

With *Trans-fixed*, in which Chris Burden is nailed to a Volkswagen Beetle, American Performance art reaches an extreme limit of physical presence, and many of its adherents abandon, moderate, or otherwise transform its practice.

Performance art extends, internationally, across the century; in the postwar period alone it is central to Gutai, happenings, Nouveau Réalisme, Fluxus, Viennese Actionism, and the Judson Dance Theater, to name a few disparate contexts; and there is a performative dimension in many other practices as well. Thus it may be impossible to define Performance art strictly; it may also be thankless, for many practitioners refused the label once it became current in the early seventies. Here performance will be limited to art where the body is “the subject and object of the work” (as the critic Willoughby Sharp defined “body art” in 1970 in *Avalanche*, the most important review of such work), where the body of the artist in particular is marked or otherwise manipulated in a public setting or in a private event that is then documented, most often in photographs, films, or videotapes. As this description suggests, Body art was involved in the same “postmedium” predicament as its Postminimalist complement, Process art; and so we might ask of it a question similar to the one asked of Process: does Body art represent a liberatory extension of materials and markings, or does it signal an anxious default of representation onto the body, a literal collapse of the “figure” of art into the “ground” of the body, which might indeed be taken as the primal ground of art?

Three models of Body art

In retrospect much Body art can be seen to elaborate three models of performance of the late fifties and early sixties. First, there is performance as *action*, as developed out of Abstract Expressionist painting in the interart activities of happenings, Fluxus, and related groups. Frequently called “neo-Dada,” such actions attacked the conventional decorum of the arts, but they affirmed the heroic, often spectacular gesture of the artist (assumed to be male). Second, there is performance as *task*, a model elaborated in the Judson Dance Theater in which antispectacular bodily routines (such as nonmetaphorical movements like walking and running) were substituted for symbolic dance steps. Set in protofeminist opposition to action performance, task performance was advanced primarily by women dancers like Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer, and Trisha Brown in a spirit of radical egalitarianism that was

sexual as well as social. And, third, there is performance as *ritual*, different versions of which were proposed by Joseph Beuys, the Viennese Actionists Hermann Nitsch, Otto Mühl, Günter Brus, and Rudolf Schwarzkogler, and practitioners of “destruction art” such as Gustav Metzger and Raphael Montanez Ortiz, among others. Whereas most task performance worked to demystify art, most ritualistic performance sought to remythify it, indeed to resacralize it—which might point, from another direction, at the same crisis in artistic convention. At times these models of performance overlapped, but important differences remained, and they guided the three directions in which Body art developed from the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies, to be represented here with the



1 • Carolee Schneemann, *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera*, 1963
Silver-gelatin print, 27.9 x 35.6 (11 x 14)

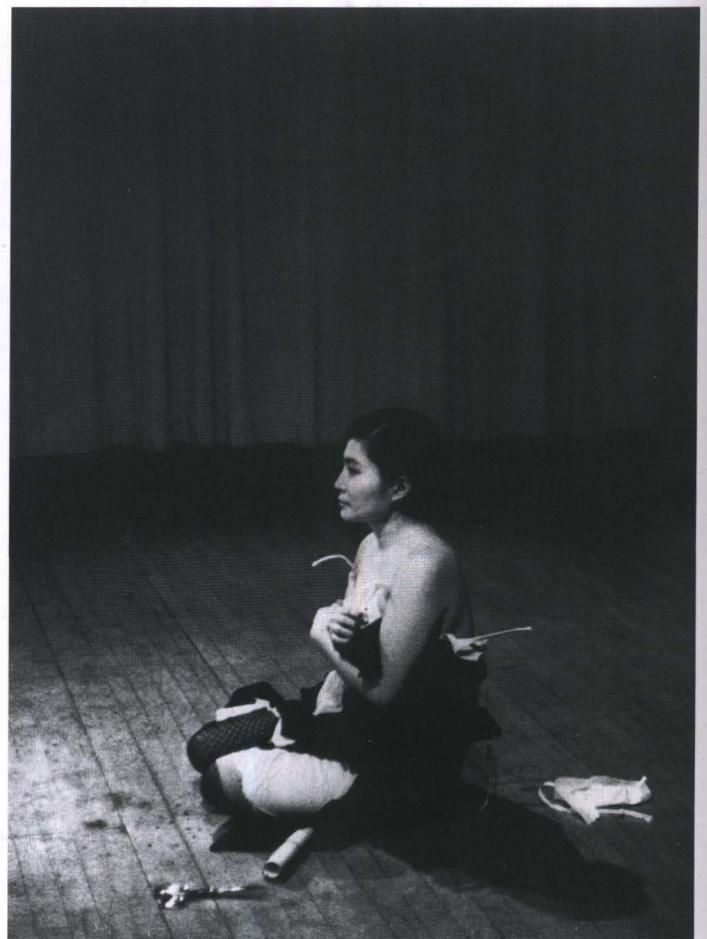
signal work of Carolee Schneemann (born 1939), Vito Acconci (born 1940), and Chris Burden (born 1946), respectively.

