



Vanishing Corporeality and the Ethics of Presence: De-contextualizing Performance Art in Recourse to Metamodernity

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a rethinking of performance art in the theoretical framework of metamodernity, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between postmodern irony and modernist sincerity as central to the current performative practices. The study places performance art in the context of the body as a medium, an ephemerality and a relationality, and explores how the artist's body becomes a critical site of negotiation for identity, power, violence and resistance. It draws on important avant-garde genealogies and current practitioners to question the shift from passive viewing to participatory co-presence. The article also addresses philosophical concepts of performativity, discipline, and spectacle to explain how corporeal exposure and the aesthetics of suffering challenge dominant epistemologies and ethical regimes. These performative acts are read not only as critiques of commodification and authority, but as attempts at reconstructing meaning in an uncertain and fragmented world, through a metamodern lens. Vulnerability and agency, detachment and affect, redefine performance art as a dynamic praxis of becoming. Finally, the study suggests that metamodernity provides a fruitful approach to the understanding of performance art as a dynamic ethical-aesthetic space, where presence, relationality and affective engagement redefine the potentialities of artistic and social experience in the contemporary moment.

Keywords: Performance Art; Metamodernity; Embodiment; Corporeality; Performativity; Spectatorship; Power and Resistance; Affect; Relationality; Contemporary Aesthetics.

INTRODUCTION

Performance Art is a complex and evolving art form that began in the mid-twentieth century and challenged traditional art classifications by focusing on the artist's body as the medium and on ephemeral, live experiences. Performance Art is an art form that is not static like painting or sculpture, but rather is an active engagement with time, place, and the physical body of the artist and the audience. This genre is not bound by traditional genre conventions, fostering an interactive relationship between the author and the audience, frequently through interdisciplinary approaches and active participation. Performance art began with the avant-garde movements of Dadaism, Futurism, and Surrealism, in which early 20th-century artists engaged in live performance and theatricality to challenge traditional art forms. However, the recognition of performance art as a genre did begin to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s, a time of great social and political change and a rejection of the gallery/museum commodification of art. Allan Kaprow wanted to break down the distinction between art and life in his "Happenings," which challenged the existing art world's hierarchy (Sayre, 1989, p. 112). One of the unique features of performance art is its ephemeral nature; the action unfolds in the moment and cannot be reproduced or captured in the same way as a painting or sculpture.

According to art historian RoseLee Goldberg, "Performance art, unlike other art forms, is marked by its focus on the live presence, its emphasis on the 'here and now'" (Goldberg, 2011, p. 45). This quality requires the audience to be involved in the process of the artwork, and creates an experience that is not easily documented, not easily commodified, and therefore poses a significant challenge to a traditional art market that is based on the sale and collection of physical objects. According to Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, metamodernity is a cultural dominant that swings between postmodernism's ironic distancing and modernism's sincere teleology. The "both-neither" logic, an epistemic pendulum between optimism and pessimism, authenticity and self-reflection, is instituted, not superseded. This emotional structure creates a paradoxical return to meaning under conditions of contingency, reactivating affect, belief, and story while maintaining postmodern criticality (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010). This article places performance art in the context of a metamodernist intervention, one that combines postmodernist self-assertion with the modernist audacity of the negation of the subject. Metamodernism is similar to the late capitalist narrative of Fredric Jameson and the emergent cultural forms of Raymond Williams, but with a focus on oscillation instead of depthlessness. It makes epic stories fictions that are lived "as if" they were true, not as real. According to Luke Turner (2011), metamodernism expresses a post-ironic sensibility that strategically performs authenticity despite ambiguity in epistemology. So, in an attempt to imagine the future, yet acknowledge its disintegration, metamodernity emerges in art and performance as an ethics of reconstruction, more an emotional modulation appropriate to the paradoxes of the present than a static paradigm.

Research Problem

While performance art has been extensively theorised within postmodern frameworks emphasising irony, fragmentation, and the critique of grand narratives (Foster, 1996; Jones, 1998), comparatively little scholarship has examined how the emergent paradigm of metamodernity—characterised by an oscillation between postmodern scepticism and modernist sincerity (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010)—might reframe the ethical and aesthetic stakes of embodied performance. Existing accounts of the artist's body as a site of power, suffering, and resistance (Foucault, 1995; Butler, 1988; Debord, 1994) remain largely anchored in postmodern critique, offering limited conceptual apparatus for understanding contemporary performance practices that oscillate between critical detachment and renewed affective sincerity. This study addresses that gap, asking how a metamodern framework can account for the ethics of presence, vulnerability, and relationality that characterise performance art in the contemporary moment—a question of both disciplinary significance, for performance and cultural theory, and broader significance, for understanding how contemporary artistic practice negotiates meaning amid epistemic uncertainty.

