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# Performance, Documentation, Temporality, and Reproduction



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## Resumé

Denne opgave vil anvende to 'ongoing' performances, 'Spring Cleaning' og 'Shouldered Streetlights', af de to tyske performancekunstnere Swaantje Güntzel og Jan-Philip Scheibe, til at analysere og diskutere tidsligheden mellem en performance og dens fotografiske dokumentation. Deres kunstværker er relevante for dette forhold, da de enten kun opføres for kameraet, for et inviteret publikum og som en intervention i et byrum.

I opgaven har jeg brugt en specifik forståelse af begrebet 'performance', der bliver defineret i overensstemmelse med Peggy Phelan og Amelia Jones for at vise, at en performance både er 'tilstede i nuet', og at det ikke er en krænkelse at dokumentere den, og gøre den til 'fraværende' objekt. Tværtimod åbner dokumentation op for en anden perception.

Den fotografiske dokumentation bliver defineret af flere teoretikere, heriblandt Roland Barthes og Walter Benjamin. Barthes begreb om 'den tredje mening' bliver brugt i analysen af det ene af fotografierne, for at se om den 'tredje mening' kan opstå. Den tredje mening opstår i en kontinuerlig proces og er at finde hinsides det informative niveau og den tilsyneladende symbolisme.

Tidsligheden kommer til udtryk på tre måder: først i spændingsfeltet mellem nærvær-/fraværsdikotomien af live-performancen og dens dokumentation. For det andet i det faktum, at det er en 'ongoing' performance, hvor der i selve ordet findes en temporalitet. At den er 'ongoing' betyder ligeledes, at den reproducerer sig selv fra gang til gang, og her bliver performanceontologien jf. Phelan udfordret. For det tredje opstår en tidslighed i 'den tredje mening'.

De ovenstående forhold bliver diskuteret gennem Max Horkheimer og Herbert Marcuses kritiske teori og deres forståelse af kunst, hvor de mener, at samfundet tingsliggør naturen og menneskene. Kritisk teori forstår kunsten som et 'afbræk' fra hverdagens realiteter, hvor der kan fordres en kritisk tænkning. I 'afbrækket' opstår der ligeledes en tidslighed, men her mellem mennesket og samfundet. Kunsten tilbyder en mulighed for at bryde med den tingsliggørelse og irrationalitet, der er i en massekultur, men kun for et øjeblik. Kunsten kan ikke bruges i et opgør mod samfundet.

Afslutningsvis viser jeg, at en live-performance og den fotografiske dokumentation er reproduktive værker, og at reproduktion ikke ændrer på de to værkers autenticitet.

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## Introduction

Performance art is a singular, immaterial and spatio-temporal event, which can be described as ephemeral, from the Greek word *ephemeros*<sup>1</sup> that means momentary or transitory. Performance art is similar to the theatre genre<sup>2</sup> and can be traced back to Dadaism and Futurism in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when graphic artists began to dematerialize the object. Performance art is mostly staged in front of an audience and often operates "[...] through presentation rather than representation."<sup>3</sup>

It is important to distinguish between the two 'art forms' in the performance, namely the 'live' performance and the following photographic documentation. What happens when a singular and ephemeral performance is turned into a long-lasting and reproductive art object? Likewise, it is not possible to exhibit the live performance, only if it is documented. What exactly is the decisive point that separates the 'live' performance from its photographic documentation? This is where the dispute about performance art and the following documentation begin.

This assignment examines the relation between performance art and its photographic documentation. The photographic documentation is not identical to the performance and my focus lies on the temporalities that occur in the 'live' performance and the following photographic documentation, respectively. I argue that there is a difference to whether the performance is 'staged' only *for* the camera or whether there is an audience to experience the performance. In both cases, a temporality occurs, which is emphasized.

Finally, I discuss Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse's understanding of art, what art can offer and do to the individual and/or the society. For both of them, art can function as a 'break from reality', because it is not reified and looked at as a potential resource. The discussion attempts to point to the relationship between society, humans and nature. This I exemplify, using some selected artworks of performance artists Swaantje Güntzel and Jan-Philip Scheibe, in order to show the interrelation between these three domains.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/ephemeral> 20.10.2014

<sup>2</sup> Jalving, Camilla, *Værk som Handling*, Museum Tusulanum, København 2011, pp. 30-31

<sup>3</sup> "[...] gennem præsentation frem for repræsentation.", Op. cit., p. 41

## **The Structure and Methods of the Assignment**

### **Applied Structure, Methods, and Theory**

In Part I, the differences and similarities in the conceptualization of performance is clarified by professor and theorist Peggy Phelan and art historian Amelia Jones' understandings and theories on it. The photographic documentation as concept is clarified with several theorists, in order to demarcate the understanding of it. The emphasis lies on the temporality.

In Part II, the first part of the analysis focus on the temporalities that occur between the live performance and its photographic documentation (fig 1-3), and whether the presence/absence dichotomy have any significant meaning in the experience of a live performance or its documentation. Secondly, there is a focus on the concept 'ongoing' performance. At last, one of the photographic documentations (fig. 2) is analyzed according to the French philosopher and theorist Roland Barthes' concept of the 'third meaning'.

This leads to Part III. Here, my discussion considers the different temporalities in addition to critical theory. Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse's critical theory of society, art and humans as opposed to nature is also explored in accordance to the question of what (performance) art can offer in contradiction to (everyday) reality. This leads to the final discussion of performance art and the photographic documentation as possible reproductive objects. The German philosopher Walter Benjamin is used in the discussion.

