

Emily Roysdon

Talking Back





The many facets of performance and performativity are all over our lives. Long theorized, long rehearsed, the forms of performance continue to unfold in every direction. There is something always new in performance, and always something borrowed. This issue of *Zehar* proposes that we consider performance as a kind of editing, a gesture of gathering, accepting, rejecting the information from the world around us. Editing our stimuli in order to make meaning —performance as process.

I have experience with each word, editing and performance, distinctly. Editing for me is most literally the work of organizing an independent feminist art journal, *LTTR*, for six years. And performance the form and site of many projects and inquiries. What happens when we rub these words next to each other and ask that performance be held within the bounds of a subtractive process? How can we read this proximity?

This formulation provokes me in several ways. My first question becomes «Who do you choose to be in dialog with?» What is it that we seek out and who do we honor with our efforts? The second main concern for me is locating a site of action, of creation and possibility. Performance demands a generative capability - humans do. I think there is a lot to consider in subsuming performance as a product of editing, and there are many great examples that challenge and highlight this idea.

I would like to begin by teasing out the significance of the word «edit» in this proposal. Closely related to the concept of editing I find other process verbs: archive, organize, reflect. Implicit is an analysis of content with the ambition of producing something better than the original. The act of editing is usually a subtractive model. If one were to add information, it would be more aptly described as collecting and organizing. You edit out. The action is a refusal. In the idea of performance as editing there is as much emphasis given to what we take in from our cultural surroundings as that which we edit out, and that which we «put out». If we allow the source material to be as significant as the product, then we lose sight of the greatest potential in having a multitude of stimuli, and that is the ability to create something new through simultaneity.

Upon close inspection, the idea of performance as editing seems to give equal power to all that we come into contact with in our daily lives. It is undeniable that we are shaped by the circumstances of our lives, as Hannah Arendt says «Men are conditioned beings because everything they come in contact with turns immediately into a condition of their existence». But it is crucial to mark differences in the value of myriad input and to continue categorizing our stimuli.

I am submitting the word «edit» to scrutiny because I believe there are certain dangers worth naming in order to avoid them. Number one is passivity. I loathe to think that we swim in a sea of images and absorb

them like salt through osmosis. I want to insist on an identity as an actor more than a mirror. Agency over reflection. The process of editing is located in a decision to accept or reject the stimulus. It is a consumerist model of identity —searching, subscribing, collecting.

Spoken differently, the positive potential of this formulation is one of the multitude, where passivity is disdained and curiosity and rigor rule. This editing —archiving to analyze and re-mix— a model that is additive and plural looks more like a palimpsest than an editing room floor. Let it be a model of inclusion that thrives on contradiction and simultaneity. It's a question of politics that can't be left out of the concept of performance. The performative subject animates our histories, and if it's a subtractive model that defines either history or the subject, then we have everything to lose.

Ian White's recent program of events in Berlin created a performative palimpsest at the site of cinema by coupling historic films with contemporary live interventions. The program brought together films chosen from the 1971 premier of the International Forum of New Cinema and re-contextualized them in several sites throughout the city. White described the programming as «an investigative series of screenings with simultaneous performances and other projections that explore the ways in which what we see is shaped by what we see it with». In *IBIZA: A Reading For «The Flicker»*, White, himself an artist and curator, read an explicit tale of sexual adventures alongside Tony Conrad's *The Flicker* film. White's voice moved in and out of being audible, deliberately competing with the amplified soundtrack of *The Flicker* blazing into the room. In another event Richard Serra's 16mm film *Hand Catching Lead* was screened in one of Berlin's notorious sex lab clubs. At the Arsenal cinema, my 12 black and white photographs, *untitled (David Wojnarowicz project)*, was projected as a slideshow simultaneous with Rosa von Praunheim's *It Is Not the Homosexual Who Is Perverse, But the Society in Which He Lives*. When it was first debuted Praunheim's film created great outrage as audience's attempted to situate themselves between the images on screen —representations of gay cruising, clubs, sex and fashion— and the off-screen, pseudo-scientific, sometimes homophobic, condescending, ironic, truthful, contradictory voice over. I arranged a choreography of my photographs to interact with the film's progression and contradictions. It was a lively experiment and an extremely productive pairing. White's program tore at the edges of each independent work and made unlikely couplings into generative bed-fellows. White's strategy of layering created an amplified space of viewing filled with anticipation. The program edited the canon of cinema, rubbed the now up against a then and created radical re-mixes that were sites of pleasure and resistance.

