

VIRAL ANGST: ON
PERFORMANCE
AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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Every body performs online—some bodies more than others. Perhaps because of the total ubiquity of performance in the social media sphere, the institutions of performance and dance have struggled to grapple with its effect on its disciplines since its emergence in the last decade and a half. Social media is itself a perfect apparatus of performativity that renders the distinction between the real and the staged obsolete, which jeopardizes the distinction usually afforded by traditional performance practices. Increasingly, social media does not constitute a medium as much as the de-facto context of mediation for all cultural production; like television before it, it is becoming an organic and ubiquitous part of our social and cultural fabric. When not only art, but artists and institutions go online, everyone and everything performs alongside each other in new hybrid apparatuses of circulation, forcing performance to adapt to new logics of production, exchange, and presentation. In this most rapacious of digital circuits, performance is driven to literally *perform* alongside a variety of other forms of *content*, which upends established notions of authorship, value, and labor.

While the performing bodies on social media derive their performativity from the euphoric rush of circulation, those of traditional performance art figure almost as their diametric opposite, summoning their performative energies as a presence in/as a live event. The historical understanding of performance as an intense, singular, unmediated experience with bodies in a live setting has resulted in an ontology of performance that not only situates it completely outside of representation—it is happening in real time, without documentation, and is fundamentally irreproducible—but posits mediatized performance as being secondary, or as an artificial reproduction of the “real” event.¹ In this framework, live performance is inherently anti-viral: it resists, or tries to resist, circulation as media. Social media, by contrast, takes the inherent mediatized nature of life itself as its ontological foundation, and is in fact only complete as it begins to perform in real time, *as media*, in the various social circuits of the internet. In this “gray zone” of performance, as Claire Bishop has aptly described it, performance artists and institutions alike find themselves under the same pressure as everyone else: the pressure to adapt to and participate in the relational circuits of social media technologies in order to navigate a digitized cultural economy where virality is the predominant metric for success, and in extension, getting paid.² Interestingly, performance art has managed to register many of the affective, corporeal, and material implications of social media, often while embracing its multiple emergent communication and presentation technologies in the process. It does so by animating and even embodying the real material stakes of virality, that is, the overwhelming angst felt by the actors who must navigate its logics. The following timeline, partial and tentative, is an attempt to analyze the process and politics of art’s social viralization (willing or unwilling) through the framework of performance, and to simultaneously position performance as the ambivalent vanguard of this culture-wide process.

While net art certainly engaged performance in, or in response to, digital spaces,³ Ann Hirsch’s *Scandalishious* (2008), is perhaps the earliest example of social media performance in its activation of a relational performativity native to the internet, smoothly combining conventional registers of “real” performance art (acting, dancing) with the unreality of digital performances of the self. The American artist was still in grad school when she created the online persona Caroline, a self-described “hipster college freshman” who danced, vlogged, and interacted with her followers via her YouTube channel, cultivating a sizeable audience over the course of 18 months. Interested in the early representation of and performance by women on the internet, Hirsch’s Caroline was unique in that she was relegated to perform *alongside such women*, following the footsteps of other earlier viral female performers such as *Jennicam* and *lonelygirl15*. “The *Scandalishious* project not only looks like all the other videos of girls dancing in their pants that you might find on YouTube, it is that,” Hirsch reflected after concluding the work, pointing to the gray zone between enacting, critiquing, and inhabiting performative personas such as camgirls on social media: digitally mediated performances “produce” real performance (and vice versa) by way of the social relationality happening between its users in real time, and may be fully appreciated by audiences without the awareness of a fictional or performative frame.⁴ This dissolution of the performative frame is distinct from modes of parody and mimicry native to 20th century performance, and implies, more so than a symbolic mimicry of forms, an inherent performativity or relational fictionalization through the media apparatus itself.

