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***Performing Endurance: Art and Politics Since 1960* by Lara Shalson**

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(hardback)

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In this excellent, elegantly written, and tautly argued book, Lara Shalson offers nothing less than a profound rethinking of key works and concepts in performance art practice and theory. She does so through an in-depth engagement with what she identifies as acts of *endurance* carried out in the contexts of art and politics since the sixties, Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964-), Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971), Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 0* (1974), Tehching Hsieh's *One Year Performances* (1978-1986), or Abramović's *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005) – those familiar with the history of performance art will not discover any unknown works in these pages; but, as Shalson's fresh readings of these canonical performances reveal, we are far from knowing them. Her detailed encounter with each is among the best writing available on the works. Furthermore, the book revisits prominent debates in performance studies on the key relationships that define performance: those between performer and audience, performance and politics, art and life, and live performance and documentation. Again, the reader encounters familiar figures – Peggy Phelan and Amelia Jones, Rebecca Schneider and Philip Auslander, Kristine Stiles and Kathy O'Dell, Adrian Heathfield and Frazer Ward – and their writing is subjected to a rigorous and admirably lucid re-examination that recalibrates these debates and also usefully highlights their connections.

Shalson's first major intervention is her redefinition of *endurance*. Frequently evoked in discussions about performance art, especially body art practices, endurance tends to be treated as synonymous with either *ordeal* or with *long duration* and thereby conjures up notions of performance artists willingly inflicting self-harm or engaging in interminable actions. Shalson proposes a more nuanced understanding that takes off from the dual meaning of the word: to endure is to bear or put up with something, but also to persist and survive. Endurance therefore – she argues in close conversation with theories of relational subjecthood as developed by Jacques Lacan, Frantz Fanon, and Judith Butler – is both something *done* and something *undergone*. What does it mean to persist as a body that both acts and is acted upon by others? How do we exist as a body that is always in relation to a world of systems and institutions (economic, legal, biopolitical) we do not control? The book's central questions have lost none of their political and ethical urgency over the fifty years that are covered here.

Shalson's second intervention is to approach endurance in performance as an identifiable formal structure, in an intentional departure from widely held convictions that performance art cannot be formally defined. Endurance works for her involve a plan and a physically and materially committed following-through of that plan (a commitment that distinguishes performance art from conceptual art); however, its outcome can never be determined in advance. It is this openness to indeterminacy, arising from our profound interdependency with the actions of others and the systems regulating such actions, that according to Shalson defines all performances of endurance, whether or not they feature physical risk, or whether they are over in the blink of an eye (*Shoot*) or extend to nearly a quarter of a lifetime (Hsieh's thirteen-year-long *Thirteen Year Plan*, 1986-1999). While her insistence on the shared formal shape of endurance thus allows Shalson to analyse a set of quite different works, it does create a certain fuzziness about whether (or not) all performance art is de facto a performance of endurance; the book tends to collapse the two.

In the four analytical chapters of the book Shalson's methodological conceit to select just a few performances and 'stay[...] with the work for a while' pays remarkable dividends (pg

36). In 'Enduring Objecthood', she reconsiders Ono's and Abramović's participatory performances of passivity, in which the artists famously gave themselves over to the unpredictable actions of others by inviting them to cut off their clothes or to use a selection of objects on them 'as desired' (Abramović, 68). Shalson reads these performances not as examples of artists performing their 'body-as-object' (pg. 41) to expose their objectification at the hands of a voyeuristic, sexist, aggressive audience. Rather, she sees them as works that made audience members endure their own objecthood by experiencing themselves as bodies that are acted upon as they act upon an other. In 'Enduring Life', Shalson carefully prises apart the layers of Tehching Hsieh's seemingly minimalist *lifeworks* to reveal their complex engagements with social, political, and economic systems (prison, industrial capitalism, homelessness, marriage). The recognition that life is regulated by such systems offers for her a corrective to the simplistic celebrations of the *blurring of art and life* that have been prevalent in discourses on performance art since the 1960s. 'Enduring Documents' takes Abramović's widely discussed reenactments of canonical performances (or, rather, of their documentation) as an invitation to move beyond the prevailing distinction between performance as disappearance or as remain by arguing that both performance and its documents neither disappear nor remain, but instead endure together in an ongoing, mutually dependent relationship that offers them both up for continuing encounters.

The remaining chapter, 'Enduring Protests' (the second in the order of the book), examines a very different case study, which takes the analysis into the realm of endurance as explicit political protest. Its focus is the so-called lunch-counter sit-ins, a series of protests against racial segregation in the Southern United States in the 1960s, during which the protesters – black women and men and a few white allies – seated themselves at *whites only* counters and endured a torrent of racist abuse until they were either served or ejected. Shalson considers these endurance acts again as committed embodiments of a plan with uncertain outcome. Informed by her readings of Ono and Abramović, she argues that the protesters refused the dehumanising objectification that was launched against them by, seemingly paradoxically, insisting through endurance on the very objecthood of their bodies.

They therefore exposed how racial segregation suppressed the mutual relationality and objecthood that are the fundamental conditions of embodied existence. Shalson makes a strong case for how an analytical approach sharpened by an engagement with art works can thus be made productive for an understanding of political practices with which they share a formal connection. The reciprocal ways in which those protest practices may in return inform our understanding of performance remains largely unexplored, however, and the chapter, though compelling, sits a little separately from the rest of the book.

It is only in the short concluding epilogue, in which she reflects on the continuing importance of endurance, that Shalson briefly returns to examples of political protest, declaring them to be ‘the most striking acts of endurance in recent years’ (pg 184). It is enticing to imagine what she would do analytically with these examples, as perhaps with those – to my mind equally striking – recent performances of endurance by artists such as Tino Seghal or Ragnar Kjartansson, which address the formal relationship between plan, execution, and outcome in new ways. These are only some of the potential future lines of enquiry that are opened up by the book. What is certain to me is that the distinctive contribution this book makes to performance art discourse will endure.

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