A Fly on the Wall or the Elephant in the Room:

The Role of the Photographer in the Production and Viewing of Photographic Documentation from Performance Art Events

Dave Kemp

This paper argues that photographic documentation of performance art does not function as an "objective" record produced by a fly-on-the-wall entity. Instead, the role played by the photographer is considered in terms of how photographic decisions subjectively shape the eventual visual document and how both the photographer's body and the mere presence of the camera alter the dynamic of the performance. Rather than lamenting this as a weakness, I propose that the viewer might come to acknowledge the mediation of the photographer and see it in a positive light: as a transfer of tacit knowledge that presents an experience of an experience rather than a reductive view-from-nowhere. In this way, the act of photographing can be seen as a form of interpretation, much like that performed by an art historian or an art critic, only in this case it is interpretation of a non-textual and non-verbal form.

Eine Fliege an der Wand oder der Elefant im Raum: Die Rolle des Fotografen in der Produktion und Betrachtung fotografischer Dokumentation künstlerischer Performance-Ereignisse

Dieser Text legt dar, dass fotografische Dokumentation von künstlerischen Performance-Ereignissen nicht wie eine "objektive" Aufzeichnung funktioniert, produziert von einer Fliege-an-der-Wand-Einheit. Vielmehr wird die vom Fotografen gespielte Rolle daraufhin betrachtet, wie fotografische Entscheidungen das betreffende visuelle Dokument subjektiv formen und wie sowohl der Körper des Fotografen als auch die bloße Anwesenheit der Kamera die Dynamik des im Entstehen befindlichen Performance-Ereignisses verändern. Statt dies als Schwäche anzusehen, schlage ich vor, dass der Betrachter die Vermittlung des Fotografen anerkennen und in positivem Lichte sehen könnte: als einen Transferakt stillschweigenden Wissens, das eine Erfahrung einer Erfahrung wiedergibt anstelle eines reduktiven Blickes aus dem Nichts. Auf diese Weise kann der Akt des Fotografierens als eine Form der Interpretation gesehen werden, ähnlich der Interpretation eines Kunsthistorikers oder Kunstkritikers, nur dass es sich in diesem Fall um eine nicht-textuelle und nonverbale Form handelt.

As I recall, it was the fall of 2001 when I witnessed my first performance art event. The performance took place at the Art System gallery in Toronto, which at the time had gained a fair bit of notoriety, partially due to it being run by Jubal Brown — an artist best known for vomiting primary colours on paintings in both the Art Gallery of Ontario and the MoMA in New York, and also for the gallery's public support of a video by Jesse Power depicting a cat being tortured and skinned alive. With this in mind, I went to the event with an expectation of something shocking and sensational to occur. I am unable to remember the name of the artist nor the title of the exhibition, but can share a description of the performance — at least as I remember it — and my visceral response to the experience of having been there myself.

The piece began with a male performer entering the room wearing a dilapidated blond wig, a white tutu, and a pair of translucent white tights through which a large adult diaper was visible. The song "Flashdance... What a Feeling" by Irene Cara began to play and the performer proceeded to dance in a pseudo-sexual fashion.³ As he continued to dance, you could see his facial expression contort; these contortions were later explained when, at the end of the song, he reached into the diaper and pulled out a handful of faecal matter. He proceeded to add this handful to a skillet on a working hotplate, where he fried it with the addition of some spicy black bean sauce. After a few minutes of cooking, he took out a spoon and began to eat the "meal," then pausing for a moment, offered a sample to the audience.

Following this foray into scatological cuisine, the performer produced a spiral-shaped piece of metal attached to a wooden handle, which he also placed on the hotplate, allowing it to heat up. Lying down on a couch, he removed the tutu, so that his assistant could apply the red hot metal to the bare flesh of his back, branding him with an abstract spiral pattern. The performer then stood up and walked out of the room, and the audience cautiously applauded.