### **Case Material**

Two German performance artists, Swaantje Güntzel and Jan-Philip Scheibe, are used in this assignment; hence two of their photographic documentations of live performances are analyzed and discussed. Their performances express three different ways to work with performance art: staging for the camera in remote areas, announced performances for an invited audience, and unannounced performances as an intervention. Case no. 1 is Güntzel's ongoing performance 'Spring Cleaning' from 2006. This performance is relevant because it operates both with the performance staged for the camera, and as

intervention (fig. 1-2). Güntzel's performances often take place in remote areas where no audience is around, which forces her to make "[...] documentary copy [...]".<sup>4</sup>

Case no. 2 is Scheibe's 'Shouldered Streetlights', an on-going performance since 2011. This performance is important because of the series of photographs that documents the performances (fig. 3).

Both examples are used to demonstrate that the photographic documentation is just as significant as the live performance itself. These performances can also be read as exemplifying some of the elements in the distinction of society, human beings, and nature, as put forward by Horkheimer and Marcuse.

## **Part I – Clarification of Concepts**

### **Performance Art**

Performance art is an ephemeral event and is therefore not a specific tangible object.<sup>5</sup> There is a distinction of the live performance as an ephemeral and immaterial event and the photographic documentation as a permanent object. In both cases, a temporality occurs within the live performance and through the photographic documentation.

Throughout the assignment, a more delimited way to understand performance art is used and it is shown through a mixture of Phelan and Jones' conceptualization and theory of it.

For Phelan, a "[p]erformance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented [...] once it does so, it becomes something other than performance."<sup>6</sup> Phelan's understanding is very stringent and there is no other way to experience a performance than to be there in the 'now', it is a phenomenological experience. For Phelan, the ontology of the performance is non-reproductive and she goes on arguing that a performance is a limited value for a limited audience, and the performance should disappear into the memory of the audience.<sup>7</sup> The live performance implies a presence, a bodily presence that cannot be reproduced in the photographic documentation.

Phelan has some important points in her argumentation of what separates the performance from its documentation. According to Jones, the photographic

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<sup>4</sup> "[...] dokumentariske aftryk [...]", Kaprow, Allan, "Ikke-teatral performance", in *Periskop* nr. 14, København 2010, p. 28

<sup>5</sup> Jalving, Camilla, "Værk som..." p. 40

<sup>6</sup> Phelan, Peggy, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Routledge, New York 1996 (1993), p. 146

<sup>7</sup> Op. cit., pp. 148-149

documentation is something else than the live performance, and she asks why the performance is more 'present' than the photographic documentation.

For good reasons, Jones (and myself for that matter) has not been able to experience some of the most decisive performances ironically because of our *absence*.<sup>8</sup> Jones argues that there is a problem with performance art, which occurred in her work with performances; namely the fact that there are often logistic issues related to the live performance.

In most of her work, Jones has only had the opportunity to study performances, or body arts, as she prefers to call it, through their documentation. “[...] I will argue here that this specificity [performance situation] should not be privileged over the specificity of knowledges that develop in relation to the documentary traces of such an event.”<sup>9</sup> Jones argues that a temporality occurs in the knowledge that develops, so the live performance is not truer than the photographic documentation. The performance and documentation are instead inextricably dependent on each other. To Jones, the temporality becomes visible in the photographic documentation, when one can “[...] look back and evaluate them with hindsight [...]”.<sup>10</sup> Where there is time to analyze and interpret.

It is in the field of tension between Phelan and Jones' understandings of performance art that is used: that a live performance is in the presence, in the ‘now’, and that it is not a violation to the ontology of the performance to document it with photographs (or any other media). Rather it is the opposite. When a performance is documented, it becomes something different, and the temporalities in the photographic documentation require another perception that can open up for interpretation and contemplation.

“Performance is always a *doing* and a thing *done*”, [my italics]<sup>11</sup> as Elin Diamond says.

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<sup>8</sup> Jones, Amelia, “Presence” in *Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation*, in *Art Journal* vol. 56, No. 4, Performance Art: (Some) Theory and (Selected) Practice at the End of This Century, College Art Association p. 11

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit., p. 12

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 12

<sup>11</sup> Diamond, Elin, “Introduction” in *Performance and Cultural Politics*, Routledge, New York 1996, p. 1

## Photographic Documentation

The photographic documentation serves to prove that a live performance took place. It serves as evidence and awareness of the performances 'having-been-there'.<sup>12</sup>

Photography, as the German philosopher Walter Benjamin argues, “[...] become[s] standard evidence for historical occurrences, and acquire a hidden political significance.”<sup>13</sup> In this sense, the photographic documentation is the performance “[...] experience captured [...]”,<sup>14</sup> and the photograph “[...] stand as a trace of that original [...] action.”<sup>15</sup> Performance art cannot escape documentation; it is symptomatic for the live performance.<sup>16</sup> Documentation and the live performance become the ontology of each other.

As Phelan argues, the presence or the phenomenological experience of performances cannot be traced in photography. But something different is captured, and photographs can often disturb the spectator more than the 'actual experience'.<sup>17</sup> The photographic documentation is the complete opposite to performance art, but because of this opposition the performance will and can exist.<sup>18</sup>

It is possible to feel an advantage while experiencing a live performance but it can be difficult to comprehend and interpret it later because “[...] it is hard to identify the patterns of history while one is embedded in them.”<sup>19</sup> The ‘now’ can seem confusing while the photographic documentation can offer clarity and give time to analyze and interpret. There is an interrelationship between the performance and documentation that cannot be ignored.

