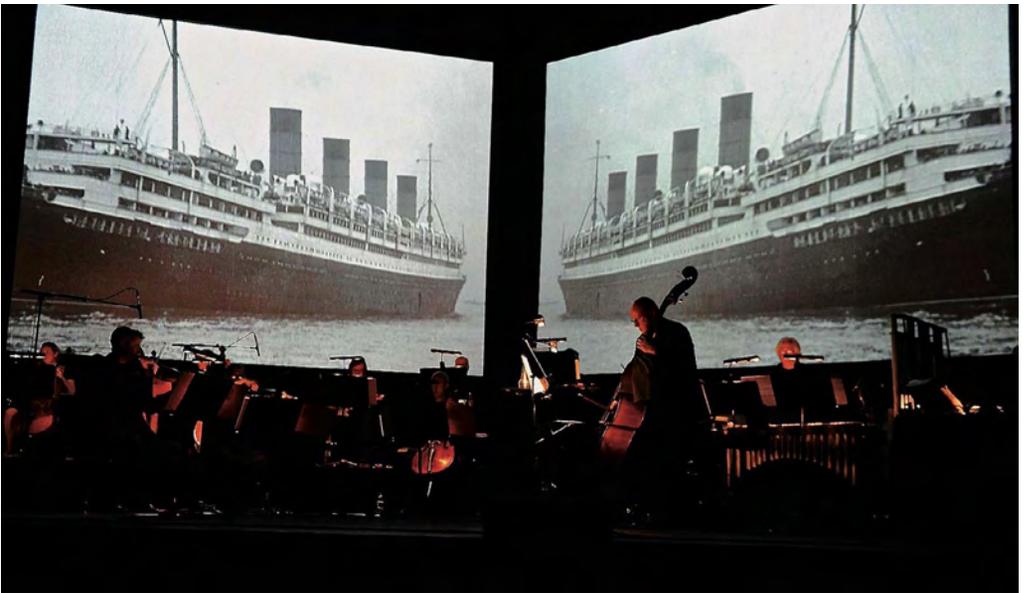


ART & PERFORMANCE NOTES



The Sinking of the Titanic, music and direction by Gavin Bryars, Théâtre de la Ville. Photo: Mark Allen. Courtesy Festival d'Automne.

EXPANDING PERFORMANCE

Agnieszka Gratza

Adrien Tirtiaux, *The Great Cut*; Vlatka Horvat, *Drift (Floor), Drift (Wall)*, and *Replacements*; Leidy Churchman in collaboration with MPA, *Painting Rooms*; Ruth Buchanan, *No Solitary Beat*; all part of *Expanded Performance* at Stroom Den Haag, The Hague, September 30–December 16, 2012.

Spread over the course of three months, longer than the lifespan of your average exhibition, the Dutch center for art and architecture Stroom Den Haag's ambitious program of fixed and changing exhibits as well as lectures, reading groups, and satellite performance events entrusted to guest curators, started from an arresting premise: "Performance art is gradually changing from an art form dominated by creeds unrepeatable, undocumentable, unsaleable, to an art form that includes repetition, documentation and objects." There is some truth to this claim; and yet the fact that each of its tenets could be challenged reveals just how slippery, or supple, a category performance art is.

As one of the participants in Tino Sehgal's *These associations* at Tate Modern (July–October 2012), an interactive live art piece which involved a great deal of repetition but no documentation or recordings—at least not officially sanctioned or in any way encouraged (yet, for once, not actively discouraged

either)—and no objects to speak of, I could be forgiven my initial skepticism. Though Sehgal balks at the use of the term "performance art" to describe what he does, coming at live art from a background in choreography and dance, his radical and influential artistic practice provides powerful counter-examples to the above claim both overall and in detail. For one thing, major institutions, art galleries and private collectors own his work, which can be bought and sold despite Sehgal's refusal to create objects.

