American Artists on Art

from 1940 to 1980

Edited by
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Performance Art, Film, and Video

By 1970, several artists in both California and the East had taken up performance art—whether as a deliberately chosen alternative to the static object-commodity or as an inevitable outcome of the shifting directions and premises and the expansion of boundaries that had occurred in modern art. In any case, it was not long before museums were hosting performances, as they had eventually presented happenings; and galleries were selling to museums and schools the films and video tapes which artists had made, sometimes as a record of the event, but more often *as* the art work itself. Video is particularly desirable as a medium for performance art because, unlike films, it allows the artist to see and criticize his/her work during the process of making it. Performance and body art evolved not only from happenings (and their ancestors), but also from Abstract Expressionism or Action Painting in respect to the idea of the art work as event and as the result of the artist's whole body action and identification with the work. The physical body and autobiographical subject matter and content that pervaded the arts of the seventies reflected overall cultural concerns familiar to everyone—whether or not they joined a consciousness-raising group, came out of the closet, took up yoga, ate health foods, jogged, or just went swimming.

During the seventies the magazine *Avalanche* was a primary source of statements, interviews, and photographs of work by artists in performance, film, and video. In the later seventies other journals presenting artists' comments and writings came to the fore, among them *Tracks* and *View;* the latter devotes each issue to an interview with one artist.

BRUCE NAUMAN (1941-   )

Bruce Nauman makes clear how the artist's awareness of his/her own body is communicated to the spectator in performance or body sculpture. See also a previous Nauman interview with Willoughby Sharp, *Arts magazine* (March 1970), which deals with his earlier installations and sculptures and several of his interior architectural pieces, that is, the corridors, with or without video and sound accompaniment.

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Excerpted from Willoughby Sharp, "Interview with Bruce Nauman," *Avalanche* (Winter 1971)

W.S.: How did you arrive at the San Jose piece, did it grow out of your *Performance Corridor*?

B.N.: Yes, because the first pieces that were at all like it were just corridors that ended at a wall and then made into a V. Then I put in another V and finally I put in the mirror.

W.S.: Why did you decide to use it that way?

B.N.: The mirror?

W.S.: No, the change in the interior, the second V.

B.N.: When the corridors had to do with sound damping, the wall relied on soundproofing material which altered the sound in the corridor and also caused pressure on your ears, which is what I was really interested in: pressure changes that occurred while you were passing by the material. And then one thing to do was make a V. When you are at the open end of the V there's not too much effect, but as you walk into the V the pressure increases quite a bit, it's very claustrophobic. . . .

Originally a lot of the things that turned into videotapes and films were performances. At the time no one was really interested in presenting them, so I made them into films. No one was interested in that either, so the film is really a record of the performance. After I had made a few films I changed to videotape, just because it was easier for me to get at the time. The camera work became a bit more important, although the camera was stationary in the first ones. . . .

W.S.: Were these the films of bouncing balls?

B.N.: Yeah. The videotapes I did after those films were related, but the camera was often turned on its side or upside down, or a wide angle lens was used for distortion. . . . As I became more aware of what happens in the recording medium I would make little alterations. Then I went back and did the performance . . . at the Whitney during the *Anti-Illusion* show in 1969. I had already made a videotape of it, bouncing in the corner for an hour. . . .

W.S.: The concern for the body seems stronger now than when we did the *Arts magazine* interview.

B.N.: Well, the first time I really talked to anybody about body awareness was in the summer of 1968. Meredith Monk was in San Francisco. She had thought about or seen some of my work and recognized it. An aware-

ness of yourself comes from a certain amount of activity and you can't get it from just thinking about yourself. You do exercises, you have certain kinds of awarenesses that you don't have if you read books. So the films and some of the pieces that I did after that for videotapes were specifically about doing exercises in balance. I thought of them as dance problems without being a dancer, being interested in the kinds of tension that arise when you try to balance and can't. Or do something for a long time and get tired. In one of those first films, the violin film, I played the violin as long as I could. I don't know how to play the violin, so it was hard, playing on all four strings as fast as I could for as long as I could. I had ten minutes of film and ran about seven minutes of it before I got tired and had to stop and rest a little bit and then finish it.

W.S.: But you could have gone on longer than the ten minutes?

B.N.: I would have had to stop and rest more often. My fingers got very tired and I couldn't hold the violin any more.

W.S.: What you are saying in effect is that in 1968 the idea of working with calisthenics and body movements seemed far removed from sculptural concerns. Would you say that those boundaries and the distance between them have dissolved to a certain extent?

B.N.: Yes, it seems to have gotten a lot smaller.

W.S.: What you have done has widened the possibilities for sculpture to the point where you can't isolate video works and say, they aren't sculpture.

