a two-dimensional art, sculpture three dimensional, but strangely theatre and performance are often thought of as primarily spatial art forms. That there is a genre

---

<sup>157</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>158</sup> Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 1-70.

<sup>159</sup> Jeoraldan McClain, *Time in the Visual Arts: Lessing and Modern Criticism*, 49.

of performance called ‘time-based art’ is evidence of this argument. Perhaps this focus on spatiality further individuates theatre from drama, but it nonetheless leaves time aside. As Lessing noted, literature (theatre would have been included in this typology) develops in time. If the focus on drama as literature accounts for Lessing’s view of theatre as more temporal than spatial, the concept of performance art as a development of visual art (a term which itself implies spatiality through its primary avenue of sensation – sight) accounts for the contemporary focus on space above time. And yet there is so much scientific evidence that resists a conception of time and space as distinct, as Einstein and later Minkowski showed through relativity.<sup>160</sup> Explaining the link between time and space is perhaps epistemologically impossible, but the ability of performance to be analysed for its temporal and spatial structures together is an important step toward determining the emergence of instantaneousness, as a performance that exists complete and then is continuously renewed before its beholder. It is in this way that one begins to think of an artwork as four-dimensional.

Perhaps the reconciliation between time and space in artworks is found in ‘dynamic tension’.<sup>161</sup> Through an exploration of intersections among art and literary criticism, Jeoraldean McClain finds that the beholder (or reader) assembles and unifies the temporal and spatial structures of an artwork, or here a performance, through empathy. If empathy may be perceived as an aspect of absorption, the absorbed beholder is pulled into the temporality and spatiality of the artwork, and its dynamism (circularly) of time and space relates to its ability to pull in the beholder. As an artwork, the temporal and spatial compositions of ‘Shoot’ provide the impetus for the beholder to comprehend the sheer and violent speed of the bullet as an instant. Space and time are unified through the motion and speed of the bullet and the receptive body of Burden.

It was first the art critic Ernest Chesneau who used the term ‘instantaneous’ to describe the ‘condition of truth’ that was evoked by photography.<sup>162</sup> In this sense, the artwork capable of being truthful in a single moment was the most successful. This conception is built upon a Newtonian view of the world, in which the moment

---

<sup>160</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid, 46.

one finds oneself in contains all that should be.<sup>163</sup> This is nothing if not an echo of the theological writing Michael Fried uses to begin *Art and Objecthood* as well as being another example of Diderot's line of thinking. In this way instantaneousness is the result of such a world-view married with an artwork that has the ability to reproduce the very same concept through aesthetic manifestation. What it reveals is a fullness or presentness that has the effect of needing no further temporal explanation of the truth contained therein. Christopher Burden's 'Shoot' finds this kind of efficacy through its almost modernistic simplicity; a work of art with a fully unified Gestalt, immediately sensible and yet through its documentation, perpetually reoccurring; hiding nothing from its beholder by enacting one simple action; having all and no finality in its total instantaneousness.

### **'One Year Performance'**

On the eleventh of April, nineteen eighty at seven o'clock P.M., Tehching Hsieh punched a time card in his downtown Manhattan studio and had his photo taken with a sixteen millimetre camera. Hsieh repeated this action every hour on the hour for the next year. He titled this piece 'One Year performance – Time Clock Piece'.<sup>164</sup>

Tehching Hsieh's background is unique for a New York performance artist of the seventies and eighties. He was born in Taiwan and served under its military. During this time he also painted. One notable work was a series of circles in red paint on white paper; an experiment in his ability, over a period of time, to achieve a perfect circle.<sup>165</sup> It was not only painterly repetition that Hsieh was interested in; like Burden, he also created work in which risk and danger were central principles.<sup>166</sup> The notable difference is that according to Hsieh his only knowledge of performance while making these early works was that he had heard the words 'happening' and 'conceptual art'. With only this limited knowledge Tehching Hsieh, while still in Taiwan, created several performance works; one entitled 'Jump'. In this piece Hsieh

---

<sup>163</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>164</sup> Adrian Heathfield, *Out of Now: The Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh*, 30. Repeating this action over a span of twelve months meant he would have to punch in eight thousand seven hundred sixty times. He missed only one hundred thirty three due to sleeping. The documentation of this performance consists of officially verified time cards and the resulting film of his face throughout the year. The film when seen in total lasts six minutes; a day makes up one second.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid, 319.

