

# Still Moving: 21st Century Poetics

Ric Allsopp

## Part 1: [slide]

My title 'Still Moving: 21st Century Poetics' has a double reference: to movement and to what might constitute a poetics, or ways of doing and making, now. 'Still Moving' may refer, but is not limited to, ideas of continuing to move; the continual micro-movements that support the stillness of the body; the turn to other, non-human forms of movement (as Rudi Laermans has noted in his discussion of 'dance-in-general'); the distillation of movement. '21st Century Poetics' is a means of thinking about the future of performance and dance, as a reading and writing of this paper through Marjorie Perloff's 2002 manifesto of a 'new poetics' which she calls '21st century modernism'. My contribution this evening comprises a rough assemblage, a rather loose or open set of notes that hovers around terms such as 'open work', 'shift of attention', 'presence', the 'yet-to-come' and 'dissemination'. It is 'wild', or better 'feral' which means reverting to the wild, in accord with the invitation from TQW to contribute, insofar as many of the ideas in it have not yet been tamed or quite domesticated; or to shift metaphor, are still beset by weeds and undergrowth.

Beginning to read the question of the future of performance through Perloff's manifesto, I note that the modernist American writer Gertrude Stein wrote in her discussion of poetry and grammar 'Successions of words are so agreeable. A sentence means there is a future'. Stein's approach to language might serve here as a model for my main point - that the future is only ever a shift of attention in the present. Stein's poetics (her way of using language) involved the accumulation of material through processes of repetition, a gradual bringing of existing materials into new relationships, an attention to a language of the ordinary, a rejection of names and naming (as descriptive function) in favor of the conditions whereby 'things' and relationships are brought to our attention. Take the example of 'Tender Buttons', her 1914 collection of portraits of objects, food and rooms: her approach was not a decisive break with the past, but a shift of attention - an openness to futurity - which might be aligned with the term 'assemblage' as a continual process of making and unmaking, of materials, energies, and circulations coming together and moving apart.

This process of shifting attention, which places itself within the field of 'open work', is not simply an arbitrary or unconstrained exploration or experimentation, but departs from, or moves outward from a position: an ethical point of departure or 'regard' towards the open which always contains the possibility of a future, and which was variously identified in the mid-20th century as 'attention' (Charles Olson); 'response/ ability' (Robert Duncan); and (more recently) 'confidence in lack' (Allen Fisher) - a term that sets itself against the modernist

aspiration of coherence. Each of these terms, following the English poets John Keat's perception of 1817, would define in turn an entrance into, or an unfolding of 'negative capability': 'when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason'.

## Part 2. [slide]

If the future of performance is not a decisive break with the present - in the sense of some novel form of *tabula rasa*, of clearing the decks, of sweeping away the junk of history - as aspects of both the historical and neo-avant-garde might have desired it, or unless of course a decisive break is brought about by unfavorable environmental, political, or technological factors outside our control, then the means by which shifts of attention come about in the present is where our thought must be focused.

I will make a loose assemblage here. Indeed the question of how to prevent any work that is paratactic, or made of the gaps and cuts which are features of open work, from disintegrating into its separate parts, is as much of the problem here as it is in the wider contexts of art making. An attention to the present - to the presence of performance - has occupied the thought of many writers, artists and performance theorists. The writer William Burroughs famously said (in his inimitable voice) in the 'Origin and Theory of the Tape Cut-Ups' that 'when you cut into the present the future leaks out' thereby staking out the present as a form of precognition, that when cut open reveals the future. In his essay 'The Fall of Art' Burroughs responds to Jasper Johns' question 'What is writing about?' He replies that '[t]he purpose of writing is to make it happen. What we call 'art' - painting, sculpture, writing, dance, music - is magical in origin'; and later in the essay '... what survives the literalisation of art is the timeless ever-changing world of magic caught in the painter's brush, or the writer's words, bits of vivid and vanishing detail.' Writing in this sense is no longer concerned with the 'aboutness' of Jasper's confrontational question with its reference to the literal and descriptive elsewhere, but with enacting the present, the magical operation of writing - and of art in general - that forms a continuous thread through experimental and avant-garde thinking and practice: the enactment of the present, the moment of encounter and participation in the emergence of the work itself.