The year 2008 also marks the rise of a set of technical innovations that dramatically reconfigured the conditions for the production and distribution of art, most vividly exemplified by the launch of the iPhone and the mass-popularization of the image-driven blogosphere. As social media mushroomed worldwide, smartphones became integral to any form of art spectatorship. The white cube was forced to recalibrate in response, refashioning itself as a space for “unlimited documentation” to facilitate the uploading of art onto social media platforms such as Flickr (2004), Twitter (2006), and Instagram (2010), where such documentation found new publics by way of its circulation power (measured in downloads, likes, reshares).⁵ Importantly, this period also saw the birth of the “dance exhibition,” which Bishop defines as a curatorial format where live performance is temporalized to fit museum opening hours, with performers often hired on an hourly basis. This remediated format resulted in the sudden broadening of audience access to the cultures of performance: performance documentation doubles as content for institutions’ social media streams, which, by way of hashtags, produce viral image clusters and thus attract more audiences. Art was entering the social media sphere, and was producing, in the words of Michael Sanchez, an online image ecology of competition marked by trends, tastes, and opportunity. Social media image platforms, Sanchez argues, are where images (and their producers)

1 Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).

2 Claire Bishop, “Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone: Dance Exhibitions and Audience Attention,” *TDR/The Drama Review* 62, no. 2 (2018): 22–42.

3 Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

4 “Scandalishious,” in Rhizome (ed.), *Net Art Anthology*, <https://anthology.rhizome.org/scandalishious> (accessed: June 14, 2021).

5 Bishop describes the new function of the white cube as one of “unlimited documentation.” See Bishop, “Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone,” 31.

“go to network,” becoming avatars of a “real-life” system of production, presentation, and exchange.⁶

While Sanchez does not touch directly on performance, these logics are glaringly applicable to the “brick-and-mortar” industries of movement and dance because the fetishized economy of presence (and supposed singular intensity) of performance translates as extra viral energy as they are mediatized in digital image circuits. Bodies *literally* perform, not only like performative images (such as images of painting and sculpture), but as living producers of spectacle. Here, *how well you perform* takes on a double meaning to connote both bodies and media, increasingly treated as one and the same. Appropriately, the first performance to actually go “viral” was one that also fetishized corporeal presence to the point of absurdity, Marina Abramović’s *The Artist is Present* (2010). Famously, this durational performance, staged as part of her career survey at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, saw the artist spend three months silently sitting on a chair faced by individual visitors, who each had a chance to make eye contact with the artist. At first glance, *The Artist is Present* seems deeply committed to performance art’s claims to anti-virality—Abramović herself offered statements on the work such as, “[t]he first time I actually put my body in front of an audience, I understood this as *my media*,” and “we are so alienated from each other, we are texting each other without *seeing each other*.”⁷ What is less known is that the entire 700 hours of the work were livestreamed on MoMA’s website, where a total of 800,000 people would tune in over the course of the performance, while headshots of participants were uploaded to the institution’s Flickr account, which was viewed more than 600,000 times before the end of the show. In Abramović’s magnum opus, what is performed, then, is the practice of watching others watch while being watched through various institutional and technological media interfaces—physical and digital. Together, these numerous and simultaneous forms of media spectatorship and performance produce the “buzz” needed for a work to go viral. The viral performativity of *The Artist is Present* is evidenced by its continued presence on social media more than a decade after its staging; it appears as polysemantic memes that in various ways abstract Abramović’s play of mediated gazes into countless other affects and situations. Presence, here, is not only mediatized through the internet, but is stretched endlessly into the non-time of digital circulation.

MEDIA TERROR, MEDIA JOY

The following year, artist Xavier Cha evoked the anxiety of performance becoming media with *Body Drama* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, where actors wearing body-mounted cameras projected intense emotional distress in front of audiences, while close-up footage of their faces was projected live onto the gallery walls. In person viewers experienced the distressed performing body in front of them only to simultaneously consume them as a recorded and disembodied image, effectively placing the two in direct competition. Wearing cameras, Cha’s performers are marked out from the crowd, but ironically, it is this very

distancing that allows audiences prime access to their most intimate emotional sphere by way of the hooked-up body-rig (a popular device in reality competition shows). *Body Drama* offers a salient allegory for both the psychological and spatial alienation of performing for the camera, as well as the terror induced by the presence of any media technology, most importantly, the terror of surveillance. Yet, if the total absorption of the body by mediation figures as the “drama” staged by Cha, consider the added layer that audiences were free, in fact encouraged, to take pictures. The spectacle of mediation itself served as a photographable moment within the art institution. As such, *Body Drama* produces a further commentary on the emotional and physical labor of performing bodies in media and mediated environments, especially within the framework of the museum gallery where performer, audience, and institution seem to converge around the desire to capture art with the purpose of sharing it online.

