

What the Fuck is That? The Poetics of Ruptural Performance

Tony Perucci

Recent years have seen a rise in the practice of political street performance. Often called “interventions” or “performance activism,” many of these actions exceed the transparent political messaging of traditional agit-prop performance. Rather, they mobilize the particular qualities of performance as embodied action—what I call “ruptural performance”—as a modality in opposition to the stultifying effects of the society of the spectacle. Drawing on Brechtian aesthetics and the Artaudian embodiment of “the poetic state” as well as the (a)logic of Dada and the materialism of Minimal Art, ruptural performance enacts interruption, event, confrontation and bafflement as a form of direct action.

*“Every day, do something that won’t compute”
— Wendell Berry, *The Mad Farmer’s Manifesto*¹*

Much of today’s activism emerges out of an experience of the totality, of the intractability and intransigence of consumer culture, and of what Guy Debord once called “the society of the spectacle.” It is an aesthetic response to a political/cultural crisis, not to mention an ecological, psychic and economic one. This essay addresses what is particular to the performance of what are variously called “interventions” and “performance activism.” These actions’ characteristics *as performance* work in ways that are specific to their form and exceed any “message” or content that they might (or might not) seek to convey. The conditions of inequity and ecological disaster that are intrinsic to consumer culture are now an open secret – or not even a secret but an accepted fact of life. Perhaps this is even truer now in the face of what has been named “the current economic crisis,” which spurs the call to “drill baby drill” and

Tony Perucci (Ph.D. New York University) is Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is also a founding member of The Performance Collective, which makes theatre and trouble.

¹ Thanks to Performance Collective artists Kaitlin Houlditch-Fair, Lisa Keaton, Grace MacNair, and Peter Pendergrass for introducing me to this quote in their beautiful performance piece, “The Rebirth Manifesto.”

sends Wal-Mart sales through the roof while the rest of the economy collapses. Ecological crisis and sweatshop labor are no longer concerns that we think we can afford to address in daily life. In the face of such conditions, Jacques Rancière points out the challenge of what he calls the dilemma of “critical art” thusly: “understanding alone can do little to transform consciousness and situations. The exploited have rarely had the need to have the laws of exploitation explained to them. Because it’s not a misunderstanding of the existing state of affairs that nurtures the submission of the oppressed, but a lack of confidence in their own capacity to transform it” (83). In what follows, I argue for and trace out the critical characteristics of this insurgent form of performance activism that I am calling “ruptural performance.” Ruptural performances are distinct less because of a communicated message of their content and more by their qualities as performance: they are interruptive, becoming-event, confrontational, and baffling. Understanding performance as rupture provides a significant way to think about and create interventionist and political performance that places the focus centrally on the act of performance.

This emergent genre of performed activism pays a particular debt to the pranksterism of Abbie Hoffman, the *détournement* of the Situationists, and the absurd enactments of Dada performance. These performance interventions are best known today through the practice of culture jamming and by the staged performances of Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping, The Billionaires for Bush, and the Yes Men. Such interventions, as well as those by lesser-known artists (partly because their strangeness cannot be easily accommodated by media coverage, political activists and academic theorization), can be understood through the notion of “performance as rupture” (Perucci “Guilty” 315-329). Rupture itself is not a “new” element in culture, and it certainly has a long legacy in modernism as the breach, shift or break. But it has a particular resonance in current activist practices that are both freer and more delimited than previous such enactments.

To define performance as rupture, we must articulate what it ruptures. At the risk of constructing a false binary, let me propose that the obverse of “performance as rupture” is Debord’s “spectacle.” Debord explains that while the society of the spectacle is indeed an “accumulation of *spectacles*,” (*Society* 12) he distinguishes that “The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (*Society* 12). While he calls it a “*weltanschauung*” (*Society* 13) it is more than an ideology or a veil of false consciousness. Rather it is “the very heart of society’s real unreality,” (*Society* 13) and in that materiality extends the alienation of the production of the commodity to its consumption: the spectacle produces “isolation” through the shift from doing to “contemplation,” where “The spectator’s alienation from and submission to the contemplated object [...] works like this: the more he contemplates, the less he lives” (*Society* 23). Ultimately, the spectacle as “social relationship” represents the triumph of the commodity-image, the “ruling order’s ... uninterrupted monologue of self-praise” (*Society* 19) where “the commodity completes its colonization of social life” (*Society* 29). In understanding the spectacle as

not merely spectacles, but a modality of experience, in which separation and contemplation flatten the encounter with presence, Debord proposes “situations” specifically to intervene at the level of the experience.