In Barthes’ text ‘The Third Meaning’, photographs are classified in three levels of meaning. The first level is informational, which means that the things seen can require meaning. According to Barthes this level is communicational. The second level is the symbolic level, which points to the obvious meaning of the photograph. Here, different

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<sup>12</sup> Barthes, Roland, *Image, Music, Text*, Fontana Press, London 1977, p. 44

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin, Walter, ”The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in *Illuminations*, Translated by Harry Zohn, Eds. Hannah Ahrendt, First Schocken Paperback, United States of America 1978 (1969), p. 226

<sup>14</sup> Sontag, Susan, *On Photography*, Picador, Britain 2002 (1977), p. 3

<sup>15</sup> Schneider, Rebecca, ”SOLO SOLO SOLO”, in *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, Blackwell Publishing, United Kingdom 2005, pp. 29-30

<sup>16</sup> Butt, Gavin, ”Liveness: Performance and the Anxiety of Simulation”, in *Performance and Cultural Politics*, edited by Elin Diamond, Routledge, New York 1996, p. 197

<sup>17</sup> Sontag, ”*On photography*”, p.168

<sup>18</sup> Butt, ”*Liveness...* ”, p. 198

<sup>19</sup> Jones, ”*Presence...* ”, p. 12

symbolisms, the historical and the diegetic, are to be found. The third level is that of the obtuse meaning,<sup>20</sup> and Barthes likewise refers to it as ‘the third meaning’.

The third meaning is the level that escapes language and opens up towards infinity “[...] it seems to open the field of meaning totally [...] the obtuse meaning appears to extend outside culture [...]”.<sup>21</sup> The third meaning transcends the informational as well as the symbolic level; it is an excess of meaning. The third meaning will be used to find a meaning in one of the photographs where, at first sight, there may be none. Both of the terms, the third and the obtuse meaning, is used interchangeably and without differentiation.

### **Civilization and Art According to Critical Theory**

Critical theory has its origin with Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse et al., with their foundation of the Frankfurt School<sup>22</sup> in the 1930’s. One of the main theses in critical theory is that there is an increasing efficiency in society, because of the technology and the rationalization, which will lead to reification and measuring of the surroundings - not only of nature, but also of human beings.

The economical and psychoanalytical aspects of critical theory will be neglected in this context. The focus is on the differences in Horkheimer and Marcuse’s perception and use of art.

In “Art in Mass Culture”, Horkheimer argues that art should function as an alternative to mass culture, as an alternative to the reified society. Horkheimer does not believe in mass culture, but in the subject. Art ought to expose individuals and society as two different dimensions in order to reveal the irrational aspects of society; art should provoke and should not conform to the objectified society. “The individual's experience embodied in a work of art has no less validity than the organized experience society brings to bear for the control of nature [...] art is knowledge no less than science is.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Barthes, “*Image, Music...*” p. 55

<sup>21</sup> Op. cit., p. 59

<sup>22</sup> Since its foundation, the Frankfurt School has systematically analysed the political situation, so to sustain a link between theory and practice. The school argues that the society needs to be critically clarified, because of the objectified potential to and the practical necessity of liberation. The school has inspiration from Hegel’s philosophy, Marxian theory and Freudian psychoanalysis. Horkheimer, Max, Kalleberg, Ragnvald, ”Innledning. Vitenskap og samfunn” and ”Tradisjonell og kritisk teori“, in *Kritisk teori. En antologi over Frankfurter-skolen i filosofi og sosiologi*, Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, Oslo, 1970, p. XII.

<sup>23</sup> Horkheimer, Max, et al., ”Art and Mass Culture”, in *Critical Theory Selected Essays*, Continuum, New York, 1972, p. 273

For Horkheimer, the fact that society is permeated by science is one of the main factors to the reification, where everything, nature and humans, only functions as a potential resource to production and social control.

Art is the gap between individual and society; art demands contemplation and critical thinking: “[...] man has lost his power to conceive a world different from that in which he lives. This other world was that of art.”<sup>24</sup> Art is not a product of mass culture and can therefore function as the alternative to the one-dimensional society. This leads us to Marcuse’s understanding of art.

Marcuse operates with Art and Form<sup>25</sup> (capitalized) in the article “Art as Form of Reality”. For Marcuse, art is the last haven of phantasy where the population can have a break or elevation in order: “[...] to provide the ‘holiday’, the elevation, the break in the terrible routine of life [...]”.<sup>26</sup> Art likewise functions as autonomous, in the sense that art stands outside the repressed society and contradicts society. Art subjects to another reality principle<sup>27</sup> than the ‘real’ world; art offers an alternate reality.

Because the content of Art has become Form, Art can break with the established definitions of what is true or false, good or bad to which “[...] the precondition for Art is a radical looking into reality, and a looking away from it – a repression of its immediacy, and of the immediate response to it.”<sup>28</sup> It is a concept of art as something that can break with reality, but at the same time art cannot break with society. “After the break, real life continues: business as usual.”<sup>29</sup> Art does offer something different from the daily routine, a different thinking. Throughout the assignment, art and form are not capitalized.

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<sup>24</sup> Op.cit., p. 278

<sup>25</sup> Art (capitalized), as including not only the visual arts but also literature and music. Form (capitalized) defines Art as Art, as essentially (ontologically) different not only from (everyday) realities but also from science and philosophy Marcuse, Herbert, “Art as Form of Reality”, in *New Left Review no. 1/74 Spain – The Untimely Revolution*, 1972, p. 52

<sup>26</sup> Op. cit., p. 53

<sup>27</sup> The reality principle is where human beings develop the function of reason, so to “test” reality in order to distinguish between good and bad, true and false. Marcuse, Herbert, *Eros and Civilization – A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, Beacon Press Boston, 1966, p. 14

<sup>28</sup> Marcuse, “Art as Form...” p. 55

<sup>29</sup> Op. cit., p. 53

## Part II – Different Approaches on Temporalities

### The Temporality in-between a Performance and its Documentation

Güntzel started to perform “Spring Cleaning” in 2006. It is an ongoing performance where the concept remains the same, but the performance varies in form, place and time. Some of her performances are staged only for the camera (fig. 1), whereas other ‘Spring Cleanings’ are unannounced interventions in urban spaces (fig. 2). The live performance varies in time, but usually the duration of Güntzel's live performance last between 15 and 30 minutes.<sup>30</sup>

In ‘Spring Cleaning’ (fig 1.) we see the artist, dressed like a cleaning lady, sweeping some beach. The ocean and sky in the background merge together in countless variations of cold-blue colours. The sand of the beach is fine; it is not a rough, stony beach and the first association that comes to mind is the myth of Sisyphos. The sweeping of the beach has no end, the 'cleaning' is endless and ungrateful.