In a different register this links to Peggy Phelan's analysis of the ontology of performance: that '[p]erformance's only life is in the present' that is discloses or opens itself only in the moment of its performance, and in so doing shifts our attention to the present. Wittgenstein observed in his war notebooks that '[o]nly a man who lives not in time, but in the present, is happy' The American poet and critic Lynn Hejinian complicates this notion of happiness as existing outside time by relating the root of the verb 'happen' to the adjective 'happy' - if something happens then it marks an event in time. For Hejinian 'happiness' is not 'the usual

condition of "privilege bestowed by fortune" but [...] the awareness that 'what happens, happens as effects to beings - beings that exist'. Whether these things are good or bad is not the issue; what matters is that it is the contemplation of happening that arouses the "wonder at mere existence" - what Gertrude Stein elsewhere called an 'alertness to the liveliness of the present and the everyday'. In Perloff's analysis 'Happiness is an attentive awareness to the sheer contingency of happenings'. Like Wittgenstein, Hejinian relates happiness to presence [which] involves 'taking a chance ... into the present'

In the context of 'open work' this 'attentive awareness' helps to identify in the present moment of performance a radical coherence; a way of holding together that doesn't rely on established means of form, or ready intelligibility, or integrity. It may be further described as confidence in lack - or a negative capability that 'turn[s] meanings loose, leaving contexts open so that the materials of performance are more like fluid and moving points of connectivity than components of a structure' (Hejinian)

We encounter the future through our participation in performance, not by asking 'what is the future of performance' but by asking how we can effectively participate in the present in ways that challenge or resist the deadening effect of imposed forms and fixities, through 'reading constructively rather than consecutively'. The work occurs in our encounter with it and opens to what is outside the work - its effect on the contexts, the social, pragmatic environment that it exists within.

### **Part 3: [slide]**

If the future is 'a shift of attention in the present' then what do I mean by 'a shift of attention'? It is a double, a reflexive movement suggesting that attentive awareness is both an effect of the work encountered - it engages us; and that it is a disposition on the part of the spectator or participant, a point of departure towards the work. The 'shift of attention' depends then on an idea of the open as an integral part of any work. Xavier Le Roy, responding to a general question in the journal *Maska* of what open work might be, asked simply: 'Open to what?' and thus pointed to an underlying problematic of openness (and by extension futurity) in so far as open work only has meaning in relation to existing structures and forms, and to the supposed autonomy of the art work. Xavier Le Roy's question also leads us to Derrida's observation that the 'open' is always a part of the system, and is that which enables the movement of culture to take place, locating the artwork as that which remains open to the contingent, the unpredictable, the monstrous. He writes:

A future that would not be monstrous would not be a future; it would already be predictable, calculable and programmable tomorrow. All experience open to the future is prepared or prepares itself to welcome the monstrous *arrivant*, to welcome it,

that is to accord hospitality to that which is absolutely foreign or strange, but also, one must add, to try to domesticate it, that is, to make it part of the household [economy] and have it assume the habits, to make us assume new habits. This is the movement of culture.' (Derrida 1992: 387)

Openness is always ghosted by form. Like the hinges of the door or 'the opening of the field' (to use the poet Robert Duncan's term) it requires form to lead us to that which is beyond itself, and to effect its subsequent domestication. The absorption or domestication of any complex artwork or form - for example 'conceptualism' - is here seen as a part of the movement of culture, the opening toward the future. The implications of, for example, the work of Jerome Bel, are not at the level of stylistics, but at the level of a shift of attention to what constitutes the work, which Una Bauer has theorised as 'the movement of embodied thought', rather than an accumulation or array of movement phrases whether drawn from bodily or non-bodily movement.

To take two examples from the historical avant-garde of what I see as shifts of attention that offer the possibility of a future. Firstly from Perloff's discussion of Gertrude Stein's 'description' (or rather enactment of) a box in 'Tender Buttons'. **[slide]** As an object of intense concentration Stein's 'box' cannot be visualized, yet 'boxness' is immediately established. The writing both shifts attention to the object in question in terms of the medium it uses and breaks with our conventional habits of reading, forcing the reader to shift attention to the way in which language constructs or re-constructs our encounters with the everyday. By analogy this could be extended to the field of conceptual choreography where 'dance' as such is not visualized or actualized (literalized), but established through an attention shifted from the conventional or normative terms of its reading. The indeterminacy of boxes - as a means of breaking with the linear sequencing of books (or in Stein's case the conventions of syntax and grammar) and thus providing the possibility of a random reading with a frame - was attractive to Marcel Duchamp, who invested considerable energy in reproducing his work and his handwritten notes in boxed forms. In 'The Green Box' in particular the visualization of a process of thought opens itself to paratactical strategies of reading - constructive than consecutive reading - a shift of attention from what Perloff describes as the form of language to what is being said.