Schneemann was the first American to extend the action model of performance into Body art in the early to mid-sixties; her use of “flesh as material” moved from the perceptual interests of the time, first to erotic expressions, then to feminist commitments in a way that was soon shared by an entire generation of women artists in the United States and abroad. For his part, in the late sixties Acconci turned the task model of performance into a testing of body and self, first in quasi-scientific isolation, then in intersubjective situations; in doing so, he opened up task performance to a Body art that was a social theater of the psyche as well. Finally, in the early seventies Burden combined task and ritual models of performance to produce a sacrificial form of Performance art; although less literal than, say, the *Orgies Mysteries Theater* of Nitsch, which was explicitly posed as “an ‘aesthetic’ substitute for a sacrificial act” (replete with the tearing up of dead lambs and the like), the violations of Burden were nonetheless literal enough to test the ethical limits of the artistic use of the body.

In her early “Notebooks” (1962–3), Schneemann drew on the phenomenological notions of bodily perception that had begun to circulate in her milieu; thus when she introduced her nude body into her painting-constructions, she did so less for sexual titillation than for “empathetic-kinesthetic vitality.” *Eye Body* [1] was her first piece of Body art: it consisted of private actions, documented in photographs, that were performed in an environment of painted panels, mirrors, and umbrellas: “Covered in paint, grease, chalk, ropes, plastic, I establish my body as visual territory. Not only am I an image maker, but I explore the image value of flesh as material.” The title of the piece was programmatic: Schneemann wanted her “visual dramas” to “provide for an intensification of all faculties simultaneously,” and *Eye Body* did indeed extend the “eye” of painting into the “body” of performance. Within six months, however, her focus shifted to sexual embodiment, perhaps under the influence of Simone de Beauvoir’s feminist classic, *The Second Sex* (1949), as well as the psychoanalytical theories of Wilhelm Reich that condemned sexual repression as the greatest of all evils. Her next piece, *Meat Joy* (1964), performed first in Paris, then in London and New York, presented the body as fully “erotic, sexual, desired, desiring.” Here a group of near-naked men and women cavorted (along with any onlookers who would participate) on a set of wet paint, plastic, and rope spiced with pieces of raw meat, fish, and chicken. The title signals the move from *Eye Body*: beyond a phenomenological extension of painting to performance, *Meat Joy* proposed an ecstatic reconfiguration of the solitary “meat” of the body in the communal “joy” of sex.

Schneemann continued to work in Body, Performance, and Installation art, as well as in photography, film, and video, but already by 1964 she had suggested these possibilities: that action models of art called out for literal embodiment; that this embodiment allowed an erotic affirmation of the female body; that this affirmation in turn effected a protofeminist appropriation of

