On Performativity

Idols and Icons

Kenneth King



The Big Bang unleashed Time, History, and Hyperbole. Wars continue to perpetuate Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty: Criminal Power Psychoses, Sycophantic Celebrity Worship, and Sturm und Drang Terror acted out on the World Stage. Which came first: art or politics, word or image, battlefield or theatre? The never-ending legions of megalomaniacal *monstres sacré*—Caligula, Napoleon, Hitler—inaugurated pathological dramaturgy, blind populism, and Deep State deception. History, like bacteria and viruses, circulates in the bloodstream; the human genome harbors an inscrutable script/crypt of secrets. Origins can be a crapshoot—robots appeared onstage long before the invention of the computer, in Czechoslovak Karel Čapek's 1921 play *R.U.R.* The ghosts of Queen Nefertiti, Cleopatra, and Queen Victoria hovered in the wings until the end of the 19th century when Sarah Bernhardt, Eleonora Duse, and Mrs. Patrick Campbell's outsized theatrical histrionics burst the Reality Bubble. Mae West, sashaying on the heels of Freud, exploded libido and libel in her scandalous 1926 Broadway play *Sex*, for which she and her cast were incarcerated—

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sexual liberation had arrived decades before Marilyn and Elvis. "I generally avoid temptation unless I can't resist it." Mae's provocative hypertrophic strut and erotic zingers (she wrote all her own material), along with the licentious Ziegfeld Follies and gritty underground Times Square haunts including bars and brothels, launched our Forbidden, Sex-Obsessed Culture, which originated in the Big Apple. Twentieth-century world wars, cinema, atomic espionage, and computers further upped the ante that blew out the theatre's fourth wall—media mania has pushed mimesis and verisimilitude through the Virtual Threshold. After telephone, movies, radio, TV, computers, and the internet created a pulsing, interactive, cinergetic fission, performance was transformed by the hybrid two-way all-seeing mirror, the disembodied digital panopticon of broadcast spectacles, multimedia hybrids, and cyber fetishism. Now techtopia's nonstop sensory and neurological blitzkriegs continue to play havoc with the collective consciousness. Before highlighting some of the avatars of performativity (all are on YouTube), some background.

Hegel defined performativity's two core principles: reflexivity and the embodiment of otherness. His mirror-like dialectic of self-consciousness initiated the reciprocity between subjectivity and objectivity; the inscrutable and unknowable Other hovers like an uncanny phantom on the margins of visibility. German Expressionist choreographer Mary Wigman insisted that even the soloist dances with an invisible partner. Phenomenology's founder, Edmund Husserl, forged the first psychotechnic capable of making the conditions of experience and complexities of perception reflexively transparent. Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943) pioneered a synoptic discovery: ontology precedes psychology. Being thus elides, eludes, and transcends identity, which is why art, aesthetics, and the performing arts furnish critical insights that escape many psychologists. In their highly revered public lectures, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, supplemented by TV cameras, microphones, and tape recorders, showcased their high-wire reflexive analyses.

Like an isotope with mutable valences and volatile coefficients, performativity raises the stakes, expands and recalibrates the theatre of ideas and performance ontology, challenging psychological thresholds while contesting cultural taboos. Like lucid dreaming, being able to capture a heady stream of subliminal images and states of mind in the act while retaining the veridical traceries after the fact involves a mysterious double action, a reflexive capacity, or psychic transference. Awakening from the nocturnal theatre, time's illusion and history's nightmare pose a still further conundrum. Like an oneiric experience, performativity uncannily began capturing and incarnating the mystery of otherness.

The entanglement of characters, psyches, voices, narratives, rapidly shifting disembodied states, and constantly fluctuating points of view galvanized a new multimedia dramaturgy—the quantum interconnectivity of art forms, the symbiosis of the real, virtual, unreal, and hyperreal. After Michelangelo completed *David* (1504) and Bernini *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1652) likely neither artist would have been able to resist imagining his glorious sculptural masterpiece coming to life and speaking. Pioneering 19th-century virtuosic ventriloquists Charles Mathews and Jack Bannister defied credulity in their elaborate stage shows by throwing multiple voices to different parts of the

