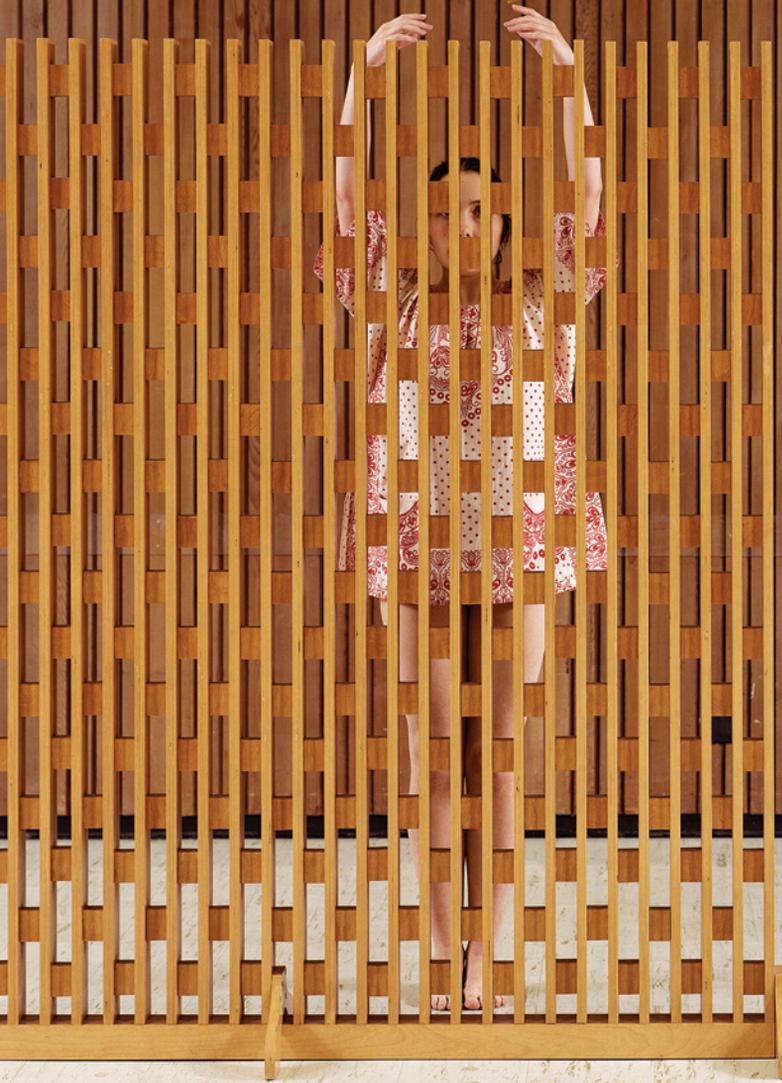


# *SPLIT* MOMENT

January 27 – April 15, 2012



# SPLIT MOMENT

*What is thus designated as a moment of presence always has to posit another, prior moment and so implicitly loses its status as a point of origin.*

—Paul de Man, 1971

How is it different to experience a performance as it unfolds or to watch it later through its documentation? While some claim attending a performance is distinct from viewing a video, others insist the boundaries between a live event and its recording are fundamentally blurred. *Split Moment* is a reconsideration of the question of “presence” during live performance. The artists in the exhibition document performance not as a record of a live event, but rather, as a form of mediation between its various components. Josh Azzarella, Trisha Brown, Jocelyn Foye, Babette Mangolte, Yvonne Rainer, and Flora Wiegmann expand the definition of both what counts as performance and what is considered as documentation. For them, mediation becomes part of the medium of a work of art and thus, the live event and its afterlife as a recording are inextricably bound.

There are many options for engaging with a performed event in addition to “being there.” Since the 60s, technologies such as photography, video, and live-streaming have exponentially proliferated in our daily lives, to a point some see as total intrusion. In 1964, media analyst and philosopher Marshall McLuhan famously proclaimed, “the medium is the message,” providing

commentary on how such technologies are more than a vehicle or channel for content, but instead become content itself.<sup>1</sup> In the context of this exhibition, the term “mediation” describes the process by which media both gain such agency and constrain human experience. As media theorists W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen have suggested, in the social domain within which culture and life happen, “media are our situation.”<sup>2</sup>

Postmodernism marks both the period that follows Modernism and a new cultural mindset through which the principles of Modernism were critiqued.<sup>3</sup> Postmodernist and Poststructuralist theorists working in the 60s reconsidered long-held metaphysical assumptions about the human subject as a “unified presence” in time and space. Such concepts as the “artist as genius” rely on the notion of an autonomous subject wholly present to him or herself. Through their analysis, Postmodernist and Poststructuralist theorists revealed how language and images modify and complicate human experience. They thereby exposed the impossibility for any subject to be wholly autonomous.

