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## Extreme Performances that Lived Inside a Book

Naomi Vogt

Review. Dominic Johnson. *Unlimited Action: The Performance of Extremity in the 1970s*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019. 217 pp., 34 b/w ills.

Transcribing physical performance into words can feel like a struggle, especially when the performances actively resist intellectual capture. How does one do justice in print to something that is extreme and refuses to stand still? In *Unlimited Action: The Performance of Extremity in the 1970s*, Dominic Johnson is careful not to shackle unruly art. Instead he lets it loose on cultural history. The latter is transformed as it confronts unorthodox, little-studied works without attempting to tame them. Indeed, extreme actions transfigure existing models of witness, including Johnson's own writing in which this idea emerges. The book becomes an object lesson unto itself, starting with the cover. Reading this work in academic and public spaces means repeatedly brandishing a bright orange object bearing the large image of two naked men: The Kipper Kids, their prosthetic-nosed faces chalk white, their elastic-strap-framed buttocks center page. People notice. And I notice that I repeatedly resist the urge to reposition myself to make this object discreet.

*Unlimited Action* does not try to keep a cool distance from the radical performances it examines. But nor does it embrace them so closely as to over-determine their meaning and effects. Johnson's research sets out to examine actions performed by artists in the 1970s in Europe and North America, which have been broadly ignored for various reasons. Most of the time, their extremity made them almost unintelligible as artworks: they were anti-aesthetic, resisted commodification and documentation, qualified as crime or pornography, caused shock or damage to the extent of alienating even the sectors of the art world most seemingly open to provocation, or they were too big, lacking in virtuosity, too small, too repetitive, too dangerous to register as viable. These works extended the boundaries of what is accepted as art by institutions, as well as the boundaries which artists and audiences can encounter within themselves. Because of the strange, barely fathomable, and repeated leaps of faith at the heart of these works, the book promises to offer only a 'troubled legibility' of its subject matter. This approach seems to develop as both a methodological and ethical guideline: if they are to remain unlimited as the title suggests, these actions can be neither ignored nor pinned down.

The chapter dedicated to COUM Transmissions, the British collective spearheaded by Genesis P-Orridge and Cosey Fanni Tutti, best illustrates Johnson's careful analysis of art that becomes inseparable from life, and of actions carried out by artists who 'don't want to be separate from anything'.<sup>1</sup> In 1976, two controversies, which unfolded mostly outside the art world, led to COUM's renunciation of their practice. First, they were charged in court for circulating indecent

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<sup>1</sup> This declaration appeared P-Orridge's formal instruction to their lawyer.

material through the mail – sexually confrontational text and images juxtaposed to representations of the Queen, in their series *Mail Action*. A more public scandal followed in the press and Parliament, over their exhibition *Prostitution* at London’s Institute of Contemporary Art. The show was shut down within a week and is still regarded as one of the most controversial in British art. It included pornographic imagery and the display of bloodied performance props. In a context of economic downturn, public funding given to this shocking content caused public anger. Yet for both Johnson and COUM, these works demonstrate that obscenity is located in the social response, namely in the scandal itself rather than the events susceptible to sparking it. After including the viewpoints of a criminologist and a barrister, the analysis convincingly moves on to show that the inclusion of pornography and violence in these works was not exhibitionistic. Instead the works pushed art’s political reach, confronting the audience with obscenity, stretching in the process the boundaries of what constitutes art and authorship. In *Magazine Actions*, Cosey posed for pornographic publications before ‘appropriating’ the published images of herself. These become her ‘assisted self-portraits’ as they reverse, if not the male gaze, certainly the place of agency associated with action and production.