Through my experience of witnessing this live performance, I can claim to know the event in a certain way – having *been* there myself to acquire the full sensory experience, in the moment, as the events unfolded. Through my written description, you have now gained explicit and "factual" knowledge of the event, yet are also able to draw from your own experience to produce a mental image, and imagine something of what it was *like* to be there: the smell of frying faeces and burning flesh, the sounds of the audience members' gasps and the performer's screams as the red-hot iron made contact with his flesh. However, this description is based upon my specific memory and my ability to recall what actually happened. As such, it is quite suspect and prone to error, and can never be held to be an "objective" or true version of the event.

The question of how one can actually know an experiential and ephemeral thing such as a performance art event becomes central to our understanding of the art form. Due to the limitations of time and space, it is rarely possible to experience the performance as a live event. Even when it is

possible, one's memory of the event may be selective, or may shift and grow vague over time. Photographic and video documentation provide a potential solution to this,⁴ but many artists and theorists resist the use of documentation because it works against the supposedly "authentic" live experience and the ephemeral ideal of performance.

This paper will explore such debates through an analysis of texts by key figures such as Peggy Phelan, Amelia Jones, and Philip Auslander, as well as drawing upon my own experience documenting performance art over many years. The goal of the paper will be to present a notion of viewing photographic documentation as a phenomenological experience in itself. Additionally, this paper will take into consideration the typically neglected role of the photographer. Where others have seen the photographer as problematic, complicating understandings of the performance event that would seek to see it as a self-contained work, I argue in favour to embrace the photographer's subjectivity, both in terms of how their aesthetic decisions shape the visual document and how the photographer's body and the mere presence of the camera alter and influence the dynamic of the performance. By considering the photographer's mediation in this manner, the photographic documentation becomes a record of a particular individual's experience rather than a mere "factual document".

Many theorists, such as Peggy Phelan, see the live and ephemeral nature of performance art as essential to the genre's form. As she states:

"Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance."⁵

Phelan promotes the idea of an "authentic" way of knowing the performance piece that is only possible through the visceral, fully sensorial, live experience, and the idea that the performance is meant to disappear, living on only in the memory of the select few who were present at the event. As romantic as this view may be, it is limiting, both in terms of the work being seen by a large audience and for it to have any life at all after the initial engagement. Plus, much like my own recollection of the performance at Art System, there are bound to be gaps in the memories of those who were present, and memory is prone to morphing and shifting over time, thus distorting pivotal aspects of the original piece. Laurie Anderson describes such a case where in relation to her own work "people would say things like, 'I really loved that orange dog you had in the show!' And I never had an orange dog ever."6 Such instances prompted Anderson to eventually embrace the notion of documentation, so that her work would not disappear through misrepresentation.

Additionally, there is no one "authentic" experience to be had at such an event. Every member of the audience is situated differently both physically within the space and through what they choose to look at and pay attention to at any given moment, and also through their background, experience and personal identity which they bring with them when viewing the work.

In some cases, performance works are reperformed as a way to renew the possibility of an "authentic experience", but the reperformance will most likely unfold in a slightly divergent manner, a different context, and in a different historic moment all of which have the potential to drastically alter the audience's reaction, the meaning of the work and the overall experience of the piece. So, one does not acquire an "authentic experience" of the original event, but rather an experience of a new performance that is essentially a "cover" of the original.⁷

For most viewers, including the art historian Amelia Jones, photographic documentation is the only way to access the event, especially for events that occurred before one's birth. The photographic record may not present the same full-fledged and hefty phenomenological experience as the live event, but according to Jones "neither has a privileged relationship to the historic 'truth' of the performance".8

Jones proposes that when we consider the photographic documentation along with other supplementary materials°, we can come to form, in the words of Jacques Derrida, "the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence, or originary perception". ¹⁰ Additionally, Jones argues that, much like the relationship between audience and performer, the exchange between viewer and document is intersubjective, albeit in a mediated way. But then for Jones "there is no possibility of an unmediated relationship to any kind of cultural product, including body art". ¹¹

Using Carolee Schneeman's *Interior Scroll* (1975) as a specific example, Jones states that "having direct physical contact with an artist who pulls a scroll from her vaginal canal does not ensure "knowledge" of her subjectivity or intentionality any more than does looking at a film or picture of this activity". ¹² For Jones, the very notion of an "authentic" live experience is no more than an idealistic fantasy or a "modernist dream". ¹³

Philip Auslander takes this idea further by proposing that the live event is, for the most part, incidental. For Auslander, the "performance" lies within the documentation itself, specifically within the relationship between viewer and image. In emphasizing the relationship between the viewer and the image over the relationship between the performance and its documentation, he allows for what he refers to as theatrical documentation or performed photography, such as Yves Klein's *Leap into the Void* (1960), to be considered as valid performances in their own right.

