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One Art with Two Sides: Theatre and Performance Art

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Introduction

There is a divide within the performing arts between "actors" and "performance artists." While in discussion with Performance Artists, Paul David Young said that Theatre is "a dead art form, one that can often be excruciating" (Young,3). The artists within the two schools see each other as very different, in both theory and function. This seems, at first, a reasonable assumption; visual performance art requires no technical training and can be created by anyone, while acting is a process of refining specific abilities. There are similarities and differences between Theatre and Performance Art that this paper will identify.

Theatre is typically a scripted performance, performed by actors within a "Theatre space" and observed by an audience. When capitalized, "Theatre" refers to a field of art and study. It is produced to tell a story, or create meaning. Theatre contains elements of plot and characters, often using the characters to tell a story. Visual performance art is art that focuses on live human performance and defines itself in terms of "visual art" and not in terms of "Theatre performance." Performance art does not always occupy a specific place or use a specific kind of script. It often lacks character, plot, and sometimes even a structure of any kind. It usually created without a story and without meaning, sometimes with and sometimes without a definitive audience, and carries the title of "performance art piece."

Are the two arts fundamentally different? I will demonstrate that the divide between the arts is unnecessary because the two schools are historically and functionally the same; they are only seen as different because they are two slightly differing modes of the same human interaction. In order to do this, I will define both forms of art by describing their history and use. I will also describe how interactions between the two help define the arts. In order to best compare the arts, the time period of Theatre I will focus on in the paper is Theatre from the

beginning of the 20th century until the early 21st century. This is the same time period I will focus on in visual performance arts.

Literature Review

Over time the scholarship of Performance became two separate schools: Performance Art studies and Theatre studies. In most cases, a scholar will write within only one of these schools.

Defining Theatre

In "From the Postdramatic to the Poly-Dramatic," Natalie Meisner and Donia Mounsef discuss the relationship between text and Theatre performances. The authors unwaveringly consider "dance, music, multimedia and installation art" (86) to be Theatre. The article discusses historical uses of the text, or absence of text, in Theatre, noting certain theoreticians who were known for their distance from Theatric text. It discusses the triangulation in ownership of speech between the text, the audience, and the performer. Triangulation in this case is the way the character is perceived by the audience, as a character defined by the understanding of the actor, the text, and the understanding of the audience.

Theatre is further defined in Aaron Meskin's "Scrutinizing the Art of Theatre," a review, criticism, and analysis of a book called *The Art of Theatre* by James Hamilton Ph.D. Hamilton is a philosopher with a specialization in aesthetics. The book is about the relationship between the concept of an "art form" and the performance element and text element of Theatric production. Meskin quotes Hamilton as defining Theatre as "the social practice in which audiences attend to the physical and verbal expressions and behavior as well as the 'non-expressive' movements and sounds of performers (human or mechanical) who, by those means, occasion audience responses to whatever the performers arrange for the audience to observe about human life (for example, stories and characters, or sequences of images and/or symbolic acts)" (Meskin, 53). This definition is specific enough to adequately define not only Theatre, but all performance, without

including too much. Meskin notes here that this definition has nothing to do with the space (like a Theatre space or museum space). This definition helps to define Theatre beyond the limits of the reviewed book because it analyzes the role that location plays in performance. This analysis eliminates the importance of the location of performance.

The Art of Theater by James Hamilton is a philosophical analysis of Theatre. This analysis culminates in a collection of "general and obvious facts about theatrical performances" (Hamilton,50). These facts help define Theatre clearly. The three facts are: "(1), Theatrical performance is a social form of art, (2) performers and audiences are disposed to interact in the standard conditions under which theatrical performances are seen, and (3) theatrical performance is a temporal form of art" (Hamilton, 50). Each of these provides information as to what Theatre is without including too much. The first fact eliminates the possibility of performance when the performer is completely alone, which would not be considered Theatre, the second comments on the fact that there must be an audience and a performance, and the third limits the definition to at least including some element of live performance.

To define Theatre by its use, Sarah Bay-Cheng discusses Theatre history in context of modern technological media like film. She discussed the media, here meaning forms of video and their respective forms of private and public presentation, and how they are being used with (and sometimes against) the Theatre arts. She also explains the strengths and shortcomings of the medium of video in relation to Theatre. Video is capable of creating identically reproduced performances of a Theatre work for study and criticism of a specific performance, but can be viewed only on a two-dimensional plane, and any imperfection (acting or technical error) in the recorded performance is not necessarily a reflection of an imperfection in the show itself, or even the specific production. This is important because it cites this relationship as a new method of historical documentation. She labels Theatre and the recordings of live performances as a means

to record history. There is much of history (and theory) known only through art. This medium strengthens the future resources for historical research in terms of the amount of content, but because of the distortion between live Theatre and recorded Theatre, the recording will not be a fair representation of the original performance.

