



Research Output Journal of Education 5(1):32-35, 2025

ROJE Publications

PRINT ISSN: 1115-6139

<https://rojournals.org/roj-education/>

ONLINE ISSN: 1115-9324

<https://doi.org/10.59298/ROJE/2025/513235>

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The Evolution of Performance Art: From Dada to Today

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ABSTRACT

Performance art has evolved significantly over the past century, beginning with its origins in the Dada movement, which challenged traditional art forms and societal norms. This paper examines the dynamic trajectory of performance art, highlighting its major movements, influential artists, and thematic concerns, such as body politics, identity, and audience interaction. It examines the profound impact of technological advancements, including digital media and virtual reality, on the definition and accessibility of performance art. The paper also addresses the sociopolitical dimensions of the medium, its role in activism, and its engagement with contemporary issues like gender, race, and environmentalism. By analyzing its past and present, this study provides insights into the future potential of performance art as a medium that continuously redefines art, audience, and societal discourse.

Keywords: Performance Art, Dada, Digital Media in Art, Audience Participation, Body Politics, Virtual Reality Art, Activism in Art.

INTRODUCTION

Performance art can be beautiful, hilarious, uncomfortable, and challenging. Terming it within visual or performing arts boundaries is an oversimplification, as it constantly blurs the line between those distinctions—making it an outsider. While we consider it a somewhat modern practice, the roots of performance art grew from nineteenth-century theater traditions in Europe, specifically the experiments of the German expressionist stage and theatre of cruelty. Similar gestures and evolving practices were embraced by Dadaists and happened at the beginning of the twentieth century. Generally, performance art usage serves as an umbrella term under which a wide variety of forms fall. Consideration will be given to a narrower form of performance, which developed in visual arts throughout the 1960s and 1970s through which art can exist [1, 2]. More than any other medium, live performance focuses on the audience as the site of experience. Unlike in cinema, where the audience is held in a passive position of observation and identification, most of the time in popular entertainment, the term spectator describes an audience in an active role; however, their collaboration in the construction of the event is undertaken before the event occurs. Performance art engages the actual spectators; depending on the nature of the work, they may be asked to participate. However, through its inception to early forms, performance has consistently made a medium out of the very structure of the work of art itself. Throughout its history, performance has both sought to define what art is and has challenged those definitions. At its most fundamental, performance is art that makes life and art inseparable; the artwork takes place in the living of life and blurs the distinction between art and life. It consists of live actions that are not specifically defined as theatre or dance. In its simplest form, this can include actions of saying, eating, and agreeing to be present when lights go on and off. This definition of performance remains no easy feat; however, early performance tradition became a privileged medium, one that was able to engage in the socio-ethical concerns of the day, particularly body politics and feminist considerations of identity and self [3, 4].

Dada and The Origins of Performance Art

Tracing the history of performance art, most critics will pinpoint Dada as the progenitor movement that laid the groundwork for modern performance. Dada was a radical movement that included artists, poets, and actors who wanted to challenge the established norms of taste and aesthetics, as well as question the rationale behind the catastrophe of World War I. Indeed, while Dada began as an avant-garde art movement focused on visual art, the group's members often conducted public performances that included absurd spoken elements [5, 6]. Performance in this first, purest form was heavily influenced by Hugo Ball, one of the founders of the Dada movement. Oftentimes, Ball's performances were confused with rants, as he rarely considered a script before presenting his works to an audience. Indeed, Ball's performances were visceral and shocking, mere howls into the void to address a weary, disenchanting public. Later Dadaist Tristan Tzara claimed that Ball intentionally intended his performances to shock, saying that Ball read his poems accompanied by the melodies of a barrel organ; he was drunk, thus it was Dada. Tzara felt that this spontaneity was an organic performance, stating in the Dada manifesto that every spectator is a coward or a traitor; every one of them is a parody of Dada, emphasizing that Dada art should either express itself completely or die. Because of this spontaneous, performative presentation, much of Dada's work lacks documentation. However, the impact of the movement was profound, shaping a future generation of performing artists who would carry on its radical traditions. Furthermore, performance, with its ephemeral, unpredictable nature, emulated the chaos of post-war European society and addressed one of the main questions of the time: how can we find meaning in a fragmented world? [7, 8].

Key Movements and Artists in Performance Art

Performance art has existed as a significant component of various art movements over the past century. The Futurists, for instance, were known for their revolutionary use of space and movement, whereas other movements, like Surrealism, sought to take audience participation and perception of performance to a new level. The Fluxus artists in the 1960s expanded the definition of performance as an art form, making it a key activity in shaping the artistic inclinations of the time. Performance art has been regarded as a sculpture in costume, installation, a happening, and so on, but we still need to study the basic attributes that make performance a unique art [9, 10]. The artists in this show have played a significant role in clearly defining performance as an art in itself. Beyond their modern definitions of performance, the work presented importantly addresses varying themes crucial in performance from the time it was conceived up to now, namely the fetishization of the woman's body, resulting in more and more extravagant use of the body in performance, the apparent presence of a ritual, the obsession with the 'real' and the 'authentic', audience and artist bonding in the artistic discourse, and a range of other themes touching on gender, race, and various social issues. Performance is a network of powerful relationships mediated through the body, meaning that the so-called death of the artist is yet a mirage to the art of performance, maintaining the ongoing and perpetual call-and-response that art is haunted by [11, 12].