Using the example of Klein's *Leap*, Auslander states:

"[T]o argue that Klein's leap was not a performance because it only took place within photographic space would be equivalent to arguing that the Beatles did not perform the music on their *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album because that performance exists only in the space of the recording: the group never actually performed the music as we hear it." ¹⁴

For Auslander, it does not matter whether the documentation is truthful, deceitful, or manipulated. The indexical relationship to the original event is mostly irrelevant — the performance exists within the viewer's imagination, in their current present as they recreate the event for their self, through an experience of the performance documents. ¹⁵ This does not mean that the document holds no connection to the past — just that it does not afford the viewer direct access to the originating event. Instead, Auslander proposes that the photographic documentation functions "as a text from which we can imaginatively reactivate historical performances in the present, allowing us to understand experientially both the past and our present as they are disclosed in and through an ongoing dialogue with one another". ¹⁶

Hans Belting also proposes a phenomenological, experiential approach to photographic documentation by considering the viewing of an image as an event in itself: "Images are neither on the wall (or on the screen) nor in the head alone. They do not exist by themselves, but they happen; they take place". ¹⁷ In essence, the viewer's body "performs the image" and the image event is a negotiation between the viewer's body and the medium. However, for Belting, there is no direct or "truthful" connection between the viewer and the image (or the originating event) as "no visible images reach us unmediated". ¹⁸

In a similar fashion, Georges Didi-Huberman acknowledges the problems that arise due to considering images as matters of fact and holding on to an expectation that they carry the complete and absolute "truth":

"[W]e often ask too much or too little of an image. Ask too much of it — "the whole truth" for example — and we will quickly be disappointed. ... Or else we ask too little of images: by immediately relegating them to the sphere of simulacrum ... we exclude them from the historic field as such. By immediately relegating them to the sphere of the document — something easier and more current — we sever them from their phenomenology, from their specificity, and from their very substance. In every case the result will be identical: the historian will continue to feel that ... 'the images whatever their nature, cannot tell what happened.' "19

Didi-Huberman's analysis, like Auslander's, Jones' and Belting's, helps us to consider photographs in a new way. Didi-Huberman argues that the power residing in such documentary images is situated not in their ability to depict events through any sort of direct indexical relationship, but instead in their capacity to aid and inspire our imagination — because, as he states, "To remember, one must imagine" and "In order to know, we must imagine for ourselves". ²¹

Didi-Huberman describes the process of viewing a photograph as a quasi-observation that functions as an interpretation augmented by the "historical imagination — written documents, contemporary testimonies, other visual sources". ²² Much like Amelia Jones' notion of a "mirage," these elements combine to form a tacit montage of knowledge within one's imagination. However, he also states that "an image without

imagination is quite simply an image that one didn't spend the time to work on". ²³ Imagining, on the part of the viewer, involves mental work, a consideration of external information and an acknowledgement of the various mediators involved in the production of the image in question.

In terms of such mediators, the most obvious and influential is the photographer. The act of image fabrication is obviously contingent upon the living body of the performer who performs in front of the camera, but also upon the living body of the photographer performing behind the camera — which in turn is visible to, and has an effect upon, the performance occurring in front of the lens. Yet, the role played by the photographer in performance art documentation is rarely considered, let alone acknowledged. Typically, the photographer is viewed simply as a black box through which one gains access to a supposedly unmediated, objective, and mechanical depiction of the event.

This neglect is explicitly acknowledged by Kathy O'Dell in her essay "Behold!" which appears in the *Live Art on Camera* exhibition catalogue:

"Ironically, the photographer has been historically invisible in the contract-like agreement that pertains to the recording of live events, even though he or she may have been most engaged in the material sense."²⁴

The *Live Art on Camera: Performance and Photography* exhibition attempted to "disallow such invisibility" of the photographer²⁵ and to present the idea of a hybrid identity for the performance art document²⁶. As Stephen Foster explains in the catalogue's introduction, "the document of a performance is not the work and neither is it a document; in every case it holds a position somewhere between the two".²⁷ However, *Live Art on Camera* is a distinct outlier and with few exceptions, the photographer's influence is almost never mentioned.