In the artistic arena, the embrace of Postmodernism resulted in the dissolution of divisions between visual media such as painting or sculpture, as well as the distinctions between the plastic and the performing arts. As part of their collaborative interventions, Postmodern artists also drew upon ordinary life, rather than emphasizing skill or creating art as a spectacle. With the development of performance art and other experimental modes, such as participatory Happenings or installations, the boundaries between what could and could not be considered art became even more blurred. Called into question by these activities were Modernist assumptions about performance as being limited to a singular “live” event in space and time that could be experienced only by a present audience.

Developments in performance and dance were consistent with, and at times magnified by, the changes visual arts underwent during the 60s and 70s.<sup>4</sup> The Judson Dance Theatre, a collective of dancers from Greenwich Village, pioneered many of these transformations by employing new and experimental media and dance forms. The group emerged in 1962 from classes taught by avant-garde musician Robert Dunn in which collective members mobilized new theories of composition to radicalize dance.<sup>5</sup> Instead of emphasizing technical skill and visually striking movements, their work incorporated ordinary activities. The group experimented with vernacular expressions in dance, creating pieces for which any action such as sneezing, coughing, skipping, and walking were all considered to be artistic content.<sup>6</sup> Through their choreographies, the Judson Theatre thereby disrupted the attitude towards dance as a spectacular event.

Traditionally, a dancer or performer is differentiated from the audience through technical ability. The theater proscenium, which dates back to ancient Rome, architecturally reinforces Western conventions and is a familiar structure to divide the audience from the staged event. In this format, all eyes are directed towards the spectacle on stage. In deliberate defiance of such traditions, the Judson Theatre relocated the audience onto a shared plane with the performance and eliminated costumes, makeup, sets, and theatrical lighting. They replaced the traditional audience/performer relationship with an awareness of the performers' bodies in space as well as a reconsideration of the viewer's presence.

By 1967, TVs could be found in ninety-eight percent of American households.<sup>7</sup> Such widespread incorporation of televised media redefined lived experience. Many individuals could witness worldwide events simultaneously from their own living rooms. Broadcast images provided viewers with a sense of immediacy, despite the fact they could have taken place thousands of miles away. Experience clearly shifted to operate through a system of mediation and “real” life became at times indistinguishable from its televised transmission.

Several of the Judson Theatre's iconic dances from the 70s were performed and re-staged for television. Moreover, they exploited the newly mediated relationship between viewer and documentation through choreography. As art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty suggests in a monograph on Judson performer Yvonne Rainer, the dances were made as if they were seen through the lens of a camera—impersonal and grayscale.<sup>8</sup>

In 1965, Rainer proclaimed, “No to spectacle, no to virtuosity, no to transformations and magic and make believe.”<sup>9</sup> The ideas with which the Judson Theatre experimented echoed the zeitgeist of the era. In 1967, Guy Debord published *Society of the Spectacle*, a Marxist critique of what he saw as the commercialization of all aspects of life.<sup>10</sup> For Debord, the modern spectacle of the performer had been replaced by a “society of spectacle” in which all relationships were mediated and formed by mechanized images.

Poststructuralism provided a way of thinking that connected and reshaped conventions across various academic disciplines. Key to this process was French philosopher Jacques Derrida, who critiqued the assumption that one could be fully present at a given moment in space and time.<sup>11</sup> *Différance* is Derrida’s term for these perpetual disparities in human perception.<sup>12</sup> *Différance* can be thought of as the received word—delayed in time and deferred through space. According to Derrida, nothing can be perceived or understood precisely as it happens. For example, speech is heard in the split second after sound waves are received, and only then translated by its recipient (or audience).

Performance, like speech, can never be perceived as encompassing presence at any one moment. From a Poststructuralist perspective, a gap exists between an event’s occurrence and its reception, even when the viewer and the performer share the same space at a live event. Because the performer is never experienced as fully present, a live performance may be considered as mediated and disjointed as that of its recording. In 1998, art historian Amelia Jones critiqued traditional

dependencies of performance to the concept of presence by directly citing Derrida’s theories.<sup>13</sup> Responding to feminist scholar Peggy Phelan’s contemporaneous position that a “performance’s life is only in the present,” Jones argued for the value and importance of alternatives to understanding live performance.<sup>14</sup> In Phelan’s pioneering essay, she discussed performance art in theoretical terms, emphasizing the ways the genre could challenge artistic traditions and the art market. For Jones however, Phelan’s claim was overstated, as “pure presence is an outdated remnant of modernism.”<sup>15</sup> According to Jones, the fractured postmodern body can be best represented through mediated forms as opposed to attempts at momentary presence.

