

Performance in Frame: the photographic perspective

By Gilles Massot

Life's synergies have interesting ways to point at directions that can put us on track. Shortly after agreeing to write something about the relation of photography and performance for the exhibition Performance in Frame, I was also asked to do a presentation/workshop on Fine Art Photography for Noise, the Singapore youth program aiming at nurturing new talents. I had some ideas of which topic to tackle on the subject of photography and performance. They stood at the back of my mind, searching for their own flow to be penned down on paper. I guess it is this silent background work going on while I was preparing the presentation for Noise that led me to suddenly reconsider a certain photograph I knew of for sometime already and look at it in a totally different light.

The photograph shows a woman, young and pretty, in the bathtub of what looks at first like a rather ordinary bathroom. The curves of her bare shoulders speak of natural elegance, along with the gently flowing blond hair. She is taking her bath. Or is she? The skin in fact looks dry and something in the attitude suggests a posed shot. There are also some unusual army boots on the floor, and a photograph of Hitler resting on the ledge of the bathtub. On second thought, something strange is going on.

The woman is Lee Miller, an American photographer who followed the American army as it progressed across Europe to free the continent from Nazi oppression and the bathtub none other than Hitler's own in Munich. A stunningly pretty young woman in the 1920's, Lee Miller became one of America's first top models, working with the most famous photographers of the time such as Steichen or Hoyningen. In 1929 she travelled to Paris to become herself a photographer by asking Man Ray to take her as an apprentice. This he did, eventually making her his lover and muse in the process. There followed a rather extraordinary period of a few years during which she found her self at the heart of Paris' most exuberant art scene, mastering the so-called solarisation process with Man Ray, working both in front and behind the camera, acting in one of Jean Cocteau's movie¹ and initiating a life-long friendship with Picasso. From there she moved back to New York to open a commercial studio, then married an Egyptian business man and lived in Egypt where she did some of her most personal works, only to move on to live with the British artist Roland Penrose in England where she was when the war broke off. Deciding to stay in Europe despite the dangers this implied, she was accredited into the US Army as a war correspondent for Condé Nast publications, which eventually led her to pose for the photograph earlier discussed taken by the American photographer David E. Scherman.

I knew of Lee Miller's life and work for some time already, but reconsidering it with the concept of "performance in frame" in mind, this particular image suddenly took on an altogether different meaning. Although accidentally so, her life spent as an artist who had mastered the making of images on both sides of the camera was a remarkable illustration of this concept and it found a powerful apex in the bathtub photograph. For what is that photograph of her in Hitler's bathtub if not a cathartic performance that truly signified in an artistic way the end of WW2? In the photograph, she is not really taking a bath, she is "rendering a dramatic role"². She is "performing". And would she have done this action if not for the purpose of taking the photograph? Probably no. There we had all the elements that make the "performance in frame": an intended meaningful action performed (or posed) for the camera and no one else.

The relation of photography and performance is a very old one. One might think at first that it started when performance art developed as a full-fledged form of practice in the 1960s. Indeed what took place then through the interaction of the two disciplines turned out to be a two ways thing that eventually had a great impact on the status of photography as a fine art practice. But the take also depends largely on what one puts in the word "performance" to begin with. One could argue that the very photographic act is a form of performance in itself. The first photographers were "performing" in the eyes of their contemporaries what must have looked like a very strange ritual that was resulting in an altogether different perception and understanding of the world. And as the discussion on Lee Miller's photograph tried to expand, within the context of today's art history perspective, many a photographs can take on the dimension of a "performance in frame", although the pose taken by the artist in the photograph might have predated the development of performance art as we know it. This is very much the case I believe with the pivotal Self Portrait as a Drowned Man done by Hyppolite Bayard in 1840.

This image, although well known in photography history, isn't yet in my opinion perceived for its full importance and meaning. Conceived as a protest against the rejection of his invention of a form of photography to the benefice of the daguerreotype, this self-portrait unknowingly paved the way for the development of prominent aspects found today in photographic fine art. The image is completed by a text at the back that explained the mise en scène and the claim. With it Bayard was touching on the topics of self, death, protest, it initiated the relation of photography and text, it posited itself in the context of art history, and most importantly, it was the first image in which Reality was pretending to be something else than what it really was. At a time when his contemporaries were getting ecstatic and even fooled by the realistic rendering of the photographic image, he was showing what photography had in fact already begun to do: the blurring of boundary between reality and fiction. In his posing, Bayard wasn't just aiming at pictorial quality; he intended to convey a message through an image, claim his rights loud and strong in the face of society with a photograph. To the exception of gender, one can say that with this one single image Bayard was touching on most of the topics that would make the Performance in Frame of today. And if one add that he also staged the first photographic exhibition in 1839 to present his invention to the world, one can see how much more prominent his name should stand in history,

1 The Blood of a Poet 1930

2 Part of the definition of "performance" from the Mac Nudget dictionary

not just of photography but art in general.