A detail in 'The Green Box' - Duchamp's formulation of 'delay' in terms of 'The Large Glass' - provides the second example. Duchamp articulates what he call a 'delay in glass' in negative terms: 'A delay in glass does not mean a picture on glass'. The notion of 'delay' also speaks to a type of futurity - the postponement of the yet-to-come, the stalling of movement, the slowing or refraction of our attentions and perceptions. Duchamp understood delay as being 'merely a way of succeeding in no longer thinking that the thing in question is a picture'. And of course by analogy such 'delay' or shift of attention enables us to 'no longer think' that the

work in question can only be encountered within the familiar frameworks of dance or performance. It opens the possibility of encountering the work in other terms, using other criteria - terms that engage us in the present moment of production rather than in the passive consumption of the work. Duchamp's central question of 1913 - 'Can one make works which are not works of art?' - implies the set up of a future, a new set of possibilities that dissolves the boundaries of artwork and other forms of work.

Discussing the shifting relationship between 'art' and 'work' Jacques Ranciere concludes that 'whatever might be the specific type of economic circumstances they lie within, artistic practices are not 'exceptions' to other practices. They represent and reconfigure the distribution of these activities'. A shift of attention - a redistribution of attention - might perhaps also be the result of what is generated by an interrogative, questioning or reflective approach to arts practice - questioning the nature and contexts of art and its relation to other practices. In her discussion of the movement of embodied thought in the work of Jerome Bel mentioned earlier, Una Bauer points to a move from statement to question that is at the centre of the choreographic effect of the work:

But it is the more open form, that is in the focus of [Bel's] interest, not a statement, but a question, a question that inspires a dialogue: a question that asks not what choreography is and what it is not but what are the processes of its construction and understanding as choreography, how is choreography constructed? And a proposal is framed: choreography is not constructed through the successful staging of particular representations, or through the impossibility of their staging [...] but through the movement of embodied thought which refuses to fix itself in particular recognizable types of oppositional discourses, or oppositional response structures. (Bauer 2008)

#### **Part 4: [slide]**

Over the last year I have had the good fortune to see a wide range of contemporary performance work, primarily in the context of festivals - in Brussels, Berlin, Kassel and Ljubljana. As such the work is of course already subject to curatorial selection, framing and programming. It is here, by cutting into the present, that we can detect the shifts of attention that face towards the future. I will briefly mention three pieces from a list (in no particular order) of performance that seem to me to engage in various ways of shifting attention in the present and opening up possibilities for the future that might include Deborah Hay's *If I sing for you*; Emil Hrvatin's reconstruction of *Pupilija Papa Pupilo and the Pupilceks*; • Rita Roberto's *Right at Presence*; Heiner Goebbels' *Stifters Dinge*; Joan Jonas' *The Shape, The Scent, The Feel of Things*; Alvis Hermanis' collective reading of Sorokin's *Ice*; Rimini Protocol's *Call Cutta in a Box*; BADco's *Memories are made of this ... performance notes*; and Zan Yamashita's collective reading of *It is Written There*.

Rita Roberto's *Right at Presence* consists of thirty five minutes of near stillness and silence by a single performer in a theatre space. The repetitive sequences of movement, including a ten minute fade from light to near darkness in which the performer, directly facing the audience, almost imperceptibly turns her head through 180 degrees and back, not only explore ideas and images of the 'care of the self (the classical concept of *parrhesia*), the space between thoughts and body 'observing their cooperation towards a care of the self – the self as being something that relies precisely on this cooperation', but also compels the audience to shift their collective attentions to the presence of what is happening which in turn creates a space of contemplation that opens to the future, and which begins to invent a 'sensible form' for the yet-to-come. Rita Roberto writes:

I don't become the things that I touch, I touch them. I take the air and give it back. I would not *be* anymore if the air hadn't been inside me, but the air *was not me* at any moment. There is this constant cooperation of things in touch [...] but to touch is also *to be at* the border that separates me from the things that I am not. It is, in fact, this separation that makes touch possible. The touch becomes the border. (Roberto, 2008)

BADco's *Memories are made of this ...* moves through a collective process of making that includes its audience, and engages with the place of memory through the processes of forgetting that are intrinsic to it. Described in its title as 'performance notes' *Memories ...* from its outset in the foyer of the theatre, involves its audience in a collective reconstruction (possibly fictive, possibly factual) of the recent archeology and sedimentation of memories of the theatre building, before taking the audience onto the stage itself where we become complicit in attempts - using transforming, and degraded digital projections, subvocal readings, the erasures and transformation of texts, both spoken and projected, and repetitive physical movement - to understand the processes of memory itself as they hover at the event-horizon of forgetting and remembering. The effect of this work is to shift attention to everyday acts of erasure and deletion, and the constantly shifting ground upon which the future constructs itself when dislocated from a consensual or collective memory.

