

# THE ART OF PERFORMANCE

A Critical Anthology

Edited by GREGORY BATTCKOCK and ROBERT NICKAS





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# THE ART OF PERFORMANCE

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# THE ART OF PERFORMANCE

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A Critical Anthology

edited by  
GREGORY BATTCOCK  
and ROBERT NICKAS

E.P. DUTTON, INC.      NEW YORK

For G. B.

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# INTRODUCTION

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Our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space. It applies itself to space like a hand to an instrument; and when we wish to move about we do not move the body as we move an object. We transport it without instruments as if by magic, since it is ours and because through it we have direct access to space. For us the body is much more than an instrument or a means; it is our expression in the world, the visible form of our intentions. Even our most secret affective movements, those most deeply tied to the humoral infrastructure, help to shape our perception of things.

—MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY<sup>1</sup>

[Performance] really is an attempt at synthesizing communication. It's an attempt at a new communication.

But the only people this art exists for are the people who are there. And it's the only time the art exists. —TERRY FOX<sup>2</sup>

I dream of the day when I shall create sculptures that breathe, perspire, cough, laugh, yawn, smirk, wink, pant, dance, walk, crawl . . . and move among people as shadows move along people.

—DAVID MEDALLA<sup>3</sup>

Before man was aware of art he was aware of himself. Awareness of the person is, then, the first art. In performance art the figure of the artist is the tool for the art. It is the art. —GREGORY BATTCKOCK<sup>4</sup>

The final epigraph comes from *The Art of Performance*, the catalogue to an exhibition of performances held in Venice in the sum-

<sup>1</sup> "An Unpublished Text: Prospectus of His Work," in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James Edie (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> "Terry Fox" (interview with Robin White), *View 2*, no. 3 (June 1979), p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Signals* 1, no. 8 (June–July 1965); reprinted in the catalogue *When Attitudes Become Form* (Bern: Kunsthalle, 1969), unpaginated.

<sup>4</sup> "L'Art Corporel," in the catalogue *The Art of Performance* (Venice: Palazzo Grassi, 1979), unpaginated.

mer of 1979, from which the title of this book was chosen. The exhibition was only one of many international festivals and symposia presented between 1977 and 1980 in New York, Montreal, and primarily, in Europe. In addition to providing an official acknowledgment of the form, these events clearly identified performance as the art form most characteristic of the 1970s.

What was most startling about these events and what set them apart from most traditional exhibitions up to that time, as the Battcock quote suggests, was their emphasis on the selection of artists over, or rather than, artworks. This was certainly the rule rather than the exception. In many cases the organizers of these events saw the artworks at the same time as the public, not in advance of them. So, in presenting artists whose work was live, in real time, they were taking a risk (along with the artists), one to which they were historically unaccustomed. Yet, take it they did, as the substantial number of festivals staged during the late 1970s, as well as the staggering amount of performances presented at them, would indicate. And although these events generated an equally substantial amount of theories, questions, and lively dialogue, the term *performance*, in use since the early years of the decade, was always loosely defined. It remains so; then, as now, encompassing a broad area of activity by a wide variety of artists with diverse styles, methods, and concerns.

This lack of a strict definition, however, was not necessarily bad. For a number of reasons it proved advantageous to the artists and to the development of the form. Performance was suited to experimentation in ways that traditional forms such as painting and sculpture, with their restrictions and physical limitations, were not, neither could they expect to be. Undefined, there were no rules to break. Artists were able to employ the widest range of subject matter, using virtually any medium or material; they could present their work at any time, for any duration of time, at the location of their choosing, in direct contact with their audience. Artists who came to performance were able to investigate their relationship with their audience, from whom they had previously been far removed. It can be said that prior to performance, art's audience saw the work of artists, the art product, with greater regularity than it saw the artist or the production of art. With performance it was simultaneously witness to both. As such, artists had new access to the

reception of their work—no longer relying solely on critics and dealers, with their own interests at stake—and they achieved a degree of control over the presentation and destination of their work. In addition, performance artists were liberated from the art object and all it entailed. This liberation offered the possibility of moving toward an art in which the idea would dominate. Performance, like Conceptual art, would enable the artist to shun mere pictorial values in favor of true visual communication: art as a vehicle for ideas and action. All of this meant that art no longer had to conform to established formats, and it would never be quite the same again.

Undefined, performance was independent of current trends and traditional forms, and this independence guaranteed, for a time, that performance art would remain controlled and guided by the artists who originated the form. So, the lack of a strict definition was indeed an advantage, for without clear and determined boundaries, performance was an open territory from its very beginnings. In the early 1970s, then, this was what attracted artists to performance.

As Michel Benamou has written, “One might ask what causes this pervading need to act out art which used to suffice itself on the page or the museum wall? What is this new presence, and how has it replaced the presence which poems and pictures silently professed before? Has everything from politics to poetics become theatrical?”<sup>5</sup> For performance artists such as Vito Acconci and Stuart Brisley, it would seem that at some point the art was no longer wholly sufficient on the page or the museum wall.

Brisley, one of the pioneers of performance in England, had produced objects up to 1966, by which time he had “reached a crisis point. I couldn’t go on working with material,” he claimed, “it had arrived at its own conclusion and I had to go a stage further.” That stage further was to be a turning point for Brisley, whose new material became process, a “material” he could use “without actually making an object, and that was a great release.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> “Presence and Play,” in *Performance in Postmodern Culture*, ed. Michel Benamou and Charles Caramello (Madison, Wis.: Coda Press, 1977), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> “Stuart Brisley: Excerpt from an Interview” (with Sarah Kent), *Flash Art*, nos. 80–81 (February–April 1978), p. 57.

Before coming to performance, to “streetworks” such as *Following Piece* (1969) and to “performance situations” such as *Claim* (1971), for which he was to become well known, Vito Acconci was a poet. In discussing his work with language, he described the page “as a field for action” and his use of the page “as a model space, a performance area in miniature or abstract form.” Acconci’s progression from “movement over a page” to his own movement in space should not be seen as evidencing a replacement of the presence of language by performance but as its extension. In fact, Acconci has suggested as much: “The page . . . doesn’t compete with elements outside but is used, instead, alongside them. Use [the] page as the start of an event that keeps going, off the page; use the page to fix the boundaries of an event, or a series of events, that take place in outside space.”<sup>7</sup>

Thus, performance can be seen not only as a new presence that has “replaced the presence which poems and pictures silently proffered before” but as an extension of their possibilities, perhaps without any substitution or replacement. Something that is replaced is not always superseded, but can be said to have been restored. As the body artist Gina Pane has stated, “Our entire culture is based on the representation of the body. Performance doesn’t so much annul painting as help out the birth of a new painting based on different explanations and functions of the body in art.”<sup>8</sup> Consider the following recollection of Jannis Kounellis, “In 1960 I did a continuous performance, first in my studio and then at the Galeria Tartaruga in Roma, in which I stretched unsized canvases . . . over all the walls in the room, and painted letters over them which I sang. The problem in those days was to establish a new kind of painting . . .”<sup>9</sup> For Kounellis, who once remarked, “One needs to consider that the gallery is a dramatic, theatrical cavity,”<sup>10</sup> performance did not replace the presence of pictures but restored painting. This is a situation not unlike that identified by RoseLee Goldberg in her essay “Performance: A Hidden History” (p. 26),

<sup>7</sup> “Notes on Performing a Space,” *Avalanche*, no. 6 (Fall 1972), p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> “Wound as a Sign,” *Flash Art*, nos. 92–93 (October–November 1979), p. 37.

<sup>9</sup> “Structure and Sensibility: An Interview with Jannis Kounellis” (with Willoughby Sharp), *Avalanche*, no. 5 (Summer 1972), p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> “Jannis Kounellis” (interview with Robin White), *View 1*, no. 10 (March 1979), p. 17.

in which artists “attempted to resolve problematic issues in performance.”

Still, why this “pervading need to act out art?” Part of the answer may be found with artists who had neither “reached a crisis point” nor sought to explore “outside space” nor to resolve their problems in performance. Artists like Mary Beth Edelson, who, oddly enough, “never really intended to do performance, but,” she explained, “with certain exhibitions I felt an imperative to act out what I was trying to say—mostly for clarity and to intensify the statement.”<sup>11</sup> This intensification of the statement is, perhaps, one of the primary reasons artists were and still are drawn to performance. Performance enabled artists to articulate their ideas in action, to set them in motion. Although some of the ideas were not always adequately articulated or, for that matter, worthy of communication, authentically new approaches to art as a form of visual communication were to be explored. We are reminded of Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the body as “the visible form of our intentions,” of Fox’s belief in “a new communication,” of a claim made by Lucy R. Lippard for performance as “the most immediate art form, which aspires to the immediacy of political action itself. Ideally,” she continued, “performance means getting down to the bare bones of aesthetic communication—artist/self confronting audience/society.”<sup>12</sup>

Historically, this ideal would be found in Russia in the 1920s with the “living newspaper” groups that performed in colleges and clubs, in factories and in the streets, presenting a “collage of facts,” a montage of political events and headlines “chosen by preference from the facts of everyday life.”<sup>13</sup> In more recent times we find artists such as Jon Hendricks and Jean Toche who, with performances such as *Guerrilla Art Action in Front of The Metropolitan Museum in New York* (1969), protested publicly against the manipulation of art and artists by cultural institutions and big business.<sup>14</sup> Parallels

<sup>11</sup> In a written statement to the editor, December 2, 1981.

<sup>12</sup> “The Angry Month of March,” *The Village Voice*, March 25, 1981, p. 91.

<sup>13</sup> N. Gourfinkel, *Le Théâtre russe contemporain* (Paris, 1931); reprinted in the catalogue *Poetry Must Be Made by All! Transform the World* (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1969), pp. 44–45.

<sup>14</sup> See *Guerrilla Art Action Group: A Selection 1969–1976* (New York: Printed Matter Inc., 1978).

to activities of this nature would include performances such as Terry Fox's *Defoliation* (see p. 208), Joseph Beuys's political lectures and dialogues, and performances such as *The Boxing Match for Direct Democracy* (1972), as well as a large body of feminist work. Leslie Labowitz and Suzanne Lacy, for example, presented *In Mourning and in Rage* (1977), a performance-protest "against the Hillside Strangler murders—a group of women [who] had been raped and murdered . . . in the Los Angeles Hillside area—and against the sensational and irresponsible media coverage of the slayings."<sup>15</sup> The performance was not presented in an art gallery, where it would certainly have been ineffective, but on the steps of City Hall in Los Angeles, in the presence of city officials, the public, and the media, at whom it was aimed. Here, then, is performance that attains the ideal of "aesthetic communication," of artists confronting society in a clear, relevant way.

In his essay "*Life Is No Performance*" (p. 170), Herbert Moldering states that "in traditional art, market and exhibition mechanisms had separated the artist from the people; performance art aimed at bringing them back together." Might we assume, then, that performance never truly replaced the presence of poems and pictures on the page or museum wall, but reintroduced the presence of the artist alongside them? In doing so, has performance also succeeded in expanding the presence of the object and the word, broadened their scope, and our awareness of their potential? We think so. How else but to view work such as, specifically, Bruce Nauman's *Performance Corridor* (1969), Chris Burden's *B-Car* (1977) or *The Big Wheel* (1980), Vito Acconci's *Instant House* (1980) or *The Peoplemobile* (1979); and work, in general, such as Scott Burton's furniture; the machines of Alice Aycock and Dennis Oppenheim; installations by Jonathan Borofsky, Ben D'Armagnac, Mike Parr, and the "tableaux vivants" of Luigi Ontani; the action objects of Franz Erhard Walther and Joseph Beuys, and the "instruments" of Helmut Schober; the photoworks of Lucas Samaras, Katherina Sieverding-Klaus Mettig, General Idea, Arnulf Rainer; films by Rebecca Horn and Yvonne Rainer; the sound works of Terry Fox and Connie Beckley; the sculpture of Richard Long and

<sup>15</sup> Moira Roth, "Toward a History of California Performance, Part Two," *Arts* 52, no. 10 (June 1978), pp. 118–119.

Klaus Rinke; video work by Marc Chaimowicz, Joan Jonas, and Dan Graham; books by Gilbert and George and Ida Applebroog; even some of the essays in this anthology. For example, whole sections of the interview with Laurie Anderson, Vito Acconci's notes, and parts of Les Levine's essay "Artistic" (pp. 240–254) are in some way performable, or lend themselves to performance. Here, in answer to David Shapiro in his essay "Poetry and Action: Performance in a Dark Time" (pp. 157–165), is writing to some degree reconciled with action.

And what of the "return" of figurative painting in recent years, by both artists once (or still) involved with performance and those who never were? Does it owe any debt to the performance art of the 1970s? According to Helena Kontova, "painting has been transformed by absorbing elements of performance, installation art, and photography. Avant-garde art in the sixties and seventies was characterized by the use of extra-artistic objects (including the human body), accentuating their materiality and objectification, and was also characterized as pure representation (which, in some cases, could be termed a new form of show). Consequently, painting in general, and the paintings of ex-performers in particular, tend to assume some of these characteristics."<sup>16</sup> We are reminded of Gina Pane's view of performance aiding "the birth of a new painting," of Kounellis's "problem . . . to establish a new kind of painting," and of Stuart Brisley's reply, when asked what his main source of ideas for performances was: "The sense of the figure in space, movement, the sense of oneself, the human."<sup>17</sup> This leads us back to Gregory Battcock's observation that "Before man was aware of art he was aware of himself."

How, might we ask, did the presence of the artist come to be reintroduced? Brian O'Doherty has written that "It was with Abstract Expressionism that critics first began consistently describing artists as 'performers' . . . and grading them according to 'performance.'<sup>18</sup> With the emphasis on 'gesture' and 'action' one began to get a

<sup>16</sup> Helena Kontova, "From Performance to Painting," *Flash Art*, no. 106 (February–March 1982), p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> "Stuart Brisley," p. 58.

<sup>18</sup> From this one should not conclude that Abstract Expressionist painting was a form of performance art.

double image of what was hailed as the single ultimate image in art: the picture, and behind it, the artist, like some gesticulating ghostly presence."<sup>19</sup> Jack Burnham also recognized this situation when he wrote that "The erosion in the plastic arts toward theater was in progress early in the beginning of this century, though never so evident as when critics began to describe in detail the activities of Pollock and de Kooning in front of or over a canvas." And, he concluded, "For a century the artist has chosen to be not only his best subject matter, but in many cases his only legitimate subject."<sup>20</sup> Thus, the decline of the "single ultimate image in art," combined with the artist as a "legitimate subject," laid the groundwork for the reintroduction of the presence of the artist, a presence which is with us to this day.

In "An Interview with Laurie Anderson" (p. 267), Anderson conjures up an image of Barnett Newman "painting a blue painting . . . talking about the *meaning* of this blue paint. He's standing by his blue painting, looking at it, and talking about it." And this, she believes, is "the generation ahead of what's called live art, which is people *really* standing next to blue in real time saying, 'Blue is . . .'"

Roland Barthes has spoken of "writing aloud"; might we speak, with the concept of the artist's presence in mind, of "painting aloud" or "sculpting aloud" or "writing aloud" within the framework of performance? The concept of "painting aloud" can best be seen in Yves Klein's *Anthropometries of the Blue Age*<sup>21</sup> and in Jim Dine's *The Smiling Workman*,<sup>22</sup> both, as it happens, in 1960,

<sup>19</sup> "Looking at the Artist as Performer," in *Object and Idea: An Art Critic's Journal 1961-1967* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967), p. 227. (Originally written in August 1964).

<sup>20</sup> "Objects and Ritual: Towards a Working Ontology of Art," *Arts* 47, no. 3 (December-January 1973), p. 30.

<sup>21</sup> A performance in which paintings were made by nude models who, under the direction of the artist, applied paint to their bodies and pressed them against immense sheets of paper. Klein, it should be noted, did not himself paint these works, but employed the models as "living brushes." See Pierre Restany, *Yves Klein* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1982).

<sup>22</sup> Dine has written of his first Happening: "I had a flat built. It was a three-panel flat . . . There was a table with three jars of paint and two brushes on it, and the canvas was painted white. I came around it with one light on me. I was all in red, with a big, black mouth: all my face and head were red, and I had a red

Klein in Paris, and Dine in New York. "Sculpting aloud" is evidenced in Joseph Beuys's *The Chief* (1964)<sup>23</sup> and in "living sculptures" such as *Underneath the Arches* (1969) by Gilbert and George, of which two more dissimilar works might not possibly be found, but which are here related. And of Barthes's "writing aloud" we find, for example, John Cage's performance *Writing Through Finnegans Wake* (1976), derived from Joyce's novel. Clearly, the presence of the artist has expanded "the presence which poems and pictures silently proffered before," and our awareness of their potential. But the presence of the artist did not appear, was not "reintroduced," as if by magic or without reason.

Several contributors to this book offer theories about how this occurred. Herbert Molderings, for example, suggests that "It is certainly not accidental that Happenings and action art, the forerunners of the performance movement, started around 1960 when television began to play a major role in everyday life." Claiming that "the origin of abstract painting around 1910 reflected the disruption . . . caused by the emergence of the movies," he concludes, "Similarly performance art and video experiments are a response to an even deeper disruption caused by television today." This would seem to correspond to Michel Benamou's pronouncement about television (with performance art in mind): "Our society is dramatized by TV and at the same time deprived of real drama."<sup>24</sup>

Elsewhere in this book, RoseLee Goldberg offers the idea that "whenever a certain school, be it Cubism, Minimalism, or Conceptual art, seemed to have gained a stranglehold on art production and criticism, artists turned to performance as a way of breaking down categories and indicating new directions."

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smock on, down to the floor . . . I picked up one of the jars and drank the paint, and then I poured the other two . . . over my head, quickly, and dove, physically, through the canvas. The light went off." "A Statement," in Michael Kirby, *Happenings* (New York: Dutton Paperbacks, 1965), p. 185.

<sup>23</sup> An action for which Beuys, wrapped in a large roll of felt with a dead hare at each end, lay for eight hours on the floor of the René Block Gallery in Berlin. One of the spectators, the artist Wolf Vostell, wondered at the conclusion: "Beuys as sculpture? The whole environment as sculpture? To let oneself become an event?" He concluded by describing the evening as "philosophical theater." In *Joseph Beuys: Life and Work* (New York: Barron's, 1979), p. 122.

<sup>24</sup> "Presence and Play," p. 3.

Wayne Enstice in his essay "Performance Art's Coming of Age" (pp. 143–144) cites formalist developments within the art of the 1960s as significant factors in the emergence of performance art in the 1970s. "The vacuity of Minimalist sculpture," according to Enstice, "provoked the viewer to locate the art experience." There were two results. "First, Minimalism changed the customary subject-object roles for the viewer of an artwork. Second, the anxiousness of Minimalism urged the viewer to scrutinize the artist with unusual intensity in an attempt to historicize his intent and process." Thus, "the unsettling blankness of Minimalism dislodged the artist more completely from behind the craft of making art, to stress his executive presence." And he goes on to cite the "inevitable dissolution" of the art object achieved by Conceptual art as enabling "the artist and his ambition [to] become the cynosure of artistic energy."

"By taking up performance," wrote Walter Robinson, "an artist was refusing to join an elite art profession that purveys esoteric luxury items to select clients." But, he continued, "For many of the performers this attitude turned out to be a matter of professional strategy: with options in painting and sculpture in the early '70's apparently closed off, performance served as a fast and effective way of carving out a personal niche in the art system."<sup>25</sup>

What all this seems to imply is that the reasons artists came to performance—and the social, cultural, and political factors that set the stage, so to speak, for performance art—are not easily explained and detailed. They are to be found, perhaps, in each individual artist and, further, in each performance. As such, performance art raised, and continues to raise, serious critical questions about the nature of art, art's audience, the role of the artist, and even of the critics themselves.

Michel Benamou claims that performance is found "in areas of culture which one seldom associates with it . . . criticism itself no longer content to gesticulate in the margins of texts also takes hold of a part of the stage, and plays."<sup>26</sup> A recent example that tends to support this viewpoint occurred during the symposium "Theoreti-

<sup>25</sup> "Art + Life = Artists' Performances," *Art in America* (January 1981), p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> "Presence and Play," p. 3.

cal Analysis of the Intermedia Art Form,” held at The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1980. A large panel of notable scholars and critics had been assembled, and a crowd filled the auditorium. They were, as befits such an event, well behaved and dozing just a bit. Until critics such as David Antin, Gregory Battcock, and, particularly, Abraham Moles set them in motion, and their laughter and animation soon dispelled the sobriety of the proceedings. The critics’ statements were received as performances because, to the mind of the audience, they were indeed “performed.”

Moles’s “statement,” with an uncooperative blackboard as his prop, resembled something far closer to a scene from a Jacques Tati comedy than a lecture by a university professor. And Battcock, who spoke about art in relation to the rapid transportation and communication systems of our time, spoke so rapidly that his words became a nearly unintelligible blur, serving to illustrate his point to great effect. The audience rather than listening passively to what was being said actively experienced the ideas firsthand.

Here, then, is criticism “no longer content to gesticulate in the margins of texts,” and critics, as performers, to some degree reconciled with performance. But the written criticism of performance was problematic from the very beginning.

John Howell, the editor of *Alive*, a magazine devoted to performance and other forms of “live” art, has written, “A performance has this obvious condition: when the show’s over it’s gone. The remaining evidence—articles and reviews, photographs, notes, and scripts—can only suggest the event. As a medium, then, performances are acutely exposed to, if not dependent on, critical conceits (individual approaches, theoretical bias) which claim to render a missing object. For certain performance artists who locate their dance, music, or theater in an art context . . . the critical vocabularies for dance, music, and theater are often too conservative for the scope of their performances: at the same time an art vocabulary is insufficient for dealing with the attitudes and techniques of those traditions.”<sup>27</sup>

In his essay “Performance Art: A New Form of Theatre, Not a

<sup>27</sup> “Performance,” *Art in America* 63, no. 3 (May–June 1975), p. 18.

New Concept in Art" (p. 122), Cee S. Brown calls for "a new vocabulary" to deal with the work of performance artists. He notes that "Much of the writing being done is merely descriptive and tends to use the vernacular of the traditional art forms of painting and sculpture, shying away from the exploratory and critical." Instead, he proposes a "species-specific language" that "could more closely approach criticism and analysis rather than description."

With performance, traditional approaches to interpretation are of little or no use because the value of the art is not to be found in its aesthetic characteristics but in the action of the artist: what is said and what is done. The question of interpretation is opened up considerably in this situation. Not only to be considered is the question of what is said and done but how? why? where? and for how long? The elements of time and duration, for example, are present in performance—the use of time, as well as the use of time as subject matter—more prominently than in traditional forms of art.<sup>28</sup> A painting or a sculpture may last thousands of years, with the proper care, but a performance is of the moment, ephemeral to the point of self-obsolescence, it may last only seconds or minutes.

Connie Beckley has written that "Music, unlike painting, is an art form in which the time of its perception is controlled almost entirely by the artist, and in which the audience is subject to the artist's judgment concerning the use of that time."<sup>29</sup> If we were to replace the word *music* with the word *performance*, the same would be true. Consider a performance by Stuart Brisley such as *180 Hours* (1978), which spanned that time period. Or one by Helmut Schober, *The Devotion Piece* (1978), which may last only two and a half minutes. Or Abramović/Ulay's *Gold Found by the Artists* (1981), which was performed for seven hours each day, for sixteen consecutive days. And what of Teh-ching Hsieh's "one year performance: 26 Sept. '81—26 Sept. '82," during which time the artist

<sup>28</sup> An exception would be, as an example, Jean Tinguely's *Hommage à New York* (1960). "When on March 17, 1960 [Tinguely's] machine was put into action, the spectacle was one of beautiful humor, poetry, and confusion. Jean's machine performed for half an hour and exists no more" [having destroyed itself as planned], Billy Kluver, "The Garden Party," in the catalogue *The Machine* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1968), p. 169.

<sup>29</sup> "Connie Beckley," *Data*, no. 24 (December–January 1976/77), p. 41.

lived on the streets of New York, in all weather, without once entering a building for shelter? How can performances such as these be interpreted by the same methods as those used for static art? Obviously, they cannot.

The role of criticism must expand and change along with that of art and of the artist. Art forms such as performance encourage critical experimentation and offer responsible critics an opportunity to assess the very foundation of art criticism.

Gregory Battcock wrote the following in 1979:

[Performance] art is, perhaps, the first art phenomenon to clearly demonstrate that modern art has become antiquated. Modern art is based upon a single assumption. That the artwork is only what it is. It is not a picture or a metaphor for something else. It is, say, a photograph, first and only. Or, perhaps, it is a painting, first and only. This assumption still looms above us all. We automatically accept it. We fall back upon it whenever we have a problem in criticizing, accepting, or understanding a work of art.

Equally, we use this assumption to help us “get out of” numerous situations. A work of art that may be quite useless, quite impossible to understand, perhaps, quite meaningless in every way, can be justified if it manages to refer specifically and exclusively to its own self. The phrase that explains this attitude, in French, is “l’Art, pour l’Art.” It is the cornerstone of modernism. It is the major theoretical basis for all modern art, be it painting, video, architecture, or environmental. However, it no longer works.

The shifts in art that will be lasting and that will help determine the art of the future will be those that recognize the limitations, if not the absurdity of this assumption. A medium may, in fact, be interesting and useful and challenging when it tries to be something that it is not.

This attitude, expressed above, is difficult for some people to understand, they have been so thoroughly trained to accept the idea that art is what it is, as the only code for making, evaluating, and understanding contemporary art. Yet the very profound level of artistic energy that is currently expended in the . . . performance field indicates that the major basis for modernist art is crumbling. We are indeed upon the threshold of a new art, and it is about time. The art that has been presented as new, it is becoming painfully clear, usually isn’t new at all. For it continually relies upon the basic assumption that made all modern art possible in the first

place, and such art is, of course, no longer new or modern. A truly new modern art will emerge when the basic theoretical foundation for the new (old) art of our time gives way.<sup>30</sup>

Would he, were he able, express these same sentiments today? Some might think so, some might not. Our reason for including them here, at this time, lies simply with the fact that they were relevant then and they are relevant now. Perhaps even more so. In any case, they deserve a wider audience than they had when they first appeared in print more than three years ago. For these reasons we find it appropriate to include them here.

The performance festivals and symposia of the late 1970s did not (nor, perhaps, did they set out to) achieve what, traditionally, “retrospectives for art movements” are supposed to do: wrap up a group of artists and their work into one neat, tidy package. This “package” may be opened at a later date, its contents removed and displayed, thus facilitating art-historical preservation and instruction. It was not to prove so easy with performance art. Because these events often presented work by a number of artists—with different backgrounds, from all over the world—virtually in one place, at one time, the similarities as well as the differences between them were visibly apparent to all: to the spectators, to the critics, and to the artists (who knew all along). Moreover, the critics, on whom the task of categorization fell, were not, as a rule, in agreement on how to classify and define the form. In fact, the contributors to this anthology are not always in agreement either. This is not to say that a deliberately haphazard book has been planned. Rather, the essays we have collected here, though at times contradictory, offer a wide variety of ideas and information without making claims for a final explanation.

The book has been organized into four parts, “Historical Introduction,” “Theory and Criticism,” “The Artists,” and “A Gallery of Performances.” Several of the essays in the first part deal with art and artists not strictly part of the performance art of the 1970s, the time of the origin and development of the form. Their inclusion is meant to provide a background, as it were, to the aes-

<sup>30</sup> “L’Art Corporel.”

thetic and to the intentions unique to performance artists in the 1970s. It is hoped that they may serve to identify or reveal the antecedents and differences between the art of the past and the art of our time.

Gregory Battcock's association with E.P. Dutton began in 1964 when he proposed that Lionello Venturi's *History of Art Criticism*, which had been out of print for nearly twenty years, be made available once again. That he was instrumental in saving, for a time, a book he called "probably the first such work" of its kind, and one that remains "the boldest," is surely one of the greater achievements of his career.

*The Art of Performance* is the end of a long, successful line for Dutton that began with Gregory Battcock's first anthology, *The New Art* (1966). He selected essays for it by John Cage, Marcel Duchamp, Lucy R. Lippard, Ad Reinhardt, and others that illustrated "the intimate relationship between contemporary art and contemporary criticism." In the anthologies that followed, *The New American Cinema* (1967), *Minimal Art* (1968), *Idea Art, New Ideas in Art Education* (both 1973), and *Super Realism* (1975), he repeatedly emphasized the interaction of the artist and the critic and called for "a new aesthetic" to deal with the art of our times. Anthologies that summed up the goals and techniques of important movements such as Minimal art and Conceptual art were all timely, providing informative, often provocative material when it was needed most. As his friend and colleague Pierre Restany remarked, "He was in the forefront."

In 1977 he brought together some of his own critical essays in a book called *Why Art: Casual Notes on the Aesthetics of the Immediate Past*. Two more anthologies followed, *New Artists Video* in 1978, and *Breaking the Sound Barrier: A Critical Anthology of the New Music*, published posthumously in 1981.

At the time of his death in December 1980, Dr. Battcock was at work on an anthology about performance art, for which I had done research as his assistant. Being familiar with the manuscript and with his ideas for the book, I proposed its completion to his longtime editor at Dutton, Cyril Nelson. We both agreed that the book should be published as he had planned.

ROBERT NICKAS



HISTORICAL  
INTRODUCTION



# ATTANASIO DI FELICE

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## Renaissance Performance: Notes on Prototypical Artistic Actions in the Age of the Platonic Princes

*“... performance art finds its most significant prototypes in the Italian Renaissance. In other words, performance has been a key artistic activity from the very beginnings of our modern concept of the artistic role ...”* So begins the following essay by Attanasio di Felice who, although he acknowledges an understandable lack of documentation of Renaissance performance, ably describes spectacles, processions, pageants, and displays of fireworks by artists such as Alberti, Leonardo, and Bernini. He claims that these three “great seminal figures of the early Renaissance, High Renaissance, and Baroque, respectively, ... stand out prominently as artists whose work in performance has had repercussions into our own day.”

Among some of the performances described are Buontalenti's “mock naval battle in the flooded courtyard of the Palazzo Pitti” (1589), Bernini's *L'Inondazione* (1638, *Inundation of the Tiber*), “in which the flood scene ... caused a substantially built house to collapse,” and Leonardo's *Paradiso* (1490) with “performers costumed as planets ... revolv[ing] and ... proclaiming the return of the Golden Age.”

Attanasio di Felice has written about modern art and performance for *Flash Art* and *Portfolio*. He lives and works in

*New York and Rome and is director of the Serra di Felice Gallery in New York.*

The guests now streamed into the Sala del giuoco alla pala, which had been arranged for the representation of the Paradiso, by Leonardo da Vinci, the Court mechanic. Then a train of powder exploded, and crystalline globes, like planets, were seen disposed in a circle, filled with water, and illumined by a myriad of living fires sparkling with rainbow colours.

—DMITRI MEREZHKOVSII, *after the eyewitness account of Bernardo Bellincioni*

That area of interdisciplinary artistic concerns known as performance art finds its most significant prototypes in the Italian Renaissance. In other words, performance has been a key artistic activity from the very beginnings of our modern concept of the artistic role, correspondent with the emergence of what remains our guiding principle of individualism in society.

The relationship of Renaissance performance to developments in all the plastic arts, in architecture, and in philosophy was not merely casual but causal, performance serving frequently as the highly flexible testing ground for ideas then finding their way into painting and architecture.

The most influential philosophical ideas for the Quattrocento were those Neoplatonic ideals that found their way through allegory into poetry and painting, and that interested even several powerful noble patrons.

As early as 1438 there was a debate at Ferrara between Platonists and Aristotelians, the Roman Catholic Church being a proponent of Aristotle. The arrival in Italy of many Greek scholars after the Turkish conquest of Constantinople in 1453 was of major importance in providing the opportunity for a greater diffusion of Platonic thought. Those who embraced it were called "humanists" and were even encouraged by the papacy for a few years in the person of Pope Nicholas V (1447–1455); under the Medici the Platonic Academy was established at Florence with the guidance of Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola.