Establishing Theatre's place in history, "Here We Are" by Guglielmo Schinina is about the history of Theatrical performances; Schinina does not cite Theatrical performance as a performance which happens in the Theatre space, but as a social ritual. Significantly, this definition would mean there is no difference between Theatre and performance art. It also cites the historical importance of Theatre as a tool of social change. Schinina covers different theories on the origin and use of Theatre in terms of a social historical (history of social events) or biological evolutionary historical (human biological history) context. Schinina discusses Theatre in terms of: origins, evolution, revolution, inclusion, recession, the definition of social Theatre, Theatre animation, and community-based Theatre, institution, and social disillusion. In the "inclusion" and "definition" sections, the Theatre companies allow non-actors (untrained performers) to act and use Theatre training methods to overcome individual or societal problems. In these cases, the production is for the performers, not an audience. This is still considered, but the role of "audience" is of little or no significance to the production. The "institution" section contains specific examples of Theatre produced for the benefit of the performers; "in Politics… for emergency relief, in rebuilding community capacities, and for democratization," in medicine, used as therapy, and in education, to distribute information (Schinina, 25).

Clarifying the history of Theatre, Stanton Garner Jr. places Dadaism in a historical context; he sees it as an occurrence within a society, with clear historical roots. He clarifies the parallel histories of art and society. The Dada movement appears to be the beginning of both

Performance Art and Postdramatic Theatre/Contemporary Theatre. If, as Garner postulates World War I was responsible for Dada, then it was largely responsible for the way Theatre and performance art are today. Not only does the physical disfigurement lead to questions of identity, but the war caused Dadaists to lash out and form avant-garde artistic and Theatric groups together as a response. Dada, in this article, cites the end of one artistic era and the beginning of another. In this way, contemporary art (whether performance or Theatre or visual or multimedia) can be traced to a single common ancestor: the Dada movement. This is important because he traces the apparent source of both forms of art to a single point, and that point is not within the world of art. This gives foundation in non-artistic history to an artistic movement.

Interactions with Non-Theatre Performance

Theatre's interaction with what is not considered Theatre strengthens the definition of "Theatre" and "non-Theatre performance." "Turning Theatre Into Art," a transcript from an interview of three performance artists hosted by Paul David Young, is part of the same series as the "Evolutions of the Performance Aesthetic." The artists who are documented in this article were very supportive of Theatre art and its use in Visual Performance Art. Though non-Theatre artists argue that performance art and Theatre art are entirely different, there seems to be an amorous relationship between Theatre and these artists, whereas the artists interviewed in "Evolutions" were disdainful toward Theatre. Ohad Meromi, who does not come from a Theatre background, expresses a fascination with the process of the creation of Theatre. Meromi used the process of Theatrical production as the work of art in and of itself. Pablo Helguera discussed a form of performance art based around the falsified biography and body of work of an artist who never existed, and the actors in the work regarded him as one of the most important artists of the

nineties, claiming that he was unjustly forgotten. A false biography and falsified works of this artist were presented to the public in the form of a discussion panel, made up entirely of actors, focusing on his body of work. His body of work was forged by other artists. This is a very Theatrical way of working in that there is material from which the actors draw, but the fake biography and portfolio are presented as factual evidence of a life that never existed. It is a form of performance art that exclusively follows the path of a Theatrical production except for the fact that it is not presented as Theatre. This is evidence of the approval and use of Theatrical technique within the art world.

Another article documenting Theatre and "non-Theatre" interaction, "Filmed Scenery on the Live Stage" by Gwendolyn Waltz is a summary of the early relationship between onstage film and staged Theatre. She explains in some detail the methods of the use of onstage film in productions, generally between the late 1890s to the 1930s. This article is a report on findings supported by the previous findings of the author and her contemporaries. The purpose of the article is to identify the early uses of film in stage Theatre, and discuss their methods, creators, and progenitors. Instead of posing questions, Waltz shows holes in the field of research by citing other articles which pose questions. She depicts different methods of film use onstage with diagrams from previous journals. This article includes the first uses of the forward progressing train image in staged Theatre, and discusses the Japanese use of staged-interior filmed-exterior Theatre. This article challenges the definition of what is considered Theatre because, although the cited performances are considered Theatre, they include performance elements that are not live. This article shows that Theatre does not mean exclusively live performance.