Emil Hrvatin's direction of the reconstruction of the 1969 Yugoslav experimental work Pupilija Papa Pupilo, places and re-activates the materials of the original production - in which 'elements of everyday life, popular culture, folklore, children's games, contemporary dance, performance and improvisation' are played out - in a context which provokes the audience to re-evaluate the re-staging of the past not only in terms of our readings of documentary evidence - films of performance and video interviews, but in terms of how and through what cultural transformations, the images and representations of the past engage us in the present. The piece provides a number of provocations (as Katherina Zakravsky has pointed out).

Involving the audience in the democratic choice of several possible reconstructions of the ending of the original performance - in which a chicken was slaughtered - shifts our attention, through theatrical means, to the potential and rapidly actual responsibilities of individual choice within a collective environment - how far are we prepared to carry out the implications of the choices which we make, and what effects might this then have on the future that we are always in the process of constructing?

Perhaps all we can ask is not what the future will be or will bring, but how we can 'face towards the future', how we make our disposition clear; how we construct or perform our present through our presence, through an attentive awareness to the possibilities of a radical coherence of forms and materials; how we enact our present to face and hold uncertainty and contingency, not in order to close down, but in order to open up to a future.

**Part 5: [slide]**

Jacques Ranciere argues in *The Politics of Aesthetics* that '[i]n the aesthetic regime of art, the future of art, its separation from the present of non-art, incessantly re-stages the past' and that 'artistic practices are 'ways of doing and making' that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility'. He argues that if the avant-garde is to have any meaning within the aesthetic regime it is not in terms of artistic innovation but in terms of 'the invention of sensible forms and material structures for a life to come'; a shift of attention that produces the yet-to-come.

As the art critic Nicholas Bourriaud has noted, writing about relational aesthetics and his concept of 'postproduction':

In this new form of culture, which one might call a culture of use or a culture of activity, the artwork functions as the temporary terminal of a network of interconnected elements like a narrative that extends and reinterprets preceding narratives. Each exhibition encloses within it a script of another; each artwork may be inserted into different programmes and used for multiple scenarios. The artwork is no longer an end point but a simple moment in an infinite chain of contributions.

(2005:18)

The shift to protocols that Bourriaud notes - the accepted or established codes of procedure or behaviour in groups, organisations or situations - also suggests a rethinking of form itself. In the introduction to a now not so recent issue of *Performance Research* (2005) I described the connection between the two parts of the title of the joint issue: 'On Form / Yet to Come' which revealed a connection between the protocols of collaboration and the possibilities which they open up:

[...] the question of form – of how, where, with and for whom performance takes place, becomes visible or manifests itself as a point of resistance or a moment of slippage or connectivity – seems to be as immediate and pressing as ever. The association of the term 'form' itself however has shifted. Form and its relation to time – to the yet to come – its relationship to politics, to space, to cultural environment, is perhaps no longer to be used in its more conventional association with the imposition of fixed organisational frameworks on the materials and contexts of performance, but in an active processes of formation, the sets of relational processes that reflect the intensities, [...] that constitute the work of performance. Such a view of form is of course exemplified widely in practice across the field of contemporary performance, and informed by a relational view of performance as a shared moment of becoming, an event within an always wider and more complex set of associated processes and contexts [...] . (Allsopp, 2005:1)

The writer and critic Bojana Kunst writing in response about protocols and the collaboration between *Maska*, *Frakcija* and *Performance Research* that produced the issue commented that:

[t]he expanded notion of the performance event is thus not merely a question of the content, through which different initiatives would aesthetically recognize and encounter one another. What it concerns as well is the understanding of form, the actualization of the language of art, the formation of a discourse on art practices themselves, and the conflicting ways of how to think the practice of art itself. The [...] excerpt mentions two important traits of contemporary performance, which I find crucial for these processes. They are, at the same time, also characteristic of the protocols of collaboration: 'active process of formation' and 'shared moment of becoming'. In this kind of comprehension of performance and in the thought about it, a certain intriguing relation is at work, which can be described as a relation between form and temporality, as a way, in which the very form can be understood as a potentiality of thinking the real and, at the same time, as a way in which the event emerges, becomes and constitutes itself precisely through this formal multiplicity. In the event form has an immediate effect on the body, form is a protocol of the performance, which places us, together with our desire, in the ways in which art could have been: it opens up different perceptual processes, intensities of the bodies, audibility of language and energies, the power of speech and gesture, where language once again opens up to imagination and potentiality. [...]