This performance is staged *for* the camera, which means that the photograph is essential for the afterlife of the performance. As Phelan argued, the existence of the live performance as present *alone* is of no significance here, because no spectator will experience the presence of the performance. The spectator will only have the opportunity to experience the photographic documentation of the performance. Without the photographic documentation, there would be no knowledge of the live performance. This temporality in the dichotomy of presence and absence that exists between the ephemeral live performance and the permanent documentation is dialectical, but necessary for their equal existence.

In the second ‘cleaning’ (fig. 2), the performance is an unannounced intervention in some urban space. The exact location has no importance for the concept or understanding of the live performance. What is important is the surroundings, depicting that western mass culture needs a good and meticulous “cleaning”. The fact that the first performance was only meant for the camera and the second performance was an intervention for an audience, expresses a conflict in temporality and the two photographs need to be approached differently.

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<sup>30</sup> The duration of their performances are not announced on their webpages or in their catalogue. I got the information from a talk with artist Swaantje Güntzel.

According to Phelan, a performance “[...] honors the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value [...]”.<sup>31</sup> This is where trouble comes into paradise. In ‘Spring Cleaning’ (fig. 1) no audience is supposed to be present during the live performance. The phenomenological experience and the presence in the performance that Phelan agitates have never been an option. The audience is supposed to experience it through the reproductive media i.e. the photographs. The live performance is turned into an art object because of lapse in time. From before the beginning, the performance is already incorporating the camera and thus, the live performance is “[...] a product of reproductive technologies.”<sup>32</sup> The mediatized photographic documentation and the live performance are in an interrelationship, where the absence of the live performance becomes the presence in the documentation - this temporality becomes the foundation of the live performance.

Jones mentions that the body of the artist in the live performance is no less “mediated”<sup>33</sup> than other artistic representations such as photographs', because the body, which most often is the primary material in live performances, is already perceived as a mediated representation. Jones does not agree that live performance is only about the artist's presence in the ‘now’, where the artist can give the audience a direct contact with the body and the subject of the artist, as Phelan would argue. According to Jones, there is no more truth in the presence of the ‘now’ in the live performance than in the ‘absence’ of photographic documentation:

Having direct physical contact with an artist who pulls a scroll from her vaginal canal *does not* ensure “knowledge” of her subjectivity or intentionality any more than does looking at a film or picture of this activity, or looking at a painting that was made as the result of such an action.<sup>34</sup> [My italics]

What Jones emphasizes is the temporality in live performances. The spatio-temporal experience that the audience gets while observing it, does not bring the audience closer to a meaning or truth, to the artist as subject or to a presence in the ‘now’. The photograph can give the same experience. Of course there will be no “[...] flesh-to-flesh

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<sup>31</sup> Phelan, “*Unmarked...*”, p. 149

<sup>32</sup> Diamond, “*Introduction...*”, p. 197

<sup>33</sup> Jones, “*Presence...*”, pp. 12-13

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* p. 13

engagement [...]" but "[...] the documentary exchange (viewer/reader ⇔ document) is equally intersubjective."<sup>35</sup> The temporality between the phenomenological experience and the documentation alone is not the essential point here: it is also the question of the temporality in presence and absence.

In relation to fig. 1, we can confirm that there is an absence in the presence, i.e. the live performance's absence to an audience is already incorporated, because the performance is *staged* for the camera. This distance or temporality in the absence of the live performance gives a presence to the documentation, thus making the 'presence' more intense. Gützel's two performances (fig. 1 and fig. 2) have taken the necessity of photographic documentation into account, because the performances either take place in a remote area or as an intervention where there is a possibility of a non-existing audience.

Scheibe began the performance "Shouldered Streetlights" in 2011. The performances often taken place in remote areas staged only for the camera (fig. 3)<sup>36</sup> or announced for an invited audience. In the photograph of the performance (fig. 3) we see a man dressed in a black suit carrying a streetlight on his shoulder and in the opposite hand, an 800-Watt generator. When the streetlight and generator get too heavy to carry and when the surroundings make an impression on the artist, he stops to turn on the streetlight while standing in that specific place for a certain duration of time. In this way, the artist gets connected with the surroundings. These random places become temporary homes for the artist.<sup>37</sup> The duration of the performance is approximately an hour, but it varies from time to time, from performance to performance.<sup>38</sup>

During the timespan, photographs are taken to document the live performance in order to prove its having-been-there. The documentation attaches the live performance to the specific landscape, holding on to the specific moment. Because it is an ephemeral performance, staged only for the camera, it eliminates the idea that an interrelationship between performer and audience gives 'an experience of value', which is to say that a presence is necessary to perceive the truth of the live performance.

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<sup>35</sup> Op.cit., p. 12

<sup>36</sup> To be clear, in the performances only staged for the camera, it sometimes happens that people come by accidental. This will not be taken into account.

<sup>37</sup> Taken from his own text about the performance. To see all the text go to: <http://www.jan-philip-scheibe.de/shouldered%20street%20light%20neu.html> 26.11.2014

<sup>38</sup> See footnote 30

### **A Temporality in the Concept of an ‘Ongoing Performance’**

It is important to take notice of the fact that both Gützel and Scheibe’s performances are *ongoing*. In the word ‘ongoing’ itself there is a temporality, which raises the question of the distinction between presence and absence. The temporality occurs in the distance in the spatio-temporal continuum from one live performance to another. The fact that the performances are ongoing opposes Phelan's argument that the ontology of performance is non-reproductive. The performance is reproduced from time to time, even though it varies in place and time. The photographic documentation of the live performance is more explicitly a reproduction, because the documentation is a tangible object, which is “[...] infinitely reproducible.”<sup>39</sup>

In so far as the performance will continue to be ephemeral *and* the photographic documentation will always be a permanent object, it can be said that the live performance in the ‘now’ tries to objectify its own ephemeral being because of its *ongoing* continuation. The essential point is that the performance and the photographic documentation are dependent on each other.