However, in his recent attempt to characterize the new activism, *Dream: Reimagining Progressive Politics in the Age of Fantasy*, Stephen Duncombe proposes that spectacle is itself the basis for protest, and that the distinction of the spectacle and the situation is merely “semantic” (130). Instead, he proposes “the ethical spectacle”:

our spectacles will be *participatory*, dreams the public can mold and shape themselves. They will be *active*: spectacles that work only if people help create them. They will be *open-ended*: setting stages to ask questions and leaving silences to formulate answers. And they will be *transparent*: dreams that one knows are dreams but which still have the power to attract and inspire. And finally, the spectacles we create will not cover over or replace *reality and truth* but perform and amplify it. (17, emphasis added)

There is much to be gained from Duncombe’s schematization here. And what I wish to do is revise and amplify it by challenging his dismissal of the distinctive character of “spectacle.”² As I have tried to show in my brief summary above, the spectacle is not just a thing to be seen, but is also a *mode of performance*. Interventionist performance, particularly that which seeks to challenge and disrupt the values and especially the *experience* of the society of the spectacle, is another *modality* of enactment rather than a variation of spectacle. While performance interventions share with spectacle the qualities of being dramatic and theatrical, what distinguishes them is that they disrupt the experience of daily life, a rupture of the living of social relations—what Reverend Billy of the Church of Stop Shopping calls “the necessary interruption” (*What Should I Do*, xiii). The interruption, which Benjamin might call the “sudden start” or the “shock” (163), creates the space for and initiates the experience of a ruptural performance.

While bearing in mind the promising schema laid out by Duncombe, but also taking into consideration the particular characteristics of the society of the spectacle upon which much “interventionist” work means to engage, I am calling for a proliferation of ruptural performances. Below is an attempt to trace out rupture as a “modality” of performance that means to disrupt, or at least, to fuck with the spectacle.

Given Duncombe’s setting of “dreaming the impossible” (158) as a critical element of performance activism, I will introduce my schematic by means of an example from a fiction film. The 2004 film, *Die Fetten Jahre Sind Vorbei* (*The Fat Years are Over*, released in the US as *The Edukators*, d. Weingartner) begins this way: an

² In Duncombe’s defense, the rationale for claiming the term spectacle and redefining it was a “tactical” choice for his book that enables the appropriating of his framework for activism. (Personal communication, October 2007) Still, I would suggest that “spectacle” in the Debordian sense and rupture are incompatible, even if the performance is “spectacular.”

affluent German family returns to their home to discover a break-in. Their first sign of trouble is a massive tower made of their dining room furniture. They gaze at the sculpture, frozen with bafflement. Nothing, however, has been stolen. But their many commodities have been humiliated: a porcelain bust is hanging from a noose, glass figurines are found stuffed in the toilet, the stereo is in the refrigerator, and finally a letter that says “Lesen!” (“Read!”). Inside reads the message from the anarchist group that reorganizes the possessions of wealthy residents: “Die fetten Jahre sind vorbei.” They stop and stare, confounded.