action models, heretofore dominated by men, for women as “image makers”; and that this appropriation might support further explorations of feminine sexuality and subjectivity. Of course, Schneemann was not alone in these early feminist developments. For example, in *Vagina Painting* (1962) Shigeko Kubota had brushed red paint onto a sheet of paper on the floor with a brush suspended from her crotch in a performance that symbolically shifted the locus of action models away from the phallic sticks of Pollock and company. Meanwhile, as artists like Schneemann and Kubota assumed new active positions in art, others like Yoko Ono underscored the old passive positions in society to which patriarchy has long submitted women. Thus in *Cut Piece* [2], performed first in Tokyo, then in New York, Ono invited her audience to cut away her clothing; in a manner resonant with some antiwar protests of the time, vulnerability was here transformed into resistance, as her audience was forced to confront its own capacity for violence, both actual and phantasmatic. Such troublings of cultural associations of active and passive modes with masculine and feminine positions (and, here at least, Western and Eastern ones as well) proved to be a fertile topos of Body art, feminist and otherwise, both for single performers (such as Valie Export) and for collaborative pairs (Marina Abramovic and Ulay, for example); it became a central arena for Vito Acconci as well.



2 • Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece*, March 21, 1965
Performance at Carnegie Recital Hall, New York

Trust and violation

Acconci first experimented with concrete poetry, a mode of writing that foregrounds the materiality of language. By 1969 he had shifted to a task model of performance, which he adapted into “performance tests” documented for an art public, first through reports and photographs, later through films and videos. Like the ▲ related performances of Bruce Nauman, Acconci subjected the body to apparently rational regimes for apparently irrational purposes (Acconci seemed to suffer the indignities impassively; Nauman seemed to delight in them secretly). For example, in *Step Piece* (1970) Acconci mounted an eighteen-inch stool in his apartment each morning at a rate of thirty steps a minute until he was exhausted. His stamina increased over the duration of the performance, but so did the absurdity of the task. His *Adaptation Studies* (1970) tilted these tests further toward failure. In one piece a blindfolded Acconci was thrown a rubber ball again and again—a recipe for errors. In another piece he plunged his hand into his mouth, also in repeated fashion, until he choked. These performances did test the reflexes of his body, but, more, they exposed its mundane incompetencies to the point where a strange aggressivity against the self predominated in his work.

About this time Acconci began to mark his body directly. In *Trademarks* [3] he bit into his flesh, turning it into a graphic medium of indentations, which were then inked and impressed on paper. This is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the autographic mark in art: at first it seems an act of absolute self-possession (“to claim what’s mine,” as he said), but this marking split Acconci into an active subject and a passive object—a self-alienation deepened by the suggestion of a sadistic–masochistic polarity in play, as well as by the implication of the body (and perhaps of Body art) as a commodity “trademark.” No doubt prompted by feminist developments, Acconci explored this self-othering in gender terms too: in a set of filmed performances titled *Conversions* (1971), he attempted, hopelessly, to alter bodily signs of sexual difference, burning away “male” hair, shaping “female” breasts, tucking his penis between his legs. At the same time he also turned his theater of aggression round on others—to test the boundaries between bodies, selves, and spaces. At first the violations were minimal: in *Following Piece* (1969) he followed randomly chosen people on the street until they entered a private space, while in *Proximity Piece* (1970) he crowded randomly chosen people in art museums until they moved away. But the violations became more insistent with subsequent performances. In *Claim* [4] a blindfolded Acconci crouched in a Soho basement, armed with lead pipes and a crowbar, and threatened any intruders into his space, intruders who were also nominal invitees to the performance; this relation between trust and violation is an important aspect of his work. And in the infamous *Seedbed* (1972) he inhabited, twice a week, the space beneath a raised floor of the Sonnabend Gallery in New York, where he would often implicate visitors in his sexual fantasies, relayed over a microphone, to which he would also sometimes masturbate.