According to the German art critic and philosopher Boris Groys “[a]ll art therefore begins with the wish to hold on to a moment, to let it linger for an indeterminate time” because in the ‘now’ “[...] we are always only accidental witnesses of certain events and certain images, whose duration we cannot control.”<sup>40</sup> Along these lines, the photographic documentation of live performances is a repetitive process where the photograph can master the ephemeral ‘now’. Even though the live performance tries to objectify itself in the ongoing process, there is still a ‘wish to hold on to’ the moment. This wish will be fulfilled in the documentation.

The dependence of the live performance's wish to be documented indicates that the distance between the presence in the ‘now’ and the absence in the documentation is not as simple, as it may seem. Perhaps the relationship is reversed.

The performance art needs the documentation; the documentation needs the live performance “as an ontological “anchor” of its indexicality.”<sup>41</sup> The ‘absence’ of the live performance in the photographic documentation can and will be ‘present’, thus giving ‘presence’ to the reproduction. In relation to the two performances ‘Spring Cleaning’

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<sup>39</sup> Berger, John, *Understanding a Photograph*, Penguin Classics, England 2013 (1967), p. 18

<sup>40</sup> Groys, “*Art Power*”, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts 2013 p. 88

<sup>41</sup> Jones “*Presence...*”, p. 16

and 'Shouldered Streetlight', the fact that there is an absence of audience during the live performances means, that the absence will become more present in the retelling of the performance, i. e. the photographic documentation.

### **The Third Meaning**

Considering the photographic documentation (fig. 1-3) it is a possibility that "[...] either the photograph means nothing because the spectator has no linking of what is involved, or else its meanings denies or qualifies its demonstration."<sup>42</sup> Along these lines "[a] photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence."<sup>43</sup> This evident temporality, as expressed in the quote, as 'pseudo-presence' and a 'token of absence', exposes the intersubjective relationship<sup>44</sup> that exists between the live performance and the documentation of it. This relationship consists of the 'absent' live performance and the 'presence' in the photograph.

As Jones argues, it is through the photographic documentation that we can gain knowledge and information about the performance independent of the live experience. "It [the photographs] is a way in which things themselves speak and are silent"<sup>45</sup> as the French philosopher Jacques Rancière points out. In their very silence, the photographs 'speak' about the live performances. Through this silence, the spectator can 'evaluate' and 'retell' the meaning of the live performance.

With the help of Barthes's concept of the 'third meaning',<sup>46</sup> fig. 2 will be analyzed. It will be necessary to briefly go through all three levels of meanings.

What informations do we get from the photograph? The surrounding is in an urban space, we see a 'cleaning lady' with a feather duster standing in a bush. There are no other characters; the cleaning lady is the only one. In the background there is a sign with the text "Karma", which tries to communicate to us. "Karma" leads on to the symbolic level; what is the obvious meaning of this sign? The referential symbolism of the sign is a distortion of the word "Karma" itself, and the cleaning lady's meticulous sweeping of

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<sup>42</sup> Berger, "*Understanding a...*" p. 9

<sup>43</sup> Sontag, "*On photography*", p. 16

<sup>44</sup> Jones "*Presence...*", p. 12

<sup>45</sup> Rancière, Jacques, *The Future of the Image*, Verso, United Kingdom 2009 (2007), p. 13

<sup>46</sup> Barthes uses film stills from the Russian movie director and film critic Sergej Eisensteins movie *Ivan the Terrible I* from 1944, to substantiate his argumentation about the third meaning.

the bush. Then there is the diegetic symbolism,<sup>47</sup> which amounts to the very act of cleaning nature. It is the concept of the photograph as well as what disturbs it. The historical symbolism is expressed in the 'modern' architecture. On the right side of the photograph appears a shopping mall with signs on the facade, which informs the consumer about the different brands there are to be found in the mall. The consistency of the historical symbolism is the Western mass culture i.e. consumerism.

There is, however, something in the photograph that continues to hold on to us, to the spectators. There is an excess of meaning that is not to be found at the informational or symbolic level. Barthes often discovers the third meaning in costumes, because it is "[...] indifferent to the story and the obvious meaning[...]"<sup>48</sup> and it is where "[t]he obtuse meaning can only come and go[...]"<sup>49</sup> as he argues. Just like the live performance, the third meaning is ephemeral and intangible, because the meaning is not always there, but can be found.

I will argue that the obtuse meaning is to be found in the costume of the artist, because it is, at first sight, not what catches the eye; on the contrary, it is the "Karma" in the back "[t]he characteristic of the third meaning is indeed [...] to blur the limit separating expression from disguise [...]"<sup>50</sup> The cleaning lady is what 'blurs' the obtuse meaning in the photograph of the performance; she 'blurs' the expression "Karma" in the disguise of a cleaning lady. Nature ought not to be dusted. There is a distortion of "Karma" and nature, or the "karma" of nature. This obtuse meaning, that blurs the limit, could function as the alternative that reveals the 'irrationalities of society'.

The third meaning offers a temporality because it is a constant process. A process that becomes a meaning that "[...]can only come and go[...]"<sup>51</sup>. The third meaning of the photograph offers another 'hidden' knowledge than the live performance. Observing the photograph, the spectator has time to see the 'disguise' that hides the obtuse meaning. The spectator needs time to contemplate in order to extract a deeper meaning from the photograph beyond the informational and obvious meanings.