<sup>166</sup> Chris Burden interviewed by Linda Montano. *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties*. 346.

jumped from a second story window and broke both ankles.<sup>167</sup> Before illegally immigrating to New York in nineteen seventy-three Tehching Hsieh had a solo gallery exhibition in Taiwan and through doing so realised that visual art lacked the potential for expression he longed for. He gave up visual art and moved to New York.

After relocating to America Hsieh did more thinking about art than actually making anything.<sup>168</sup> He was discontented with visual art and was only beginning to become aware that performance could actually be a possible medium through which he might more specifically express himself. He took on menial jobs to pay his way and eventually found himself a studio in downtown Manhattan. Once Hsieh got into the studio he was still at a loss for manifesting any creations. He spent so much time sitting and thinking that he eventually realised that what he actually wanted was to ‘make the process of thinking about art in [his] studio an artwork, and present it over a long duration [...]’<sup>169</sup> Such postmodern self-reflexivity in visual and performance art may have been common in the context in which Tehching Hsieh was working but his final thought that it should be shown within an extended duration was his important original contribution that distinguishes his work among his contemporaries.<sup>170</sup> These long durations act as an aestheticising frame for Hsieh’s thinking. That it is *thinking* that Hsieh set out with as his artistic catalyst is significant because his thought produced no primary objects (unless one identifies the out of body *props* he used to execute and document his performance as primary, which is arguable since the actions of Hsieh’s body and mind; his performance, seems most significant) as a result of such thinking, rather it was performance in time that was the end result.

Tehching Hsieh created a remarkable series of one-year performances. In the first year Hsieh spent the duration locked in a cell in which he did not speak, read, listen to music or watch television.<sup>171</sup> That a then illegal immigrant completed such a work

---

<sup>167</sup> Ibid, 322.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid, 324.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid, 319.

<sup>170</sup> This is not to say that the work of On Kawara or Roman Opalka do not match and even sometimes supersede Hsieh’s temporal commitment. It is rather that the work of these two artists is implicitly performative and explicitly visual while Hsieh’s work is the opposite. Adrian Heathfield glosses these two artists on pages 17-23 in which he also responds to Michael Fried.

<sup>171</sup> Adrian Heathfield, *Out of Now: the Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh*, 24-29 and 66-100.

reveals a sense of the ethnic imprisonment one feels as a foreigner. The sense of otherness Hsieh must have experienced was trumped only by the actual danger of deportation Tehching Hsieh faced if apprehended by authorities. Only several months after this work was completed Hsieh began the 'Time Clock Piece', which will be analysed in greater detail below. From nineteen eighty-one to nineteen eighty-two Tehching Hsieh spent the entire year outside.<sup>172</sup> While the practicalities of this experience such as staying warm through a New York winter and finding places to eat and defecate make this work interesting enough, it is the implied dialectic of freedom from imprisonment into yet another prison of rules that really makes the commitment worth noting. The next performance took on a collaborator, Linda M. Montano. Montano and Hsieh were tied together with a ten-foot rope and not allowed to touch.<sup>173</sup> The scratches above each of their single beds testify to the stressful challenge each faced in living with the other, but the confinement of marriage with and without love as the knots people tie to each other appear more readily as a concrete thematic message. Lastly Hsieh created a one-year performance and a thirteen-year piece after which formed the end of these works. In the final one-year piece he vowed to have nothing to do with art, at all. His promise was to, simply, 'go in life'.<sup>174</sup> After this piece ended Hsieh promised to make art but not show it publicly for the next thirteen years. He emerged on his birthday, 31 December 1999 with an announcement that 'I kept myself alive.'<sup>175</sup> Glossing over these incredible durations is both at once insufficient explanation and, as with the work of Christopher Burden, perhaps all one needs to know to understand what exactly Tehching Hsieh did for all those years. What emerges most prominently in this work is Tehching Hsieh's impulse toward committing to enduring and aestheticising the passage of time.