Figure 1. (previous page) Carol Burnett as Eunice in "The Family" sketch on The Carol Burnett Show*, 8 January 1978. Cashman 99, "Carol Burnett – The Family 'Honorary Degree' (Uncut)," YouTube, 1 February 2020. www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJvoaJ35FoU&list=PLLirgrrh7iQXJzonmNjCzHjxrK_RXHrA_. (Screenshot by* TDR*)*

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stage to deceptively inhabit and manifest a mysterious medley of characters. More than any other art, theatre celebrates the conundrum of otherness through mercurial character transformations that also materialize Jung's collective unconscious theatre of archetypes and personas, affirmed by Martha Graham's dance *Every Soul Is a Circus* (1939). Graham's theatricality was consummate, whether portraying Joan of Arc, Jocasta, or Medea.

The granular signages and "intervallics"—or systemic weave of intervals—inhering in vocal transmission galvanized the interconnectivity of psyche and media and transformed theatre by releasing subliminal messages, virtual dimensions, subconscious codes, and secret revenants. The human body's extended nerve network, inseparable from the world's pulsing electromagnetic continuum, mediates nonstop synergetic transmissivity—or multiple modes of transmission. The sine waves of speech, theatre's touchstone, compress the syntagmatic weaves that oscillate multiple meanings, virtual registers, covert dimensions, and hidden realities.

Cinema changed everything. The movie camera collapses distance, magnifies detail, suspends time, dilates temporality, and intensifies the participation mystique. The celluloid flicker, like the telegraphic pulse, animated a new virtuality, a hypertransmissibility that transmutes actors and audience though a double interactive reciprocity. Being virtually inside and outside performance projected a new transparency, a cinemediated transference, as if by magic—an empathy or bilocation as uncanny as Houdini's incredible manacled underwater escapes. The silent mimetic ethos of Charlie Chaplin's endearing Little Tramp's hyperkinetic penguin strut, faux balletic feints, and live-wire walking stick created another double reality. In contrast, the mysterious allure of Greta Garbo's ethereal beauty fashioned a new sphinxlike incandescence, the first indelibly transcendent cinematic presence. Her slouching barroom entrance in *Anna Christie* (1930), lugging a suitcase with louche languor, set the stage for her first husky words, which dramatically broke the cinematic sound barrier: "Give me a whisky, ginger ale on the side, and don't be stingy, baby!" Acting in films is different than performing onstage; less can be more, projection recalibrated. By promulgating hybrid pedigrees, movies and media began transforming theatre and performativity.

At the same time Freud and Stanislavsky pioneered 20th-century psychology and theatrical transference. Method actors turned dramaturgical transparency into psychological verisimilitude. Just prior, British actors acquired their commanding technique, impeccable diction, and overproduced King's English by performing Shakespeare. Musicals transformed the pedestrian voice with operatic grandeur; *My Fair Lady*'s (1956) rags-to-riches saga proved that class and status depend on elocution. The theatrical sea change migrated from Europe to America with the Group Theatre, founded in 1931 by Harold Clurman, Clifford Odets, Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner, Cheryl Crawford, and Lee Strasberg; morphing into The Actors Studio when Elia Kazan and Robert Lewis came aboard. Kazan's maverick direction of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and subsequent plays ushered in a new era on the Broadway stage. Marlon Brando's earthy acting style onstage catapulted him to an overnight sensation, but in the film version (1951) Vivien Leigh's outstanding performance upstaged Brando.

The Method created an urgent new realism exemplified by exceptional artists such as Geraldine Page as the dissolute aging actress Alexandra del Lago in Tennessee Williams's harrowing *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959), Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke in electrifying portrayals of Anne Sullivan and Helen Keller in William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker* (1959), Uta Hagen with her poignant evocation of the renowned Freudian psychoanalyst *Mrs. Klein* (1995), and Meryl Streep in her biopic coups as Karen Silkwood, Margaret Thatcher, Julia Child, or *Vogue*'s imperial maven Anna Wintour. Creating a double transparency with uncanny similitude has enabled actors to penetrate magical thresholds that prodigally expanded performativity. Language and voice provide the fulcrum of characterization; theatre thereby manifests and reveals the human psyche. Authoritative voices like those of Boris Karloff, Tallulah Bankhead, and Basil Rathbone commanded spellbinding attention. Perhaps there are as many methods as performers.

