EDITORIAL

To introduce this issue of *New Formations* I want to say something about popular performance. The question addressed by all our contributors is what is meant by a 'performance', particularly now that 'the performative' is a routinely used term in the critical lexicon. Writing as a pop critic, I am less interested in performance as a means by which a text is presented, 'licensed' or made 'excessive',[1] than in performance as an experience (or set of experiences) of sociability, and I've always thought that postmodern theorists (much concerned with performance issues) have more to learn from a study of popular music than popular music theorists have to learn from post-modernism. Nick Kaye, for example, concludes his systematic survey of the postmodern in dance and theatre by tentatively identifying the term with 'an unstable "event" provoked by a questioning that casts doubt sharply upon even itself', but his relentless attention to the institutionally defined avant-garde means that he doesn't stop to consider to what extent such instability and questioning have always been an aspect of popular performance – something as much to do with the social basis of the event as with the intentions or principles of the performers.[2]

1. See Graham F. Thompson: 'Approaches to "Performance" ', *Screen* 26(5), 1985, p81.

My feeling is that before trying to make sense of performance as a way of working with a text, we should first be sure we understand how performance is different, how it is non-textual. The question is what makes something a performance in the first place? What are its conditions of existence? How does performance-as-acting relate to performance-as-role-playing? What is the difference between performance on stage and performance off stage? Such questions are central to any discussion of performance in popular culture, in which the most interesting phenomenon is, precisely, the shifting boundary between the staged and the everyday.[3] Even performance art describes a social process. Performance requires an audience and an interpretation; it is a form of rhetoric, a rhetoric of gestures in which, in performance art at least, bodily movements and signs (including the use of voice) dominate other forms of communicative sign, such as language and iconography. Such a use of the body depends on the spectator's ability to understand it as both an object (an erotic object, an attractive object, a repulsive object, a social object) and as a subject, as a willed or shaped object, an object with meaning. Rhetorically, performance is a way not of acting but of posing: it takes for granted an audience's ability to refer these bodily movements to others (in this respect, as in others, Madonna is the most self-consciously 'arty' of pop performers, but by no means pop's only performance artist).

2. Nick Kaye, *Postmodernism and Performance*, Macmillan, London 1994, p144.

3. See Thompson, *op.cit.* p88. I'm also obviously indebted in what follows to the work of Erving Goffman.

The performance artist, like the pop performer, depends on an audience which can interpret her work through its own experience of performance, its own understanding of seduction and pose, gesture and body language; an

audience which understands, however 'instinctively' (without theorising), the constant dialogue of inner and outer projected by the body in movement. For performance art to work it needs an audience of performers; it depends on the performance of the everyday.[4]

From a socio-historical perspective it would doubtless be relevant here to point to the increasing significance of performance in everyday life as an effect of urbanisation and the decline of intimacy (more and more of our dealings are with people we don't know), as an effect of industrial capitalism (we no longer derive our identity from productive labour), as an effect of commodity fetishism (our consumption is now a matter of imagination not need).[5] But whatever the material basis for contemporary performance, it is clearly culturally based. Western performers only make sense in terms of western performing conventions – conventions shaped as much in the home and on the street as in the gallery and on the stage.

The body-in-communication holds in tension not simply the subjective and the objective (the art question), but also the private and the public (the everyday question). In our experience (or imagination) of our own bodies there is always a gap between what is meant (the body directed from the inside) and what is read (the body interpreted from the outside); and this gap is a continual source of anxiety, an anxiety not so much that the body itself but its meaning is out of our control. In most public performances the body is, in fact, subject to a kind of external control, the motivation provided by a score or a script or a routinised social situation, which acts as a safety net for performer and audience alike. It is this safety net which the so-called performance artist explicitly abandons, and one can conclude therefore that the essence of performance art is embarrassment, a constant sense of the inappropriate. If, in conventional theatre, one is embarrassed only when someone forgets a line, is suddenly 'out of character', in performance art one is on the edge of embarrassment all the time because the performer is not 'in character' to begin with (and the nervous tension among the audience at a 'performance' as against a 'performance of a play' is palpable).