In the years to come, artists now canonized under the sweeping “post-internet” rubric skillfully articulated the simultaneous joys and anxieties of performing online. Rather than purporting deep technological innovation, these practices thematized the ubiquity of online culture—namely, the digital social network through which everything (commodities, events, images, personalities) comes to pass. For instance, with the launch of #artselfie in 2012, a website that would aggregate images with this hashtag from Instagram, the US collective DIS added an ironic and relational spin to Abramović’s deadpan content proliferation of the museum space, and rendered art documentation a performative, self-reflexive genre in its own right, one to be inhabited and performed by any content-producing audience member. “The selfie genre that has proliferated on Instagram’s phone-specific platform reveals the social network as a telephone/mirror hybrid—literally!—and continues the aestheticization of everyday life in social media that has leached the authority of image-making from mass media and from art,” wrote Brian Droitcour, who helped coin the term, at the time.⁸ In a complete inversion of Abramović’s institutionally-sponsored viral proliferation of the performer, the #artselfie deauthorized and distributed this role to the user, and provocatively posited the artwork as a mere prop for anyone to *perform in front of*.

The social implications of this aestheticization or *making performance* of everyday life online is deeply ambivalent and was famously mined during its infancy by Amalia Ulman. In 2014 the Spanish-Argentinian artist started posting selfies and carefully groomed depictions of her glamorous Los Angeles lifestyle, chronicling a dramatic story arc that took her from sweet small-town émigré through partying, sugar dating, and plastic surgery, ultimately facing a near-suicidal meltdown, only to return post-rehab as a reformed “clean-living” health guru. The performance threw her friends and the art world into disbelief and attracted tens of thousands of followers who passionately commented on Ulman’s trajectory in real-time with a mixture of support, admiration, vulgar fetishization, mockery, and downright abuse, effectively allowing the network to *perform* its own toxic relationality. In a violently accelerated and economized social media space compared to that of Hirsch’s only six years prior, Ulman’s *Excellences and Perfections* was, upon completion, criticized

6 Michael Sanchez, “Contemporary Art, Daily,” in Isabelle Graw, Daniel Birnbaum, and Iain Hirsch (eds.), *Art and Subjecthood: The Return of the Human Figure in Semicapitalism* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011), 54.

7 Abramović quoted in *Marina Abramović: from the ‘Early Years’ to ‘The Artist is Present’*, Serpentine Galleries, <https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/whats-on/marina-abramovic-early-years-artist-present/> (accessed June 14, 2021). Emphasis added.

8 Brian Droitcour, “Let Us See You See You,” *DIS Magazine*, December 3, 2012, <http://dismagazine.com/blog/38139/let-us-see-you-see-you/>

for not only promoting retrograde female ideals, but for supposedly satirizing “real” performances by young women who sincerely construct aspirational versions of themselves online. But like Hirsch, it is exactly the performance of social media’s networked muddling of reality and unreality that makes the project so poignant: Ulman’s attempt to perfectly emulate the so-called “Hot Babe persona” that reigned Instagram at the time is, regardless of its artistic frame, as real—or, if you will, unreal—as any other kind of “labor of the self” that happens online. This is because this labor, *performance labor*, is measured not by notions of authenticity or physicality, but by its capacities for producing virality, a kind of value that has become increasingly tangible in the wake of *Excellences and Perfections*. Present-day professional social media influencers have advanced and economized this (predominantly female) labor of managing digital personas that double as marketing platforms for commodities. This performance labor—looking sexy, funny, aspirational—is, like Ulman’s performance, often dismissed as narcissistic, but importantly, the influencer perpetuates not *herself* but a (*viral*) *self* in order to make money—specifically, the self that best embodies the network’s taste and trends of a given moment. Ulman’s bid for virality, then, is very much “real” in that it embraces the economized performance labor of social media in its totally staged nature, situating the female body as the site in which this competitive economization plays out most vividly and ambivalently. Naturally, this labor extends into digital sex work, first with the so-called camgirl industry of the early 2010s, and today on platforms such as OnlyFans, where sexual or erotic acts are performed as custom orders, ranging from the generic to the hyper-specialized.⁹

