



Performing for the camera 18 February–12 June 2016, Tate Modern

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Performing for the camera

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With the incalculable and ever-increasing number of selfies now circulating on a range of digital platforms – on Instagram and other social media, on YouTube and video blogs – the idea of performing for the camera has become commonplace, an integral part of the visual culture of the quotidian, in an age of global digital communication. The past few decades have witnessed the morphing of the concept of “performance,” from one explored by a handful of avant-garde artists, to the conduit through which identity itself is essayed and presented. Identity, in short, is frequently probed not by performance, but as performance. Yet, as Hippolyte Bayard’s *Self Portrait as a Drowned Man* of 1840 illustrates, yoking together performance and photography is not new, it has been around since the inception of photography as both medium and practice.

Bayard’s intriguing self-portrait in the guise of a corpse – a hazy, small photograph – is one of numerous historical works in the exhibition *Performing for the Camera*, curated by Simon Baker. This historical nucleus also includes a couple of often seen, iconic images by Man Ray of Marcel Duchamp looking sultry as *Rose Sélavy*, and only a single “self” portrait by the celebrated Claude Cahun, who, like Duchamp, treated identity as costume. There is also a substantial collection of studio shots by Nadar (Gaspard-Félix Tournachon) and his brother Adrien Tournachon, making a strong case for the continuity of the notion of identity as a performance that is intensified in its address to the camera, rather than the avidly embraced notion that it is a contemporary invention. The argument for historical continuity is perhaps the most innovative and interesting aspect of this exhibition. The Nadar studio produced a suite of images of theatre stars, restaging scenes from their popular shows, set against appropriate backdrops. Not only precursors to modern-day celebrity shots, these photographs tap into the rhetorical potential of “the pose” as the construction of a static physical stance imbued with communicative potential and narrative significance. They hyperbolise the inevitability, for the viewer, of reading meaning into the moment of photographic arrest

in ways that Roland Barthes describes as stock metaphors, a “grammar” of gestures that have come to connote mood or attitude within broad cultural contexts, and that the public grasps without recourse to specific explanation.

That photography has always been full of such stock metaphors – both portrait and fashion photography have always appropriated them – is also made evident in other works in the exhibition: Masahisa Fukase’s shots of his wife striking various attitudes for him as she leaves for work in the morning in *From Window* (1974) (Fig. 1); Martin Parr’s exploration of portrait tropes in *Autoportraits* (1996–2015), Hans Eijkelboom’s *With My Family* (1973), in which the photographer poses convincingly as the pater familias with four different families, all strangers; and Romain Mader’s *Ekatarina* series (2012), probing the notion of photogenia in the shady business of Ukrainian mail-order bride catalogues. Keith Arnatt, always quirky and amusing, underlines the potential awkwardness of posing in his series *Gardeners* (1978–79). The deadpan black and white photographs of people standing outdoors in the gardens they tend, looking directly towards the camera, bridges the gap between vernacular snapshots and concept-driven photography, suggesting subtle links, where pride and modesty commingle, between the individuals and the settings to which they are clearly strongly attached.

But there are other ways in which performance is linked to photography, and this exhibition, while intending to eschew a “definitive history of the relationship between performance and photography,” highlights three fairly conventional aspects of this relationship. In the first room, the work of three artists – Yves Klein, Aaron Siskind and Charles Ray – introduces the three positions: Klein’s famous documentary records of ephemeral performance works, where the photographic record is integral to the evolution of performance art; in Siskind’s *Pleasures and Terrors of Levitation*, (1956–65), we

are shown collaborations between performers and photographer; and in Charles Ray’s *Plank Pieces* (1973), an example of artists whose work consists in performing specifically for the camera. These three positions – respectively labelled “Documenting Performance,” “Staging Collaboration,” and “Photographic Actions,” are then used as the categorical divisions for the rest of the exhibition, which fleshes out the three categories with examples, both historical and contemporary. Of these positions, the last – “photographic actions” – is potentially the largest, coinciding, as it does, with the digital revolution. However, this turns out to be the most conspicuously underrepresented and underpowered in the exhibition.

The section dealing with documenting performance includes fascinating, if not exactly novel, examples of performances by the Japanese Gutai group, who grasped how essential photography was to transitory and time-bound actions. In turn, the photographs of Carolee Schneemann, Stuart Brisley and Paul McCarthy (1960s and 70s) showing the artists variously writhing in paint and other unnamed viscous materials together grant us a glimpse of the continuum between action painting and performance. But this first section is overwhelmingly dominated by the presence of the duo Harry Shunk and János Kender, known as Shunk-Kender, who not only recorded (and photomontaged) Yves Klein’s famous *Leap into the Void* (1960) and his *Anthropometries of the Blue Period* (1960), in which Klein directed naked female models to become his “living paintbrushes,” but also documented performances by Trisha Brown, Merce Cunningham, Niki de St Phalle, Eleanor Antin, Yayoi Kusama and others. (Somewhat randomly, the curatorial decision was to include dance performance in this section, and with this inclusion, one was invited to ask: why was the whole area of performance in fashion photography not broached?)



Fig 1 Masahisa Fukase, *From Window*, 1974, © Masahisa Fukase Archives. Courtesy Michael Hoppen Gallery.

