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ABSTRACT
               Teachers, researchers, and performers in the field of
Performance Studies often find themselves defining what it is that
they do. Boundaries are often hard to draw, however. Is the work they
are doing "art?" The distinction is important to funding agencies,
tenure committees, and university administration. One definition of
art attributed to Allan Sekula is "a mode of communication, as a
discourse anchored in concrete social relations, rather than a
mystified, vaporous, and ahistorical realm of purely affective
expression and experience." Another, from Henry Sayre, states that
"art is the act of making, not the thing made," indicating that power
or authority rests with the artist rather than the object itself.
Elizabeth Fine believes that once a performance is abstracted from
its native setting and presented to outsiders, the message can no
longer be expected to fit automatically the audience's capacity to
decode it. Richard Bauman addresses differential identity in relation
to folklore, labeling it "artistic verbal communication," with the
focus on communicative interaction. According to Stephen Tyler, the
meaning is not the exclusive right of the text or the author/artist,
but, instead, the interaction of text-author-reader. Perhaps there is
a middle or new ground of understanding that lies not with self and
not with the other, but in an intersection between the two. (Contains
10 references.) (CR)

Performance Challenges Revisited:

What is Art?

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Performance Challenges Revisited:

What is Art?

As researchers, teachers, and performers in the field
of Performance Studies, we sometimes find ourselves defining
what it is that we do. It becomes clear, however, that
boundaries are often difficult to draw. Is the work you are
doing art? This distinction may not be an important one to
you, but it could be to funding agencies, tenure committees,
and university administration. In looking for an answer to
this question, I became aware of how many times the word art
is placed in the position of "art". Is this quotation mark-
ing of art a result of its sacred status or the multiplicity
of its definitions? Does the word art need to be defined?
In the following pages an attempt will be made to address
these questions in one form or another. What may result,
however, is the dissemination of an annoying and incessant
echo.

In Criticizing Photographs: An Introduction to
Understanding Images, Barrett (1990) explains that
"aesthetic theory most prominently attempts to define what
art is" (p. 121). Barrett goes on to offer a definition of
art from Allan Sekula: "a mode of human communication, as a
discourse anchored in concrete social relations, rather than
as a mystified, vaporous, and ahistorical realm of purely
affective expression and experience" (p. 121). Sounds
uplifting, democratizing, but incredibly broad. Using

Sekula's definition, the next question would seemingly be "What isn't art?". To further quell my hopes in answering the question, "What is art?", Barrett kindly leaves this discussion by stating that some definitions of art "take the length of a book to fully explicate" (p. 122).

Sayre (1989) offers a variety of answers to the question, "What is art?" in his book, The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde Since 1970. In relation to Ginsberg's "breath-event," Sayre explains that "Art is the act of making, not the thing made" (p. 183). According to this definition of art, power or authority rests with the artist rather than the object itself. In the case of oral poetry, which is the focus of the Sayre discussion, the text is "demystified and desanctified" and the spoken word is "reconstituted with mystery and awe" (p. 183). This definition of art seems to be modernist and contradictory in some sense to that offered previously by Sekula, as Sekula deems art "anchored in concrete social relations" rather than mystified. Both, however, emphasize the primary position in art as a human one.

According to Danto (1981), some of the best philosophers of philosophy and art have argued that a definition of art cannot be given, that "it is a mistake to attempt to give it, not because there is not a boundary but because the boundary cannot be drawn in the ordinary ways" (p. 57). The definition of art, however, has become "part of the nature of art in a very explicit way" (Danto, p. 56).

Danto argues that, indeed, there is not a neat "formula" which will lead us to "pick out artworks in the way we can pick the bagels out in the bakeshop: for if `bagel' had the logic of `artwork,' a pumpkin pie could be a bagel" (p.61). The Transfiguration of the Commonplace (1981) is Danto's argument for a philosophical definition of art which is not tied to properties such as boundaries.

Victor Turner defines art as "redressive machinery" that is "put into operation in order to `patch up quarrels, mend broken social ties, seal up punctures in the social fabric'" (as cited in Sayre. 1989. p. 185). Sayre goes on to explain that Turner sees art as transformative in nature: an activity that "seeks to move forward the society that has generated the breach" (p. 186). In his essay. "Dewey, Dilthey, and Drama: An Essay in the Anthropology of Experience," Turner (1986) cites John Dewey's definition of art as one he partly shares. "Dewey (1934) held that works of art. including theatrical works. are `celebrations, recognized as such, of ordinary experience'" (Turner, p. 34). Turner explains that Dewey rejected the capitalist definition of art as separated from human life, and deemed valuable only if judged commercially so by "esoteric experts." In Art As Experience, Dewey (1958) states, "Even a crude experience, if authentically an experience, is more fit to give a clue to the intrinsic nature of aesthetic experience than is an object already set apart from any

other mode of experience" (p. 11). Here, then, art is
connected to human experience as it is in the definitions
given above by Sekula and Ginsberg. And, as is the case in
Danto's discussion, no recognizable boundaries (or perhaps
traditional/Structuralist criteria) are identified.