Figure 1 - Humiliated Commodities in *Die Fetten Jahre Sind Vorbei* (2005, d. Weingartner)



Figure 2 - Interrupted in *Die Fetten Jahre Sind Vorbei* (2005, d. Weingartner)

1. *Ruptural performances are interruptive.* In some way these performances halt, impede, or delay the habitual practices of daily life. They intervene at the level and in the midst of the quotidian. Such performances engage the “necessary interruption” which seeks to make conscious what is habitual so that it is available for critique. In this way it shares Debord’s notion of the constructed situation—“the concrete construction of temporary settings of life and their transformation into a higher, passionate nature” is inherently interruptive as it “asserts a non-continuous conception of life” (“Report” 48). They seek to destabilize what the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky called the “automatism of perception” (13). For Shklovsky, the role of art is to undo “habitualization,” which he says, “devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war” (12). Such a reclamation of perception Shklovsky calls “defamiliarization” (13), for which the Russian phrase is *priem ostraneniye*, and that translates literally as “making strange.” Brecht realized the political potential for this concept as the *Verfremdungseffekt*, which is foundational in that it focuses on the *experience* of making the familiar strange as much as the transmission of a political message. In the speed-up of a contemporary life characterized by images and simulations, these performances engage what Walter Benjamin calls the “interruption of happenings” that estranges the “conditions of life” (150). It is this interruption, Benjamin suggests, that allows performance to obtain the “special character [of] ... producing astonishment rather than empathy” (150). Interruptive performance, however, occurs not at the level of representation, but on the field of presence. It is achieved by “putting a frame” around experience (more in John Cage’s than Erving

Goffman's sense) that produces what Richard Bauman calls a "heightened intensity" or "special enhancement of experience" (43).

The Brazilian group, *Opovoempé*,³ has performed their *Guerrilha Magnética* (Magnetic Guerilla) and other *intervenções* (interventions) throughout public spaces in São Paulo. In 2006, they composed and performed *Congelados* (Frozen), a series of *intervenções*, throughout the city's *supermercados*. The performances consisted of simple and improvised ensemble compositions constructed through the use of gesture, repetition, spatial relationship, and kinesthetic response.⁴ The piece, in its basic performance of the actions of shopping, defamiliarizes the activities of shopping.



Figure 3 - *Congelados* (Frozen) (2005) – One of *Opovoempé's* *Guerrilha Magnética* (Magnetic Guerilla) in São Paulo, Brazil.

³ *Opovoempé*, which translates to English as "people on their feet," was founded in São Paulo, Brazil in 2004 by Ana Luiza Leão, Christiane Zuan Esteves, Graziela Mantoanelli, Manuela Afonso, and Paula Lopez. For more on *Opovoempé*, see www.opovoempe.org.

⁴The Viewpoints, first conceived by choreographer and theorist Mary Overlie (and revised by theatre director Anne Bogart), works to challenge what Overlie calls the "Vertical" theatrical system that privileges plot and character over other theatrical elements. Overlie has developed a full re-conceptualization of theatrical practice, as well as specific rehearsal, training exercises, and performance strategies to encourage performers and directors to engage on the "Horizontal." All elements, or Viewpoints, of the stage are in equal value and particularity: Space, Shape, Time, Emotion, Movement, and Story. Bogart has broken these down further: tempo, duration, kinesthetic response, repetition (elements of time), spatial relation, shape, topography, gesture, and architecture (elements of space) (Bogart and Landau). Viewpoints-composed pieces treat these elements as Horizontal to plot and character (more akin to instrumental music or postmodern dance). For a discussion of the use of Viewpoints in creating theatre performances, see my "Pretty Isn't It?: Adapting Film Noir to the Stage."



Figure 4 - *Opovoempé* performing an *intervenção* at a *supermercado* in São Paulo, Brazil.
[view video of the intervention here: http://www.opovoempe.org/?page_id=211]

The “choreography” that constitutes the “dance and music of buying” only gradually becomes evident, as the repetition of the banal gestures of shopping begins to mark their strangeness as performance (“Nos Supermercados” Esteves).⁵ Though the content of the action is not overtly political (it does not scream its ideology), it makes the encounter with shopping, and especially its mindlessness and repetitiveness, seem strange. At its foundation, the pieces are rupture-producing machines: “The interventions intend to cause rupture of communication barriers, revelation of humor and play, change in the use of public space, and the manifestation of latent contents or social tensions previously unnoticed” (“What is” Esteves). That rupture is specifically political—particularly in mobilizing the poetic state of quotidian settings. *Guerrilha Magnética* performances are intended “to break apathy and indifference, to install a creative atmosphere of play and to reveal the poetic content of the city” (“What is” Esteves).