Performance in this sense has a low cultural history too, and performances in popular places and genres (in the music hall and vaudeville, popular song and comedy) are, I think, much more akin to performance art than to 'legitimate' art or theatre. If performance artists in the 1960s turned to such popular performance forms as stand-up comedy and burlesque, wrestling and the circus, this was not just a postmodern breakdown of high/low cultural barriers; it was also because they had something to learn.[6] For example, one of the recurring pleasures of popular culture is the difficult or spectacular act, the drama of which lies precisely in its immediacy, in the resulting sense of risk, danger, triumph, virtuosity: we need to see things which we know must be live (even if we also know, as in the case of a James Brown show, that for such things to work they must be elaborately planned and rehearsed – they must always work, that is, *in exactly the same way*). What's valued here is not (as in high culture) seeing something unique, but seeing something difficult, something

4. As Erving Goffman famously puts it, 'All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify.' *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* [1959]. Penguin, 1971, Harmondsworth, pp77-8.

5. See John F. Kassan, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth Century Urban America*, Hill and Wang, New York 1990, pp114-5.

6. See Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC 1993.

that takes work. Far from wanting the means of production to be concealed, the popular audience wants to see how much has gone into their entertainment. Performance as labour is a necessary part of the popular aesthetic.

A second point to make here concerns framing. Performance may only make sense through the everyday, but 'public performance' also describes something marked off from the everyday, something in which when the everyday does appear it is as a joke, an intruder (which also means, to reverse the argument, that when the everyday turns out to have been a performance, to have been literally framed, by a view-finder, it comes as a shock: 'Smile, please! You're on *Candid Camera*!'). Such framing involves the application of genre rules, rules which determine how both performer and audience should behave (rules which we can see enacted in even the most domestic of home videos).

As the anthropologist Richard Bauman has pointed out, the distinction between the staged and the everyday is not necessarily a matter of setting. What is at issue is how activities are staged *within* the everyday, and a way of speaking can therefore signify a performance (which describes both an action and an event) by putting an 'interpretative frame' around itself, such that listeners no longer treat what is being said as part of normal conversation.[7] The most obvious example of this is probably the joke: joke telling is certainly a performance, even if it occurs within a casual conversation (or within another sort of performance altogether, a lecture, say) – hence people's claims that 'they can't tell jokes'. What does such telling involve?

7. See Richard Bauman, 'Verbal Art as Performance', *American Anthropologist* 77, 1975.

The point here is that the relationship between the conversational and the performative is complex, involving not just a particular use of language but also a claim to be competent in such use, and an assumption that one's audience is also so competent, or, at least, able to recognise one's talking skills. Unlike ordinary conversation, that is, a performance can be good or bad, it is evaluated. It follows some sort of formal rule, and the anthropologist's question becomes how is such a performance 'keyed'? How do we know that it is a performance? That it has begun? That it is over? Bauman notes that in anthropological terms a performance may range from the completely novel (spontaneous invention) to the completely fixed (a traditional religious rite). In practice, nearly all popular performances lie somewhere between these two extremes and, as Bauman suggests, this is what enables an audience to judge them: by measuring what is original, personal to this performance, against the conventions of the performance form in general. (This is one of the problems, of course, for performance art: no-one knows if it's any good or not. No-one knows how to tell. And this isn't just a problem for the audience. The success of a performance for a performer can, in the end, only be measured by the audience response – this is what makes it a performance, a kind of oratory. A joke that gets no laughs, a song that gets no response, an act that bores its audience is a bad performance by definition.)

On the one hand, then, a performance is 'an emergent structure', it comes into being only as it is being performed; on the other hand, it is an

'enhancement', it involves, in Bauman's words, a heightened 'intensity' of communication: it makes the communicative process itself, the use of language and gesture, the focus of attention. And if for the performer this means prestige (for a good performance, for their skill), for the judging audience too it means an increased sense of control over the usual flow of communication: performance is, in this context, a way of standing back from content and considering form. It is in such self-conscious playfulness that the popular exemplifies what is now described as the postmodern. Whereas in both high and folk cultures, performing rules tend to be naturalised (so that everybody carefully avoids noting what very peculiar events a classical concert or a folk festival are), in popular performance, the rules (and the comic or shocking possibility of breaking them) are always on the surface of performance *itself*. Peter Bailey thus argues brilliantly that the central performing trope in late nineteenth-century music hall was a kind of knowingness, a *collusion* between performer and (implied) audience, between audience and (implied) performer, which was both inclusive and exclusive, worrying and reassuring.[8]

