

undergraduate. The selection of the material means that students can compare different viewpoints on roughly the same area easily – three of the four chapters in Part I deal with classical Indian art and architecture. The downside is a certain one-sidedness to a book that ostensibly deals with cultural difference in all its manifestations in the world of visual culture. However, this can be defended as the comparison between James Fergusson, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Partha Mitter is an excellent way of introducing students to precisely the conclusions Thomas heads towards. There's also a neat juxtaposition between Jantjes' welcoming of difference and hybridity in contemporary visual culture, and Araeen's closing scepticism. ■

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Performativity

To Say is To Do

Mark Harris

Performing the Body/Performing the Text, eds Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson, Routledge, London, 1999, 306pp, 66 illus, p/b, \$15.99, 0 415 19060 6, h/b, \$50, 0 415 19159 2.

This is a diverse collection of 18 texts that evolved from conferences on performance and performativity organised in 1997 by editors Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson. To the editors, this variety of essays is justified as a way of disrupting traditional models of art history. Their goal is nothing less than to bring about a revolution in the commentary on visual culture by using the conceptual tool of performativity, as it has been developed for example in gender studies. In their view this is necessary because most recent analytical approaches perpetuate those structures by which artwork is assigned value and meaning. Somewhat rashly, the reader is effectively invited to judge these essays by the radical claims set out in the introduction. Not surprisingly, most fall well short as models of transformative research. Despite its pretensions, however, the introduction is helpful for describing clearly art history's failure to question readers' desires and complicity in establishing meaning because of those modernist assumptions that objectivity is still possible in determining quality. The familiar road back through Greenberg to Kant is delineated.

There is a lot to question here – most irritatingly the resurrection of a caricatured Modernism just to have something to knock

Andy Warhol
White Car Crash
1963



down again. This is too intricate an issue to settle with off the shelf teleologies like Kant to Modernism. For one thing, so much happened in aesthetics between Kant and the 20th Century as to have once and for all impeded uncritical access to his ideas. Hegel is not mentioned in this book, yet the introduction to his *Aesthetics* (perhaps as challenging and problematic a modernist antecedent as Kant's *Critique of Judgement*) is helpful for understanding why modernist formalism has at no stage intended objectivity.

The key to salvaging art history for the editors is JL Austin's term 'performative' which was intended by him to designate those forms of speech 'in which to say something is to do something', but which has lately served the explanation of gender issues and performance art by identifying a continuous enactment of sexual identity within the everyday production of culture. Without much contention we can recognise this process occurring elsewhere in the formation of subjectivity with racial or national identities. Performativity becomes more attenuated

though when Jones and Stevenson extend it to any cultural commentary, such as art history, that is adequately critical or reflexive. But then they go even further, urging engagement beyond conventional critique, proposing 'the act of interpretation itself as a kind of performance', at which point it is hard to see what is gained that isn't already part of the critical apparatus. This programme doesn't clear the decks for a new art history and offers no distinction between itself and earlier unorthodox histories and aesthetics, like those of Arnold Hauser, Adrian Stokes, Theodor Adorno or John Berger.

Perhaps the editors are persuaded by their own enthusiasm that some oversimplification is permissible to strengthen their case. A scapegoat is named for the present crisis: 'the usually heterosexual, white, Euro-American male art professional'. And lest we missed it first time around we are reminded later in Jones' own essay of the culprit as 'implicitly masculine, white, heterosexual, upper middle class, etc'.

Unfortunately the essay Jones writes on

Minimalism perpetuates further examples of bias against which we are warned in the introduction. Most invidious is her fixation on Michael Fried's 'Art and Objecthood' (serving as springboard for her feminist reassessment of Minimalism) which she elevates to demonic canonical status, when its actual importance lies more with the debates around sculpture in which it participated at that time.

Among the other contributions however, are six or so outstanding essays that make the book worthwhile. Best of these have to be Gavin Butt's piece on Larry Rivers' enactment of camp sensibility and Phelan's unveiling of Warhol's accumulated American deaths. Butt and Phelan go a long way to indicating what a genuinely new art history might feel like, performing their subject from the inside in a generous identification that nevertheless resists predictable positions.

With agile humour Butt coaxes several strands of thought together, leaving you wondering how on earth such a feat can be made to seem effortless, particularly with so problematic a figure as Rivers. In his bid for companionship and relevance Rivers is shown to have concealed his Jewishness to perform first black and then gay identities,

as fashions shifted in the New York of the 1950s. What moves this onto another register though, is Butt's ability to assemble the vanities and real affections felt by Rivers into a critical position taken by his artwork against the Abstract Expressionists whose own notions of artistic inauthenticity were inseparable from their homophobia.

In an account strengthened by reference to late Heideggerian concepts of technological exploitation of human resources, Phelan explains how Warhol used the repeated images of car crashes, suicides and electric chairs to reveal the ineluctable continuity of death into the present. Of the remaining pieces three are particularly memorable. What is surely the most appalling of America's homegrown enactments of death, the Southern lynching spectacles, is given new profile in Michael Hatt's essay. Like Phelan, Hatt redirects Austin's performativity, in this case as a means of assigning individual responsibility for the murders, seen here as enacting concepts of white honour while culpability is deflected onto mob will. Reina Lewis discusses orientalist accounts of harem life by early 20th-century Turkish expatriate women. She deploys performativity to

articulate the conflicting cross-cultural and erotic demands on these writers who were complying with the expectations of two different audiences. Finally, in a reconsideration of Viennese Actionism's controversial swansong performance *Art and Revolution*, Philip Ursprung analyses performativity in terms of the Actionists' misdirected resistance against the German tendency to overinvest art practice with socially redemptive potential. The irresponsible and unassimilable nature of the Actionists' performance for the entire political spectrum is set in productive contrast to Joseph Beuys' veiled authorisation of conservative tendencies towards cultural hegemony.

Such essays don't attempt to act performatively, but instead reveal the performative at work in their subjects. The 'engagement with the processes of art production and reception as *performative*', requested in the introduction, would surely entail a move out of art history and into creative, or concentrically driven, writing. In which case Stokes and Adorno return as paradigms to haunt what is a flawed, but often enough interesting collection. ■

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