⁵ *Guerrilha Magnética*’s movement from invisibility to visibility is distinct from the group’s “*Fora de chava* (Out of Key(s))” where the event of performance is distinctively marked from the start.



Figure 5 - The author in performance with *Oporoempé* in the *Guerrilha Magnética*, “O que se viu que você vê (What Was Seen That You See)” (2007) on a freeway overpass, on Avenue Paulista, and at a police substation in São Paulo, Brazil. Photos by Christian Castanho.

2. *Ruptural performances are becoming-events.* That is, they do, as Dell Hymes suggests, “breakthrough into performance” (11). And while their boundaries are unstable and unfixed, it is the ruptural performances’ eventness, their status as singular in time and space, which enables the presencing that the spectacle confounds. Alain Baidou puts it this way: “This other time, whose materiality envelops the consequences of the event, deserves the name of a new present. The event is neither past nor future. It makes us present to the present” (39). And yet the instability of the boundaries of the event is equally significant. Ruptural performances tend to confound boundaries of the real and artificial. The actual event of performance is generated by means of artifice, in which audiences often don’t initially realize that they are in a performance. In ruptural performances, audiences often first suspect that something isn’t right, but are not sure if something is amiss. Ultimately, though, the “breakthrough” occurs that things aren’t normal, they are strange, and we are in the midst of an event. It is this eventness (and the anticipatory process of becoming event) that enlivens the occasion of the here and now. And that temporal immediacy is captured well by Benjamin’s invocation of *Jetztzeit* or the “presence of the now” (261).

One becoming-event that has been performed around the world is the “whirl.” The whirl consists of a group of fifteen or more people entering a sweatshop store a few at a time (most often a Wal-Mart, thus the sometimes-used moniker: “Whirl-Mart”) who move empty shopping carts throughout the store. Once all performers are inside and with carts, the participants create a single line of carts that snakes throughout the store, splitting and refiguring as the snake of carts meets up with blocked aisles and shopping customers (which must look like a Busby Berkley dance sequence to the overhead security cameras).⁶

⁶ View videos of whirls here: <http://www.archive.org/details/WhirlMart> and here: <http://www.thevacuumcleaner.co.uk/whirlvid.html>



Figure 6 - The becoming-event of performing the whirl.

During the hour or more of the performance, if asked by management, security, employees, or customers what they are doing, performers respond kindly with “I’m not shopping.” As performers make their rounds, it is the employees who first encounter the becoming-event, then the customers, then management (who begin manically communicating on walkie-talkies), and finally security. When security gets wise, it’s time to return the carts and exit the store. As ruptural performance, the whirl does not make any specific claim on protesting the many things one could advocate against—sweatshop labor, poor treatment of store employees, predatory business practices, etc. ad infinitum—given that all present could recite this litany of wrongs. Rather the whirl *enacts* the becoming-event of “not shopping,” which in itself can be read as an engagement against over-consumption, Wal-Mart’s imperialism, unfair labor practices, or ecological devastation.⁷

3. *Ruptural performances are confrontational.* By this, I don’t necessarily mean aggressive, though they may be that. Rather, it is as Benjamin puts it, where a

⁷ This description of the “whirl” is based on my experience participating in Whirls at Los Angeles area Wal-Marts under the guidance of Bill Talen and Savitree Durkee in 2004 and 2005. Talen describes an array of ruptural performance retail interventions in his book *What Would Jesus Buy?* A history and description of the whirl can be found at <http://www.breathingplanet.net/whirl/>.