Assumptions of the Study

Although the postmodern emphasis on irony, fragmentation and the critique of grand narratives has been widely theorised (Foster, 1996; Jones, 1998), there has been comparatively little scholarship that explores how the new paradigm of metamodernity, which oscillates between postmodern scepticism and modernist sincerity (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010), might redefine the ethical and aesthetic concerns of embodied performance. The artist's body as a site of power, suffering and resistance (Foucault, 1995; Butler, 1988; Debord, 1994) has been largely postmodern, providing little conceptual framework for contemporary performance practices that are critical yet also reaffirmative, affective yet detached. This study asks how a metamodern perspective can explain the ethics of presence, vulnerability, and relationality that inform performance art in the present moment, both as a disciplinary question, in the context of performance and cultural theory, and as a broader question, in the context of how contemporary artistic practice is negotiating meaning in an era of epistemic uncertainty.

- The artist's body is not just a medium of representation, but a legitimate and primary one of philosophical and aesthetic inquiry.
- Theorised by Vermeulen and van den Akker, metamodernism is an interpretive framework that can be used in literature and architecture, but also in embodied and performative art practices.
- Spectatorship is not a static or neutral relation, but a historically and culturally specific one that is actively reconfigured by performance art.
- Canonical and contemporary performance works (e.g., those of Abramović, Acconci, Schneemann, Athey, Orlan, and Sehgal) are treated as representative

examples from which broader theoretical patterns can be responsibly drawn, but not as exhaustive of the field.

Objectives of the Study

General Aim

To rethink performance art in the theoretical framework of metamodernity, in which the postmodern ironic and the modern sincere approaches to the body, power, spectatorship, and resistance reconfigure ethical-aesthetic meaning-making.

Specific Objectives

1. To explore the artist's body as a key medium for negotiating identity, presence, and affective becoming in performance art.
2. To examine the ways in which relations of authority, aggression, and discipline are performed, challenged, and made visible in the body.
3. To examine the shift from passive viewing to participatory co-presence and the ethical consequences of this change in spectatorship.
4. To create a metamodern conceptual framework that explains the oscillation of performance art between critique and belief, detachment and affect, as an emerging "ethics of presence."

Conceptual or Theoretical Framework

The theory of metamodernism developed by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker is the foundation of this study, which describes the current cultural situation as a "both-neither" logic that re-activates affect, belief, and narrative, while maintaining postmodern criticality (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010). This framework is different from Fredric Jameson's description of late-capitalist depthlessness and Raymond Williams's idea of emergent cultural forms, because it emphasizes oscillation instead of flatness, and, following Turner, it is read here as a post-ironic sensibility that strategically performs authenticity despite epistemological ambiguity. The study of power and aggression is informed by three supporting theoretical lenses operationalised in relation to performance art. Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* explains the inscription of power on and through the body. The study's focus on identity and resistance is supported by Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which explains the materiality and performativity of the body. The study's analysis of spectatorship and the mediated consumption of suffering is set in the context of Guy Debord's concept of the "society of the spectacle." Read together, these paradigms enable the study to view performance art as more than a postmodern critique, but as a praxis that oscillates and is ethically charged, as shown in a schematic in Figure 1 (see Results and Discussion, Section 4.4). The remainder of this article is organised as follows. The Methodology section describes the qualitative, interpretive-conceptual design used to analyse the selected performance works and theoretical literature. The Results and Discussion section summarizes the study's findings in four thematic axes:

the artist's body as the primary medium; authority, aggression, and defiance; resistance and the transformation of spectatorship; and a final synthesis toward a metamodern ethics of presence, which culminates in a conceptual framework (Figure 1). The article ends with a list of references.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design used in this study is qualitative, interpretive-conceptual research design, which is based on hermeneutic textual and visual-cultural analysis. The study does not seek to produce primary empirical data, but rather to read selected performance artworks and critical reception closely and theoretically, placing them in the conceptual framework of metamodernism. This design is suitable for a humanities-based inquiry that aims for theoretical reconceptualisation, not measurement or hypothesis testing, and is consistent with the practice of performance studies and cultural theory, where close reading and conceptual synthesis are the main ways of producing knowledge (see Bishop, 2012; Jones, 1998).