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Samuel Beckett revolutionized performativity by stripping stage, language, and psychology to their bare essentials; sparseness intensified theatricality. Visionary playwright Athol Fugard, also a consummate actor and director, transformed the trauma of South African apartheid into revelatory theatre. Richard Schechner's groundbreaking *Dionysus in 69* (1968) further liberated theatre by transforming performance into an immersive, participatory, environmental spectacle that deconstructed the text of Euripides's *The Bacchae*. Premiered on 6 June 1968, the day Robert Kennedy was shot, this long-running production launched the celebrated Performing Garage prior to Soho emerging as a pioneering arts community.

The camera and the cathode-ray tube, as another incarnation of performance via media, further reconsecrated theatre by activating a hypnotic dialectic that cross-fertilizes popular, commercial, and avantgarde arts in curious, even devious ways. After Hollywood's 1930s Depression heyday and the go-America movies of WWII, the cultural saturation of 1950s and '60s TV—precursor of the digital—transformed consciousness by catalyzing a performative synergy that anticipated postmodernism by conflating a diversity of cultural sources and styles. The "boob tube"—a televisual cabinet of exploding curiosities propagating nonstop information—presaged the computer revolution by compressing *cineminematic* detail into digital platforms. Just as Marcel Duchamp created miniature valise museums, TV created mini home movie theatres that hit pay dirt in 1956 when Ed Sullivan's Sunday night TV variety show featured Elvis Presley, sideburns and desperado ducktail intact. But cameras were prohibited from showing his obscenely gyrating hips. Hound Dog Elvis the Pelvis happened two years before the Hula-Hoop, when Americans began gyrating their hips, a seductive prelude to the '60s sexual revolution and precursor of internet porn. Libidinal sacrilege also incites performativity.

There was a hint of Elvis's slinky hips in Balanchine's *Agon* (1957), which incorporated jazz moves in this abstract ballet. Tall, long-limbed, streamlined ballerinas capable of pyrotechnical feats became kinetic aviators. Pushing physicality to the max, French *assoluta* superstar Sylvie Guillem's eye-popping hyperextended hips and fleet legs recalibrated balletic virtuosity. Luckily, Mr. B's biased sexist inversion "ballet is woman" was quickly countermanded by hordes of eager teenagers cutting up the floor to early rock in 1950s TV—*American Bandstand*, *The Dick Clark Show*, and later *Soul Train*. Merce Cunningham's fusion of ballet and modern dance pioneered the outer limits of ballet and dance performativity, by developing a synergetic technique of quicksilver legs and highly flexible spines capable of breathtaking coordination and structural counterpoint. Multimedia performativity reached an apotheosis in *BIPED* (1999), made when the choreographer was 80 years old. Stick figure avatars from LifeForms computer software, used to generate movement possibilities, were projected on a frontal scrim; hanging, rear-lit Mylar strips enabled the 14 dancers to appear magically out of thin air and then just as mysteriously disappear. The dance's title might be a cipher for the enigma and duality of human anatomy—two arms, legs, eyes, ears, lungs, neural hemispheres, cardiac chambers, kidneys, and gonads. In contrast, 1960s Judson Dance Theater choreographers' conceptual dances, composed of pedestrian movement, executed with impassive deadpan delivery, enabled audiences to focus on the sheer no-nonsense physicality of tasks, games, and structural challenges—another performativity. Sally Banes's *Democracy's Body* (1983) fashioned yet another myth.

The TV talk show further dilated the collective consciousness. *Tonight Starring Jack Paar* (1957) inaugurated intimate and mesmerizing late-night Close Encounters as another performativity before the '60s celebrity culture. Televisual interviews and confessionals upstaged the *National Enquirer* with their sycophantic broadcast bonanza long before scamming televangelists and the TMZ celebrity news website. TV and movies' synergy broadcast seductive images that obsessively accelerated a gossipy fascination with sex, celebrities, and secrets, just as the invention of the telephone and wireless presaged the allure of the afterlife and telepathic nonlocality. After TV's popularity peaked in the 1960s, radio got a regenerative boost from call-in shows and nervy vocal acrobatics. The King of Shock Jocks, Curtis Sliwa, founder of the Guardian Angels and 2021 Republican NYC mayoral candidate, has for more than four decades been a pioneering radio