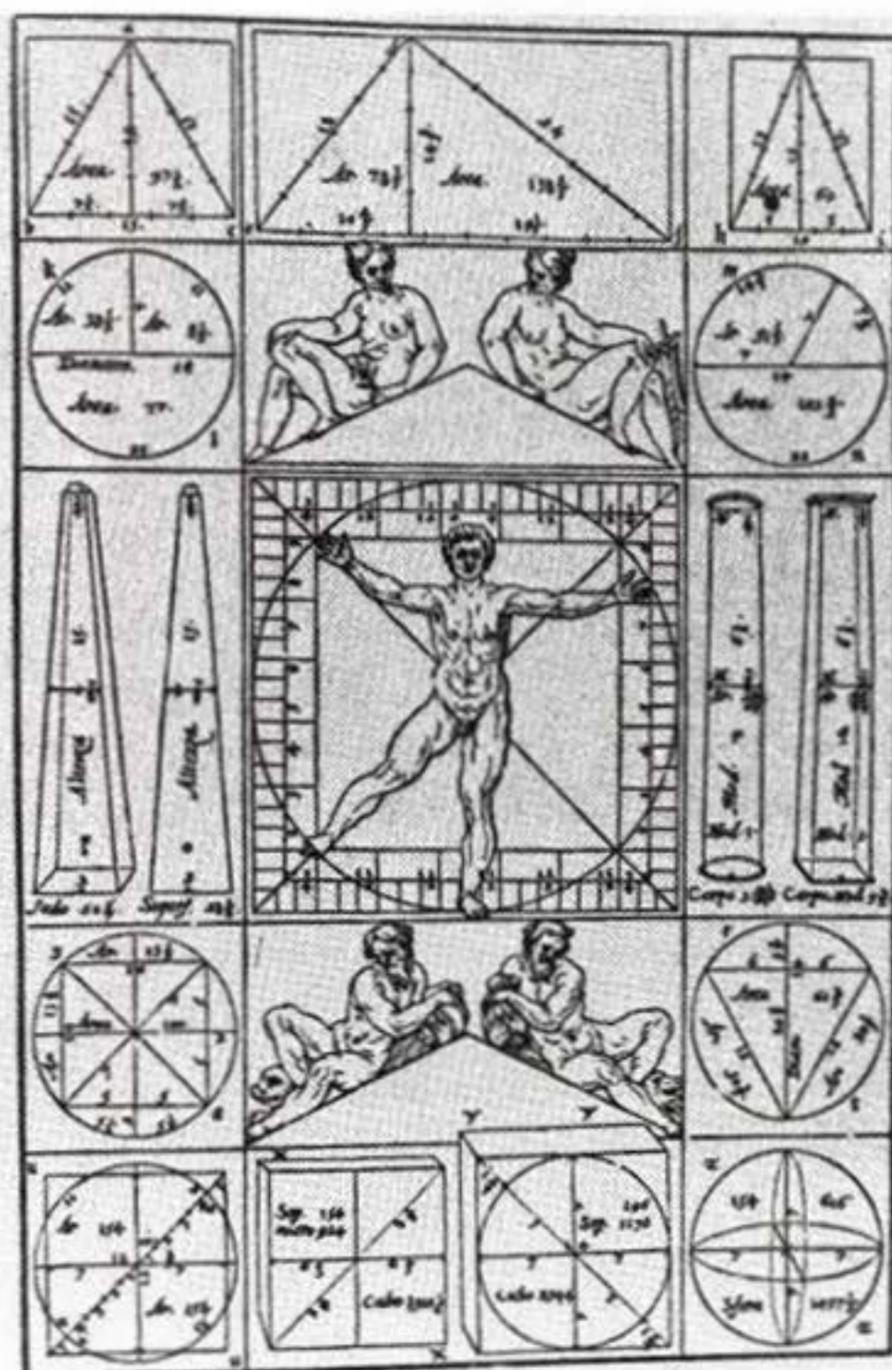
Thus Neoplatonic philosophy played a part in determining the nature of many courtly commissions, and indeed colored the patron's concept of the artist's role. Aside from the specifically Neoplatonic content to be found in much of the earliest performance art, the idea that the Earth itself is but an imperfect representation of the perfect forms to be found only in the empyrean lent to Neoplatonically inspired rituals the weight of being considered parallel realities, that is, creations at least as "real" as the world around them. Thus, as the officially acknowledged erectors of parallel realities, most readily manifested in performance art, artists came to be regarded as creators rather than mere artisans.

A most extraordinary example was Sigismondo Malatesta, the Prince of Rimini, so passionately committed to Platonic ideals that he fought bloody battles with the Turks in the Peloponnesus for the sole purpose of recovering the ashes of the philosopher Gemistus Pletho. Malatesta commissioned Alberti to build the Tempio Malatestiano, chronologically the first example of what is considered Quattrocento architecture. The sarcophagi set in niches in the outer walls of this Platonic temple contain the remains of humanists whom Sigismondo had attracted to his court, or with whom he had engaged in particularly meaningful discourse, including Gemistus. In his book *The Stones of Rimini* Adrian Stokes commented: "There have been investigators who thought they found more than one hint of esoteric rite and symbolic manipulation staged in the Tempio." As opposed to the Medici, who tended to use artists as political tools, while paying elaborate lip service to Platonism (which is already something), Sigismondo gave artists such as Piero della Francesca free rein to be creative entities.

In Quattrocento Italy, once the liberating factor of a philosophic framework was established, artists manifested work in every form possible to the technology of the day. From the design and execution of fountains to the production of spectacles for the courts, the artists of the Renaissance were encouraged in the pursuit of their pronounced multimedia concerns. Their normal activities included the creation of *trionfi* (triumphal processions frequently requiring the construction of elaborate temporary arches), *cortei* (court pageants), *grottescherie* (masquerades with bizarrely costumed participants), and *carri allegorici* (allegorical vehicles



1. Piero della Francesca;  
*Triumph of the Duke of Urbino*. c. 1465.



2. Vincenzo Scamozzi: The human body in motion through space as the procreator of form. (Photograph: Livia)

often used in jousts). A long line of such artists extending through the Baroque era included Filarete (c. 1400–1469), Leon Battista Alberti, Leonardo, Sebastiano Serlio (1475–1554), Baldassare Peruzzi (1481–1536), Giulio Parigi (d. 1635), Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Stefano della Bella (1610–1664), Andrea Pozzo (1642–1709), Giovanni Servandoni (1695–1766), and Antonio Galli Bibiena (1700–1774).

Donato Bramante (1444–1514) was called upon by the Duke of Milan in 1492 to create “una fantasia per mettere a spettacolo.” Raphael painted the sets for Ariosto’s *Lena*. In 1535 Polidoro da Caravaggio designed a triumphal procession for Emperor Charles V at Messina. In 1589 Bernardo Buontalenti (1536–1608) planned elaborate festivities for the marriage of Christine de Lorraine and Ferdinando III Medici in Florence, including a mock naval battle in the flooded courtyard of the Pitti Palace.

The greatest historians have lamented the dearth of documentation of Renaissance artists’ performance. Sir Kenneth Clark wrote, “In studying the architecture and even the painting of the Renaissance, we must always remember that one whole branch of each is almost completely lost to us—the architecture and decoration which was designed for pageants and masquerades.” This ephemerality was not lost on Renaissance man either. Some attempts were made to create a record of these works, particularly triumphal processions honoring the mighty, in the form of commemorative books especially prepared for the occasion, which reproduced the principal motifs devised by the artists. These souvenir booklets, which themselves have largely been lost, in a way parallel the revival of artists’ books that coincided with the renewed performance activity early in this century.

Yet, despite the lack of direct evidence and the disappointment of not being able to appreciate the no-doubt wonderful works so conveniently achieved through these temporary media, there are several interesting trains of thought that may be deduced from the records that do exist.

Three of the great seminal figures of the early Renaissance, High Renaissance, and Baroque, respectively, Alberti, Leonardo, and Bernini stand out prominently as artists whose work in performance has had repercussions into our own day. Although each

achieved his greatest fame in a different discipline, namely architecture, painting, and sculpture, each engaged in all three of these activities and more.

Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472), through the progress of his development, makes clear to us the intrinsic connections between painting perspective, stage design, and architecture. Largely remembered today for his rediscovery of Vitruvius and the innovative application of ancient architectural precepts in such structures as the Malatesta Temple (1450), Alberti was for many years before his first architectural projects engaged in painting as a form of personal research and in optical experiments. During his formative years he was already a famed and sought-after personage, well known for his humorous dinner speeches, the texts of which, as well as a funeral oration for his dog, survive today.

Alberti came to realize that ancient Greek knowledge of perspective, inferred from references by Vitruvius to lost treatises, derived from scenographic design techniques developed within the context of performance practice. Alberti authored the first Renaissance treatise on painting and systematic perspective in 1435, expressing the Platonic view that the plastic arts represent a sort of frozen music or an artificial fixing of the universal flux, in respect to which, performance, providing temporarily evident intervals, may be regarded as a nexus between the fluid and the fixed. It is no wonder then that his comedic play *Philodoxus* is the first conceived as a carefully controlled aesthetic whole, Alberti having designed every element, including the pioneering use of illusionistic perspective, the seed of that tendency toward theatricalization in all the arts which culminated in the Baroque.

Questions of illusion and reality, provoked by Platonic perceptions and instigating the scientific speculations of Alberti and Leonardo, find a curious parallel early in this century when the major reemphasis of artists' performance by the Futurists was added to by their professed interest in the philosophical ramifications of physics, notably in Bergson and Einstein, and a renewed appreciation of those same Pythagorean precepts, such as the "golden section," which fascinated artists during the Renaissance.

Our "shadowy" apprehension of reality in terms of flux, so graphically parabled by Plato in his *Republic*, has made its greatest impact through Einstein's theories, which demonstrate that energy

and mass are interchangeable in the inseparable continuum of space and time. Quantum physics actually refers to subatomic particles, the shadowy stuff of which the universe is made, as “tendencies to exist.” These findings, affirmed by Heisenberg’s principle of “indeterminacy,” indicating how the nature that we seek merely to observe cannot help but be altered by man’s presence, confirm Renaissance man’s largely intuitive recognition of his own personal sense of spatiality, thus making it possible for Leonardo and Bramante to conceive of an art of performance and for us to recognize it as such today.

The hallmarks of the Renaissance man—syncretic breadth of vision, multiplicity of talents, an exalted sense of personal creative force—were present to such an extraordinary degree in Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) that he was regarded with awe even by the great men of his time. As a formulator of highly impressive pageants and smaller scale spectacles full of novelty and surprise, he was a legend in his own day, provoking unique commentary by contemporary diarists and historians.

With something of the mischievous spirit of the trickster he liked to mystify and frighten observers, as in the following account by the painter Giorgio Vasari:

He formed a paste of a certain kind of wax, and as he walked he shaped animals very thin and full of wind, and, by blowing into them, made them fly through the air, but when the wind ceased they fell to the ground. On the back of a most bizzarre lizard, found by the vinedresser of the Belvedere, he fixed, with a mixture of quicksilver, wings composed of scales stripped from other lizards, which, as it walked, quivered with the motion; and having given it eyes, horns, and beard, taming it, and keeping it in a box, he made all his friends to whom he showed it, fly for fear. He used often to have the guts of a ram completely freed of their fat and cleaned, and thus made so fine that they could have been held in the palm of the hand; and having placed a pair of blacksmith’s bellows in another room, he fixed to them one of these, and, blowing into them, filled the room, which was very large, so that whoever was in it was obliged to retreat into a corner; showing how, transparent and full of wind, from taking up little space at the beginning they come to occupy much, and likening them to virtue. He made an infinite number of such follies, and gave his attention to mirrors.

It was through such "follies" that Leonardo undoubtedly perfected the techniques that permitted the range of fantastic effects he was able to achieve in his elaborate commissioned pageants, notably during the period at Milan where he was originally received as a musician. There, under the Sforza, he created his *Paradiso* in 1490 and *Jupiter and Danae* in 1496. Mythological themes, like the stories of Jupiter and his loves, were most commonly used as the basis for the design of court pageants and festive allegorical cars. But as the Platonists knew, as Vico attempted to ascertain by semantic proofs, and as Frazer, Freud, Jung, Eliade, and Deleuze have affirmed, these colorful episodes, so adaptable to the plastic arts and theatre, are of archetypal significance.

This is not to say that conventions of mythological expression were not used by Leonardo and others to convey their own personal interpretations, just as the pageants themselves had as pretexts the ceremonial festivities of princely marriages and the like. As Walter Pater noted, "We have seen Leonardo using incidents of sacred story, not for their own sake, or as mere subjects for pictorial realization, but as a symbolical language for fancies all his own."

The reinterpretation of symbolic devices so conveniently realized through temporary media makes of performance art a laboratory of metamorphoses of linguistic significations. Renaissance performance would undoubtedly be a fertile field for the observation of such linguistic Darwinism if we only had more concrete evidence to analyze.

We are fortunate in the case of Leonardo's pageant of *Paradiso*, which was witnessed and described by the court poet Bernardo Bellincioni. Leonardo caused performers costumed as planets to revolve and recite verses proclaiming the return of the Golden Age. This specific performance has continued to exert its influence in the twentieth century. It is fascinating that Ferruccio Busoni based one act of his mysterious masterpiece, the opera *Doktor Faust*, on the *Paradiso*. He was particularly affected by Leonardo's use of crystalline globes of water to produce the Pythagorean "music of the spheres." Meditating on the chiaroscuro of Leonardo's character, his double nature turning at once toward Christ and Antichrist, Busoni composed a musical equivalent to his combination of "clear shadow and obscure light."

It is impressive to what extent the mere legend of Renaissance performance persists in its power to inspire artists through the philosophical tradition it evokes and in outward aspects of symbolic representation. Most notable in this regard have been the painter Filippo de Pisis (1896–1956) who appeared in the guise of a humanist; and at the present time Luigi Ontani who, in his tableaux vivants, has represented the demigods of antiquity as well as the now hardly less mythical figures of Leonardo and Raphael. Moreover, in their concrete mythopoetic actions, Leonardo and the others are in a larger sense the noble fathers of all successive performance artists.

Among the few additional details that may be added about Leonardo's public spectacles there is little of revelatory significance, just a strengthening of what we already know. In an unusually diarylike note to be found at Windsor Castle, dated April 23, 1491, during the period at Milan, Leonardo mentions that he had been at the house of Galeazzo da Sanseverino to organize a spectacle for a joust in which the servants were to be costumed as wild men. A series of finely wrought drawings exists for masquerade costumes (c. 1512), containing also some such details of effect as a miniature waterfall, but for what event or where cannot be determined. Vasari describes the mechanical lion made during his final years in France, his last documented commission of any kind. The lion advanced a few steps and appeared to menace King Francis I, then its head opened revealing lilies in the form of the royal crest.

Leonardo created other automata, the traditions for which go back to the Middle Ages and to the ancient Greeks. For this we have Athanasius Kircher (*Musurgia Universalis*, 1650) and other authorities. Leonardo designed and built ingenious mechanical drums and other instruments of great refinement. In fact, music and sound made up an important part of his artistic concerns. Many of his short compositions survive. By all accounts he was a highly accomplished musician and renowned improviser on the lyre; so much so that when he was first received at the Milanese court it was as the player of a curious silver lyre of his own making, in the form of a horse's head.

Among his inventions are a sort of wind instrument whose function is based on his study of human anatomy. In what many



3. Leonardo da Vinci: Youth in masquerade costume.



4. Leonardo da Vinci:  
Drawings of mechanical  
drums. (Photograph: Livia)

have seen fit to regard as purely scientific researches, Leonardo conducted experiments that lent to his understanding not only of the mechanics of light and sound waves but also of the human senses, the relationships among them, and the phenomena that stimulate them. We know from his notebooks that he observed correspondences between the visual and auditory realms, the physical evidence of certain Platonic ideas. Even such seemingly trivial discoveries as that of the small heaps of dust that formed on a table struck with a hammer must have been of special significance for a mind such as Leonardo's.

He was not only an incredibly acute observer of natural phenomena but also a keen observer of the effects of such phenomena on the human senses, and thereby on the emotions. He wrote, "Observe how much grace and sweetness are to be seen in the faces of men and women on the streets, with the approach of evening in bad weather." (He thus anticipated what would be discerned centuries later concerning changes in atmospheric ozone levels and their effect on mood.)

In what has come down to us as the *Treatise on Painting*, Leonardo urges the study of gesture to determine those movements that best convey certain emotions: "That figure is most praiseworthy which, by its action, best expresses the passions of the soul."

He applied his scientific and engineering knowledge to performance and he applied it, if I may beg the question for a moment, with a subtle understanding of the human heart, to move his audience as he would.

Much confusion has existed among admirers of Leonardo who for the past few centuries have had difficulty resolving what divides in their minds Leonardo the artist from Leonardo the scientist or simply nonartist. This division of roles has been particularly acute since the rationalism of Descartes became popular enough for people to begin thinking of knowledge and imagination as hindrances to each other. This conflict is essentially contained within the arguments of Descartes and his opponent Vico.

An involvement with science and engineering goes hand in hand with the emergence of the role of artist-as-individual. Was not Giotto an architect; and certainly the creators of systematic perspective were mathematicians? In a Cartesian world the painter became, as the nineteenth-century French saying went, "dumb as a painter." According to Vico man could achieve a surer knowledge of himself through his own creations (history, languages, laws) than through the study of natural science. Poets and artists through their ongoing reinterpretation of mythic knowledge provide the basis for a possible superior understanding of man.

Leonardo seems to have maintained a tenuous balance for himself between these two extreme attitudes. Although nominally opposed to the Medicean Platonic academy and its worship of the past, this was at least in part due to differences in personalities. Leonardo later taught himself Latin grammar, and he was certainly concerned with the idea of flux (Gemistus stemmed all from Neptune), a sense of fluidity in the universe that contributed to his inability to "finish" anything. He was led in his final years to make many intense line-drawing studies of the motion of water, not the placid surfaces of lakes or the gentle flow of rivers but the utterly cataclysmic force of the deluge, a force beyond the capabilities of man's control until today. A few years earlier he produced more



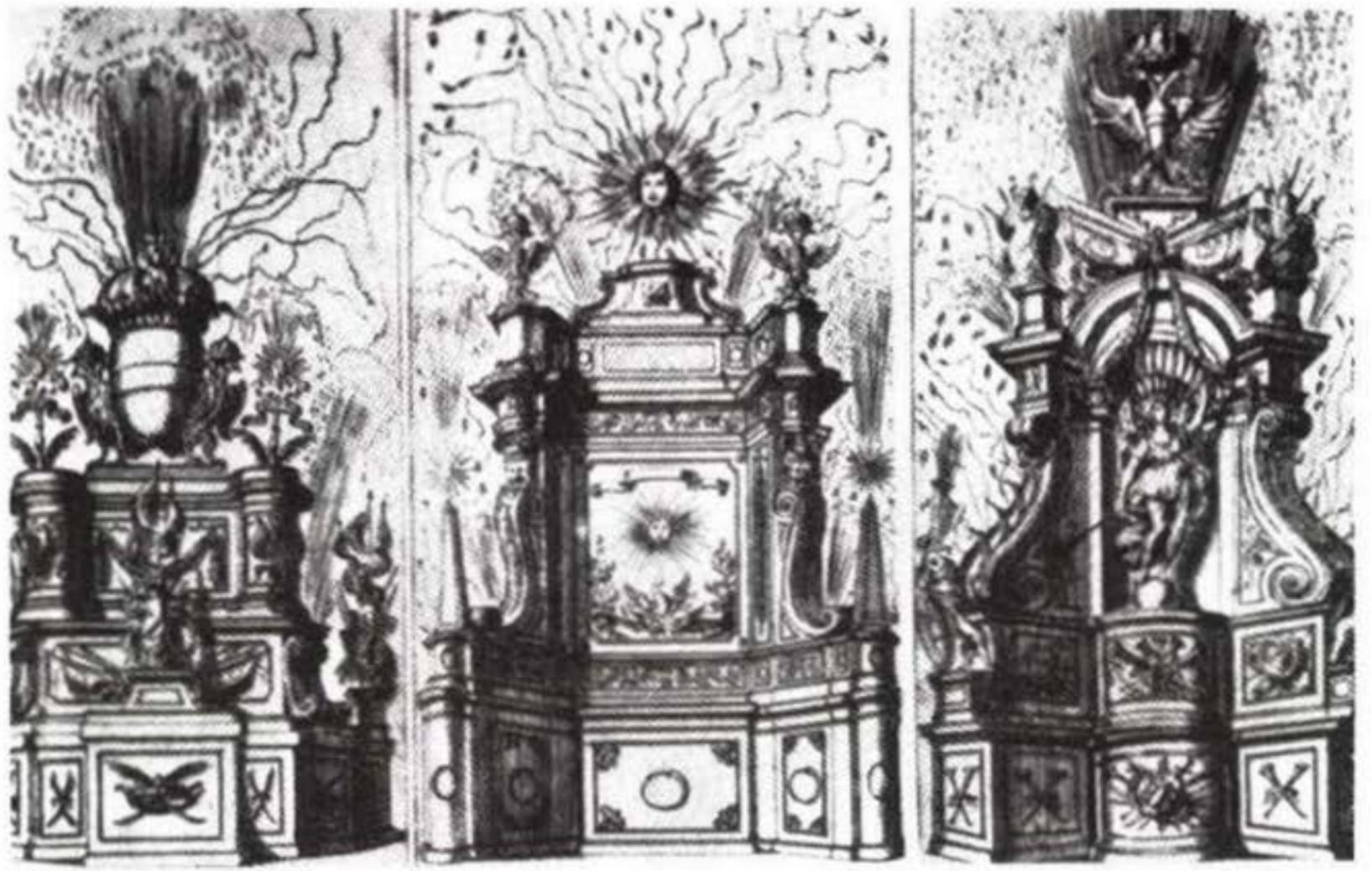
5. Leonardo da Vinci: Self-portrait contemplating water in motion around an obstacle.

modest studies of flowing water encountering obstructions that seem purposely placed.

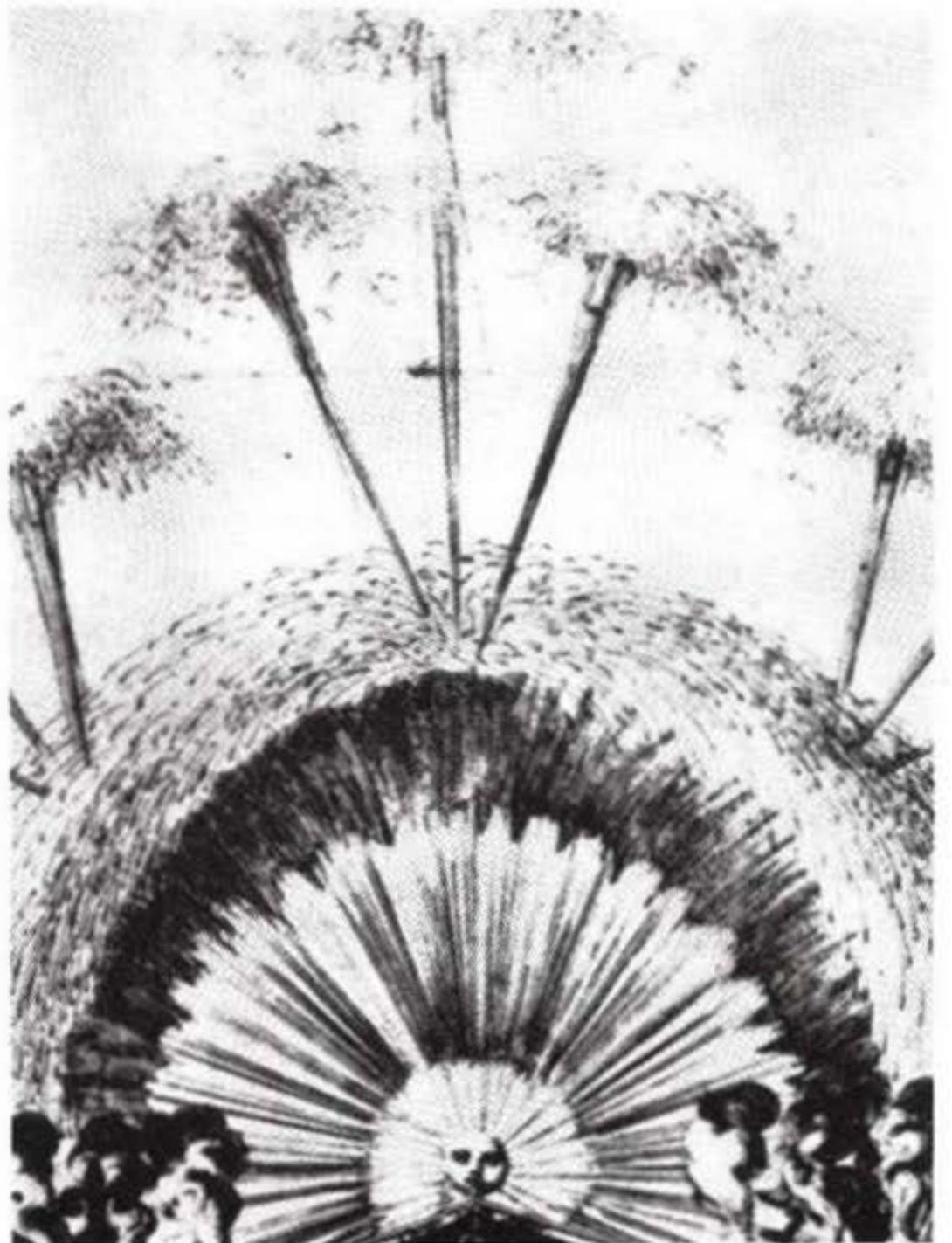
Artists have always been known for their impressive actions: Alberti leaping, in a single bound, over a man's head, Leonardo bending horseshoes easily in his hands. This need for and admiration of unusual and difficult feats found its fullest gratification in the frightful fires, powerful explosions, and actual floods of the spectacles of Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680).

Bernini is the earliest major artist about whose performance activities we have a substantial amount of documentation. As such he is a key not only to the age which he did more than any other to define, the Baroque, but also, inasmuch as he carried forward concepts from the past, he adds in retrospect to our understanding of the Renaissance.

His career is marked from the start by a concern with ritual and spectacle. This is due in part, of course, to his lifelong attachment to the papacy with its increasingly elaborate rites and holy



6. Carlo Rainaldi: Project for Ferdinand IV. 1653.



7. Elpido Benedetti:  
The sun appearing,  
from the fireworks  
project for the  
convalescence of Louis  
XIV. 1687.



8. Gian Lorenzo Bernini: *The Triton Fountain*. 1642–1643.

festivals, far from the simple purity of Gregorian chant. But it is also clearly essential to his personal development as an artist, and to the tenor of the age that he helped form. As the honored Bernini scholar Fagiolo dell'Arco wrote,

He transformed immobility and certainty into movement and ambiguity. And this movement was not merely psychological and representational; it was actual movement. The statue had ceased to be the ideal: now it was the fountain, the theatrical set, the ephemeral construction.

From all the evidence available, it is clear that Bernini's spectacles stimulated the imagination to contemplate the profound questions of the cosmos—space and time—that occupied the Platonically spirited artists of the Renaissance. However, his indisputable individuality as well as his philosophical concerns were assimilated within the bounds of the hybrid doxy of an at once stricter and more extravagant Counter-Reformation Catholicism. In his day artists were called on to create sacred performances transforming entire church interiors for such ceremonies as the marathon "Forty Hours of the Sacrament."

Renaissance performance art took most of its forms from the highly ritualized society of the Middle Ages when church processions and feudal formalities such as jousts were anonymously planned. Individualism was responsible for contaminating these forms with personal interpretations and for awakening a lust for fame that naturally led the men of an age obsessed with antiquity to those ancient metaphors for personal greatness, the triumph and its counterpart the triumphal arch. It is no coincidence that the first two explicitly Quattrocento structures are the triumphal arch of King Alfonso I of Naples and Alberti's Tempio Malatestiano, which incorporates the triumphal arch into the center of the facade.

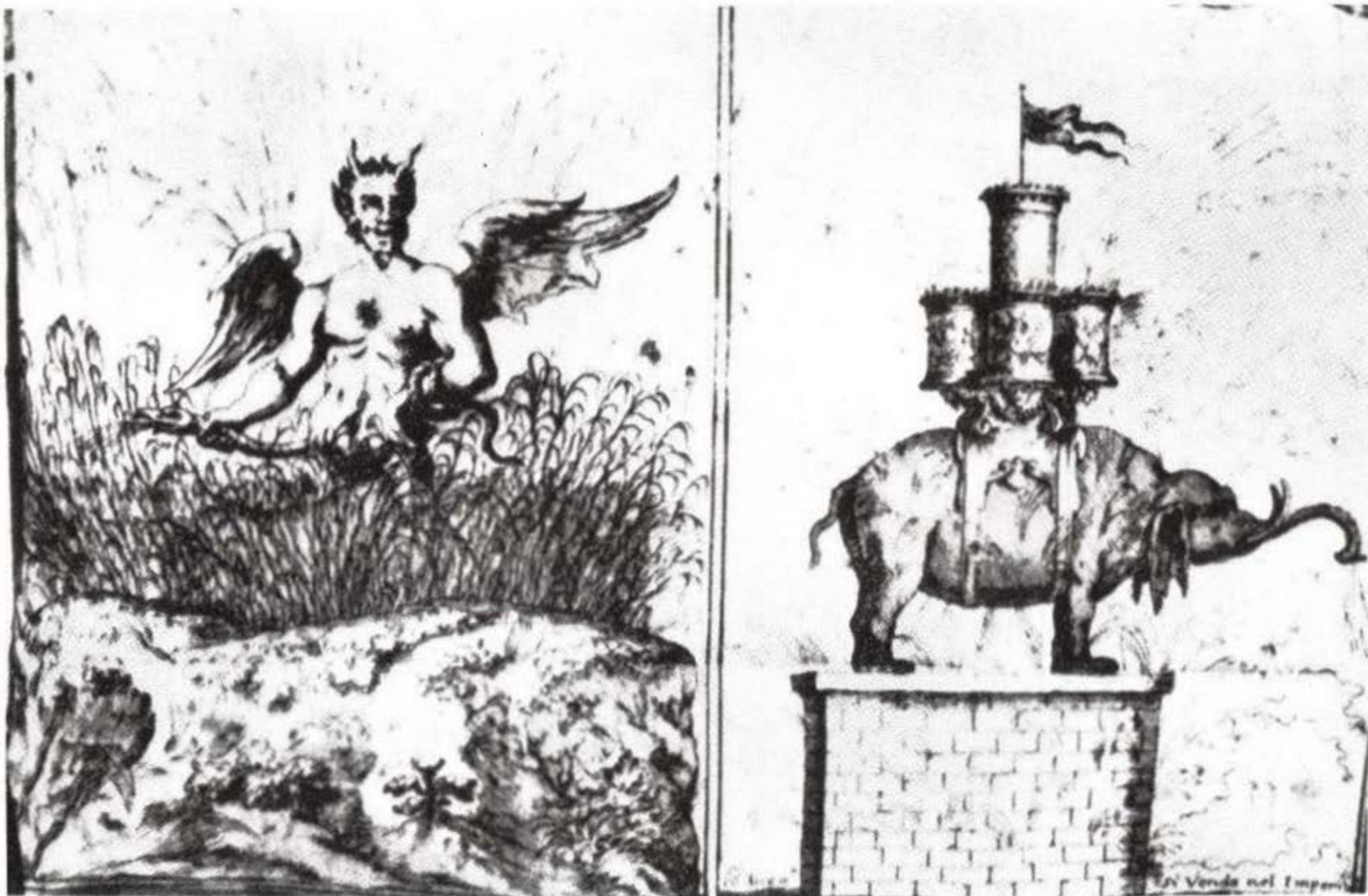
Bernini had both the inclination and the means vastly to expand the expressive scope of these forms from the past while satisfying with unprecedented grandiosity the love of virtuosic effect, achieved by emphasizing the basic elements of water, fire, and light.

The age of the Baroque saw the ultimate theatricalization of the plastic arts embodied in the works, sculptural and architec-

tural, of Bernini. Bernini's basic preoccupation with theatrical effect is clearly represented by his many staged spectacles, for which he wrote the scripts, designed the scenes and costumes, carved the sculptures, planned effects of lighting and sound, and undertook the complete direction and execution of the works himself, including elaborate feats of engineering. The most brilliant example was probably his *L'Inondazione* (Inundation of the Tiber) of 1638 in which the flood scene featured real rushing waters that alarmed the audience, and caused a substantially built house to collapse.