### **Duration and Durational Aesthetics**

Adrian Heathfield builds upon Henri Bergson's theory of duration as a way of analysing Tehching Hsieh's performance. Bergson defines pure duration in *Time and Free Will* as a form in which the self exists outside the boundaries between the present and the past. Heathfield casts this process as '*a continuous movement of*

---

<sup>172</sup>Ibid, 37-45 and 160-228. He was only forced inside once when police arrested him for carrying a 'dangerous weapon', the nunchaku he kept for protection.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid, 46-54 and 231-294.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid, 55-58 and 296-315.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid, 315.

*differentiation.*<sup>176</sup> Duration for Bergson exists inside ‘us’ as ‘[a] qualitative multiplicity, with no likeness to number; an organic evolution which is yet not an increasing quantity; a pure heterogeneity within which there are no distinct qualities.’<sup>177</sup> Externally Bergson casts time as ‘simultaneity’.<sup>178</sup> Human consciousness is what creates succession; in the world all we see is what happens to be there at any one time. Perhaps Bergson had read Lessing, as his temporal philosophy builds upon Lessing’s idea of an internal temporality (in literature) and an external, spatial simultaneity (in visual arts). More recently, in Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *The Phenomenology of Perception* further elucidates these concepts by essentially stating that subjective consciousness assembles the passage of time; thus making time *of* humanity as opposed to humanity *of* (or more simply *in*) time. What these concepts amount to are theories of time that contextualise the ‘thinking’ that Hsieh was doing in each performance, especially the ‘Time Clock Piece’. Through his performance and the documentation of it Hsieh ‘impresses’ himself upon time and within it, situating his art at the very core of temporal procession.<sup>179</sup>

Heathfield then draws out of Bergson’s framework a system for analysing art, which he terms ‘Durational Aesthetics’.<sup>180</sup> Aesthetics of duration will focus on the constructions of time within an artwork, identifying meaning and formal figurations in temporal organisation. Importantly, durational aesthetics arises not only out of continental philosophy but also equally from contemporary performance practice such as the work of Tehching Hsieh and a similar line of thinking to Michael Fried’s in *Art and Objecthood*. Fried found that theatrical and absorptive emergences in art rely upon and are produced through an artwork’s specific manifestation of temporality. What is useful about durational aesthetics as a method of finding endlessness and instantaneousness in art is that both (and more) temporal concepts find footing within this framework. Although time was not Fried’s priority, it did prove to be a particularly important block in the building of his argument, which essentially dealt with ‘presentness’ as an outcome of various modes of presentation (as absorption or

---

<sup>176</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>177</sup> Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: an Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, 226.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid, 227.

<sup>179</sup> Adrian Heathfield, *Out of Now: the Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh*, 10. Heathfield titles his chapter of writings on Hsieh, ‘Impress of Time’.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid, 22.

theatricality) and opposite temporalities (of endlessness or instantaneousness).<sup>181</sup> There is a parallel in durational aesthetics to the socio-political theory of ‘Chronopolitics’, which is engaged in determining how views of time can affect transformation in government.<sup>182</sup> In both systems of analysis, the foregrounding of time allows for insight into time as a conduit of communication, labour and therefore power. In the work of Tehching Hsieh, a commitment to marking and mapping the movement of time is the *loci* of the work; and it is through the optic of durational aesthetics that this intention becomes so readily apparent.<sup>183</sup>

Through durational aesthetics Heathfield arrives at his own definition of aesthetic duration and a specification of the unique emergent temporality in the work of Tehching Hsieh, evidenced most clearly in ‘Time Clock Piece’. He defines aesthetic duration ‘as a sense passage in which corporeal attention is drawn to (a) time reforming.’<sup>184</sup> In ‘Time Clock Piece’ Hsieh is continually placing points of interest on his autobiographical temporal map which is to do no more and no less than at once give oneself over to the present and commit one’s future to a known action. Punching the time card again and again is Hsieh’s way of serving time and it is Hsieh’s way of allowing time to serve him life. It is this specific *co-constitution* of duration and consciousness over a long period of time that leads Heathfield to cast Hsieh’s work as ‘uneventful’ because the temporality of the ‘One Year Performance’ negated the finitude and separation from the everyday that is evoked in ‘event’ time.<sup>185</sup> With this acknowledgement Heathfield also notes that in this way ‘Time Clock Piece’ sets up a kind of ‘entanglement’ with the spectator, which is not a dissimilar idea to Fried’s concept of theatricality (as engagement of the beholder). On one hand, it is convincing that within an aesthetics of duration the beholder might find no clear temporal boundary upon which to place the artwork: but on the other hand in the documentation, and more importantly, the utterance of Tehching Hsieh’s performance

---

<sup>181</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 81

<sup>182</sup> George W. Wallis, *Chronopolitics: the Impact of Time Perspectives on the Dynamics of Change*, 102-108.