Performance theorist André Lepecki has extensively explored the relationships between dance and writing.<sup>16</sup> In both activities, he sees erasure and non-presence enacted.<sup>17</sup> These elements of dance reveal, especially through movement, a process defined by changes in time and space, further complicating any understanding of a unified presence. Lepecki’s study thus casts dance as a genre that necessarily problematizes “presence” in all of the ways discussed here.

Working contemporaneously with Derrida’s and other similar developments of ideas, the Judson Theatre formulated a performance model that would foreground the inevitability of mediation. For example, they challenged the viewer to consider interactive processes by mimicking the experience of viewing via documentation even during the performance itself.<sup>18</sup> By highlighting the delayed and deferred experience, live performance was freed from its temporal and spatial confines.

Such theories and practices developed in the early postmodern period paved the way for the contemporary multimedia practices of the artists in *Split Moment*.<sup>19</sup> Since that time, methods for documentation and mediation have grown exponentially. Debord's "society of spectacle" foreshadowed today's proliferation of the "hyperreal."<sup>20</sup> Contemporary artists have applied this term as they create works that advance awareness of the extent to which experience is mediated. They demonstrate that pure presence, in performance or in life, is impossible. For the artists of *Split Moment*, performance is composed of a series of split moments—a play of movements and the liminal space between them—as meaningful in their absence as when visible.

In his work, **Josh Azzarella** uses digital technology to remove the main subject from iconic images of visual culture and thereby deny them a temporally and spatially unified presence. He assumes that we experience events via the constructed images of them. His source material, often historic or journalistic photographs, are themselves constructed images, which act as referents to our experience of major international events. The extensive use of digital image editing software in the past decade has further problematized the notion of presence introduced by the proliferation of television culture, increasing the level of mediation in daily experience and erasing the boundaries between image and reality. The validity of, and context for, "original" images has become uncertain.

Featured here is Azzarella's *Untitled #100 (Fantasia)* (2007-09) (fig. 12), in which he removed the dancers, music, and main props from Michael Jackson's pop music video, *Thriller* (1983). Only empty scenery and faint background noise remains. The ambient sounds of wind and a chirping cricket replace Jackson's hit song as the camera lingers on the now empty but oddly familiar setting. By appropriating *Thriller*, Azzarella references the emergence of 80s music video culture resulting from MTV, the explosively popular cable network. Unlike a video, such as the recording of *Trio A*, the original *Thriller* video did not originate from a performance within a specific space and time. The music video medium is produced as a conglomerate of disparate audio and video files, each produced separately from one another. The live performance of an "original" music video is inconceivable—it never exists wholly in space or in time as simulcast televised experience. By using an



12. Josh Azzarella, *Untitled #100 (Fantasia)* (still), 2007-2009,  
Blu-ray Disc 5.1 Master Audio Surround Sound, duration: 12 minutes, 6 seconds.  
© Josh Azzarella. Courtesy of the Mark & Hilarie Moore Family Trust and Mark Moore Gallery

already mediated form of experience as a starting point, Azzarella attempts to convey what may be considered “pure” mediation. In *Untitled #100 (Fantasia)* mediation is a medium without an original event to which it refers. Azzarella accepts the reality of mediation, as did the Judson Theatre, and applies this awareness to critique the perceived value of performance, de-spectacularizing the subject by removing it.

Extending early postmodern critiques of presence, all of the artists in *Split Moment* respond to the proliferation of mediation. They problematize the importance of a viewer's presence at a live event in space and time, suggesting that performance is not only mediated, but can be experienced through various modes of documentation as fully as at the live event. Eventually, even a singular event is replaced by a series of fragmented images. The Judson Theatre critiqued the notion that “being there” is as important in the context of technology's development. Responding to this moment, Rainer re-defined modern dance, creating work through which she expressed self-awareness of its eventual recording. In culture at large, as all manner of experience came to be recognized as fundamentally mediated, fragmented through a system of delay and deferral, the significance of witnessing the live event was further challenged. Rainer's deconstructed response is echoed in Nipper's work, entirely staged for the camera. Brown radicalized the notion of documentation by emphasizing its inherent discontinuity. Creating work where the dependence of the performance on its remnants is total, Foye further emphasizes the interdependence of the live event and its record. Once mediation is accepted as a fundamental

condition of experience, it affects not only how art is transmitted, viewed, or thought about, but also how its medium functions. Mangolte, Wiegmann and Azzarella all employ pre-existing images as source material, intervening upon already highly mediated referents and proposing new ways of interacting with performance.