Research Locale/Study Setting

The research is conceptual-critical in nature, and is not limited to a single physical location. It is situated in the wider discursive context of performance art history and theory, from the mid-twentieth century (Dadaism, Futurism, Surrealism, Kaprow's Happenings) to the present (participatory and relational practices of the 2010s). This field includes gallery, museum, and public space performances that have been recorded in scholarly monographs, journal articles, and artist archives, and that serve as the context in which the study's textual analysis is set.

Participants or Data Sources

The data sources of the study are not human subjects, but rather performance artworks and theoretical and critical texts that have been purposively selected. Works of recognised canonical significance and thematic relevance to the study's objectives were identified through purposive (criterion-based) sampling, such as Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 0* (1974) and *The Artist Is Present* (2010), Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* (1975) and *Meat Joy* (1964), Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972), Ron Athey's *Self-Obliteration* (1993), Orlan's *Carnal Art* series, and Tino Sehgal's *This Progress* (2010). The works were chosen for their long-term critical documentation and their ability to shed light on the four thematic goals of the study: embodiment, power, spectatorship, and resistance.

Research Instruments or Materials

The qualitative-conceptual design of the study led to the use of the main instruments: the theoretical frameworks and the scholarly literature used to read the selected performance works. These are basic works on performance theory (Bishop, 2012; Goldberg, 2011; Jones, 1998; Sayre, 1989), critical philosophy (Foucault, 1995; Butler, 1988; Debord, 1994), and metamodernist theory (Turner, 2011; Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010). No questionnaires, laboratory apparatus or software-based instruments were used, but rather textual and documentary sources, such as artist statements, exhibition records and secondary scholarship, were used as material basis for analysis.

Data Gathering Procedure

Data collection was carried out by systematically reviewing the scholarship on performance art and metamodernism, starting with the basic texts (Goldberg, 2011; Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010) and moving outwards by citation tracing to uncover recurring theoretical issues and canonical case studies. Thematic patterns emerged from the literature, and performance works were selected iteratively: embodiment, discipline, spectacle, and resistance. Prior to analysis, each selected work was cross-referenced with several secondary sources to verify the accuracy and completeness of the description.

Data Analysis

Thematic-conceptual analysis was used as a qualitative method appropriate for synthesizing textual and theoretical material on patterns of meaning. Selected performance pieces and theoretical texts were manually coded into four thematic categories that correspond to the study's specific aims: (1) the body as medium, (2) power and discipline, (3) spectatorship, and (4) resistance and agency. These themes were then interpreted through the prism of metamodernity, which explores how each theme swings between postmodern critique and modernist sincerity. The analysis is comparative and interpretive, not statistical, as is common in critical and cultural theory research.

Ethical Considerations

This was a desk-based, literature-oriented study, with no human subjects involved, and therefore did not require institutional review board or ethics committee approval. Ethical standards were nevertheless upheld by careful and accurate representation of artists' works and intentions, careful and accurate attribution of all quoted and paraphrased material in accordance with APA 7 citation conventions, and by avoiding sensationalising representations of suffering, violence, or the body as discussed in the source performances. Special attention was paid to performances that involved explicit risk or distress to the body, in keeping with the study's own argument about the ethics of representing suffering, rather than a voyeuristic engagement. The findings are

presented below in relation to the four specific objectives of the study: the artist's body as primary medium (4.1); authority, aggression, and defiance (4.2); resistance and the transformation of spectatorship (4.3); and a synthesis toward a metamodern ethics of presence (4.4).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 The Artist's Body as a Primary Medium

