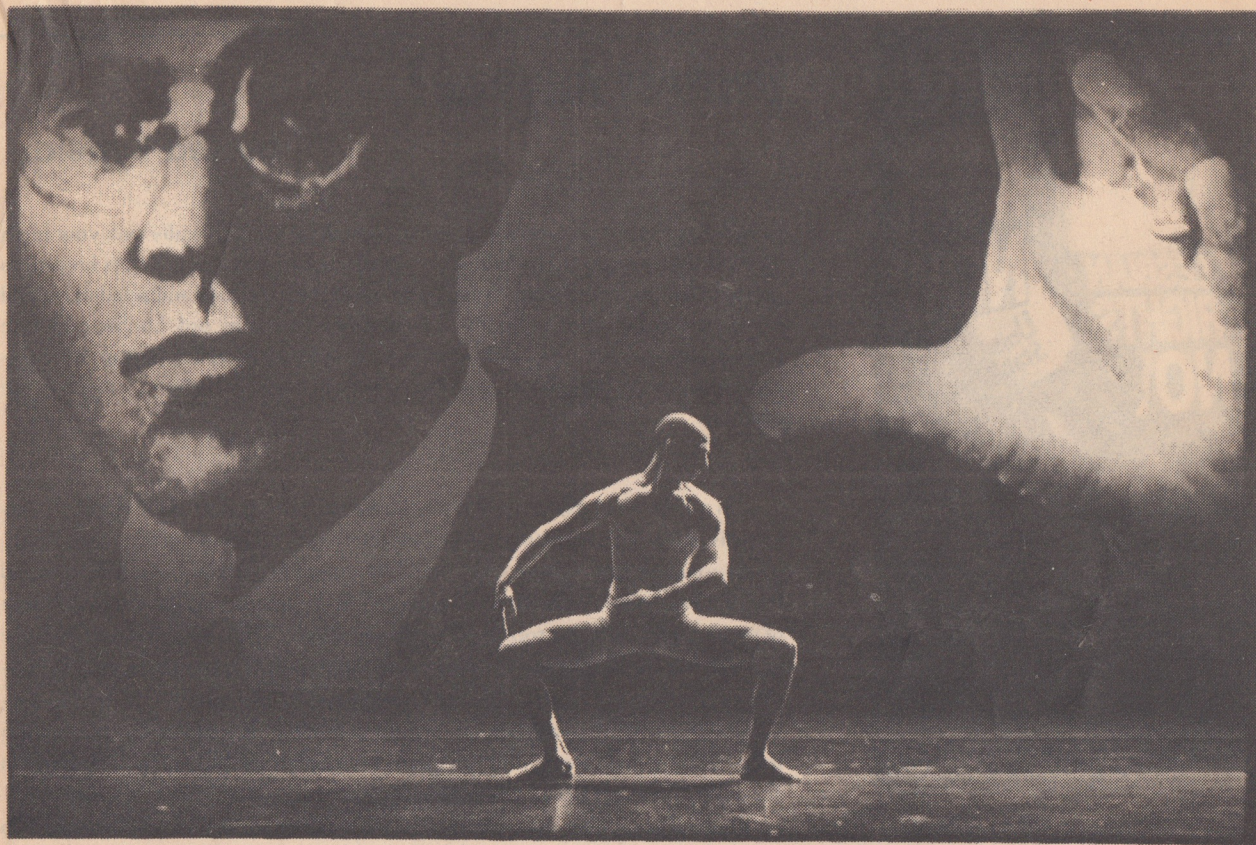




Stephen Petronio, "An Amnesia" with projections by Justin Terzi  
This photograph was included in the exhibition "Out in Public" at the New York Public Library

photo: Tom Brazil

## Protest as... Coming Out on Stage

by Annie Lanzillotto  
with quotes from Barbara Stratyner

Following is a series of reflections on the exhibit "Out in Public" by Barbara Stratyner, and a series of writings by Annie Lanzillotto baring her chest within the context of those reflections.

"Coming out on stage is an act of protest. The solo voice coming out on stage is a braver act of protest than marching in group protest."

- Barbara Stratyner

formity. In performance and in illness, my intention is self-exposure. Sharing the image with the audience of the way my hand looks when, "You should see these women! Circling the table, washing the dishes, water boiling, their hands look like newborn babies, as mine does when I pull it out of my lover's cunt," is definitely forcing them to think about what they would not want to. So is pulling my shirt off and revealing a crosshatch of scars. Is this protest of an undeliberate nature, when it becomes protest only because of the antipathy of the audience? Gay and lesbian performers have an automatically antipathetic audience. Everything we do, on and off stage, is automatically rendered protest.

"Coming out is inherently theatrical. Coming out is often planned, scripted, rehearsed, role-played.... On stage, you're in a power position, and you're in a vulnerable position. Nobody comes out on stage before they deny it. The performative act of coming out generally comes from someone who has performed straight, on stage and in life...the person you pretend to be."