Of the works by Shunk-Kender, the juxtaposition of their images of Dan Graham's performance in *Pier 18* (1971) and Graham's own photographs from the vantage point of the performer himself, provide an instance of distinct points of view in documentary photography. Babette Mangolte's more dynamic and dramatic photographic records of performances (Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer) serve as a foil to the photographs of Shunk-Kender. But visually, the whole section is monotonous: the endless, sparsely hung grids of small, mid-tone black and white photographs, predominated by the obsessively recurring figure of Yves Klein, is poorly judged for an exhibition, if good for a catalogue, where the inclusion of many images on a page might provide an overview without occupying precious wall space. A more deft curatorial strategy might have been to embrace fully the archival seductions and benefits of this section and to crowd these documentary works into a much smaller space, leaving more room for greater visual experimentation, or even verve, in the remaining two sections of the show.

As it is, the following two sections absorb and extend the note of visual monotony introduced by "Documenting Performance," missing a vital beat provided by the unique visual and spatial opportunities of an exhibition (as opposed to book) format. Undoubtedly each section contains gems: Boris Mikhailov underlines, with bald self-mockery, how – to rephrase Rimbaud's famous formulation – the "I" is not identical to itself. (A more po-faced allusion to Rimbaud may be seen in David Wojnarowicz's *Arthur Rimbaud in New York*, [1978–79]). Jimi de Sana's intensely coloured, idiosyncratic photographs of naked bodies cavorting with cones and extension cords and Erwin Wurm's off-the-wall juxtaposition of dramatic poses with mundane objects (fruit, crockery, a suitcase), also in colour, strike a note of visual relief amidst the general drabness. Jemima Stehli's celebrated *Strip* (1999–2000) always bears reviewing: against brightly coloured

studio backdrops, Stehli performed a striptease for several men individually, each chosen from the art world – writers, critics and curators – and each, provided with a camera, looking embarrassed and fascinated in equal measure. Each photographed the artist's performance, thus becoming simultaneously viewer and photographer. The long extension cord is seen in every shot, but we, the viewers, are teasingly only given to see Stehli from behind. Far more convincingly and with greater complexity than Hannah Wilke's *Super T-Art* (1974), Stehli's work succinctly plays out and makes visible the dynamics of power and eroticism in traditional studio representations of the female nude.

In the section "Staging Collaboration," dealing with partnerships of performers and photographers, the series *Kamaitachi* (1969) by Eikoh Hosoe and Tatsumi Hijikata is a striking, large sequence of black and white photographs evincing an unusually close and fertile collaboration between performer and camera operator (where usually, one or the other steals the limelight). Also compelling is Hicham Benohoud's sequence of black and white photographs taken in the classroom where he gave drawing lessons in Marrakech (*Classroom*, 1994–2000). For each image, a student was given free use of simple materials available in the studio – cardboard hoops, bands and tubes – which he (the students are all boys) then uses inventively as prop or prosthesis in a performance that, apparently, the rest of the class ignores.

The exhibition moves from the 1960s and 1970s, the period when performativity enjoyed its first period of fruitful invention (including Joseph Beuys, VALIE EXPORT, Hannah Wilke, Linda Benglis, Adrian Piper, Norio Imai, Mike Mandel) through the 1980s (Robert Mapplethorpe, Jeff Koons, Andy Warhol, Linder, Nan Goldin, Cindy Sherman), and onwards towards our own time, a moment when performing to the camera has enjoyed such rich reinvention. And it is at this point that the

exhibition most egregiously fails. Of course any exhibition elicits subjective complaints about curatorial omission. But manifestly, in the case of *Performing for the Camera*, this last section, "Photographic Actions," might have been a locus for contrast and visual drama, shifting the exhibition from the register of "document" in which the first two sections remain stuck, to that of "display." Its failure to do so makes of potentially fascinating individual material a rather lacklustre whole.

In relation to Cindy Sherman's formidable oeuvre, where staging the self as other is the overwhelming trope, the decision to select images that most closely resemble Sherman in "real life" is puzzling. Tomoko Sawada's grids of photobooth snaps of herself as different characters and Samuel Fosso's use of his studio props to stage portraits of himself as heroes of the black resistance movement are enticing examples of a genre that has proliferated exponentially over recent years, and that begs for more lavish and extensive representation. Amalia Aulman's Instagram page lamentably underrepresents the social networking

and image-sharing aspect of performative photography, serving as the whimpering close to an exhibition that begins with some promise.

The fascinating amalgam of performance and photography in the digital age is almost entirely ignored in this exhibition. In a bid for clarity exemplified by the three overall categories – documenting, staging, and action – the viewer is provided with a commonplace array of works that randomly exemplify a crossover between performance and photography, to the detriment of the most striking aspects of performativity in contemporary photographic work. However, there are redeeming aspects. As well as work by Wurm and Mikhailov, Komar and Melamid's *A Catalogue of Superobjects* (1975) and Mashisa Fukase's grid of photographs of himself larking about submerged in a bath (*Bukubuku – Bubbling*, 1991) remain strong reminders of the rich seam of comedy and pathos that can be mined from everyday life, while never losing sight of the proposition that, without performance, the self remains trapped in muteness.