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“stranger is confronted with the situation as with a startling picture” (151). Ruptural performance is thus distinguished from the “revelatory” performance that unmask the hidden truths (though it may also do this). In our age, what Marx called the “secret of the commodity”—that its price masked the alienated labor that produced it—is now exposed. We know, for instance, that many of the products we buy are produced by sweatshop, child and slave labor; but we have developed what Adrian Piper calls “ways of averting one’s gaze” (“Ways” 167). Ruptural performance is thus less a critique of ideology or false consciousness, and is more about the experience of the encounter of returning one’s gaze to that which one avoids to maintain acceptance of the inequities of the contemporary social orders. As Husserl notes, “Things are simply there and just need to be seen.” Bruce Wilshire also gets at what I’m talking about when he describes phenomenology as a “systematic effort to unmask the obvious” (11). In fact, this quality is what Michael Fried complained about as the central quality minimal art: its “stage presence” or “theatricality” where “the work refuses, obstinately, to let him alone—which is to say, it refuses to stop confronting him” (140). And in this way, ruptural performance owes as much to Minimalism as it does to Dada. As such it enacts what Fred Moten suggests is not only an “excess of meaning” but also “the anti-interpretive nonreduction of nonmeaning” (197). Ruptural performances, like Minimal Art, are characterized by a “concrete thereness,” that Barbara Rose says is a “literal and emphatic assertion of their own existence” (216). As Rosalind Krauss says of Donald Judd’s work, we can say of Ruptural Performance: it “compels and gratifies immediate sensual gratification” (211).

On February 29, 2008, two days before the Russian election that resulted in the victory for Vladimir Putin apprentice Dmitry Medvedev, the Russian group *Voyna* (“War”) confronted patrons of the Moscow Biological Museum with a display of sensual gratification in the form of a “collective fuck action” (www.indymedia.org). Five Russian couples surreptitiously disrobed and proceeded in an extended session of group sex as bearded man with a top hat and tuxedo holds aloft a sign that reads “Fuck for the heir bear cub.” The phrase is a play on Medvedev’s name, which is derived from the Russian word for bear (Medved).



Figure 7 - Voina's collective fuck action, *Fuck for the bear cub* (2008) in the Moscow Biological Museum. <https://www.indymedia.org/images/2008/03/901903.jpg> View video of this action here: http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=a4d_1204458756.

Though Reuters described the “stunt” as a “wry commentary on the handover of power—decried by opponents as undemocratic” (Thomas), it is certainly more than a straightforward piece of political agit-prop. If for no other reason, this can be determined by the wildly divergent interpretations of the act as it has been disseminated on the Internet. Some read it as a critique on the undemocratic qualities of the Russian election (www.reuters.com), some as offering support for the incoming president (<http://community.livejournal.com/anarchists/2318694.html>), some as animal rights protest in defense of bear cubs (<http://sanseverything.wordpress.com/2008/03/04/russian-animal-rights-orgy/>), and even as a “Crazy Russian Teen Orgy” at teen-orgies.com. But even more than this, it is constituted by the materiality of the confrontation by live bodies in the midst of public sex. Similarly, in Voina's action days before Medvedev's inauguration (May 6, 2009), the group entered a Russian police station pasted photos of Medvedev, formed a human

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pyramid to recite a poem by D. A. Prigov,⁸ and attempted to serve the officers tea and cake.⁹



Figure 8 - Voina, *Humiliation of Cop in his Own House*. The human pyramid of dissident poetry.

⁸ -- The poem is “The Plumber Will Come” :

“Here comes the plumber
-- He'll ruin the lavatory pan
-- The gas-man will ruin the gas
-- Electrician guy will spoil electricity
-- Fireman will set a fire
-- Delivery man will do something mean
-- But the Policeman will come
-- And tell them all
-- No fooling around!” (Prigov)

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⁹ A more recent action (September 7, 2008) found Voina celebrating Moscow city day by “hanging” two gay activists and three immigrant workers in a Moscow supermarket. <http://publish.indymedia.org/en/2008/03/901901.shtml>



Figure 9 - Voina serves tea and cake at the police station. View video here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=796-g_NQobA&feature=related

4. *Ruptural performances are baffling and confounding.*¹⁰ Rather than a pragmatic approach to efficient communication that disables so much political art, ruptural performance is indebted to Mary Overlie’s concept of “doing the unnecessary.” For Overlie, the “unnecessary” action undermines performance’s “efficiencies”¹¹ by doing that which is not called for in habitual activity (www.sixviewpoints.com). “In these unnecessary activities the body, senses and objectives leap into alertness because they do not know the routine. The body and the mind are put in a state of high awareness and therefore function with thrilling accuracy stretching performance into extraordinary performance” (Overlie). Thus ruptural performance is paradoxically Minimalist and Maximalist.