Whether performance needs expanding is in itself debatable. Unlike the focus of Rosalind Krauss's influential 1979 essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," from which *Expanded Performance* takes its title, performance art is not obviously "a historically bounded category" with an internal logic and a clear set of rules, defined partly through what it excludes (sculpture, as Krauss has it, is thus poised between "not-architecture" and "not-landscape").¹ In the visual arts, it is a productively eclectic and mal-

leable category, capable of assimilating into its fold a wide range of disciplines and fields rather than being defined in opposition to them—from painting, sculpture, architecture, music, poetry, and dance to photography, video, and film. It can, but need not, happen live before an audience, or be performed for video, recorded on stills, filmed, or written about.² The artist's body likewise can, but need not, feature in a performance. Given that it prohibits nothing, strictly speaking, the case for pushing the boundaries of performance art is hard to make.

While “expanded” this, that, and the other seem to be the flavor of the month, eagerly seized on by curators of every ilk, the modalities of “expansion” and what is understood by the term appear different each time. “Expanded cinema”—an expression coined by the American filmmaker Stan VanDerBeek in the mid-1960s, which gained currency after Gene Youngblood used it as the title for his landmark study of video art in 1970—thus moved beyond the narrow confines of movie-theatre viewing to include live, multimedia projections and video art installations shown in alternative spaces. In stripping down cinema to its bare essentials and drawing attention to the materiality of film, “expanded cinema” reverted to the pre-motion-picture spectacles and, curiously given its name, amounted to a narrowing of the cinematic medium. Something equally paradoxical was at work in Stroom's *Expanded Performance* program, which focused on “performing” objects and at times appeared to do away altogether with the live element of performance in the name of expanding the field.

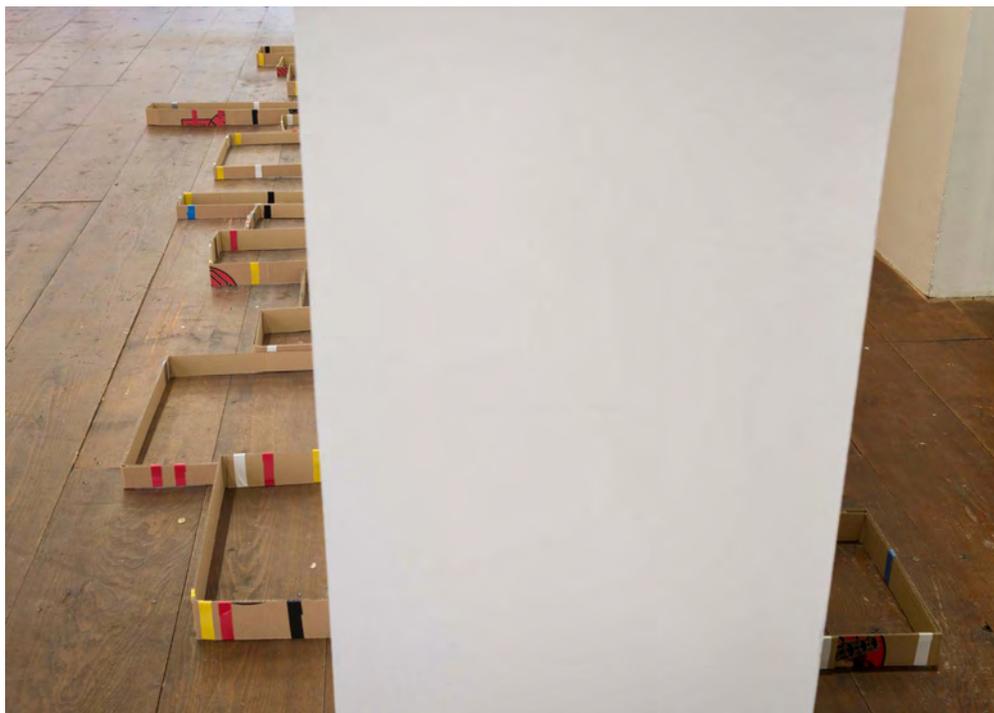
The five works that made up the core of *Expanded Performance* were all spatial interventions involving more or less obstructive objects, designed to make one self-conscious about space. The most remarkable and intrusive instance of this, one that had the greatest impact on the life of the institution as a whole, came in the shape of Adrien Tirtiaux's *The Great Cut*. Socio-political issues are often the impetus behind Tirtiaux's art-architectural interventions. In this instance, the slanted, skeletal, wooden structure erected across Stroom's space and gradually filled out so as to (eventually) reduce it by twenty percent, was intended as a poignant illustration of the severe budget cuts taking their toll on Dutch cultural institutions, Stroom Den Haag among them.