Defining Performance Art

Catherine Larson's forms a definition in "What Do We Mean When We Talk About Performance?," an article about the word "performance" and its uses across languages, mainly focusing on English and Spanish. Larson immediately considers things like business, economics, and functionalism as performance. She then makes a transition to performance as a social occurrence, and cites gender performance, street vending, and role participation as performance. In this way, Theatre and performance art are exactly the same in that they are both an avenue of human performance which exists to be observed. An extremely helpful portion of the article was taken from Richard Schechner's "Drama, Script, Theatre, and Performance*" (*The Drama Review,* 17.3, 1973, 5-36), which is a series of definitions which are a solid perspective on some words which are used often in the art and Theatre worlds without precise definitions. Schechner defines "performance" basically as anything that happens from the time the performer or spectator enters the space until the time the performer or spectator exits. This definition of performance is space-defined.

In Richard Schechner's "Drama, Script, Theatre, and Performance," the author defines Theatre with specific parameters. Schechner uses a play production to explore of the relationship of script to Theatre, and an eastern trance dance to illustrate the relationship between drama and performance. In the play example, Schechner explores the relationship between a playwright and a production, and in doing so explores the influence of the text of a play on the production of the play. In his conclusion, he says about the text "To some degree the theatre is the visible aspect of the script, the exterior topography of an interior map. But script and theatre do not necessarily relate in this way; a script may be the cause of the theatre, and the theatre may influence the shape of a script" (Schechner, 24). This defines Theatre as a combination of performance and text. Schechner defends in this article that the most important element of performance is the

audience. This clear definition places Performance Art outside the limits of Theatre because Performance Art is more about the performance than the audience, and often does not have a text.

Bruce McConachie takes a distinctly scientific view on play, performance, and rituals. Play here means the nature of being playful, not the Theatric term for a performance. McConachie explains that in Theatre, the audience's understanding of a character is a combination of the character in the text, the character as portrayed by the actor, and the character as understood by the audience members individually. It also explores the nature of a role, which does draw a distinction between performance art and Theatre, because in Theatre, the roles are often clearly defined (audience, performer), whereas in performance art, they are often arbitrary or hard to define. This is another approach to the definition of performance. From a psychological approach, performance art and new Theatre appear to be very different because of the ideas of what the audience brings into the piece, and their preparedness to witness the spectacle (of the play or of the performance).

Mike Sell seeks to define the terms of modern performance in "Resisting the Question, 'What is Avant-Garde?'" Contrary to the title, Sell (apprehensively) embraces the question, and explores the nature of the avant-garde, not only in Theatre or art, but in many aspects in which it was applied, including business, politics, medicine, military strategy, and engineering. He comes up with a very interesting definition, or rather criteria, under which something can or cannot be labeled avant-garde. According to Sell, avant-garde is that which "First and fundamentally… *challenges power*. That challenge is as varied as the stratagems and technologies of power itself… second, to be avant-garde, one must be a *minority*…Third, to challenge power from a minoritarian perspective, the avantgarde [sic] must work with and within *culture*."(769-70). This

is the role of performance art since its beginning, but also an area occupied by some Theatre. This illuminates some of the boundaries surrounding performance art and Theatre. If post-dramatic Theatre and performance art were drawn as a venn-diagram, the center section would be avant-garde. Sell definitely helped to sanction a specific area of theory and label it, which helps to define Theatre and performance art.

Johannes Birringer, in "Dance and Not Dance," discusses the use of performance arts concepts in the world of contemporary dance. He discusses occurrences at recent dance conventions, which is one of the only means by which a community can take a snap shot of the current world of dance Reports, like this article, are useful tools for recording the history of –and advances within- an art form. Birringer focuses on pieces which are on the cutting edge of dance performances, which fit the avant-garde definition of performance art.

In "Dancing in the Museum," Birringer discusses the use of dancing in the museum space. He mainly cites three performance installations: *Move: Choreographing You* (Hayward Gallery, October 13, 2010), *Dance with Camera* (Contemporary Arts Museum, August 7, 2010), and Mike Kelley's *Test Room Containing Multiple Stimuli Known to Elicit Curiosity and Manipulatory Responses* (Hayward Gallery 1999). In these, dance is used as a tool to create immediate presence in the work in the cases in which the museum space itself is occupied by dancing or motion signified as dancing, with the exception of *Dance with Camera*, which is a recorded and edited dance piece presented as a video within the museum itself. These media reconsider the gallery space to be a performance space. Theatre and Theatric forms of dancing, presentational or representational, are not discussed in the piece except that they are used "to very different ends" from performance art. The lack of consideration for Theatric dance shows that Theatric dance is outside the scope of the dance avant-garde.