Over the years, I have photographed many performances. I am well aware that my presence as a photographer is always an issue and it is always something that I have to discuss with the artist before the performance begins. During such a discussion, I review the challenges of getting decent images without interfering, in order to gauge where the performer's priorities lie: in the event itself or in its documentation. We agree upon parameters such as whether or not I can move around during the performance, whether I can move in front of audience members, if I can use a flash or not, and whether I should hold back from shooting during quiet periods lest the sound of the camera's click break the solemn quality of the moment. The results of this discussion vary, but in most cases, artists lean towards allowing me to do what is necessary in order to get good images, as they usually appreciate and acknowledge the significance of documentation for the viability of their work.

An extreme example of my interference occurred when I was commissioned to photograph Michael Dudeck's performance *Parthenogenesis* at the Pari Nadimi Gallery in Toronto in 2009. Being a young performer, Dudeck wanted

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An extreme example of my interference occurred when I was commissioned to photograph Michael Dudeck's performance *Parthenogenesis* at the Pari Nadimi Gallery in Toronto in 2009. Being a young performer, Dudeck wanted

to obtain high-quality documentation in order to help establish his career, so he gave me free reign to do whatever was required. The performance involved a number of mannequins covered in hockey tape, gas masks, and deer antlers scattered around a large room, functioning for the artist as shamanic objects with which he would interact in a ritualistic and sexualized manner. When the audience arrived, they lined up, in the conventional way, with their backs against the outer walls, looking in toward the main space of the gallery. The only figures on display in the centre of the room were the artist (dressed in shamanic garb), the manneguins, and myself (dressed all in black at the artist's request). My presence in the gallery was difficult to ignore as I had recently suffered a severe Judo injury, 28 which had left my knee stuck in a bent position and had me walking with a significant hobble for a number of months while I awaited surgery. So, as the performance progressed, the artist was followed by a clicking, limping, shadowy figure which was in no way intended, but had, through the need for documentation, become a part of the spectacle - thus drastically altering the audience's experience of the performance as a live event.

This interference or influence on the part of the photographer is not always negative and at times can become a beneficial extension. During a recent performance of *The 5th Annual Power Animal Party* by Michael Farnan, my presence, as the photographer, was reconfigured as I became a form of paparazzi that accentuated the "celebrity" status of his fictional character, AssFace, the Plastic Shaman to the Stars.²⁹

Beyond the influence of the photographer's body within the space of the performance, the mere presence of the camera significantly alters the way in which events unfold. With an awareness that their image may be captured and scrutinized by others at a later date, both performers and people in the audience tend to act differently: they pose and make attempts to appear in a self-flattering way, or they alter their path and actions in order to avoid the camera's gaze altogether.

Not only does the camera induce a degree of pretence in both performers and audience members, but it also functions to turn the event into a spectacle. The presence of the camera visually indicates that the situation occurring before the lens is worthy of documentation, hence is worthy of attention and, as such, passers-by take notice. The act of documenting defines it as a performance and as an event.

As for my own experience in this regard, the best example occurred while I was documenting the relational/public performance work *Each Hand as They are Called* by Reena Katz. This was an extended piece involving numerous public performances taking place in Toronto's Kensington Market over the course of one week in October of 2009. Included in Katz's piece was a series of minor performances involving the spontaneous appearance of a duo singing traditional Yiddish songs backwards. The time and location of these

small, intimate performances were left to chance (determined by a roll of dice) in order to facilitate serendipitous encounters with unsuspecting members of the public. A number of these performances occurred exactly as intended, as quiet little surprises, but due to the need for documentation, a majority took place with me in tow as the photographer, lying visibly in wait for the event to begin, thus diminishing the potential of a serendipitous and surprise encounter.

