

# Bad Art and Objecthood

DAVID LEVINE

IT SEEMS THAT BAD ART IS THEATER.... GETTING SHOT IS FOR REAL ... THERE'S NO ELEMENT OF PRETENSE OR MAKE-BELIEVE IN IT. CHRIS BURDEN, 1973



Let's talk about *Tamy Ben-Tor* for a second.

She can't act.

No, I know I know I know.

That's not the point.

But she also can't write.

No, I know I know. That's not the point either. "She gives us people who are disintegrating unconsciously.... In this sado-masochistic purgatory the path of least resistance has mutated into the one of most stupidity."

But so does, like, *Don Rickles*.

And don't give me, y'know, *performative, undermining...*

Don Rickles at Zach Feuer would TOTALLY rock.

Tamy Ben-Tor at the Vegas Sands would totally, like, not.

So are we letting our standards DOWN, or what?

*Catherine Sullivan* makes art about overacting. *John Bock* makes it about failed theater.

*Tino Sehgal* does work that isn't exactly *about* bad site-specific choreography—but he sure incorporates enough of it. *Alex Bag?*

Bad movies: *Sue de Beer?*

Bad sets: *Stan Douglas?*

Failed Narratives.

So how did good art become a repository for bad performance?

And why's everyone always ragging on "Hollywood" *Shirin Nesbat?*

Back to Don Rickles at Zach Feuer for a moment.

He wouldn't be Don Rickles anymore.

He'd be "Don Rickles."

This is how modernist gallery space works: everything turns into a specimen of itself.

Now back to *Tamy Ben-Tor! Live, at the Vegas Sands!*

It wouldn't "suck."

It would just flat-out SUCK, because that's how auditorium space works: it's built for conviction. It's hungry for belief. Only Sullivan's scene-chewers look natural in that environment.

In a gallery, though, they look like vain, self-regarding assholes who believe in all the wrong things.

*Tamy Ben-Tor doesn't* look like that in a gallery.

And Catherine Sullivan hates actors.





Actually, Catherine Sullivan is *embarrassed* by actors, as only someone who comes into art from theater can be.

I mean—what are you going to do? Modernists couldn't stand theater because it lacked autonomy. 1970s artists couldn't stand it because it was too representational. Steven Henry Madoff, batting for the present day, doesn't like it because it's *too* autonomous, and the general art-going public doesn't like it because (a) it's, like, cheesy, and (b) who would want to pay money to be trapped in a dark room watching people *emote* for two hours when you can go to Deitch Projects, drink for free, see *The Citizens Band*, wonder aloud why the fuck these performance guys don't even *rehearse*, and leave whenever you want? Seriously.

Good theater = Bad art.

Good art = Bad theater.

But let's back up.

It's a funny accident that live art, which was designed to *evade* the crass commercialism of the art market, was from inception so easily confused with *theater*, an art form considered even *more* crassly commercial by the art market, that all the Body and Happening artists had to run around drawing these distinctions between themselves and theater based on the fact that, y'know, our stuff isn't *representational*, and our stuff doesn't *cater to the crowd*, and pretty much just sounding like Clement Greenberg with organs. The modernist ethos recapitulated itself in the very movements Fried feared modernism would be eviscerated by, the anti-autonomous movements he himself grouped together under the name of *Theater*.

Yet all *Allan Kaprow*, etc. really wanted to say is that their stuff is *really real*.



That's the point Madoff made in last October's *Artforum*, which actually *reviewed* a theater festival ... but only to demonstrate that 40 years later—*phew!*—performance *still* kicks theater's ass.

Madoff derived the superior *realness* of performance, however, from a theatrical recreation of some 40-year-old *Marina Abramovic* pieces.

And my question is, if performance is so antithetical to theater, how does Abramovic's stuff fit so comfortably into a theater festival?

And if the basis of this antithesis is *spontaneity*, how's it possible to reenact such pieces at all?

And if the basis is *presentness*, how's it possible to use actors?

And you can ask the same questions about Abramovic's recent greatest-hits reenactments at the Guggenheim, on a special round white stage (*Single performance \$10! \$5 for members, students, and seniors!!*).

And then ask yourself, does it really matter if *Chris Burden* actually got shot?





It's the kind of question you'd ask if you come from theater (I do); but then again, we were never hung up on authenticity like art is.

No, no, I know, *it's not* ... And recent performance and video, recognizing the unavoidably *theatrical* component of performance, deploy a willed amateurism in the creation of artifice that *emphasizes* the constructedness of narratives and social personae.

But what's *that*, if not another way to keep your brushstrokes showing?

And what's theater, except performance polished to a mass-produced, signatureless, industrial sheen?

And what is art's horror of theater, if not modernism's terror of Pop?