<sup>183</sup> It may be that to investigate temporality in art on a broader scale than the performance work of the 1980’s in New York the use of the word ‘durational’ may be substituted for the still specific but more capable ‘temporal’. Thus a temporal aesthetics measures not only how a work is durational but also how it evokes discrete time. This digression is footnoted because to allow proper investigation into the invention of an aesthetic genre is outside the ambition of this dissertation.

<sup>184</sup> Adrian Heathfield, *Out of Now: the Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh*, 22.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

(as was noted with Christopher Burden's above) it fully manifests in the instant. Even if one were to watch Hsieh clock in once or several thousand times, the overarching 'premise' (as in Burden's work and most performance art) would override the insignificance and uneventful-ness of the small repeated action. In this way the 'entanglement' that Heathfield terms is perhaps for Hsieh a means to an end. He performs under a kind of endlessness so that the beholder may be able to fully appreciate the instantaneousness of the work at hand. Put bluntly, instantaneousness is to the entirety of 'Time Clock Piece' as endlessness is to each punch of the time card. This shows the ability of an artwork to manifest one temporality in its production and another in its reception, which recalls the discussions surrounding theatricality.

'Time Clock Piece' is temporally significant not only because of its extended duration but also because the documentation of the work, the film made up of photographic stills taken of Hsieh on each hour, but because it simultaneously presents 'two visual and therefore spatialised orders of time: the linear and the cyclical.'<sup>186</sup> Recorded on a sixteen-millimetre film camera, each one-second frame represents one hour of life, and strung together make up a six minute four second film.<sup>187</sup> It is as though an entire year of experience has been boiled down to its trace moments. The growth of Hsieh's hair and the slight difference in his placement in relation to the camera mark the passage of time. What it reveals is a 'cinematic conception of the photographic', in which an essentially motionless medium gains an element of movement through seriality and succession.<sup>188</sup> What accounts for its linearity is the simple growth of Hsieh's hair; but a closer look reveals a stability, almost a constantly returning gaze in his body and face that evoke the cycle of Hsieh's performance through photography. The photograph is the container within which Hsieh's self is recorded and thus projected. Hsieh's body is the container of time, but it is only through assembling these stills into a succession that they are able to contain motion (the motion of growth) and present the passage of time. Time in this film is encircling itself, enclosing onto the instant as the image appears to 'click' along through Hsieh's year. This 'clicking' is due to what would have been for Hsieh imperceptible differences in

---

<sup>186</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid, 33.

his position when having the photo taken that result in a quality akin to stop-motion.<sup>189</sup> Time in this film becomes both a passage and what Heathfield deftly refers to as ‘shards of instants’. Each instant fracturing unto the next until a whole is assembled in time and complete, re-assembled in memory to form a simultaneous instantaneity.

### **Performance and Objecthood**

Out of the plethora of responses to *Art and Objecthood* the one which stands out for its affirmation of performance as medium is Henry M. Sayre’s *The Object of Performance: the American Avant-Garde Since 1970*. Sayre begins with a response to Michael Fried, building off the changes in visual art traced back to the dominance of the photographic medium and identifying the essence of performance through investigating its emergent aspects.<sup>190</sup> The book, especially the first chapter, introduces two critical frameworks that like theatricality and absorption affect how an artwork manifests temporalities. Both are binaries: the first is between aesthetics of presence and aesthetics of absence and the second is of two types of presence, ritual and narrative. Although Sayre does not specifically address the work of Tehching Hsieh, his frameworks apply well to ‘One year performance’.

