Performance Legacies in Print and Practice: *High Performance* Magazine, 1978-1983

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Abstract

This article examines the history and legacy of *High Performance*, a Los-Angeles based magazine devoted to documenting performance art. I interpret the magazine as a record of performance history, a self-contained archive of documents and as a source for creating new performances and re-enactments. In the process I put forward a number of different, at times contradictory characterisations of the magazine as both a permanent historical record and a transient document. After contextualising the magazine's historical significance and exploring the materiality of the magazine through a theoretical discussion of the archive, I examine two projects that use the magazine both as a record of performance history and as a source to inspire the creation of new works: a 2003 exhibition about the history and influence of the magazine and a 2012 performance platform incorporating digitised documents and live performances. *High Performance,* a magazine which nurtured its relationship to the present moment, also endures and resurfaces as a generative source for artists and audiences. The projects outlined here utilise *High Performance* as a site for continuous revisions of performance art history, and to reflect on how audiences engage with this history through the documents that record it.

The performance art magazine can be variously described as an archive, a temporary exhibition space and a transient document to be shared between friends, that risks being thrown away. This article addresses broader histories of performance documentation and art magazines, and examines the specific history of *High Performance,* a Los Angeles-based magazine founded in 1978, that focused exclusively on performance art. The magazine ran until 1997. Here I focus on the first five years of the publication, 1978-1983, during which the magazine's main feature, the Artists' Chronicle, was published.

In a publication exploring live art and performance in Los Angeles within this period, Peggy Phelan states that 'much more than documenting the early days of performance, [*High Performance*] helped produce the history of live art as we know it today' (8). Here Phelan acknowledges the historical significance of *High Performance* whilst situating it within current understanding of how performance histories are created and remembered. As a historical document the magazine provides a material record of live events which might otherwise have been lost. Not unlike other modes of performance documentation such as photographs and videos, the magazine circulates far beyond the events themselves. However, in providing a specific format and context for the circulation of these documents, the magazine has shaped the way that contemporary curators and practitioners engage with this particular performance history.

This article looks at two projects that use the magazine in this way, both as a record of performance history and as a source to inspire the creation of new works. It examines the different types of documentation that the magazine embodies, and the different temporal structures within the magazine, its circulation and collection within archives, its re-presentation and display in exhibitions and its use as source material to produce new live performances. A look at the versatile nature of this magazine, and its participation in what Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik have called 'memory practices', the act or processes by which cultural memory is transmitted through art and popular culture, and are 'intimately connected with […] the act of creation' (4), reveals how *High Performance* might facilitate the revision and renewal of performance histories.

The first project is an exhibition from 2003: *High Performance: The First Five Years, 1978-1982,* curated by Jenni Sorkin and presented at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE). Pages from the magazine were displayed in the gallery space alongside other objects and documents, photographs, videos and performance props (Klein 111), presenting the history and legacy of the magazine to a wider public. The second project is a performance platform organised by Los Angeles-based artist Liz Glynn in 2012 entitled *Spirit Resurrection.* This project developed in part from the digitisation of documents

from the 1980 performance festival, *Public Spirit,* recorded exclusively in *High Performance.* Discussing these projects alongside each other, both of which take *High Performance* as their source material, illustrates the magazine's significance as a record of performance history. That the magazine is also used in these projects as inspiration for the creation of new performance works, suggests that it potentially exceeds the transiency of the artists' magazine genre, and the artistic form it represents.

Although proposing that the magazine both captures and transcends the ephemerality of performance is perhaps somewhat idealistic, I would like to suggest that *High Performance,* a magazine created by artists, for artists, is positioned at the intersection of a number of different temporalities of performance. Working against the notion that there are 'two contrasting ways of bringing the past into the present; acting out and remembering', Plate and Smelik suggest that they might be seen as a continuum (4). Similarly, I propose that *High Performance* operates on a continuum between the historical archive and the contemporary performance platform.

High Performance Magazine

High Performance was founded in Los Angeles in 1978 by Linda Frye Burnham, who declared it 'the first magazine ever to be devoted exclusively to performance art' ('*High Performance,* Performance Art, and Me' 15). At this point she defined performance art as 'live performance created by visual artists', a category which emphasised the liveness of the form, namely, artists performing for a live audience in a shared time and space, and its roots in visual art practices (15). This definition initially excluded dance, theatre, music and comedy, since these forms were more substantially represented elsewhere. However, this definition became increasingly untenable, particularly in the late 1980s and early 1990s as performance art developed across the boundaries of other forms. Published quarterly until 1997 the magazine enabled performance artists to disseminate their work outside or alongside the mainstream art press, which otherwise overlooked or actively vilified the form (Sorkin 37), and had three primary aims: to provide a space for artists outside the New York City art capital to document and share their work;

to create a forum in which the rich diversity of performance art could be represented; and to enable artists to convey their work to wider audiences through text and images authored and arranged by the artists themselves (black and white photographs and short descriptions which appeared in the Artists' Chronicle), rather than through the words of critics.