Variations of method and scale make Johnson’s re-evaluation of COUM particularly rich. His use of Jacques Rancière’s emancipated spectator is convincing: performance and public life (in court, in the press) are blurred such that they recombine the source material of what can be sensed in aesthetic terms. But some of Johnson’s key insights also surface in less expected passages. Without relying on biography, the book consistently conveys the artists’ temperaments and, at times, the author’s admiration thereof. His attention to Cosey Fanni Tutti’s self-naming highlights that her moniker’s malapropism ‘puns on fanny’ (British slang for vagina) with ‘a saccharine soupçon of tutti frutti that suggests a pleasurable but nutritionless confection’, all while building on Mozart’s almost eponymous opera and its titular generalization about women. Moreover, the spirit of this art – extreme and absurd yet never quite only that – is regularly reproduced in the prose rather than merely described. The chapter juxtaposes Johnson’s own use of puns to structure his argument (the best and most dad-joke-like section title being ‘*Couming* on strong’) with hard-to-handle quotes describing performances that involved self-injury, raw egg ingestion and vomiting immediately followed by public sex and anal use of milk syringes. Finally, Johnson’s gusto for anecdote draws attention to the neglected and sometimes imperceptible ways in which orthodoxies can form, even among the world of extreme performance. After recounting the public dismissal of COUM by extreme-art patriarch Chris Burden, Johnson explains that any mention of P-Orridge still garners the American artist’s ‘jocular eye-roll’. This analysis of non-verbal reception evokes Clifford Geertz’s account of a wink – and the potentially profound importance of such gestures – in the anthropological essay that introduced ‘thick description’ as an ethnographic method.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In the opening pages of his landmark volume, Geertz compares a ‘burlesque wink’ borrowed from a philosophical thought experiment with a ‘mock sheep raid’ from Moroccan Middle Atlas ethnography. His aim is to demonstrate that human behavior and what we call culture demand to be described thickly, namely in a way that depicts their context and

Four other groups of performances form the core of this book, which, apart from its contribution to art theory and performance studies, functions as an anthology of haunting stories (a genre both kin to contemporary art and one too often avoided in the field). In *An Eight Day Passage* (1977), Kerry Trengove spectacularly dug his way out of a walled-in concrete cell beneath London's Acme Gallery, gruelingly laboring alone for eight days in suffocating dark confinement. The endurance performance was represented through closed-circuit footage and received extensive national coverage, before slipping into art-historical oblivion. Johnson's minute reconstitution situates the event beyond macho bravado, and rather as belonging to a revolutionary aesthetics and picturing of freedom acquisition. In this analysis, Paulo Freire's philosophy of revolutionary praxis (which was central to Trengove's thinking) receives as much attention as the artist's media savvy. From his instructions to exhibit the news clippings of the feat to his exaggerated swigs from the champagne bottle handed to him upon his triumphant tunnel exit, the staging and afterlives of the performance are cast as constitutive of historical action, while being taken seriously as representation.

The chapters on Ulay, Anne Bean, and The Kipper Kids continue to mine the blurring of art and life. This concept, though integral to the history of avant-gardes, is rarely fleshed out to the point that its meaning becomes concrete. Yet in Johnson's accounts of actions as both art-historical and life-historical events, the blurring is no mere maxim. In *There Is a Criminal Touch to Art* (1976), Ulay stole Carl Spitzberg's *The Poor Poet* (1839) from Berlin's Neue Nationalgalerie before placing it in the living room of a Turkish family in a working-class area of the city. The painting was particularly beloved in Germany, and had reportedly been Adolf Hitler's personal favorite. The chapter retraces the action's practical and material reality, from the nylon bag brought to carry the stolen good which turned out to be too small, to the detailed legal repercussions Ulay faced after being caught. Yet the most powerful question to emerge from this narrative passage concerns iconoclasm. While theft is historically less likely than vandalism to be associated with activism and artistic intention, it is by crossing over into this category of crime that Ulay's object displacement acts on national identity and self-knowledge. Johnson's research remains wary of definitive explication. But the strength of this performance seems to lie in its liminal, ceremonial nature: Spitzberg's romanticized depiction of poverty is transfigured without being physically altered, and only those in the know – including readers of this book – can 'see' the invisible, performative layer now forever attached to the painting.