B.N.: It is only in the last year that I have been able to bring them together.

W.S.: How do you mean?

B.N.: Well, even last year it seemed pretty clear that some of the things I did were either performance or recorded performance activities, and others were sculptural—and it is only recently that I have been able to make the two cross or meet in some way.

W.S.: In which works have they met?

B.N.: The ones we have been talking about. The first one was really the corridor, the piece with two walls that was originally a prop in my studio for a videotape in which I walked up and down the corridor in a stylized way for an hour. At the Whitney *Anti-Illusion* show I presented the prop as a piece, called *Performance Corridor*. It was 20 inches wide and 20 feet long, so a lot of strange things happened to anybody who walked into it . . . just like walking in a very narrow hallway.

54. Bruce Nauman, *Green Light Corridor*. Wallboard and fluorescent light, variable dimensions. Giuseppe Panza di Biumo, Milan.

W.S.: You had been doing a lot of walking around in the studio. When did you start thinking about using corridors?

B.N.: Well, I don't really remember the choice that led me to . . . I had made a tape of walking, of pacing, and another tape called *Rhythmic Stamping in the Studio* which was basically a sound problem, but videotaped . . . I was just walking around the studio stamping in various rhythms.

W.S.: Did you want the sound to be in sync?

B.N.: The sound was in sync on that one. In the first violin film the sound is out of sync, but you really don't know it until the end of the film. . . .

W.S.: Is the film of the two bouncing balls in the square out of sync? Did you play with the sync on that?

B.N.: No. I started out of sync but there again, it is a wild track, so as the tape stretches and tightens it goes in and out of sync. I more or less wanted it to be in sync but I just didn't have the equipment and the patience to do it.

W.S.: What did you think of it?

B.N.: It was all right. There's one thing that I can't remember—I think I cut it out of some of the prints and left it in others. At a certain point I had two balls going and I was running around all the time trying to catch them. Sometimes they would hit something on the floor or the ceiling and go off into the corner and hit together. Finally I lost track of them both. I picked up one of the balls and just threw it against the wall. I was really mad.

W.S.: Why?

B.N.: Because I was losing control of the game. I was trying to keep the rhythm going, to have the balls bounce once on the floor and once on the ceiling and then catch them, or twice on the floor and once on the ceiling. There was a rhythm going and when I lost it that ended the film. My idea at the time was that the film should have no beginning or end: one should be able to come in at any time and nothing would change. All the films were supposed to be like that, because they all dealt with ongoing activities. So did almost all of the videotapes, only they were longer, they went on for an hour or so. There is much more a feeling of being able to come in or leave at any time.

W.S.: So you didn't want the film to come to an end.

B.N.: I would prefer that it went on forever.

W.S.: What kind of practice did you have for those films? Did you play the violin to see what sound you were going to get?

B.N.: I probably had the violin around for a month or two before I made the film.

W.S.: Did you get it because you were going to use it, or did it just come into your life?

B.N.: I think I bought it for about fifteen dollars. It just seemed like a thing to have. I play other instruments, but I never played the violin and during the period of time that I had it before the film I started diddling around with it.

W.S.: When did you decide that it might be nice to use it?

B.N.: Well, I started to think about it once I had the violin and I tried one or two things. One thing I was interested in was playing . . . I wanted to set up a problem where it wouldn't matter whether I knew how to play the violin or not. What I did was to play as fast as I could on all four strings with the violin tuned D.E.A.D. I thought it would just be a lot of noise, but it turned out to be musically very interesting. It is a very tense piece. The other idea I had was to play two notes very close together so that you could hear the beats in the harmonics. I did some tapes of that but I never filmed it. Or maybe I did film it while I was walking around the studio playing. The film was called *Walking Around the Studio Playing a Note on the Violin*. The camera was set up near the center of the studio facing one wall, but I walked all around the studio, so often there was no one in the picture, just the studio wall and the sound of the footsteps and the violin. . . .

I guess we talked about this before, about being an amateur and being able to do anything. If you really believe in what you're doing and do it as well as you can, then there will be a certain amount of tension—if you are honestly getting tired, or if you are honestly trying to balance on one foot for a long time, there has to be a certain sympathetic response in someone who is watching you. It is a kind of body response, they feel that foot and that tension. But many things that you could do would be really boring, so it depends a lot on what you choose, how you set up the problem in the first place. Somehow you have to program it to be interesting.

. . . With the films I would work over an idea until there was something that I wanted to do, then I would rent the equipment for a day or two. So I was more likely to have a specific idea of what I wanted to do. With the videotapes I had the equipment in the studio for almost a year; I could make test tapes and look at them, watch myself on the monitor or have

somebody else there to help. Lots of times I would do a whole performance or tape a whole hour and then change it.