Henry M. Sayre first identifies a change in art due to the prominence of photography which has resulted in an aesthetic split between two paradigms: one of presence and one of absence.<sup>191</sup> This split emerges, he suggests, due to the dual nature of the photographic object. In its own right, a photograph is entirely present. The object may be theatrical and/or absorptive (in Fried’s terminology) but it is nonetheless, as an object on its own, unchanging and complete. What is problematic is that the photograph is of course a reproduction of another image, a moment from elsewhere in the past; which is now significantly absent. Thus the photograph is both *there* and *not there*, it is at a remove and fully graspable. What this allowed Sayre to understand is that these two ways of seeing photography reveal two separate paradigms of seeing art. The first paradigm, on the side of presence, is an immanentist aesthetic that ‘transcends history’ and the ‘quotidian’, ‘escapes temporality’, and goes beyond

---

<sup>189</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>190</sup> See Henry M. Sayre, *The Object of Performance: the American Avant-Garde Since 1970*.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid, 1-2.

politics and the every-day by creating a materialist art that is above all, ‘absolute’.<sup>192</sup> The opposite paradigm ‘subjects art to the wiles of history’, is ‘politically implicated’, ‘embraces time’, ‘accepts the quotidian’s impingement upon art’, and operates under a performativity that is dematerialised and fundamentally ‘contingent’.<sup>193</sup> The former makes no claims upon its beholder; the latter necessitates an audience. More simply, the aesthetics of presence are ‘monistic’ while the aesthetics of absence are ‘pluralistic’.<sup>194</sup>

Tehching Hsieh’s ‘Time Clock Piece’ problematizes this framework through its repetition and documentation. The corporeal performance is far too mundane and extended in duration to have any kind of efficacy. On its own, without framing devices, documentation or hearsay, any ‘One Year Performance’ would be no different from any other one year of Hsieh’s life, or anyone else’s for that matter. So although Hsieh’s performance is dematerialised it rarely draws or necessitates an audience. Rather, the repetitive, cold and almost simultaneous structure of his repeated actions take on many elements of the aesthetics of presence. Further, that ‘Time Clock Piece’ has within its composition the creation of documentation makes it further straddle the seam between these two aesthetics in the same way the tableaux straddle the seam between painting and theatre. Hsieh’s work is essentially performance; *and* it takes on the spatial quality of visual art through its process of presentation. That ‘Time Clock Piece’ sits somewhere between these two aesthetic paradigms does not weaken the critical framework, rather (again like tableaux) it reveals the dynamism of Hsieh’s artistic practice and its ability to transcend critical boundaries. To acknowledge this straddling is also to admit that much of Hsieh’s work may be characterised as endless. Heathfield is quick to do so and Fried would surely find most of the artworks that are on the side of the aesthetics of absence as emergences of endlessness. The aim of this dissertation is reveal how both sides emerge even within single works to show how it is a question of *when* an artwork is instantaneousness rather than *if*. This dissertation could easily examine how Burden’s and Hsieh’s work are endless; others have done so but few have analysed their

---

<sup>192</sup> Ibid, 1-8.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid, 1-8.

<sup>194</sup> Sayre quotes Fried at length and analyses *Art and Objecthood* within this book; identifying Fried as an ‘immanentist’ critic.

potential for instantaneousness, which is the task of this project. Finally, Hsieh's own temporal outlook may further explain his own sense of endlessness with which he sees the world, as Fried must have, which is why he appreciated the art that had presentness. Hsieh says, 'The only thing I'm sure about is that I'm still in the process of passing time, as I always am. Life becomes open and uncertain once again.'<sup>195</sup>

As a result of the split between aesthetics of presence and aesthetics of absence, Henry M. Sayre develops another dualism in art that, as he explains, evolves out of the need of the aesthetics of absence to create 'a new kind of presence'.<sup>196</sup> Sayre builds a framework around 'ritual' and 'narrative' forms of presence, where the ritual involves he doing and narrative involves the telling.<sup>197</sup> It is worth quoting his text as it explains how an artwork such as 'Time Clock Piece' manages to be both instantaneous and endless through its extended duration, mundane action and intermediality.