My intent is not to be critical of these artists for choosing to obtain good documentation at some expense to the intimacy of their live performances. After all, the reality, as described by Jones and Auslander, is that the performance lives on and will be experienced primarily through its documentation. Therefore, satisfactory documentation is a crucial part of the performance's existence as an artwork. My intent is simply to show that the photographer and the camera are mediators that are always implicated in some way to the performance they document, and it is a trade-off that the performing artist must always carefully weigh.

In his essay "How to Be Iconophilic in Art, Science, and Religion?" Bruno Latour examines such mediators, and proposes that viewers should approach images according to an iconophilic approach rather than as an idolatry of the image. To illustrate this, Latour uses the example of a map as a mediator between a group of scientists in a Brazilian café and an actual location in the Amazon rainforest. The map allows the scientists to point to, designate, and "see" the very real spot they plan to visit the next morning.31 The question Latour asks is: what do they actually "see"? If one embraces idolatry, they would claim that they see nothing but the piece of paper before them, since the designated landscape is absent. However, if one takes an iconophilic approach and considers the scientists as relating to the location "through a long series of intermediary steps", 32 they are indeed able to see according to the map and thus imagine the location for themselves. As explained by Latour, "Iconophilia is respect not for the image itself but the movement of the image". 33 lt should also be noted that even though the map, or a photograph for that matter, is a construction achieved through intensive mediation, this does not make it a fiction or a simulacrum - there are still what Latour calls "immutable mobiles" that exist as informational constants that are "carried intact through the transformation of the media". 34 According to Latour, through an iconophilia approach, one is able "to be a constructivist and a realist at the same time".35

Latour looks to art history as a constructivist model — one from which other fields such as the sciences might learn — where the "mediators" are seen as adding to the overall quality and informative value of an image:

"[T]he beauty of a Rembrandt, for instance, could be accounted for by multiplying the mediators — going from the quality of the varnish, the types of market force, the name of all the successive buyers and sellers, the critical accounts evaluating the painting throughout history, the narrative of

the theme and its successful transformations, the competi-

tion among painters, the slow invention of a taste, the laws

of composition and the ways they were taught, the type of studio life, and so on in a bewildering gamut of heterogeneous elements that, together, composed the quality of a Rembrandt. In art history the more mediators the better."36 However, and somewhat ironically, art historians do not seem to apply this iconophilic view to performance art documentation. Instead, the common practice is to ignore the mediators and embrace idolatry. Viewing the document as a form of black-boxed, objective fact — then to criticize it for not living up to this imposed ideal. Perhaps this is because the performance art document is not considered as an artwork in its own right, thus is seen as unworthy of a constructivist interpretation. But as stated earlier by Stephen Foster, the performance art document is not simply a document either: "it holds a position somewhere between the two." 37 Another way to think of the performance art photographer would be to align them with the figure of the art critic or a journalist reviewing an art exhibition — only in this case, the photographer is working in an uncoded and non-linguistic form of interpretation. In the same way that a writer chooses what to highlight and what to ignore, what to present in a positive light and what to pan, so does the photographer. Yet the photographer is typically not seen as a subject or as an author, but merely as an instrument: an intermediary through which information passes supposedly unaltered. Babette Mangolte, one of the few performance art photographers to have written about her own practice, describes her approach as a "balancing act between instinct and reason."38 She states that even though she was striving for objectivity, she also valued her "instinctive reactions in confronting a performance"39 and the significance of her intuition in interpreting the event. In so doing, she is able to present a fair and accurate portrayal of events, yet one that still incorporates her own personal, instinctive, and visceral response. This leads to a richer phenomenological experience of the image itself, as viewers can then place themselves in her position, thus constructing a much more detailed and affective "mental image" 40 through the use of their own imagination.

Yet another possible way to think about performance art documentation would be to consider a cinema-type approach where the eventual artwork is not simply the product of an individual, heroic figure, but instead a collaborative endeavour involving writers, a director, actors and a cinematographer.

Returning to Peggy Phelan's claim that once performance art is documented it becomes something else.⁴¹ It may very well be the case that the full sensory experience of a performance event is not entirely transferred through the documentation, but this "something other"⁴² that it becomes, Jones reminds us, is what the vast majority of viewers experience as the actual artwork. Both Jones and Auslander also propose the possibility of a phenomenological experience,

by way of the image, through the use of one's imagination—and this sentiment is echoed by Hans Belting and Georges Didi-Huberman.