Nothing if not invasive, the bare-bone structure made its inexorable progress through the exhibition and work areas, normally off bounds to the public but, for once, open for viewing, thus effectively dissolving the boundaries between public and private, and forcing everyone to adjust their behavior and habits accordingly. One had to perform feats of acrobatics to access the female toilets, which had been temporarily impeded with wooden slats at a punishing angle. (The male toilets, being located further down the corridor, were at an unfair advantage in this respect.) Some of the tables in the dining area next to the kitchen and in the office spaces likewise had been tilted in line with the temporarily raised floor, drastically altering the appearance of the place and making for an unstable work environment.

Rather than simply being foisted on staff members, the alterations affecting



Top: *No Solitary Beat* (2012), Ruth Buchanan. Audio on headphones, silk curtain, suspended rail, paint, light filter. Dimensions variable. Photo: Eric de Vries. Courtesy Stroom Den Haag.
Bottom: *Drift (Floor)* (2012), Vlatka Horvat. Cardboard, insulation tape. Dimensions variable. Photo: Eric de Vries. Courtesy Stroom Den Haag.



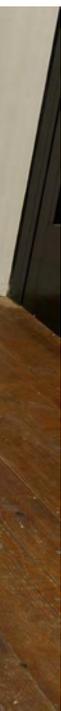
their daily routine were the result of an ongoing process of negotiation, involving eighteen people over the course of three months. An integral part of the piece, documented records of these discussions, taking the form of typed notes and architectural drawings or propositions, were pasted on the walls in the dining area for all to see. Aesthetic considerations seem to have been sacrificed on the altar of democracy: too many functional compromises had to be made in a bid to accommodate everyone for the overall aesthetic effect to be anything but messy and lopsided like the wooden structure at its heart. But *The Great Cut* certainly worked as a piece of “performance architecture,” an emergent field championed by, among others, the MoMA curator Pedro Gadanho who gave a lecture on the subject at Stroom as part of *Expanded Performance*.³

Another changing exhibit that unfolded over the show’s duration and required the cooperation and creative input from Stroom’s staff members was Vlatka Horvat’s *Replacements*. For this project, they took turns to choosing an object found on Stroom’s premises and placing it in a designated area in one of the exhibition spaces, replacing an object that had been put there the previous day by a colleague. Just as each object was temporarily displaced and by the same token promoted to the status of an art object, so every employee who agreed to take part (as most did) was cast in the role of a performer and, in addition, called on to document the process in photographs (of their own object and the one that it replaced) that were then gradually uploaded on Tumblr. Ranging from the mundane (chairs, a pencil) to the meaningful (a battered plush toy that

acts as the institution mascot, a glass of water placed directly beneath where there once was a leak in the ceiling, thus reflecting a collective memory of the place), together the objects amounted to a self-portrait of an institution and the people working there.

The link with performance seemed more tenuous in the fixed exhibits that remained on display, virtually unaltered, for the duration of the exhibition. In Horvat’s two-part spatial intervention, titled *Drift (Floor)* and *Drift (Wall)*, cardboard frames bound with multi-colored tape were lined up against walls in two narrow stairway corridors, forcing the visitor to contend with their parasitic presence in a confined space and negotiate them like an obstacle course. This was more true of the vertical and upright *Drift (Wall)* than of the horizontal and prone *Drift (Floor)*, which did not obstruct the space as much. To call this a “performance” would be stretching things. Though one could argue that each of these objects retained the lingering presence of the human body simply by virtue of having been made, a degree of projection (or else magical thinking) is involved in ascribing “performative” qualities to them.