Indeed, narration is often necessary to the durability of these performances, which usually left few or partial traces. Johnson's writing thus has a complicated relationship with its objects. This text not only recovers and interprets a series of performances: it also contributes to their existences, amalgamating with them. This becomes most acute with Anne Bean, whose actions often had no audiences, or no framing within the art world. Her 'life art' – as she called her perpetual work-in-

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the cultural significance ascribed to them by their authors. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures, Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

progress – forms such a continuum between, well, life and art, that identifying the latter becomes antithetical. And yet it must be done, leading to the book's most meta forms of writing. Examples include her attempt to dig a hole in water with a shovel, a time when she sliced the tip of her finger, using the blood to paint her lips, or the dog she adopted and named Mortality so she could repeatedly shout out that word when walking the animal in public. Bean's scarcely determinable actions seem to shake Johnson's stance as a researcher most profoundly. Her performances that cannot be considered in isolation from her life ask him to recalibrate his scholarship and the underlying principles of performance studies at large – something which, as he reflexively remarks in a sweet note in brackets, is his 'problem, not hers'.

As the book progresses, it treads closer and closer to the edge of the ontologically possible within the realm of art. After Bean's barely perceptible performances come The Kipper Kids, whose outrageous actions estranged them from the art world. The duo – they share the name and persona of Harry Kipper – performed self-sabotaging ceremonies throughout the 1970s. The 'food ceremony' featured excessive food fights, the 'boxing ceremony' always ended in Harry Kipper's violent and bloody self-defeat, and the audience routinely went home splashed in indelible substances, ready to sue. Simple statements in the chapter stand out: 'Harry Kipper speaks in a peculiar, self-invented idiolect (...) interrupted by guffaws, squeaks, fart sounds, grunts, burps and parps and other phonetic oddities. Their speech suggests an autistic lingua – the language of children raised (not by wolves, but) by kippers'. Physical performance is transcribed into words, as this chapter shifts the focus to comic effects and uncomfortable affects, which accumulate into a clear picture of the duo's institutionally incompatible anti-aesthetics. In addition to the book's five central case studies, Ana Mendieta's renowned blood-based street intervention *Moffit Building Piece* (1973) occupies the first pages. Through it, the introduction poses questions that resurface rarely but always consequentially in the book, about the politics of shock and the production of incidental audiences beyond the art world – here, uncharacteristically, in the absence of the artist's body. Finally, the pyrotechnic performances of Stephen Cripps, chronicled in the conclusion, serve the exploration of recklessness as concept and phenomenon – one in which excessive action is matched by a dearth of care or distorted uses of self-determination.

In this vein, something unexpected happens throughout the book. Various phenomena and affects usually considered as culturally minor and ungraspable are delicately explored and explained. These notions are often the peripheral yet omnipresent connotations of the cultural matter at hand (recklessness, sabotage, shtick). Some of the definitions offered are succinct asides that serve the works' formal analyses – the variation without singularity at the core of shticks, for instance, illuminates The Kipper Kids' subversion of artistic claims to mastery. Meanwhile, an enticing appendix classifies motley themes. Under 'D', for example, entries range from 'danger' and 'dialogical aesthetics' to 'doppelgängers' and 'drunkenness'. Other notions, those of action and extremity in particular, constitute the book's central aesthetic subjects, and only become conceptually perceptible through the full arc of the case studies. This approach somewhat evokes Sianne Ngai's transformative study of three postmodern aesthetic categories – *Zany, Cute, Interesting*

– though it is presented here in a less theoretically far-reaching and a more disciplinary-abiding form, namely a clear-cut contribution to performance studies. Indeed where the zany, the cute, and the interesting are broadly used to process a (respectively) performance-driven, hyper-commoditized and mass-mediated late-capitalist culture,<sup>3</sup> Johnson's extreme concerns a handful of practitioners prodding the limits of knowledge and experience through the production of actions. At stake are moments of vacillation, namely the opposite of entrenched aesthetic categories.