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<sup>47</sup> Diegesis: "a narrative or a plot, typically in a movie",  
[http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/american\\_english/diegesis](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/american_english/diegesis) d. 29.11.2014

<sup>48</sup> Barthes, "*IMAGE, MUSIC...*", p. 61

<sup>49</sup> Op. cit., p. 63

<sup>50</sup> Op. cit., p. 57

<sup>51</sup> Op. Cit., p. 63

In the following part, there will be a discussion of performance art in relation to society, human beings, and nature. The reproductive elements in the live and ‘ongoing’ performance and the photographic documentation is likewise discussed.

## **Part III – Discussion on Performance Art and its Reproduction**

### **The Influence of Temporality and the Third Meaning**

Marcuse argues that art can offer a break from reality. In this 'break', a temporality occurs because it is not a permanent condition, it is only momentary. The temporality emerges in this case not between the live performance and the photographic documentation, but between ‘society’ and ‘individuals’. In the following quote by Marcuse, several things are to be noticed when it comes to temporality:

Art is not (or not supposed to be) a use value to be consumed in the course of the daily *performances* of men; its utility is of a transcendent kind, utility for the soul or the mind which does not enter the normal behavior of men and does not really change it – *except for precisely that short period of elevation* [...].<sup>52</sup> [My italics]

Marcuse uses the word ‘performance’<sup>53</sup> to describe the daily work and lives of the population in a (given) society. Art is not a matter of consumption in this 'daily performance', instead art ought to push or provoke the mind, thus being the reason for a different kind of thinking. The temporality emerging with this break has influences on the individual, where the temporality can be seen as an interruption in the (everyday) reality, but without effect on society.

In this case, Benjamin's concept of 'anesthesia' is interesting, which he transfers to the spectator, i.e. the masses. The spectators become anesthetized when collectively experiencing art,<sup>54</sup> which produces a mass (culture) that does not react on the things they see. This is similar to Marcuse’s idea of temporality. The spectator will only

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<sup>52</sup> Marcuse, "Art as Form...", p. 53

<sup>53</sup> Marcuse uses the concept 'performance-principle' which is defined as: "[...] the prevailing historical form of the reality principle" and "The performance-principle [...] presupposes a long development during which domination has been increasingly rationalized. [...] Men do not live their own lives but perform pre-established functions", "Eros and Civilization", pp. 35-45

<sup>54</sup> Because of the technical reproduction, there is a loss of aura. Artworks have more exhibition value than a unique cult value. Benjamin connects it to movies, where there is a collective perception, and in *pari passu* the critical reaction to art falls apart. This is why the masses are anesthetized.

momentarily be uplifted and critical before turning 'back to business', or to the anesthetized (everyday) reality.

In relation to 'Spring Cleaning', it also *performs* an aspect of a daily routine of the masses (i.e. dusting). It is in the 'absence' of the photographic documentation, and maybe in the 'presence' of the live performance, that the obtuse meaning is to be found. Obtuse in the sense of "[a]nnoyingly insensitive or slow to understand,"<sup>55</sup> The elevation or uplifting only lasts for a moment, and the spectator may be too 'slow to understand', because as mentioned before, the obtuse meaning only comes and goes. Yet there is a chance that the spectator will perceive the third meaning and be critical for a moment, and Barthes does "[...] believe that the obtuse meaning carries a certain *emotion* [...] [A]n emotion which simply *designates* what one loves, what one wants to defend [...]"<sup>56</sup> The temporality is seen between individuals, society, and in the third meaning, because of the 'break' from reality. In the timespan in which the break exists, a critical thinking of society can be thought, but the critique will stay in thoughts.

### **Performance as Art in Correlation with the Individual and the Society**

We are told that art should function as an alternative to a (given) society. Art should reveal the irrationalities of the structures in society and open up for another type of thinking. What is it art can offer as an alternative to these irrationalities in society?

Horkheimer argues that the population only sees nature as a potential resource where:

[...]it takes shape either as that realm of nature which despite the far-reaching conquests still to come will never wholly vanish, or as the weakness of the society of previous ages in carrying on the struggle with nature in a consciously and purposefully organized way.<sup>57</sup>

This is exemplified in the photographic documentation of 'Shouldered Streetlight'. In a very powerful way, the photograph reveals the factory in the background, which is not able to 'carry on the struggle' in relation to nature. The factory's only function is to use nature as a resource, as a means of production. The factory, which in this case is a metaphor for society, does not only reify nature, it also reifies the man with the

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<sup>55</sup> <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/obtuse?searchDictCode=all>, 02.12.2014

<sup>56</sup> Barthes, "IMAGE, MUSIC...", p. 59

<sup>57</sup> Horkheimer, Max, "Traditional and Critical Theory" in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, The Continuum Publishing Company, New York, 1975, p. 230

streetlight. It is obvious that it is the factory's inability 'to struggle' that reveals the irrational structures in society.

In fig. 3 there is also a similarity with "Wanderer above the Sea of Fog" from 1818, by the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich (fig. 4). In the painting, the nature surrounding him becomes formless, where the 'wanderer' (and the man in fig. 3) confronts the wild nature by being in the middle of it. Nonetheless the wanderer (and the man in fig. 3), which is just as important, confronts humanity. The confrontation with humanity is a question of identification. The one who observes the photograph cannot identify with the man, or society (the factory), because the back of the man is turned towards the spectator:

[...] [I]t is always a question of showing the spectator what she does *not know how to see*, and making her feel ashamed of what she does *not want to see* [...]. [It] is the obvious reality that you do not want to see, because you know you are responsible for it [...]. [A]n awareness of the hidden reality and a feeling of guilt about the denied reality.<sup>58</sup>

This quote by Rancière shows how the individuals in mass culture do not know how to see the irrational structures in society; they only have an 'awareness' of them. Art, in this case the photographic documentation of 'Shouldered Streetlight', can open up for an alternative to mass cultures' "[...] amusement industry [...]",<sup>59</sup> hence identifying the individuals in society as reified.