Ruptural Performance embraces the notion that the political message is sometimes not immediately clear, but instead embodies what Artaud calls “the poetic state” (122). Rather than the clarity of agit-prop performance’s political messaging, ruptural performance is characterized by “true dreams and not [...] a servile copy of reality” (86). This “attack on the spectator’s sensibility” (86), Artaud says, is a form of “direct action,” (87) and aligns with contemporary activism in the resurgence of neo-situationists and neo-anarchists like Crimethinc, whose *Recipes for Disaster: an anarchist cookbook* instructs its readers on “direct action” (which they consider to be the “opposite” of “representation” (13)) that “sidesteps regulations, representatives, and

¹⁰ It is noteworthy that Brecht describes one element of the *Verfremdungseffekt* as when “What is obvious is in a certain sense made incomprehensible” (143).

¹¹ On performance efficiencies see McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*.

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authorities” (12). In their advocacy of replacing “representations of sex” with “*real sex*,” they assert the theatrical dimensions of direct action: “It’s time to stop being spectators and start being actors” (*Days of War* 201, emphasis in original).

The materiality of direct action and Artaud’s emphasis on the “immediacy” (123) of the poetic state occur at the “rupture between things and words” (7) and thus work at the juncture of the phenomenological literalism of minimalism with willful nonsense of Dada in producing a “concrete expression of the abstract” (64). If Brecht moves from the spectacle’s “ooh” to Epic Theatre’s “Aha!” (Duncombe 146) then Artaud adds the element of “huh?” Ruptural performance puts the “strange” back in estrangement. In this way, the rupture is, following Adrian Piper, “catalytic” (“Talking” 32). In her *Catalysis* series, the work of art was but a “catalytic agent between myself and the viewer” (“Talking” 42) that creates an “ambiguous situation” (“Talking” 43):

For *Catalysis IV*, in which I dressed very conservatively, but stuffed a large white bath towel into the sides of my mouth until my cheeks bulged to about twice their normal size, letting the rest of it hang down my front and riding the bus, subway, and Empire State Building elevator; *Catalysis VI*, in which I attached helium-filled Mickey Mouse balloons from each of my ears, under my nose, to my two front teeth, and from thin strands of my hair, then walked through Central Park and the lobby of the Plaza Hotel, and rode the subway during morning rush hour. (“Talking” 43)



Figure 10 - Adrian Piper, *Catalysis IV* (1970). Photo by Rosemary Mayer.

Piper explains that familiar structures of sense-making “*prepare* the viewer to be catalyzed, thus making actual catalysis impossible” (“Talking” 45). In this way, the work of art/activism can be as Félix Guattari says is an activity of “rupturing sense” (131) – and in its uncategorizability, its uncontainability, and its ungraspability¹², it is no longer easily dismissed as political protest.

If there is a proper response to ruptural performance, it is to say, “What the fuck is that? No, really, what the fuck is that?” Ruptural performance seeks to “escape the tyranny of meaning,” to use Barthes’ phrase (185). And I’ve overheard the conversations to the agit-prop piece: “What’s going on?” “Anh, some kinda protest.” And then they amble on. When my students recently performed an open viewpoints session next to a massive 10-foot tall anti-choice monument of late-term aborted fetuses, a student came up to me and asked, “Do you know what’s going on?” I said, “What do you think is going on?” He replied, “I dunno. It seems symbolic.” “Symbolic of what?” “I don’t know!” he said as he continued to reckon with the performance from various positions. In the mode of performance that I want to call the rupture, that is interruptive, becoming event, confrontational, and confounding, “I don’t know” is a response not easily managed by the spectacle.

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¹² I borrow this term from Nathaniel Mackey, “Graspability is the self-incriminating thirst utterly native to every hand, an indigenous court from which only the drowned hope to win an acquittal” (52).

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