The vacillation at the heart of these works echoes their historical contexts. In the Northern Atlantic, the 1970s constituted an economic and ideological threshold whose shifts, in addition to armed conflicts, concerned new frontiers between public and private and the passage from an industrial, social-democratic world to an informatic, neoliberal one. And this is perhaps where markers of cultural and intellectual history become sparser in the study. While Johnson explores uncharted spaces between virtuosic performance (as understood in dance and theatre for instance) and the performance of 'non-art domains of practice' (such as work, love, and crime), it becomes easy in these pages to forget the historical nature and the 1970s reality of, say, love and crime. I also wondered about the performers' specific relationships to Dada and Viennese Actionism (both of which are mentioned), or to their immediate Vietnam-War-era forebears in the Art Workers' Coalition, who radically melded art work and work. And where do these artists stand in relation to the life-art blurring performances of Lee Lozano or of Bonnie Sherk, Tony Labat and Ben Kinmont – radical representatives of what Julia Bryan-Wilson has termed 'occupational realism'?<sup>4</sup> How did Anne Bean occupy the space of punk culture? Moreover, Johnson shares with much of the humanities the tendency to use 'ritual' as a qualifier – for example The Kipper Kids engage in 'methodical, excessive, ritual food fight' – with little concern for the deeper history, nature, and consequences of that category of social practice. But these considerations mostly reach beyond the remit of this research, or result directly from the generosity of the writing. After Johnson's gripping inquiry into recklessness, this reader wished to contemplate that notion's cultural destiny in MTV's *Jackass* and videos of hazing rituals; after the pointed description of 'shtick', she yearned for more – an em-dash addition to define 'cult classic' when the expression appeared for example, precisely because we all think we know what it means.

*Unlimited Action* makes us face performances which cultural history had hitherto convinced us we did not want to think about too much. And rewardingly from the perspective of art history, Johnson's scholarship and even its tone always fan out from the works themselves. In these analyses, all media involved are meticulously examined according to their own formal terms – in the case of Ulay, the film of his theft made by Marina Abramović materializes in the text *as* film, rather than being absorbed in an all-encompassing conception of 'performance' (a known risk in the field). For the sake of the integrity of Anne Bean's 'life-art', the argument dives into what it calls 'bad

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<sup>3</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> In occupational realism, waged labor and artistic realism collapse, sometimes leading to performances that last several years. Julia Bryan-Wilson, 'Occupational Realism,' *TDR: The Drama Review* 56:4 (2012): 32-48.

theory'. Just as Freire was pivotal to the formation of Trengove's practice, so was the mystic thinker George Ivanovich Gurdjieff to Bean. Johnson engages with Gurdjieff's school of thought on the occult until his theories of world-maintenance and increasing sensitivity to one's instinctive sensing of reality shed light on Bean's actions, such as digging a hole in the water. Rather than aesthetic production, life-art aims for aesthetic sensing. Filled with difficult objects – some not even meant to be witnessed – this writing and its black-and-white illustrations can be challenging, and make one quiver. As Susan Sontag remarked about being a spectator once removed, seeing a live surgical operation shocked her less than watching one in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Chung Kuo, Cina*: this vulnerability lies in receiving events shaped first by their makers and secondly by their image-makers or witnesses.<sup>5</sup> Extreme action transfigures the way we witness, including through research. As the work on COUM Transmissions and their exit from the art world suggests, the performance of extremity pushes not only to the limits of the physical but to the limits of thought, playing with the contours of our categories of knowledge. This book similarly places readers in the spirit of the limit, rather than the limitless indicated in its title. It asks us to inhabit the moment just after a (metaphorical) slap in the face, before the vacillation (of understanding).

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1977).