Furthermore, because the factory is in the middle of the wild nature, it is possible to assume that it uses the nature as a resource, as a means to production, thus expressing the critique of society that Horkheimer agitates. The man in the photograph (fig. 3) is most likely not conscious of his own reification; it is only the spectator who can conclude this. The problem is that the spectator will only be critical momentarily, and the critique that emerges will only last as long as the photograph is gazed upon.

There is also a disturbance emanating from the smoking stacks in the middle of nature, which at first sight is mistakenly seen as a part of it. The disturbance points to the irrationality in society, which "[...] of course, says something about this thinking, not about nature."<sup>60</sup> Thus:

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<sup>58</sup> Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, United States 2011 (2008), pp. 27-30

<sup>59</sup> Horkheimer, "Art in Mass..." p. 290

<sup>60</sup> Horkheimer, "Traditional and..." p. 229

[t]echnological rationality reveals its political character as it becomes the great vehicle of better domination, creating a truly totalitarian universe in which society and nature, mind and body are kept in a state of permanent mobilization for the defense of this universe.<sup>61</sup>

‘Shouldered Streetlight’ truly emphasizes this ‘technological sensibility’ by questioning the (given) society’s ‘increasing efficiency’ caused by nature and humans as resources. What we see in fig. 3 is both the reification of nature and human(ity), but also a demand for contemplation from the spectator.

The same can be said of the photographic documentation of ‘Spring Cleaning’ in fig. 2. The sign in the background, “Karma”, emphasizes the distortion referred to by the performance’s title ‘Spring Cleaning’, but it also points to the exact opposite; that no karma exists here. As Marcuse argues, art is autonomous in the sense that it contradicts the society: “They [art and literature] were a rational, cognitive force, revealing a dimension of man and nature which was repressed and repelled in reality.”<sup>62</sup> This is where art insists on critical thinking because “[...] art has this magic power only as the power of negation.”<sup>63</sup> As long as art can ‘speak’ its own language and deny the existing structures in society, art is powerful. This negation can be seen in both Gützel and Scheibe’s photographic documentation. Whether the negation is seen as ‘cleaning’ the nature or as confronting it, the photographic documentation shows the different dimensions between ‘individuals’ and ‘society’ that it is not an equal relationship.

Performance art and the photographic documentation is the negation of (everyday) reality, also because of its form: “By virtue of the Form, and the Form alone, the content achieves that uniqueness which makes it the content of one particular work of art and of no other.”<sup>64</sup> Form is that which ‘defines Art as Art’ and can separate art from reality. Marcuse’s understanding is not necessarily form as a tangible object; it is rather a *question* of what art has to offer.

It is the form that gives the ‘content a uniqueness’, hence distinguishes one artwork from another. The content of the form is not whether the live performance is more ‘present’ or if the artist’s ‘presence’ is more ‘absent’ in photographic documentation. Instead it is about how the form *can* give content.

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<sup>61</sup> Herbert, *One-Dimensional Man, Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1964, p. 24

<sup>62</sup> Op. cit., p. 54

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p. 54

<sup>64</sup> Marcuse, “*Art as Form...*”, p. 53

The content of the live performance is shown in the form of a momentary phenomenological 'flesh-to-flesh' experience. The momentary form of the performance distinguishes it from the photographic documentation, whose form is static. It is a form that gives us time to evaluate and contemplate. The photographic documentation can offer a basis in mass culture, where "[...] the subject which is alienated is swallowed up by its alienated existence."<sup>65</sup>

Marcuse argues that "[...] the work of art is to appeal to the senses, to satisfy sensuous needs – but in a highly sublimated manner. Art is to have a reconciling, tranquillizing, *and* a cognitive function, to be beautiful *and* true."<sup>66</sup> According to Marcuse, art *can* appeal to human beings and question whether an aesthetic judgment can "[...] become a collective or "common" judgment."<sup>67</sup> According to Benjamin, if there is a collective judgment, the experience of art will be anesthetized, and not raise the critical thinking. In order to end the discussion with the words of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, "[...] every man's esthetic judgment is suffused with the *humanity he has in himself*."<sup>68</sup> [My italics]. To judge, or to be possessed by art is an individual experience, according to these theories, and does not have the potential to change the irrational structures in society.

### **The Possibility of Reproduction**

Performance art is reproducible because of its iterative process, and the photographic documentation is so because of technology. This opposes Phelan's statement of the performance's ontology: that it is non-reproductive. Why is the reproduced documentation less authentic than the live performance?

In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", Benjamin points to the dichotomy between the original and its copy. The live performance has several similarities to the concept 'original', and the photographic documentation to the 'copy', where the original has an aura,<sup>69</sup> and the copy does not. The performance, in accordance to Phelan and Benjamin, has a 'here and now', the documentation, as Barthes would

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<sup>65</sup> Marcuse, "One-Dimensional Man..." p. 19

<sup>66</sup> Marcuse, "Art as Form...", p. 54

<sup>67</sup> Horkheimer, "Art in Mass...", p. 274

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. p. 274

<sup>69</sup> Aura is the 'here and now', the presence of something, the artworks authenticity. When an artwork is documented, it becomes a reproduction of the original [the live performance], where authenticity cannot follow. But certain technological technics has produced a differentiation and graduation of the authenticity. In this case, the photography has obtained some of the originals 'here and now'.

state, a 'having-been-there'. It can be argued that in the moment a photograph is taken, there emerges another 'here and now' that is only to be found in the obtuse meaning in the photographic documentation.

In relation to Güntzel and Scheibe's performances and their documentation, the "[...] technical reproduction [the photographic documentation] can put the copy of the original [the performance] into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself."<sup>70</sup> In the photographic documentation, both the temporal and spatial restraints are transcended or 'deterritorialized'<sup>71</sup> as Groys argues, or to use Barthes' rhetoric: the obtuse meaning. The obtuse meaning is beyond the obvious and can therefore 'put the copy in situations out of reach' for the live performance.