With the notion that the documentation functions, for the viewer, as the primary experience of the artwork, the typically omitted role of the photographer rises to the forefront because it is the photographer's experience that the viewer of the documentation experiences by proxy. The photographer is not a mechanical tool, or an objective black box that simply transfers information unaltered from input to output, but is instead a mediator who plays a role in shaping the imagery through technical decisions and subjective interpretation - as well as through their physical presence as a corporeal body implicated in the dynamics of the performance itself. This mediation on the part of the photographer should not be ignored, or seen negatively by the viewer, but instead, they should allow for the subjective influence of the photographer to carry through as a form of personal storytelling, intermixed with immutable mobiles and indexes to historic fact, that when combined together help them to better imagine and experience the event for their self through the eyes of the photographer - by way of an encounter with the photograph.

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Notes

- 1 BARBER 2007, pp. 116-125, and DEPALMA 1996a, 1996b
- 2 SMITH 2001, and Stevens 2005
- 3 A song made famous through the film Flashdance
- This paper will primarily focus on photographic documentation because that is where my personal experience lies.
- 5 PHELAN 1993, p. 146
- 6 ANDERSON 1998, pp. 6-7
- 7 CHARMERS 2008, p. 25
- 8 JONES 1997, p. 11, and Jones extends this idea, proposing that the subsequent view may in fact be the more thorough understanding of the work.
- 9 The other supplementary materials Jones mentions include spoken narrative, written text, video, film, and photographs.
- 10 JONES 1997, p. 14
- 11 JONES 1997, p. 12
- 12 JONES 1997, p. 13
- 13 JONES 1997, p. 17
- 14 AUSLANDER 2006, p. 9
- 15 AUSLANDER 2009, p. 95
- 16 AUSLANDER 2009, p. 95
- 17 BELTING 2014, p. 302
- 18 BELTING 2014, p. 304
- 19 DIDI-HUBERMAN 2008, pp. 32-33
- 20 DIDI-HUBERMAN 2008, p. 30

- 21 DIDI-HUBERMAN 2008, p. 1
- 22 DIDI-HUBERMAN 2008, pp. 113-114
- 23 DIDI-HUBERMAN 2008, p. 116
- 24 O'DELL 2007, p. 35
- 25 O'DELL 2007, p. 35
- 26 The Live Art on Camera: Performance and Photography exhibition took place from September 18 to November 10, 2007 at the John Hansard Gallery in Southampton UK.
- 27 FOSTER 2007, pp. v-vi
- 28 I had torn the meniscus in my right knee which had shifted to become jammed in the joint creating a "locked knee" condition. This resulted in my knee being stuck in a bent position.
- 29 After the performance it was also suggested (in a jovial manner) that I could have manifested an even greater influence by also taking on the role of bouncer and helping to manage and potentially eject some excessively drunken audience members who became disruptive presences towards the end of the performance; however, I held back in that particular role, deciding that ejecting audience members without explicit directions to do so went beyond my expected role as photographer.
- 30 This also opens up potential problems in terms of authorship and ownership, if one considers the documentation photograph as an art object that is to be bought and sold in the art market. Is this document a product of the artist, the photographer, or a collaborative production by both? In any case, who should receive the proceeds from such a sale? I once had an artist approach me indicating a desire to sell my documentation of his performance through his dealer in New York. He offered me a percentage of the sale, which seemed fair enough in my opinion, but I have yet to hear back I am not sure if they were never put up for sale, never sold, or if his dealer simply convinced him that my role in making the actual images was incidental.
- 31 Although not explicitly stated by Latour, it is assumed that they have not previously visited this location, so through the use of the map they are able to imagine a geography and a location that they have never seen.
- 32 LATOUR 1998, p. 419
- 33 LATOUR 1998, p. 421
- 34 LATOUR 1998, p. 426
- 35 LATOUR 1998, p. 423
- 36 LATOUR 1998, p. 422
- 37 FOSTER 2007, pp. v-vi
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