The artist's body is a crucial part of the performance art, as it is the subject and object of the performance, and is also used to communicate personal, social, or political messages. Metamodernity's performance art vacillates between ironic self-awareness and renewed sincerity, presenting the body as a locus of affective becoming. It reclaims presence in the face of mediation, an ethics of vulnerability and relationality, lived immediacy negotiating meaning as provisional, suspended between scepticism and belief. Marina Abramović is known for her avant-garde approach, which involves pushing the boundaries of physical and emotional limits through her body. In her signature piece *Rhythm 0* (1974), Abramović invited the public to touch her body with 72 objects placed on a table, from a feather to a loaded revolver. The audience was allowed to touch these objects, some of which were harmless and some of which could be harmful, on her body, which made the performance a kind of a merging of the artist and the viewer, and also showed the artist's vulnerability and the viewer's often aggressive nature (Abramović, 2016, p. 126; Foster, 1996, p. 130). The work reveals the voyeuristic nature of art consumption and the exploitation of the artist's anguish, and the delicate balance between coercion and consent. The emphasis on the body is not just physical, but also often a focus on identity, gender and the social and political implications of embodiment. Carolee Schneemann and Ana Mendieta were feminist performance artists who used their bodies to challenge cultural norms and the structures of patriarchy, to challenge objectification, violence and affirmation of agency. Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* (1975) showcased her recitation of a feminist text from a scroll progressively extracted from her body, symbolising the emergence of the feminine voice and challenging patriarchal oppression (Jones, 1998, p. 154). Artists often use their bodies to mimic or endure pain, revealing the ways in which bodies are governed, disciplined, and violently treated in public and private spaces. The artist's body is subjected to harsh conditions or actions, and becomes the medium for the inscription of social issues and taboos. Vito Acconci claims that "the artist's body is not just a subject but an active player in the discourse of art" (Acconci, 2000, p. 12). This approach challenges the commercialization of suffering and the voyeuristic tendencies of a media-rich culture, pushing the boundaries of physical endurance and emotional intensity to make viewers question their own participation in the show of suffering. Performance art thus contests the traditional passive involvement of the audience. A participant in performance art is sometimes asked, or even required, to engage with a work of art, which can alter the course of the performance, as opposed to an observer who views a painting or sculpture from a distance. This approach is still being developed by contemporary artists: Tino Sehgal's *This Progress* (2010) invited performers of all ages

to interact with visitors to the museum in discussions on development, making the line between performance and conversation and between artist and audience indistinct. These performances defy the notion of art engagement, urging dynamic engagement and a communal experience (Bishop, 2012, p. 234). In performance art, the body becomes more than just a medium for expression, it becomes a complex site for exploring various aspects of identity, life, power, violence, and resistance. Postmodern artists frequently investigate identity in the form of their artworks, looking at how the human subject is influenced by the wider cultural and political context. Judith Butler claims that the body is "material and performative" (Butler, 1988, p. 521), meaning that it is a vehicle for social norms and a vehicle for resistance and challenge. Performance art becomes a vehicle for the artist to challenge and challenge the traditional ideas of gender, ethnicity and identity, and to show how fluid and open to reinterpretation they are. *Meat Joy* (1964) was Schneemann's groundbreaking work, in which she used her own body to challenge traditional gender roles and the exploitation of women. The work challenged the male gaze on the female body, using raw meat and physical action to depict it as a space of strength and independence. The chaotic and visceral nature of the performance embodied the complex interplay between control and freedom, exemplifying performance art's tendency to blur the boundary between the regulated and the liberated aspects of human identity.

4.2 Authority, Aggression, and Defiance

In a metamodernist perspective, authority is neither rejected nor accepted, but rather questioned and tentatively lived. Aggression is a critique and a complicity, revealing the latent violence in structures and recognising entanglement. Defiance is not a break, but a negotiation, a vulnerability, an irony, a new sincerity, an ethics of becoming, a contestation of power without transcendence. The body is frequently employed as a medium to question and embody power relations, particularly those of violence and domination, in performance art. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault's theory of power and surveillance is crucial to understanding these processes in art, as he argues that contemporary cultures control individuals through subtle and pervasive methods of power, not through violence (Foucault, 1995, p. 200). This idea is reflected in performance art, in which artists will intentionally put themselves in situations of violence or endurance to show how authority is marked on the body. Abramović's work is full of examples of the body as a material arena for the struggle for power, and *Rhythm 0* is no exception. Abramović's body—simultaneously passive and defiant—served as a medium for the real-time manifestation of power relations, emphasising the human subject's vulnerability under external influence. The idea of potential harm is an example of the degree to which authority is exercised in an aggressive manner, symbolically and physically. The use of torture and spectacle in performance art is a reflection of a wider cultural interest in the themes of suffering and the representation of violence in modern society. This focus on violence is frequently a reflection of the media's ability to turn human suffering into entertainment, as described by Guy Debord in the "society of the spectacle," in which life is lived by images (Debord, 1994, p. 24). Artists put themselves in the middle of these performances, making viewers face the

brutal facts of violence that is often sanitized or abstracted in media. Ron Athey's performance art involves significant physical pain for the body, as well as the body being a central point of discussion for LGBT identity, trauma and marginalisation. In Athey's *Self-Obliteration* (1993), self-mutilation and ritualistic cutting are explored through the image of blood and agony, to look at the stigmatisation and regulation of gay bodies by convention. The performance shows that violence, whether it is committed or suffered, is a means of resistance to repressive regimes.