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personality known for his unique fractured hipster lingo laced with clever "trendoid tricknology" puns, "camoufloogie" spoonerisms, and "discomboobilating" malapropisms exposing gritty insider politics, urban history, and criminal underworld secrets. Radio in the '60s, instrumental in launching the counterculture's radical participation mystique, moved theatre from stage and screen into streets, courtrooms, colleges, and bedrooms—anticipating Reality TV. Championing the power of the pedestrian, Jill Johnston commanded "Don't just do something, stand there," in one of her lively *Village Voice* columns.

WWII ushered in the Atomic Age's technological prowess that, during the following decades, morphed into multimedia technophilia. Products were extolled for their "performance" capabilities—cars, appliances, aircraft, weapons. Before the desktop revolution, the paperback, beginning in 1935, transformed literary performativity by making mass-produced books accessible and economical, and whose sometimes shocking and sensational tabloid subject matter could be compared to contraband. Computers and internet transformed libraries and cumbersome card catalogs by launching instantaneous online search engines, data banks, streaming information services, along with digital publishing. Thanks to the consumerist bonanza, luxurious homes, gas-guzzling SUVs, timesaving gizmos, elegant to-die-for fashions, and toxic fast food were all glorified as singularity breakthroughs. It wasn't enough to act, dance, paint, or film to challenge, exceed, or outdo expectations; lifestyles were also pushed to the brink. Breaking the rules turned art forms, identity, and politics inside out; challenging taboos pushed the boundaries of convention and accelerated media hypertrophy.

TV produced another seismic weekly blowout in the '60s on *The Carol Burnett Show*, a prodigious laugh fest (1967–1978). This peerless comedian staged an endless satirical repertoire of ridiculous skits, absurd spoofs, and preposterous sendups. Equally adept as actress, Broadway troubadour, and clown, Burnett's endearingly wacky humor featured outsized physical feats and, like a chameleon with quirky, wide-eyed, silly-putty expressions, her ability to morph from one outrageous character into another while decked out in Bob Mackie's extravagant costumes and wigs made her an adored showstopper. Instead of Method training, Burnett learned her trade from the movies she saw as a child with her grandmother. Like Lucille Ball, Burnett could only have realized the theatricality of her comic genius through the new medium of TV.

Technology and media thus began challenging theatre to forge alternative performativity paradigms by rapidly permuting and conflating the real and unreal, lowbrow and highbrow, commercial and avantgarde. The instant digital bombardment of data fired by perpetually evolving algorithms created virtual implosions of words, images, and icons—we now see as much with our ears as we hear with our eyes. YouTube's streaming platform has catalyzed a cyber performativity revolution comprising millions of free public-access channels that generate billions in revenue, videos, movies, and viewers.

The real/unreal conflation is uncannily realized through vocal production and reproduction. The evanescent vibrating vocal stream elicits invisible audial currents just as media performativity materializes subliminally camouflaged signage. Speaking is mercurial and revealing. Mouth, windpipe, vocal cords, esophagus, nasal passages, and chest cavities combine, along with 60 throat muscles, to produce a highly complex resonating sound chamber analogous to the octave stops of a wind instrument or pipe organ. Carefully shifting vocal placement between these cavities can produce a range of different character voices whose volatile and virtuosic undercurrents elicit thrilling nuances, surreptitious messages, and undercover secrets.

Anthropologists and folklorists have written about North American and other Indigenous peoples who were sometimes superstitious about being photographed anxious, the camera would steal their souls (see e.g., Goodman 2021). How might those Indigenous peoples have responded to someone who captured and reproduced their *voices*? Speech defines and transmutes identity—replicating another's vocal signature, especially someone prominent or deceased, occasions an incredulous thrill—a metaphysical frisson. Vocal impressionists with a dizzying duplicitous edge such as Tracey Ullman, Rich Little, Kevin Spacey, Dana Carvey, Robin Williams, and Carol