The focus ought not to be on whether the live performance is authentic in a way, which the documentation is not. The focus, with reference to Jones, should be on the interrelationship, between the repetitive ongoing performance and the technological reproducibility of the photographic documentation, and what meanings, experiences and critical thoughts it can give in the 'daily routine'.

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<sup>70</sup> Benjamin, "*The Work of...*", p. 220

<sup>71</sup> Groys, "*Art Power*", p. 62

## **Conclusion**

The assignment has examined the temporality which occurs in the live performance and the following photographic documentation. The assignment has used two artists, Swaantje Güntzel and Jan-Philip Scheibe, to analyze and discuss this.

In the first part, a delimited understanding of 'performance' by Peggy Phelan and Amelia Jones is defined; a performance exists in the 'now', but the documentation, which is not a violation to it, open up for another perception. Roland Barthes' concept of the 'Third Meaning' is used in relation to photography where it shows that a meaning is to be found in that which seems insignificant: the costume of the artist, where it reveals the irrational structures in society.

A performance is in the presence, as Phelan argues, and the photographs document its absence. In the analysis, this dichotomy of presence/absence is used in order to show that the relationship is reversed; in a performance only for the camera, there is an absence of audience, whereas a presence will become more intense in the documentation.

The temporality also occurs in the word 'ongoing performance' and in the third meaning because it is in constant process.

Lastly, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuses' critical theory was used as method. They argue that art can offer a 'break from everyday reality' and raise a critical thinking that can reveal the irrational society and demonstrate how it reifies nature and humans. This was shown in relation to one of the photographic documentations. However, the thinking will only last as long as the photograph is gazed upon. The momentary break implies a temporality between the 'individuals' and 'society'. The critical thinking will stay in the moment and cannot be used against society.

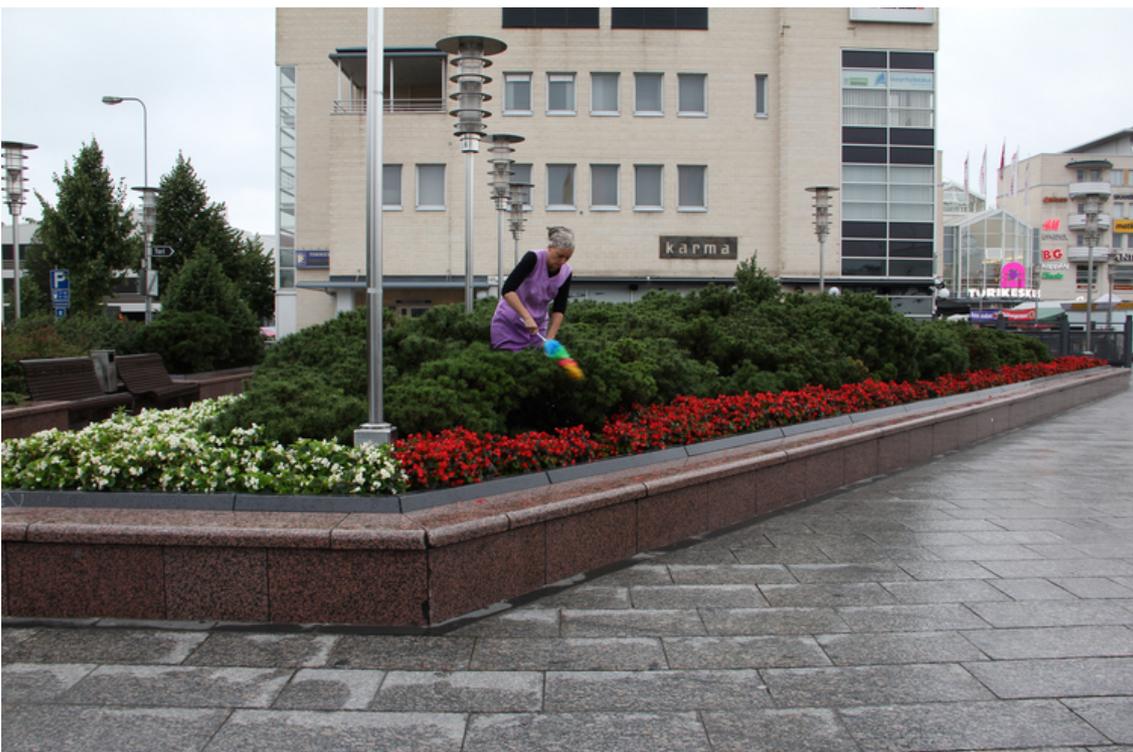
## Appendix

Case nr. 1 “Spring Cleaning” by Swaantje Güntzel, ongoing since 2006

Fig.1



Fig. 2



Case nr. 2 “Shouldered Streetlights” by Jan Phillip Scheibe, ongoing since 2011

Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Caspar David Friedrich,  
'Wanderer above the Sea of Fog', 1818  
Hamburg Kunsthalle,  
Germany,  
98,4 x 74,8 cm,  
oil-on-canvas



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**Total 985 np**

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<http://www.denstoredanske.dk>

### **Appendix**

Fig. 1 - <http://www.swaantje-guentzel.de/#/spring-cleaning/> 03.12.2014

Fig. 2 - <http://www.swaantje-guentzel.de/#/spring-cleaning/> 03.12.2014

Fig. 3 - <http://www.jan-philip-scheibe.de/shouldered%20street%20light/norbotten.html>  
03.12.2014

Fig. 4 -

[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b9/Caspar\\_David\\_Friedrich -  
\\_Wanderer above the sea of fog.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b9/Caspar_David_Friedrich_-_Wanderer_above_the_sea_of_fog.jpg) 03.12.2014