W.S.: Edit?

B.N.: I don't think I would ever edit but I would redo the whole thing if I didn't like it. Often I would do the same performance but change the camera placement and so on. . . .

W.S.: Did you consider using a video system in the San Jose piece?

B.N.: Well, in this piece the mirror takes the place of any video element. In most of the pieces with closed circuit video, the closed circuit functions as a kind of electronic mirror.

. . . The mirror allows you to see some place that you didn't think you could see. In other words you are seeing around the corner. Some of the video pieces have to do with seeing yourself go around a corner, or seeing a room that you know you can't get into like one where the television camera is set on an oscillating mount in a sealed room.

W.S.: That was at the Wilder show, wasn't it?

B.N.: Yes. The camera looks at the whole room; you can see the monitor picture of it, but you can't go into the room and there is a strange kind of removal. You are denied access to that room—you can see exactly what is going on and when you are there but you can never get to that place.

W.S.: People felt they were being deprived of something.

B.N.: It is very strange to explain what that is. It becomes easier to make a picture of the pieces or to describe what the elements are, but it becomes much more difficult to explain what happens when you experience them. . . . It had to do with going up the stairs in the dark, when you think there is one more step and you take the step, but you are already at the top . . . or going down the stairs and expecting there to be another step, but you are already at the bottom. It seems that you always have that jolt and it really throws you off . . . when these pieces work they do that too. Something happens that *you didn't expect and it happens every time. You know why, and what's* going on but you just keep doing the same thing. It is very curious.

W.S.: The Wilder piece was quite complicated.

B.N.: It is hard to understand. The easiest part of the piece to get into was a corridor 34 feet long and 25 inches wide. There was a television camera at the outside entrance, and the picture was at the other end. . . . When you walked into the corridor, you had to go in about 10 feet before you appeared on the television screen that was still 20 feet away from you. I

used a wide angle lens, which disturbed the distance even more. The camera was 10 feet up, so that when you did see yourself on the screen, it was from the back, from above and behind, which was quite different from the way you normally saw yourself or the way you experienced the corridor around yourself. When you realized that you were on the screen, being in the corridor was like stepping off a cliff or down into a hole. It was like the bottom step thing—it was really a very strong experience. You knew what had happened because you could see all of the equipment and what was going on, yet you had the same experience every time you walked in. There was no way to avoid having it.

VITO ACCONCI (1940-)

This entire issue of *Avalanche* is devoted to an analysis by Acconci of his work to 1972. He had been engaged in poetry and other writing from 1964 to 1969, when he turned to performance art. Among numerous other Acconci documents, two should not be missed: "Vito Acconci on Activity and Performance," in "Notebook," *Art and Artists* (May 1971); and Acconci, *Think/Leap/Re-Think/Fall*, in which he presents the history of an installation piece (for Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio, 1976) from its inception throughout the entire process, and his thoughts about it.

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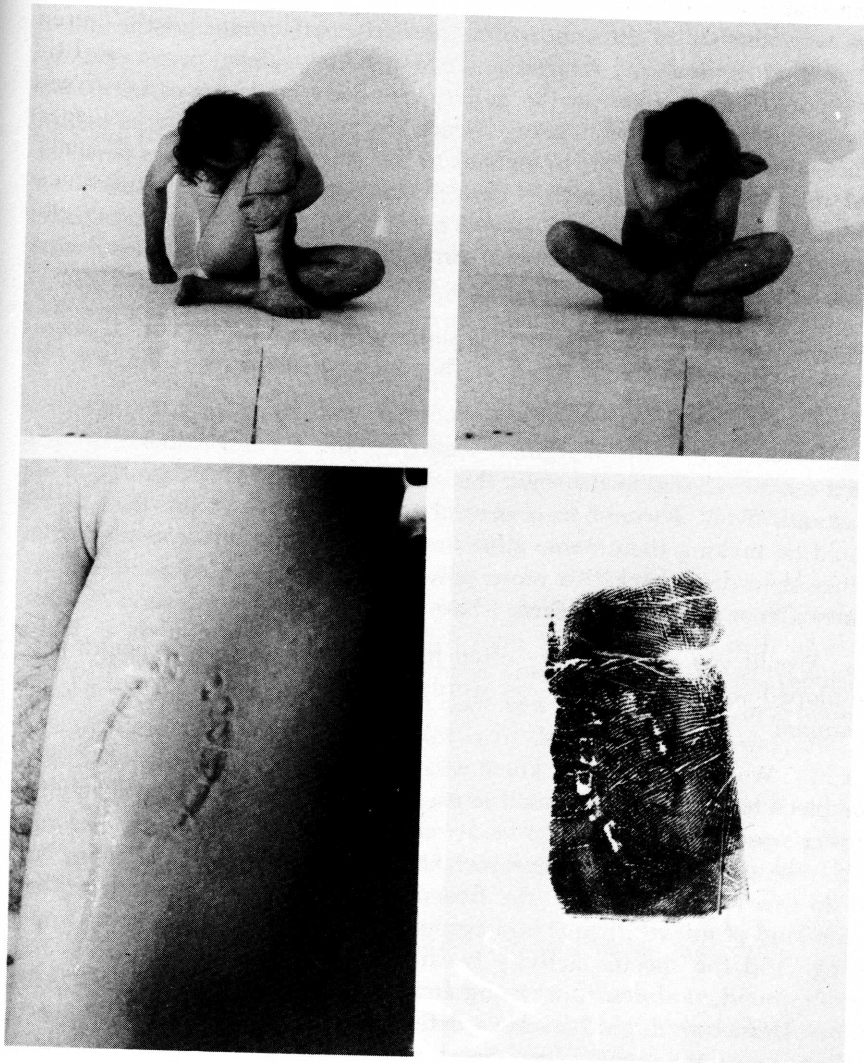
Excerpted from Liza Béar, Interview with Vito Acconci, *Avalanche* (Fall 1972)