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Figure 2. Charles Pierce as the character from All About Eve *on The Dick Cavett Show, 1981. Alan Eickler, "Charles Pierce – 1981 TV Interview," YouTube, 15 February 2021. www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEas3GgsFD8. (Screenshot by* TDR*)*

Channing challenged credulity through their uncanny impersonations of celebrities and politicians. Rich Little mastered the voices of many American presidents, but admitted it took him a year and a half to be able to impersonate Johnny Carson's vocal mannerisms and nervous tics. Nicole Kidman needed two months with a vocal coach to reproduce Lucille Ball's on- and offstage voices for *Being the Ricardos* (2021). Incomparable illusionist Charles Pierce appeared on Merv Griffin's 1972 TV show as Bette Davis and Tallulah Bankhead simultaneously barking bitchy barbs at each other while also knocking out the curveball voices of Katherine Hepburn, Mae West, and Carol Channing. Some performers have the ability to manifest other states of being as well—Willem Dafoe and Kate Valk in The Wooster Group productions, and Kate Manheim in Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theatre. Performativity thus breaks through to a double transparency by embodying, while also conflating, multiple characters, registers, styles, mercurial states of mind, and alternative realities that capture the metamorphoses of the real, unreal, and surreal—as did magicians Harry Houdini, Howard Thurston, and Ricky Jay, who similarly proved that artifice and deception are integral to revealing truth.

Ninety-nine percent of reality might amount to acting or illusion. Theatre is more than life's double—its ineffable ethos, brute force, capricious passions, blind hubris, unremitting intensity, and stark pathos recall the mythological double-faced Roman god Janus, whose comic and tragic faces fascinated, mystified, and deceived. Instead of playing one character, a dramaturgy of multiples has upstaged theatre itself: Lily Tomlin, Anna Deavere Smith, John Leguizamo, Tracey Ullman, Robin Williams, Whoopi Goldberg, and Barry Humphries created spectacular new watershed genres. Their teeming comedic fission through virtuosic assimilation of improbable personas and zany, quick-change characters and voices recollect Walt Whitman's "I contain multitudes." In Lily Tomlin and Jane Wagner's consummate Broadway extravaganza *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* (1985), ingeniously synchronized strobe lighting enabled Tomlin to masterfully ventriloquize while pantomiming an astonishing constellation of characters. Anna Deavere Smith, professor and sociological sleuth with keen linguistic smarts, is a mercurial actress with the unusual ability to graph, analyze, and reproduce a spectrum of real-life character voices, as in her extraordinary production *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1993) drawn from the Rodney King police beating. Smith generates 40 characters' vocal physiognomies to effectively materialize their physicalities and capture the existential trauma surrounding blind injustice. Her vocal expertise actualizes the indemnity of double identity, creates the channel that manifests a medley of characters. Act one ends with the commanding voice of operatic diva Jessye Norman. John Leguizamo's brilliant and outrageous gender-bending tour de force *Spic-O-Rama* (1992) began with a swaggering, beer-swilling, macho Vietnam vet stomping atop an abandoned car, scaling a chain-link fence, segueing into a campy and sassy laundromat Latina, followed by a cascade of other eccentrics. Tomlin is not only an accomplished shape-shifter, but also an expert gender impersonator. Her lounge singer Tommy Velour rips open his shirt to reveal a hairy chest startling Elizabeth Taylor and Michael Jackson. Leguizamo's

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Figure 3. John Leguizamo in a scene from the one-man Off-Broadway play Spic-O-Rama. *(New York, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/2f24bed0-65c3-0131-e030-58d385a7bbd0)*

hilarious *Manny the Fanny* (1992) might be a devious Puerto Rican femme fatale or a streetwalking drag queen hooker (Miguel Novoa TV 2012). Pulling out all the stops, actors and performance artists expertly portraying any gender catalyzed a grand *frission* of virtuosic ontological anomalies. Like Joan Rivers, whose irascibly acerbic extemporary barbs exploded taboos, in *Whoopi Goldberg: Direct from Broadway* (1985) Goldberg proved herself an adept taboo stomper by riffing on the usually off-limits subject of female genitalia. Tyler Perry's movies feature him playing male and female characters—his wildly popular madcap Madea tackles the foibles of Black culture and womanhood while he also plays the quintessential macho detective in *Alex Cross* (2012).