Defining the relationship between technology and performance, Scott deLahunta discusses the history and reasoning behind the use of virtual reality technologies in performance. He also discusses the relationship between actors/choreographers and the use of virtual reality. DeLahunta discusses a few installation pieces and how virtual reality technologies have been incorporated into their use either as a performance or kind of interactive experience for the audience, blurring the line between performer and audience member. DeLahunta only mentions Theatre in passing, but views these performances as a visual art, even though they are spectacles achieved through a performance. Because technology is constantly advancing, this leads the way for more exploratory performances in the future, and because the performers (or participants themselves) are not choreographed, each performance is unique. This is unlike traditional Theatre, which is structured to be repeatable. This article forces one to question the nature of video games in regard to the definition of the performance arts. The pieces discussed were very well recorded and the piece "Desert Rain" incorporated DeLahunta as a participant. This work uses story and actors, which are elements of Theatre. The performance is not within a Theatre space, and the audience is included in the performance. Because of the synthesis of devices, this performance is both Theatre and Performance Art, showing that the two are not mutually exclusive.

History of Performance Art

In "Theatres of Cruelty in Interwar Europe," Kimberly Jannarone discusses the technical aspects of early performance art and contemporary Theatre, by showing how theorists of the time tried to redefine the purpose and place of the performers and the audience. Jannarone explores the influence of crowd control theory on Theatre, and Theatre staging. An interesting part of the

article compares the theories of Artaud and of Fascist Theatre, and finds them to be strikingly similar. Although for different reasons, both Artaud and the Fascist Theorists opposed the same concepts with extreme disgust. This led to a push for advances in Theater, leading to the birth of Performance Art. It also showed how thinkers such as Artaud and Mussolini sought to redefine Theatre and performance. Political theory and Theatre history crossed paths here, and as political speech theories are tested, so were new Theatre theories. Hitler was also discussed here, which raised an interesting question: although it is clear that history influenced Theatre, how did Theatre influence history? This article is important to my research because it gives further historical grounding for the phenomena in the art and Theatre worlds relevant to my topic. It shows the crossroads of history and Theatre from the late 1800s to World War II.

Performance Art Interaction with Theatre

Showing that Theatre can become Performance Art, another Paul David Young interview documented in "Evolutions of the Performance Aesthetic" is a discussion is held on the work of current "visual artists" (like painters, sculptors, and installationists) and how it relates to traditional text-based Theatre. This article reveals that traditional Theatre is perceived by many "visual artists" to be "a dead art form, one that can often be excruciating" (Young,3). Seeing this perception and how it appears to be accepted as fact indicates that visual artists (including live performance and film performance artists) see Theatre arts as a wholly separate art form. The artists discuss the successes and failures of different artistic performances which are not considered Theatre, and the interaction between "performance artists" in a sense of the visual arts and the different "performance artists" in terms of Theatre and film, and showing distinctions between them. Levine discusses the differences stating that Theatre uses with a false setting or biography (based in a text that is usually fictional in regards to the life of the

performers), and performance art is usually without those elements, making it an original existence onstage. Each artist uses their own understanding of both Theatre and art to form their opinions on the distinction.

Discussion/Conclusion

My research shows that the belief is supported by most artists and scholars that Performance Art and of Theatre are different. However, the way in which these arts are defined, and the way that their histories are documented, shows the evolution of one art form into two modes. Although Theatre usually is used to tell a story and performance art is usually not, these two modes, even in their most extreme contemporary forms, are still functionally the same.

A definition of "Theatre" synthesized from these authors would be, in its most certain terms, an action or series of actions performed with the intention of being observed. Through the avant-garde Theatre movements, the necessity for a defined performer/audience role has been removed, as has the need for a defined performance space. Although this definition is extremely vague, this is the only consistently agreed-upon definition of Theatre. This definition also encompasses performance art. The definition is specific enough to include all Theatre and performance art without including things that are not Theatre or performance art. The implication of this definition is that any instruction or dictation is considered performance. My research shows this to be the case (Larson, "What Do We Mean When We Talk About Performance…", 2012)

The reason these arts are seen as different is only because the artists within one mode tend to stay consistently within their mode. This is visible in the Paul David Young interview series. In *Evolution of the Performance Aesthetic*, Theatre is regarded by the interviewed artists

as "a dead art form, one that can be excruciating" (Young, 3). The perceived distance between the arts comes not from a difference between them, but from an inaccurate definition of Theatre. If defined accurately, Theatre and Performance Art are identical. The statements of the artists in the Young interviews seem to be based on the understanding that "Theatre" refers strictly to a text-based performance within a Theatre space. My research shows that this definition is inaccurate because Theatre does not rely on a specific performance space, nor does it rely on a text in order to be performed. Although traditional Theatre includes text, the research shows that what the manner in which the artists in the Young interviews perform is defined as a form of Theatre.