The cupola of Saint Peter's in Rome remains partially melted as the result of Bernini's *Allestimento di una Girandola* (fireworks installation) of 1659. It has been suggested that he found inspiration not only from nature but also from the artistic camp, particularly from Peruzzi who some years before was fond of flooding the dining halls of villas, arranging for guests to eat in small boats. Drawing parallels between the Baroque phenomenon of spectacle informing plastic arts, we may quote Dorfles when he speaks of "qu'une des situations les plus curieuses de notre époque—dans le secteur des arts plastiques—(et non seulement des arts plastiques, mais aussi de la musique), est une tendance univoque vers la spectacularité, vers la théâtralisation" ("that one of the most curious situations of our age—in the sector of the plastic arts [and not only of the plastic arts, but also of music], is an unequivocal tendency toward the spectacular, toward theatricalization").

Leonardo said: "Il dipintore disputa e gareggia colla natura" (The painter contends with and rivals nature). And in the realm of performance the artists of the Rinascimento created works that frequently combined a matrixing of Neoplatonic symbolism (seeking to reflect the perfect forms of the empyrean) with a love of display and effect for its own sake. However, the inevitable changes in social structure, involving the loss of interest in Neoplatonism on the part of princely and noble patrons, altered the combination of factors that had facilitated the creation of performances by artists who "contend with and rival nature" (as opposed to those who merely seek to reproduce it). There were also instances of the repression of Neoplatonism as when Botticelli's work was burned by Savonarola and when Malatesta was ordered to be burned in effigy in St. Peter's Square (on being informed of this, Malatesta commissioned



9. Gian Lorenzo Bernini: Fireworks for the birth of the Infanta of Spain. 1651.



10. Gian Lorenzo Bernini: Fireworks project in the Piazza Farnese for the Peace of Aachen. Watercolor by Sevin. 1668.

from Giulio Romano an effigy suitable for that purpose). In other words, artists were being persuaded once more to descend from the heroic heights of true creators (that is to say "poets," from *poietes*, the maker), being able to conduct rituals in which they, as signifiers, imparted original autonomous knowledge to those who were present, to increasingly pursuing the recording of mundane visual experience.

The growing tendency toward specialization, which was becoming a factor in the 1500s of portrait painting, church decoration, mosaic work, sculpture, costume design, and architecture becoming mutually exclusive professions, reached an extreme that firmly established itself by the 1700s. By then there was nowhere to be found a painter or sculptor who was active in performance, but there had fully emerged the set designer, the costume designer, and so forth, who were considered artisans as such. Heavily contributing to these changes in artistic concerns was the steady secularization of philosophy, the attendant lessening of the significance of court ritual and pageantry, and the growth of public forms of theatre.

Just as the withering of interest in court ritual (having lost its meaning in the ongoing social revolution) showed a proportionate decrease in performance art, so it follows that a key element in the notating of artists' performance must reside in an understanding of the significance of ritual in society. As a pioneering delineator of the concept of the class struggle, Vico traced the processes whereby social change affected the uses of language (in its total sense of communication) and imbued certain people (called by him "heroes" after the original prototypes), who constantly reappear in history, with the power to determine and demonstrate the meaning of certain words and actions.

Examining the historic origins of performance art helps clarify the relationship of performance to painting and other forms today. The speculations of present-day Vasaris have in the early history of performance art been an invaluable aid to gaining the perspective necessary to discourse correctly on phenomena that are all too recent to allow easy analysis.

Renaissance and Baroque performance art provide an example that contradicts the popular current view of performance as a

symptom of a tendency toward dematerialization or even Minimalism in the arts. Rather, history points toward a distinct pattern of performance mediating between nature (the flux) and the plastic arts (the fixed) in a process at once of dissolution and materialization; in other words, the form in which the artist discovers for himself the truths of cycles and intervals (Rilke: “music, the breathing of statues”), of time, which he manifests more permanently in more enduring form. Bernini spoke eloquently of his allegorical figure of Time:

The figure of Time carrying and revealing Truth is not finished. My idea is to show him carrying her through the air, and at the same time show the effects of Time wasting and consuming everything in the end. In the model I have set columns, obelisks, and mausoleums, and these things, which are shown overwhelmed and destroyed by Time, are the very things that support Time in the air, without which he could not fly even if he had wings.

# ROSELEE GOLDBERG

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## Performance: A Hidden History

*According to RoseLee Goldberg, performance art has been around for quite some time. She notes that the "history of performance art in this century can be seen as a series of waves," and she points out that the Futurists, the Constructivists, the Dadaists, and the Surrealists all "attempted to resolve problematic issues in performance."*

*RoseLee Goldberg is author of Performance: Live Art from 1909 to the Present (1979) and has been actively involved in performance art in the United States and England. She concludes this essay with the suggestion that art history demonstrates that artists have used performance "as a way of animating the many formal and conceptual ideas on which the making of art is based."*

From Futurism to the present the history of performance raises fascinating questions about the nature of art as much as about art history as it is written. Not a continuous history, rather it tends to stop and start, to emerge during particular political and social climates. At times it appears as an outrageous publicity stunt for artists wishing to engage a wider public; at others it reinforces an analysis of the formal art notions of a period. Its variety and ephemerality pose difficulties of definition, as much as of recognition, in conventional art-history studies.

Art historians have no ready category in which to place performance, and with good reason. For performance has always developed along the edges of disciplines such as literature, poetry, film, theatre, music, architecture, or painting. It has involved video, dance, slides, and narrative and has been performed by single individuals or by groups, in streets, bars, theatres, galleries, or

museums. As a permissive open-ended medium, with endless variables, it has always been attractive to artists impatient with the limitations of more established art forms.

Indeed, because the very nature of the form is about the cross-breeding of the arts, performance aggressively defies precise or easy definition. If this genre possesses any underlying common denominator, it is that performance is “live art” created by artists who closely relate their public confrontations to the fine-art modes of the time. The decision to perform live before an audience—rather than to work in an isolated studio and to exhibit in a gallery removed from any direct relationship with the public—is an important factor in coming to grips with the phenomenon of performance. Conversely, public interest in the medium stems from an apparent desire of that public to gain access to the art world, to be a spectator of its ritual and its community. Like tribal ritual, it provides a *presence* for the artist in society while its references remain tightly knitted into the art context.

This audience-performer relationship provides yet another characteristic of performance, which is that it can be both serious and entertaining: the motive to make art ideas available to a larger public inevitably suggests a level of playfulness or satire, which is used in some cases to demystify observers of their deeply held notions of the preciousness of art.

Performance is the expression of artists who wish to challenge the viewers’ perceptions of art and the limits of those perceptions. Each performer makes his or her own definition of performance in the very manner and process of execution, so that each work becomes an entirely unexpected combination of events. The form allows artists to make a “collage of media,” and the means by which they do this are as diverse as the imaginations of the performance artists themselves. Moreover, the expertise, even the virtuosity, of performance artists often lies in their ability to manipulate the unlimited choice of material, much in the same way that an editor pieces together the hundreds of thousands of frames of a movie.

Such a radical stance against the conventions of art has made performance a catalyst in the history of twentieth-century art. Whenever a certain school, be it Cubism, Minimalism, or Conceptual art, seemed to have gained a stranglehold on art production

and criticism, artists turned to performance as a way of breaking down categories and indicating new directions.

The history of performance art in this century can thus be seen as a series of waves; successive periods when performance provided a release from the stagnation and complacency of set styles and attitudes. Moreover, within the history of the avant-garde—meaning those artists who led the field in breaking with each successive tradition—performance in the twentieth century has been at the forefront of such activity: an avant-avant-garde. Despite the fact that most of what is written today about the work of the Futurists, Constructivists, Dadaists, or Surrealists continues to concentrate on the art objects produced by each period, it was more often than not the case that these movements found their roots and attempted to resolve problematic issues in performance: when the members of such groups were still in their twenties or early thirties, it was in performance that they tested their ideas, only later expressing them in objects. The Italian Futurists, for example, began with manifestoes and performance before actually finding a painterly or sculptural means to represent those ideas. The Zurich Dadaists were poets, cabaret artists, and performers before creating Dada objects, if at all. Similarly the Parisians who would later draw up the Surrealist manifesto were poets, writers, and performers six years prior to suggesting the means to materialize those ideas in objets d'art. Usually, these artists turned to performance as a means to gain access to a wider audience and to shake up the public's attitude toward art, life, and culture. They printed manifestoes in daily papers, arranged group events in theatres, cafés, and in the streets, and organized public demonstrations. Such manifestations were intended as a reaction to the prevailing art establishment and to the disproportionate influence of critics in determining the "value" of art. But they were also aimed at halting what the Futurists saw as a stagnation of ideas produced by a museum mentality committed largely to exhibiting only the work of dead artists.

Although performance is now becoming generally accepted as a medium of expression in its own right, relatively little is known about its rich and extensive evolution. Yet the discovery of this hidden history reveals that artists have always turned to live per-

formance as one means among many of expressing their ideas. Examples prior to the twentieth century abound: Leonardo da Vinci created river pageants and performed experiments related to his artwork in front of invited audiences. Gian Lorenzo Bernini devised spectacles such as the *L'Inondazione* (Inundation of the Tiber), in which Rome's Piazza Navona, flooded with water, became the scene of mock naval battles. And in the 1890s Henri Rousseau held "soirees" in his Montmartre studio to provide entertainment for his artist friends, including Alfred Jarry and Pablo Picasso.

Despite these isolated instances, recording the richness of performance history has been particularly complicated, primarily because of its ephemeral nature. Like the history of the theatre, the history of performance can be reconstructed only from scripts, texts, photographs, and the descriptions of onlookers. Furthermore, because it verges on so many disciplines, constructing its history necessitates the investigation of the history of theatre, of film, of music, of opera, of mime and dance, as much as of art. These parallel studies show that performance has more often than not been the result of the collaboration of artists from different disciplines—painters, poets, architects, dancers, magicians, and filmmakers—and it was at such times, when certain cultural capitals, be they Paris, Zurich, Berlin, Moscow, or New York, provided the context for such collaboration, that performance flourished.

Such general observations on a medium that has only recently undergone scrutiny as a relevant genre with its own history and conditions are built on a survey of the social and intellectual lives, as much as the artistic output, of numerous artists. It is a story that moves from meeting places such as the Café Simplicissimus in Munich, the Stray Dog Café in Saint Petersburg, or the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich to innovative schools such as the Bauhaus and Black Mountain College. And that story is colored by political events that made it seem untimely or irrelevant for artists to work only in the acceptable media of painting, sculpture, or drawing.

The Italian Futurists began with manifestoes and performances that reflected the political mood that would eventually lead to the turmoil of World War I. Live performances in Paris, Milan, Naples,



11. Umberto Boccioni: *Futurist Evening*. 1911. By 1911 the Futurists were notorious for their irreverent and noisy performances. (Photograph courtesy RoseLee Goldberg)

London, and Saint Petersburg played an important role in their early fame. In fact, their later painting and sculpture had less initial impact than did their outrageous performance “declamations” against what they branded as the “past-loving” art of the museum establishment.

Some of the most effective early Futurist performance work was executed by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, a wealthy Alexandria-born poet who arrived in Paris in 1893 at the age of seventeen. Determined to establish his reputation in this fiercely competitive cultural capital of Europe, Marinetti devised a sure means to attract public attention. On February 20, 1909, he published the initial “Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism” in the large-circulation Parisian daily *Le Figaro*. “We will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind,” it declared. “With the manifesto, we establish *Futurism* because we want to free this land from its smelly gangrene of professors, archaeologists, cicerones and antiquarians . . . from the numberless museums that cover her like as many graveyards.”

The manifesto caused exactly the scandal that Marinetti had intended. Later, the painter Umberto Boccioni, who had joined the cause, wrote, “we feel violently that it is our duty to shout out the prime importance of our efforts.” What followed was the first Futurist Evening, presented at the Teatro Rosetti in Trieste in 1910. There Marinetti and his friends played on the underlying political tension of the town as an additional element in the unrehearsed performance. They flamboyantly declaimed the tenets of the manifesto, abusing the audience for its bourgeois values and triggering a riot.

Public scuffles, arrests, a day or two in jail, and considerable press coverage became the typical Futurist fare in the wake of the Trieste episode. Anticipating that their actions would be regarded with “contempt,” their 1910 “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting” declared that “the name of ‘madman’ with which it is attempted to gag all innovators should be looked upon as a title of honor.” The artists turned to variety theatre as a model for their performances, because it destroyed “the Solemn, the Sacred, the Serious and the Sublime in Art with a capital A.”

Above all, Futurist performance was an attack on the public’s notion of life and art. And the excitement and scandal the Futurists



12. Tristan Tzara: *Le Coeur à Gaz*. 1921. Sonia Delaunay's elaborate cardboard costumes for the first performance at the Dada salon organized by the playwrights Louis Aragon, Paul Éluard, and others. The production was revived for the Soirée du Coeur à Barbe at the Théâtre Michel, July 6–7, 1923.



13. Hugo Ball: *Elefantenkarawane*. 1916. This sound poem was one of the last events held at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich. Ball placed his texts on music stands scattered over the podium and turned from one to another during the performance, raising and lowering the cardboard “wings” of his costume. (Photograph courtesy RoseLee Goldberg)

produced reached Saint Petersburg and New York, as well as Paris and Zurich. Within the decade similar events were being staged throughout European art centers.

Like the Futurists, the original Zurich Dadaists came together as a group as a result of particular political circumstances—World War I. Zurich was the neutral retreat for conscientious objectors to the war, and a small bar in the Spiegelgasse became the fertile setting for Dada performance. The Cabaret Voltaire opened its door on February 5, 1916, to a full house. For its founders—cabaret artist Emmy Hennings and poet Hugo Ball—the opening of the club was an opportunity to re-create something of the cabaret life they had left behind in Munich. But the founding of an art movement as such was far from their intention. The press release announcing the

cabaret opening explained that they merely wished to “create a center for artistic entertainment.”

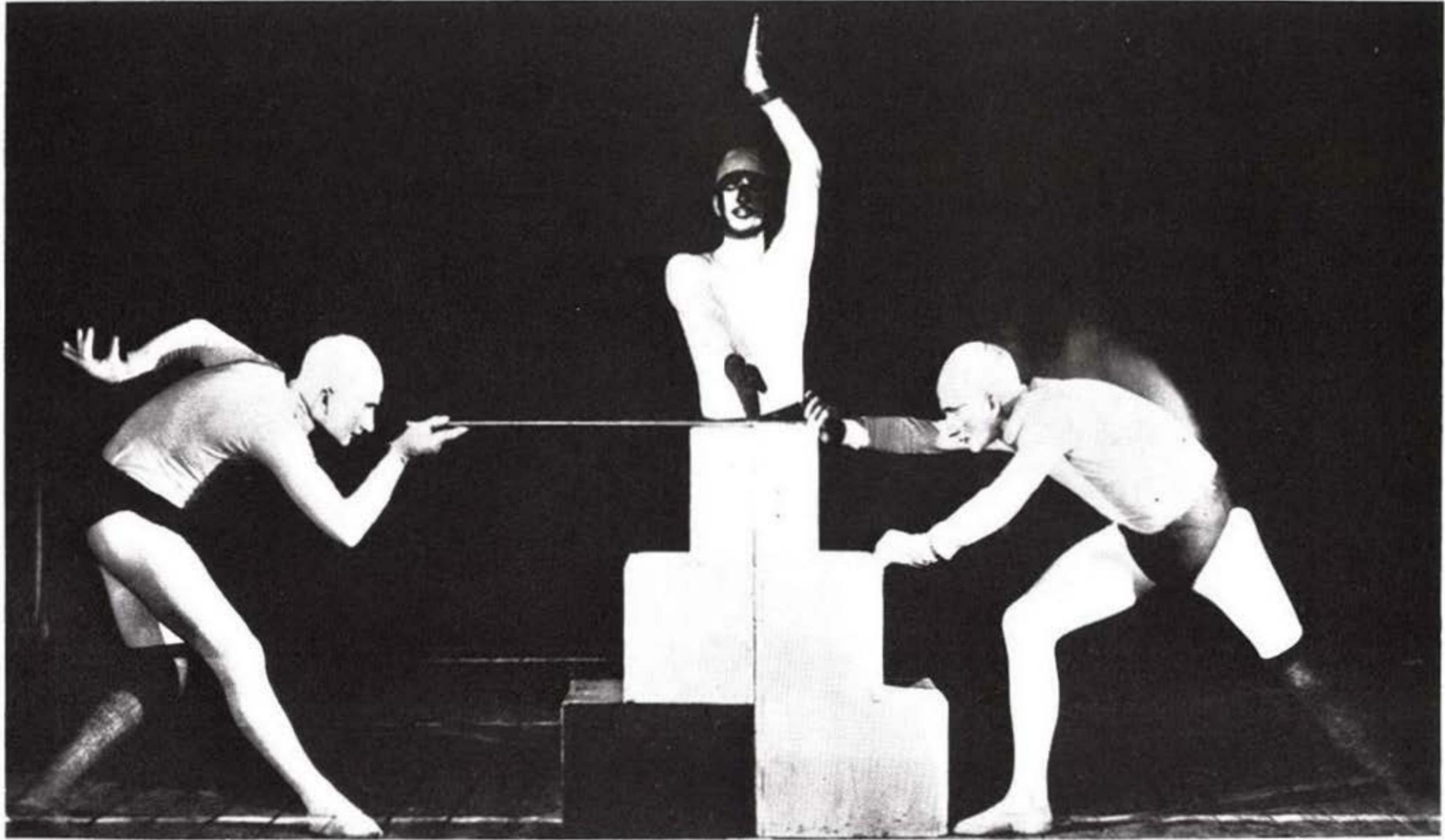
The cabaret, which was decorated with Futurist posters and included a small stage, was soon bursting at the seams. Participants became adept at particular performance styles. According to contemporary accounts, Emmy Hennings sang in French and Danish, and Tristan Tzara read “traditional style” poems, which he fished out of his various coat pockets. Richard Hülsenbeck swished his cane while reciting poems with a “Negro rhythm,” and Ball invented what he called a new species of “verse without words,” or “sound poems,” that he read from notes on randomly placed music stands.

Such activities were not thought of as creating an identifiable Dada art. In fact, the term was coined only several months after the cabaret program began. Ball believed that the insistence on an entirely original art was pretentious and unrealistic. “The artist who works from his freewheeling imagination is deluding himself about his originality,” he wrote. “He is using a material that is already formed and so is undertaking only to elaborate on it.” The members of the cabaret wanted instead to make it the focal point for the “newest art,” presenting a spectrum of contemporary poetry, art, and music.

Not surprisingly, in light of the differing creative energies within the group, its members often found themselves in conflict, and Cabaret Voltaire lasted only five months. Tzara, who wished to make an official movement out of Dada, left for Paris to join the group that would five years later write the Surrealist manifesto. Hülsenbeck returned to Berlin, where it would not be long before Dada Berlin was formed.

Meanwhile, the Bauhaus had opened its doors in Weimar under the direction of Walter Gropius, who called for the unification of all the arts in a “cathedral of Socialism.” A stage workshop, the first course in performance ever given in an art school, had been discussed from the first months as an essential aspect of the curriculum. In 1923 Oskar Schlemmer, painter and choreographer, took over its direction.

Schlemmer’s fascination with performance as a means to bring together all the arts was in keeping with the Bauhaus ideal. His



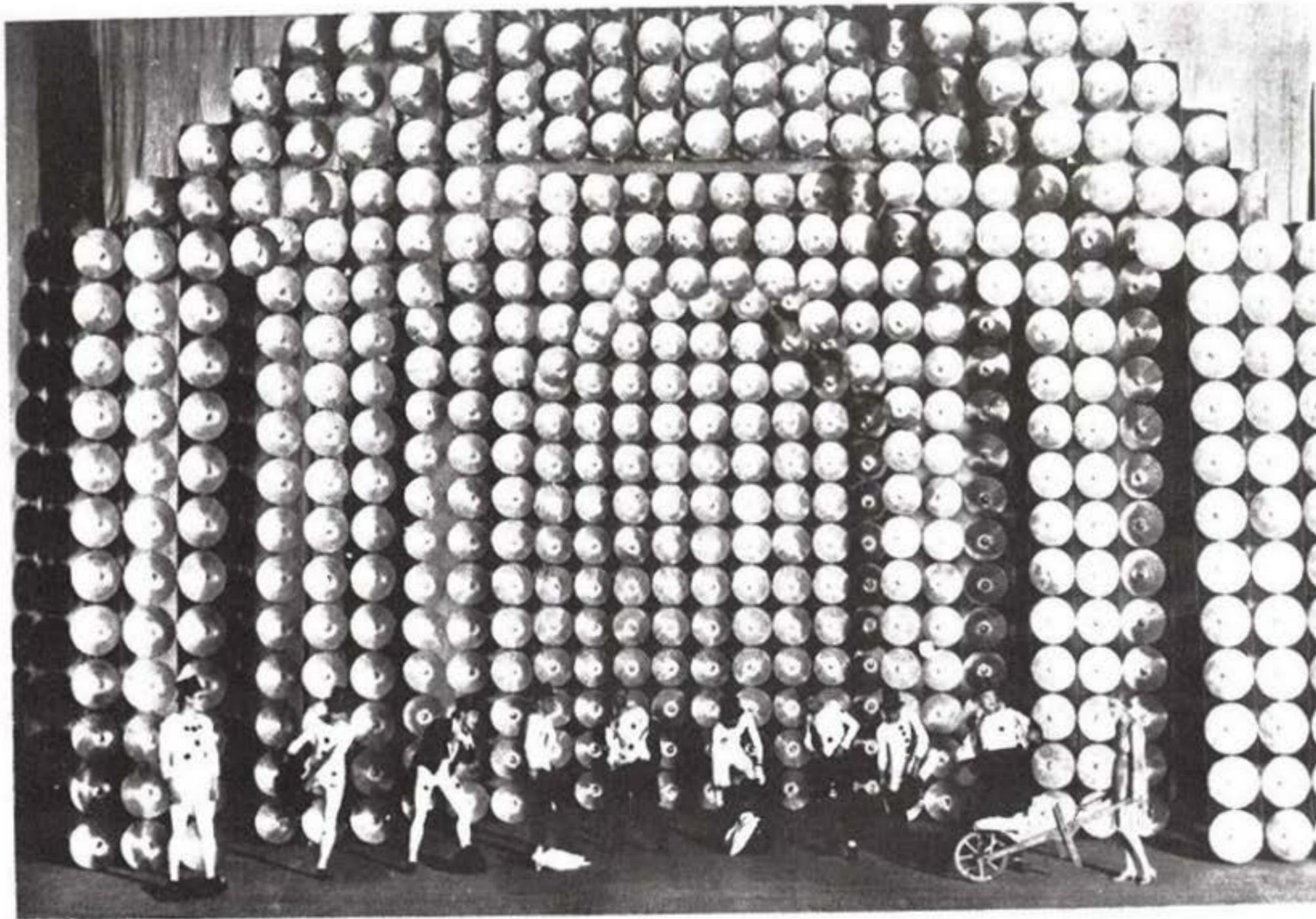
14. Oskar Schlemmer: *Game with Building Blocks*. 1926. Performed at the Bauhaus theatre, this was an experimental work in which three figures dismantled a wall, rhythmically rebuilt it, and danced around it. (From RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art from 1909 to the Present*, copyright © 1979 by RoseLee Goldberg; Harry N. Abrams, Inc.)

own obsession, as expressed in his painting, sculpture, and performance, was to devise a theory of body movements in space, and it was his particular interpretation of these various media that gave performance at the Bauhaus its special quality. Works such as *Slat Dance* (1927), *Game with Building Blocks* (1926), or *Gesture Dance* (1926) revealed Schlemmer's methodical transition from one medium to the other; from the two-dimensional surface of his paintings to the plastic qualities of his reliefs, and finally to the animatedly plastic art of the human body. Ultimately, the Bauhaus developed a performance mode entirely its own, at once more playful and more formal than its provocative Futurist and Dadaist models.

By the end of World War II performance had clearly emerged as a medium unto itself, and its influence spread rapidly. Bauhaus-inspired performance took place in the late 1940s at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. In 1952 John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, David Tudor, and Merce Cunningham—all of whom were at the college—helped produce the now-legendary *Untitled Event*, a collage of film, improvised “noise music,” dance, and poetry that became the prototypical Happening.

During the mid-1960s artists better known for their paintings and sculpture, such as Claes Oldenburg, Jim Dine, and Robert Morris, devised extraordinary gatherings of artists and the public. Fluxus, a movement inspired by Dada, appeared in the United States and mounted festivals on both sides of the Atlantic.

Today, performance is as varied as its own history. Examples abound, particularly in New York City, where art spaces such as The Kitchen Center or the Franklin Furnace in SoHo present nightly events, focusing their programs almost exclusively on live art. The terms that have sprung up in the 1970s to describe various aspects of performance—*body art*, *living sculpture*, *autobiography*—are an indication of the very different approaches to the medium taken by contemporary artists. Indeed, the open charter of performance—anything can happen, any number of materials can be used, and any length of time can be appropriated for the work—has resulted in an extraordinarily diverse spectrum of productions. A representative selection would include the mix of narrative, film, and specially constructed musical instruments done by



15. Francis Picabia and Erik Satie: *Relâche*. 1924. The setting, a wall of silver disks, each inset with bright lights, was by Picabia; the music was by Satie; dance was provided by the Swedish Ballet; brief sketches included Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray; and the film *Entr'acte* was by René Clair. The production opened December 3 at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. (Copyright by the Dance Museum, Stockholm)

Laurie Anderson, or Pat Oleszko's cabaretlike presentations in startling costumes. It would include work by artists such as Joan Jonas or Meredith Monk, who for many years have worked "live" almost exclusively, or an emerging younger generation of artists such as Robert Longo or Jack Goldstein, who use performance as one aspect of work in the related media of film, records, and wall reliefs.

Museums in the United States and Europe have acknowledged the importance of the form by staging festivals and conferences, often funded by government agencies. Despite this official recognition, however, performance remains a challenge to art critics and public alike, for it continues to question the basic criteria by which art is evaluated. The stance of performance artists has historically been a radical one: against the establishment (be it art or politics), against the commercialization of art, and against the strict confinement of museums and galleries. Performance artists have acted against the overriding belief that art is limited to the production of art objects, insisting instead that art is primarily a matter of ideas and actions. Each performance calls on the audience to experience the making of an artwork rather than contemplating static objects within an exhibition framework.

History shows that artists have used performance not merely as a means to attract publicity for their seemingly wild and bohemian life-styles but also as a way of animating the many formal and conceptual ideas on which the making of art is based. "[T]he past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past," wrote T. S. Eliot.<sup>1</sup> So, this present-day evaluation of performance provides a special lens through which to review past art history. And if the history of performance is any guide, it is clear that performance, whatever form it may take, can be expected to remain a vital catalyst for the culture of the future.

<sup>1</sup> "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *The Great Critics*, comp. and ed. James Harry Smith and Edd Winfield Parks, 3rd ed. rev. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1951), p. 715.

ANNABELLE HENKIN MELZER

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## The Dada Actor and Performance Theory

*Several contributors to this book have linked today's performance art to the Dada movement of the early years of this century. In this essay Annabelle Henkin Melzer links performance theory to specific Dada works and artists, including Tristan Tzara, Hugo Ball, Marcel Janco, Hans Arp, and others.\* The author recognizes that the difficulty of separating the Dada artist into artistic categories is as "hopeless as it is irrelevant," and she emphasizes the element of chance as a peculiarly vital characteristic of the art of the Dadaists.*

*Melzer is associate professor of theatre at the University of Tel Aviv, Israel. Her essays on European avant-garde performance have appeared in Comparative Drama, Theatre Quarterly, and Theatre Research International. Her book Latest Rage the Big Drum: Dada and Surrealist Performance (1980) was awarded the 1981 Joseph Hazan prize for twentieth-century art literature.*

"Are you one of those people who call themselves dadaists. . . ?"  
"Yessir," I said, stiffly clicking my heels on Zurich's neutral soil.  
"Well," he said in a paternal and almost melancholy tone of voice, "you'll be hearing from us."

\*Unless otherwise indicated, quotations are from the following sources: Robert Motherwell, ed., *The Dada Poets and Painters* (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1951); Georges Hugnet, *L'Aventure Dada 1916-1922* (Paris, 1971); Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965); Marcel Jean, *The History of Surrealist Painting* (New York: Grove Press, 1960); Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931); and Michel Sanouillet, *Dada à Paris* (Paris, 1965).

“Yessir,” I replied in an even stiffer tone (if that was possible). The army doctor looked back at me as he was about to step through the doorway: “Be careful and avoid excitement.”—RICHARD HÜLSENBECK, *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer*

It's too idiotic to be schizophrenic.—CARL JUNG, on the Dada productions

The name *Dada* may have lent a new notoriety to the young Zurich movement but the nature of the performing experiments, the “deeds,” remained basically the same. The work with sounds and language, with simultaneous poetry, with costuming and masks, as well as the attacks on the audience all grew in scope and intensity. Marcel Janco captured a soiree at the Cabaret Voltaire in a painting described by Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia:

In an overcrowded room, teeming with color, several fantastic personages are seated on a platform: they are supposed to represent Tzara, Janco, Ball, Mrs. Hennings and your humble servant. We are in the midst of an enormous tumult. The people about us are shouting, laughing, gesticulating. We reply with sighs of love, salvos of hiccups, poetry, Wa Was, and the miowings of Mediaeval Bruitists. Janco plays an invisible violin and bows down to the ground. Mrs. Hennings, with the face of a madonna, tries to do the split. Hülsenbeck beats incessantly on his big drum while Ball, pale as a chalk dummy, accompanies him on the piano.

Tristan Tzara, describing “The Dada Night” of July 14, 1916, wrote:

In the presence of a compact crowd Tzara demonstrates, we demand the right to piss in different colors, Hülsenbeck demonstrates, Ball demonstrates . . . the dogs bay and the dissection of Panama on the piano . . . shouted Poem—shouting and fighting in the hall, first row approves second row declares itself incompetent the rest shout, who is the strongest, the big drum is brought in, Hülsenbeck against 2000, *Ho oßenlatz?*<sup>2</sup> accentuated by the very big drum and little bells on his left foot and the people protest shout smash windowpanes kill each other demolish fight here come the police interruption.

This evening was at once the climax of the first period of Zurich Dada and the beginning of the second phase in which

Tzara's more negative, more nihilistic drives would eventually force Ball's retirement from the group. The program, perhaps because of the holiday evening (July 14, Bastille Day), perhaps because of Tzara's growing desire to reach a larger public, had been moved out of the confines of the Cabaret Voltaire and into the larger *Zunfthaus zur Wagg*. The nature of the events remained basically the same in an evening advertised to include "music, the dance, theory, manifestoes, poems, pictures, costumes and masks," with the participation of Arp, Ball, Emmy Hennings, Hülsebeck, Janco, and Tzara himself. Janco exhibited some paintings and was also responsible for the costumes and sets. The costumes, as usual, were "en papier, en carton, en chiffons, de toutes les couleurs, fixés avec des épingles" ("made of paper, cardboard, and scraps of many colors, stuck together with pins"). They were perishable, temporary, ugly, absurd; all intended to reinforce a sense of spontaneity and to fight any impression of formal, aesthetic coordination, any adherence to "Art" with its rules and sense of the establishment. Original musical compositions by the composer Hans Heusser were played, and a Cubist dance was performed: "each man his own big drum on his head, noise, Negro music." Five literary experiments were performed by Tzara "in tails before the curtain": a gymnastic poem, a concert of vowels, a bruitist poem, a static poem, and a vowel poem. The vowel poem was simply a sequence of vowels: a a o, i e o, a i i, and so on. The static poem involved chairs on which were placed placards, each containing a word. A curtain was lowered and raised, each time revealing a new ordering of the words. None of the various genres of "poem" was far from the "accidental poem" for whose composition Tzara's instructions read:

To make a dadaist poem  
 Take a newspaper  
 Take a pair of scissors  
 Choose an article as long as you are planning  
 to make your poem  
 Cut out the article  
 Then cut out each of the words that make  
 up this article  
 and put them in a bag.

Shake it gently  
 Then take out the scraps one after the other  
 in the order  
 in which they left the bag  
 Copy consecutively.

Ball, who by this time was well into his experimentations with phonic poetry and rhythms, performed some of his poems as well. A half year later, in March 1917, he wrote in his diary,

the human figure is progressively disappearing from pictorial art and no object is present except in fragmentary form. This is one more proof that the human countenance has become ugly and outworn, and that things which surround us have become objects of revulsion. The next step is for poetry to discard language as painting has discarded the object, and for similar reasons. Nothing like this has ever existed before.