Art no longer possesses the traditional utopian and emancipatory role of transforming life, the role which is today so successfully adopted by contemporary commodification



in all its creative procedures. Notwithstanding, we can still understand it as an open process of the articulation of the possible, which can reveal ways of being together. It has become a general truism that we live in a time when the potentiality of nature is performed and privatized in advance. At the same time aesthetic and cognitive competences of intensities, energies and events are in the centre of contemporary commodification and economy of entertainment. Critical thought thus needs to re-discover means to articulate the potentiality of processes and ways of life, which may bring about change in the ontological place of art itself. It is necessary to examine both the poesis as well as the praxis of art. (Kunst, 2007: forthcoming).

Open work, and the shifts of attention to the present that it implies in its dynamic, can perhaps be identified with the processes of dissemination as integral to the poetics which construct the work; with ideas of dissemination as artwork, not simply of artwork; not as object but as process.

**Part 6: [slide]**

The idea of dissemination (as theorised by Derrida and others) problematizes the notion of the 'artwork' as a coherent, singular object and asks what constitutes the artwork, and how is artwork positioned or located. Questions of dissemination in the field of cross-disciplinary contemporary arts practice are intimately linked with the processes of making, and making public, the artwork whether as material or immaterial object or event. As a focus for arts research its fundamental questions might be: what constitutes the artwork as a dynamic process; how does the artwork provide meanings in relation to the contexts that it participates in and moves through; how can we generate, understand and curate artwork as a dynamic, fluid, event-based phenomenon?

Dissemination as a critical framework suggests a means of engaging with contemporary practice that is concerned more with ideas of process, mobility and transmission, than with form, materials and techniques. It provides an understanding that can reflect, position, or map the shifting role of artwork in contemporary culture. Dissemination suggests inter-subjective relationships rather than 'detached opticality'; a dialogic imagination rather than a dialectics. It encourages an expanded notion of practice, where production is inseparable from dissemination and from active and critical engagement.

In this sense the term 'dissemination' triggers questions such as: who participates in the extended life and reach of a given practice and how? what kinds of knowledge are being generated through arts practices and how and to whom are they disseminated? what forms, structures, processes and economies are involved and implied? It is the movement of the work itself that is dissemination. 'Meaning' then does not reside in the artwork but in its

performance, in the present moments of its performance and its dissemination/ dispersal across multiple contexts, a movement which continually re-activates the work.

**Part 7: [slide]**

If, as Deleuze wrote in one of his final essays, we are 'moving towards control societies that no longer operate by confining people but through continuous control and instant communication' (see Wise, 2005) then what is the role and poetics of the artwork? How does it intervene in other forms of practice? Can it still be resistant? Can it operate outside of control or commodity societies? Does the 'open work' have any meaning in such contexts of control? Charles Olson's early sequence of poems 'ABCs' (1953) point to a relationship between 'risk and control' that is still within the power of the individual subject:

And the boat, / how he swerves it to avoid the yelping rocks / where the tidal river  
rushes (Olson, ABCs (2))

But what risks can still be identified in a culture that seeks to control and commodify all aspects of subjectivity and experience? Is this the future of performance?

To reach back to the poet Robert Duncan:

Fact and reason are creations of man's genius to secure a point of view protected against a vision of life where information and intelligence invade us, where what we know shapes us and we become creatures, not rulers, of what is. Where, more, we are part of the creative process, not its goal .... (Duncan, 1973)

Such 'reaching back' is not to suggest a nostalgia for a neo-avantgarde utopia of the open work as free art, but to question what open work can mean (if anything) in our present contexts. If modernity is our antiquity, as the 2007 Documenta XII in Kassel proposed as one of its main themes, then such a return is to recognise that the visions of freedom and equivalence that emerged with 20th century modernism, and still provide us with a reminder of the possibility of a radical and resistant coherency which links the idea of open work to an understanding of the way in which art is made, seen and distributed, and to its attendant responsibilities.

In the forward to his final work 'The Head of Vitus Bering' the Viennese writer Konrad Bayer spoke of the capability of 'travelling to the past and future and of uniting and coordinating everything in one point.' The shifts of attention that cut into the present and reveal and produce the future do not perhaps provide us with such a singular position from which to move. They do however, place the responsibility, the 'alertness to the liveliness of the present

and the everyday, the mode of being that for Gertrude Stein constituted 'complete living', on us - as makers, doers and thinkers.

\*\*\*\*\*

DRAFT ONLY