V.A.: I think that when I started doing pieces, the initial attempts were very much oriented towards defining my body in a space, finding a ground for myself, an alternate ground for the page ground I had as a poet. It seemed very logical that this could be me, my person, and work from there. But from 1969, after those body definition photograph pieces, the interest has really been in an interactive element, what I would call throwing my voice, setting up a power field, though not so much that I want to grab and trap someone. In pieces like *Points, Blanks,* I was a sort of margin surrounding the audience. . . . Then there was a shift from me as say, margin, to me as center point, as focal point. This particularly came out in my films—most of which were done in a few months in 1970—*Hand and Mouth, Grass and Mouth,* in almost all of which I am the central figure. But it seems that since then I am in a marginal situation again. In *Seedbed,* I'm under the ground—in *Crossfronts* I'm criss-crossing through people, around people. The way I want the space to



55. Vito Acconci, *Trademarks*, 1970. Activity. "Biting myself: biting as much of my body as I can reach. Applying printers' ink to the bites; stamping bite-prints on various surfaces."
(Photo: Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, New York)

work is not so much viewer on one side, me on another, as kind of mingling that involves me moving around the space, being at different points. In a way, that's also the concern of the early performances—the difference is that in those, my interest was in a very neutralized presence. Anybody could have walked to the gallery, anybody could have stared. But obviously something was missing, hence the track toward me as central figure, almost to enable me to go back to the margin, but now as personalized marginal presence, rather than neutralized marginal presence. . . . And my interest over the past year is not in another person as an outsider observing my behavior, but more sort of seeping into what's inside my behavior, seeping into my experience, and my sort of sinking into his.

L.B.: To say "marginal presence" is slightly misleading, isn't it? It seems inconsistent with wanting to affect the public space, exert some kind of power over it . . .

V.A.: I mean physically marginal—being around a room rather than at a point—not marginal in the sense that my presence can be forgotten about or sloughed off. I would be a part of the walls, part of the floor, but I would be making them come alive in such a way that they would strike, rather than draw back. It's more powerful to exist around four walls or under a floor than in one place. I have more points to act from. . . .

L.B.: Would you say that very often the structure of a piece couldn't be developed without that play on words—in *Seedbed, Broadjump 71,* for example?

V.A.: . . . Well, in *Seedbed,* I knew what I wanted the general structure of the piece to be, I wanted myself as a presence that would exist during the viewer's presence, that would be at more than one point—I wanted myself to be part of the space in which the viewer was. One convenient way to do this was to be under the floor, under the ground, which implied some kind of growth, plants underground, develop something, grow something. And the specific activity became clear in thinking in terms like underground, undercurrent, going from that to seedbed. So though the general structure might have been determined by the situation of a public gallery space, the activity itself was a combination of the space and terms for that situation—the words provided the activity. With all this emphasis toward post-studio, post-gallery art or whatever, it seems incredibly retrograde that what I'm doing really demands a gallery space. It really brings back the gallery rather than goes away from it . . . gallery space is not so much a space with an audience—an audience is bad—as a space with passers-by. What I like about 420 are the stairs from floor to floor; the galleries seem like stations on some transportation system, transient exchange points—that kind of situation seems so much the basis of what I've been doing lately.

. . . This interest in movement. Trace it back to poetry, movement over a page. Trace it back to childhood. We always lived in small apartment space—it could never be considered a place for me to be somewhat self-sufficient in. It was always a place from which I had to go, to which I could return.