But the art of creating such a poetry was already in progress. Ball's recollection of the reading of his "abstract poems" on that July evening bears transcribing in full, for it is one of the clearest descriptions we have of a Dada "event."

I wore a special costume designed by Janco and myself. My legs were encased in a tight-fitting cylindrical pillar of shiny blue cardboard which reached to my hips so that I looked like an obelisk. Above this I wore a huge cardboard coat-collar, scarlet inside and gold outside, which was fastened at the neck in such a way that I could flap it like a pair of wings by moving my elbows. I also wore a high, cylindrical, blue and white striped witchdoctor's hat.

I had set up music stands on three sides of the platform and placed on them a manuscript, written in red crayon. I officiated at each of these music stands in turn. As Tzara knew all about my preparations, there was a real little première. Everyone was very curious. So, as an obelisk cannot walk, I had myself carried to the platform in a blackout. Then I began, slowly and majestically.

"gadji beri bimba glandridi laula lonni cadori gadjamma gramma berida bimbala glandri galassassa laulitalomini gadji beri bin blassa glassala laula lonni cadorsu sassala bim Gadjama tuffm i zimzalla binban gligia wowolimai bin beri ban. . . ."

After an initial period of confusion, the audience exploded: laughing, screaming, applauding. Ball, immobilized in his costume, faced them, motionless and unmoved.

The accents became heavier, the emphasis stronger, the consonants harsher. I very soon realized that my powers of expression were not going to be adequate to match the pomp of my staging—if I wanted to remain serious, and this I wanted above all things. In the audience I saw Brupacher, Jelmoli, Laban, and Frau Wigman. Fearing a debacle, I pulled myself together. I had now completed “Labadas Gesang an die Wolken” (Labada’s Song to the Clouds) at the music stand on my right, and *Elefantenkarawane* (Elephant Caravan) on the left, and now turned back to the middle stand, flapping my wings energetically. The heavy sequences of vowels and the ponderous rhythm of the elephants had allowed me one last crescendo. But how could I get to the end? Then I noticed that my voice, which had no other way out, was taking on the age-old cadence of priestly lamentation, the liturgical chanting that wails through all the Catholic churches of East and West.

“zimazim urallala zimazim uralla zimazim zanzibar zimzalla zam elifantolim brussala bulomen brussala bulomen tromtata veio da bang bang affalo purzamai affalo purzamai lengado ter. . . .”

I do not know what gave me the idea of using this music, but I began to chant my vowel sequences like a recitative, in liturgical style, and tried not only to keep a straight face but to compel myself to be in earnest. For a moment I seemed to see, behind the Cubist mask, the pale, anguished face of the ten-year-old boy who, at parish requiems and high masses, had hung on the priest’s every word, avid, and trembling. Then the electric lights went out as arranged, and, bathed in sweat, I was carried down from the platform, a magical bishop.

Ball was perfectly aware of the primitive and “magical” import of his metrical and phonetic experiments: “We have charged the word with forces and energies which made it possible for us to rediscover the evangelical concept of the ‘word’ (logos) as a magical complex of images.” In his writing Ball withdrew to the “innermost alchemy of the word,” surrendering the word as a promoter of logic in favor of Tzara’s dictum “thought is made in the mouth.” It was in performance, however, that the impact of the spontaneously formed, alogical, rhythm-linked word reached its full power. With drumbeats in the background and with a dead-serious expression on his face, Ball presented himself, a multicolored obelisk, before his audience. The three music stands on which his texts of phonic poetry rested demarcated the boundaries of his small stage. The tubular cardboard shapes encasing him prevented almost any move-

ment but the mock-heroic flapping of his wings. They were of the same ready-made materials as the other Dada costumes: cardboard tacked and pasted, and patches of colored paint. Ball's priestly garb as well as his tubular costume on another Dada occasion, both products of the rectilinear vocabulary of Cubism, are striking in their resemblance to the "abstract-puppets" of Hans Arp and his wife, Sophie Täuber, as well as to the conical forms of Fortunato Depero's Futurist figures.

The puppets, which consisted mostly of thread spools joined together, were used in performances at the Cabaret Voltaire.<sup>1</sup> Their mechanical and robotlike appearance was occasionally relieved by a bit of feather or a drape of rag, but by and large they were formed like the Futurist figures and Ball's cardboard encasement of geometric shapes and harsh joints, of chimney heads and pointers for hands. The actor had been abstracted, and the Dada costume itself stood as a reaction against the "arts" of sewing and design, against permanence, and against any sort of subtlety in characterization. Ball's costume and others' consistently evoke the feeling of a school play, a masquerade, or a birthday party: something infantile, amateurish, and hastily put together. This attraction to the childlike is linked to the Dadaists at many levels. The phonetic gibberish and cacophony of natural sound that the Dada performer reveled in is as suggestive of childish regression as the name *Dada* itself. Ball wrote that the aim of the Dadaist was to "surpass oneself in naïveté and childishness." He described in no uncertain terms his unswerving attraction to childhood: "childhood as a new world, and everything childlike and phantastic, everything childlike and direct, everything childlike and symbolical in opposition to the senilities of the world of grown ups." Throughout the pranks, both social and artistic, one cannot avoid the sensation of a group of highly sophisticated "bad" kids, justifying the acting-out of their libidinal and asocial impulses by working within the

<sup>1</sup> Little is known of the Dada work with puppets. Hugnet mentions "... couplets satyriques de Ball contre-l'impérialisme allemand et ses 'Krippen Spiele' (jeux de crèche), figurés par les poupées de Emmy Hennings ..." ("Ball's satirical couplets against German imperialism and his 'Krippen Spiele' [manger play], presented by the puppets of Emmy Hennings"). Hans Richter recalls "the puppets Arp and Täuber made were the first abstract puppets ever used at puppet shows. . . . They moved with a grace not of this earth and would have out-circused even Calder's circus in their purity."

institutionalized (although they would deny it) framework of a movement that, thereby, gave them the prerogatives of assembly, publicity, and pontification. I do not mean this to sound as damning as it does, but there is an unequivocal sense that the Dadaists created their art despite all their declared efforts to the contrary. If there was to be no art, then all Dada efforts were to be good substitutes for it.

I return to Ball, to the costumed performer carried onstage in darkness and suddenly revealed to begin his incantatory chants. All this was meant to arouse and shock the audience, yet one has the feeling here (a feeling corroborated by the performer's own recounting of the event), and in other Dada events as well, that the ensemble of performer(s), costume, mask, phonetic text, and drum, plus the permission to ululate and crow to one's heart's content was intended to affect the performer as much as to work its effect on the public. In the Dadaist struggle for primacy between process and product, process emerged the victor, and as with much of contemporary psychophysically oriented theatre,<sup>2</sup> one often has the uneasy feeling (uneasy because it places the spectator at a disadvantage) that the actor is having a fuller, more satisfying experience than the audience. This sensation pervades almost all encounters with the Dadaists in performance (and changes significantly when we approach the later theatrical works of the Surrealists).

While Ball is carried off in a state of such fevered exaltation that it results in his nervous collapse, the audience is at best roused to "shouting and fighting in the hall," and one can even find "several elderly Englishwomen taking careful notes." This is not to minimize the hurly-burly in the audience on repeated occasions but to focus on the audience's basic remove (or distance) from what was going on onstage as opposed to the performer's intense involvement. The quality of experience the performer desired for himself was different from what he wished to present to the audience. To his audience he said, "I will make you a Dadaist by inciting your indignation. I will shake your bourgeois bastion of complacency by tomfoolery, infantilism, contempt for venerated critical standards,

<sup>2</sup> The term is Grotowski's, but it refers not only to the type of work done in his Polish Lab Theatre, but also to the work of such groups as Joseph Chaiken's Open Theatre, the Becks' Living Theatre, and Richard Schechner's Performance Group.

and the use of vulgar language. I will preach accident and irrationality." And, for the audience, the performance remained largely an experience of agitation and arousal. For the performer, however (let the Dadaists say what they will about their antiart predilections), the performing experience was an artistic one.

There was, however, another, more intimate audience whose presence cannot be ignored and whose experience of the performance more closely resembled the Dada performer's own. That audience was the Dada group itself. There can be little doubt that the Dadaists created and performed for one another with at least as much relish as they manipulated their audiences. The importance of "the group" was paramount. In the Café de la Terrasse, their first meeting place in Zurich, Tzara, Serner, and Arp together wrote a cycle of poems titled *The Hyperbole of the Crocodile's Hairdresser and the Walking Stick*. The meeting place soon shifted to the Odéon (in sympathy with a waiters' strike at the Terrasse) where two or three tables were not sufficient to hold the Dadaists' burgeoning circle of friends. They wound up reserving half of the Rami Strasse corner of the Odéon for themselves. Here, the group sat for hours, introducing one another to those various people who chanced into their midst: Dr. Oscar Goldberg, the numerologist; Erich Unger, who had studied classical philosophy and the Cabala; the heavy-bearded Augusto Giacometti; and the fiery Spaniard del Vajo, who vied with Ball for the affections of Emmy Hennings. It was open house every day, but the center held. If it was not at the Odéon, the group might be at Hack's bookshop or at Laban's ballet school, where the Dadaists established both permanent and fleeting emotional ties with the young dancers Mary Wigman, Sophie Täuber (who became Mrs. Hans Arp), Susanne Perrottet, Maria Vanselow (who went around with Janco's brother, Georges), and Maya Kruseck (Tzara's *petite amie*). When the café sessions waned, a number of the group might walk along the Limmatquai, opening one restaurant door after another to shout within, *Vive, Dada!* And then there was always the work of putting out the journal *Cabaret Voltaire* and its successor *Dada*, or working on the editions of the Dada Library, which succeeded in bringing out two publications: Tzara's short play, *La première aventure céleste de M. Antipyrine*, with illustrations by Janco; and Hülsenbeck's *Fantastick Prayers*, illustrated by Arp. The evenings found them reunited at the Ca-

baret, where they often stayed till the early hours of the morning: "I go home in the morning light/The clock strikes five, the sky grows pale,/A light still burns in the hotel;/The cabaret shuts for the night" (Emmy Hennings). Hennings went home with Ball, Janco, and Arp to their respective lodgings, and Richter and Tzara to adjoining rooms in the Hotel Limmatquai. Even for the night the group barely separated.

Under these conditions the importance of the group's individual members is not surprising. The evening programs were undoubtedly planned over rounds of coffee and beer (together), and the programs themselves hashed over the next day. Again coffee, again together. The circle of people who understood and delighted in the series of nightly devotions and exorcisms was generally limited to that very circle of people who perpetrated the activities.

First and foremost, however, the Dada actor performed for himself, in search of himself. In accord with Apollinaire's poem "Cortège,"

One day  
 One day  
 I said to myself Guillaume it's time you turned up  
 So I could know just who I am . . .  
 All those who turned up and were not myself  
 Brought one by one the pieces of myself

the Dadaists tracked the "pieces of themselves": Ball in his incantatory "trips," Hülsenbeck banging on the big drum, and Tzara codifying the principle by writing, "Art is a private affair, the artist produces it for himself." Richter as well points to the importance of individual creation for each member of the group: "The Cabaret Voltaire was a six-piece band. Each played his instrument, i.e., himself, passionately and with all his soul. Each of them, different as he was from all the others, was his own music, his own words, his own rhythm. Each sang his own song with all his might." The compartmented structure of the soiree was ideal for accommodating both the individual performer as well as groups disporting themselves in the spotlight.

Most significant in this performing for oneself, which the Dadaists practiced, is the liberating creative method which it fostered and out of which it grew. "The artist cedes a measure of his control

(and hence of his ego) to the materials and what transpires between them, placing himself partially in the role of discoverer or spectator as well as that of originator."<sup>3</sup> The element of "chance" and the "spontaneous act" took on new significance for performer and artist. Chance is the basis of Tzara's paper-bag poetry (shake the words) and much of Arp's poetry as well. He explained: "I tore apart sentences, words, syllables. I tried to break down the language into atoms, in order to approach the creative. . . . Chance opened up perceptions to me, immediate spiritual insights." Hans Richter recounts in an anecdote the workings of chance in Arp's painting:

Dissatisfied with a drawing he had been working on for some time, Arp finally tore it up, and let the pieces flutter to the floor of his studio on the Zeltweg. Some time later he happened to notice these same scraps of paper as they lay on the floor, and was struck by the pattern they formed. It had all the expressive power that he had tried in vain to achieve. How meaningful! How telling! Chance movements of his hand and of the fluttering scraps of paper had achieved what all his efforts had failed to achieve, namely expression. He accepted this challenge from chance as a decision of fate and carefully pasted the scraps down in the pattern which chance had determined.

Arp himself attempted to record the process of his improvisational methodology in working on his "automatic drawings." The starting point in the creation of these works was the notion of vitality in the movement of the creative hand. First the artist would paint an entirely black surface.

The black grows deeper and deeper, darker and darker before me. It menaces me like a black gullet. I can bear it no longer. It is monstrous. It is unfathomable. As the thought comes to me to exorcize and transform this black with a white drawing, it has already become a surface. Now I have lost all fear and begin to draw on the black surface. I draw and dance at once, twisting and winding, twining soft, white flowery round. A snail-like wreath . . . turns in, grows. While shoots dart this way and that. Three of them begin to

<sup>3</sup> William G. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1961), p. 37.

form snakes' heads. Cautiously the two lower ones approach one another.<sup>4</sup>

Some art historians see Arp's use of chance only as a way of stimulating the imagination and as a starting point for images that were later consciously rearranged. Although this possibility of rearrangement may be granted the painter and the poet, it is hardly viable for the unrehearsed Dada performer. Ball came on stage, costumed and text-laden, with only the most general idea of what he was going to do. In his work with Janco's masks, Ball improvised on the spot a piece of music for the dances, which themselves emerged out of movements five minutes before, unanticipated and unpredictable. "What we want now," Tzara explained, "is spontaneity. Not because it is better or more beautiful than anything else. But because everything that issues freely from ourselves without the intervention of speculative ideas represents us." When the internal factor alone weighed in the balance, then no acquired technique was necessary for the creation of a work of art. The works of children and madmen were the ones to be admired and emulated, and chance was the only saving force that could liberate the artist from centuries of restrictive rationality.<sup>5</sup> All of these Dada notions did not, of course, emerge full-blown from a vacuum. In 1919 Paul Kammerer wrote a book called *The Law of Seriality*, which attempted to develop a theory around "dreamlike" associations and to discover the laws governing acausal relationships. Carl Gustav Jung wrote of "the power of attraction of the relative, as if it were the dream of a greater, to us unknowable Consciousness." The first book on children's art had been translated into German, and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner "discovered" the "primitive" arts of Africa and Oceania in the Dresden Ethnological Museum. Were the Dadaists really open to the subconscious, or merely involved with a series of

<sup>4</sup> Hans Arp, *On My Way: Poetry and Essays, 1912-1947*, ed. Robert Motherwell (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1948), p. 52.

<sup>5</sup> The creative approach of the "chance" factor is by no means an invention of contemporary artists. Pliny the Elder tells that Protogenes of Rhodes, upset at his attempts to draw the lather around a horse's mouth, hurled a sponge at the picture. "The sponge deposited the colours with which it was charged in the very manner which he had sought in vain, and thus chance constructed nature in a painting."

jesting situations that relied on the element of chance for their ultimate form? Jacques Rivière, in his "Reconnaissance à Dada," argues for the former:

Saisir l'être avant qu'il n'ait cédé à la compatibilité, l'atteindre dans son incohérence ou mieux sa cohérence primitive, avant que l'idée de contradiction ne soit apparue et ne l'ait forcé à se réduire, à se construire; substituer à son unité logique, forcément acquise, son unité absurde seule originelle.<sup>6</sup>

(To seize being, before it had surrendered to consistency, overtaking it in its coherence, or better still, its primitive coherence before the notion of contradiction had appeared, forcing it to be limited, framed; to substitute for its logical unity acquired by force, its absurd unity which alone is primordial.)

Although I have spoken of "chance" in the paintings of Arp, the poems of Tzara, and the performing of Ball, I must remark that trying to separate the Dada artist into plastic artist, *littérateur*, and theatre person is as hopeless as it is irrelevant. The elements of chance, spontaneity, and the immediacy of the creative act were championed by painters, poets, and performers alike. It is impossible not to mention the experiments in painting by members of the Dada group as a part of their theatrical work. The Laban dancers danced in front of Arp's biomorphic cucumbers: products of an experiment to provoke the internal psychological processes and emerge with a "plastic representation of an internal event." Ernst's collages are the visual counterpart of the simultaneous poem, instantaneously presenting contradictory data in the tradition of Lautréamont's "chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissection table," while Apollinaire's radical defense of collage and *papiers collés* in *The Cubist Painters* (1913) opened the way not only for an incredible liberation of the plastic arts but of the performing arts as well. He stated: "You may paint with whatever material you please, with pipes, postage stamps, postcards, or playing cards, candelabras, pieces of oilcloth, collars, painted paper, newspaper." The art repertoire had been expanded to all existing sights and objects. Art, no longer in the service of religion, ethics, history, or government, saluted an end to descriptive con-

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Rivière, "Reconnaissance à Dada," *Nouvelle Revue Française* (August 1920).

tent. If painting increasingly sought “the possibilities of painting,” then theatre, searching for the possibilities of theatre, returned to its origins in the actor as performer.

A word more about the Dada actor: if we divide the body of actors into three major varieties: the skilled actor, the masked actor, and the personal actor, such a division may be helpful in understanding the Dada performer by relating him to this last group. The skilled actor is one most clearly recognized by the skill he presents before the audience: the acrobat and his bodily contortions, the tightrope walker and his daring abilities. Rather than seeing the actor (him), we see the skill (it). We look at the actor’s virtuosity; we are thrilled and aghast at what he can do that we cannot. The Dada performer had no skill. With the exception of Laban’s dancers (who, although they were not Dadaists, did participate in Dada performance), no Dadaist who ventured on stage did so with a performing skill greater than that of the average artist in the street. That he had more daring (and quite specific and driving motivation for his performances) is for the moment beside the point. The Dadaist was not a skilled performer.

The masked actor works behind a mask or role. He is most simply the actor within the traditional play. Watching him perform, we know him as Faustus or Oedipus and, with our “willing suspension of disbelief,” we allow him to take us into the life of his character. He will excite us only as much as we are moved by the character he “lives” on the stage. Afterward, the more sophisticated may comment, “look at who he [the actor] can become.” The average spectator will remain entranced by the mask. No one ever went home from the Cabaret Voltaire speaking of the characters X or Y, and although the Dadaists used real masks, they never so lost themselves to the mask that one was not always aware, “Oh, there’s Tzara, kicking up his feet.”

The Dada actor was the personal actor, tied always onstage to the name, the identity that marked his offstage life. In this, he is most readily recognized as the nightclub star: Frank Sinatra, who sings to us as Frank Sinatra; Buddy Hackett, the stand-up comedian, who throughout his shenanigans remains Buddy Hackett. Film and television have blurred these distinctions by deifying the actor. They have washed out the line between the personal and the

masked performer. We can hardly look at Dustin Hoffman in a role without seeing Dustin Hoffman. The theatre still manages to retain some of the categorical difference. On the Dada stage at the Cabaret Voltaire, however, the actors were Tristan Tzara, Hugo Ball, Marcel Janco, Emmy Hennings, Hans Arp, and so forth, for the public at large. The audience never lost sight of the performer as an identifiable person, and as for the actor, Tzara presented Tzara, and Ball presented Ball.

The personal actor, then, outfitted either in his clothes of everyday or in the hastily put-together trappings of some outlandish masquerade, performed his menu of phonetic intonings, masked dances, and rhythmic instrumentals. Michael Kirby calls the setting for these performances a nonmatrixed environment. Kirby speaks of the performer in traditional theatre as performing within a matrix, a created world of time, place, and character (see "On Acting and Not-Acting," pp. 99–100). The Dada performer, inasmuch as he is a personal actor, performs outside the matrix of character and time. The time is now, the performer is himself. There are no "given circumstances." The actor works within no physical setting. The stage, the small, slightly raised platform at the Cabaret Voltaire or the larger stages of the "provocation performances," was usually bare, or furnished with an occasional backdrop of abstract shapes painted by the members of the group, for example, the one painted by Arp and Richter for one of the *grandes soirées*. Richter has described it: "We began from opposite ends of immensely long strips of paper about two yards wide, painting huge black abstracts. Arp's shapes looked like gigantic cucumbers. I followed his example and we painted miles of cucumber plantations . . . before we finally met in the middle. Then the whole thing was nailed onto pieces of wood and rolled up until the performance."

Performing before such a backdrop, never within it, the Dada actor worked in completely "unlocalized" space. The stage represented no place, it was the stage. It was important that it remain a stage, a clear dividing line between the actor and the audience. For all their innovative work in performance, the Dadaists guarded the line that separates actor from audience. It was not the proscenium that they protected (for they had no need of a picture frame of any sort to confine a theatre of illusion) but the slightly thrust stage of the presentational performer, a stage that allows him at times to

address his audience directly and then again to withdraw to a position where the audience must regard him as separate from itself.

The evening of Ball's triumphant bishopry saw the first production of Tzara's *La première aventure céleste de M. Antipyrine*, a play in one act capped by a lengthy manifesto-monologue. The manifesto was recited by "Tristan Tzara," whose name was listed in the text in the same way that the fictitious character names preceded their individual speeches. In addition to Tzara there were nine other characters: Messrs. Bleubleu, Cricri, Boum Boum, Antipyrine (the hero of the title), Pipi, Npala Garroo, La Parapole, and Le Directeur. Also La Femme Enceinte. We do not know who played what role, although we do have the cast list for the play's second performance in Paris in 1920. Because Tzara played the role designated him in the text in Paris, it is likely that he did the same in Zurich. The text, with woodcuts by Janco, was published on July 28, 1916, in an edition limited to ten copies. Janco's woodcuts are abstract and offer no iconographic evidence about the Zurich production. The text itself has no stage directions. What we are left with, then, is a text of some 238 lines divided among ten characters.

At first reading the text is a maze of impenetrable phrases strung one after the other, interspersed with pseudo-African words (Soso Bgai Affahous), phonetic gibberish (diin aha dzin aha bobobo), and freestanding vowels and syllables (oi oi oi oi . . . uu u u n pht). The title itself is a source of confusion, because "Antipyrine" has been translated as "Fire Extinguisher," but the word was also the name of a common Swiss headache remedy. The emphasis is quite clearly on sound rather than on meaning in the repetition of syllables ("immense, panse, pense et pense pense . . . la cathedrale, drale . . . drale . . . rendre, prendre, entre"), in internal and half rhymes ("amertume sans église allons allons charbon charmeau/synthétise amertume sur l'église isisise les rideaux/dododo"), in the names of the characters with their childish doubleness (Cricri, Pipi), and in the clearly alogical syntax and non sequiturs we recognize from the verbal collages of the Zurich Dadaist simultaneous poems, "la fièvre puerperale dentelles et SO<sub>2</sub>H<sub>4</sub>/je pousse usine dans le cirque Pskow."

In his use of the exotic rhythmic words of a pseudo-African tongue, Tzara merely followed the same muse that led him to write

of the art of Africa and Oceania, to seek out the African drum rhythms and use them to shock the sensibilities of the Zurich bourgeoisie. The handiest reference a Continental burgher of 1916 had to the man of the dark continent was an image of the towering Senegalese mercenary brought to fight in the front lines of the war. From this he might well conclude that they were savages, an impression reinforced in the play by the coupling of exotic Africanisms with the fantasy images of sex and excrement: "L'organe sexuel est carré est de plomb est plus/gros que le volcan et s'envole au dessus de Mgabati/le grand nommé Bleubleu grimpe dans son/désespoir et y chie ses manifestations." Add to this a series of lists without purpose, "Quatre-cents chevaux soixante chameaux trois/cents peaux de zibelines cinq cents peaux d'hermines/son mari est malade/vingt peaux de renard jaunes trois peaux de chélizun/cents peaux de renard blancs et jaunes . . ." and two simultaneously recited poems of phonetic chants, and the Dada aim of incensing its public was sure to be achieved.

Tzara termed the text a *double quatralogue*. It begins with the introduction of four characters: Bleubleu, Cricri, La Femme Encainte, and Mr. Antipyrine, each reciting his own introductory monologue. The four, plus Pipi, exchange ripostes, which on paper resemble dialogue, yet are incomprehensible both in themselves and in their relationships one to another. The play's opening lines seem to indicate activity such as might be given in a stage direction: "pénètre le desert/creuse en hurlant le chemin dans le sable gluant/écoute la vibration . . ."

In looking at the text that follows, however, it is difficult to propose (or forbid) any activities whatever that might have been associated with the text, or to justify in any way the dividing of the play into analyzable segments. What strikes the reader instead are a few "numbers" or "acts" within the piece. There are two simultaneous poems bringing together first one and then another combination of the five characters met thus far and then introducing the sixth, Le Directeur, who says two of the play's more coherent lines: "il est mort," and then "puis ils chantèrent." The latter is followed by a "song" in the form of the second simultaneous poem. Outstanding as well is Tzara's long monologue. Suddenly in the midst of all the confusion comes a manifesto, clearly didactic and quite comprehensible. The show stops for a moment and its chief barker

permits himself a few choice words that, if there were any doubts, make clear the Dadaists' purposeful violation of the audience: "C'est tout de même de la merdre, mais nous voulons dorénavant chier en couleurs diverses, pour orner le jardin zoologique de l'art de tous les drapeaux des consulats" ("It's shit after all, but we intend henceforth to shit in various colors, to decorate the zoo or art with the flags of all the consulates"). The insertion of the monologue seems to suggest that Tzara was taking no chances. If, for some reason, the audience "took to" the phonetic gibberish of the play, or merely laughed, Tzara had provided himself with an infallible instrument of attack in the form of the manifesto. Not many Frenchmen could avoid being offended by the short rhyming lines: "psychologie psychologie hi hi/Science Science Science/vive la France" (especially in the light of all that came before), and to top it all off, Tzara ended with kisses to the audience, "bons auditeurs, je vous aime tant, je vous aime tant, je vous assure, et je vous adore" ("good listeners, I love you so, I love you so, I do assure you and I do adore you").

Two long monologues bring the play to its concluding line, "puis ils s'en allèrent," which is truly an exit line.

All told, there is little to hold on to. What seems to move the play more than the energy of a comprehensible activity is the acoustical energy, the thrust of the music of the lines, which, in performance, was augmented by the shape of the audience's response.

Nothing is known of the Zurich performance. We can put together some details of the Paris première three and a half years later. As Tzara participated in both productions, it is possible that elements of the first carried over into the second. More likely, though, with the passage of time, within the new Paris-Dadaist framework, and with new collaborating artists (it was Francis Picabia who designed the Paris costumes and sets, not Marcel Janco), the performance in no way resembled the first. The scenic details of this second production, however, may serve to hint at a conception of staging that is recognizable as not so different from the Zurich-Dadaist performances.

For the occasion Tzara had invented "a diabolical machine composed of a Klaxon and three successive invisible echoes, for the purpose of impressing on the mind of the audience certain phrases

describing the aims of Dada." The sets and costumes (the characters enclosed in huge, variously colored paper sacks, each with his name written on a large placard and hung around his neck) were described by the critic of *Commoedia* as: "étonnants, imprévus, ridicules" ("shocking, unexpected, ridiculous"). He continued:

Ils évoquent nettement les dessins imaginés par les foux et correspondent parfaitement au texte inconcevable de M. Tristan Tzara . . . Le décor, placé en avant des interprètes et non en arrière, le décor transparent, composé d'une roue de bicyclette, de quelques cordes tendues à travers la scène et de cadres contenant des inscriptions hermétiques ("La paralysie est le commencement de la sagesse," "Vous tendez les bras, vos amis vous les couperont") complétait parfaitement l'ensemble. (They clearly evoke designs imagined by fools and correspond perfectly with the inconceivable text of M. Tristan Tzara . . . The decor, placed in front of the interpreters and not behind, the transparent decor, composed of a bicycle, of some cords extended through the scene, and of frames containing hermetical inscriptions ["Paralysis is the beginning of wisdom," "You extend your arms, your friends will cut them"] completing perfectly the ensemble.)

Tzara's own recollections of the play's performance and the audience's reaction are quite clear. "This play is a boxing match with words. The characters, confined in sacks and trunks, recite their parts without moving, and one can easily imagine the effect this produced—performed in a greenish light—on the already excited public. It was impossible to hear a single word of the play."

By the summer of 1916 both internal and external pressures determined the closing of the Cabaret Voltaire six months after it had opened. Herr Ephraim, the proprietor, fed up with public complaints at the nightly excesses committed on his premises, announced that the Dadaists would have to seek a new home. Tensions between Tzara and Ball had also reached a crisis that made it desirable for the group to split up for a while. The split, however, was short-lived, and in March 1917 the two men again joined together to open the Galerie Dada.

This "one last try" lasted four months, and by June 1917 the Galerie Dada went on "unlimited vacation." Ball was spent and tormented. He did not want to leave the gallery, but his views and

Tzara's on the development of Dada theatrics became more and more at odds. Tzara was rapidly moving away from all modern art toward a path of pure provocation, a "new transmutation that signifies nothing, and was the most formidable blasphemy mass combat speed prayer tranquillity private guerrilla negation and chocolate of the desperate." For Ball, who finally declared, "I have examined myself carefully and I could never bid chaos welcome," the split with Tzara was final. Ball left Zurich for good at the end of June 1917, while Tzara in a euphoric mood at his new emergent leadership wrote in his diary, "Mysterious creation! magic revolver The DADA MOVEMENT is launched." Yet Tzara's "victory" was a slightly tarnished one. One interesting proof of Dada's fundamentally theatrical base was its need for constantly virginal audiences. The years in Zurich had virtually used up such a public. The group too had fed on itself for too long. Dada moved on and, in 1920, Tzara packed his bags for Paris.

# KEN FRIEDMAN

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## Fluxus Performance

*According to Ken Friedman, defining Fluxus has always been problematic, but through a brief introduction of its origins and descriptions of performable pieces by a number of artists, he conveys much of the spirit, humor, and diversity of Fluxus performance.*

*He writes: "Fluxus began . . . primarily as a publishing and performance program" conceived by several artists, many of whom "had studied with John Cage." Citing the publication of An Anthology, which he calls "the early major anthology of performance art, Conceptual art, Minimal art, event structures, and related forms," he identifies in Fluxus elements of Zen, vaudeville, and ritual. Friedman goes on to describe performances by George Brecht, Robert Watts, Alison Knowles, Nam June Paik, Dick Higgins, and Milan Knizak, as well as some of his own.*

*Ken Friedman leads two lives: as a Fluxus artist he is exhibited around the world and is collected by institutions such as the Guggenheim Museum and the Kunstmuseum, Basel; as Kenneth S. Friedman he is editor of The Art Economist. An expert on the sociology and economics of art, Dr. Friedman is a consultant to corporations and publishing houses.*

## I—What Is (or Was) Fluxus?

Fluxus germinated in the late 1950s and early 1960s as a group of artists, composers, and performers who came together to present innovative works and projects that had no home in the art world of their time. No one has ever succeeded in defining Fluxus to the satisfaction of its many members and participants. The group has been characterized at various times as a movement, a cooperative, a school, and a philosophy. The real structure of Fluxus lies somewhere among these.

The success (and the occasional failure) of Fluxus consisted in its remaining flexible and open to new growth, to an opportune revision of experience. Fluxus was as experimental in practice as it was in philosophy.

There is no consensus among Fluxus members whether or not Fluxus still exists; whether a Fluxus participant creates one set of works that is "Fluxus" and another that is private; or whether Fluxus is defined by its participants, all of whose work must therefore be considered "Fluxus work."

Fluxus is remarkably hardy. Fluxus artist and videoteur Nam June Paik (who began as a composer) says that "Fluxus is like a Korean plant: when it looks dead, it's about to blossom." The territory covered by Fluxus has been so large and varied that any description of Fluxus can be somewhat confusing. One can begin just about anywhere in explaining just what Fluxus is, or was.

A few things are clear.

Fluxus began loosely, primarily as a publishing and performance program conceptualized by several artists. A common bond among some of them was the fact that they had studied with John Cage in his famous courses at the New School for Social Research in New York. Others were more generally influenced by Cage and his Zen-inflected philosophy. One artist, architect, and architectural historian, George Maciunas, seemed to take on a role as provisional chairman to the Fluxus "posse comitatus," if only by virtue of the fact that he was willing to manage organizational matters. Maciunas, passionately energetic and madly methodical, proceeded to contact nearly every kindred spirit in the worlds of art, music, theatre, dance, and poetry. He invited them to participate in a rigorously structured series of programs, concerts, and publications envisioned under the rubric "Fluxus."

