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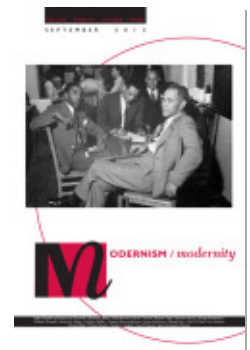
When Bodies Met Galleries: How Performance Art Changed the Art World's View of Painting

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Review Essay

When Bodies Met Galleries: How Performance Art Changed the Art World's View of Painting

By Siobhán Garrigan, University of Exeter

***A Bigger Splash: Painting after Performance*. London: Tate Modern, 14 November 2012–1 April 2013. Curated by Catherine Wood.**

***A Bigger Splash: Painting after Performance*. Catherine Wood, ed. London: Tate Publishing, 2012. Pp. 128. \$16.00 (paper).**

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Just before you head for the large, heavy exit door, having submitted yourself to the IKEA-esque herding route through the galleries housing *A Bigger Splash*, you might be thinking about the strangeness of the room you're about to leave, with its *trompe l'oeil* recreation of empty rooms in an old, posh house (Lucy McKenzie's *Slender Means*, 2010). You might also be imagining the use of these rooms for acting and filmmaking (as in Lucile Desamory's film *ABRACADABRA*, 2013). But unless you turn around, right before you push out the huge door in the wall, you will miss the gem of the whole exhibition, hanging there on the back of the wall of the fake posh room.

It's a relatively small *trompe l'oeil* rendering of a sign by Lucy McKenzie, spelling out the words *Communauté Emmaus*. The piece is not in the catalog, and no information is given about it on the walls. But *les Communautés Emmaus* are dwellings where anyone who finds him- or herself homeless, for whatever reasons, can come and live. Signs such as the one depicted are found on gates all over France, their distinctive postwar Italian-industrial aesthetic signaling that beyond the threshold is a place where anyone who needs a home can come, for as long as they want—with no need for “rehabilitation,” unless they want it—so long as they are willing to work and to be a “*compagnon*.” Originally called *chiffonniers* because of their daily task picking rags, today's companions still sustain their communities through their recycling (of wood, metal,



586 bric-a-brac, anything), but their name-change reflects the emphasis on ending isolation in this French response to homelessness. The commitment that *Emmaus* requires of all who go through its gates is not a commitment to re-housing but to the hard art practiced there: mutual accompaniment.

Perhaps this piece is included, and positioned where it is, because by the time you've made it to the end of *A Bigger Splash*, you're (aware of your condition as) homeless. Everything you knew as home, in terms of how marks are made or what art is for, has been displaced—or, at least, an attempt has been made to so convince you. And now that you're reeling with the dissolution this represents, there's a sign to a community of also-once-homeless people. (Except, of course, it isn't: it is an illusion.)

That one of modernity's defining characteristics is homelessness is a well-honed thesis. But this exhibition explores the nature of such homelessness by going further than the usual diagnosis of division from our roots, our relationships to place, and our bonds with everything from other people to gods, institutions, and ideas. Instead, it explores homelessness within our very bodies, personal and political. It captures the moment when we realized both that we cannot do without them and we cannot be at all sure about them. From Lynn Herschman's parody of magazine makeup advice (and its prescient view of cosmetic surgery) in *Roberta Construction Chart #1* (1975) to the collective IRWIN's *costumes* (1980s), with their suited bodies foregrounding icons' frames, we are confronted with our reliance on bodies for identities, and for dissolutions thereof.

For all that it both tests and champions bodies, breaking their taboos and reveling in their versatility and dynamism, I was surprised to find that the exhibition's atmosphere conjured anxiety rather than, say, joy, delight, or a sense of adventure. This process begins with the title itself: *A Bigger Splash*—bigger than what, one asks, than that made by painting alone? Similarly with the subtitle: *Painting after Performance*—is performance over?

This anxious atmosphere is furthered by too many "Oh God, they're not going to do that, are they?" moments. These are elicited by things like too many (literally) painted bodies, as if someone took the poststructuralist axiom of life being "written on the body," thought, "Aha: painted on the body!"—then did it to death. Another example comes in Wiktor Gutt and Walde-mar Raniszewski's *The Hexagon Mask* (1974): is that a pastiche of an African mask? Really? Yet another western artist robbing what was once already robbed, and visually insisting their cleverness (actionism, how are you?) redeems the situation? Really? Furthermore, much of the show is bloody, adding a queasy layer of bodily nausea to the mounting anxiety. Ana Mendieta's work *Untitled: Self-portrait with Blood* (1973) is inevitably so, but many less explicit explorations of the sanguine in life create an overload, such as the way Kazuo Shigara's *painting with his feet* (1956) gives way to his 1960s painting *Chizensei-Kouseima*, which resembles smears of dried blood. Or Hermann Nitsch's *Poured Painting* (1963), with its great blood-red drip over linen. Is this because blood is the bodily material most like paint? Or because these artists were left to process the twentieth century's blood-letting wars? The questions themselves, like any stray images of spilled blood, also provoke anxiety.

But all this anxiety is no bad thing. On the contrary. The crass, the cringe-inducing, and the queasy are familiar to anyone who has taken an ideological or a creative risk in, with, through, or for their bodies, and as such, they evoke in the viewer a sense of *the process* of painting after performance. There are, inevitably, many ways of seeing painting in relation to performance, but in verbally describing them, this bodily discomfort—its risk and its cost—is usually missed or accidentally sanitized.