British shape-shifter Tracey Ullman goes even further with her over-the-top send-ups that replicate not only the voices but also exact character likenesses, thanks to prosthetic makeup that creates thrilling theatrical deepfakes. She becomes spitting images of Angela Merkel, Theresa May, and a wickedly spot-on capriciously uncouth Camilla Parker Bowles, as well as an obstreperously deceitful Judi Dench, hilariously caught shoplifting but excused after being recognized as a National Treasure. Ullman also deftly portrayed Asian and Black characters—for which she received criticism and has since apologized (O'Dornan 2024)—including playing Sheneesha Turner, a mischievously aggressive airline screener, a performance that attempted to jettison racial stereotyping. If performers can genderbend, why can't they also be challenged by interracial roles (Sistasasy 2011)?

WWII medical advances and increased understanding of gender dysphoria set the stage for unprecedented performativity breakthroughs. In 1946 Sir Harold Gillies, a British pioneering surgeon who reconstructed soldiers' catastrophic war injuries, transformed Laura Dillon into Michael Dillon. In 1952, Christine Jorgensen's sex change exploded in screaming headlines: "EX-GI BECOMES BLOND BOMBSHELL"—flabbergasting an incredulous public. So new and revolutionary was the idea of changing sex, meaning gender, that when Jimmy Durante caught Jorgensen's nightclub act he told her she wouldn't get any laughs for the first 15 minutes because people would just be looking her over (Jorgensen 1957). Singer Bobby Darin, also an accomplished impersonator, pretends he's Durante in his 1962 TV special, then gets interrupted by the real McCoy, who exuberantly joins the hijinks. A prominent ophthalmological surgeon underwent gender affirming surgery in 1975, transitioning into tennis champ Renée Richards. More recently,

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Figure 4. Tracey Ullman as Dame Judi Dench on Episode 1 of The Tracey Ullman Show. *BBC, "Dame Judi Dench causes havoc - Tracey Ullman's Show: Episode 1 Preview - BBC One," YouTube, 4 January 2016. www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNEfI6JnMJI. (Screenshot by* TDR*)*

Caitlyn Jenner came out as a trans woman at the 2016 ESPN Awards ceremony in a sleek, form-fitting, floor-length, white Versace gown before a packed audience of family, celebrities, and incredulous wide-eyed athletes. All three may be considered pioneering "gendernauts" who have written revealing and eloquently informative autobiographies.

The "gender revolution" shatters more than a glass ceiling. From 1955 until his death in 2023, British comedian Barry Humphries was the extravagantly ridiculous Dame Edna on British, Australian, and American TV, talk shows, and Broadway spectaculars. Dame Edna was coifed in a lacquered bouffant and lavish spangled outfits topped by oversized glitzy rhinestone glasses. She upstaged excess and transcended camp with impromptu farcical *bon mots* delivered with an ingratiating yet slyly seditious faux sincerity. Robin Williams, whose vocal and gender transformation were wizardry in *Mrs. Doubtfire*, created comedic fireworks when he appeared on Dame Edna's TV show as a manic pizza deliveryman. Two ingenious comedians masterfully collided.

Painters also catalyzed performativity by breaking rules and presentational formats. Jackson Pollock's intricate, large-scale, energetically complex drip-and-splatter paintings exemplify lyrical bravura; Joseph Cornell's elegantly mysterious, cryptic, and poetic habitat boxes are miniature theatres; and James Rosenquist's oversized, brightly colored Pop Art canvases explode the largesse of hypertrophic Americana with their F-111 fighter-bombers, appliances, cars, and even an atomic blast. Now satellites and drones accelerate information age performativity that, along with GPS tracking, are able to target and transmit detailed aerial vistas, an ideal synergy for the obsessive military and their relentless, accelerating digital surveillance.

The camera also ignited media performativity as charismatic celebrities were trailed by indefatigable paparazzi: for example, the glamorous and ubiquitously photographed First Lady Jackie Kennedy Onassis, or the alluring Princess Diana captured in chic, revealing, haute-couture fashions. One shutterbug made over $4 million when his telephoto lens caught the princess necking with boyfriend Dodi Al-Fayed on his yacht in Sardinia. Diana died trying to escape the cameras.