INSTITUTIONS PERFORM

In the 2010s, performance artists continued to develop new modes of hybrid performance labor, producing online performative content via brick-and-mortar performance events in art institutions. One example is Young Girl Reading Group (f. 2013 by artist duo Dorota Gawęda and Egle Kulbokaitė), a weekly performance webcast that would move nomadically between homes, hotel rooms, galleries, and institutions to stage highly aestheticized collective reading events. YGRG described itself as a “live Instagram hangout,” self-consciously playing up the social ambivalence of such a notion. How social is social media *really*? In these sessions, groups of fashionably dressed youths would lounge around reading out loud various feminist critical theory texts from their smartphones, barely noticing the audience, let alone each other. If YGRG performed (as) a physical community, this community was both connected and separated by digital devices—a perfect, almost clichéd image of the melancholy of digital sociality. Visitors to these sessions would often note their uneventful and almost tedious nature, as the “outlouding” of textbook theory is rarely pleasant or even fully understandable. Instead, the highly mediatized aesthetic of the production as a whole (complete with headsets, broadcasting gear, and numerous cameras) became the durational object of study, framing the reading group as social media transmission station.

The simultaneous banalization and refetishization of the in-person performing body, caught between the value systems of physical and digital media, has become the dominant paradox for performance of the last decade. In

this model, the cult presence of the performer is no longer delineated to the single irreproducible in-person moment but must extend just as vividly to a performative media presence *as circulating content* in digital spheres across space and time. Here, documentation of in-person performance becomes ever-more crucial, as that image constitutes the basic unit of digital circulation. In increasingly digital lives, in-person presence of bodies becomes a scarce and sought-after commodity, so much so that even the digital mediatization of its documentation takes on a value of its own.

So exactly when and where are performers to perform, and for what purpose and for which value? What does *not performing* even look like in these spaces? This temporal, spatial, corporeal, and economic crisis triggered by performance art’s digital mediatization expresses the fundamental angst of virality; a feeling of deep anxiety or dread that feels impossible to ignore, let alone escape. This angst is not only triggered by economic precarity, but by the general dissolution of “the performative” as a frame or medium into everyday life. This angst, which is underscored in the work of Hirsch, Cha, and Ulman, also characterizes notable performance practices of the 2010s. While celebrity artists such as Tino Sehgal developed increasingly anti-viral policies around their work by attempting to ban documentation altogether (which, ironically only builds new hyped image economies by way of leaks and unlicensed documentation), artists such as Xavier Le Roy, Maria Hassabi, and Adam Linder thematized the discipline’s crisis-ridden economy of presence more ambivalently by presenting performances that complicate it. By strictly structuring performance and dance around technology, time, or money, often producing purposely slow, “boring,” or repetitive action, these artists can be understood to test out the repercussions of performance virality in an embodied fashion. If the conventionally performing body is twice-mediatized simply by its mere presence, could one opt out by assuming other types of embodiment, such as the object, the zombie, the robot?

VIRAL ANGST

The most vivid (and critically divisive) thematization of this economy remains that of German artist Anne Imhof, who, in 2016, gained attention from both the art world and the internet with her large-scale three-part “opera performance” aptly titled *Angst*, where audiences were invited to not only immerse themselves in a thoroughly stylized tableau of performing youthful bodies (dancing, singing, smoking, or hanging out) but to document it from within. In Imhof’s fashionable zombie-time, performers don’t *do* as much as they *exist* within the mediated and temporalized frame of performance itself. Imhof’s performance evokes the ambivalent paralysis, the *angst*, of viral performance spectacles, at once charged and extremely boring or banal—an atmosphere that, very importantly, implicates the audience too. Faced with little to no performative action, Imhof’s audiences are confronted with their own performative co-presence, their Brechtian implication in the work, which mostly leads people to start taking photos of whatever performer is in front of them, thus reasserting a safe performer/non-performer division. Incidentally, Imhof’s immersive tableaux make for great photos—not least thanks to the editorial styling of her model-like performers—photos that take on their own life as they begin to circulate online as a kind of hybrid between performance documentation and fashion photography. In *Faust*, her 2017 commission for the German pavilion at the