1970–1979



3• Vito Acconci, *Trademarks*, 1970 (details)

Photographed activity

▲ 1966a, 1967a, 1973



4 • Vito Acconci, *Claim*, 1971

Performance with closed-circuit video monitor and camera, three hours

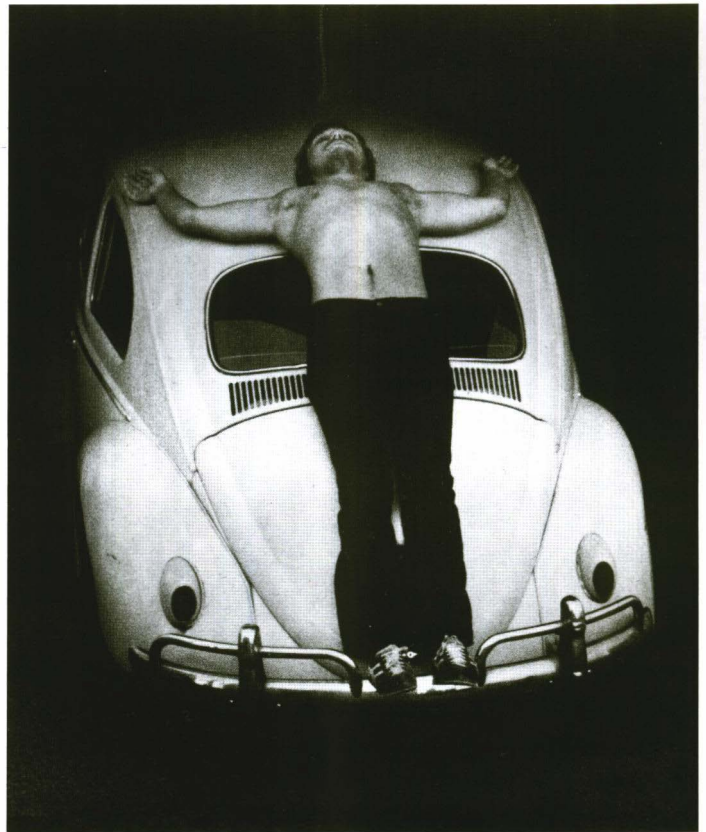
As Acconci explored such imbrications of self and other, privacy and publicity, trust and violation, he tested different kinds of limits—physical and psychological, subjective and social, sexual and ethical. But when these lines seemed broken—for example, in a 1973 performance involving a story of seduction, a young woman from the audience embraced him on the stage—Acconci backed away from such practice. For Chris Burden, on the other hand, the crossing of such lines *constituted* his practice. His first body piece, performed in 1971 when he was still a graduate student at the University of California at Irvine, made him notorious: for his master's thesis he squeezed into a school locker for five days and nights, attached only to two five-gallon water bottles, a full one above, an empty one below. Here task performance was taken to an ascetic extreme—Body art as a spiritual exercise without the religion, except perhaps for the faith demanded of performer and onlookers alike. This attenuation of ritualistic performance into an ascetic regime would later be pursued by teamed performers like Abramovic and Ulay and Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh.

Like Acconci, Burden alternated such quasi-masochistic performances with quasi-sadistic events, but he concentrated on acts that placed his own body at primary risk, even as his studied irresponsibilities also tested the spontaneous responsibilities of others. There are several examples from the early seventies, but two stand out. In *Shoot* (1971) Burden had a marksman shoot him in the arm (his left bicep was grazed), while in *Trans-fixed* [5] he was nailed, with his arms extended à la Christ, onto the hood of a Volkswagen Beetle: the garage door was then opened, the car with the crucified Burden rolled out, the engine raced for two minutes (to signify his screams), then the car was rolled back in, and the door dropped. However inflected by Pop parody (regarding, perhaps, the sacramental value of the car in American culture), the ritualistic basis of Body art is blatant here. Transfixed, Burden also transfixed his viewers (the performance continues to have this mesmeric effect through photographs), and indeed the remnants of his actions,

such as the nails, are often called “relics.” To the ambivalent positions of narcissism and aggressivity, voyeurism and exhibitionism, sadism and masochism already evoked by Acconci, Burden added another ambiguous dimension, a sacrificial theater that, as with ▲ its other celebrants like Nitsch, Schwarzkogler, or Gina Pane, touched on the extremes of art—its ritualistic origins as well as its ethical limits (ethical limits in two senses: what can an artist do to self and to other, and when does the viewer intervene?).