L.B.: You're clenching your teeth.

V.A.: Maybe the words'll get out through them anyway. . . . When I think of my relationship with my father, I think in terms of walks. Anytime I talked with him we were always walking—walks in the Botanical Gardens in the Bronx. On Sunday mornings my mother would stay home cooking and we would walk. I remember a nursery rhyme he used to tell me. It was about a man with a rubber leg, and it went something like this—"Crossing the river, the man did drown, but his leg kept jumping on." I'm *sure* that was an incredible influence on everything I've ever thought about since. That idea I always talk about, of power field, reverberations . . . the guy is dead, drowned, but that leg keeps going, it just keeps *moving*, it doesn't *stop*. That's like the urge behind *Seedbed*, behind so many of those pieces, the urge to have something continue. . . .

I've always been incredibly interested in drift, though probably my keynote is drive . . . I was thinking particularly of a movie called *Hatari*, which is about a trek in Africa, with John Wayne. . . . The drift element in Hawks's *Hatari* is something I have never quite gotten to, though I think it's been my attempt in the past few months—even in *Seedbed*, though there is a drive, the attempt is to do something all day, and to drift from point to point. . . .

. . . A piece like the Documenta performance—all the things I've been saying lately about acting as the space, becoming part of the space, adhering to the terms of the walls—why, because this would make me drift around the room, from corner to corner.

L.B.: You want to slow down your drive into something more fluid.

V.A.: Yes, because the drive is too much involved with points, and I want that surrounding more than I want the point. . . . It could be a drift with a drive at the back of its mind.

CHRIS BURDEN (1946-)

It is often frightening and always startling to watch Chris Burden's performances, in which he subjects his body to violently dangerous situations that, as he remarks, reflect elements he finds in our culture. No

one could fail to respond to his dramatic pieces; often visually as well as emotively compelling, they set up currents like flashes of energy between the artist and his audience, as Burden himself points out.

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Excerpted from Chris Burden, "Church of Human Energy, An Interview by Willoughby Sharp and Liza Béar," *Avalanche* (Summer-Fall 1973)

W.S.: What do you see as your central concerns?

C.B.: Well, in some of the pieces I'm setting up situations to test my own illusions or fantasies about what happens. *The Locker* piece, for instance . . . I didn't know what it was going to feel like to be in that locker, that's why I did it. I thought it was going to be about isolation; it turned out to be just the opposite. I was seeing people every single minute for thirteen, fourteen hours a day, talking to them all the time. In *Secret Hippie,* I thought I was gonna get hurt when I got that stud hammered in my chest, but it didn't hurt at all, there was absolutely no feeling. In *Shoot* I was supposed to have a grazed wound. We didn't even have any Band-aids—the power of positive thinking. It's not that I consciously decided *not* to think about what might happen . . . I had no plans of going to the hospital; I was going to get drunk or stoned afterwards.

Five Day Locker Piece, *April 26–30, 1971, Irvine, California*

I was locked in locker No. 5 for five consecutive days and did not leave the locker during this time. The locker measurements were 2 feet high, 2 feet wide, 3 feet deep. I stopped eating several days prior to entry, thereby eliminating the problem of solid waste. The locker directly above me contained 5 gallons of bottled water; the locker below me contained an empty 5 gallon bottle.

Shoot, *November 19, 1971, F Space, Santa Ana, California*

At 7:45 pm I was shot in the left arm by a friend. The bullet was from a copper-jacketed 22 long rifle. My friend was standing about 12 feet away.

W.S.: You didn't think it was dangerous?

C.B.: I knew it was dangerous, but I figured it would work out perfectly, the bullet would just nick the side of my arm. It didn't work out that way, but it wasn't a bad wound.

W.S.: So it doesn't matter much to you whether it's a nick or it goes through your arm.

C.B.: No. It's the idea of being shot at to be hit.

W.S.: . . . Why is that interesting?

C.B.: Well, it's something to experience. How can you know what it feels like to be shot if you don't get shot? It seems interesting enough to be worth doing it.

W.S.: Most people don't want to be shot.

C.B.: Yeah, but everybody watches it on TV every day. America is the big shoot-out country. About fifty percent of American folklore is about people getting shot.

W.S.: Do you see a lot of violence in the culture?

C.B.: It's not always out front, but it's there. That's what was so exciting about the sixties, all those big rock festivals and riots in Berkeley. It was horrible but it was interesting. When that was on TV, you watched it.

W.S.: Do you feel that you come out of Southern California?

C.B.: To some degree. I've lived here for six years now. I lived on the East Coast for five years. I don't think of myself as a California artist. But it certainly has influenced me.