Special mention should be made as well of the series of works done by the American photographer Holland Day in 1898 in which he posed as Jesus Christ. With this body of work we are moving a little closer to what the Performance in Frame is going to be, for these are not "self portraits" as in the case of Bayard, but images in which the identity of the subject, who happened to be the photographer as well, takes on a secondary importance. Or does it? For some not fully explained reason Day chose to pose as the main character (and not any character for the matter, Jesus!) while he himself had apparently little religious belief. Was it the simple fact that his emaciated figure posited him as a suitable Christ, or identification with a figure seen as a symbol of the suffering and lack of understanding encountered by artists in general? Many of the shots make an extensive use of friends and hired talents to complete the scene. Surely his decision wasn't just accidental and it announces the choice made by many contemporary artists who use the photographic medium and their own bodies, sometimes to the exclusion of anyone else, to develop a life long research, such as in the case of Cindy Sherman's on-going practice.

Day's work however was clearly and intentionally pictorial. What mattered primarily to him was the production of a beautiful image loaded with emotion and mood. The artistic explosion of the 1930s is going to expend conceptually the reasons as to why an artist would choose to be part of the work without being the subject of it. There is indeed an intriguing question mark found in this approach, for surely this isn't just about simple egocentrism. Maybe the fact that the towering figure of Marcel Duchamp is associated to this new step forward in the development of the Performance in Frame practice can give a hint of the conceptual reasons behind it. Man Ray's portrait of Marcel Duchamp as Rose Sélavy³ was not meant to be perceived as just a "pretty picture". Rather it is the implications it suggests, the questions it raises in the viewer's perception and understanding, the pun on words it is built around that makes it interesting. Although carefully staged and art-directed by Duchamp himself as a parody of the nascent school of advertising photography of which Man Ray was a prominent exponent, the true beauty of the work isn't found in its appearance but in its meaning. In line with the conceptual shift that had made his Fountain a Copernican shift in art⁴, the persona enacted by Duchamp was intently opening a whole new Pandora box about gender and sexual role as well as deeply entrenching the physical relation between the artist and his work. The Fountain said "Forget aesthetic, life is art and art is life". Rose Sélavy said "Eros, that's life". As in the case of Day's portrayal of the Christ, albeit this time in a clearly articulated and projected way, the physical presence of the artist in his work gave its utmost expression to the intended meaning.

³ Developed as a series of collaborative works by the two artists in the 1920s

⁴ Jerry Saltz in the Village Voice 2006,
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fountain_\(Duchamp\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fountain_(Duchamp))

One of the earliest true pieces of Performance in Frame happens to be a clear reference to Duchamp's influential Fountain. In 1966 Bruce Nauman did a Self-portrait as a Fountain in which the bare-chested artist is spewing water upwards. Bayard's self portrait merged with Duchamp's Fountain and Rose Sélavy as a recorded artist performance. Most importantly, and in contrast to the type of performances popular at that time (or "actions" as they were then called), the performance wasn't a public one. It was done for the camera alone and the final work wasn't the performance as such but precisely the resulting photograph that documented the action. The documentary aspect of photography that had prevented its full acceptance as a fine art medium until then was turned upside-down. The work was not conceived as a piece of fine-art photography but was none the less a full-fledged piece of fine art. Art, embodied in the physicality of the artist, was also beginning to revisit its own history through the photographic medium, an approach that has become a leading artistic trend of today's contemporary practice, as seen in the work of Morimura among many others.

Another two images of roughly the same period are symptomatic of the directions then opening up for the development of Performance in Frame. Yves Klein Leaping into the Void by Harry Shunk is dated 1960. It shows the French artist springing off a wall into the void of an anonymous suburban street. At first it seems to be a rather dangerous performance, until one learns that photo manipulation had removed the assistants holding the trampoline in which the artist landed. The artist as risk-taker is also raising the question of photographic truth⁵. This form of staged fictitious interpretation of reality already a major trend in photographic fine art, would find a new extension with its combination to performance, and be used by many artists to tackle all sorts of issues. One interesting example of this kind of work is found in the post-colonial take of Yinka Shonibare, a British artist of Nigerian origin, who uses staged fictitious photographs among other mediums to talk about his "biculturalism".