Rabble-rousing poets also challenge the Outer Limits. Poetry leapt from page to stage in 1955 in San Francisco when Allen Ginsberg read his fiery *Howl* and also performed his music-poetry alongside lover Peter Orlovsky on harmonium; the two created empathic, sure-fire audience excitement when I saw them at the University of Maryland in 1976. The infectious kinetic energy of the

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Figure 5. Barry Humphries and Dame Edna in an interview on 60 Minutes*. 60 Minutes Australia, "Barry Humphries and Dame Edna together in a TV first | 60 Minutes Australia," YouTube, 23 April 2013. www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ycZbOsq9bk. (Screenshot by* TDR*)*

spoken word erupts performatively whenever dynamo Bob Holman, founder in 2002 of the Bowery Poetry Club, steps before a microphone or camera or acts in plays. This poet's exuberant theatrical showmanship resembles a vociferous circus barker. By 1980 Holman had already absorbed and incorporated rap, appeared at the newly founded Performance Space 122, moved on to slams at the Nuyorican Poets Café, and was featured on numerous TV shows including *Charlie Rose*, Ted Koppel's *Nightline*, and *Good Morning America*.

Politics also turned brave rogue hacktivists into notorious outlaw performativity icons. Edward Snowden, Julian Assange, and Chelsea Manning continue to pay an unconscionable price for stealing, revealing, and broadcasting state secrets. Snowden is in permanent exile in Russia (his NSA defection was dramatically captured in Laura Poitras's 2014 documentary *Citizenfour*). Assange was trapped in detention limbo in the UK's notorious "Guantanamo Bay" Belmarsh Prison for five years while the US wrangled for his extradition, finally cutting a deal for his release in June 2024; and Chelsea Manning, after being pardoned by President Obama, was harassed and rearrested. Both are subjects of Alex Gibney's 2013 movie *We Steal Secrets: The Story of WikiLeaks*. Maverick journalists are also pioneering political activist media performers. Amy Goodman and *Democracy Now* deserve nothing less than a Nobel Prize for decades of unrivaled, cutting-edge investigative journalism; similarly, Jane Mayer's groundbreaking *New Yorker* exposés and media interviews are also superb sleuthing performances that dig deep into the hidden recesses of political machinations to expose corruption.

Silicon Valley computers and iPhones surreptitiously equipped with hidden backdoor spyware are able to track our online presence/performance. Hidden cameras lurk on city streets, police, in stores, lobbies, subways, elevators, and offices providing clandestine undercover scrutiny of our performance in daily life. Video upstages performance art by acting as a pervasive and invasive surveillance tool. Even art presenters and concert bookers request videos in advance in part to make sure that performers and dance troupes are "safe." The all-seeing Über Eye is everywhere.

As performativity transformed art and culture, so did several exemplary critics, adept on both page and the media stage. Jill Johnston's unpredictably enlightening, oracular, and unconventional "Dance Journal" column (1959–1981) in downtown New York's preeminent weekly *Village Voice* chronicled from its emergence in the '60s the avantgarde dance, visual art, and performance art

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scenes with bravado, gossip, and keen insider smarts. She performed in Andy Warhol's early movies; gained notoriety by scandalously upstaging a big women's lib event in 1970 (just as the movement was exploding in the media) by jumping topless into Pop Art collector Robert Scull's East Hampton swimming pool (see Warner 2012); disrupted the infamous 1971 Town Bloody Hall panel with Norman Mailer (Marcus 2020); appeared on TV in denim couture on *The Dick Cavett Show* and published *Lesbian Nation* in 1973; scooped emerging celebrities like psychiatric guru R.D. Laing ([1972] 1974); was photographed at the inaugural Gay Pride marches (McDarrah 1971); published numerous books; and was courted by oil mogul John de Menil, who showed up at her Bowery digs in his limousine. Jill made performance art, criticism, journalism, literature, protest, and gender politics inseparable.