W.S.: How has the outdoors, the sun, and the emphasis on one's body affected your work?

C.B.: It's not exactly that, because I don't think of California as being eternally sunny. Look at it now, it's pretty foggy. It's foggy in the winter for months. It's more that there's a different perspective. I used to hate it. In LA the first thing that bugs you is that the horizon is really weird, it's more spaced out, because you're usually looking at it in your car, traveling at sixty, seventy miles an hour . . . I do a lot of thinking when I'm driving on the freeway.

. . . In some ways there's so much else to do that art is almost not important.

W.S.: But isn't that the same everywhere?

C.B.: It seems that in New York there's more art pressure, so to speak.

W.S.: Why is your work art?

C.B.: What else is it?

W.S.: Theater?

C.B.: No, it's not theater. Theater is more mushy, you know what I mean? . . . It seems that bad art is theater. Getting shot is for real . . . lying in bed for twenty-two days . . . there's no element of pretense or make-believe in

it. If I just stayed there for a few hours or went home every day to a giant dinner it would be theater. Another reason is that the pieces are visual too. . . .

W.S.: What's the significance of the drawing you showed at Newspace, *The Church of Human Energy?*

C.B.: The reason I did that drawing is that it represents things that go on when I do pieces. There's an energy that goes back and forth between me and the audience, like electricity.

C.B.: Everything matters, every single thing. Every detail is important, more so than in regular life. . . .

W.S.: How critical are you of the pieces?

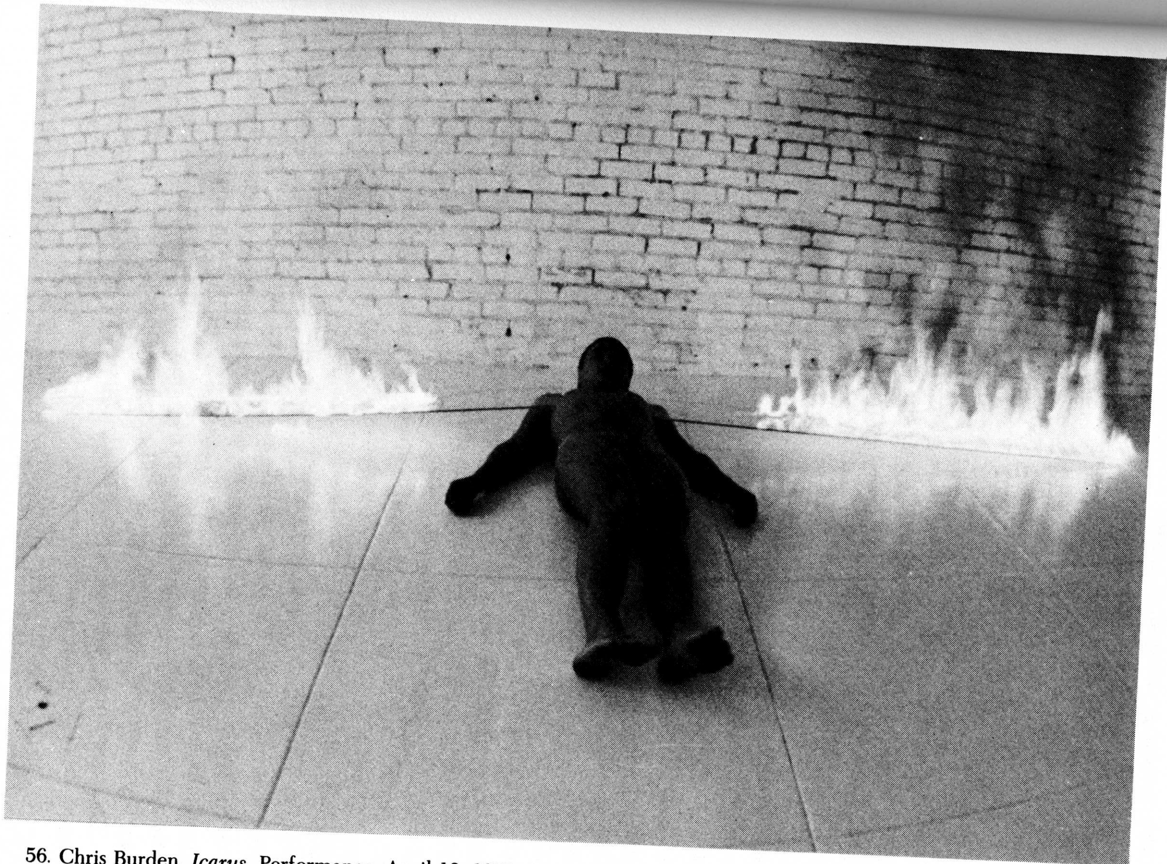
C.B.: I'm always pissed off if I don't get good photos. I'm trying to work that out. It always seems something fucks up; it's just unbelievable. So I think, Why didn't I make a movie of that? What the hell was I thinking about? Or why didn't I have somebody there taking pictures? If I'd had more time at Oberlin, I might have done the piece there a little differently. But it all works out to the good. I wanted to do it a lot higher, and if I'd had two or three days, I would have probably gotten a bigger ladder and hung myself higher up, but then I would have gotten crunched. . . . It's hard to say. Some of the fire pieces, like *Icarus,* have been really tricky. The matches were supposed to be thrown simultaneously . . . I realized I should have practiced with Roger and Charles.