More generally we could say that the 'act' of, say, singing is always contextualised by the 'act' of performing; and if the latter, like any other stage role, is put together behind the scenes, the former takes place in public: we see and hear the movement in and out of character; we watch this aspect of the performance as a performance. The way singers adopt differing roles 'the next song is a slower number' – works differently in different genres, but all methods (irony, earnestness, virtuosity, craft pride, humour) draw attention to the singer's knowledge of what is going on, to their knowledge of our knowledge of what is happening. It's as if the 'as if' of the song performance is foregrounded in order to naturalise the 'as if' of the musical performance.

It follows that pop singers are unlike play actors (though similar to film stars) in two respects. First, they are involved in a process of double enactment: they enact both a star personality (their image) and a song personality, the role that each lyric requires: the pop star's art is to keep both acts in play at once. This is most obvious in the plainest narrative forms, such as music hall or country music, where performers employ a variety of techniques (more obvious on stage than in the recording studio, though used there too) to move in and out of character. Interruption, for example, is a basic vocal device: the performer's skill is to objectify an expressive gesture at the very moment of its expression, to put quotation marks around it. A singer like Elvis Presley performs as his own audience: is it really *me* singing that? (In country music, with its excessively self-conscious equation of realism and formalism, a central place in this process is occupied by songs about the past: the singer in her present persona responds to the naivety or ambition of her past self, as expressed in the song; the performer is thus the singer and not-the-singer simultaneously, just as – and this is essential to country ideology – the past is both the present and not the present.)

Second, in enacting a pop star, the pop singer becomes a site of desire – as a body and as a person. In performance, in the playing of their various song

8. Peter Bailey, 'Conspiracies of Meaning: Music Hall and the Knowingness of Popular Culture', *Past and Present* 144, 1994.

parts, instead of forgetting who they are, singers are continuously registering their presence. (This is, perhaps, most obvious for performers who are most remote – Whitney Houston, for example). Singing, as an organisation of vocal gestures, means enacting the protagonist in the song (the right emotions for this part), enacting the part of the star (the moves in keeping with the image), and giving some intimation of a real material being – a physical body producing a physical sound, sweat produced by work not order, a physicality that *overflows* the formal constraints of the performance.

This is to raise questions about the sexuality or erotics of performance. In particular, what does it mean to make a spectacle of oneself? To perform for an audience as a woman obviously means something different than to perform for an audience as a man – different in terms of both the social connotations of what it means for a woman to show her body publicly, to pose; and in terms of the power play of sexual desire. (Even in the most 'respectable' of the performing arts – classical theatre, the ballet – female performers, like artists' models, were taken in the nineteenth century to be akin to prostitutes, while one could argue that an important strand of performance in the low arts, such as vaudeville and music hall, blues and jazz, has been the continuing, deliberate, emphasis on the performer's off-stage propriety.) As Susan McClary puts it, a woman's problem is how to keep control of herself in a space, the stage, patrolled by an objectifying sexual gaze conventionalized by hundreds of years of patriarchal command. The female performer is inevitably much more self-conscious than a male performer in that she has to keep redefining both her performing setting and her performing narrative if she is to take charge of her situation.[9]

McClary's heroine in this respect is Laurie Anderson; most recent feminist discussion of the issue has focused on Madonna.[10] But women performers in all musical genres have explored what it means to be spectacularly female. As a country singer, Dolly Parton, for example, doesn't only play on a male notion of femininity, but in performing the signs of vulnerability – the little girl voice, the giggle, the nervous flounce – makes their meaning problematic. Parton's remarkable vocal range – in terms of volume/power rather than pitch as such – draws attention to her art as a singer as much as to her life as a woman. As is typical in country music, her voice (as against her body), though a clearly physical sound, becomes the sign, trademark even, of her stardom, the meaning around which all her other signs (the hair, the breasts, the gowns) are organised. The song of dependence (common in her repertoire and often self-written) is therefore so obviously crafted, so clearly designed to display vocal skill rather than an emotional state, that at the very least Parton's audience has to consider her lyrical sentiments as ironic. (It is not surprising that she has built up a strong camp following.)[11]