Between the real and the symbolic

Our initial definition of Body art—in which the body is “both subject and object of the work”—seems innocent by comparison. But this innocence, this “immediacy” of Body art, should not be lost: it is what attracted its first practitioners and impressed its first viewers. It is also what aligned Body art with the modernist mandate to expose the materiality of art, to pursue an idea of sheer presence. But, as we have seen, Body art did not render “subject and object” one; on the contrary, this polarity was exacerbated, and it set up other binarisms as well—the body as active or passive, Body art as expressive, even liberatory (as in Schneemann), or withdrawn, even debilitated (as in Acconci, Nauman, and sometimes Burden), and so on. But the definitive ambiguity of Body art might be this: even though it was regarded as an art of presence—positively as an avant-gardist reuniting of art and life, negatively as a nihilistic obliterating of aesthetic distance—it was also a marking

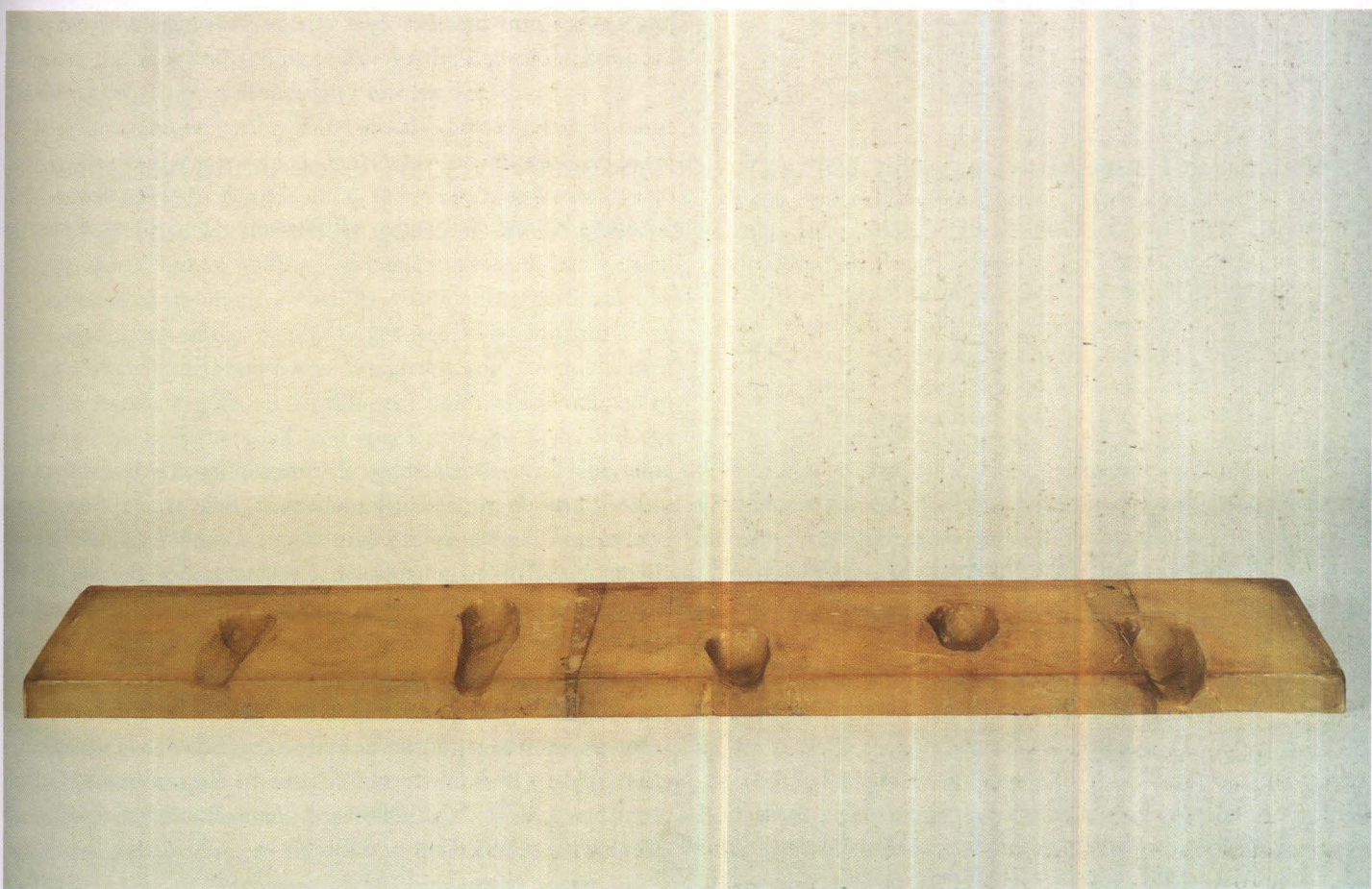


5 • Chris Burden, *Trans-fixed*, 1974

Performance, Venice, California

▲ 1960c, 1964b

▲ 1962b



6 • Bruce Nauman, *Wax Impressions of the Knees of Five Famous Artists*, 1966

Fiberglass, polyester resin, 39.7 x 216.5 x 7 (15¼ x 85¼ x 2¾)

of the body as a representation, as a sign, indeed as a semiotic field. Perhaps the essence of Body art is this difficult shuttling between presence and representation, or, more exactly, between indexical markings of the real (this arm bitten or shot, right now, before your eyes) and grandiose invocations of the symbolic (especially evident in ritualistic performance). For some practitioners like Acconci, this vacillation—of representation collapsed into the body, of the body raised into representation—seemed almost traumatic. For others like Nauman, the great ironist of Postminimalist art, it was an occasion for subversive play. For example, his *Wax Impressions of the Knees of Five Famous Artists* [6] mocked both the indexical markings and the ritualistic pretensions of Body art almost before they were proposed: all five sacred impressions here are faked—they are his alone (indeed this relic is not even wax).