Another arts critic superstar who received media attention was Susan Sontag. Her commanding books, essays, elegant literary style, and lectures at many college and university campuses were always events, as were her captivating media performances on many TV programs here and abroad, including *Camera Three* (1969) and *Charlie Rose* (1992, etc.). An eminent author, grandiloquent speaker, and charming, sophisticated conversationalist with more than abundant charisma, Sontag's glamour added to her performance appeal. She appeared in black leather in one of Joseph Cornell's mysterious artworks (*Untitled [Susan Sontag]* [n.d.]), and was captured incessantly by an army of photographers—Diane Arbus, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Richard Avedon, Peter Hujar, and Annie Leibovitz.

Finally, for grand critical contretemps, enter another maverick stylist, the swashbuckling, fast-talking, *All About Eve* gatecrasher with lip-lashing hotspur and prickly literary swagger: Camille Paglia, who excels at provocatively plucky prose. After interminable rejections, her prodigiously wide-ranging doctoral tome, *Sexual Personae* (1990), became a bestseller (the introduction alone is mind-blowing). She, too, ignited media mania by lobbing incendiary verbal Molotovs in her *Salon* columns, college lectures, and on feisty TV interviews with Bill Maher (2011) and Roger Ailes (1995) where, with nonstop gusto, she gallantly ran roughshod, ambushing taboos and trashing any number of cultural icons. Pro-porn Paglia knows how to pull out all the stops with hyperbolic audacity, as in her virtuosic "Sex Quest in Tom of Finland" essay in her *Provocations* (2018), about heavy-duty gay male erotica.

A writer's block colliding with conversational frisson created an unusual performance art anomaly: Fran Lebowitz. Droll, impassive, witty, unflappable, propelled from writing about bad movies for Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine into decades on the TV talk and lecture circuit. Labeled a humorist, Lebowitz is an ironic, shrewdly observant urban hipster who has spent decades at parties and on TV honing her improvisatory finesse dispensing wry and incisive social, political, and cultural *bon mots*. As she quipped in a viral Facebook post: "In the Soviet Union, capitalism triumphed over communism. In this country, capitalism triumphed over democracy" (in Karlin 2015). She's NYC's penultimate urban raconteur in Martin Scorsese's 2021 documentary series, *Pretend It's a City*.

Performativity also invaded fashion, with great élan. The glamorous, longest working (since 1946), nonagenarian, *ne plus ultra* super model Carmen Dell'Orefice, sporting her magnificent trademark white hair, lithe figure, commanding theatrical grace, flawless classical bone structure, dramatic makeup, and photogenic allure, has transformed runways, magazine covers, and couture into action theatre. Striding dramatically among much younger models with flair and aplomb, her presence steals and commands attention as only a seasoned *au fait* actress could.

Undoubtedly, many more iconic examples could be cited in the surveillance panopticon of performativity's exploding firmament. Technology is increasingly the catalyst and provocateur for expanding the theatrics of lifestyle mania, conflicting ideologies, and outrageous conspiracies that rapidly and seductively populate psyches and screens. Aided and abetted by social media's fast-paced and relentlessly hyperactive gallery of windows, portals, and posts, the unrelenting tsunami of images, ads, messages, photographs, paintings, facial recognition captures, videos, movies, and AI-mined data are interlaced with political overkill. Ironically and fitfully, the Covid-19 pandemic,

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unstoppable wars, and catastrophically escalating superpower hostilities have usurped Reality TV and transformed the world into a dangerous, all-encompassing venue of performativity, whose incendiary upsurges are corralled by shrill pundits, with their barrages of breaking news, exposés, disasters, and scenes of catastrophic genocide and displacement. The stranglehold of truth and survival is threatened by divisive ideological blowouts that perpetrate ruses of disinformation. The global surrealism of warring political hegemonies teeters on fragile tenterhooks: to invade or not to invade, to bomb or not to bomb, to mask or not to mask, to vaccinate or not to vaccinate, to be armed or unarmed, to censor, threaten, silence, pollute, suppress, investigate, subpoena, indict, repeal, gerrymander, or whether pandemics are perpetrated by secret government germ warfare—they all rally everyone to become performer, witness, and victim caught up in an endlessly convulsive media maelstrom of contradictions that leave everyone desperately scrambling to ascertain what's real, fake, truthful, deceptive, or illusionary—or all simultaneously! Surprisingly, theatre's limits might conflate with Zen—Reality might be the Biggest Illusion of all!

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