The point is simply that performance art exists on a continuum between ritual and narrative and its placement on that continuum depends upon its relation to its documentation, to the objects it produces.<sup>198</sup>

Thus a manifestation of alternative presence is arisen in the aesthetics of absence to compensate for the lack of presence by enacting strategies for ways of either *narrativising* or *ritualising* presence. In 'Time Clock Piece' Hsieh's bodily actions were, within Sayre's framework, undoubtedly ritual. To return to his gallery at every hour, pick up the card and place it in the machine to be punched; and to do so as many times as he did, the action must have taken on a kind of religious quality, as the signing of the cross must be for a Catholic priest. The action produced Hsieh's time cards as a by-product, but the cards were also his script. They were officially verified and it may have felt to Hsieh as if the objects waited for the moment in which they would be punched. In retrospect the cards appear as a document; they are full and complete and tell an immense story. But to Hsieh doing the performance they would have been like an empty road ahead of him, or more specifically the material on

---

<sup>195</sup> Tehching Hsieh interviewed by Adrian Heathfield in *Out Now: the Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh*, 338.

<sup>196</sup> Henry M. Sayre, *The Object of Performance: the American Avant-Garde Since 1970*, 17.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

which his art would be made present. In all those moments of presence in which Hsieh punched the time card, the machine immediately presented him with the tedium of such an extended repetition and simultaneously, that awareness of duration further enhanced the sense of ritual.

But as Sayre points out ritual work stops short of fully realising presence and it is the narrative activity that makes sense of what is happening. In Hsieh's performance, the video and the time cards provide the narrative that contextualise his actions. Perhaps even more so (as the empty time cards were to the punched time cards), Hsieh's letter of intent is the most clearly narrative of his work. Before starting each endeavour, Hsieh clearly stated what each one-year performance would be, typed in black ink and dated with a signature. These letters tell the story without being the story. However, it is only through these letters that Hsieh enacts his ritualised performance. The narrative and the ritual co-constitute the performance and together make a coherent whole.

As narrative activity presents or represents another time it has the ability to invoke the kind of instantaneousness Michael Fried discussed in *Art and Objecthood*. It is outside of any time, which is similar to the work that falls primarily under the aesthetics of presence. Alternatively, ritual work is always of the moment and thus occurs in the immediacy of presence, producing emergences of both instantaneousness and endlessness (harbouring the potential for both within its compositional methodology), but also recalling a primarily durational modality of production and reception in which the immediacy of the moment is in constant flux. As Melville notes, there is 'a new wrinkle in the dialectic of absorption and theatricality: a work can remove us from the time in which we come to it only by rewriting that time as its own.'<sup>199</sup> Whether duration is referring to dozens of years, in which a painting takes on a theatrical entanglement where it was once absorptive; or refers to five minutes in which suddenly the use of black face in a theatre piece suddenly loses its relationship with the beholder and pulls him or her in, completely, through its formal structure, duration being heterogeneous and qualitative means that instantaneousness and endlessness are possible as not only ontological qualities of the

---

<sup>199</sup> Stephen W. Melville, *Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory*, 84

artwork, but also sensibilities of beholding and composing art and phenomenological results of the situation of beholding. Instantaneousness (the completion of the artwork, its temporal presentness) becomes and fades.

## Conclusion

To render time sensible in itself is a task common to the painter, the musician, and sometimes the writer. It is a task beyond all measure or cadence.<sup>200</sup>

In order to be made and beheld, all art needs time. What art makes of time determines its success as art. Often, what art seems to make of time is a clarification of some emotion, or a thought. This meaning, or message, is sent to the beholder and if it happens to be appropriately assembled it might just be clarified in an instant. A painting is able to do this because it doesn't change, but a performance or a play builds in time and therefore creates its own sense of time that is distinct from visual art. So whether or not instantaneousness, a concept of visual art, has any use being applied to theatre and performance is debateable. One side of the argument must be that a painting and a play are too different. One is in motion while the other is still. Practically of course all paintings are *in a way* instantaneous while all theatre and performance, when it begins at least, seems endless *in a way*. But this simple *in a way* does not go far enough in analysing how artworks construct time and use those temporal methods of composition to create successful pieces of theatre or painting. The sheer difference between these two mediums is wide and distinct, at least until visual artists started making performance that fit more within the framework of visual art than theatre. This typological classification is made obvious by architecture (performance happens in galleries, not theatres) but is more deeply ingrained in the forms and content of performance that are so distinct from even postdramatic theatre. That performance is neither sculpture nor theatre gives it the possibility of incorporating aspects of both; which in turn make it capable of manifesting both theatre *and* visual art-like aesthetic qualities. For this reason it seems useful to allow a term from visual arts to be incorporated into the vocabulary of theatre and performance studies. If not to steal but to discover that a term that *should* have been used by now for theatre and performance *can* be used now.