Some participants stuck. Some came unglued while remaining friendly colleagues—or distant colleagues—depending on who might at any moment have been feuding with whom. One landmark venture was the early major anthology of performance art, Conceptual art, Minimal art, event structures, and related forms published by Jackson MacLow and La Monte Young, designed by Maciunas, titled simply *An Anthology*. Originally prepared for publication in 1961, it was released in 1963. Since then, it has been reprinted widely both in pirate editions (distributed at no cost to

interested artists around the world, nearly 1,000 copies sent out in all) and in authorized reprints, such as that issued by Heiner Friedrich in 1968. *An Anthology* has long since become one of the classic texts of art-making, not only for the artists on whom it exercised direct influence but also indirectly for the artists whose thinking was shaped in the era of the late 1960s and 1970s.

The roster of participants in Fluxus took its basic shape by the year 1964 or so and continued to expand through late 1966. Harald Szeemann and Hanns Sohm prepared a fairly definitive list of the first generation of Fluxus artists for the catalogue to the major 1970 exhibition "Fluxus & Happenings" at the Kölnischer Kunstverein in Cologne, Germany. The artists included were:

Eric Andersen, Ay-O, Joseph Beuys, George Brecht, Henning Christiansen, Phil Corner, Robert Filliou, Henry Flynt, Ken Friedman, Bici Forbes Hendricks, Geoff Hendricks, Dick Higgins, Hi Red Center, Joe Jones, Per Kirkeby, Bengt af Klintberg, Milan Knizak, Alison Knowles, Addi Koepcke, Takehisa Kosugi, George Maciunas, Yoko Ono, Robin Page, Nam June Paik, Benjamin Patterson, Tomas Schmit, Carolee Schneemann, Mieko Shiomi, Daniel Spoerri, Ben Vautier, Wolf Vostell, Bob Watts, Emmett Williams, La Monte Young, and Zaj.

By 1982, the twentieth anniversary of the first widely publicized Fluxus concerts (1972 had earlier been declared the "Tenth Anniversary" to coincide with the Fluxus exhibition year in England), a number of major exhibitions had taken place including significant artists who had not been shown extensively in Cologne. The well-known Silverman Collection, one of America's largest collections of Fluxus objects and artifacts, was seen at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, and at the Neuberger Museum in Purchase, New York. Retrospective Fluxus exhibitions were presented at Wuppertal and Wiesbaden in Germany. Other major shows were staged elsewhere in the years previous. Artists included in these exhibitions who were not given solo rooms or major participation in Cologne included:

Albrecht D., John Armleder, Jeff Berner, Peter van Beveren, Don Boyd, Robert Bozzi, Giuseppe Chiari, Willem de Ridder, Jean Dupuy, Felipe Ehrenberg, Rimma and Valery Gerlovin, Davi det Hompson, Alice Hutchins, Vytautas Landsbergis, John Lennon, Frederic Liebermann, Carla Liss, Joan Mathews, David Mayor,



16. Larry Miller: *Remote Music*. 1979. Fluxus Retrospective concert, The Kitchen, New York. *Remote Music* is performed almost as much in the mind as on the stage. Humorous and entertaining, very much in keeping with the spirit of Zen Vaudeville around which much Fluxus work is organized, a hand drops from the ceiling to play middle C, a conclusion both obvious and surprising. (Photograph: Lisa Kahane)

Tommy Mew, Larry Miller, Kate Millett, Peter Moore, Charlotte Moorman, Olivier Mosset, Maurizio Nannucci, Serge Oldenburg, Jock Reynold, James Riddle, Peter van Riper, Takako Saito, Wlm. T. Schippers, Greg Sharits, Paul Sharits, Al Souza, Tamas Szentjauby, Yasunao Tone, Endre Tot, Brank Vucicevic, and Yoshimasa Wada.

Most of these individuals are considered by many commentators to be key members of Fluxus in one of several regards. Although the lists vary and although many member-participants have come and gone around the core defined at Cologne, the constellation of individuals and their interaction remains as fascinating as it was and ambiguous in equal measure.

At only two or three times has Fluxus been “organized” in any usual sense. The first instance was in the formative stage, when Maciunas had prepared lists of national committees, chairs, editors,

and directors, most of whom never actively fulfilled their assigned roles. The second was in a brief, lucid period of heavy publishing and concert making between about 1964 and 1967, managed through an organizational structure defined by Maciunas in 1966 (and commemorated on organizational stationery that he published) listing Per Kirkeby, Ben Vautier, Milan Knizak, Ken Friedman, and George himself as the five “directors” of Fluxus, such as it was. The final moment of clearly structured activity came in the early 1970s, when Fluxus West in England presented the Fluxus Year and Fluxshoe under the leadership of David Mayor and Michael Weaver, sponsored by the University of Exeter and its American Arts Documentation Centre.

No one really knows who invented the name Fluxus. It has been defined in many ways, relating to “states of flux,” “confusion,” “a bloody evacuation of the bowels,” “spatial and temporal instability,” and many more. Scholars offer differing theories. It is significant to the nature and identity of Fluxus that there has never been a precise recorded definition of the name, a fact that accounts in part for its generative and regenerative strength.

## II—Fluxus Performance

Fluxus attitudes toward performance have been as varied and individual as the artist-participants themselves. There are leanings toward Zen in austere and often ritual works by George Brecht, Bob Watts, Mieko Shiomi, Alison Knowles, Shigeko Kubota, and others. Much of the Fluxus performance work has been made available in boxes of collated scores and event notations, the best known of these being the George Brecht box *Water Yam*, published in 1963. Similar collections of work by Bob Watts, Mieko Shiomi, Takehisa Kosugi and Ben Vautier were published. Boxes of events were planned for Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, Ken Friedman, George Maciunas, and others. Most of the event works of these artists were eventually produced by publishers other than Fluxus. Maciunas’s own events and scores paradoxically remain unpublished, appearing for the most part as occasional single works.

A look at a few scores will illustrate the “Fluxus Zen” attitude. For example, Brecht’s *Word Event* (1961) simply reads “Exit.”



17. A selection of Fluxus boxes. 1968. Exhibited at the Fluxfest at The Red Shed, Point Loma, California. These boxes contain the events and performable works that comprise the Fluxus multiples as well as more purely visual or Conceptual pieces. (Photograph: Dumb Ox, Los Angeles, and ArtCom, San Francisco)

There is a variation that states, "Audience is instructed to leave theatre." It is clear that the piece can be performed theatrically, as a visual event in a gallery context, or as a private ritual. Some events take on further potential, such as Brecht's *Three Aqueous Events* (also 1961): "Ice. Water. Steam." This piece not only permits performance as theatre but can easily be extended to film, radio, or even television. In the context of extended performance structures *Three Aqueous Events* can be understood as a description of physical processes taking place in real time on a daily, global basis. Brecht's continual revision of the boundaries between performance and life typifies Fluxus Zen.

Robert Watts's work tends to be more pointedly performable. Some of the performances seem private in nature, even though intended for public space. *Casual Event* (1962) is one such work: "Performer drives car to filling station to inflate right front tire. He continues to inflate tire until tire blows out. He changes tire and drives home. If car is newer model, he drives home on blown out tire."

Some Watts events, despite their ephemeral, private sensibility, become manifestly public in their acknowledgment of the audience. One such event is *Two Inches* (also 1962): "Two inch ribbon is stretched across stage or street, then cut."

Some of the works are designed for sculptural installation, even for a specific space, as was *Event for Guggenheim* (1963): "A very heavy pendulum, suspended by steel wire from a high dome, is permitted to swing over a concave layer of fine sand on the floor, inscribing thus rotation of swing according to rotation of the earth."

Watts, like Brecht, has had a strong though varied career as a visual artist, showing at such galleries as Leo Castelli in the early 1960s. Watts was considered, at different periods, both a Pop artist and a Minimalist. The variety of his performance pieces underscores the complex nature of his oeuvre.

As Zen-like as these works are, the Oriental quality of Fluxus becomes most pronounced in the work of the Japanese Fluxus artists. Mieko Shiomi's Fluxversion of *Event for the Late Afternoon* (1963) is exemplary: "Violin is suspended with rope or ribbon inserted through pulley at top and secured to floor. Performer in samurai armor positions himself under suspended violin, draws his sword and cuts the rope in front of him, releasing the violin, which falls onto his helmeted head."

Similarly oriented toward samurai culture is Ay-O's well-known mid-1960s *Paper Event*, once performed at Carnegie Recital Hall. In this piece, a frame of crossed wooden strips in a latticelike arrangement is built on stage. Various objects are attached to the frame at different points, including, but not limited to, wood, metal, musical sounding blocks, glass sheets, and more. A paper screen is stretched across the stage. The performer must be a skilled archer. The archer is brought into the theatre never having seen

the positioning of the objects. Standing at the back of the theatre, the performer shoots arrows through the paper screen, where arrows hit or miss objects at random. The sounding aspect of the concert takes place when the arrows strike the objects attached to the frame.

Austere, ritual, but warm in its overtones, the work of Alison Knowles includes pieces that are subtle but dazzling in their witty charm. Her *Shuffle* (1961), for example, is an early postmodern soft-shoe first performed in 1963 at the National Association of Chemists and Perfumers convention in New York: "The performer or performers shuffle into the performance area and away from it, above, behind, around or through the audience. They perform as a group or solo, but quietly."

Her performances are often food for more than thought, as was *Proposition* (1962) at London's Institute for Contemporary Art: "Make a salad." During an active career of performance work now spanning over a quarter of a century, Knowles has moved more and more toward the silent, the liminal, and the meditative, frequently engaging viewers in meditation through group activity and quiet communal eating.

If the "sane Zen" of Japanese Fluxus artists and Alison Knowles represents one pole of the Orient, Nam June Paik's "crazy Zen" represents the other. Long acclaimed as the George Washington of video art, he has had an active career moving from music to robotics to cybernetics and electronic media. Paik has been keenly prophetic of a future he himself has helped to shape. His predictions have come true in some cases earlier than even he expected. For example, Paik's *Utopian Laser TV Station* (1965) first became visible in the 1970s through cable and direct satellite rather than in the mid-1990s as he had originally suggested. (On the lighter side, his *Young Penis Sinfonie*, a robust piece of erotic pseudo-music, was premiered in 1975 rather than in 1984 as anticipated.)

Paik's video tapes include the world-famous *Global Groove* (1973) and his recent *Guadalcanal Requiem* (1976). He has a talent for conducting himself with highly personal directness while presenting his ideas with engaging charm and lucidity. As a result, he can work well with an extraordinary range of people, from officers



18. Nam June Paik (with Denise Gordon): *Life's Ambition Realized*. October 12, 1981. The Kitchen, New York. (Photograph: Paula Court)

of the Rockefeller Foundation and Sony to artists such as Ray Johnson and Kit Fitzgerald.

Paik's performances are interactive. He often engages the audience, as in his famous tie-cutting incident in homage to John Cage (and to John Cage's tie). His work—and statements—often comment directly on the *Zeitgeist*, on the moment in culture and on the moment in his life. His *Tribute to Andy Mannik* at The Kitchen (1981) in New York focused on a telephone call to Woody and Steina Vasulka, and on Paik's lifelong ambition to “play bad piano” in a honky-tonk strip joint. The piece was not simply a Paik invention, however, but a sensitive collaboration with Andy Mannik (whose *Tribute to Nam June Paik* took place on the same program) and with dancer Denise Gordon. Paik's work involves the collaborative sensibility of the Fluxus spirit, his frequent and best known collaboration being that with cellist Charlotte Moorman (also a long-time Fluxus “fellow-traveler”).

If Paik represents a free-associating Eastern sensibility, the prolific Dick Higgins holds a comparable position with a Western approach. Higgins's work is protean, a series of experiments first outlined in his projects of the 1960s. Highly musical in source, Higgins's *Constellations for Theater* presents typical performance possibilities, in which different numbers of performers and instruments create sound according to varying structures. Two of the works give an idea:

vii—*New Constellations* (Constellation #7).

Any number of performers agree on a sound, preferably vocal, which they will produce. When they are ready to begin to perform, they all produce the sound simultaneously, rapidly and efficiently, so that the composition lasts as short a time as possible. (Boulder, Colorado, October 1960)

viii—(from) *Two Contributions I* (Contribution #1).

The performers elect a leader. Each performer selects a sound to produce which in some way contributes to the environment of the performance, but which neither opposes nor is directly derived from it. At a signal from the leader each performer produces his sound as efficiently as possible. When each performer has produced his sound the piece is over. (1959–1961)

Higgins presents the musicality inherent in Fluxus, as well as the temperance inherent in the ability to appreciate nonsound, which can be traced back to John Cage. This sense of silence is particularly evident in

x—*A Winter Carol* (Contribution #6).

Any number of people may perform this composition. They do so by agreeing in advance on a duration for the composition, then by going out to listen in the falling snow. (1961)

Czech Fluxus artist Milan Knizak may be closest to Higgins as a creator of performances. Both in his variety, his fluency, and his ability to transcend media (participating with equal vigor in events, music, visual art, and—as an acknowledged co-founder—Happenings, all roles he shares with Higgins), Knizak has been one of Eastern Europe's major international influences, ranking with such figures as Jiri Kolar. Knizak has influenced younger generations of Eastern European artists including J. H. Kocman, Jiri Valoch (Czechoslovakia), Endre Tot, Tamas Szentjauby (Hungary),

Janusz Haka, and Jaroslaw Kozlowsky (Poland). Knizak's influence, however, extended far beyond the boundaries of the Eastern European art community. He was discussed extensively in *Assemblage, Environments and Happenings*, Allan Kaprow's seminal book on Happenings and performance art forms, as one of the key figures in the development of the field. Since 1966, when the book appeared, Knizak's influence and reputation have waxed and waned by turns, his status often has been determined by the seclusion into which he has occasionally been forced because of his political and artistic beliefs. Knizak is much represented and loved by those who appreciate his robust events, pieces in which a zany spiritual emphasis on what might be called Euro-Zen combines with a Rabelaisian delight in the pleasures of the flesh.

Three of Knizak's *Confrontation Events* of 1964 and 1965 summarize his style.

*Confrontation No. 1.*

Each participant wearing a paper cap tries to knock off with wood or toy sword the cap of another while defending himself with own sword against the same attempts of opponents.

*Confrontation No. 2.*

Take a train ride without buying a ticket.

*Confrontation No. 3.*

Keep silent all day long.

Knizak's American stay in the late 1960s brought his ideas and highly physical mode of presentation to North American audiences. His trips to California were spectacular for those who were present at the confrontations surrounding his *Way of Fire*; the evening of silent meditation at de Benneville Pines, the Unitarian Universalist conference center in the mountains outside Los Angeles that later hosted several series of avant-garde and contemporary art and music conferences and exhibitions; the morning snow walk following his nightlong meditation in the mountains; and, most memorable, in the spring 1969 series of actions, Knizak's successful attempt to drink a roomful of Los Angeles hipsters under the table in a nightlong round of festivities that grew to Hemingwayan proportions as artists and musicians followed one another against Knizak in a dramatic drinking context.



19. George Maciunas: *Solo for Lips and Tongue*. 1961. Fluxus Retrospective concert, March 24, 1979. The Kitchen, New York. The performers are (l. to r.) Larry Miller, Phil Corner, Peter van Riper, Yoshi Wada, Bob Watts, and Peter Frank. (Photograph: Lisa Kahane)

Joseph Beuys is tough and gritty enough to rival Knizak, but oriented in a very different direction. Beuys's work is well enough known that it does not require description or illustration. The sensibility that he espouses stands as artistic parent to much work in the areas of Arte Povera, process, and performance art. It is as profoundly humanitarian and spiritual as Knizak's. In style and tone Beuys is somber, yet charismatic in his rich sobriety. His work can be warm, but it stands in definite contrast to the passionately exuberant actions of Knizak. Were one to define a triad among three clearly spiritual Fluxus artists, Beuys, Paik, and Knizak, one could say that Paik and Beuys share the ethereal yet earthy qualities of Zen-oriented Fluxus, Paik and Knizak share the Rabelaisian, and Knizak and Beuys share the gutsy, Pan-Eurasian folk culture with its magical and often mythical ethos.

Much Fluxus work is vaudevillian, particularly in artists such as Ben Vautier and George Maciunas. Maciunas's hundreds of jokelike

projects ranged from training a dog to answer commands by undertaking the direct opposite action of the words spoken to the famous “Door of Knives” that effectively disinvited all but the most stalwart visitor to his “basement loft” in SoHo. He was the Spike Jones of contemporary art. (Curiously, Maciunas’s favorite composers were Spike Jones and Claudio Monteverdi.)

Vautier, brash, ribald, and egocentric, goes beyond Spike Jones in his energetic zest and in his blunt execution of Fluxus projects. Other artists love him and hate him by turns. For over two and a half decades, he has created art and blasphemed against art from his center in Nice, France. It may be worth nothing that Mario Diacono, the Italian critic and art historian, believes that Vautier—who prefers to call himself Ben—was an influence on such major figures as Piero Manzoni and Yves Klein.

### III—A Personal Account

My friend and colleague Peter Frank noted in an essay on my work that

The humanistic grounding to the proposal piece genre is more apparent in the work of certain proposers than in the work of others. It is safe to say, however, that no proposer seeks to make that grounding more overtly manifest than does Friedman. As other commentators have observed, Friedman’s proposals seem often to engage individuals in interfunctions with other individuals—and those that engage individuals instead with objects do so in search not so much of the graceful formal gesture as of contemplative unity with the world. (*Ken Friedman: Events* [New York: Institute for Art and Urban Resources, 1980])

I enjoy interaction with others and with their work. This has been the focus of my named pieces and homages. One example is *Homage to Christo* (1968): “Something is unwrapped.” It was first performed at St. John’s College, Santa Fe, New Mexico, during a conference. The opportunity later came to unwrap Christo’s own *Wrapped Auditorium* during a 1981 exhibition at P.S. 1 in New York, when his show—and my show—both ended there on the same day.

Contemplation and unity take many forms. Fluxus events create a theatre of the object: objects take on a characteristic life,



20. Ken Friedman: *Homage to Christo*. 1968. Performed by Peter Frank, January 25, 1981, at P.S. 1, New York, in a concert directed by Frank. The performers included Geoffrey Hendricks, Suzanne Anker, Sten Hansen, Cyril Christo, Harrison Rivera, Carla Liss, and Brian Buczak, all realizing works in dramatically personal interpretations grounded in basic event structures, as well as taking part in such group pieces as this. (Photograph: William Hellerman)

drawing performer and audience into the world. The many versions of *Fruit in Three Acts* (1963–1967) explore this process:

- Fruit in Three Acts.*
- Act 1: Peach.
- Act 2: Watermelon.
- Act 3: Pear.

My events emerge from the process of reflection and involvement with others and with the world. I came to join Fluxus not because I had intended to become an artist (I hadn't), but because some of the artists in Fluxus saw in what I was doing a sensibility akin to their own.

What I had been doing up to that time were "events," that is, physical events or actions in time and space. I had not done them as an artist, which I was yet to become, but as a response to ideas and



21. Ken Friedman: *Fruit in Three Acts*. 1966. Fluxus Retrospective concert, March 24, 1979. The Kitchen, New York. Act 1: Pear. The pear is thrown into the audience. Act 2: Apple. The apple is placed between boards and squashed when the performer jumps on the top board. Act 3: Watermelon. The watermelon is thrown out the window and splatters onto the street below with a sound that carries faintly back into the hall. (Photograph: Lisa Kahane; courtesy the artist)

situations. The ability to respond to artistic reason (and unreason) makes us and our art what we are. A decade of “events” emerging from my life activity preceded my participation in Fluxus, starting when I was quite young. The earliest of them speaks, in a way, for the sensibility which appears in all of them.

*Scrub Piece.*

One the first day of Spring, go unannounced to a public monument. Clean it thoroughly. (First performed at the Nathan Hale Monument, New London, Connecticut, spring 1956.)

## IV—A Provisional Conclusion

Fluxus has managed to succeed, to survive, and to influence others because of its light touch, its responsiveness, and its sense of scale. Time and change are basic to Fluxus, giving it liveliness and durability. That—and a profound sense of adventure—may account for a phenomenon which has grown and changed through over two decades in an art world which usually measures time in months and seasons, only rarely in years. Response is the heart of the matter.

# ROSELEE GOLDBERG

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## Performance: The Golden Years

*In the following essay, RoseLee Goldberg looks back on the 1970s as the "Golden Years of Performance," as "a period when the medium grew from an array of eccentric gestures . . . aimed at unsettling the art establishment to a fully accepted art form." Her overview spans the years 1968 to the present, from a New York perspective, and identifies initial attitudes, the courses they took, and where performance is now. She does not, however, attempt to cover every aspect of performance in the 1970s or the work of every artist, but to introduce and discuss this recent period of performance art and some of its practitioners.*

*In the course of her survey, Goldberg cites artists such as Laurie Anderson, Eric Bogosian, and Robert Longo, and dancers such as Karole Armitage and Molissa Fenley, whose work in the latter half of the decade contributed to performance's increasing popularity and access to popular culture and its ability to convey the energy and intensity of the time.*

*Concluding with some thoughts on the "return to painting" and performance art's loss of "fashionable status," she claims that "there is a built-in cyclical aspect to performance history. Throughout the twentieth century it has come and gone in waves, appearing as an irritant and a catalyst when any one prevailing style or art form becomes entrenched," and she predicts that "performance will again rear its head and provide the shake-up that it customarily does."*

*RoseLee Goldberg is author of Performance: Live Art from 1909 to the Present (1979) and has been actively involved in performance art in the United States and England.*

The 1970s may well be looked on in time to come as the Golden Years of Performance. It was a period when the medium grew from an array of eccentric gestures—variously called *body art* or *living art* or *art aktuell*—aimed at unsettling the art establishment to a fully accepted art form with its own written history, magazines, and critics. Performance featured as a large part of the oeuvre of many artists and correspondingly became the focus of numerous festivals and conferences. From street performances and private studio events witnessed only by peers of the artists to art spaces specifically dedicated to showcasing the medium, performance gradually became a highly popular and even fashionable genre. Most important, it also became a major influence on 1970s art in general.

It has covered an area so broad and varied that it provides a fascinating yardstick to changing sensibilities and attitudes in the 1970s, attitudes that ran the gamut from strictly noncommercial, even alienating, activities to work that made decisive inroads into the popular media and clubs, venturing into far larger establishments than the art world's, such as the record or video industries. Or such has been the case in New York City, the principal subject of this study.

Such scrutiny of recent history becomes possible right now, in 1982, as performance takes a more steady course, relinquishing its fashionable status to a renewed interest in painting. Performance is not the hot item that it was in the late 1970s, mainly because its very high points have provided the route into the present media-oriented aesthetic that dominates the new generation of artists making paintings, drawings, or photographs. These artists have, as it were, graduated from the performance context that was the setting for their formative years, when it was simply uninteresting to paint, and even more uninteresting to associate with painters. However, this is not to say that performance will be dormant. On the contrary, the 1970s produced artists who worked almost exclusively in the medium. It has produced a network of established venues, subsidized (until recently) by federal grants and attended by a regular audience. These venues have in turn become the generating force behind the medium; they guarantee that performance will continue to be produced, albeit to fit the particular scheme of the venue and the interests of its audience.

This plateau of stability marks a particularly interesting moment in performance history; it points to the fact that a major performance period has reached full circle, the circle here being somewhat schematically that which began in the late 1960s with performance as an irritant, a provocative weapon used to unseat a complacent public and its view of the value of art, to the present time when it has become an established and acceptable medium in its own right. From body art, which was a means to break the impasse reached by Minimal art and its overwhelming "objecthood," through the early 1970s when performance became an important means to illustrate the cerebral and oftentimes ironic gestures of Conceptual art.

A turning point came around 1976, by which time the first generation of this "performance cycle"—Vito Acconci, Dennis Oppenheim, and Bruce Nauman, to name only a few of the artists—had ceased performing, only to create environments that suggested their presence, surrogate "performances" that included recorded voices or puppets or video as devices to "activate" a space and so interact with the viewer. At this point a second generation overlapped the first, an unusual phenomenon within such a short time span. This second generation—Laurie Anderson, Julia Heyward, Michael Smith, Martha Wilson, Adrian Piper, Michael McClard, Robert Longo, among many others—were in turn the students of the Conceptual artists, a sophisticated and articulate group who were not so much concerned with dismantling the previous generation's attitudes, as with absorbing and embellishing them. While taking for granted a certain intellectual rigorousness they dared to add the ingredient of pleasure that strict Conceptual art had denied. Just as their mentors indulged in personal histories, sentimentality, and "everyday life" so did the younger generation of performers. But unlike the older generation they added narrative and sequential presentations that separated them from the somber and cerebral, erudite demonstrations of the Conceptualists. As a result, these performances began to resemble more traditional performance modes—be it variety theatre, cabaret, or stand-up comedy—and marked a shift to "performance as performance," rather than "performance as documentation," which had largely been the case with the earlier works. This more recognizable format pointed, in

addition, to a different relationship with the audience, one that actually verged on audience gratification—on entertainment—rather than the intentionally oblique and disturbing actions of an Acconci or an Oppenheim.

This new generation took the conceptual premises for granted, extending them at the same time, but the unavoidable “generation gap” accounted for further differences. The former were the political activists of the 1960s, the generation that escaped the American 1950s. The latter were the first television generation, albeit the not so naïve witnesses to 1960s protest. So whereas the Conceptual artists could be said to have been searching for an existential essence through their work, the “media artists” received it all as so much recycled imagery—the post-Warhol children, the children of distance and dissimulation.

The work of these artists, still in their twenties, tested the double edges of fine art and popular entertainment, autobiography and fantasy, art and illusion—issues that orthodox Conceptualism bypassed in favor of philosophical rhetoric—and in so doing relaxed a mood and attracted larger audiences to work that was far easier to comprehend. Theoretical propositions were dropped in favor of recomposing media ingredients to satisfy the cultural diet of these 1950s babies. At the same time punk music filtered in from England, appearing in New York clubs in far more sophisticated form, given that it was young educated artists—with their special privileges, as opposed to the genuinely hurting and deprived working class of Britain—who assimilated its liberating effects, attracting the art crowd to CBGB’s or The Mudd Club, The Ocean Club or Hurrah’s, to watch this rock-and-roll renaissance.

By 1978/79, the high period for New York’s new wave clubs, performance crossed easily from the art world and venues such as The Kitchen Center and Franklin Furnace or Artists’ Space to rock clubs and back again. The groups that played both sides—The Erasers, DNA, Theoretical Girls, and many others—were made up of artists who could not bear to be walled into the somewhat precious world of art, yet who wanted to find the means to include their own rock-and-roll backgrounds, their own new wave culture in their art, without relinquishing their desires to be part of both worlds. This was the time that performance could be tested in the

“real world” with a more general public as had historically been its intention.

To graduate from the art world into real life—into television or into video discs, into feeding the industries that in turn feed the art and allow artists to live on revenue from their own work—has been the goal of many young artists now performing in the early 1980s. Questions have been raised about the feasibility of playing both sides, about what compromises must be made to “sell out” in terms of audience before selling out in terms of content and artistic integrity. Needless to say, the two factions, popular and high art, had been eyeing one another across a fragile divide for some time, with a fairly simple rationale to justify the merger: something so omnipresent as the media must be utilized and adapted, infiltrated and altered, for to avoid it was tantamount to living in the past, in a sentimental land of pastures and idyllic picnics along quietly flowing streams. Even so, there would be those few who could actually make the crossover.

How different the situation is now from then, the late 1960s, how different now to read an article on Vito Acconci from 1973 that queries how such “body art” can be sold, when today the new young painters have waiting lists for their works, which daily are endorsed by critics quoting the latest prices like the call of a bullish stock market. How different now the role of the artist and critic, now from then in the late 1960s, when many artists, responding to the barricades in Paris streets and the protests on American campuses, metaphorically erected their own barricades, calling for an art of ideas and an art that would short-circuit the consumer market, an art that would find for itself a philosophical base, almost a moral code for existing, and an art that spoke for itself—through the intelligence of the artists themselves—not through the mouth-pieces of critics.

Such were the opening years of the 1970s, truly begun in 1968, a preface as it were to the new morality. The gesture, the event, was what characterized the one-off performances that were often as brutish and painful as the protests taking place across the country. Vito Acconci’s work of this time captured that sensibility: *Claim* (1971) had him in a basement, wielding a lethal iron pole,

blindfolded, and beating at the air; *Following Piece* (1969) had him trailing a randomly selected person in the street, taking in the person's route and activities, ending up on one occasion in a movie house; and *Conversions* (1970) had him burning the hairs off his chest and hiding his penis between his legs in a futile attempt to understand himself without these masculine characteristics.

Each experiment absorbed him and the audience in a self-analysis of difficult proportions, an analysis that he equated in retrospect to being "like a child . . . a kind of child growing up." First the realization of existence, simply "being in the world"; hence the simple illustrative experiments with presence such as those described above. Then the realization of there "being another person"—an "other"—illustrated by works such as *Seedbed* (1972), with Acconci masturbating under a ramp in a gallery, acting out his fantasies to the beat of anonymous footsteps; to the power of "things" as in *Remote Control* (1974), a play between male and female on video monitors, in which the action is ordered and acted out over screens; to withdrawing from performance altogether in *Command Performance* (1974), a video installation that was the grand finale to this early repertoire.

Such demonstrations were part of a generally didactic and investigatory mood, one that sought to explore the notions of "being an artist" as well as the motives and emotions for "making art." This attitude opened the doors to any kind of experimentation, providing an open charter in terms of method or materials. It led to works such as *Reading Position for a Second-Degree Burn* (1970) that Dennis Oppenheim undertook at Long Beach, California. Comprising the simple act of lying in the sun for a three-hour period, with an appropriately titled book on his chest, Oppenheim "painted" his body with sunburn, the section where the book was placed retaining the pink skin tones of an academic. Another such "sensation-oriented" work was *Lead Sink for Sebastian* (1970), in which the "act of sculpting" was felt by Sebastian, a one-legged man whose especially designed iron leg was melted down by Oppenheim. Bruce Nauman made performances in which he measured out the edges of a square or curled into the corners of a room, each time delineating the spatial properties of place that a sculptor might consider, while Klaus Rinke and Monika Baumgartl made

more formalistic demonstrations of similar considerations, producing emblematic images of contemporary male/female figures.

The simplicity and purity of these actions were in direct response to the rigorous analysis that these artists were making of the art process, the mechanics of the art world, and the very existential base of being an artist. Such scrutiny did not allow for instant acceptance or easy readability, yet at the same time the work—being “live” and decidedly eccentric—had a small public following and some notoriety. Above all it raised questions, disturbed the critics and public alike, and allowed for few pat answers. It was intentionally “difficult” in that an underlying premise was to avoid the comfortability that painting or sculpture might induce. Moreover, its ephemerality, its very intangibility pointed always to a philosophy of art, a theoretical position vis-à-vis the culture, which in turn created a critique of criticism and a review of the traditional notion of the artist as a sensitive but inarticulate creature.

At the same time those that chose to work in performance maintained a doggedly antimaterialist stance, suggesting that an art that could not be bought and sold would of necessity retain its original purity, that is, always be responsible for raising polemical questions. The resulting aesthetic was a particularly clean-cut one, pared of all “decoration,” one that insisted that “the elegance of an idea” was more important than its execution. While posing critical problems about the success or failure of such intangible “beauty,” the discourse that this provoked was considered to be preferable to comfortable “armchair art.”

Coinciding with this moral code was an even more angst-ridden position that was taken by a group of artists for whom such analysis resulted in extremely unsettling work. Demonstrating danger and pain, sacrifice and madness in their most realistic terms, each of these artists responded to very particular cultural triggers. In California, Chris Burden’s dramatic stagings—as a student he squeezed himself into a school locker where he remained for five days, or, later, was crucified to a Volkswagen, or shot in the arm by a marksman—rebuked a society indifferent to violence and made catatonic by television and movie killings at all times of the day and night. In Paris, Gina Pane climbed ladders of broken glass or lay millimeters

above burning candles, in painful experiments that seemed linked to an equally anesthetized society, recovering from the political upheaval of May 1968. In Austria, Hermann Nitsch promised to bring Western man closer to his primitive origins with orgies of cow's blood and entrails, processions and theatrical rituals that recalled a medieval passion play.