- Barbara Stratyner

A.L.: I don't say these things in the mirror; on stage, I ask for pub-

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A.L.: When I say, on stage, with my fist raised in the air, "This arm has been inside a woman up to the wrist!" I am proclaiming my victory (Oh poor and tainted word) over everything that I, growing up and lesbian, have had to push against; ultimately my own vagina, contoured as it was by fear and a deep love of women.

"Performance and protest are completely linked, specifically about gay rights. The use of performance techniques in social protest, that is, theatricalized protest, is an effective method for both public instruction and political persuasion. Using traditional tools of theater (props, costumes, banners, and parade floats), political groups such as ACT-UP gained considerable public and press attention while blurring the lines separating performance and protest."

- Barbara Stratyner

A.L.: I like seeing faces and feeling the illusion of community. I march for that. I like seeing what old lovers who fly to D.C. are up to; but in the group, in the street, in the river of the march, I never heard my voice. I lose my voice, both literally and figuratively. The stage for me is distilled. The stage is the black silence I can enter. I saw a scientist hold a snake and a sterile container. The snake seized the container with its jaw and shot its venom into the pure atmosphere that that glass contained. This is the stage for me. How else can I see what my own sweet venom is made of?

"Protest is forcing people to think about something they wouldn't want to think about.... For it to be an act of protest, there has to be an audience, an audience that is not totally aligned with the language of the performance. Much of radical camp is not an act of protest because it is performed to an audience who already speaks the same language."

- Barbara Stratyner

A.L.: Protest is not my intent, yet my life, as I live it, can't help but be confrontational. I'm a protest even to myself. Coming out to myself was a healing from a different kind of protest my body was already engaged in; illness. At 18 I developed a lymphatic cancer. The cure was as radical as the disease itself, as cures must be. Still in pursuit of a somewhat elusive health, I work to identify and reject the boons of illness that I can't otherwise win. All throughout my childhood I remember illness as the most effective tool of defiance, making me exempt from participating in the status quo of the life of a child. Articulating the experience of illness is its own affront to the way people are generally presumptuous about bodily experience. A.I.D.S. certainly forces the general public to think about things they don't want to think about; sex for starters, not to mention the unceremonious deterioration of the body, or the mass of an articulate gay protest. All this has its backlash. By having gay private experience catapulted into the language of mainstream culture we have become the newest target of marketing. "Gays and Lesbians. They're affluent, articulate and they'll buy your products!" is the latest mass-market mailing outcry. I reject this boon of A.I.D.S.. In fact I'm swallowing water from the high tide of a marketed gay identity. So much for the bundle of joy The bundle of joy is a bundle of con-

formed straight, on stage and in life...the person you pretend to be."

- Barbara Stratyner

A.L.: I don't say these things in the mirror; on stage, I ask for public witness. The stage has afforded me with a place and an audience to perform a self-designed series of initiation rites. Coming out on stage was a big one. My extended family congratulated me after the show for playing a good role. "Did you hear," they say to relatives who were not in attendance, "cousin Annie said on stage that she was a lesbian!" What does this "on stage" mean? We've entered an area buffered by the possibility of a fourth wall. The chance that this all is fiction. If this is a protest, it is because the public has protested first. There is no initiation rite, even within the subculture, where I as a lesbian have been affirmed by public witness. The stage provides me with this public witnessing, necessary for self-transformation.

Annie Lanzillotto came out on stage in 1993 in her solo performance, "Confessions of a Bronx Tomboy: My Throwing Arm (this useless expertise)." She would like to thank Mike Kindred for his solo voice.

Barbara Stratyner is Curator of Exhibitions at The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, where she has developed a series of exhibits on Artists and Advocacy, specifically anti-fascism and blacklisting, and most recently, "Out in Public: Post-Stonewall Performance and Protest." "Out in Public" was developed with input from a large number of library staff members, who also lent protest memorabilia (buttons and t-shirts) to complement materials from the library's research collection: posters, programs, texts, and photographs on performance, an audio track of coming-out songs, and oversized photographs of performance and protest marches from 1969 to the present by Tom Brazil and Dona Ann McAdams.

## Secret Lives of an Art Critic

by Cathy Edwards

Jill Johnston interviews Jasper Johns and asks him about his work: "Well, Jill," he says, laughing hard again, "if that's what you see...." Why are artists so reluctant to talk about the meaning in their work? Is it because artists, representative of the new, oppositional, or avant-garde, are important precisely because they are removed from prosaic means of expression? Does the desire to preserve that enigma contribute to a reluctance to engage, the consequent fostering of a certain mystique? One reason I was drawn to Johnston's new book *Secret Lives in Art* is her mystique: unlike Johns, a riddle because of his silence, Johnston is preoccupied with explaining herself and her point of view.

Johnston's book reads like a good mystery story; her writing

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