Between 1978 and 1982 Burnham ran open submissions for documentation of performances presented within one year of the published issue. This time frame ensured that the magazine was publishing and circulating up-to-date contemporary performances straight after their first iteration. The documents were collated and formed the magazine's main feature, the Artists' Chronicle, the last of which appeared in 1983. Burnham insisted on a balanced representation of renowned and lesser-known artists, male and female, and on the inclusion of work from around the world ('Performance Art, and Me' 38). This broadly democratic approach to representing performances in print soon after they were performed ensured that the magazine both reflected and influenced the dynamic and shifting performance art community.

High Performance might be characterised as an artists' magazine, in that the majority of the content was produced *by* artists *for* artists and operated in an economy of ephemerality akin to the performance art it documents. In her book *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art,* Gwen Allen suggests that to publish artists' magazines is to 'enter into a heightened relationship with the present moment. [...] Their transience is embodied by their unprecious formats, flimsy covers, and inexpensive paper stock, and it is suggested by their seriality, which presumes that each issue will soon be rendered obsolete by the next' (1). Rather than an art journal based on representations of artists mediated by critics, or a book-length publication designed to endure both materially and canonically, *High Performance* nurtured its relationship to contemporary performance; its material transience matched by its ideology and commitment to the present moment. However, whilst each issue of *High Performance* may be flimsy on its own, as a collection or body of work the magazine might also be characterised as building a canon of performance artists whose work, in turn,

becomes part of the history of the magazine,

Whilst Allen's characterisation of the magazine implies that its significance is located in the kind of elevated irreverence it demands from its audience (akin perhaps to the valued ephemerality of live performance), Burnham has described the documents in *High Performance* as 'absolutely primary material', capturing events which might otherwise have been lost. For Burnham, the process of recording and disseminating live events through documentation is significant because it extends the life of the performance without defaulting to the binary opposition of authentic live event versus secondary documentation.

Similarly, Amelia Jones has argued specifically against 'this binary so often posed between the "authentic" live body [in performance] and the "secondary" archive' which is 'by definition filled with scraps, representations, impressions of subjects who did something at some past time' (117), a description similar to *High Performance.* However, Burnham's insistence on the primacy of *High Performance* is problematic because documenting a performance does not mean it has been saved from obscurity; documents, even when compiled as an organised set of records, are still liable to be lost, concealed, or disregarded. Artists' magazines, as Allen points out, '[favour] processes over product, and risk being thrown away' (2). In short, she says, 'they court failure' (2).

Alternatively, *High Performance* might be described as a temporary exhibition space; a collection or series of works that, for a limited time reflects the work of contemporary artists, before lapsing into history and becoming instead, an archive nonetheless open to active processes of preservation and intervention. The magazine occupies an ambiguous position in which it risks being thrown away, but also comes readymade as an archive or anthology of documents which collectively build towards a history of performance, for example, held as a collection in archives and libraries. Similarly, it both captures and transcends the ephemerality of performance. Documents are susceptible, on one hand, to an overinvestment in meaning that they are originary, primary material, and provided for many artists the only means of disseminating their early work

(Sorkin 38). On the other, the magazine might be equated with the ephemerality of performance and therefore willingly disregarded. Whilst the ephemerality of performance is, in this sense, to be valued, it also risks elimination from histories of performance which depend on images and texts as indexical markers for the events themselves. By choosing to retain the magazine for future reference, audiences are also preserving or disregarding the legacy of performance the magazine represents. In Jones's terms, '[we cling to [such] scraps from the past, *re-embodying them* through projection, interpretation, restaging them in written art histories or performative art works, in order to try to claim infinite futures' (117).