Icarus, *April 13, 1973, 823 Oceanfront Walk, Venice, California*

At 6:00 pm three invited spectators came to my studio. The room is 15 by 25 [feet] and well lit by natural light. Wearing no clothes, I entered the space from a small room at back. Two assistants lifted one end of a 6-foot sheet of plate glass onto each of my shoulders. The sheets sloped on to the floor at right angles from my body. The assistants poured gasoline down the sheets of glass. Stepping back they threw matches and ignited the gasoline. After a few seconds, I jumped up sending the glass crashing to the floor.

W.S.: But it would be artificial to rehearse, wouldn't it?

C.B.: Well, I did practice with them ten minutes beforehand. But I realized that I'd have to do it not once or twice but a lot of times, so that they wouldn't be freaked out by the gasoline. And they were freaking out. . . . But if I had, it wouldn't really have happened . . . they would just have gone through the motions, it would have been more choreographed. . . . But you're right, I can only experience being dropped on the floor once; I



56. Chris Burden, *Icarus*. Performance, April 13, 1973, Venice, Calif. (*Photo: Courtesy Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York*)

can only experience getting the gasoline lit close to me once, because if I do it again I'll know what to expect. The unknown's gone. I mean, there's no point in ever getting shot again.

LAURIE ANDERSON (1947-)

Laurie Anderson's performances—especially those early ones combining her violin, singing, electronics, and film images—are among the most poetic and touching in the contemporary field. Her remarks below are particularly illuminating with regard to the spatial, sculptural character of her performances. Since most artists working in performance, film, and video (i.e., visual artists) consider themselves as sculptors, it is particularly valuable to have one of them analyze what constitutes "sculpture" in that kind of work. Anderson was among the first to "cross over" between visual art and music, a common practice among the currently popular New Wave and Punk groups.

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"Laurie Anderson," Interview by Robin White, *View* (January 1980)

L.A.: . . . One of the most interesting things I did last year was a seminar in the Midwest with Benedictine nuns. . . . They had gotten my name from a national list of artists. . . . It said something about "artist who deals with spiritual issues of our times." . . . I think I'd written it myself. And since they could only have women at the convent, I was a natural choice. I was amazed—this is the biggest Benedictine convent in the world, 3,000 nuns. Benedictines are scholars but they also want to balance it with physical activity. They're very strong. They work in the garden and have pigs and cattle and then they work in the library . . . and pray. On the way into the convent we passed an enormous graveyard of nuns; it was a very moving experience to me because all of the stones, all of the crosses—little crosses, were marked with the same four or five names, you know—Theresa, Maria Theresa, Maria, Theresa Theresa—Everything was given up . . . the way they lived. I wasn't really sure for the first day or so what I should do—

R.W.: What could be more foreign to the contemporary art world or avant-garde art, if you want to call it that, than a Benedictine convent?

L.A.: I think it's very close to the art world in a lot of ways. The nuns are isolated, but these are people who think and feel and have a relationship to—to a kind of ideal, a spiritual or intellectual ideal.

. . . I thought about it a lot last spring when I was trying to write something about the difference between theater and performance—

I was thinking of it in a couple of ways: one is that in theater there is, first of all, character and then motivation, and finally situation. For instance, if you want to have earthquakes in your play, you might have a character who's really interested in earthquakes, a geologist. Or you might tell the story of something that happened during an earthquake that the characters remember and they bring it up in the play.

R.W.: There has to be a logical sequence.

L.A.: Yes. There has to be motivation for the character to say or do something. In a performance, though, you don't have to have character. If you want to talk about earthquakes all you have to do is say "earthquakes," and whatever follows from that. . . .

. . . This [*Americans on the Move*] is the first part of a four-part series about American culture. This first part is transportation, the second part is money, the third is kind of the psycho-social situation and the fourth is, ah, love. All of the pieces, in some way or another, in the first part relate to transportation; they have a diagrammatic connection to each other. . . .