By contrast, the English music hall star, Gracie Fields, an ungainly, 'homely' woman by showbiz standards, took on character roles much more specifically than Parton and, like other music hall stars, mixed sentimental ballads with comic story songs. By spoofing her voice (rather than her looks), by displaying

9. See Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1991, chapter 6.

10. The most entertaining collection of Madonna essays is Lisa Frank and Paul Smith (eds), *Madonnarama: Essays on Sex and Popular Culture*, Cleis Press, Pittsburgh, PA 1993.

11. Listen to Dolly Parton, *Best of Dolly Parton*, RCA LP 1970.

her vocal range (in terms of style as well as pitch) as a bit of a joke, Fields became endearing – beloved – 'Our Gracie' – as a kind of favourite aunt or big sister. (This meant, among other things, that in her films Fields, unlike Parton, always, only, played herself.)[12]

By contrast again (although less of a contrast than one might imagine), Millie Jackson uses the different conventions of soul feeling and the insult ritual to set up another sort of collusive relationship with her audience – or at least with its female part, speaking for it, drawing on innuendo and the unsaid to unfold a conversation that could be taking place in the launderette and then moving dramatically back to the reality of her presence, on stage, with a band, microphone, lights. Like Fields, Jackson's movement from comic routine to ballad implies that, in the end, the comedy is the assumed role, the ballad the real feeling. The message, for all the ideological aggression, is orthodox: all men are shits (laughs) but we love them anyway (sighs). Her strutting public performance acts out a private resignation.[13]

Two issues are significant here, I think. First (as I've already suggested), *embarrassment*. Performing involves gestures that are both false (they are only being put on for this occasion) and true (they are appropriate to the emotions being described, expressed or invoked). Even the most stylised performer, the one with the most obviously formal and artificial gestures, is expressing the self, displaying in public sounds and movements usually thought of as intimate; what the audience wants to see, as Roland Barthes puts it, is a 'convinced body, rather than a true passion.'[14] In judging a performer we are, as an audience, measuring her gestures against our sense of what she's really like, off stage (what her voice and body really do, in this sort of situation), and even if, from the singer's point of view, this makes it even more important to maintain a clear separation or distance between self and personality, nevertheless, what's on offer is a kind of vulnerability: we might not like her (and in most pop genres performance is, specifically, about being liked).[15]

The performer's problem here is that however carefully crafted the star persona, in performance a real body is involved. Singing is not necessarily or even desirably pretty: singers sweat, they strain, they open their mouths wide and clench their throats. To make the necessary musical sounds, singers have to do things (or simulate doing things) which may not 'fit' the star body, the star persona. As Wayne Koestenbaum says of opera singers:

> Singers look like freaks unless they control themselves, and this possibility of looking grotesque is appealing if you choose (as I am choosing) to embrace rather than to reject a stereotypical freakishness.[16]

On the other hand, we also know from everyday life that the way to deflate embarrassment is through self-mockery – we hastily pretend that the gesture was a joke, was meant ironically. As audiences too we often decide (with delight or disdain) that a performer has gone 'over the top'. This is, in part, the effect of the music in making expressed feelings more intense: a stage performer gets

12. Listen to Gracie Fields, *Stage and Screen*, EMI/World Record Club, no date, which includes a live recording of her show at the Holborn Empire, October 11, 1933.

13. Listen to Millie Jackson, *Live and Uncensored*, Spring/ Polydor, 1979.

14. Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* [1975], Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 1977, pp177-8.

15. And as J.O. Urmson points out, in paying to see a performance we also expect that the star (Madonna, say) will, in good faith, continue to *be herself* (whatever the new theme or costume). 'The Ethics of Musical Performance', in Michael Krausz (ed), *The Interpretation of Music*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1992.

16. Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality and the Mystery of Desire*, Gay Men's Press, London, 1993, p168.

the same sort of emotional charge from her soundtrack as a screen performer gets from his. And music's enveloping effect applies to the audience too: the world can only now be perceived in this emotional state, and the narcissism of the singer, exploring her own feelings, becomes our own. We forget ourselves in the music as part of a condition of collective self-indulgence; we are alienated, as Sartre would put it, in the collective ego. (To be excluded from this excitement – the rock critic's common condition – is, oddly, to be embarrassed not for oneself but for everyone else. The point here is that intense or abandoned listening is a loss of physical control – think of the ugliness of the audience in concert photos – and it is this which embarrasses: to be the only person to clap at the end of the first movement, the only person to leap to one's feet screaming. It is not embarrassing – well, I was never embarrassed – to be the only person taking notes.)

But, further, over-the-top artists deliberately set gestures free from their appropriate setting. The great pop performers (whether Judy Garland or Shirley Bassey, Mick Jagger or Prince) don't so much enact emotional roles as hold their enactments up before us in fragments, so we can admire the shape of the gesture itself. It is no accident that such performenrs are camp idols, are beloved (following Susan Sontag) in terms 'of artifice, of stylization'. Such performers seem to have grasped the camp point that the truth of a feeling is an aesthetic not a moral truth: it can only be judged formally, as a matter of gestural grace. 'Sincerity', in short, cannot be measured by searching for what lies *behind* the performance; if we are moved by a performer we are moved by what we *immediately* hear and see.[17]

This brings me to the second issue I want to pick up here, seduction. Guy Scarpetta suggests that a singer is in the same trade as a prostitute, publicly offering a bliss that can only be experienced privately.[18] We realise that the singer is making us an offer ('Know me!') that is essentially false, yet is true to our fantasy of what the offer might be, that it might be just for us ('To know me is to love me.'). The listening fantasy, to put this another way, is that we control the music (the sexual exchange) when, in fact, the performer does. The seductive voice mediates between nature (the real person about whom we fantasise) and culture (the performing person we get); it draws attention both to the social construction of our desire, to its artificiality, and to our obdurately subjective reading of it. The presence of even a recorded sound is the presence of the implied performer – *the performer called forth by the listener* – and this is clearly a sensual/sexual presence, not just a meeting of minds.

A theatrical performance is framed by a suspension of fellow feeling or, perhaps, by a kind of enactment of it: we know the performer is acting anger, so we act our fearful response. In popular performance, though, as in performance art, the boundaries of 'the act' are blurred and an element of our fear is therefore real – maybe she, Millie Jackson, is going to come to my table and ask my partner about my own sexual performance (and there will be further embarrassment when I reveal my fear of humiliation just as she reveals that this was only an act, after all). Or, alternatively, perhaps she, Judy Garland,

17. See Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp" ' [1964], in her *Against Interpretation*, Delta, New York 1966, p277.

18. Guy Scarpetta, *L'Impureté*, Bernard Grasset, Paris 1985, pp207-8.

is not just acting grief but is really crying, which is to embarrass us in a different way, on her behalf. This is a particularly complex issue given that in performance body language is necessarily a combination of direct and conventional expression, referring to both *what* is being done and *why* it is. To read body movements, to interpret them, is always to put them in a story. The same physical acts may be described as writing or doodling, as caressing or harassing; we refer here not to what we see but what to what we infer (because of the situation, the characters, the plot).

The performing text, that is to say, is always the performing context. And that, in the end, is what all the essays in *Performance Matters* are about. Whether the arguments are philosophical (Lydia Goehr), musicological (Nicholas Cook) or political (Martin Stokes); whether the issue is class (John Stokes), race (Sally Banes and John Szwed) or gender (Gill Frith), the argument is the same: the essential *instability* of the performative (the postmodernists' point) is always in practice, momentarily, necessarily, *fixed* – ideologically, by agreement, as a matter of social concern. And my point (taken from a study of popular music[19]) like Karen Lury's (taken from a study of television) is that while it may be all but impossible to capture this interpretative moment academically – to hold it still for analysis – in everyday life we make such meanings all the time.

Simon Frith
May 1995

19. See my forthcoming *Performing Rites: The Aesthetics of Popular Music*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, chapter 10.