Perhaps the ambiguity of the body as both natural flesh and cultural artifact is irreducible, and Body art only confronts us with the ambivalence of this condition. But Body art also complicates this ambiguity with another, for it not only presents the body as a marked thing but also invokes it as a psychic site. For the most part Body art preceded the psychoanalytic engagements in art ▲ first prompted by feminism in the mid-seventies; when its models of the subject were not phenomenological, they tended to be behavioral, even sociological. Nonetheless, its involvement in

subject–object relations led it toward an abstract theater of psychosexual positions: as we have seen, Body art often seems to stage the Freudian couplets of narcissism and aggressivity, voyeurism and exhibitionism, sadism and masochism, indeed to play out the Freudian “vicissitudes of the instincts”—the constant “reversals” of active and passive positions, the perpetual “turnings round” from subject to object and back again. In this way, Body art anticipates rather than illustrates the psychoanalytic theories of ▲ subjectivity and the political critiques of power that became prominent from the late seventies onward.

FURTHER READING

Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996)

Kate Linker, *Vito Acconci* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994)

Carolee Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy: Complete Performance Works and Selected Writings* (New Paltz, N.Y.: Documentext, 1979)

Kristine Stiles, “Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions,” in Paul Schimmel and Russell Ferguson (eds), *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object 1949–1979* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1998)

Fraser Ward, “Gray Zone: Watching ‘Shoot’,” *October*, no. 95, Winter 2001

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To Nikos Stangos (1936–2004), in memoriam

With love, admiration, and grief, we dedicate this book to Nikos Stangos, great editor, poet, and friend, whose belief in this project both instigated and sustained it through the course of its development.

We would like to thank Thomas Neurath and Peter Warner for their patient support, and Nikos Stangos and Andrew Brown for their editorial expertise. The book would not have been begun without Nikos; it would not have been completed without Andrew.

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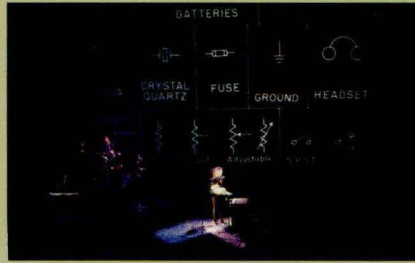
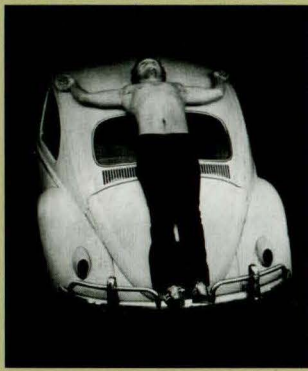
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560 1973 The Kitchen Center for Video, Music, and Dance opens its own space in New York: video art claims an institutional space between visual and Performance art, television and film.