The artists of *Split Moment* are not beholden to a single performed event, but depart from it. For them, mediation itself serves as material for experimentations with the live event. The live event's status is revealed as being as mediated as its documentation. For viewers, the artwork of *Split Moment* should inspire questions about the primacy of the live event and the artistic potential for its documentation.

# END NOTES

**1** See McLuhan's book, *Understanding Media* (New York: Signet, 1964).

**2** See Mitchell and Hansen's "Introduction", in *Critical Terms for Media Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

**3** Jean-François Lyotard defined Postmodernism in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979). The concept was later developed by Jean Baudrillard in *Simulations* (1983) and by Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991).

**4** Minimalism's emphasis on the spatial relationship between art and viewer was adapted by postmodern dancers, who critiqued that medium's traditional reliance on this dynamic.

**5** In 1962, Robert Dunn's dance class held its first collaborative concert at the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village. Dunn used John Cage's "Composition of Experimental Music" classes as a model. Dunn's classes were called "a little version of Black Mountain College," where a similar freethinking, communal atmosphere had originally developed. Al Hansen and Dick Higgins, "On Cage," in *John Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (London: Penguin Books, 1974), 123-124. The multi-media and interdisciplinary experiments carried out by Cage, Merce Cunningham and Robert Rauschenberg at Black Mountain were highly influential. Definitions of different media were tested and everyday movement and objects adopted, activities that became fundamental for the Judson Theatre.

**6** Allan Kaprow's Happenings of the 50s evinced a similar aesthetic. At these performative events, the art "object" consisted of the action and reaction of the audience to specific instructions and situations. Joanna Drucker, "Collaboration without Object(s) in the Early Happenings," *Art Journal* (1993): 51-58.

**7** See William L. O'Neill, *Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the 1960s* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1977), 3.

**8** Carrie Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2008), 1-7.

**9** Yvonne Rainer, "Some Retrospective Notes on a Dance for 10 People and 12 Mattresses Called Parts of Some Sextets, Performed at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut, and the Judson Memorial Church, New York in March, 1965," *Tulane Drama Review* 10 (Winter 1965): 168-178.

**10** Guy Debord's *Society of Spectacle* (1967) is a Marxist critique of the commercialization of human experience. For Debord, society is an accumulation of spectacles, experienced through the multiplicity of images. To him, this societal system—rather than the binary class system—oppresses the individual. Lambert-Beatty connects Rainer's art practice to Debord's application of Marxism in *Society of Spectacle*. She emphasizes the continuity of these parallel responses to 1960s consumer culture. Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched*, 23, 127-130.

**11** Derrida critiques the modernist concept of "self" as a singular and complete entity. Instead, he emphasizes the relational, interdependent nature of experience. See Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 129-160. In this text, he establishes the foundation for the methodology known as deconstruction, among other things. Through his study of Edmund Husserl, Derrida emphasizes the temporal gaps in any moment of "living presence," arguing there is always spacing that precludes any possibility of an all-immediate presence. In "Différance," he rejects a binary model of absolute meaning, where an object is either here or there, absent or present, instead proposing "difference and deferral."

**12** Derrida refrained from describing *différance* as a concept, stating, it "is neither a word nor a concept." Susan Broadhurst uses "quasi-concept" to describe Derrida's intent and argues deconstruction has replaced the idea of "concept" with that of "inscription." As opposed to rigid analytical systems of modernism, deconstructionist viewpoints emphasize blurring of boundaries. The term "quasi-concept" allows for association with a set of ideas without "committing" to the term "concept." See *Liminal Acts* (New York: Cassell, 1999), 49.

**13** See Amelia Jones, "Postmodernism, Subjectivity and Body Art: A Trajectory," in *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis, The Regents of the University of Minnesota, 1998), 21-52 and "Dispersed Subjects and the Demise of the 'Individual,'" in *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis, The Regents of the University of Minnesota, 1998), 197-240.

**14** Phelan argues performance is permanently altered once it is recorded. For her, pure performance is the only medium in which the artist can escape commodification. Peggy Phelan, "The Ontology of Performance: Representation Without Reproduction," in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 146, 165.

**15** Jones, "Dispersed Subjects and the Demise of the 'Individual,'" 201.

**16** See André Lepecki, "As If Dance Was Visible" *Performance Research*, 1 (1997): 71-76 and *Inscribing Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

**17** Lepecki, *Inscribing Dance*, 132. For him, Derrida's "quasi-concept" of the "trace" becomes the all-important link in contemporary critiques of modernism.