I've tried to reserve the options to pull things out as I see how it feels— Rather than finish the whole thing and call it the final form. I like doing things in different situations because each time you have a completely different physical set-up. You can learn a lot. . . .

Originally my idea was not to be this person on a stage, mostly because that idea reminded me a lot of theater. I wanted the work to be about space, in a certain way, so I used architectural images that wouldn't jar with the space so much—

R.W.: Like that piece at the Whitney in 1976 where you sang and talked in front of a film of the window in your loft, with the curtains blowing— things like that?

L.A.: Yes. So the performing space would be a logical extension of the room itself, without being reminiscent of some other situation. It was another way to hide, to be in the dark, to not be there, to be a bulge in the film surface. And then I thought—since I have spent a lot of time working as a sculptor, ideas about space were real important to me and . . . I wanted to emphasize physical presence in a real room. . . .

In my first performances you felt that spatial situation, your own presence in the room the whole time. I began, at that point, sending standing waves through the audience. Just really emphasizing the room tone—

R.W.: Sending standing waves? When was this? What are standing waves?

L.A.: It was in the mid-seventies. The standing waves were just barely

audible; they produced a physical sensation. You became aware, because of these waves, of your placement in the room. It's like being blind, in a sense, because you feel the space behind you; it's a way to prevent falling into an illusion, into film space. I really wanted to, umm . . .

R.W.: Locate people in reality?

L.A.: Yes, exactly. I began to understand that my idea of space in terms of performances was really almost as if people were there for scale you know? I mean I set it up so that they would feel their physical presence. That's very sculptural, spatial, etc. But it's not about energy. . . .

I think I really wanted to ignore the fact that there were people there because I . . . was nervous. I thought I'd be a librarian, you know. It's what I always wanted to be—or a scholar, someone who's near books.

R.W.: Retiring?

L.A.: Yes, and near ideas. I got into the work I do through a series of things that I thought seemed logical and then when I found that I was—there were people, that's when I turned out the lights and wanted to be a voice in the dark.

. . . The power the audience has—I've been noticing in the last few years that I respond to that really directly. Now I really like to watch people.

. . . Artists are supposed to be innovators and yet we have our own little system set up which is very closed and which doesn't really infiltrate the culture.

. . . One nice thing about the work that I do is that I get to go around the different parts of the country. I also take a lot of trips even without doing work. Just going some place with no money and no plans.

Not taking a tape recorder or cameras—

. . . Really the chance to be not myself, you know, to be an observer and not to have to act in a particular way.

. . . These are the times that I really learn the most.

. . . But it's more especially when I play the violin, because the violin is, for me, another voice. The violin is in my vocal range pretty much, and I feel that in the duets I do talking and playing become really the same thing. And of course the way the whole instrument works is just so beautiful. I like to combine electronics with the violin; it's like combining the twentieth and nineteenth century. Electronics is so fast and the violin is a hand instrument.

R.W.: The combination of nineteenth and twentieth century is like incorporating history into the present.

L.A.: Incorporating, and *updating* history. For me, the action of the bow

57. Laurie Anderson, *Duets on Ice*, 1974. Performance, Genoa. (*Photo: Courtesy Holly Solomon Gallery, New York*)

seems like an endless source of images, or ways to be. A lot of the pieces that I've made come out of this action.

R.W.: The action of the bow across the strings?

L.A.: A lot of the stories I use are about this kind of balance of glide activity. One of the first ones I did was *Unfinished Sentences*, which has a very linear design. There was a sentence, a bow length sentence, and then the bow just goes you know, this way, like that—

R.W.: A bow length sentence, in other words, a sentence you would speak while you were moving the bow over strings: Or was it one of the tape bows?

L.A.: It was strictly acoustic—using a bow with tape is another variation on that. Actually, the thing about using tools is that you need constant access to them. It seems strange that so many art students, for instance, work with video tape although they have limited access to the equipment. It's like a painter who thinks about a work for months and then, one day, goes out to rent a brush—paints the painting in twenty-four hours and returns the brush—clean—the next day.

R.W.: No chance to really work with the material.

L.A.: As for me, I like to work with whatever equipment I have, you know, and not plan things for equipment that I don't have—because it teaches things, the material does, in doing it; it teaches me things.

R.W.: That sounds like John Cage. . . . I'm wondering if Cage had been a specific influence on you?

L.A.: I'm sure of it. Also, through other people who are influenced by him. . . . And thinking about the artists who influenced me, one of them was Vito Acconci. . . .

It's so easy sometimes to forget that you are part of a whole thought structure that is going on, and you participate in that, without—

. . . You think you're alone and thought this up yourself, you know, and you're not; you're a part of this intricate web of twentieth-century thought. That, to me, is incredibly lovely because I—it's just less lonely.