The genuine lack of interest in producing art objects continued to provide a breeding ground for performance of all sorts. It would not be long before these same artists would have to submit to the reality of the art marketplace, but in the meantime a generally curious and amenable "scene" developed around these events. This in turn had a multiplying effect in that it encouraged artists from other disciplines to use the performance setting and existent audience for their own experimental work.

Thus the relationship among dancers, artists, musicians, and poets in the early 1970s was a close one, sometimes involving direct collaboration, at others, complementary experiments because performance provided a permissive umbrella for renegades from the more conservative bastions of their chosen art. The Judson Church group for example saw young Merce Cunningham dancers breaking away from the master to form their own eccentric company in a Washington Square church hall in New York City. There they developed a vocabulary of dance and composition that insisted on the audience examining the matter of dance—the body—and its everyday movements, uncluttered by formalist jetés or classically bowed arms. This same group, including Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Simone Forti, Steve Paxton, and Lucinda Childs, would branch out to create very different dancer personalities that echoed the conceptual work of the time. Patterns of movement, complex spatial tactics performed by dancers less concerned with turnout than with conceptual strategies, such ideas formed the basis for the new dance. Like the conceptual work that it paralleled, this dance was pared down to "pure ideas," freed of costume, lighting, or decoration of any kind, with even the traditional musical accompaniment being replaced by the sounds of feet stamping or hands clapping, the movement of clothes loosely draped across bodies.

Lucinda Childs developed staccato movements that would transport the dancers from one point to the next, each move having been carefully marked off beforehand in the form of intricate nota-

tion. Trisha Brown, more playful and less purist in her approach, created early works with gravity-defying dancers moving across walls, tied to the ceiling with mountaineering equipment, or walking down the sheer face of buildings similarly suspended. Laura Dean's dancers spun, dervish fashion, in and out of predetermined patterns while Deborah Hay created participatory events in which the audience, like a gathering of flower children, would become the performance through following a series of motions indicated by a leader.

These events, which took place at the Judson Church or at 112 Greene Street or at the Mercer Arts Center (later The Kitchen Center)—alternative spaces that opened at the beginning of the 1970s—created a network of places that accumulated to make for an extraordinarily lively performance world. The issues at hand were numerous and each was explored in unexpected formats. The “live” work could have any dimension and any timing—from brief one-minute works to twenty-four-hour extravaganzas—and could take place on the street or in a building, in the newly opened warehouses of SoHo or in the rotunda of the Guggenheim Museum. Its emphasis could be poetry, music, dance, or film.

There were those less concerned with conceptual puritanism and philosophical signifiers who interpreted this open situation by turning to their bodies in stylish ways, painting and transforming them. Hence Gilbert and George, who added some much needed wit and romance to the aesthetic of the London group that emerged from St. Martin's School of Art in the late 1960s. Meticulously dressed as middle-class Englishmen in neat suits that would become their uniform in the following decade, the two dedicated their lives to Art and all its Perils. Precious as Wedgwood china, faces and hands painted gold, they presented their *Singing Sculpture* at New York's Sonnabend Gallery in 1972; a tape of *Underneath the Arches* played and replayed as Gilbert and George moved marionette fashion on top of a table. In a different vein Urs Luthi or Castelli, both in Switzerland and in very different ways, made tableaux of transvestite imagery, reflecting the fay glamour and chic rock-and-roll styling of the Stones or Roxy Music or Lou Reed.

Costume and fabrication, the body as the best place to hang a work of art, took on yet other forms in the displays of artists such as

Colette, whose tableaux found her sunk into folds of fabric, pastel colored from head to toe; while Pat Oleszko made costumes with multiple-choice arms or legs, as in her *Coat of Arms* (twenty-six arms); Hannah Wilke brought body art down to basics by appearing in various works bare breasted, usually accompanied by a particular subtitle that gave a double-edge meaning to her nudity. Dr. Brus or Mr. Peanut in Canada created performance persona that infiltrated the image banks of magazines, particularly that collected by *File* magazine, the stylish *LIFE*-like publication of General Idea in Toronto, whose effective art direction spread the rumor of extraordinary performances, many of which took place largely within the pages of the magazine.

Even while new artists emerged on the performance scene at a steadily increasing rate, adding their own idiosyncratic gestures to the broad vocabulary of the genre, they had to reckon with the innovations of those who had for some time committed themselves to working “live.” By 1975 Joan Jonas’s body of performance work was extensive enough to provide its own mini history of the changing preoccupations of the 1970s. Sculptor turned performer (after a period of working with the Judson Dance Theatre in the late 1960s) Jonas’s early work investigated “issues of space—ways of dislocating it, attenuating it, flattening it, turning it inside out.” First with mirrors, then with video or film, indoors or out, Jonas used these devices to create spatial illusions, investing them at the same time with curious personal symbols. *Twilight* (1975) comprised layers of space activated through various stage levels, movie screen, and transparent scrim, as well as video monitors, through which moved mysterious robed figures, white funnels to their lips. It would be these Grimm’s fairy-tale-like creatures that would lead the way to Jonas’s later productions.

Richard Foreman, director and playwright, constructed a very particular layered space in his Broadway loft for his Ontological Hysteric Theatre. But his figures were far from any fairy tales; rather they were the product of a brain part structuralist, part Surrealist. The action was both what was said (live) and what was about to be said (recorded, matter of fact) as well as what could or should be said (recorded, argumentative), as if one had access to the mind of the “character” and the “writer” and all his silent partners—philosophers, semiologists, psychologists—simultaneously.

The only performance work of the time to be profusely verbal, Foreman's productions nevertheless drew attention to spaces and pictures, as defined by words and actions.

Robert Wilson, on the other hand, constructed spaces that became the underlying drama of the work; visual landscapes powerfully determined the very presence of the performers, reducing language to background murmurings. In productions such as *A Letter to Queen Victoria* (1974) or *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) the sets gave stature and direction to each scene as they were transformed from one potent visual image to the next. Unprecedented in scale and spectacle, Wilson brought new life to the "total artwork," investing it not only with his own vivid imagery but with the talents of some of the most interesting artists, musicians, and choreographers of the time. This ability to orchestrate ideas and people, constructing extraordinary visual worlds from their mix, reinforced and extended Wilson's sphere of influence; even while the many artists who at one time or another had worked with Wilson departed to make their own very distinctive work, they carried with them the spirit of his professionalism and rigorousness as well as the confidence of his support.

By 1976 performance festivals were taking place at regular intervals throughout New York, as well as in London, at Documenta in Kassel, and the Biennales in Venice and Sydney. There was actually an air of excitement around these events, given that they provided the general public with a milieu for meeting or seeing artists. This was a time, it should be remembered, when painting was still of the more cerebral kind, beautiful stratified canvases by artists such as Bob Ryman, Brice Marden, Agnes Martin, or Cy Twombly, laden with paint or calligraphy, with a quiet, intensive sensuality. But these were not the kind of paintings that made the general public feel at ease, or feel included in any way in the life of the artists or the art scene. On the other hand the nonstop performance festivities stirred the imagination of a public curious to view the art world at closer quarters.

Despite New York's densely crowded cultural calendar performance events were heavily attended. Nineteen seventy-six began with a major event at the Whitney Museum, *Four Evenings, Four Days*, a performance series that announced the now fashion-

able medium to the New York public at large. The program comprised a mix of newcomers to the city: Michael Smith with his diapered Baby Icky; Adrian Piper with her go-go dancer; local downtown favorites such as Stuart Sherman or Martha Wilson; artists like Richard Foreman or Robert Wilson, who had already presented major performances in the city; emerging performers who would give solid ground for performance's new popularity such as Laurie Anderson or Julia Heyward. Audiences were attracted by the ever-changing formats for performance: *Grommets* (a series arranged by Jean Dupuy in his Broadway loft) provided peep-show conditions, viewing cubicles with one artist per canvas partition, while Scott Burton's *Pair Behavior Tableau* at The Guggenheim Museum situated the viewers at a distance of about a hundred feet. *Line Up* at The Museum of Modern Art turned the museum into a fairground for performance with events taking place in the penthouse, the stairwell, and galleries.

This official acknowledgment of the genre had a twofold effect on the performance scene: on the one hand it whetted the appetite of an audience that might normally not have become involved, and on the other it spurred artists to find less sedate venues for a medium that had traditionally been without traditions—that had in fact been a means to bypass curatorial or critical approval. By 1978 so-called alternative organizations such as The Kitchen Center or Artists Space actually became the showcases for the more accomplished and experienced performers—a “safe” place with a steady and polite audience, as well as regular press coverage. On the other hand the clubs such as The Mudd, TR 3, or Hurrah's provided a difficult proving ground for new work, given the trials of attracting attention above the noise level of the music and the clinking of beer bottles on a bar counter.

Both sides in their different ways had similar goals: to provide intelligent and provocative entertainment. Both looked to the Dadaists' Cabaret Voltaire as a precedent for what could ideally be achieved; an easy atmosphere where artists would present work to a nonexclusive audience, without the aura that surrounded art events. This polarization of the genre into rock-club entertainment on the one hand and “art” on the other allowed places like The Kitchen Center to play a more didactic and critical role, situating

the work in a thematic or historical context. For the clubs, the art-world following gave credibility to a business enterprise, but it also showed an increased readiness on the part of some press and public to embrace the art world—either because they found it glamorous or because they genuinely looked to it for the unusual and interesting in a city already overburdened by the “fascinating” as portrayed in the hype magazines and the sensational news programs.

The sheer density of performers, performance spaces, and audiences slowly created qualitative measures for the work, but the rating system came to resemble more and more that applied to traditional performance. This was as much the result of the maturation and experience of certain artists as it was their looking to entertainers as models or the media as potential vehicles for the work. Lorne Michaels’s *Saturday Night Live*, with its audience of millions, offered a tantalizing prospect for some artists and the SNL writers were not unaware of potential raw material in the art world. But, although Michaels had a particular talent for constructing a context for unusual work, particularly in the corporate situation of television, his followers, once he left the show, were not as able or willing. Video and sometime performance artist Mitchell Kriegman was brought in by the second generation of *Saturday Night Live*, but was dismissed shortly thereafter. The work remained too idiosyncratic and personal for the television team, despite some success with audiences. The Kipper Kids were also very briefly courted by the popular media, appearing with their outrageously silly songs that bordered on the obscene at rock concerts or, once, on network television. But while their bawdiness was just acceptable in the art world, it was not so in the media world. Kriegman or the Kipper Kids aside, these unsuccessful courtships further pointed to whether the machinations of the larger culture would actually permit the inclusion of artwork. For while the media had been looking to performance and its popularity at the clubs and to some artists’ video, it was on their part a means to coopt a fashionable trend rather than actually to provide a larger context for work that had entirely different reference points—in terms of both style and content.

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22. Kipper Kids: *Silly Ceremonies*. 1979. The Kitchen, New York. (Photograph courtesy RoseLee Goldberg)

Despite these particular instances the goal of producing material that could appeal both to the art intelligentsia and to the general public was an important one for many artists. As a futuristic ideal it was democratic but it was also an inevitable fact of life in a media society; “the public,” narrow or broad, could be reached through the mediation of magazines, television, and daily press; video discs would soon be available to every American home. At the same time these young artists, who had grown up thoroughly accepting of that media world, would understandably “speak its language.” It was “only natural” that they seek access to the popular culture. Indeed, one artist who has succeeded in escaping the art-world minority for the larger culture while still maintaining artistic integrity—Laurie Anderson—in a recent performance wore a T-shirt with the words *Talk Normal* written across it, even as she talked through electronic modifiers that gave her voice the eerie sounds of computerized speech. For her, a normal evening at home is sitting in the dark in her studio playing all her “tech” equipment. This to her is everyday life.

So, too, are her performances. Everyday life in American culture is depicted in a four-part opus *United States* (1978–1982) that



23. Laurie Anderson: *United States Part II*. October 1980. Performed at the Orpheum Theatre and presented by The Kitchen, New York. (Photograph: Paula Court)

was premiered as a whole in the fall of 1982. Presented separately, each hour-and-a-half-long segment has dealt with particular themes—transportation, politics, sociopsychology, and money—juxtaposing images and text, sound and technological inventions. Made up of a series of ironical “talking songs” interspersed with unusual visual devices—such as a slide show that magically appears and disappears at the whisk of a violin bow in the air or red lips that hover in the dark—this series has attracted an extraordinarily large audience. In concert, in a theatre, at clubs like the Ritz, or solo on the road, the mix of smooth professional productions worthy of Broadway with highly unusual content elicits powerful responses from increasingly large circles of followers.

Above all Anderson has a talent that prior to her performance work was once considered irrelevant to art performance, and that is stage presence. A “natural,” she also understands and expertly applies the performer’s power to seduce and control. Whereas in earlier works this quality was disguised by a studied clumsiness, as a protective device against art-world criticism that the work might be entertaining—and therefore banal—Anderson has taken a stand against that argument, pointing out that “seriousness can also be a container for the banal.” Anderson’s work proves that even while it is entertaining—owing to humor, to language, to timing, style, and presence—it is never banal. Rather the performances that verge on conventional stage shows, with their synched lighting, musical cues, and three-minute segments, allow for the unusual content to be transcribed to wider audiences than might normally consider such issues. For Anderson, the media—radio, television, even telephones—are simply vehicles for ideas and inventions as well as a means to create a personal circuit outside of the gallery one, rather than forms that must necessarily alter the substance of her thinking. And the very clarity of that thinking, the precision with which she molds it to her distinctive style, is an additional explanation of her very broad appeal.

Even so, the stage presence, the intricate play between words, song, and extraordinary custom-made instruments that characterize her performances, could not explain the popularity of her record “O Superman” that in 1981 reached Top of the Pops, the English rock-and-roll hit parade. An eight-minute song without

bass line or chorus, with a synthesized voice and nonrepetitive lyrics, is not the thing of which a hit song is usually made. Rather, Anderson's hit was a curious blend of haunting electronic sound and disturbing lyrics; a mixture that suggested consumer aesthetics—oppressive and anesthetizing but heroic at the same time. Its title, "O Superman," which Anderson dedicated to Massenet, was, like his song that begins *O Souverain . . .*, an appeal for help. About the media culture that controls, it appeals to a generation exhausted by its artifice.

Also in 1981 Anderson signed a six-record contract with Warner Bros. (USA); for the record company she remains an artist, an unusual and intriguing addition to their stable; for Anderson, integrity intact, they provide her with the most professional means to produce her art. What results from this merger will provide some interesting answers to the ongoing question of fine arts and mass culture crossovers, and the art world will be keeping a close watch on Anderson's progress. In the meantime, Anderson is a model and an influence; directly or indirectly the professionalism of her enterprise has encouraged a study of technique and performance expertise, a trend that has been growing in a number of artists contemporary with Anderson. At first glance this drift toward traditional variety theatre, cabaret, or even situation comedy would seem a conservative one. Yet a closer view reveals a subtle analysis of the media culture and of performance as an effective critical tool.

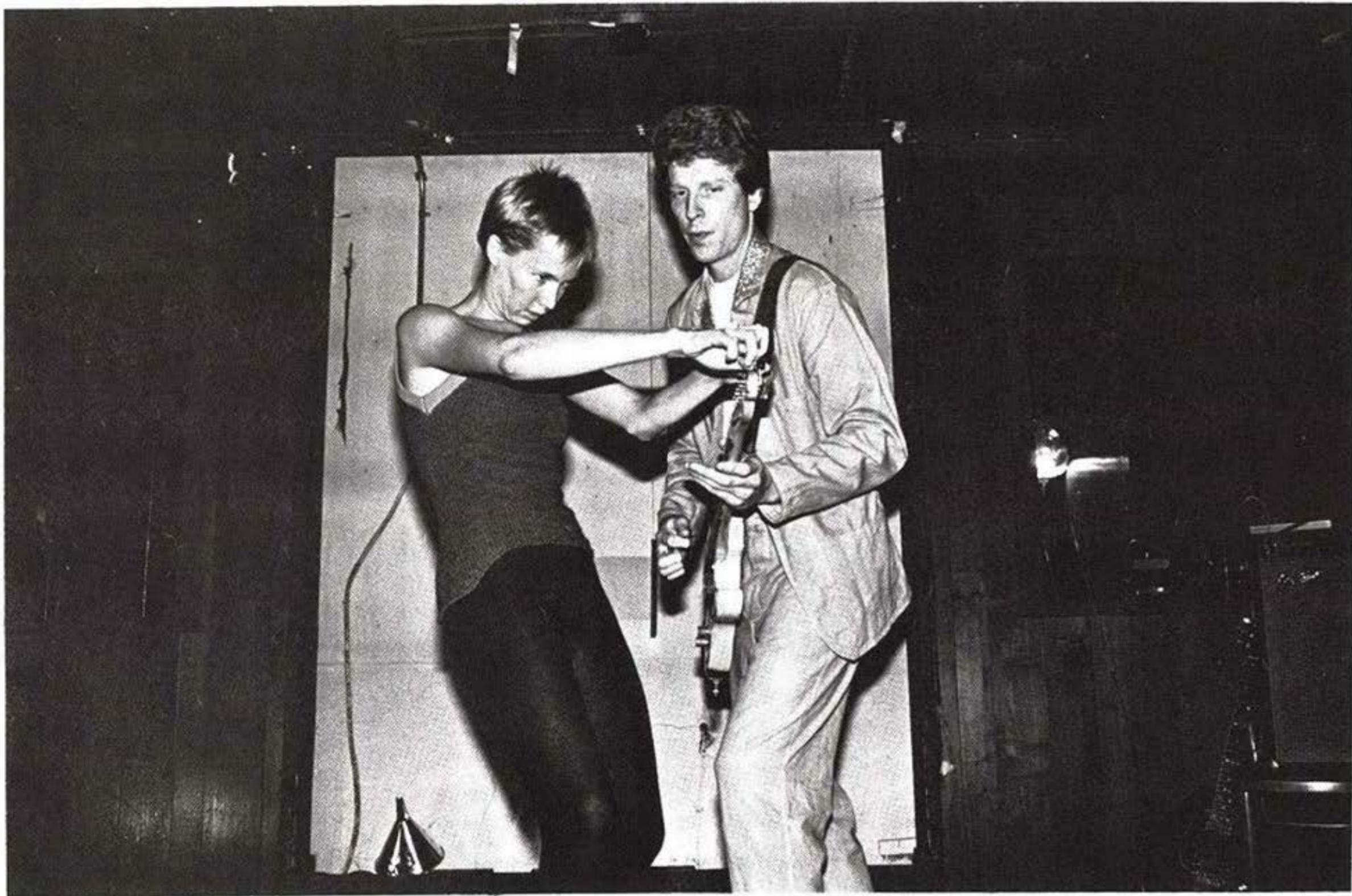
Eric Bogosian, a trained actor performing in the art context, looked to the tradition of solo performers—whether Lenny Bruce or Brother Theodore, Laurie Anderson or Julia Heyward—as confirmation of his concern for *presence*—the actor's live presence being the energy and the "humanity" of his work. Concerned first and foremost with content, Bogosian at the same time emphasizes acting itself, "framing" the medium as it were by tightly constructing each piece in terms of moves, lighting, and subtly mannered acting. The characters that people his one-person shows are a gallery of contemporary types, and their appearance illustrates his virtuosity as well as his acknowledgment of classical actor training techniques. Such "acting in relief" in images that are both two-dimen-



24. Eric Bogosian as "Ricky Paul." August 1980. Snafu, New York. (Photograph: Paula Court)

sional—carefully choreographed against space and set—and three-dimensional in their breadth of “personality” is as much the result of Bogosian’s own love of spectacle (his background was the rock concert, not Broadway) as the result of his proximity to the art scene. Particularly, Bogosian was influenced by artists like Jack Goldstein, Robert Longo, Cindy Sherman, and Michael Zwack, some of whom had made performances alongside work in other media and all of whom have appropriated aspects of mass culture in their work. For these artists “growing up” meant being literate in movies and television, not books. The economy of means used to create an image in the media—cutting and cropping, editing and freeze-framing—encouraged an equivalent sensibility in their art and performances. Goldstein’s *The Fencers* (1978) re-created the stop-and-start effects of an editing machine through the use of pulsing white lights against fencing figures in an otherwise dark space, while Robert Longo’s *Sound Distance of a Good Man* (1978) presented a three-part “screen” of figures; two wrestlers in one frame and an opera singer in another flanked a third that comprised a movie of a photograph of a man’s and a lion’s head. Each performance was the work of an artist who approached the material in much the same way as would a movie director, arriving at isolated and flattened images that resembled movie stills, and with a sense of timing closer to a film loop than to the “real time” of live actors on a stage.

The generation that emerged at the time of rock-and-roll’s twenty-fifth anniversary and a growing interest in movie history injected bits and pieces of rock nostalgia and Hollywood culture into the art of the early 1980s. Translating this general sensibility, which could be seen in specific downtown New York clubs from around 1978 where many artists were performing in their own new wave bands, into dance was the surprise move of Cunningham-trained Karole Armitage. With her perfectly tuned body, she teamed up with Rhys Chatham and his “out-of-tune guitars” to create a dance piece that would stunningly capture the sensibility of the moment. *Drastic Classicism* (1980)—a collaboration including Charles Atlas who was responsible for the decor—magically combined all the ingredients of punk/new wave artifacts and energy: their glamour and seediness; their sophistication and simulated dumbness; their sounds and movements; their purples and blacks



25. Karole Armitage and Rhys Chatham: *Drastic Classicism*. September 1980. Tier 3, New York. (Photograph: Paula Court)

and splashes of phosphorescent colors. Within this tension there was the balance of classical and anarchistic approaches to both dance and music. There was an evident respect for classical modes expressed by both artists, yet every movement and each guitar chord stretched those modes past the breaking point. Dancers and musicians met head-on in the same performing space, one using the other as support and antagonist in a dialectical tryst. While the musicians held their ground, beating out a wall of sound, the dancers attempted to shove the musicians aside, forced by these physical barriers to create “louder” movements as the intensity of the music increased.

Another dancer who made an important break away from so-called postmodern dance, which had held sway for a good decade with its minimal aesthetics and overall conceptual sensibility, was Molissa Fenley. Like Armitage she was fired by the intensity and energy of the performance scene in the late 1970s, the mood that provided the starting point for many of the more visible young artists today. With the barest of external references Fenley managed to suggest the dynamics underlying the nervous energy of the time. Inventing movements that each contained the making of the next series of gestures, Fenley created a mesmerizing and stimulating work called *Energizer* (1981), which as its title suggests left audience and dancer hyperventilated at its conclusion.

Despite New York’s ability to regenerate itself continuously, the particular intensity that characterized the clubs and the emerging new scene in various media from 1978 through this four-year period had inevitably to play itself out. Many of the artists who had made performances—Jack Goldstein, Michael McClard, Robert Longo, Cindy Sherman, or Robin Winters, to name a few—now make paintings, sculptures, or photographs. They have settled into more contemplative (and profitable) forms of expression, returning to what the world at large considers to be mainstream art. At the same time their work contains many media references, styles, and techniques and is far more popular in its approach, partly as a result of the artists’ proximity to performance.

This “return to painting”—to more accessible art, after well over a decade of perplexing conceptual material—relieves per-



26. Molissa Fenley and Co.: *Energizer*. September 1980. Dance Theatre Workshop, New York. (Photographs: Paula Court)

formance of its fashionable status. This in turn will probably allow those committed to the live medium to develop in a less frenetic atmosphere, consolidating ideas and motifs without the pressure or influence of prevailing trends. Performers of the caliber of Laurie Anderson will no doubt continue to walk the fine line of art and mass culture, keeping the notion of performance in the public eye; Eric Bogosian can more carefully develop a repertoire of men and manners, allowing each to evolve from a much larger frame of reference than the performance scene itself; and younger performers such as Tim Miller or those testing their skills at P.S. 122 or Inroads will have to work with the more sophisticated elements of performance—presence, structure, and spectacle—that the 1970s have consolidated. More than likely these artists will continue to move in the direction of the media—television, video discs, cable—both because of their obvious potential as a way of reaching large audiences, and because they hold the possibility of financial reward in this not-for-profit medium.

But above all history will provide its own regenerating force for performance. Even while it continues to be accepted as a medium in its own right, there is a built-in cyclical aspect to performance history. Throughout the twentieth century it has come and gone in waves, appearing as an irritant and a catalyst when any one prevailing style or art form becomes entrenched. It has been used by young artists determined to attract public attention outside of the decorum of gallery and critics, and as such has often represented the highly experimental aspects of emerging artists' work. Such was the case with the Futurists, the Dadaists, the Surrealists, or more recently with Happenings in the challenge to color-field painting, and body art in its relation to Minimalism. Each time performance is the escape hatch from the art establishment that the new generation of artists needs. Yet each time that it returns, performance looks entirely different, even unrecognizable, from the time before. It will be different the next time around, because it will be responding to an entirely new set of cultural and artistic concerns and because no matter how accepted, the definition of performance remains open-ended. Right now, in 1982, performance may be less in the spotlight than the "new painting," less a focus of magazines or festivals than it was in the late 1970s. An era

has begun that will bear witness to the establishment of the new painting styles and their accompanying criticism, but then when the market backing this generation begins to create an impasse for effective work, performance will again rear its head and provide the shake-up that it customarily does.

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# THEORY AND CRITICISM



# MICHAEL KIRBY

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## On Acting and Not-Acting

*Performance art, which is closely linked to such earlier art forms as the Happening and “environmental” performances, borrows elements from these as well as from traditional theatrical forms. Thus acting is an important element of performance art, although it sometimes is important only because the artist attempts to minimize its role.*

*Michael Kirby recognizes that some performances do not involve acting. Nevertheless, other elements carry the meaning in place of acting. Kirby sees acting from these other viewpoints, which he identifies as nonmatrixed performing, nonmatrixed representation, received acting, simple acting, and complex acting. In this essay he creates a scale, with examples, that “measures the amount or degree of representation, simulation, impersonation, and so forth in performance behavior.”*

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*In his conclusion to this essay Kirby notes that his acting/not-acting scale should not be used to establish values of any kind. “Objectively, all points on the scale are equally good. It is only personal taste that prefers complex acting to simple acting or nonmatrixed performing to acting. The various degrees of representation and personification are ‘colors,’ so to*

*“speak, in the spectrum of human performance; the artist may use whichever colors he prefers.”*

Acting means to feign, to simulate, to represent, to impersonate. As Happenings demonstrated, not all performing is acting. Although acting was sometimes used, the performers in Happenings generally tended to “be” nobody or nothing other than themselves; neither did they represent, or pretend to be in, a time or place different from that of the spectator. They walked, ran, said words, sang, washed dishes, swept, operated machines and stage devices, and so forth, but they did not feign or impersonate.

In most cases acting and not-acting are relatively easy to recognize and identify. In a performance we usually know when a person is acting and when he is not. But there is a scale or continuum of behavior involved, and the differences between acting and not-acting may be quite small. In such cases categorization may not be easy. Perhaps some would say it is unimportant, but, in fact, it is precisely these borderline cases that can provide insights into acting theory and into the nature of the art.

Let us examine acting by tracing the acting/not-acting continuum from one extreme to the other. We shall begin at the not-acting end of the scale, where the performer does nothing to feign, simulate, impersonate, and so forth, and move to the opposite position, where behavior of the type that defines acting appears in abundance. Of course, when we speak of “acting” we are referring not to any one style but to all styles. We are not concerned, for example, with the degree of “reality” but with what we can call, for now, the *amount* of acting.

## **NOT-ACTING**

## **ACTING**

There are numerous performances that do not use acting. Many, but by no means all, dance pieces would fit into this category. Several Far Eastern theatres make use of stage attendants such as the *kurombo* and *koken* of Kabuki. These attendants move props into position and remove them, help with onstage costume changes, and even serve tea to the actors. Their dress distinguishes them from

the actors, and they are not included in the informational structure of the narrative. Even if the spectator ignores them as people, however, they are not invisible. They do not act, and yet they are part of the visual presentation.

As we shall see when we get to that point on the continuum, “acting” is active—it refers to the feigning, simulation, and so forth that is *done* by a performer. But representation, simulation, and other of the qualities that define acting may also be applied *to* the performer. The way in which a costume creates a “character” is one example of this.

Let us forsake performance for a moment and consider how the “costume continuum” functions in daily life. If a person wears cowboy boots on the street, as many people do, we do not identify him as a cowboy. If he also wears a wide, tooled-leather belt and even a Western hat, we do not see this as a costume—even in a northern city. It is merely a choice of clothing. As more and more items of Western clothing—a bandana, chaps, spurs, and so forth—are added, however, we reach the point where we see either a cowboy or a person dressed as (impersonating) a cowboy. The exact point on the continuum at which this kind of specific identification occurs depends on several factors, the most important of which is place or physical context, and it undoubtedly varies quite a bit from person to person.

The effect of clothing on stage functions in exactly the same way, but it is more pronounced. A performer wearing only black leotards and Western boots might easily be identified as a “cowboy.” This, of course, indicates the symbolic power of costume in performance. It is important, however, to notice the degree to which the external symbolization is supported and reinforced (or contradicted) by the performer’s behavior. If the performer moves (acts) like a cowboy, the identification is made much more readily. If he is merely himself, the identification might not be made at all.

At this stage on our acting/not-acting continuum we are concerned with those performers who do *not do* anything to reinforce the information or identification. When the performer, like the stage attendants of Kabuki and No, is merely himself and is not embedded, as it were, in matrices of pretended or represented character, situation, place, and time, I refer to him as being *non-matrixed*. As we move toward acting from this extreme not-acting

position on our continuum, we come to that condition in which the performer does not act and yet his costume represents something or someone. We could call this state *nonmatrixed representation* or *nonmatrixed symbolization*.

**NOT-ACTING****ACTING**

NONMATRIXED

NONMATRIXED

PERFORMING

REPRESENTATION

In *Oedipus, a New Work*, by John Perreault, the “main performer,” as Perreault refers to him rather than calling him an actor, limps. If we are aware of the title of the piece and of the story of Oedipus, we might assume that this performer represents Oedipus. He does not pretend to limp, however. A stick has been tied “to his right leg underneath his pants in such a way that he will be forced to limp.” When the main performer operates a tape recorder, as he does frequently during the presentation, we do not think that this is a representation of Oedipus running a machine. It is a nonmatrixed performer doing something. The lighting of incense and the casting of a reading from the *I Ching* can be seen as a reference to the Delphic oracle; the three lines of tape that the main performer places on the floor so that they converge in the center of the area can be seen as representing the place where, at the intersection of three roads, Oedipus killed his father, and the limp (and the sunglasses that the main performer wears throughout the piece) can be considered to stand for aspects of Oedipus. The performer, however, never behaves as if he were anyone other than himself. He never represents elements of character. He merely carries out certain actions.

In nonmatrixed representation the referential elements are applied *to* the performer and are not acted *by* him. And just as Western boots do not necessarily establish “a cowboy,” a limp may convey information without establishing a performer as “Oedipus.” When, as in *Oedipus, a New Work*, the character and place matrices are weak, intermittent, or nonexistent, we see a person, not an actor. As “received” references increase, however, it is difficult to say that the performer is not acting even though he is *doing* nothing that we could define as acting. In a New York luncheonette before

Christmas we might see “a man in a Santa Claus suit” drinking coffee; if exactly the same action were carried out on stage in a setting representing a rustic interior, we might see “Santa Claus drinking coffee in his home at the North Pole.” When the matrices are strong, persistent, and reinforce each other, we see an actor, no matter how ordinary the behavior. This condition, the next step closer to true acting on our continuum, we may refer to as *received acting*.

<b>NOT-ACTING</b>		<b>ACTING</b>
<b>NONMATRIXED</b>	<b>NONMATRIXED</b>	<b>RECEIVED</b>
<b>PERFORMING</b>	<b>REPRESENTATION</b>	<b>ACTING</b>

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Extras, who do nothing but walk and stand in costume, are seen as “actors.” Anyone merely walking across a stage containing a realistic setting might come to represent a person in that place—and, perhaps, time—without doing anything we can distinguish as acting. There is the story of the critic who headed backstage to congratulate a friend and could be seen by the audience as he passed outside the windows of the onstage house; it was an opportune moment in the story, however, and he was accepted as part of the play.

Neither does the behavior in received acting necessarily need to be simple. Some time ago I remember reading about a play in which John Garfield—I am fairly sure it was he, although I no longer know the title of the play—was an extra. During each performance he played cards and gambled with several friends onstage. They really played, and the article emphasized how much money someone had won (or lost). At any rate, as my memory is incomplete, let us imagine a setting representing a bar. In one of the upstage booths, several men play cards throughout the act. Let us say that none of them has lines in the play; they do not react in any way to the characters in the story we are observing. These men do not act. They merely play cards. And yet we also see them as characters, however minor, in the story and we say that they, too, are acting. We do not distinguish them from the other actors.