4.3 Resistance and the Transformation of Spectatorship

Performance art frequently functions as a means of opposition to entrenched systems of authority. It produces resistance by engaging the body with power, by unsettling fixed identities and dominant narratives, by turning spectacle into critique, and by involving the spectator. Resistance is not heroic opposition, but rather a fragmented, embodied intervention, where meaning is continually deferred, contested, and reconstituted. Amelia Jones claims that the fragility of the body in performance art reveals the "limits of power and control" (Jones, 1998, p. 188). The works question the commoditisation of bodies in capitalist systems, in which the body is seen as a commodity to be consumed or subjugated; performance art reaffirms the body as a focus of personal and collective resistance. *The Artist Is Present* (2010) by Abramović is a good example of this type of resistance. Abramović sat in silence for more than 700 hours during the entire presentation, inviting the visitors to sit opposite her in nonverbal connection. The simplicity of the performance, which makes the body both weak and strong, defies the fast-paced, consumption-oriented tendencies of modern culture. Abramović's slow time and her body as the sole medium challenges the postmodern spectacle of life, providing a contemplative moment for reflection on human connection and presence. Performance art examines corporeal experience, contesting the passive reception of spectacle and prompting profound contemplation of the interplay between the individual, society, and the dynamics of power and control. Such works often "provoke critical discussion of the ethical implications of representing pain and suffering" (Finkelpearl, 2000, p. 98). Vito Acconci's performance art often addresses issues of the male body, nudity, pain, and spectacle, and examines the complexities of the male body in a public space (Buckland, 1995; Harrington, 2004). In his notorious *Seedbed* (1972), Acconci hid himself under a gallery floor, speaking his sexual fantasies into a hidden microphone, an act that merges the personal with the public, the subjective with the voyeuristic (Acconci, 2000, p. 45; Foster, 1996, p. 180). This confrontational and intensely intimate style of performance has been interpreted as a powerful critique of the male experience and the power dynamics inherent in the art-viewing experience, and of "the expectations placed on the male body" (Schachter, 2005, p. 72). Orlan is known for her "*Carnal Art*" series, where she has herself subjected to cosmetic surgery as a form of performance art, thus challenging the beauty standards of society and the control of women's bodies (Krauss, 1985, p. 105). Her work exposes the commercialization of the body and the merging of art, identity and medical technology. Performance art is a mode of investigation into sensory reality and a challenge to traditional modes of spectatorship, highlighting the physical dimensions of the body and its relationship to social structures,

and allowing for deeper investigation of the interactions between individuals, society and the mechanisms of power and authority. This confrontation frequently includes the visual aspects of suffering and its display, and can lead to a great deal of discussion about the ethics of such display (Davis, 2008, p. 44). Performance art thus contests the passive consumption of spectacle by emphasising the corporeal and immediate sensation of the body, compelling spectators to confront disquieting truths about the processes of power and control in society (Jones, 1998, p. 56). This move from passive observation to active reflection invites people to reflect on their own involvement in systems of authority and domination. The visual aspects of suffering and the display of distress in performance art are an important way of examining the ethical issues of representation. Such performances surpass a simple depiction of violence; they are designed to provoke a response that fosters contemplation on the moral ramifications of representing such events. The incorporation of physical pain and bodily extremity forces the viewer to consider the limits of representation and the possible desensitisation to suffering (Kritzer, 2008, p. 78). These issues extend the limits of representation and of the experience of pain in modern society through performance art.

4.4 Toward a Metamodern Ethics of Presence: A Synthesis

Metamodernity offers a much-needed conceptual tool to rephrase the ontology of performance art, a tool that goes beyond the postmodern focus on fragmentation, irony and critique, and instead brings in an oscillatory logic that lives in scepticism and renewed sincerity. In this paradigm, the performative body is no longer limited to revealing structures of power or simply to perform resistance; it is a moving point of negotiation where affect, ethics, and relationality are constantly re-made. The depiction of suffering, violence and corporeal extremity then becomes a new philosophical statement. It is not just a critique or provocation, it is an effort to re-construct meaning in an epistemological state of uncertainty. The spectator, in turn, is re-positioned as an agent, caught up in an intersubjective field of experience that is both detached and empathetic. Performance art, in turn, makes the experience of suffering into an ethical experience, where the distinction between self and other, representation and reality is constantly blurred. These findings are summarized in a single conceptual framework in Figure 1. The artist's body is in the centre, where embodied negotiation is the focus, bringing together the four thematic findings of the study: power and discipline, suffering and vulnerability, spectatorship, and resistance and agency. These findings coalesce around one axis of oscillation, from postmodern irony and critique to modernist sincerity and belief, and performance art is neither one nor the other, but oscillates between them. The result of this oscillation, and the article's main theoretical contribution, is what the article calls an ethics of presence: the reconstruction of meaning as a becoming praxis.