In the 1970s and early 1980s *High Performance* provided a platform for the visibility of performance, making it a public, political act in itself, and as Allen suggests, 'one that challenged the art world' (7). By providing a mode of dissemination for performance that sought to counter the material and economic conditions of the art world, including art galleries as sites of display, documents of performance art circulated in *High Performance* in a mode of activity additional to the mainstream. However, when the Artists' Chronicle was discontinued its documents were effectively taken out of public circulation; they are now mostly available in back issues of *High Performance* held within the comparatively private spaces of libraries and archives. The two projects discussed in the latter part of this article engage with *High Performance* as a historical document or archive, but also re-frame it and work to bring it back into public visibility. Despite the celebrated ephemerality of the artists' magazine, as outlined by Allen, the collection and preservation of *High Performance* in archives is essential to the process of revising and re-shaping the histories it documents.

The Archive: *High Performance*

Issues of *High Performance,* held collectively as a set of documents, appear in archives both in the UK at the Tate Library, London, and in the US at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. Individual issues might also be characterised as archives, independently of the whole. In her article 'The Seductions of the Archive', Harriet Bradley suggests that '[t]he archive is a

repository of memories: individual and collective, official and unofficial, licit and illicit, legitimating and subversive' (108). Arguably, acceptance into an archive challenges the idea that any document retains its 'unofficial' or 'illicit' status, or indeed that documents are included indiscriminately. If *High Performance* is an archive, as I am proposing, then it is no exception. Inevitably editorial decisions about what to include have affected which artists' works have made it in to the magazine, particularly when, in 1982, the number of open submissions peaked and it became clear that it was impossible to represent them; it was at this point that the Artists' Chronicle was discontinued ('Artists' Chronicle' 27). Each issue of *High Performance* is therefore a collection of voices representing the diversity of performance art, but one which is underpinned by the editor's vision for the communality of the magazine.

Furthermore, the result of a collective and collaborative labour, the magazine was distributed for the contemplation of individual readers, just as a researcher enters the archive to engage with historical material. I am interested here in the relationship between the multiple voices of artists in the magazine, representative of a performance community at a specific time in history. These voices are then relayed to audiences, individual readers or researchers who contemplate the magazine at their own pace, returning to it repeatedly if necessary, in a time and place far beyond the historical and geographical specificity of the performances themselves.

And yet, *High Performance* also resists this definition of the individual readership. As Jenni Sorkin has observed, when it was published, issues of the magazine were shared between groups of friends. These accounted in part for the relatively modest number in circulation; at its peak, it was around half that of *Artforum* but double that of *October* (Sorkin 38). As a document of performance, Sorkin is suggesting, the magazine was potentially as collaborative in its reception as it was in its production and publication. In its aims and ideology, the magazine sought to represent a cacophony a voices and allow artists a platform to disseminate their work; albeit under the rubric of an editorial policy. In an article on the history of *High Performance* published in 1986, Burnham described

performance art 'not as an art form' and 'not a group of artists', but as an audience or community of performers and spectators ('Performance Art, and Me' 17). 'This audience' she says 'was nurtured at the breast of visual art but reared by an information network of which [*High Performance*] is an important part' (17). *High Performance* is therefore both a vehicle for representing performance, and a catalyst for creating new events and audiences, for example in Sorkin's 2003 exhibition and Glynn's 2012 performance platform.

In a similar way, Bradley suggests that by engaging with archives 'we strive to recover what we [...] have lost, and to relive the lost past by telling its stories' (109). But, she qualifies, 'in that endeavour of writing history we also inevitably rewrite history, that is, re-create the past in new forms' (109). *High Performance,* and documentation of live works more generally, already re-creates performance in new forms as a kind of self-historicising function, in which the printed documents circulate more widely than the events themselves. Although, as Allen argues, the magazine too is always in danger of becoming obsolete (2). Sorkin and Glynn use *High Performance* as a catalyst for their own projects which address the history of the magazine and re-frame the individual performances it documents. Rather than asking how or why these documents and this particular legacy has been preserved, perhaps a more relevant enquiry for these projects is to ask what kind of work is being done by artists and researchers when these documents are revisited in order to make multiple new works, adjusting or extending the temporal framework of the magazine and its legacy, in the process. As Plate and Smelik suggest, '[foregrounding the *work* of memory, the active labour of remembering and of forgetting brings the focus on its creative aspect and functions theoretically to push representation beyond its borders as just representing meaning' (6).

Ann Featherstone and Maggie B. Gale suggest that 'if the archive encourages researchers to examine and process multiple truths, to see the [...] networks of connective materials rather than the flat negative, then there is an argument for a creative archival process' (37). Responding to the notion that the archive harbours a universal truth which needs only to be uncovered,

Featherstone and Gale characterise the archive as a source for potential creativity, in order for 'multiple truths', perhaps even contradiction or failure, to emerge (37). In its initiation *High Performance* reflected a network of artistic exchange already extant in 1970s performance culture. Featherstone and Gale's endeavour to characterise the archive as part of a wider network of material reflects the culture of interactivity captured in *High Performance.* Similarly the projects described here use the magazine as a means to access performance history, and as a source for creating new works and audiences.