If, as I should like to do, we define acting as something that is done by a performer rather than something that is done for or to

him, we have not yet arrived at true acting on our scale. "Received actor" is only an honorary title, so to speak. Although the performer seems to be acting, he actually is not. Nonmatrixed performing, nonmatrixed representation, and received acting are stages on the continuum that move from not-acting to acting. The amount of simulation, representation, impersonation, and so forth has increased as we have moved along the scale, but, so far, none of this was created by the performer in a special way we could designate as *acting*.

Whereas acting in its most complete form offers no problem of definition, our task in constructing a continuum is to designate those transitional areas in which acting "begins." What are the simplest characteristics that define acting?

NOT-ACTING		ACTING	
NONMATRIXED	NONMATRIXED	RECEIVED	SIMPLE
PERFORMING	REPRESENTATION	ACTING	ACTING

These characteristics may be either physical or emotional. If the performer does something to simulate, represent, impersonate, and so forth, he is acting. It does not matter what style he uses or whether the action is part of a complete characterization or an informational presentation. No emotion needs to be involved. The definition can depend solely on the character of what is done. (Value judgments, of course, are not involved. Acting is acting whether or not it is done "well" or accurately.) Thus a person who, as in the game of charades, pretends to put on a jacket that does not exist or feigns being ill is acting. Acting can be said to exist in the smallest and simplest action that involves pretense.

Acting also exists in emotional rather than strictly physical terms, however. Let us say, for example, that we are at a presentation by the Living Theatre of *Paradise Now*. It is that well-known section in which the performers, working individually, walk through the auditorium speaking directly to the spectators. "I'm not allowed to travel without a passport," they say. "I'm not allowed to smoke marijuana!" "I'm not allowed to take my clothes off!" They seem sincere, disturbed, and angry. Are they acting?

The performers are themselves; they are not portraying char-

acters. They are in the theatre, not in some imaginary or represented place. What they say is certainly true. They are not allowed to travel—at least between certain countries—without a passport; the possession of marijuana is against the law. And I think we will all grant that the performers really believe what they are saying—that they really feel these rules and regulations are unjust. Acting exists only in their emotional presentation.

At times in “real life” we meet a person that we feel is acting. This does not mean that he is lying, dishonest, living in an unreal world, or that he is necessarily giving a false impression of his character and personality. It means that he seems to be aware of an audience—to be “onstage”—and that he reacts to this situation by energetically projecting ideas, emotions, and elements of his personality for the sake of the audience. That is what the performers in *Paradise Now* were doing. They were acting their own emotions and beliefs.

Let us phrase this problem in a slightly different way. Public speaking, whether it is extemporaneous or makes use of a script, may involve emotion, but it does not necessarily involve acting. Yet some speakers, while retaining their own characters and remaining sincere, seem to be acting. At what point does acting appear? At the point at which the emotions are “pushed” for the sake of the spectators. This does not mean that the speaker is false or does not believe what he is saying. It merely means that he is selecting and projecting an element of character—that is, emotion—to the audience.

In other words it does not matter whether an emotion is created to fit an acting situation or whether it is simply amplified. One principle of “method” acting—at least as it is taught in this country—is the *use* of whatever real feelings and emotions the actor has while playing the role. (Indeed, this became quite a joke: No matter what unusual or uncomfortable physical urges or psychological needs or problems the actor had, he was advised to “use” them.) It may be merely the use and projection of emotion that distinguishes acting from not-acting.

I think that this is an important point. It indicates that acting involves a basic psychic or emotional component; although this component exists in all forms of acting to some degree (except, of course, received acting), it in itself is enough to distinguish acting

from not-acting. Because this element of acting is mental, a performer may act without moving. I do not mean that, as has been mentioned previously, the motionless person "acts" in a passive and "received" way by having a character, a relationship, a place, and so on imposed on him by the information provided in the presentation. The motionless performer may convey certain attitudes and emotions that are acting even though no physical action is involved.

Further examples of rudimentary acting—as well as examples of not-acting—may be seen in the well-known "mirror" exercise in which two people stand facing each other while one copies or "reflects," as if he were a mirror, the movements of the other. Although this is an exercise used in training actors, acting itself is not necessarily involved. The movements of the first person, and therefore those of the second, might not represent or pretend. Each might merely raise and lower his arms or turn his head. The movements could be completely abstract.

It is here, however, that the perceived relationship between the performer and what he is creating can be seen to be crucial to the definition of acting. Even "abstract" movements may be personified and made into a character of sorts through the performer's attitude. If he seems to indicate "I am this thing" rather than merely "I am doing these movements," we accept him as the "thing": He is acting. Nevertheless, we do not accept the "mirror" as acting, even though he is a "representation" of the first person. He lacks the psychic energy that would turn the abstraction into a personification. If an attitude of "I am imitating you" is projected, however—if purposeful distortion or "editorializing" appears rather than the neutral attitude of exact copying—the mirror becomes an actor even though the original movements were abstract.

The same exercise may easily involve acting in a more obvious way. The first person, for example, may pretend to shave. The mirror, in copying these feigned actions, becomes an actor now in spite of his neutral attitude. (We could call him a received actor because, like character and place in our earlier examples, the representation has been "put on" him without that inner creative attitude and energy necessary for true acting. His acting, like that of a marionette, is controlled from the outside.) If the originator in the mirror exercise put on his jacket, he would not necessarily be acting; if he or

the mirror, not having a jacket, pretended to put one on, it would be acting, and so on.

As we have moved along the continuum from not-acting to acting, the amount of representation, personification, and so forth has increased. Now that we have arrived at true acting, we may say that it, too, varies in amount. Small "amounts" of acting—like those in the examples that have been given—will occupy that part of the scale closest to received acting, and we can move along the continuum to a hypothetical "maximum amount" of acting. Indeed, the only alternative would seem to be an "on-off" or "all-or-nothing" view in which all acting is theoretically (if not qualitatively) equal and undifferentiated.

*Amount* is a difficult word to use in this case, however. Because, especially for Americans, it is easy to assume that "more is better," any reference to amount may be taken to indicate relative value or worth. It is better to speak of *simple* and *complex* acting with the hope that these terms can be accepted as objective and descriptive rather than evaluative. After all, *simple* and *complex* are terms that may be ascribed quite easily and without an implied value judgment to other performance arts such as music and dance. A ballad is relatively simple compared to a symphony; the ordinary fox-trot is much less complex than the filmed dances of Fred Astaire. Let us apply the same kind of analysis to acting, remembering that simple acting, such as we saw in the mirror exercise, may be very good, whereas complex acting is not necessarily good and may, indeed, be quite bad.

Complex acting, then, would be the final condition on our acting/not-acting continuum. What do we mean by complex acting? In what ways can acting be simple or complex?

NOT-ACTING		ACTING		
NONMATRIXED	NONMATRIXED	RECEIVED	SIMPLE	COMPLEX
PERFORMING	REPRESENTATION	ACTING	ACTING	ACTING

The simplest acting is that in which only one element or dimension of acting is used. Emotion, as we have seen, may be the only area in which pretense takes place. Or, as in the mirror exercise, only an action such as putting on a jacket may be simulated. Other acting

exercises attempt to isolate various aspects of acting, and they are proof that behavior, which is complex, can be broken down into simple units.

The simple/complex scale also applies to each individual aspect of acting. Emotion may be generalized and unchanging, or it may be specific, modulating and changing frequently within a given period of time. An action may be performed in a simple or a complex way. In the game of charades, for example, we may only indicate that we are putting on a jacket. As long as our team understands what we are doing, the acting is successful. The same action becomes more complex as details such as the resistance of the material, the degree of fit, the weight of the jacket, and so on are acted.

(The word *indicate* that was just used in connection with charades has negative connotations in the technical vocabulary of the American "method." Practitioners of the method cannot accept an element of acting that exists in relative isolation and is not totally integrated by being "justified" and related to other elements. In other styles, however, isolated acting elements are perfectly acceptable and are used, among other things, to focus attention.)

Acting becomes complex as more and more elements are incorporated into the pretense. Let us say that the performer putting on a jacket is part of a scene: he may choose to act emotion (fear, let us say), physical characteristics (the person portrayed is old), place (there is a bright sun), and many other elements. Each of these could be performed in isolation, but when they are presented simultaneously or in close proximity to each other, the acting becomes complex. In a like manner it is obvious that when speech is added to mime, the resultant acting is more complex than the mime alone; the acting involved in a staged reading will, in all likelihood, be less complex than the acting in a fully staged production of the same script, and so forth.

In part, complexity is related to skill and technical ability. Some styles make use of a highly specialized vocabulary that is quite complex. This does not contradict our earlier statement that the acting/not-acting continuum is independent of value judgments. It is not a question of whether a performer can do certain

complex acting well but whether he can do it at all. Anyone can act; not everyone can act in a complex way.

Yet the analysis of acting according to simple/complex does not necessarily distinguish one style from another, although it could be used to compare styles of acting. Each style has a certain range when measured on a simple/complex scale, and in almost all performances the degree of complexity varies somewhat from moment to moment. It would be impossible to say, for example, that the realistic style of acting is necessarily more complex than the "Grotowski style" of expressionism. Realism, in its most complete and detailed form, would certainly be considered relatively complex. Yet there are many approaches to realism; some—such as those used in many films—ask very little of the actor and would be considered relatively simple. The film actor may do very little, while the camera and the physical/informational context do the "acting" for him. A nonrealistic style, however, such as that developed by Grotowski can also be extremely complex. When I saw *The Constant Prince*, I felt that I had never seen performers act so *much*: the impression was not one of overacting but of many things taking place simultaneously in the work of a single actor. During the Prince's long monologues the other performers did not decrease the complexity of their acting; their bodies were frequently involved in numerous, detailed, small-scale movements. In part, at least, this complexity may be explained by Grotowski's exercises, which are designed to develop the ability of the actor to express different, and even contradictory, things with different parts of his body at the same time. However, other companies that use what may be recognized as Grotowski style act very simply.

Thus, we have arrived at a scale that measures the amount or degree of representation, simulation, impersonation, and so forth in performance behavior. Although the polar states are acting and not-acting, we can discern a continuous increase in the degree of representation from nonmatrixed performing through nonmatrixed representation, received acting, and simple acting to complex acting.

Belief may exist in either the spectator or the performer, but it does not affect objective classification according to our acting/not-

acting scale. Whether an actor feels what he is doing to be “real” or a spectator really “believes” what he sees does not change the classification of the performance; it merely suggests another area or parameter.

Various types and styles of acting are, indeed, seen as more or less realistic, but, except as an indication of style, the word *reality* has little usefulness when applied to acting. From one point of view all acting is, by definition, “unreal” because pretense, impersonation, and so forth are involved. From another point of view all acting is real. Philosophically, a No play is as real (if not as realistic) as a Chekhov production. Pretense and impersonation, even in those rare cases when they are not recognized as such, are as real as anything else.

Most plays, of course, even the most naturalistic ones, do not attempt to fool the observer into thinking that they are real—that they do not involve acting. Illusionary stagecraft and realistic acting do not intend or expect to be taken for real life any more than an illusionistic painting is intended to be mistaken for what it represents. In almost all performances we see the “real” person and also what he is representing or pretending. The actor is visible within the character.

To say that no performance *can* deceive a spectator would not be true, however. True and complete illusion is possible in the theatre; acting may actually “lie,” be believed, and be seen as not being acting at all. This happened in Norman Taffel’s *Little Trips*. *Little Trips* began with an enactment by two performers of the story of Cassandra, who was captured by the Greeks when Troy fell. After acting out several incidents—the entry of the Trojan Horse, the rape of Cassandra, and so on—the spectators, who were standing around the performing area, were asked to join the actors, if they wished, and to play the same incidents, which would be repeated. At some point in the first or second repetition, while some spectators watched and others participated, the play began to break down. Perhaps one of the spectators protested that they should not—for this was one of the carefully selected images—be spitting in “Cassandra’s” mouth. Perhaps the performers began to argue, and the spectators took sides. At each performance there was an argument; the play, as it had been described to the spectators in a preliminary introduction, never ended. This is the way the

presentation had been planned, however. By talking to and exploiting the feelings of the participating spectators, with whom they were able to talk more or less informally, the actors were often able to make them, unknowingly, part of the planned "breakdown" of the performance. The entire performance was designed to move from the context of "art" to that of "life." Many people actually believed it; indeed, some never discovered that what they thought was a real argument that "destroyed" the performance had actually been acted.

(During *Little Trips* the two performers changed from a rather simple form of acting that could be more or less copied by participating members of the audience to a conversational style, the realism of which was, perhaps, heightened by the contrast. In terms of our previous discussion of acting, however, it is important to note that the effect of reality did not depend entirely on the acting. It is not only the behavior of the performers but the total performance experience that determines the spectator's response. What creates an illusion in one context will not necessarily do so in another, and in other frames of reference the same acting would have remained acting.)

There is another type of performance in which the spectator does not recognize the acting for what it really is. I remember meeting an Argentine architect who told of her experiences at an all-night religious ceremony of some sort on the northern coast of Brazil. At one point costumed performers appeared who were thought to be dead ancestors. This caused panic among the believers because the doors were locked, and they thought if these ghost beings touched them they, too, would die. Although belief of this kind obviously affects the quality of the experience, it does not mean that pretense, impersonation, and so forth were not involved in the performance. The appearance of the "dead" ancestors was acted.

Even if the performers believed themselves to be dead, acting would have been involved. Belief would not change the objective fact that something or someone was being represented. This is not to say that belief cannot be an important aspect of acting in certain styles. A principle of the method that achieved the stature of a cliché was the attempt by the actor to *really believe* what the character was doing. If he was successful, the audience would really be-

lieve, too. There is no question that this approach has frequently been successful. The *attempt* to believe undoubtedly attains or approaches with some certainty and predictability the goals that are sought, and it well may be the best approach to these particular problems. At the same time it is just as clear that belief is not an acceptable criterion for an actor. Many times the actor, when faced with a certain lack of belief by his audience, protests that he *really believed*. The important point, however, is that when belief is present or is attained by a performer, acting itself does not disappear. The acting/not-acting scale measures pretense, impersonation, feigning, and so forth; it is independent of either the spectator's or the performer's belief.

During the last ten or twelve years theatre in the United States has undergone a more complete and radical change than in any other equivalent period in its history. At least this is true of the theatre considered as an art rather than as a craft, business, or entertainment. Since, in the past, almost all of American theatre has been craft, business, or entertainment, this may not be a very startling fact, but the changes have been striking and extensive. Every aspect of performance has been affected, including acting. As recently as the fall and winter of 1964 *The Drama Review* could devote two complete issues to Stanislavsky; now the method no longer has the absolute dominance it once did in this country, and certain alternative approaches are attracting great interest. Everyone now seems to realize that acting does not mean just one thing—the attempt to imitate life in a realistic and detailed fashion.

Thus eclecticism or diversity in the approaches to acting is one aspect of the recent change in American theatre. In terms of our theoretical acting/not-acting continuum, however, we can be more specific: There has, within the last ten years, been a shift toward the not-acting end of the scale. This means not only that more non-matrixed performing has been used but that, in a number of ways, acting has grown less complex. A brief review of recent developments will allow us to examine how this has come about while also providing additional examples of the various areas on the acting/not-acting scale.

The most important single factor in the recent changes in per-

formance has been the so-called Happening. Happenings, of course, are now a part of history. The term is best used in a completely historical and sociological way to refer to those works created as part of the international Happenings movement of the early and mid-1960s. (The first piece called a Happening was done in 1959, but other generically similar works preceded it, and the term is important only as a reference and as a popular catchphrase.) The necessary thing to notice, however, is that works that, on completely formal grounds, can be called Happenings continue to be done and that almost all of the many innovations produced by Happenings have been applied to narrative, informational, acted theatre. Although I have no wish to perpetuate the name, those who think that Happenings were unimportant, or that the theatre form characterized by Happenings is no longer alive merely because the word is no longer used, are literary and do not understand the nature of the form. At any rate, the Happening can help to explain much about current developments in acting.

Under the direct influence of Happenings every aspect of theatre in this country has changed: scripts have lost their importance and performances are created collectively; the physical relationship of audience and performance has been altered in many different ways and has been made an inherent part of the piece; audience participation has been investigated; "found" spaces rather than theatres have been used for performance and several different places employed sequentially for the same performance; there has been an increased emphasis on movement and on visual imagery (not to mention a soon-commercialized use of nudity), and so forth. It would be difficult to find any avant-garde performance in this country that did not show the influence of Happenings in one way or another. But Happenings made little use of acting. How, then, could they have anything to do with the recent changes in acting? One way to see this is to examine the historical relationship between Happenings and the more prominent United States theatre groups. The history is not very old, but things are forgotten very quickly.

The last play that the Living Theatre produced before going into their period of self-imposed exile in Europe was *The Brig*. It was a realistic play with supposed documentary aspects, and it emphasized the "fourth wall": a high wire-mesh fence closed off the

proscenium opening, separating the spectators and the performers. When the Living Theatre opened their next production in Paris in October 1964, their style and form, if not the sociopolitical nature of their content, had changed completely. *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces* was a Happening. (They would later do another piece, *Paradise Now*, that could also have been called a Happening.)

Of course, *Mysteries* was not called a Happening by the Living Theatre, and few, especially in Europe, recognized it as such. (Claes Oldenburg, who was the first one I knew to see it, identified it, but this might have been expected. He had seen quite a few Happenings.) At any rate the performance was without plot, story, or narrative. It was divided into sequential scenes or compartments: one emphasized movement, another sound, another the smell of incense, and so forth. Some even involved acting. The performance was apparently put together on rather short notice and was the work of the group rather than any one writer. (Almost all of the major Happenings were the product of one artist's imagination, but Happenings often were created by a group, each of whom contributed his specialty—music, design, poetry, and so forth—and, among other things, the form gained the reputation of being a group creation, thus inspiring those who were dissatisfied with working from an author's previously written script.) Certain images in *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces* came from *The Brig*, but much of it was taken from outside the group and was identical or similar to various "event" and Happening images.

In one of the later sections of *Mysteries* all of the members of the cast died. That is, they pretended to die. Death can be symbolized, but they chose to act it. No acting of this sort was taking place in the Happenings; the Living Theatre chose to use elements of acting within the Happening structure. But the acting did not involve character, place, or situation—other than, perhaps, the conditions of the Artaudian plague that was the cause of death. The actors were only themselves "dying" in the aisles and on the stage of the theatre.

This simplification of acting is typical of much of the work in the new theatre. Indeed, the movement toward the nonmatrixed or reality end of our acting/not-acting continuum made some wonder when death itself would become real rather than "merely" acted in performance. In Happening-like presentations Ralph Ortiz—and

others before him—had decapitated live chickens. Peter Brook included the burning of a butterfly in *US*. (Live butterflies were seen flying out of a box, but there is some doubt whether the burned butterfly was indeed real. Cutting the head off a chicken makes death obvious; a butterfly can be “faked.” “We cannot tell,” reads the script of *US*, “if it is real or false.”)

One of the scenes in *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces* was a sound-and-movement exercise taken from the Open Theatre. Two lines of performers face each other. A performer from one line moves toward the other line, making a particular sound-and-movement combination. A person from the second line “takes” the movement and sound, changing them before passing them on to someone in the first line, and so forth. Like the mirror exercise that was discussed earlier, this use of an acting exercise as an actual performance is one way to simplify acting by concentrating on one or a limited number of elements. Exercises, often more integrated into the action than was this example, are frequently used in the new theatre for their performance qualities and expressiveness rather than for their training values.

I believe that it was this same exercise that opened the first public performances of the Open Theatre. These presentations, which began in December 1963 and continued into 1965, combined various exercises and short plays on the same bill. It would be foolish to claim a kinship with *Happenings* for these “variety” programs, but one wonders whether the similarity between the exercises and certain “game” and task-oriented work by, among others, the Judson Dance Theatre did not suggest the possibility of presenting the exercises, which were designed to be done privately, to the public.

Yet another company that showed exercises and made them part of a longer piece is The Performance Group. In their first public presentation, on a 1968 benefit program with other groups, they performed an “Opening Ceremony” composed of exercises adapted from Jerzy Grotowski with certain vocal additions. This “Ceremony”—dropped, as I recall, after Grotowski saw the production—was in *Dionysus in 69* when it opened. Grotowski himself would never show exercises as performance. This merely emphasizes the complexity of his work and the difference between it and even the people in this country who were most influenced by it.

The effect of Happenings on Richard Schechner's work predated The Performance Group, however. The New Orleans Group, which he organized in late 1965, produced a large and spectacular Happening in 1966 and then adapted the various technical means and the audience/performance relationship of the Happening to an "environmental" production of Ionesco's *Victims of Duty* in 1967. The use of real names, personal anecdotal material, and so forth in *Dionysus in 69* can be seen as an attempt to move away from complex acting toward the nonmatrixed performing of Happenings.

Happenings somehow gained the reputation for exhibitionism; some certainly had camp aspects. It was probably their use of the untrained performer—the "found" person/actor, so to speak—that had the most influence on the Theatre of the Ridiculous. John Vaccaro, who performed in at least one of Robert Whitman's Happenings, has explained how important the experience was to him. The unabashedly homemade quality of many Happenings was also an inspiration to many people who did not have an inclination toward slickness, craft, and technique.

I do not mean to suggest that the general movement toward the simplification of acting is entirely owing to the direct influence of Happenings. There have been many factors, all interdependent to some extent: Viola Spolin's improvisations; Grotowski's emphasis on confrontation, disarming, and the *via negativa*; an interest in developing ensembles; and the early desire of the Open Theatre to find techniques that were applicable to the Theatre of the Absurd. (In regard to the last it should be noted that, with *Terminal*, the Open Theatre moved into a form quite similar to some Happenings in both structure and use of imagery.)

Yet influence can also be indirect. Happenings have contributed their share to the creation of a state of mind that values the concrete as opposed to the pretended or simulated and that does not require plots or stories. The most original playwright of recent years, Peter Handke, has worked in this area. Although his plays are quite different from most of the new theatre in this country, many of them illustrate the same concern with the simplification of acting.

*Offending the Audience* and *Self-Accusation* by Handke are

rather unusual plays, if they can be called plays at all. Handke refers to them as “speak-ins” (*Sprechstücke*). They do not employ any matrices of place or character. They take place on plain, bare stages; the actors do not relate to or refer to imaginary locales. The performers are themselves; they are not dressed in any unusual way, neither do they portray characters. In fact, Handke has written dialogue for performers who do not necessarily have to act. The scripts require no pretense or emotion.

The performers speak. They have memorized what Handke has written and they have rehearsed. But this does not, in itself, make a person an actor. People recite poems and speeches without acting. Musicians rehearse, are concerned with timing, and respond to cues. None of these factors defines acting.

What the performers say are, almost entirely, direct statements that would be true no matter who was speaking them. In *Offending the Audience* they speak about the performance situation: “You are sitting in rows . . . You are looking at us when we speak to you . . . This is no mirage . . . The possibilities of the theatre are not exploited here.” In *Self-Accusation* the two “speakers,” as Handke calls them rather than “actors,” talk about themselves: “I came into the world . . . I saw . . . I said my name.” There is no need to act in order to perform this material.

If *Self-Accusation* were played by a blind “speaker,” however, the statement “I saw” would be untrue. Or, to take a somewhat less facetious example from the later passages that are no longer so universally applicable, certain people could not say, as if they believed it, the line “I came into the world afflicted with original sin” without feigning. But even a blind person could use the word *saw* metaphorically, and Handke does not suggest that each of the lines has to be given as if the speaker believed it. There are interpretations that would avoid any kind of acting during the performance.

However, these observations are based only on the script, and there is no script, including Handke’s speak-ins, that can *prevent* acting. Let us say that a performer creates an emotion. In *Offending the Audience*, for example, he pretends to be angry at the spectators when, actually, he is glad that they are there. An element of acting has been added to the performance. The presentation would then be using what we have called simple acting. Under a certain

director each of the actors might even create a well-rounded characterization; the acting could become complex. Knowing the eagerness of actors to act, I doubt whether there has ever been a production of these scripts that did, in fact, avoid the use of acting.

Handke's *My Foot, My Tutor*, makes use of simple acting by reducing the performers' means: the two characters do not talk, they wear neutral half-masks and, for the most part, they perform ordinary movements (that sometimes seem extraordinary because they contradict expectancies and do not "fit" the context). The play does involve characters—a Warden and a Ward—but much of the action provokes the question "What is acted, and what is real?" There is a cat in the play. A cat cannot be trained and does not act: In the performance "The cat does what it does." Timing depends on the will of the actor, but the length of one scene depends on the length of time it actually takes water to boil in a teakettle. The Ward eats an apple just as he would if he were not acting: "as if no one were watching." Yet he fails, for no reason, to slice a beet with a large and powerful beet-cutting machine: obviously he is only pretending.

These scripts by Peter Handke show, among other things, that the playwright, too, may use an awareness of the acting/not-acting continuum. Although his control (exerted only through the written word) over the complexity of the acting is limited, he may still deal with the nature and degree of acting itself as an element in the script. And Handke's early work is another illustration of a general but not universal shift among contemporary theatre artists toward simple acting and the not-acting end of the scale.

It must be emphasized that the acting/not-acting scale is not intended to establish or suggest values of any kind. Objectively, all points on the scale are equally good. It is only personal taste that prefers complex acting to simple acting or nonmatrixed performing to acting. The various degrees of representation and personification are "colors," so to speak, in the spectrum of human performance; the artist may use whichever colors he prefers.

In spite of Handke's example one importance of attempting a formulation such as the acting/not-acting scale lies in the fact that it is a practical theatre tool as opposed to a literary one. The qualities and characteristics of acting can be determined only in per-

formance. We have a great heritage in the analysis of dramatic literature, but it is vitally necessary to develop techniques and methods for the analysis of performance.

Such analysis need not be purely philosophical and academic. Just as literary analysis contributed much to playwriting, performance analysis should contribute directly to all of the arts of the stage. It should be relevant, pragmatic, eminently useful, and stimulating.

CEE S. BROWN

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## Performance Art: A New Form of Theatre, Not a New Concept in Art

*Three major elements serve to link performance art to theatre. According to Cee Brown these are a performer, an audience, and a message to be conveyed by the performer to the audience. However, there are, of course, several important differences between performance art and theatre, and in this essay, written in 1979, the author outlines the similarities and differences and explains their direct effect on performance art itself.*

*Cee S. Brown is the director of Holly Solomon Editions, New York. As an assistant to the Department of Education at The Museum of Modern Art, he established the Performance Artists' Archive (see p. 124).*

Why is it that so many people are voicing the opinion that performance art is going nowhere fast? Can it be that there are people searching for qualitative rather than quantitative art mediums? Is it possible that there are still those seeking palatable and easily digested art? Can the fact that most often performance art does not reap many commercial benefits for those involved be detrimental to the art form? Practically speaking, is it conceivable that there are those who would attend more performances if they were not held so far downtown or out of the way? What about someone who wants to learn more about performance art: where can he go for reference? Currently there is a great deal of performance activity going on: some of it is bad, some is good, very little is great. However, I think a clear definition of the role that performance art plays in society is needed, and that definition will probably assist us in answering the above questions.



27. Arleen Schloss: *It's A to X Y Z*. 1978. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. (Photograph: Chris von Hohenburg)

As much as I should like to define and defend the art form as a new and unique medium, I cannot. Performance art is a new form of theatre, but it is certainly not a totally new concept in art. The format of performance is like that of theatre and/or dance: there is a performer, an audience, and a message to be conveyed by the performer to the audience. Some artists insist that what they do in their performances is more like painting than theatre or dance. These artists may indeed be painting very visual images with their bodies and movements and words, but the choice of presentation has made the art a form of theatre. When I entered Sonnabend Gallery to see Joan Jonas's *Upside Down and Backwards* (1979), I was asked to sit in front of an obviously staged area, and I immediately slid into the role of "audience." In Joan's beautiful and clever piece, dance, drawing, music, narrative, and painting comprised the audience's experience; however, her presentation was a form of

theatre. Arleen Schloss works with letters and music and words. She uses video monitors and live action to present her message to the audience. Her performances are generally fast-moving, very witty, and employ the alphabet and alphabetical recitation of lists of words relating to where she is or what she is doing. When she did *It's A at MoMA* at The Museum of Modern Art as part of a performance series in October 1978, she rattled off, with rather alarming speed, hundreds of words keyed into the museum, its collection, and artists. Although Arleen's work may not be the first thing that comes into someone's mind if *theatre* is mentioned, indeed what she does is theatrical both in content and in presentation.

Much conventional theatre has several components that performance does not. Theatre is often structured as follows:

A playwright produces a script.

A producer decides to back it and finds a director and a theatre company to do it.

Casting takes place, and actors are assigned roles.

The director stages the entire play, sometimes in collaboration with the playwright.

The finished product is presented to audiences on a repeated basis.

Most often in performance art, this is not the case. Instead:

A performance artist comes up with his/her piece.

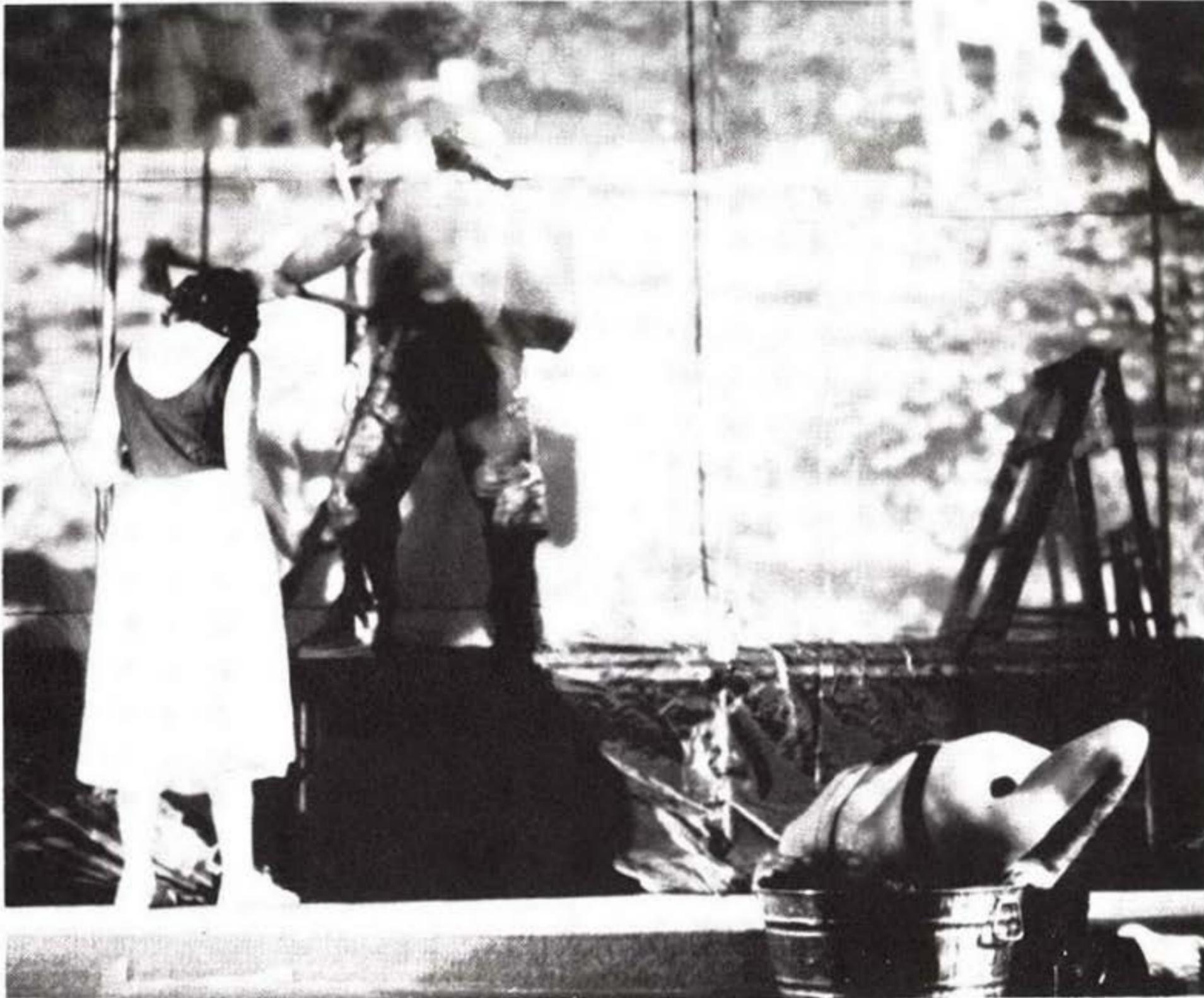
The piece is staged in the artist's mind.

