

***My Ass Might Be Dumb, But I Ain't No Dumbass:¹ The Performance
Work of Danai Anesiadou***

Native American Indians capture three men. An American, a Frenchman, and a Pole. They strip the men down and tie them up to a tree. The chief arrives and looks at the three men, unsheathes his knife, unbinds the American, quickly carves him up into a canoe, and sends him down the river. The chief looks at the two remaining men, takes his knife to the Frenchman and makes short work out of him, carving him up, and sending him down the river as well. When the chief unbinds the Polish man, the Pole grabs the chief's knife, and quickly turns it in on himself, stabbing holes all over his own body. The chief starts shouting out to the Pole, "Man! What the hell are you doing!?!?" and the Pole replies, "I'm making holes in myself, you see! No one's gonna make a canoe outta me!!"

I used to think that the performance artist was like the Polish man. My idea was that while the rest of the art world bemoaned the market while simultaneously and undoubtedly participating within it, the act of the performance artist was (occasionally, literally) like poking holes in one's own body. A performance both proudly declared its own irreproducibility and, at the same time, disabled its ability to be easily sent down the river of the market. No one's gonna make a rich artist outta me!

Since the recent re-boom of performance in the visual arts, I've begun to think differently.

I'm quite certain that no one becomes a performance artist for the sake of being in such an unmarketable position—in hopes that it will somehow privilege a distinct and unique relation (in its non-relation) to use-value. Not even someone like Tino Sehgal, who's made such a task the object of his work. And yet, it's no secret that performance artists and the galleries and institutions they work with must perpetually create and invent strategies of distribution; and that the ability to construct a logic, and a specific attitude with such strategies, especially in relation to the events, objects,

¹ The character of Ordell Robbie (played by Samuel L. Jackson) quoted from Tarantino, Q. 1997. *Jackie Brown*. Miramax Films: New York.

and artifacts which one can actually, eventually sell, is more often than not, what we call the performance.

In other words, the performance ‘itself’ usually becomes deeply entangled with the performance of an artist’s strategic negotiation between his own aspiring singularity—singularity of himself and the singular moment of the performance—and the general rules of the market.

If the innocent days of performance art were full of self-inflicted holes in its marketability, I would say that the success of performance in the field of art today doesn’t depend on whether the boat sinks or floats. The performance is not all about the performance anyways. Those who believe that are either naïve or, like myself, they work in the theater. The performance in the field of art is rather an advertisement whose symbolic, immaterial capital is supposed to be representative of a heretofore promised material capital. Like a brilliant flower, the strategy is at its base a rather simple one, however complex its articulation might be: the brilliant colours are necessary for every opening, event and symposium as a sign for the birds and the buyers and the bees—this is where the honey’s at. And for a price (free now, pay later), you can come and taste it.

Free now, pay later; which is also why performance in the visual art field is usually for free.

It seems less common, since the end of performance’s heyday in the mid-seventies, that the content, logic, gesture, act and attitude of the work is not in some way tied to a greater external strategy than the work ‘itself’. Indeed, considering the *work* of performance to be the immaterial experience which it produces within the short timeframe of its happening seems old hat. If we want this we can go to see a theater play, where a program playbill might be the most external artifact that we can be tempted to eventually hold.

***I don’t do smart art.*²**

² Danai Anesiadou in conversation with the author, November 2010.

The appeal of Danaï Anesiadou's work is something different. The object of her performance is her performance, even more naïve than that, the subject of her performance is usually herself—the most cliché of subjects for solo performance. Only, while she often performs alone, Anesiadou's work is never solo performance. Nor is it ever about group, the social, or the interpersonal. It is always only about herself, however, she can't but employ as many people as possible, both real and fictional, to help narrate her multitude of fragmented autobiographies.

If I would use the word that was nearly beaten out of me in college, I would say Danaï's work is authentic. If the integrity of the translations from experience to expression are the proof of the authentic, then her performances are at the very least this. This authenticity, in her case, however, manages to preclude the singular. Complicated by a strata of fictions, an outsourcing of true stories from her own life to an ever-overlapping multitude of family, friends, and iconic figures (from Greek mythology to present-day Hollywood), Danaï's work, if it has any strategy at all, resembles more the strategies of the theater than the field of performance today in the visual arts.