Another excellent project that embodies the additive, palimpsest form of editing is Ridykeulous' 2006 intervention on the seminal 1989 Guerrilla Girls poster *The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist*. The Guerrilla Girls took aim at the male dominated art world and made a list of ironic benefits to being unsung makers in the art market. Ridykeulous updated the 20 year old feminist politics by inserting a queer lesbian identity into the mix and over writing hysterical sex jokes atop the Guerrilla Girls' legitimate claims of exclusion. For example, where the Guerrilla Girls write «Not being stuck in a tenured teaching position», Ridykeulous writes «Not getting your fist stuck in a tight spot». This after five lines of pussy licking, dick sucking stabs. Ridykeulous ridicules acceptance and makes no attempt to make their politics palatable to the mainstream. They write another scene for success overtop their feminist heritage. And it is definitely a performance. They aren't asking for room at the table of masters, they are spotlighting their current position and making it look liberated and self-sustaining. By writing on top of the original 1989 poster they in fact make the historical document more visible, and in making visible their attention to the feminist legacy of the Guerrilla Girls, Ridykeulous is making performative declarations of independence by speaking directly to an audience of their own making.

Thinking now from the vantage point of history, I want to consider the aforementioned question «who do you choose to be in dialogue with?» I think asking, if not explicitly answering, this question is a crucial act of identifying our politics and ambitions and differentiating between the information we are fed and the information that we seek. In directing our attention and speaking back —to a source, regime, history, individual— we validate the vocabulary and language that comes with the original statement. Is there a way to interrupt the network of meanings and associations of the original statement to engage anew?

This question exists for me primarily in the macro perspective - thinking about politics, and processes of history, and thinking about our ability to create and to change the circumstances of our lives. In Yael Bartana's video *Mary Koszmary* (ghost and nightmares in Polish), we become witness to the performance of the leftist intellectual Slawomir Sierakowski as he stands in an abandoned amphitheater and delivers a public address. He is proposing that Jews return to Poland and together they move forward, away from the limits of their shared past of Nazi tyranny. The sound of his words echoing through the space and drifting towards the history that once animated that theatre. Listening to him, wondering why there is no audience for his message, I imagine the potential of his dream. Sierakowski is re-writing what is possible in Poland. He is occupying a space, stating his position and inviting dialogue about the political history and process of reconciliation. Boldly speaking of the future in a monument of the past, he is addressing an absent nation. Bartana and Sierakowski's project is placed in

conversation with a history of Jewish diaspora, Nazi occupation and Polish leftist politics. Clearly the message is unpopular but, in speaking it, they create a potential audience and potential action. Bartana and Sierakowski take these histories and create a new vocabulary of what is possible, flaunting the processes of change and history.

Change and history come together in the archive. Sierakowski's actions are opening the national archive and asking people to dig around and regroup for a radical left future. Ridykeulous Perverse the feminist art archive and in one swift maneuver reinvigorated and updated the original message. The archive is the performance of history through collection and proximity.

In my work with LTTR I thought of the archive as a set of relations and intimacies. LTTR sought to create an active archive of contemporary feminist art in order to make visible the conversations and projects of our generation. We edited a journal, organized live performance events and radical read-ins, anything that could give form to the networks of collaboration we experienced and to articulate our genderqueer feminism. LTTR was dedicated to highlighting the work of radical communities whose goals are sustainable change, queer pleasure, and critical feminist productivity.

The group was founded in 2001 with an inaugural issue titled *Lesbians to the Rescue*, followed by *Listen Translate Translate Record, Practice More Failure, Do You Wish to Direct Me?*, and in 2006 *Positively Nasty*. Each issue of LTTR was initiated by an open call and edited through consensus by myself, Ulrike Muller, Ginger Brooks Takahashi and K8 Hardy. Each submission was considered independently and in regards to the working themes of the journal. The desire to make the journal a significant contribution to contemporary feminist genderqueer concerns guided editorial debates and decision making. It was an incredible experience to receive a hundred submissions and have the privilege of taking seriously each work's proposition and its position in regards to our call. We spent days reviewing each submission and debating the effects of each project next to another and the ramifications of our decisions. With each open call we created a frame and the submissions filled out the statement of the journal. We asked for what we wanted and, together with the submissions, developed the vocabulary that we wanted to exist. LTTR created active spaces of collaboration and was also cognizant of creating an archive of our generation's queer and feminist politics. We were not reinventing the wheel. We were all interested in and indebted to the histories and strategies of prior generations. We were talking back to *Heresies*, to Gran Fury and Fierce Pussy.

Each of the projects I have discussed have mined the archive and built a new vision alongside the source material that inspired and challenged them. They are great examples of people being explicit in the choice of their dialogic partner, and of directly addressing the inherited vocabularies of the debate. What is so exciting to me about this framing is that projects can be productive and not reproductive. We can engage the language and strategies of stimuli around us and create something new. Its still a process of editing, an intimate process of attraction, but it emphasizes the generative capability of performance and the simultaneity of influences and desires. My concern that history and self not be a subtractive process is my will insisting on the ability of this simultaneity to destabilize and proliferate. The «talking back» that these projects exhibit sometimes becomes the power to rewrite, and I don't want this engagement to be thought of as a consolidating gesture. Rather the demand for more.