565 1974 With *Trans-fixed*, in which Chris Burden is nailed to a Volkswagen Beetle, American Performance art reaches an extreme limit of physical presence, and many of its adherents abandon, moderate, or otherwise transform its practice.

570 1975 As filmmaker Laura Mulvey publishes her landmark essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," feminist artists like Judy Chicago and Mary Kelly develop different positions on the representation of women.
box • Theory journals

576 1976 In New York, the founding of P.S. 1 coincides with the Metropolitan Museum's "King Tut" exhibition: important shifts in the institutional structure of the art world are registered by both alternative spaces and the blockbuster show.

580 1977 The "Pictures" exhibition identifies a group of young artists whose strategies of appropriation and critiques of originality advance the notion of "postmodernism" in art.

1980–1989

586 1980 Metro Pictures opens in New York: a new group of galleries emerges in order to exhibit young artists involved in a questioning of the photographic image and its uses in news, advertising, and fashion.
box • Jean Baudrillard

590 1984a Victor Burgin delivers his lecture "The Absence of Presence: Conceptualism and Post-Modernisms": the publication of this and other lectures by Allan Sekula and Martha Rosler signals a new approach to the legacies of Anglo-American photoconceptualism and to the writing of photographic history and theory.

596 1984b Fredric Jameson publishes "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," as the debate over postmodernism extends beyond art and architecture into cultural politics, and divides into two contrary positions.
box • Cultural studies

600 1986 "Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture" opens in Boston: as some artists play on the collapse of sculpture into commodities, others underscore the new prominence of design and display.

605 1987 The first ACT-UP action is staged: activism in art is reignited by the AIDS crisis, as collaborative groups and political interventions come to the fore, and a new kind of queer aesthetics is developed.
box • The US Art Wars

612 1988 Gerhard Richter paints *October 18, 1977*: German artists contemplate the possibility of the renewal of history painting.
box • Jürgen Habermas

617 1989 "Les Magiciens de la terre," a selection of art from several continents, opens in Paris: postcolonial discourse and multicultural debates affect the production as well as the presentation of contemporary art.
box • Aboriginal art

1990–2003

624 1992 Fred Wilson presents *Mining the Museum* in Baltimore: institutional critique extends beyond the museum, and an anthropological model of project art based on fieldwork is adapted by a wide range of artists.
box • Interdisciplinarity

630 1993a Martin Jay publishes *Downcast Eyes*, a survey of the denigration of vision in modern philosophy: this critique of visuality is explored by a number of contemporary artists.

635 1993b As Rachel Whiteread's *House*, a casting of a terrace house in east London, is demolished, an innovative group of women artists comes to the fore in Britain.

639 1993c In New York, the Whitney Biennial foregrounds work focused on identity amid the emergence of a new form of politicized art by African-American artists.

645 1994a A mid-career exhibition of Mike Kelley highlights a pervasive concern with states of regression and abjection, while Robert Gober, Kiki Smith, and others use figures of the broken body to address problems of sexuality and mortality.

650 1994b William Kentridge completes *Felix in Exile*, joining Raymond Pettibon and others in demonstrating the renewed importance of drawing.

654 1998 An exhibition of large video projections by Bill Viola tours several museums: the projected image becomes a pervasive format in contemporary art.
box • The spectacularization of art

659 2001 A mid-career exhibition of Andreas Gursky at the Museum of Modern Art in New York signals the new dominance of a pictorial photography, which is often effected through digital means.

664 2003 With exhibits such as "Utopia Station" and "Zone of Urgency," the Venice Biennale exemplifies the informal and discursive nature of much recent artmaking and curating.

670 Roundtable I The predicament of contemporary art

681 Glossary

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