9 This particular performance economy was explored in its infancy by American artist Shawné Michaelain Holloway.

Venice Biennale, Imhof took this logic to its formal extreme, rendering the four-month performance exhibition a total environment for endless image documentation. Here, Imhof retrofitted the pavilion with raised glass floors and mezzanines, which allowed performers to retain maximum visibility to the audience even when the installation was crowded. But interestingly, *Faust's* viral power as a performance that *performs its own mediatization as image* was so intense that it eventually overtook the in-person experience. During my own visit to the Biennale, I found myself (like countless others) stuck outside the pavilion, unable to enter due to the absolutely overwhelming crowd. After a number of unsuccessful attempts, I left Venice without ever seeing the work, but at that point it didn't even matter. I had already consumed it countless times on the social media channels of my friends. What exactly would prohibit me, I thought, from claiming my personal witnessing of this live, singularly hyped performance? What difference would it make if I posted someone else's photo from within? In a strange echo of Ulman, *Faust* crystallized the specificity of social media content's aggressive performativity, deprivileging, but never fully obliterating, a connection to some originary live performing body. In the age of social media, every internet user becomes a potential participant in a performance if they choose to engage in its viral hype.

"Mediation today is less a matter of documentation than it is a compositional method," Bishop writes in reference to artists such as Hassabi as well as Ryan McNamara, who, like Imhof, thematize the apparatus of social media in the context of performance.¹⁰ Beyond such self-reflexive practices which abstract, complicate, or accelerate virality in the spirit of institutional critique, in the wake of Imhof's work, we have seen the rise of a much wider phenomenon of performance and dance documentation going viral. New technologies continue to proliferate this tendency: the mention and sharing functions introduced by Instagram in 2018, for example, have allowed social media to become a literal mis-en-abyme of digital sociality, where brief but spectacular live performances are immediately broadcast to a wide digital social sphere by way of interactive audience-generated documentation, resulting in hours of documentation on a performer's Instagram or Facebook stories. But as any content manager will attest, virality *as a tactic* can rarely be consistent. The nebulous logics of increasingly algorithmic social media feeds will squish some content and proliferate other, which also results in some performances "accidentally" going viral because they somehow hit the zeitgeist of the social media moment. This was the case with Michele Rizzo's choreographic commission *HIGHER xtn* for the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 2018. The performance investigated near-extinct electronic music dance styles and was intended as a live intervention in the museum over four weekends, where dancers distributed across galleries would slowly gather in a collective choreography. However, scrappy smartphone footage circulating on social media quickly led to huge turn outs and thus obstructed the free-moving strategy of the work. The crowds were so fierce that by the last weekend, a designated "performance zone" or stage had naturally formed in the museum lobby for dancers to perform within—not only for their safety, but for ideal documentation conditions by the incessantly picture-taking audience.

What collectively underwrites these disparate performance projects in the last one-and-a-half decades are the social and material stakes of virality, that is, its competitive economy. Whether performance on social media is deemed narcissistic, nihilistic, fame-driven, silly, or critical, they all increasingly depend on virality as a generator of value—sometimes far beyond economic institutions that can support it. Performance mediation has always developed alongside shifting economic conditions for performing bodies, who, regardless of the medium and the materiality, must be fed, housed, cared for. But social media has produced a sizable gap between mediation and remuneration. Performance art on social media is merely enacting (in a more or less privileged sphere, depending on who you ask) the real precarity of digital performers everywhere, be they motivational speakers, adult entertainers, university lecturers, or virtual tour guides. The drift towards an ever-more precarious performance logic of work as an index of evaluation is at the heart of post-Fordist society, and virality is merely the realization of this logic in a digital, algorithmic space. In response to the question *who would want to be viral at all?* we could ask, *who could afford not to be?* Virtual visibility, fame, and hype are symptoms of our time and economy, and increasingly define how people get paid, and who gets paid the most. "Today," as Paolo Virno, a long-time theorist of post-Fordist labor says, "we are all virtuosic performers."¹¹

11 Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), 52.

Jeppe Ugelvig is an independent curator and scholar based in New York. He has staged exhibitions at Tai Kwun (Hong Kong), Kunsthal Charlottenborg (Copenhagen), and the Hessel Museum (New York), and contributes frequently to publications such as *Frieze*, *Mousse*, and *Spike*. His first art historical book, *Fashion Work*, was published in 2020 by Damiani.