Barbara Babcock (1986) echoes both Dewey and Turner in
her essay, "Modeled Selves: Helen Cordero's `Little
People'". Babcock agrees with Dewey that art objects should
not be separated from human experience. In addition, like
Turner, she sees art as transformative: "objects are used
not only to represent experience but also to apprehend it
and to interpret it, to give it meaningful shape'"
(p. 318). Babcock notes that "`techne'" (art or craft)
originally denoted a mode of knowing" (p. 319). This mode
of knowing shapes personal, as well as cultural experience.
Babcock explores Pueblo pottery "as an art shaped from
experience as well as earth . . . as something people have
used to give meaning and structure to their lives as well as
to carry water or to make money" (p. 320). Art, then, is
tied to human experience, shaped by human experience, and
shapes human experience. Babcock's essay has made me aware
of the very ethnocentric (Western/Capitalist) view of art
that I have held. According to Babcock, art can be used in
everyday practices: it does not have to stand high above the
mundane to be art.

The above mentioned definitions generally share the
notion that there are no specific structural boundaries and,

perhaps more importantly, human experience is at the center
of the word "art." Is human experience, however, universal?
If not, then where does the "touchstone" of universality fit
in? Universality stands as one of the three marks of "great
art/literature": individuality, universality, and
suggestion. Is that approach outdated with the contemporary
awareness of Western ethnocentricity?

Geertz (1976) argues for the cultural specificity of
art. Designating art objects "is always a local matter;
what art is in classical China or classical Islam, . . . is
just not the same thing. no matter how universal the
intrinsic qualities" (pp. 1476-1477). Geertz explains that
art is a part of the larger culture, and that art is only
possible through participation "in the general system of
symbolic forms we call culture" (p. 1488).

As human experience potentially differs and art is
culturally specific, how can it be recognized? And if
identified as art, how do we understand the art of the
other? Can we?

Elizabeth Fine (1984) presents information theory and
its premise that once a performance is abstracted from its
native setting and presented to outsiders, "the message can
no longer be expected to fit automatically the audience's
capacity to decode it" (p. 105). Nida (as cited in Fine)
goes on to suggest that the audience must adjust to the
culturally unfamiliar message or the performance must be
adjusted to the audience. Fine explains that it would be

possible to insist that the audience invest the necessary
time and effort to decode a non-native text, but Nida argues
that "`a really satisfactory translation should not impose
that sort of burden on the receptor'" (as cited in Fine,
p. 106).

Can "art" be separated and translated apart from its
native context? Browning and Hopper argue that "rather than
treating context as static and separable from messages,
. . . context should be treated as `becomings' or
`interactive systems'" (as cited in Fine, 1984, p. 67).
Hence, in response to Nida, the goal should not be to adapt
self to other but to treat this interaction as a new
creation. This new creation, however, is perceived as
"cultural genocide" by some. According to Snyder,
ethnopoetics presently stands to protect societies by
promoting cultural specificity and identity.

Richard Bauman (1972) addresses the issue of
differential identity in relation to folklore. Not only
does he include different tribal and linguistic groups in
his analysis, but ethnic, religious, regional, occupational,
demographic, and kinship affiliation differences as well. A
reorientation is proposed which posits that "members of
particular groups or social categories may exchange folklore
with each other, on the basis of shared identity, or with
others, on the basis of differential identity" (p.38).
Early in his essay Bauman explains the sense of shared lore:
"The lore is shared in the sense that it constitutes a

communicative bond between participants, but the
participants themselves are different. the forms they employ
are different, and their view of the folklore passing
between them is different" (p. 37). In applying this idea
of exchange, Bauman labels it "artistic verbal
communication." As with communication theory, the focus is
the communicative interaction. For artistic communication
to occur, some "shared understanding on the part of sender
and receiver of the esthetic conventions of the expressive
system being employed" is required (p. 40). Although this
view would seem to be arguing against an ethnopoetic ideal
of cultural differentiation, it seems to stop just short.
Bauman's position seems to lie somewhere between the two
poles of "let us find the universal `we'" and "cultural
identity and integrity must be maintained." (Perhaps,
however, this is a projection of my own liminality
concerning this topic onto Bauman! For it seems that there
is a middle ground that can be occupied. Not in the sense
of "riding the fence," but in viewing and moving toward
understanding of other while preserving cultural diversity.
A postmodernist would most likely label me romantic!)

So. to the postmodernists. According to Tyler (1986),
meaning is not the exclusive right of the text or the
author/artist but, instead, the interaction of text-author-
reader: it is emergent "through the reflexivity of text-
author-reader and privileges no member of this trinity as
the exclusive locus or means of the whole" (p. 133). In

addition, no transference of meaning/understanding is
provided for in the postmodern ethnography. For example, in
response to the question of translation, Tyler portrays it

> as fording a stream that separates one text from
> another and changing languages in midstream. This
> is _mimesis_ of language, one language copying another,
> which never makes a copy anyway, but a more or less
> contorted original . . . . it is still a silly idea to
> suppose that one might render the meanings of another
> folk in terms already known to us just as if the others
> had never been there at all. For it is not for us to
> know the meaning for them unless it is already known
> to us both, and thus needs no translation, but only
> a kind of reminding (pp. 137-138).

I would agree with the above to a certain degree. We may
never be able to truly reproduce the original or completely
understand the other, but that does not rule out
understanding in and of itself. Perhaps there is a middle
or new ground of understanding that lies not with self and
not with other but in an intersection between the two. This
intersection may take the form of a "reminding," but may
also take the form of a new discovery--a new "art."
Romantic? Probably.

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