Figure 1 synthesises these findings into a single conceptual framework.

The artist's body occupies the centre as the site of embodied negotiation, drawing together the study's four thematic findings—power and discipline, suffering and vulnerability, spectatorship, and resistance and agency. These findings converge along a single oscillating axis that runs from postmodern irony and critique to modernist sincerity and belief; performance art, read through metamodernity, occupies neither pole but moves recursively between them. The outcome of this oscillation, and the study's central theoretical contribution, is what the article terms an ethics of presence: the reconstruction of meaning as a dynamic praxis of becoming.

Figure 1. A Metamodern Framework for Performance Art

Synthesising the study's findings on the body, power, spectatorship, and resistance

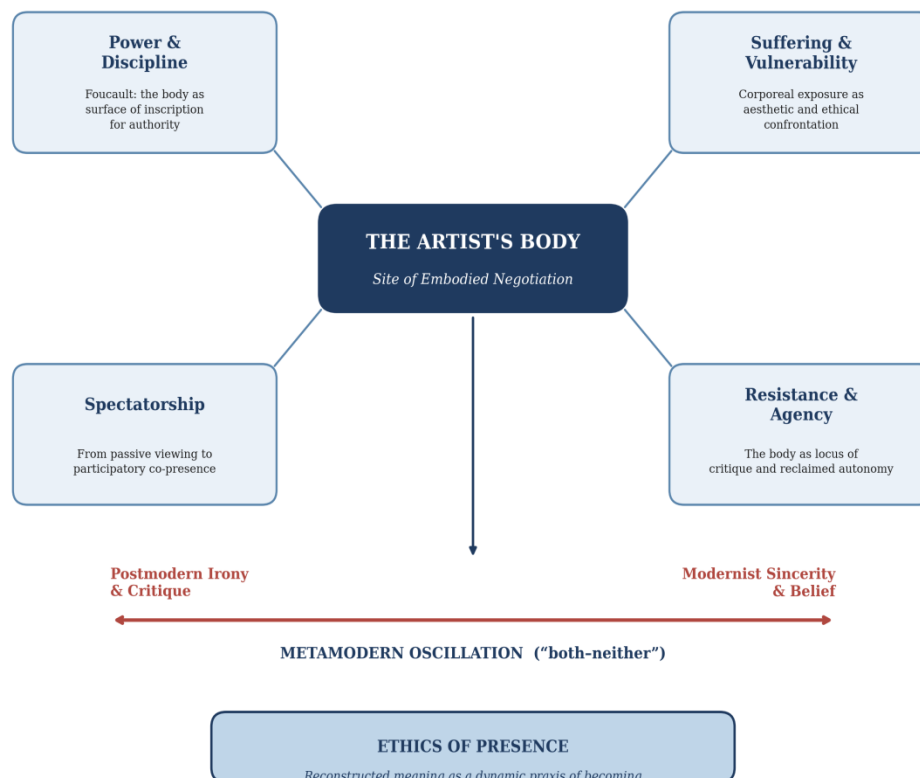


Figure No. 1. A metamodern framework for performance art, synthesising the study's four thematic findings—power, suffering, spectatorship, and resistance—around the artist's body as the site of oscillation between postmodern irony and modernist sincerity, culminating in an ethics of presence.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, these findings indicate that performance art advances an emergent sensibility that neither fully rejects nor uncritically embraces existing structures, but navigates them through reflexive participation. Understood as an instance of metamodernist art practice, performance art emerges as an evolving praxis of becoming—an embodied inquiry into the possibilities of meaning, responsibility, and presence in a world marked by contradiction and contingency. This directly addresses the study's overall objective: the four thematic axes examined—embodiment, authority, spectatorship, and resistance—converge not as static categories but as an oscillating field in which the artist's body continuously negotiates the "both-neither" logic that defines the metamodern condition.

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