The Exhibition: *High Performance: The First Five Years, 1978-1982*

The 2003 exhibition *High Performance: The First Five Years, 1978-1982,* curated by Jenni Sorkin, displayed correspondence, photographs, videos and artists' books, some borrowed from the *High Performance* magazine archive, then held at the 18th Street Art Center in Santa Monica. The exhibition also included displays of pages from the magazine which were left open to view, Sorkin wrote and published an article entitled 'Envisioning High Performance', that offered an overview of the magazine, including its key aims and concerns. A third element of the project, a programme of live performances by contemporary artists entitled *The Rebirth of Wonder,* was organised by LACE curator Irene Tsatsos. These included performances, concerts, readings, and digital documentation of works by a diverse group of artists working across different media, including audio performances, durational pieces, video projections and story-telling (LACE). The exhibition, the 'historical and retrospective' element of the project physically opened up the pages of the magazine, making public that which was otherwise closed to public view (LACE). The exhibition makes literal the artists' magazine as an alternative exhibition space for art. However, in this case it is not the art that is on display, but its documentation. Arguably, this was an exhibition about the history of a particular collection of performance documentation, its circulation in print culture and the influence of *High Performance*, rather than performance art as such. The live performance programme featuring 'a forward-looking series of fresh work and new ideas by artists who [were]

emerging and based in Los Angeles', provided a counterpoint to the exhibition, offering a public engagement with contemporary performance beyond the relative containment of the exhibition space (LACE).

Problematically perhaps, the exhibition repositions the artists' magazine that, by definition, supports experimental forms of art outside or alongside the gallery system, within a conventional mode of display. However, since the project of the exhibition was to recognise and celebrate the legacy of *High Performance,* particularly its role in nurturing an audience for performance art, LACE was an ideal venue. *High Performance* and LACE, both founded in 1978, were equally committed (indeed LACE continues to be so) to providing a space alongside mainstream cultural institutions for artists to share their work. At the same time, by re-framing the magazine in a public space, Sorkin encourages an engagement with how performance art was documented in the past, and how performance histories are constructed and reconstructed in the present.

In his writing on the archive, Charles Merewether questions if documents are 'sufficient in representing those histories where there is no evidence remaining' (12). He asks, '[is what is materially present, visible or legible, adequate to [represent, for those not in attendance at] an event that has passed out of present time?'(12). The adequacy or legibility of this material dictates the way histories are constructed and reconstructed in the present, particularly in the process of re-performance, to which documentation and archives are a significant part. It seems our preoccupation with performance documentation and archives is matched only by our fascination with re-performance. Indeed the two are arguably inseparable. The process of re-performance necessitates a period of research and often the creative use of archival materials; as Michael Ned Holte has argued, 'any act of "reperformance" is, at the same time, a curious act of scholarship' (41). Whilst *High Performance* has recorded the outcomes of performance-related activities it cannot replicate the collaborations and networks between individuals. Instead the exhibition of the magazine requires a parallel series of live works which enact something of the communal spirit which *High Performance* sought to capture.

The performances programmed alongside Sorkin's exhibition, although not framed as re-enactments, but rather innovative pieces which respond to the contemporary environment, went some way to indicate that the legacy of the magazine lay not just in the way performance is documented, but also how it informs and influences contemporary performance making.

The Performance Platform: *Public Spirit* and *Spirit Resurrection*

Primarily *High Performance* served to document and disseminate artist performances, but in 1980, the *Public Spirit* performance festival, organised by an artist group closely associated with the magazine, addressed broader audiences. *Public Spirit* was developed in part to expand the project of *High Performance* beyond the provision of performance documentation towards the activation of live works, and to act as a nexus for both. For Burnham, the title of *Public Spirit* 'symbolized a joining of hands by all the performance artists of Los Angeles to support and showcase each other, to make [their] activities visible by linking them under a single banner' ('What about Public Spirit?' 165). Comprised of works by artists living and working in Los Angeles, including Allan Kaprow, Suzanne Lacy, Paul McCarthy, Rachel Rosenthal and Barbara Smith, with performances held throughout Los Angeles in May and October 1980, this was the first festival of its kind to be held in the region and was documented exclusively in *High Performance* ('What about Public Spirit?' 1). This special double issue (11-12, 1980) now stands as the primary document of *Public Spirit*, and acts a festival catalogue and stand-alone archive, as well as part of the larger archive of the magazine.