Not only do the arts share definition, but in their current forms, they come from the same artistic movement. The movement responsible for Postdramatic Theatre and Performance Art is the Dada movement. In Garner's "The Gas Heart: Disfigurement and the Dada Body," Postdramatic Theatre is traced to Dada. Postdramatic Theatre challenged the need for text, characters, plot, or even Theatre setting. Because of this, what is considered Performance Art and what is considered Postdramatic Theatre are the same thing, born from the same movement, inspired by the same event, World War I (Garner).

There is a difference between Theatre and Performance Art in terms of function. Performance Art is often produced by the artists themselves without a story to present to the audience. Theatre is almost always produced by a Producer, who funds a work with the intention of generating income and an production crew (including actors) that use a text, usually a story, to give the audience purpose for their attendance. Theatre, in this way, has expectations put upon it that do not exist for a performance artist.

As seen in Schechner's "Drama, Script, Theatre, and Performance," a defining feature of Theatre is that it often uses a text. This difference is also discussed in Hamilton's *The Art of Theatre*, but text is cited as a tradition, not a necessary element of Theatre. According to Hamilton:

> "The text-based tradition is a condition of theatrical performance in which performances are generated by a use of texts that, typically, are written for the purpose, and the written text is used to determine, reasonably precisely, what is said, who says what, and in what order, and sometimes who does what and when. The rest of the issues about which performers must deliberate are left open." (Hamilton, 204)

This definition describes the use of text as a traditional tool, but does not use it as a defining feature. The fact that text is considered a tool and not a necessity or essential feature of Theatre includes many works of Performance Art under the definition of theatre.

A problem in the field of research is that scholars either consider Theatre and Performance Art the same, or consider them different, without discussion. It seems as well that artists within each field consider the fields separate without considering the absence of differences or the abundance of similarities.

There isn't much to be found in the field of research addressing the interaction of the arts. Two exceptions are the Paul David Young interviews: "Turning Theatre into Art" and "Evolution of the Performance Aesthetic"; a few performance artists are investigating traditional Theatre techniques to create their works of Performance Art. The interview shows that the work of performance artists is so divorced from the work of Theatre artists that when there is play between the two it is seen as innovative and new. Because the two are the same, this should not be the reaction. This doesn't mean both modes should be practiced and performed in exactly the

same way, but the problem brought up by this is that the education of performance artists is lacking in Theatre, and the education of Theatre artists is lacking in Performance Art.

This misunderstanding is harmful to the arts because the artists in each field don't interact artistically, and this lack of interaction means an advance on one side will not as directly advance the other. This problem creates stagnation because Theatre and Performance Art are as artistically advanced as they are because of mutual advancement and the artists now see the schools as separate.

Just as training in Theatre can lead an artist towards performing musicals, non-musical plays, or devised pieces, a more varied training for these artists will not lead to a nebulous undefined art. The opposite is true: a more thorough training will give performing artists more choices in defining themselves as artists, and will allow them to be more aware of the meaning their performance.

My research shows that the idea that Performance Art is essentially different from Theatre is false and harmful to both of the arts. This could be solved, however, within the educational systems of the arts. If an education in Theatre requires an education in Performance Art, and vice versa, the world of the performing arts as a whole will be enriched and advanced by newly capable artists.

The difficulty in this comes from a lack of formalized education available in Performance Art. The field is seen as new and hard to teach but because both arts are based in the concept of performance, Theatre education should provide the skill set necessary for Performance Artists (developing oneself as a performer). The multiply applicable uses of formalized training can be seen in Birringer's "Dance and Not Dance." (2005) and "Dancing in the Museum" (2011) where dancers are using their formal training in order to create works of Performance Art. Another

difficulty in this is that the difference in financial and audience expectation for a Theatre Production is not a concept that exists in Performance Art, and some concepts employed by Performance Artists may fail to account for this and be harmful to a Theatre Production. However, with cross-education, Theatre Producers may begin to produce Performance Art, and an audience may develop, which would help to integrate the arts in the eyes of the non-performers (or non-scholars) as well.

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