

GUEST EDITORIAL

The Anthropology of Performance and the Performance of Anthropology

Anya Peterson Royce
Professor of Anthropology
Indiana University Bloomington
<http://www.indiana.edu/~anthro/faculty/royce.html>
(This Guest Editorial was first published in 1987)

Why should anthropologists care about the arts? What are the differences between performing arts and nonperforming arts? Are Western and non-Western arts fundamentally different? Is artistic creativity different from creativity in science? What do performers and anthropologists have in common? These questions are central to an anthropology of the arts. They also help anthropologists reflect on their own discipline. Some have been addressed at length by anthropologists—the first question, for example.

Others, like question four, have more often been examined by nonanthropologists. In fact, it has been scientists who have asked about artistic and scientific creativity. And the consensus seems to be that if we look at the creative process, rather than at the *products* of creativity, we see some amazing commonalities between the arts and the sciences.

The third question has only recently surfaced as an important issue, largely because we thought we knew the answer: that there *were* major differences between Western and non-Western arts. Early museum exhibits, with their emphasis on form, were partly to blame. When we began thinking along the process line, however, we came to the same conclusion as did the people talking about creativity in science and art: there are fundamental similarities in the process of making art and in the nature of artists.

The second and the last questions, having to do with performing arts and performers, have had to wait for a relatively new breed of anthropologist—the performer-anthropologist. As one of these (I spent twenty years in a career in classical ballet and have now spent almost the same amount of time as an anthropologist), I shall return to questions two and five.

The arts are by no means new territory for the anthropologist. But anthropologists have done more work in some areas of the arts than in others. Until recently, the visual arts captured most of the attention, simply because they are easier to document. You can collect examples of pottery, sculpture, and painting, or at least you can photograph them. You can then study them at your leisure.

Music comes next, because we have ways of recording it—both as a written score and as an audio recording.

Dance and other kinds of performance based on the human body making patterns in time and space have been the most difficult and elusive of the arts. Anthropologists talking about dance, mime, and drama have usually concentrated on the functions these art forms play in society rather than on their form. While this is understandable, it is an oddly selective approach. No

anthropologist who wants to retain his or her standing in the club would dream of looking only at the functions of kinship while ignoring the form—that is, terminology, forms of address, and so forth. But kinship has long been an acknowledged mainstay of anthropology, whereas dance has not. All introductory courses talk about kinship; all field methods courses teach you how to collect genealogies and to record kin terms. Dance and other performing arts have been the poor relations in comparison. A contributing factor to their second-class status was the feeling that, while anyone can describe the form of a pot or cross-cousin marriage, to do the same for dance takes a specialist. I do not want to argue about the merits of this statement, but a reason for increased attention to both the form and the function of the performing arts must surely be that we now have anthropologists who have been or are performers. The number of performers-turned-anthropologists is growing all the time, and as a result we see more and more studies of the performing arts.

Some of us have also begun to examine the differences and similarities between the performing and nonperforming arts. I have long suspected that much of our theory in the anthropology of the arts comes from the studies done of nonperforming arts without asking whether it is applicable to performing arts.

One major difference between performing and nonperforming arts is their context. The visual arts and literature are created by individuals working in their own time and space. The performing arts exist only in performance. What happens in that arena is a unique occurrence created by the coming together of performers and audience. The context of communication changes with every performance, and performers must create their art anew each time.

In performance, the response is immediate and continuous. Performers know where an audience is throughout a performance, and certainly know at the end whether they have been judged successful by the audience. Painters, sculptors, and writers spend long, solitary days and months creating a piece, and then wait often an equally long time for a response to their work.

Out of this difference comes the issue of revision. There is no possibility for revision in the performance context. Nonperforming artists revise all throughout the process of creating their work. What is revision for them is similar to practice and preparation for the performer. However, no matter how much you practice in advance, in a performance there are still factors that you have no control over but that affect your performance: the audience, fellow performers, the condition of the performance space, your instrument. None of these factors affect the products of nonperforming artists who can, ultimately, choose *when* to display their work to the public.

Another difference concerns the nature of creativity. Performers are the medium through which audiences understand and appreciate works composed by others. This is not a mechanical act of reproduction, nor is it passive. Nor does it involve less creativity. But it is different. In the works of a great musician, Pablo Casals, it is a recreating process with no set rules.

One is not a slave to the text, which can represent only a small part of what the composer, choreographer, or writer intended, nor should one's own personality dominate. The interpretation must be a synthesis of the creators' intentions and the performers' skill, style, and ideas. Even

though audiences sometimes prefer flamboyance to passion, raw emotion to distilled feeling, playing to the audience can easily lead to a cult of personality that will displace the truly skilled interpreter. It is the difference between John Wayne, who played John Wayne no matter what the role, and Sir John Gielgud, who brought out the subtle differences in each role he played.

Having established the nature of performer as interpreter, we can now begin to answer the last question: What do performers and anthropologists have in common? As you may have guessed, it is their role as interpreters. Anthropologists are the interpreters of the cultures in which they work; they translate for a world unfamiliar with those cultures their coherence, distinctiveness, excitement. They are the medium through which one culture is “performed” for another.

Performing artists are the same kind of interpreters. The musician makes Beethoven come to life for an audience. The dancer recreates the choreography of centuries past or of yesterday. Without the actor, Shakespeare is simply a text to be read in solitude. None of these forms has any existence for an audience without the interpretation of the performer.

The performer-anthropologist combines the experience and technical knowledge of the performer with the analytical skills of the scholar. That person is uniquely qualified to stand as interpreter, conveying to a larger audience by means of description, analysis, and words the phenomena that affect us so powerfully precisely because they communicate *without* description, analysis, or words.

Just as becoming a “personality” is seductive for performers, so it is for anthropologists. The performer who is a personality obscures the meaning of the original text. The anthropologist who is a personality lets that personality dominate the meaning of the culture being described. Neither is a true interpreter, and the audience in both cases is the loser.

I have posed five questions. Tackling them forces us to be more reflective about assumptions we have taken for granted, as well as about the way we do anthropology. There are hundreds of questions we can ask. We are limited only by our own imagination and daring. We must learn to be comfortable with the knowledge that there is no one right answer, just as performers understand that there is no one ideal performance. There are better and worse answers and better and worse performances. We progress by the continual performing of anthropology. Our goal is true synthesis that lies at the heart of interpretation.