In theater, *nothing* is spontaneous.

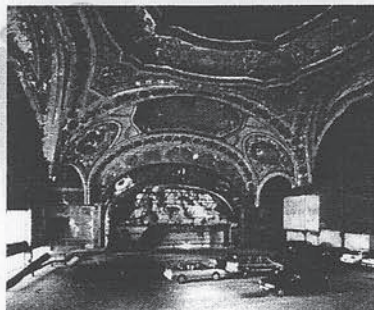
In theater, *nothing* is authentic.

In theater, ephemerality makes money.

In theater, there's no market for documentation.

Theater is actually the wet-dream realization of various post-1970s artistic claims, claims the art system can't honor because of the way it's *financed*.

But still, y'know ... ewww. It's so ... unsophisticated.



So what's theater's *deal*?

Well, for one thing, it's been getting dissed by the art world for, like, 40 years and been too nipple-eyed to notice, which only fuels more contempt...

But why *should* theater read *Artforum*?

Why should it know about Michael Fried, or Minimalism, or Jonathan Meese? None of this stuff *pertains*. None of this stuff *applies*. None of this stuff would *save it*, because Theater—and this is true whether you're talking about Richard Forman or old people down in Florida—is architecturally committed to a nineteenth-century notion of picture planes, and this drastically restricts both its aesthetic capacities and its ability to respond to or incorporate any developments, aesthetic or otherwise, of the twentieth or twenty-first centuries.

Fried—with whom I agree on *nothing*—described Minimalist dissatisfaction with painting as follows:

Painting is here seen as an art on the verge of exhaustion, one in which the range of acceptable solutions to a basic problem—how to organize the surface of the picture—is severely restricted. The use of shaped rather than rectangular supports can, from the literalist point of view, merely prolong the agony.

Swap in "site-specific theater," "video projections," "planting actors in the audience," "dance," and "the Wooster Group" for "shaped supports," and you've pretty much got *my* problem with theater in a nutshell: theater's not like Specific Objects; it's like staring at a fucking *painting*.

So we're back to autonomy.

And how, alone, the performing arts still cleave to that ideal.

We pretend like we don't; we pretend like we need a crowd to fulfill the experience—Fried even *believed* us—but everything we *do* is about establishing autonomy.

Lighting and architecture separate spectator from spectacle.

Narrative sequence separates our temporality from theirs.

And intensive rehearsals establish a separate causal universe in which accidents just don't happen. And this in turn guarantees the infinite repeatability of the theatrical event, ensuring that the artwork *does*, in fact, outlast the spectator's experience of it—night after fucking night.

Whatever else gallery performance is, it's not autonomous.

Until you reenact it. Or play it back on video. Or, I mean, just *sell* it —



Here's why Tino Sehgal is a genius:

He took the most banal *facts* of performing arts production—absence of a material commodity, prohibiting video even for documentation purposes, overall ephemerality of a nonetheless repeatable product—and transposed them into an art economy, in which the artwork suddenly becomes a miracle of dematerialization.

And it's true: in this context, choreography becomes a fundamentally different *object*.

But given what a sophisticated move that is, couldn't he have come up with a better chant than  
*It's so con-temp-or-ary?*

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By "better," I mean something less smug, less self-satisfied.

And so we're back to Tamy Ben-Tor, making fun of people who don't exist, and helping us feel superior in the process.

But to *whom* are we feeling superior?

To these hypothetical cats who can't see how dumb they look, who can't see that they're being mocked. To characters, essentially.

Theater rules this out. *Belief* requires that actors leave no trace of themselves as they vanish into characters: *belief* requires that all indices of a world outside the fiction vanish. This total suppression of context is what Brecht found so irritating about theater, and why Brecht's thinking ultimately found a more congenial home in contemporary art.

Art recognizes that awareness of context is ultimately a political decision: the ability to come and go as you like, the refusal to compel focus, the presence of multiple artworks in the same room, all make the difference between gallery and theater attendance the difference between informed self-determination and—well—mass hypnosis.

But mass hypnosis *wants* to fuck with you; its tactics are developed to get under your skin. Realism is one of them, ambiguity another. The artists of these corporate forms—actors, writers, directors, designers—spend years refining their ability to vanish behind character, plot, setting, all to undermine your sense of where fiction ends and you begin; they *want* to get under your skin and stay with you, permanently.

It actually sounds kind of appealing.

It also sounds kind of repulsive.

But if you're going to critique it, and if you've got the benefit of working a context that can alienate *anything*, wouldn't you want to throw the *best* gladiators into the arena? Wouldn't you want *dare* your spectators to be seduced? Rather than showing them what they already know to be false?

I mean, unless you're just doing it for fun. In which case, y'know, we could all go see a *movie*.

*fin*