Her work is not consistent. as It lacks the conceptual strategy that defines many performance artists now, who hone their ability to do one thing, to craft one expression, one signature, to mature one persona into a consistent body of work. However non-linear the logic of her work might be, it is dramaturgical—never environmental nor durational—it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. If it includes its context into its content at all, it is not to comment or to refer but to activate it. The work is nearly devoid of any awareness of its relevance to the market, or a means by which it should craft its relationship to ownership. It is choc-full of the tropes of comedy and tragedy, of characters, stories, symbols and symbolic acts, archetypes, empathy, catharsis and ritual. And let's not forget the costumes. If the work has a strategy, it's not even akin to the theater, but to Classical theater. It feels more like a group rite than a cogent artist's statement. Its pseudo-therapeutic ceremony combines the absurd and the sensical enough to be effective if you want it to be. While attending, you can easily forget you're seeing art.

Love is in the air.

The first performance I saw of Danai Anesiadou, was a performance I missed. Having mixed up the address to the Elisa Plateau Gallerie in Brussels in Fall, 2008, I arrived at the gallery late to hear Danai declaring out loud, “it’s over!” Only, I couldn’t quite tell what it was that made me suspicious of the veracity of her declaration. For a while I wasn’t sure that apologizing that I’d screwed up and missed the performance wouldn’t put me at the end of a joke where I would soon realize that the performance was still going on.

But what I’d mistaken for a still unfolding event was, in fact, the consequent reverberation in the room after her performance had indeed ended. The energy in the gallery felt like I’d just walked into the anticipation of a Prince concert. I don’t remember if it was a full moon that night, or if the performance had included some immersion into a group-drug experience that I’d missed, but I suspected that Danai’s work, whatever it had been, had to be responsible for producing such an immediately electric and contagious energy.

Trying to materialize into language the immateriality of a performance is always dangerous business. Either we fall into romantic-phenomenological notions, or we end up turning into gossip something that would better be kept between you and me. Writing about such immateriality is to flirt with both no-nos but it is also a necessary task if we’re going to talk not about what is done in a performance, but about what the doing does. In this case, I was witness to what Danai’s doing did, before I knew what it was that she actually did do.

Since that evening I’ve seen, participated, performed, written about, analyzed, assisted, cooked for, and gonged (long story) many of Danai’s performances. But rather than discuss the content of any of them, I would rather try to speak about this first experience and how it was an encounter which I feel, even arriving to her subsequent performances on time, I’ve run into again and again.

With so much work that attempts to approach the implications of a becoming-immaterial labor society, little seems to be able to offer what that discreet value is that immaterial value could have for us. What is the specific power of immaterial labor to transform bodies and sentiments? What are the modes of transformation that an event or an interpersonal exchange can provide which an experience with an object cannot? What is the value that the immaterial potentially produces when it operates more by sense than by meaning, more by aura than argument, more by gesture than language?

In the performances of Danai Anesiadou, immaterial exchange represents a proposal of generosity, which freely admits the weird, an exchange of various incarnations of high and low sensibilities, which would be difficult to make sense out of, and most characteristically, the ability to radically transform—for lack of a better word—the atmosphere of a space. This evokes notions of performance as a revelation of self, which doesn't reveal one's own solipsistic self-importance, but rather invites others to reveal themselves too. A notion of self that is both complicated, made more problematic, but also expressible only in terms of a multitude of layers and surrogates, or in other words, in terms of the group. A notion of the group that is always present, and as such is fluidly implicated into the performance. Performance in the classical sense of a ritual of purging, and theater in the traditional sense of contextualizing group experience, the process of experiencing the private publicly.

This immaterial work is so radically different from work on or about immateriality, which, even if it precisely tries to eradicate the market from the material of the work, in such a decisive gesture, only succeeds to reinstall its presence. Because, things will be sold and seen and held and consumed and bought and sold again and if the adage that experience is what lasts a lifetime is our way of convincing ourselves that it doesn't hurt as much when an experience we like is over, then we should reconsider the use value of experiences.

I'm not there.

For the last show of Danai Anesiadou at the Elisa Plateau Gallerie, and her first significant solo show, I arrived late. One week late. It looked like a gallery. The

objects were effective and bold and strange but they didn't vibrate, they didn't declare in a deep voice that their name was Danai Anesiadou, they didn't tell me stories, they didn't personify personal dramas. They didn't make me feel like telling someone next to me a revealing anecdote, or to confront me with my own lack of religious, or ritualistic experience. Or to lament that bizarre, irrational, but nevertheless cathartic experiences aren't a more frequent part of our communal practices. Or that if they are, they rarely look so good, or have such a good sense of humor. Looking at the works by myself in the empty space, the objects were almost sad for me, static, absent, like an empty stage. And I could understand why someone would want to own one. But only if they knew Danai Anesiadou, her personae, or had encountered both in her performances. I wanted to own one too—; to remind me of what I'd experienced when she was there.