

Performance and Cultural Politics

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Performance came to be defined in opposition to theater structures and conventions. In brief, theater was charged with obeisance to the playwright's authority, with actors disciplined to the referential task of representing fictional entities. In this narrative, spectators are similarly disciplined, duped into identifying with the psychological problems of individual egos and ensnared in a unique temporal-spatial world whose suspense, reversals, and deferrals they can more or less comfortably decode. Performance, on the other hand, has been honored with dismantling textual authority, illusionism, and the canonical actor in favor of the polymorphous body of the performer. Refusing the conventions of role-playing, the performer presents herself/himself as a sexual, permeable, tactile body, scourging audience narrativity along with the barrier between stage and spectator. (5)

Note

5. Consider the early work of performance artists Carolee Schneemann, Valie Export, Linda Montano, Eleanor Antin, Chris Burden, Vito Acconci, among others. For an influential articulation of the postmodern body in performance, see Josette Féral, "Performance and Theatricality: The Subject Demystified," *Modern Drama* 25.1 (1982): 170-81. See David Roman's recent discussion of Féral's piece in "Performing All Our Lives: AIDS, Performance, Community," in Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach, *Critical Theory and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), pp. 208-21.