**18** For Lambert-Beatty, Rainer responded to "the seeing difficulty" that results from the time-based quality of dance, which leads inescapably to experiencing it through the camera. Lambert-Beatty *Being Watched*, 1.

**19** The curators of this exhibition are indebted to Lambert-Beatty for her research and arguments, on which much of *Split Moment's* thesis is based. In *Being Watched*, she applied the philosophies of Derrida and Guy Debord to an analysis of the Judson Theatre's relationship to their social, political and philosophical context. She concludes that Derrida's critique of presence continues to impact contemporary artistic practices. Artists today have adapted relevant precedents to extend the definition of mediation beyond the mere function of recording.

**20** Jean Baudrillard's term "hyperreal" refers to how images, spectacles, and the "play of signs" have become key constituents of contemporary societies. Reality itself is a system where experience is made up of images, which themselves infinitely refer back to another set of images. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

**21** Lambert-Beatty discusses Rainer's interpretive process in "Moving Still: Meditating Trio A," *October* 89 (Summer 1999): 87-112. Lambert-Beatty describes Rainer's piece as a "well running, if slightly quirky machine" through the photographs that document the performance. She positions *Trio A* as a direct response to the camera's spectacularization of the dancer's body. Ironically, Rainer's "task-like dance," which relied so much on its spatiality, was remarkably photogenic, in part due to its choreographer's internalization of the camera's lens.

**22** For a full description of *Accumulation*, see Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980), 82-84.

**23** Derrida "Différance," 156; Henry Sayre, *The Object of Performance* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 134-135.

**24** Derrida "Différance," 156.

**25** Trisha Brown's works on paper appeared in *Trisha Brown: So That the Audience Does Not Know Whether I Have Stopped Dancing* at the Walker Art Center April 18—July 20, 2008. *It's a Draw* was performed in 2008 as part of the Walker exhibition.

**26** Lambert-Beatty describes Rainer's concern over the limitations of "shards...papyri and those mysterious and inscrutable petroglyphs" of past events in *Being Watched*, 22. Rainer's autobiographical book *Work 1961-1973* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1974) was an attempt to document her prior performances even as she realized the challenges of such a project.

**27** Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched*, 22.

**28** Several artists in *Split Moment* draw upon the legacy of Mary Wigman. For her sketch, Wiegmann appropriated two images of the Mary Wigman dance company; see reproductions in Susan A. Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 109 and 111. In addition to Wiegmann's extensive study of Wigman's work, Nipper references Wigman's dances and the theories of her mentor, Rudolf Laban. Rainer addresses Wigman briefly in her essay, "A Quasi Survey of Some 'Minimalist Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst The Plethora, or An Analysis of Trio A.'" (1966). In addition, Robert Dunn studied dance with Jan Veen, one of Wigman's pupils. It bears mention that while Wigman inspired dance's independence from music, emphasizing movement of the body over narrative, her writings express very different, expressionistic intent from that of the Judson Theatre.

**29** Postmodern art is frequently marked by artists' direct appropriation of elements from the past as opposed to honoring them as "inspirational," as modernist artists would credit earlier forms.

**30** Rudolf Laban's studies of the body in space and his dissection of the dancer into geometric shapes are applied in several of Nipper's projects. Laban developed his method of recording movements on paper to create an international language for documenting and sharing choreography. Nipper, like Wiegmann, also references the work of Mary Wigman in her work, *Weather Center* (2009), which is a re-performance of Wigman's *Witch Dance* (1914).

**31** Jocelyn Foye, "Artist Statement," Long Beach Arts and Culture Registry, [http://www.smolarcorp.com/aclb-registry/index.php?name\\_select=291](http://www.smolarcorp.com/aclb-registry/index.php?name_select=291) (accessed February 10, 2010).

# ARTIST BIOS

## **Josh Azzarella**

Josh Azzarella is a New York based artist whose practice is concentrated on digital manipulation of pre-existing images in order to re-frame or alter their original meaning. Azzarella received his M.F.A. from Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, in 2004. Since then, he has exhibited at the Athens Video Art Festival (2005) (Athens, Greece); the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum (Ridgefield, CT); Missoula Art Museum (Missoula, MT); Akademie der Künste (Berlin, Germany); Kavi Gupta Gallery (Chicago, IL); DCKT Contemporary (New York, NY) and California State University, Fullerton, Main Art Gallery (Fullerton, CA). His work is included in the permanent collections of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA. Additionally, he was the recipient of the Fassbender Award for Excellence in Photography (2003) and The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum's Emerging Artist Award (2006). Azzarella is represented by Mark Moore Gallery in Culver City, CA.