---

<sup>200</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Francis Bacon: the Logic of Sensation, 64.

It is in this vein that I see the value of using Fried's framework for emergent temporalities within artworks to be a valuable critical tool for engaging with works of theatre and performance. This dissertation aims to reflect Fried's own argumentative trajectory, which is that in order to get to time something else needs to come first. Temporalities do not emerge singularly. Instantaneousness and endlessness are produced as qualities along with other aspects of the artwork, whether it be theatricality and absorption, internal and external focalisation or even perhaps a kind of semiotic clarity. For this dissertation it has begun with Fried's linkage of theatricality to time but it might be possible to assemble a more specific framework through closely analysing temporalities in theatre works. This may allow for an understanding of how a performance manifests temporalities to do away with a pejorative use of the word theatre (which inevitably obfuscates the critiquing system's ability to apply to theatre as a form). Although Fried perhaps weakens the ability of his argument to apply to theatre by using the word so combatively this should not stop others short of seeing through the rhetoric and being able to adopt and value such a prescient framework for art and time.

What all this leads to is a suggestion of how to step forward on the path toward understanding how time *operates* (and *operates in*) artworks. In all mediums of art time plays a crucial role in determining nearly every aspect of production and reception. Time in culture is also inextricably linked to systems of value; it is value that is important, and it is the successful artwork that makes good use of time. This kind of analysis is free to embrace philosophical terminologies of duration and discrete time and a plethora of other important implications such as ideas of causality and relativity; it need not stop and start with rhythm. What it will all allow is a clarification of how perceptions of time in art are necessarily linked to perceptions of value in art. This then allows critics to focus on the sense of time in an artwork and it allows the artist the freedom to make of time whatever he or she wishes to make of it.

## **Bibliography**

### **Books**

Bishop, Claire. *Installation Art: A Critical History*. London: Tate Publishing, 2008.

Bleeker, Maaïke. *Visuality in the Theatre: The Locus of Looking*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008

Brecht, Stefan. *The Theatre of Visions: Robert Wilson*. London: Methuen, 1994.

Cavell, Stanley. *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Francis Bacon: the Logic of Sensation*. Trans. Smith, Daniel W. London and New York, Continuum, 2003.

Fischer-Lichte, Erika. *The Transformative Power of Performance*. Trans. Jain, Saskya Iris. London and New York: Routledge, 2008.

Fried, Michael. *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Gieskam, Greg. *Staging the Screen: The Use of Film and Video in Theatre*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008

Holmberg, Arthur. *Directors in Perspective: The Theatre of Robert Wilson*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Huxley, Michael and Witts, Noel eds. *The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1996.

- Kester, Grant H. *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2004.
- Lee, Pamela. *Chronophobia: On Time and Art in the 1960's*. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2006.
- Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Postdramatic Theatre*. Trans. Jurs-Munby, Karen. London and New York: Routledge, 2006
- Lippard, Lucy R, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*. London: Studio Vista, 1973.
- Morey, Miguel and Pardo, Carmen. *Robert Wilson*. Spain: Ediciones Poligrata, 2003.
- Montano, Linda M. *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties: Sex, Food, Money/Fame, Ritual/Death*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2000.
- Pavis, Patrice. *Analyzing Performance*. Trans. Williams, David. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003.
- Quick, Andrew. *Wooster Group Workbook*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Savran, David. *Breaking the Rules: Wooster Group*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1986.
- Sayre, Henry M. *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde Since 1970*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Shevtsova, Maria. *Robert Wilson: Routledge Performance Practitioners*. London

and New York: Routledge, 2007.

Shyer, Laurence. *Robert Wilson and His Collaborators*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1989.

Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961.

### **Online Journals**

Anscombe, G. E. M. "Before and After." *The Philosophical Review* 73:1 (1964): 3-1. 26 July 2011.

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2183199>>

Bechtel, Roger. "Visuality in the Theatre: The Locus of Looking (review)." *Theatre Journal* 63:1 (2011): 145-146. 1 August 2011.