Technological Advancements and Performance Art Today

The integration of performance art and digital media has radically transformed not only the way we access and experience performance but has also changed the role of the artist and how they design work. Internet live streams, videos, stories, online gaming, and virtual in-world environments have changed not only what we understand a performance to be, and who the viewer is, but also the economies of the objects produced by the artist. We have seen artists design performances that are available only online, disruptions in video game environments, live streams of people doing nothing, and virtual reality artworks all so that one or many people can interact, affect, or be affected. Rather than just providing another version of a solvable game, artists are using immersive technology to open up experience and awareness in the same way that certain artists did through live performances. These artists pushed the frameworks as far as they could toward contrived ambiance and experience, while the newer generation of artists are doing so through an atmospheric, digital medium [13, 14]. There have been a variety of critical and practical performances emerging recently that investigate what it means to currently experience today. In a world of augmented reality games, the emergence of virtual reality headsets, live streaming, and financial technology, the definition of what a performance is and who the viewer is become ever more elastic and changing. For instance, an artist creates environments, machines, and performances that are total sensory experiences and demonstrate that technology can foster dialogues between an artist, a participant, and a medium. Social media is one of today's primary channels for the documentation and dissemination of performance art. Both artists and curators have integrated various platforms as ways

to document performance and then use this documentation as a way of creating new work, giving context, promoting curatorial statements, and artworks themselves [15, 16]. While performance can be experienced digitally, this does raise further debates on the connected commodification or “sale of the performance,” and issues of authenticity in creation can no longer be disregarded. Through the ever-changing landscape of technological advances, terms like “view” and “response” just to name a few for a live artwork become interchangeable, ever-expanding, and unstable. The role of the artist now, and certainly in the future, not only involves asking what is the artwork, but what is the context, and what is the viewing/immersive experience. Performance art was, and to many still is, about questioning art’s authenticity, its purpose, the role of an artifact, and, ultimately, where such things reside in the world and culture on meaning and understanding. Performance art and its mediums are all the more relevant within a world of rapidly evolving technologies. While at times seemingly not mass-producible or consumable, the future of performance relates to our capacity to produce and understand in response to a world in time, through experience and interaction [17, 18].

The Impact and Future of Performance Art

Performance art has profoundly impacted the art world, broadening the definition of visual art and influencing subsequent art forms such as body art, dinners, political actions, movement, interventions, and juxtapositions of images. Perhaps it is performance art’s engagement with contemporary social and cultural issues that has had the greatest impact on both the public and the art world. Drawing on contemporary social and political ideologies, gender and identity politics narratives, and issues of identity and cultural heritage have been a primary source of inspiration for the new generation of artists who practice creative outcomes under a variety of conceptual guises in a performance art context. Future generations will benefit from the broad spectrum of creative ideas that continue to be generated, reinterpreted, shown, and reworked by those who are actively engaged in the art form we call performance art. Besides the historical or philosophical beliefs that most people find somewhat obscure and esoteric, if not worthless, performance art can have a dramatic effect on the spectator emotionally and intellectually. Much physical and emotional trauma happens to people exposed to extreme actions on the performative art front. Performance can be used as a method of activism. The artists in this category are primarily concerned with using their art to make a change in society. The issues artists address can include individual subjects or politico-social issues. The performance environment is intrinsically social, and therefore concerns about the environment and themes such as wildlife and environmentalism are now beginning to surface. New technology is also beginning to infiltrate the medium, with performances taking place in virtual reality as well as in real-time. Another trend, now bubbling below the surface in the new millennium, is the move towards hybrid performance involving a combination of media, from live webcasts to real-time interaction with robotics to performances that take place on the net. Given the ever-increasing computer interfacing capabilities, the possibilities are potentially endless. Whatever the future of performance art, it is clear that however much the art form develops and mutates, its soul is bound to show the generic resilience that it has in the past, inevitably reflecting the human condition and questioning the decisions imposed on it. Art always tends to be the most up-to-date form of articulation for discourse [19, 20].

CONCLUSION

Performance art has remained a revolutionary and adaptable medium, reflecting the human condition and challenging societal norms through its ephemeral, interactive nature. From the Dadaist provocations to contemporary explorations of digital and immersive technologies, performance art continues to blur the lines between art and life, artist and audience. It has pushed boundaries, fostering dialogue on critical issues such as identity, politics, and the environment. As technological advancements redefine artistic possibilities, the medium’s capacity for innovation and social relevance ensures its enduring legacy. Performance art, grounded in its historical resilience and adaptability, will persist as a vital force in questioning and shaping cultural narratives.

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CITE AS: Nyiramukama Diana Kashaka. (2025). The Evolution of Performance Art: From Dada to Today. Research Output Journal of Education, 5(1):32-35. <https://doi.org/10.59298/ROJE/2025/513235>.