Working with rooms as opposed to making objects that go into rooms is how Horvat has come to think about her practice. For their *Painting Rooms*, Leidy Churchman in collaboration with his muse, performance artist MPA, had walls and a doorway built especially to frame the two large vinyl canvases laid out on the floor, reflecting the artists’ critical engagement with action painting. To Churchman, these works have a lot of action to them; their human scale



and the fact that they are time-based is what makes them “performative.” The circular black patterns and diagonal lines that cut across the canvases made them resemble landing pads with runways on them; and that is indeed how they had been used by the artists who carried out various mundane actions on them, such as running around and across the painted vinyl canvas, in a performance made for video alone, rather than as a live event in front of an audience.

Shot in black and white with two surveillance cameras, the video shown on a monitor in Stroom’s library (rather than next to them) contrasted with the restricted but vibrant palette of glossy red, green, black, and white in the actual floor-based pieces straddling the divide between painting and sculpture. MPA’s own contribution to these painting-sculptures—gleaming brass rods nestled within room corners and doorframes, resting against the wall in places and edging out towards the painted canvases on the floor as if to interact with them—provided an additional contrasting note. Unlike in Horvat’s *Drift* pieces, it was less the visitor negotiating a space with certain obstacles placed in his or her way that interested Churchman and MPA than the spatial dialogue in which the objects themselves seemingly engaged.

The three protagonists in Ruth Buchanan’s elegant sculptural audio piece *No Solitary Beat*, which connected the upper and lower levels of the exhibition space in an audio-visual *parcours*, were a green color-field painted on a wall, a barely visible mauve spotlight projected on the floor, and a flesh-colored, translucent curtain hung from the ceiling. Each of these flimsy, insubstantial objects was

paired with two yellow Eames chairs of the kind found elsewhere within Stroom for visitors to sit on while listening to the same recording of a rhythmic text, written and read out by Buchanan herself in her melodic voice, on the headphones attached to the chairs. The latter had been placed in slightly different configurations each time, with respect to each other and to the object they faced, creating different performative scenarios in which to engage visitors, either with the objects or with another visitor confronted by the same object.

Expanded Performance set itself as a goal to do away with the historical fetish of the live event and to propose new forms of performance in which the body is no longer central, the artist’s body at any rate. The objects themselves redefined the institution’s living space, and not just the designated exhibition rooms, in such a way as to invite or forcefully elicit some form of performance from visitors and staff alike. They were “performative” to the extent that they called for small gestures from their audience, or even just awareness, to bring them to life. But why should we wish to do away with the fetish of live performance in the first place?

Responding to a set of criticisms routinely leveled against his work at a Frieze talk, one of them being that he is fetishizing the presence of the body, Sehgal started by pointing out the logical contradiction that, strictly speaking, you can’t fetishize the human body since to “fetishize” means to animate something, and you can’t animate something which is already animated. In primitive cultures, a fetish is an object—a carved figurine or such like—that you endow with special powers, in other words you



The Great Cut
(2012), Adrien
Tirtiaux. Wood.
Dimensions
variable and
expanding. Photo:
Eric de Vries.
Courtesy Stroom
Den Haag.

animate *it*. But, more to the point, why shouldn't we fetishize the things we love? It means we care about them.⁴ The same holds true of live performance as far as I'm concerned. Fetishize away, I say.

NOTES

1. Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (Spring, 1979): 33–38.

2. Kristine Stiles, "I/Eye/Oculus: Performance, Installation and Video," in Gill Perry and Paul Wood, eds., *Themes in Contemporary Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 182–89.

3. For the theoretical underpinnings and practical illustrations of "performance architecture," see the dedicated issue of *Le Journal Spéciale'Z* 4 (2012): 100–187.

4. See <http://friezefoundation.org/talks/detail/tino-sehgal-in-conversation-with-joerg-heiser/>.

AGNIESZKA GRATZA is a writer and critic based in London. Her written work often stems from live art and performance: she has collected dreams during an artist residency at the Gershwin Hotel in New York, staged *tableaux vivants* of the Annunciation, and made a series of edible artworks using saffron.