<[http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theatre\\_journal/v063/63.1.bechtel.pdf](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theatre_journal/v063/63.1.bechtel.pdf)>

Carlson, Marvin. "The Resistance to Theatricality." *SubStance* 31: 2/3 (2002): 238-250. 28 July 2011.

<<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/sub/summary/v031/31.2carlson.html>>

Féral, Josette. "Forward." *SubStance* 31:2/3 (2002): 3-13. 28 July 2011.

<<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/sub/summary/v031/31.2Féral01.html>>

--- and Bermingham, Ronald P. "Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language." *SubStance* 31:2/3 (2002): 94-108. 28 July 2011.

<<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/sub/summary/v031/31.2Féral02.html>>

Fischer-Lichte, Erika. "Introduction: Theatricality: A Key Concept in Theatre and Cultural Studies." *Theatre Research International* 20:2 (1995): 85-95. 20 July 2011.

<[http://www.brown.edu/Departments/German\\_Studies/media/Symposium/Texts/Theatricality%20EFL.pdf](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/German_Studies/media/Symposium/Texts/Theatricality%20EFL.pdf)>

Freid, Michael. "Toward a Supreme Fiction: Genre and Beholder in the Art Criticism of Diderot and his Contemporaries." *New Literary History* 6:3 (1975): 543-585. 23 July 2011.

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/468466>>

Gran, Anne-Britt and Oatley, Diane. "The Fall of Theatricality in the Age of Modernity." *SubStance* 31:2/3 (2002): 251-264. 28 July 2011.

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3685490>>

Grubbs, David. "Review: Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews." *Chicago Review* 44:3/4 (1998):193-195. 12 June 2011.

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25304330>>

Magnat, Virginie. "Theatricality from the Performative Perspective." *SubStance* 31:2/3 (2002): 147-166. 28 July 2011.

<<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/sub/summary/v031/31.2magnat.html>>

McClain, Jeoraldean. "Time in the Visual Arts: Lessing and Modern Criticism." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 44:1 (1985): 41-58. 21 July 2011.

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/430538>>

Melville, Stephen. "How Should Acconci Count for Us?: Notes on a Retrospect." *October* 18:1 (1981): 79-89. 21 July 2011.

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/778412>>

---. "Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory, the Forgetting of Modernism, the Necessity of Rhetoric, and the Conditions of Publicity in Art and Criticism." *October* 19 (1981): 55-92. 20 June 2011.

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/778660>>

Reinelt, Janelle G. "The Politics of Discourse: Performativity Meets Theatricality."  
*SubStance* 31:2/3 (2002): 201-215. 28 July 2011.

<<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/sub/summary/v031/31.2reinlet.html>>

Williams, Peter A. "Between Wilderness and Civilization: Bodies, Gesture, and the  
Aesthetics of Representational Subtraction." *Symploke* 5:1-2 (1997): 73-94.  
15 July 2011.

<<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/symploke/v005/5.1williams.html>>

### **Film and Video**

Chekhov, Anton Pavlovich and Wooster Group. *Brace Up!*. New York:  
Wooster Group, 2009.

Katharina Otto-Bernstein, *Absolute Wilson*. Leipzig: Kinowelt Home Entertainment,  
2007.

Le Compte, Elizabeth and Wooster Group. *House/Lights After Gertrude Stein's  
Doctor Faustus Lights The Lights*. New York: Wooster Group, 2004.

Obenhaus, Mark. *Einstein on the Beach: The Changing Image of Opera*. New York:  
PBS, 1986.

South Bank Show, the. *Wooster Group*. London: BBC, 1987.

---. *Robert Wilson*. London: BBC, 1989.

Wooster Group, et al. *The Emperor Jones*. New York: Wooster Group, 2009

### **Production**

Wilson, Robert, Dir. *The Life and Death of Marina Abramovic*. The Lowry Theatre,  
Manchester, 13 July 2011.

**Websites**

Burden, Chris. 'Shoot', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26R9KFdt5aY>. 01 August 2011.

Burden, Chris. 'Documentation of Selected Works (1971-1974)' [http://www.ubu.com/film/burden\\_selected.html](http://www.ubu.com/film/burden_selected.html). 07 September 2011