The other image is the record of a "performance" in the proper contemporary artistic meaning of the word. This image was later presented along with some props used during the performance, by then carefully framed, and a text describing the performance. Together, image, objects and text turned the performance into a concrete artwork that could be exhibited in a gallery. The artist was Chris Burden and the 1974 performance, Trans Fixed, saw Burden literally crucified on the rooftop of a Volkswagen kept still but with an engine running at full speed. The photograph had again a purely documentation aspect that was transformed into a piece of fine art. Indeed the Performance in Frame approach of the 60s-70s became one of the prominent reasons that led non-photographer artists to start using the medium. In turn this led to the full acceptance of photography by the Fine Art world, a medium perceived until then as too mechanical to be accepted in High Art institutions.

⁵ Photography, a Cultural History, Mary Warnen Marien

Burden's performance is particularly arresting in its dramatic and physically painful aspect. Prior to this, he had already made a name for himself with a performance in which he was shot at with live bullet. Again, the photograph of this action, in fact taken just after the weapon had been fired, is the only trace of it. The photographic transcription (one would be tempted to say "dematerialisation") of a highly physical performance in which the artist is involving his or her flesh and blood found a sophisticated expression in the work of Orlan. Originally a performance artist using photography for documentation record, Orlan at some point of her process started truly turning her body into a work of art by going through extensive plastic surgery to re-design it at the image of famous works in art history. The operations were entirely documented and then turned into exhibitions. The latest phase of her work has taken the form of digital images in which her transformed features are blended with art works from African and American Indian cultures. Interestingly enough, the mutual influence of photography and performance has turned the iconoclast performance artist of the beginning into a somehow classical visual artist. Indeed, the Performance in Frame results in a concrete object that gives it a marketable value.

With the opening of China to the rest of the world in the 1990s, the Performance in Frame proved to be a driving element for the development of Chinese conceptual art, although the works are often presented as "Chinese Photography". Interestingly enough this approach was adopted by artists most often born in the 1960s/70s, precisely when the concept was defined in the West. The suddenly predominant physical presence of the human body in Chinese art, along with the artist's persona, marked a drastic departure from traditional Chinese pictorial approach which had long preferred non-human subjects such as mountain and bamboo for its high art painting. Most representative of this evolution is the famous To Add a Meter to an Anonymous Mountain done as a collaborative piece by members of Beijing East-Village who turned traditional Chinese painting up side down through photographic documentation. Much less noticed worldwide but none the less concomitant to this trend in main land China was the development of similar practices across South East Asia, including Singapore where performance art had been introduced in the early 1980s, in particular by Tang Da Wu.

One might argue that there isn't anything fundamentally new in the exhibition presented in SMU and indeed there are no new works as such. Most of them are at least a couple of years old and many have been already exhibited. Yet this isn't what one could call a "retrospective" of Singaporean Performances in Frame as it presents only a fragment of what has been done here over the last 15 years or more. Maybe the show precisely does highlight the need for the project of an exhibition of that sort to be undertaken by a Singaporean art institution allotting on this occasion substantial means for research and publication. In any case, the show's intention on Jeremy's side is I believe to familiarise the Singaporean public with an art form often confused with other practices and focus on its specificities. From Dahu's body action to Jeremy's interpretation of art history, from Jacklyn and Ryzman's social commentary to Lee Wen's physical take, from Juliana's self questioning to Guanfeng's political stance one can find indeed a little bit of all the elements that have

paved the way towards the emergence of Performance in Frame as an art form in its own right.

There has been much debate about the true nature and implications of the mingling of performance with photography as a finished art piece. But the performance in frame in its many forms has none the less emerged as a leading form of expression for contemporary artists of all sorts. Maybe the fact that this relation was already contained in Bayard's self portrait, a work which in my opinion lays the basis of photographic fine art (as opposed to fine art photography) as early as 1840, might give a hint of the possibly inherent link between the two. Performance art, along with installation, emerged as an almost unavoidable post-modern evolution of visual art. Should we be surprised that it eventually found a natural ally in photography, the quintessential post-painting question mark?

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