A further strength of the exhibition is how geographically diverse its artists are, the contributions from eastern Europe giving it a particular strength and distinctiveness. Such is also conferred by its mixing of art-world darlings with far less well-regarded practitioners. This is no accident; as the catalog says, "This exhibition very much reflects Tate Modern's interest in weaving major and minor histories together, to form new, richer art historical narratives" (5), a sentence whose prejudices I can overlook when juxtaposed with a related fact: eighteen out of the fifty-three individually-named artists are women—nearly thirty percent—which is far from fifty percent but is a significant improvement on those usual art-historical narratives. This is particularly important in a show that includes some of art's most chauvinistic excesses, such as

Yves Klein's *Anthropométries* (1960), with its elegant, naked model being dragged in paint, like an inept brush, by the fully-suited Klein.

Part of what gives this complicated diversity its integrity is that the show is nicely arranged physically. Each artist or collective is shown in gallery "boxes," like so many little galleries with walls open to each other, yet also with a connective but not monotonous thought-road between them. The thoughtfulness evident in both these commitments to diversity and techniques for honoring it is a credit to the curators.

By contrast, one gets the impression that the catalog was done on the cheap. I can't remember a Tate catalog this physically compromised. It is small, comes only in paperback with a single-paper (not wrap-over) cover and, relative to other Tate books, it is unsatisfying to handle. The exhibition that occupied the same gallery space twelve months previously—a major retrospective of Gerhard Richter—produced a proper book, weighty in every sense. The catalog of *A Bigger Splash* is not proper without being interestingly improper, and thus seems to reflect a second-class status for the subject matter itself.

This does no justice to the three cracking essays it contains. Each complements the others. "Painting in the Shape of a House" by the volume's editor Catherine Wood is a succinct art history of the period and a great introduction to the exhibition through a strong (but not simplistic) thematization of the material, including crucial chronological and ideological data. "Don't!" by Eda Čufer is, by contrast, a Miłosć-like collage of nine reflections on various detailed aspects of just a selection of those themes, with particular attention paid to the early portion of the period represented in the show and to the critical writings of Allan Kaprow. And "Painting (*the Threshold of the Visible World*)" by Dieter Roelstraete explores possible antecedents for the work displayed in nineteenth-century German painting, particularly that of Caspar David Friedrich and those whom he influenced. "The painting," he argues, "is not just a window onto the world—and all the world's a stage, evidently—but is a world itself, or alternatively is a stage upon which the utopian wholeness of this world can be enacted" (33).

This insight makes the catalog's cramped style all the more disappointing, because the stages these essays consider would benefit from a lot more space: more pages would allow more images and bigger pages would allow clearer study. Instead, some images are too small to be useful (for example, there is a pitiful lack of detail on Cindy Sherman's exquisite *Untitled*, 1976) and yet others are split over the centerfold of an over-squeezed binding. Only with bricks and clips can you get the thing to lie open on a desk (making, for example, Joan Jonas's *The Juniper Tree*, 1976/1994, impossible to view in full). While it must be said that the color reproduction is good and the layout stylish, the overall effect is infuriating: I want something I can *use*—in scholarship, as a reference, with students, while thinking and writing—and this, as an object, is not adequately designed for such use. My eyes, my hands, my brain all had to scrunch up to try to make it work *as a catalog*. Ironically, the human body and its functions, so present, insistent, and multiply-considered in the exhibition itself, seems under-regarded and undervalued in the planning for its companion volume.

However, this neglect of a middle-aged body's abilities seems somehow consistent with a curatorial eye that reflects the classic modernist enchantment with youth. Nearly all the pieces exhibited were created by artists when they were young and/or using predominantly young bodies and exploring (developmentally) young themes. This makes the exhibition the visual art equivalent of *On the Road*. The young David Hockney anchors the show (providing both its verbal title and its visual lead-image, 1967), although the opening room in which his work appears is shared with Jackson Pollock, one of the few artists whose mature work is displayed. Much appeal is made to Pollock's influence on the other artists: "Pollock . . . discovered the joy of painting as if his hands were paws; rather than dabbing paint from can to canvas with a brush, he moved like an animal, leaving traces of his own self on the ground—a new kind of painting creature, in total motion" (23). But his situation here at its start, in the shape of *Summertime No.9A* (1948), as well as in the imagery of him at work, is not sufficient to convince the viewer of his much-vaunted status as instigator of the turn to performance. The question must be asked: has this show sufficiently examined whether *all* painting is the product of performance?

When you finally push the exit door, the world directly ahead of you is one of pure consumerism (Cake! Beer! Plus books, gifts, and stacks and stacks of catalogs). To your right, through the

- 588 Tate's beautiful windows, the Thames, St. Paul's Cathedral, the city, and for many the memory of the *Make Poverty History* banner that once strode over this scene. Quietly, then, Lucy McKenzie's last sign gives a clue as to where you might go after *A Bigger Splash*. Home, like art, is not something that can be manufactured through any purchase or design. The catalog discusses art's movements from autographic to allographic, asking why musical performance was notated while dance was not (or not until lately). We might ask the same of many forms of living in place, including homemaking. And if asking makes you feel a bit anxious, the sign for *Emmaus* suggests one "real," post-consumerist way.