Public Spirit was the inspiration for Liz Glynn's performance platform *Spirit Resurrection*, which took place in 2012 as part of the Pacific Standard Time (PST) Performance and Public Art Festival in Los Angeles. Documentation of *Public Spirit* as well as items from the magazine archive – which by this point had moved to the Getty Research Institute – played a significant role in the realisation of the project. Documents from the festival, including press releases, programmes, artists' proposals and photographs, were digitised and uploaded to the

Spirit Resurrection website. Whilst Sorkin's exhibition opened the pages of the magazine to gallery audiences, Glynn took the next step in disseminating the magazine as an online archive, broadening further its potential for interpretation and adaptation. Although both projects were built on the same foundation of documents, namely *High Performance*, each adds to an accumulation of interventions which re-frame the magazine's history in new ways.

Glynn invited artists to potluck events to discuss how to go about adapting or re-enacting the *Public Spirit* performances and a series of re-inventions took place at venues across Los Angeles, including: *Black Box,* a temporary performance space which operated alongside *Spirit Resurrection*, Machine Project, LACE, Museum of Public Fiction and Workspace (Hoetger). Events at *Black Box* included talks and performances by Motoko Honda, Kim Jones, Barbara T. Smith, and Paul McCarthy, and re-performances and adaptations of works from the *Public Spirit* festival included: an adaptation of Barry Markowitz's *Think About It Susan* (1980), which Markowitz re-performed in 2012 as *How I Learned to Draw* at LACE; Jon Rutzmoser created and performed *Pleasure of the Piss: Arm Utterances* at LACE in conversation with Anne Mavor's performance *Venus on the Half Shell and Other Poses*, which was presented for *Public Spirit* in 1980; and *Untitled (remodel)* was presented at Machine Project by sound artists Yann Novak and Simon Whetham as a reinterpretation of Carl Stone's untitled performance at the Vanguard Gallery in October 1980. In an article on the use of re-performance during the Performance and Public Art Festival, Megan Hoetger described *Spirit Resurrection* as foregrounding 'the overwrought relation between performance and its archives', and whilst 'the project was a platform for manifold events and re-inventions, the "performance" in *Spirit Resurrection* was the physical and conceptual unpacking of the archive' (n.p.). In *Spirit Resurrection* re-performance was merely one element in a series of related activities which entailed the opening up of archives, making them available as a source for creativity. Hoetger suggests that through *Spirit Resurrection* 'Glynn performed the dual meaning of the concept of archive, pointing to its function as both a repository for knowledge (the website) and an active

process (the potluck and subsequent re-inventions)' (n.p.).

Another element in this process is the communication and collaboration between artists and audiences. By re-framing *Public Spirit* as a platform for exploring Los Angeles' performance history in a contemporary context, *Spirit Resurrection* highlights the network of interactions and artistic exchange which *High Performance* stood for. At the time of writing (March 2014), the *Spirit Resurrection* website is still live and the documents still available to be viewed online. The magazine as a stand-alone archive has been left open for the possibility of further interventions, adaptations, and re-performances to occur, addressing, as Jones proposes, our desire to 'claim infinite futures' (117).

Conclusion

This article started with an exploration of the artists' magazine as a transient entity, whose survival depended on the whims of individuals to either disregard or preserve it. Its survival is still dependent on the intervention of human activity, but not necessarily through the maintenance of the archive as an organised set of documents. Instead, the history of *High Performance* and its role in documenting and shaping the legacy of performance art is transferred through interactions between individuals and audiences.

The magazine, in its initial publication, engaged in specific temporal structures, for example the one-year deadline for documentation submissions indicates that each issue was succeeded by the next (Allen 1), and seemingly reflected the ephemerality of the form it documented, with its flimsy materiality, communal readership and participation in delayed readings of the historical contemporary. Whilst the presence of *High Performance* issues in art collections such as the Tate, and the preservation of the magazine archive at the Getty certainly indicate an acknowledgement of the magazine's history at an institutional level, the communal and collaborative spirit of the publication seems to demand that its legacy be borne out by interactions and exchanges between individuals. The projects outlined here offer alternatives for the artists' magazine beyond its seemingly pre-determined transiency. In fact, they utilise

High Performance as a dynamic site for continuous revisions of performance art history, and to reflect on how we engage with this history through the documents that record it.

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