

Performance Art in the Expanded Field

‘If performance is
everything, and everything
is performance, it leaves
us to question the
substance of reality.’

Catherine Wood

Catherine Wood, *Performance in Contemporary Art*, Tate Publishing,
Millbank, London, 2018, p104

Wood is Tate Modern Senior Curator of International Art
(Performance)

Pioneer performance artist Marina Abramović distinguishes performance art, which she indicates is unscripted and authentic, from theatre, which she says is scripted and fake.

Most importantly, it is the artist's body that becomes the subject, site, or vehicle of the performance.

[Marina Abramović: What is Performance Art?](#)



Marina Abramović: 'The Artist is Present'

Prue Stevenson: 'Expend'

Multi-media artist and Taekwondo black belt Prue Stevenson is autistic. Her repeated Taekwondo kicking action is a form of “stimming”, or self-stimulatory behaviour. Many autistic people use forms of stimming to expend excess energy to manage their emotions.

Stevenson deploys this form of stimming to create her artwork.

She is an advocate for autistic people.

[‘Expend’](#) [Attitude Foundation](#) [Prue Stevenson](#)





Recognising performance outside the gallery

[Pina - Dancer in white in a train](#)

Tanztheater Wuppertal performing on the Wuppertal Schwebebahn:

The passengers might notice that the action is being recorded on video and realise that they have been co-opted as audience members with the potential to respond to the performance or to look away.

Ilotopie : Open theatre company

‘Our shows, great theaters in landscape, are performed all over the world, often for thousands of people, transforming everyday places into surrealist representations where the imaginary has taken over.’

[Ilotopie - Malta Festival 2024](#)

<https://ilotopie.com/en/company/>





–Oh hi! I'm just doing some thinking

Pilvi Takala: 'The Trainee'

Performance artist Pilvi Takala was “employed” as an intern by the accounting firm Deloitte and she secretly filmed herself during office hours behaving in unusual ways — sitting doing nothing or riding in the elevator all day — to provoke reactions from her colleagues who were unaware of the ruse.

['The Trainee'](#)

Can performance art be found in music videos?

In their song 'Se oli SOS' ('It was SOS'), Finnish duo Maustetytöt (sisters Kaisa and Anna Karjalainen) address the treatment of mental health issues. In their music video of the song, they are shown 'performing' the role of patients in hospital.

[Maustetytöt - Se oli SOS](#)

[Maustetytöt - Se oli SOS \(Live 2020\) English Subtitles](#)



Can performance art be found on social media platforms — Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X...?

Maustetytöt's demeanour on their Facebook page suggests a parody of banal daily life. It's as if they are performing themselves rather than being themselves. Could their Facebook page be seen as an ongoing performance artwork?

At what point does the presentation of one's daily life on social media become self-conscious performance?

Should someone's presentation on social media be assumed to be self-conscious performance?

Social media allow asynchronous audience interaction. Is asynchronous interaction a substitute for liveness?

Maustetytöt's [Facebook page](#)

[Is TikTok A New Wave of Performance Art?](#)



Abigail Thorn

Philosophy Tube

In her YouTube channel videos, philosopher, actor and playwright Abigail Thorn frequently uses her body to illustrate gender politics and the social forces that construct identity.

Her videos are lectures on philosophy presented in a theatrical format with performative characteristics. She addresses viewers directly, so we do not suspend disbelief as we do with conventional theatre.

[Philosophy Tube](#)

[Is Art Meaningless?](#)



At the opening of her video ‘Is Art Meaningless?’, Thorn is clad in a black dress and declares ‘I am the “Portrait of Madame X” by John Singer Sargent’. She indicates that, while she — Madame X — was intended to be a study in light and shade, audiences and critics thought she was trying to be sexually provocative.

Abigail Thorn: 'Social Constructs (or, "What is a Woman, Really?")'

In this video, Thorn presents herself as a woman in the stereotypically male role of the motor mechanic and discusses the kinds of social constructs that identify and shape individuals in society.

We are often unaware of these constructs and take our social position for granted.

['Social Constructs
\(or, "What is A Woman, Really?"\)'](#)



In her 2016 documentary video, 'Marina Abramović in Brazil: the space in between', Abramović says,

'I understand that I have to give tools to the public to experience their own selves.'

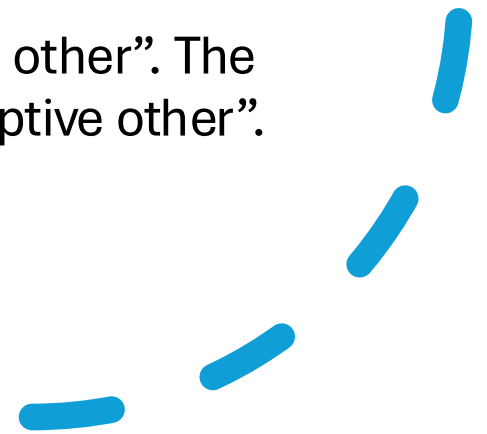
[Marina Abramović in Brazil: the space in between](#)

Social media have become online galleries that can be used to present all kinds of artworks including performance.

Is what we are viewing primarily a form of performance or is it a secondary characteristic or byproduct? In what way are we being engaged as an audience?

We might look for evidence of self-conscious, scripted performance or spontaneous action in an unusual setting; the choice and possible meanings of signifiers and identifiers; and the disruption of codes of behaviour. We might also look for the exposure of the networks of power that influence our self-perception.

In daily life, we are regularly confronted by "the other". The performance artist could be seen as the "disruptive other". What is the message in the performance?





The Tate Gallery says of performance art:

‘Throughout the twentieth century performance was often seen as a non-traditional way of making art. Live-ness, physical movement and impermanence offered artists alternatives to the static permanence of painting and sculpture.

‘In the post-war period performance became aligned with conceptual art, because of its often immaterial nature.

‘Now an accepted part of the visual art world, the term has since been used to also describe film, video, photographic and installation-based artworks through which the actions of artists, performers or the audience are conveyed.

‘More recently, performance has been understood as a way of engaging directly with social reality, the specifics of space and the politics of identity. In 2016, theorist Jonah Westerman remarked “performance is not (and never was) a medium, not something that an artwork can be but rather a set of questions and concerns about how art relates to people and the wider social world”’



Whether artists describe their work as performance art or think of themselves as performance artists, the issue is whether viewers recognise and appreciate their work as performance art.

Media literacy has become an essential life skill.

Is this performance art: [Performance Art Short?](#)

Chris Reid, March 2025

This presentation is made for educational purposes.