Sometimes other people are asked to participate, if necessary.

The artist searches for a gallery or alternative space that is willing to provide the space for the performance.

The piece is done once, perhaps several times.

In a conversation with Barbara Smith, a California performance artist, the difference between theatre and performance art became more apparent to me. Many artists perform in theatrelike contexts, but it was pointed out that each time an artist does a piece, it can be new, different, and open to spontaneous change and growth. Lines are not necessarily committed to memory, neither are there many stage directions, and unlike most conventional theatre, each time a piece is done it can be new for the artist as well as for the



28. Michael Meyers: *Buzz Aldrin, Man on the Moon*. 1979. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. With such elaborate staging and numerous cast members, coupled with the small admission fees charged for most performances, can he consider himself lucky to break even? (Photograph courtesy the artist)

viewers. This should not preclude our seeing that the distinction between conventional theatre and this new form of theatre, performance art, is sometimes very slight. The work of Mabou Mines is considered by most critics and her peers to be performance, but it is so close to being conventional theatre that the difference is negligible. Spalding Gray is another artist in this category, as are Michael Meyers and Guy de Cointet. Their works are so close to theatre that one could, I suppose, call them that. Yet there is something in their works that is *avant-garde* (if that word still has meaning), that distinguishes them from, for example, the works of Beckett or Ionesco.

I feel that those who make a hard-edge and sure distinction between theatre and performance only give a "preciousness" to performance art that it does not deserve or need. It would be ideal to be able to draw from the rich history of theatre and to skip over the unstable and difficult formative years of becoming established as a legitimate art form. Because performance is a new form of theatre, it need not struggle with these growing pains and fight for acceptance as, for example, video art does. Video, an almost completely new medium, has many obstacles to overcome; however, performance art, because it has so much in common with traditional theatre, can avoid most of these. Performance needs only popular acceptance as a form of theatre to begin to be thought of, looked at, and written about as such.

In the past two years [1977–1979] the amount of performance work being done has more than doubled. Surprisingly, despite the increasing number of active performance artists and the improved quality of their material, there has not been much growth in critical writing about performance art. Much of the writing being done is merely descriptive and tends to use the vernacular of the traditional art forms of painting and sculpture, shying away from the exploratory and the critical. A new vocabulary should be assimilated by artists and critics, galleries and museums. With the advantage of a species-specific language, perhaps writing about performance could more closely approach criticism and analysis rather than description.

Unfortunately, there seems to be a trend toward categorizing the various areas of performance art. Critics writing about performances often discuss the pieces only in terms of theatre or

dance. This establishes a format wherein the work is not absorbed and regarded with a critical eye as “performance,” but rather is compared to and evaluated by conventional theatre or dance standards. Although performance is, in my opinion, a form of theatre, it requires some independence and it should not be compared to theatre or dance in the conventional mode. One critic recently wrote of a performance piece: “The performance was picturesque and well staged, but if one is going to do theater, why doesn’t one do *good* theater?” It seems that a distinction between theatre and theatrelike performance was not clear to that critic.

There are relatively few galleries and alternative spaces in New York and other major American cities that support performance activity. These are usually small spaces, often situated in out-of-the-way locations. Invariably, these institutions are state and/or federally subsidized, understaffed, and overworked. I conjecture that performance artists would have more exposure and more far-reaching effects if they were to do their work in less remote spaces where there is a potential for larger audiences. To do this, however, requires finding larger and more commercially oriented galleries that are interested in performance. If artists could work in spaces where getting there is not like trekking into the wild unknown, perhaps audiences would be larger and not composed only of friends and peers of the artists but interested observers and supporters as well.

Financially, performance events do not realize much profit for either the sponsors of the program or the artists. Often artists need to rent expensive sound, video, and film equipment for their pieces for one evening or other short time periods. Even if galleries or alternative spaces charge admission to performances, the expenses usually surpass the income. I am told that if an artist breaks even, he considers himself lucky.

Obviously, one cannot buy a performance. In this it is very much like theatre. But when one compares the admission prices of Broadway or off-Broadway shows to performance admissions (if there are any), the difference is sorely evident: fifteen dollars to twenty-five dollars and one dollar to three dollars.

At this time there are not many sources of reference for performance art. RoseLee Goldberg’s book *Performance: Live Art from*

*1909 to the Present* (1979) is a good historical document of performance as a subcurrent of the varied art movements since the beginning of the century. There are a few critics who are not too timid to mention, at least periodically, performance in their articles. However, there are relatively few reliable informational sources about performance art that are accessible to the general public. Certainly there are publications that are well known to the cognoscenti of many art circles, including *Art Com*, *High Performance*, *Performance Art*, and *Alive*. I hope that the Performance Artists' Archive that I began over two years ago under the aegis of The Museum of Modern Art can help fill in the large gaps between artist and audience by making artists' statements about their works accessible to the public; providing visual documentation of artists' performances; and establishing personal contact with the artists if people should wish to discuss the works with the artists. In the near future I should like to think that artists might consider video-taping performances before or after an actual performance—not a documentation video tape, but rather a video-taped performance. These tapes could then be presented in a "video jukebox" format, allowing the audience to select for individual viewing a variety of tapes of performances made by the performance artists. Then those who could not attend certain performances could still get a good feeling for the pieces, and this enlarged exposure of the artists' works would be good for the artists as well as for the public. I think the old adage "The best customer is an educated consumer" is certainly applicable.

# FRANÇOIS PLUCHART

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## Risk as the Practice of Thought

*Performance and body art works by diverse American and European artists, including Helmut Schober, Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, Dennis Oppenheim, Gina Pane, and Hermann Nitsch, seem to involve elements of risk, either in practice or in theory. Whether such works are actually physically risky or dangerous is not the point, rather it is risk as a theoretical presence that is examined in this essay by François Pluchart. How does the use of risk define itself? What is the relation of risk to the creative act? How has the meaning of body art been determined by the presence of risk? When is risk symbolic?*

*These are but a few of the questions dealt with by Pluchart, a well-known French art critic who has written extensively on modern art and modern art theory.*

The staging of risk, of suffering, and of death cannot be dissociated from the history of Western art. It even constitutes a sort of archetype, inasmuch as any creation tends to be a metaphysics or, at least, a transcendence of the hard existential reality. However, beginning with the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century, let us say since Courbet, the artist tends to become more and more deeply committed to social struggle and to gamble his safety against his ideas. The movement precipitates during the twentieth century, first with the nonaligned ones from Stalinist orthodoxy, then in relationship to revolutionary or dictatorial situations. This experience of risk, though, is just the most outward aspect—and certainly not its best—of the artist's responsibility, of the danger of being an artist (to play a role in the course of thought). The more or less deeply acquired experience of folly and of disorder of the senses (Rimbaud, Van Gogh, Artaud, for example), which touches

certain mythical temptations, clearly underlines the price an artist must often pay in order to steal an assent and to bend enslaving ideologies.

Generally, risk remains theoretical, a kind of by-product of the masochism inherent in every creative act, and actually one had to wait for the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s to see the artists endanger their bodies and inflict on themselves a violent physical suffering in order to produce thought.

Except for a few Dadaist provocations, particularly those of Johannes Baaden and Arthur Cravan, the first artists who exposed their bodies to public filth and aggressiveness are four Viennese—Hermann Nitsch, Otto Muehl, Günter Brus, and Rudolf Schwarzkogler: Muehl, with his political actions, Nitsch with ritual ones, Schwarzkogler with sexual disalienation, and, even more so, Brus, with actions that involve defecation and the swallowing of urine. Bodily risk is present as well in some of Joseph Beuys's actions having a desecrating nature. In all these cases the aim is to denounce determinisms, taboos, obstacles to freedom and to the individual's expression, whether it belongs to social, or family, or other structures. The artistic use of risk quickly defined itself through the first important statements of body art, particularly those by Oppenheim, Acconci, Journiac, Gina Pane, and Chris Burden.

Beginning in 1970, Dennis Oppenheim, in a work called *Parallel Stress*, put his body in danger by hanging in the void from a collapsed concrete casting between the Brooklyn Bridge and Manhattan. And again in 1971, with *Rocked Circle-Fear*, and *Reading Position for Second-Degree Burn*. In the first of the two Oppenheim was standing still inside a 5-foot-diameter circle. A person above him was throwing stones inside the circle while a movie camera was recording his facial expressions. This action had to be interrupted before the artist expected.

In the second, which lasted five hours, Oppenheim in a sense painted his body red by means of sunburn, with the exception of his chest, which was protected by an open book. Although Oppenheim soon dropped dangerous actions, pain often plays a role in his work: in *Arm and Wire* (1969), in which he ran his arm over an electric wire and used a string to mark the trace left on his skin; and in *In-*

*terchange Material* (1970), in which he ripped off a fingernail and stuck a wood splinter into his finger.

The second American artist who used pain as a creative element is Vito Acconci, a poet who, beginning in 1969, progressively abandoned the space of the written page for a place in which the body was assigned the task of going beyond the poetic function. Acconci's body actions at first tried to define the artist's body as a place where he could intervene and create an event by measuring at the same time different types of feelings, such as a pain caused by a burn or a bite, the variations of the biological rhythm during an intellectual or physical effort, his resistance to physical or psychic fatigue, and so forth (see *See Through*, 1969; *Rubbing Piece*, *Trademarks*, *Hand & Mouth*, 1970). This period was somehow that of his language formation. In a second moment, he started to modify his own body, as in *Conversions*, an action of which he gave two versions with a one-year interval (1970 and 1971) and in which he experienced the possibility of going from the masculine to the feminine, by burning the hair on his chest, by pulling his nipples in the attempt to achieve a feminine appearance, by hiding his penis between his thighs and training his body to perform, in this new position, a great number of familiar actions, such as walking, dancing, jumping, sitting down, and finally making his penis disappear into the mouth of a young woman kneeling behind him. This work marks an evolution toward the projection of the individual body on another and above all the awareness of the transformation of that individual body through its insertion into society. Starting from this moment and in opposition to what happened in his earlier actions, he tends to elude the spectator's eye by imposing his presence only through his voice, his body's movements, the inner throb of his biology. As in *Trapping* (1971), in which he converses with his penis covered with a white cloth; in *Seedbed* of the same year, in which he masturbates until exhaustion while the audience is walking above him; as in *Anchors* (1972), in which he dreams he has a sister.

For Acconci, whose main preoccupation is the body's physical space, the body action tends to modify the individual physically and psychically, as well as to transform it thanks to the practice of a mental tension. The action ends at the ultimate stage of exhaustion,

at the approach of death, which, if it actually came, would be for the artist a kind of setback, a final change that would brutally interrupt a process of potential change, of physical endurance, and of self-surmounting. Like many artists of this tendency, Acconci subsequently moved toward more plastic actions, in which he has reintroduced language.

The third American in the most exasperated art trend is Chris Burden. Beyond the violence of their themes, many of his actions constitute a physical provocation as well, in particular *Five-Day Locker Piece* (April 26–30, 1971), a work for which the artist was closed in a locker for five days; *Shoot* of the same year, in which a sharpshooter at a distance of five steps hit him in the arm with a 22-caliber rifle bullet; *Deadman* (1972), in which he placed himself under a tarpaulin at 8:00 P.M., on La Cienega Boulevard in Los Angeles, near a car marked by two danger fire signals of fifteen-minutes' duration. *Through the Night Softly* (1973), in which, his hands behind his back, he crawled on broken glass for fifteen yards. Missed by a sharpshooter, or stopped by the police at the very moment the flares were going out and nothing could have protected him from a real accident, Chris Burden has taken art to the verge of suicide.

In Europe Michel Journiac has played a determining role in the definition of a mode of art expression in which thinking, in its most acute sense, takes risks as far as the individual's very existence is concerned. After he defined, in a book of poems, *Le Sang nu* (1968), and an exhibition, the body in its double aspect of flesh and sex, he took to revealing the implications of his political awareness. Many of his events have subsequently aimed at specifying this scandalous definition of the body, an entity despised, derided, disowned by all political or religious forms of government.

Each Journiac certainty, followed or made explicit by an event, is a trap in which he shuts himself up in order to find his own values for liberation. Starting with social travesty and that sexual coadjutant that is attire, he defined at successive times the existence of the body through the faculties of change, offering, and desire, its physical and biological components, its being available to mutilations, to being destroyed, to feed a gluttonous society. For

Journiac, the body can be approached only through rituals. Some of the rituals he has created or of which he has diverted the meaning have had a great impact on the evolution of contemporary thinking. It is especially the case in *Messe pour un corps* (1969), an event in which he stated his solitude by offering a pudding made with his own blood; *Contrat pour une exécution capitale* (1971), which is an accusation thrown at the obsolete partisans of capital punishment; and *Piège pour un travesti* (1972), which showed the passing from masculine to feminine mediated by clothing. Whether they are at the deepest level of being or more immediately physical (for instance: drawing blood in view of making the human blood pudding, from 1969, or cigarette burns in *Rituel pour un mort* of 1976), pain and risk are present in all Journiac's works, and it is precisely through them that today's art can try to carry out a cathartic action.

After having shown that the body is the most stubborn taboo, that it is manipulated, mutilated by all ideologies, and that body censorship is first of all the denial of the individual, Journiac asserted that the indictment of a castrating and degrading system was of extreme urgency, as well as the only ineluctable duty of the creator, who, at any price, must say no to the restriction of the being. There is no doubt that this attitude permanently puts the artist in a situation of danger: in relation to his own balance, but even more so in relation to his social insertion. By the doors closing on him, Journiac pays for this provocation day after day.

Deeply present in Journiac's work, risk is inherent in Gina Pane's events, since the very first *Projets de silence* (1970), and especially after *Escalade sanglante* (1971), a studio work for which the artist climbed, with bare feet and hands, a ladder-object with cutting edges. This was followed by actions in which danger played an ever more important role: *Sang, lait chaud* (1972), *Transfert* (1973), *Psyché* (1974), and *Le cas n. 2 sur le ring* (1976).

Every body action by Gina Pane aims at emphasizing, to denounce them and to correct them, certain determinisms, according to which each day is identical to the preceding one and which contribute to the throwing of man toward a fate of self-mutilation and destruction. In order to restrain this fall, Gina Pane does not take shelter in the abstraction of great philosophical chimeras, but on

the contrary, she takes life in its most daily aspect, that of the banal fact through which great mutations take place, precisely because its anodyne habitual character conceals all the pernicious and determinant sides it carries. To be able to reach a state of discomfort, Gina Pane disarranges certain familiar mechanisms, like swallowing half a pound of rotten minced meat while watching television news in an intentionally uncomfortable position; alternately wounding herself with a razor blade and playing with a tennis ball; gargling endlessly with milk until blood mixes with the spit liquid; crushing glass with her mouth, or breaking a sheet of glass with her body. The meaning of the body act is channeled by the effects of the perturbing phenomena she creates when doing violence to herself. The wounds, burnings, lacerations of blood vessels, and biological disorder the artist inflicts on herself reveal and generate on the rebound in the spectator's mind a state of discomfort that allows him to apprehend a certain behavior whose cause is at the same time revealed to him. Gina Pane ill-treats herself in order to make one feel that violence is a daily fact, a way of denying both man and life, just as it is proved by torture, war, road accidents, or deportation because of one's beliefs, and so on; on another level, she swallows rotten meat, laps milk like a dog, licks splinters of glass mixed with mint and milk to show the role played by our nutritional and therefore affective impulses. During the whole action Gina Pane does not give the spectator a break. By her suffering, her risking, she disrupts his indifference and hostility, she channels his repulsion, making him aware of what they carry. Here, the body is projected as the conscience of the self. It is pure thought, an intellectual and sensitive analysis. Put in the right condition by several months of theoretical preparation (notes, sketches, reading, and daily practice of existence), as well as by a physical preparation (swallowing rotten minced meat, prolonged standing over lit candles, physical tension), the body, having become a thinking and suffering matter, transforms itself into a coadjutant of thought.

Self-imposed pain by artists like Acconci, Burden, or Pane has produced a strong echo in several Western artists, such as Jan Mlčoch, Petr Štembera, and Marina Abramović/Ulay.

In 1972 Petr Štembera started his first actions in physical endurance: progressively increasing the number of days without eat-

ing, drinking, or sleeping; studying his muscular resistance by contracting his neck and face muscles; or grafting a rose onto his arm, an operation that gave him an infection.

On the other hand Jan Mlčoch's actions are generally of a symbolic character. However, pain and risk are often present in his work: in 1974 he pricked his whole body with a needle so that the sun's rays could penetrate it better; also in 1974 he hung from a steel beam, his wrists and ankles tied with a rope.

Since 1975 Marina Abramović and Ulay have engaged in a series of actions in which pain and risk are largely present, as, for example, in a performance presented in Venice in July 1976. In an empty room two naked bodies clashed frontally, full speed and over and over again. In another action they are back to back attached by their hair.

We could mention many other works, by Barry Le Va or Mike Parr, by Terry Fox, Ben Vautier, or Pinoncelli, which represent danger for the artist, as when Barry Le Va ran over the same straight line for one hour and forty-three minutes, in *Velocity Piece* (1969); when Ben Vautier hit his head against a wall (1970), as well as in several actions in which he exposed himself to the audience's aggressiveness and reactions; just as Beuys did many times since 1963; when Pinoncelli, armed with a water pistol, shot red paint at André Malraux during an official party; when he set fire to his own clothes during a street action, or was thrown into the water in the port of Nice, closed in a bag, tied and ballasted (*Hommage à Monte-Cristo*, 1974); or when, shortly afterward, he attacked a bank, armed with a sawed-off rifle loaded with blanks.

The risk of infection, of poisoning, of a bad wound, of a heart attack, of psychic disorder, or of death, and also the constant provocation of the social structures, which react with rejection, such are some of the main risks run by artists since 1969.

One may question the meaning of such practices and wonder whether the game is worth it. A number of authors, like Georges Bataille in his search for the sacred and Antonin Artaud in his desperate attempt to give back to the theatre its primary cathartic function, show us the way. Depth psychology, psychoanalysis, and especially the work of Paul Schindler give us a better insight. In fact, Schindler, in *The Image of the Body* (1935), wrote "Moral laws

cannot be applied to human beings but through their bodies. So that moral phenomena are also tightly associated with the images of the body. To say that one never suffers alone is not a simple cliché. The laws of identification and of communication between images of the body make one's suffering and pain everybody's affair." Schindler defines his thought by adding:

The fact that the image of the other's body is kept, constructed, elaborated is the sign, the signal, the symbol of the value of personality. Thus, psychology of the image of the body could lead to an ethical and moral system. Pain, joy, destruction, mutilation, death concern all those who approach them, but there is a magic link which unites the closer to the more distant, and which, therefore, extends up to the animal, the plant and inanimate nature.

It is at this level of thought that one must find an answer to so much suffering, violence, risk.

## Helmut Schober

Danger is present in my works just by chance, as, for instance, in *The Glass Piece* (1977) at Documenta 6. Personally, I do not see why the artist should expose himself to danger. As far as I am concerned, art is not a form of self-punishment, at the most it could be considered a warning bell for society. *The Glass Piece* was an act of liberation for me. For the destruction of the sheets of glass within which I was enclosed, I used a metal sphere attached to a wire held by my mouth. By moving my head, I kept hitting the sphere against the two sheets of glass until they shattered. I used the mouth as the privileged zone that is synchronic with thought, intending to say that liberation takes place guided by thought and not only by means of the body.

## COUM Transmission

My interest in putting myself into unpleasant or risk situations is various, as is all my work in COUM. First, I use it as a means of de-conditioning myself psychologically. I believe all bodily and all erotic functions of the human being, both male and female, are



29 and 30. Helmut Schober: *The Glass Piece*. 1977, Documenta 6, Kassel, and 1978, Museum Ludwig, Cologne, West Germany. (Photographs courtesy the artist)



both natural and interesting. I hate shame. Anything I found myself thinking about and that I was not sure I could do in public or private without feelings of embarrassment or self-consciousness, I put into an action to test myself. Doing these things in actions gives me a deadline when I must face up to my obsessions and fears. So also in public I am giving witness to my beliefs. I believe it should be possible to make love in public (not necessary but possible), therefore I make love in public, once I have done this once it holds no interest for me, I have proved I can do it. With pain and danger it is the same. I wonder about something, I therefore do it. I do not believe in voyeurism by myself, so if a thing interests me I believe I have to do that thing in order not to be merely masturbating intellectually. I also like always to have an element of difficulty and the unknown in my actions or I get bored, so I include risks, pain to keep me alert and increase the tension of a piece by the underlying feeling of minimal control shared with spectators.

The other thing that fascinates me is the blurring of the definition between real and manufactured pain and horror created largely by TV and newspapers. We get bodies on the news in some distant war, riots, followed by pretend bodies in a cowboy film, followed by advertisements. They are all presented in the same dimension and are therefore very hard to perceive separately. In actions I initiate tasks of real pain that are overshadowed by theatrical tricks that look *more* real, more bloody. For example, I drink a pint of milk, a pint of blood, a pint of urine that I have passed in front of spectators, my foot rests on a bed of nails that are sinking into my foot, but the spectators have forgotten that because they are focused on the obvious taboo of drinking urine. I will insert unsterilized needles into my veins, this shocks but I leave them there so long that people forget that they are real and causing pain; they see them very quickly as decoration. So I use the real and the trick to provoke a question of response and manipulation of response. I get *no* masochistic pleasure from my risks, but I get the satisfaction of facing up to my fears and relinquishing inherited and to me false taboos and neuroses in a way that offers a system of revelation and education to a percentage of bystanders.

PETER GORSEN

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## The Return of Existentialism in Performance Art

*The history of Abstract Expressionist art has been linked to developments in existentialist philosophy. According to the author of this essay recent performance art represents a return to existentialist values and preoccupations. These include the re-emergence of a degree of general skepticism, a mood of crisis, a tendency to imitate alienated behavior, and a "paradoxical claim to self-experience based on 'we,'" all of which combine to bring "performance philosophy close to the existentialist constructions of Kierkegaard, right down to Jaspers and Sartre."*

*In order to reveal the relationship between performance art and existentialist philosophy, the author cites the performance-type works of several artists including Allan Kaprow, Laurie Anderson, Gina Pane, Hermann Nitsch, and others. The author is a lecturer at the Hochschule der angewandte Kunst in Vienna and is the author of *Das Prinzip obszön, Kunst, Pornographie und Gesellschaft*.*

Looking back on twenty years of performance art, we can now be quite sure that here is no uniformly new style that we have to rack our brains over before assigning it to its right place in the history of modern art. If we leave aside narrow journalistic labels like "Happening," "Aktionismus," "living art," "body art," "performance," and so forth, we find ourselves confronted much more with an existential attitude to perceived reality, the philosophical bare bones of which were already visible in the 1950s through Cage and Kaprow,

whose ritual, once again, is not something in isolation but is to be viewed as steps in a continual process of overstepping the aesthetic mark. The basic idea of this overstepping the mark is the *relating of art to the cohesion of life*, to the preexistence of art in empirical everyday terms, whose historical figure at any given time has produced totally opposite interpretations on the meaning and aims of this relating. The Soviet cultural revolution, whose theory can be reconstructed in the writings of Arvatov, Eisenstein, Mayakovsky, and Tretyakov, gave this relating, as is known, a different political content from the European antiart movement in Dadaism and in Marcel Duchamp. Here, there is neither any intention to put forward some avant-garde academic theory nor is any attempt made to impart doubtful respectability to the performance movement through forerunners in the history of art. Rather is it a necessarily brief sketch of a change in attitude, of a shift in artistic perception and interest. It is for others to think of justifying performance as art. The art market and the performance artists who make themselves dependent on it make every effort to convert the progressive assessment of the performance movement as something of intrinsic value into marketable "art" forms or substitutes for the same.

But the political relating of art to life has failed time and time again: in Soviet Russia, in the Weimar Republic, and more recently in Paris, in May 1968, when, for example, Jean Jacques Lebel put his aesthetic equipment at the disposal of those fighting their daily battles at the barricades. As is known, many intellectuals at that time celebrated the translation of that scandalous protest into political action, defending the "lost" autonomy of living art as a new hope for self-organization to meet human needs—Lefebvre and Marcuse had given the protest publicity. Now, toward the end of the 1970s, there seems to be nothing left of that hope. This can be seen in the broken, *agnostic* expression of today's living art, which has been robbed of its political basis, and therefore in many ways looks like a new edition of the existentialist and existentially philosophical reduction to experience of oneself, of a way of thought going back to the 1930s.

There is something striking about the unsymbolic reflection on one's own corporeality and its nonverbal language, on the aesthetics of an unseemingly unconditional "naked existence" (Sartre),

which shows similarities with the modern "*I am in my body*" tautology, and, in connection with this, the determined stand against declarations that crop up to assert the claims of the scientific approach, of finality, and of exclusiveness. Thus, as early as 1931, Karl Jaspers explained the skepticism of existentialist self-experience vis-à-vis the "typically modern sciences," stating that the latter "with their absolutist attitude presume fully to recognize the being of man, and to condemn it as a hopeless substitute for philosophy."<sup>1</sup>

Marxism, psychoanalysis, and racial theory, above all, were for him, in their universal assertiveness, brutal models of a fully defined humanity about which there was nothing left to be said. Creative "man, however, who is able to be spontaneous, rebels against being regarded as a mere abstract result."<sup>2</sup> For he wishes to understand himself and the possibility of his own realization. This need today, now that the limitations of progress and the domination of nature have become clearer, has grown even stronger and comes to the fore with all the irrational impetus of the disappointment following the failure of the protest movement of the 1960s.

What makes the subjective-thinker type of the performance movement so close to the existentialist attitude here is his critical rejection of man as a "mere result," of his spontaneity being manipulated by economic, scientific, and technological norms. The formal determination of performance art in accordance with the real, open spatial and temporal character of experience as a process and the renunciation of the closed autonomous work-of-art type are above all the expression of the same distrust toward a result-ridden, conclusion-bound systematic type of thought that, in apparently irrefutable scientific form, interprets and programs personal and spontaneous life cohesion and experience.

It is no coincidence that the presence of a return to existentialist attitudes should be so favorable, for, as in the 1930s, skepticism and a mood of crisis, as opposed to reason, rationality, progress, and technical enlightenment as the dominant meaningful factors in the capitalist system, are making themselves noticeable.

This skepticism reacts with a deeply abrasive interest in the

<sup>1</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Die geistige Situation der Zeit* (1931; Berlin, 1971), p. 138.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

phenomena of illness, madness, crises of identity, the psychiatrization of living conditions, alienation, and the removal of all meaning from human communication. The performance movement has adopted this crisis material, this perversion of progress, whole, in order to imitate the civilizatory process in detailed, often dramatic form. This speaks, above all, for its authenticity. We wonder only with what intention it adapts itself so thoroughly to the process of alienation of civilization. And here the greatest caution should be exercised toward the current optimistic conviction of the exhibition makers that performance art would “investigate and liberate those *very* ways of behaving that, *under everyday conditions*, are *disguised by conventions* and only recognizable in rudimentary form, although nevertheless present in man.”<sup>3</sup>

Critical analysis of individual performances reveals, rather, the tendency to imitate the alienated conventional behavior and experiences springing from everyday life with irrational directness. Very often this is a descriptive, mostly overdifferentiated presentation of something found in everyday life, at the same time without there being any question of changing it or acquiring it in an emancipatory manner, or showing it up in an alternative perspective. Looking at them charitably, the “concepts in performance” are, moreover, to be interpreted as synthesization of the presentation or staging of life unlived. Even more often we are concerned with intensification and aestheticization of everyday life experienced as something aggressive and destructive, which are manifested in the body mutilation of so many actions and performances.

It all looks as though in the 1970s and the 1980s we are moving toward a new irrationalism and intuitionism, and as though the presentation ritual of the inner stream of consciousness, of the body-environment relationship experiences, which have already been a subject in the philosophy of life and existence since the turn of the century, are going to occupy a most important place in art. The illustrative function of traditional art will, to an increasing extent, be declared superseded by the empathetic function of living art. The “performer” of living art offers the beholder empathy in an everyday situation that he has himself experienced—in the hope

<sup>3</sup> Joachim Diederichs, “Zum Begriff ‘Performance,’ ” *Documenta 6* 1 (1977), p. 282.

that this self-presentation will bring about communication or interaction.

If many performers (such as Reindeer Werk, Brisley, Gerz, Lebel, Paik, Vostell, Export, Weibel, Abramović-Ulay) emphasize the "social aspect" of their work, this means that they place their trust in communication *with the other person* through the confirmation and experience *of one's own self* in its temporal existence. The performance, which is always "self-performance" up to the limits of presumption, offers the possibility "that people will be reminded of themselves" (Jochen Gerz). The communicative (ego-transcendent) value of the reminder is emphasized by the artists in unison.<sup>4</sup> They see their performances as referring less to the moment than to recollection, as aiming more at the achievement of a "we" than of an "I" identity. This paradoxical claim to self-experience based on "we" brings performance philosophy close to the existentialist constructions of Kierkegaard, right down to Jaspers and Sartre.

The person presenting the performance experiences himself as *pars pro toto* (taking the place) of a whole that has previously been lived existentially, and for which he, as a mimic, a magician—and not as a reconstructing historian—has taken on the job of midwife. He wants to illustrate, on a meta (physical)-linguistic, existential plane, what "we" experience as negative, in what respect "we" suffer, or, more rarely, in what "we" are happy and are able to evade self-alienation in discursive thinking.

How often are there religious, ecstatic, suffering and Christ-attitudes in the performance movement,<sup>5</sup> already found in the Viennese Aktionismus<sup>6</sup> with Brus, Nitsch, and Gina Pane, or, in extreme form, in Chris Burden's "self-punishing events," which depict essential "borderline situations" of man, such as fear and death?<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Georg F. Schwarzbauer, "Performance: 14 Interviews," *Artforum* 24, no. 6 (1977), pp. 55–139.

<sup>5</sup> Jindrich Chalupecky, "Art and Sacrifice: Danger in Art," *Flash Art*, nos. 80–81 (1978), pp. 31–35.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Gorsen, *Das Prinzip obszön, Kunst, Pornographie und Gesellschaft* (Reinbek, 1969); *Sexualästhetik: zur bürgerlichen Rezeption von Obszönität und Pornographie* (Reinbek, 1972).

<sup>7</sup> Dorothy Seiberling, "The Art Martyr," *New York*, no. 24 (1976), pp. 48ff.

The living of life made stageable through performances is certainly not a naturalistic repetition of everyday events but their symbolic interpretation, to which Schober expressly pointed in his works.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, because of the extension of space and time, of the character of an open trial of each performance, it is logical to define the latter as an acted repetition and imitation of a real happening, of a real experience in time. The performance is always the visualization of this awareness of time, whether it is to be classified individually as focused on presentation or media or as referred to a concept or body. These partial definitions, which stem from the reconstruction of the history of performance, always have as the formal essence of their staging the "modified presentation" (Husserl) of temporal extension. The existentially experienced moment, and with it an "emotional motif stemming from one's own biography," which one "would not like to allow to be engulfed," is decisive. Laurie Anderson holds the condensed, essential moment to be the most important. This moment is to the fleeting time of consciousness as a soup cube is to the soup. It gives the everyday person, Anderson, the certainty of being wholly with herself, "in maximum proximity to my life."<sup>9</sup> James Barth lets consciousness appear in three individuals, or solo parts, who speak fragmentary, overlapping lines *and are shown in the sequel together*: that is, under an I-consciousness, as a subtotal.<sup>10</sup> The formal functioning of intentional temporal consciousness cannot be better reproduced than was attempted to do here. With Kaprow, too, the staging of everyday events has the character of a temporal happening, the contents of which are filled up in his "frames of mind" (1976) by ten groups of three persons each.<sup>11</sup>

If, in explanations of artists, so much is said about the rhythm and meter of temporal experience, and the pendulum (as in the case of Schober) is so often used for the sensitization of the temporal experience, if repetitions of short or very short periods of time through echoes and body reflexes (as in the case of Julia

<sup>8</sup> Schwarzbauer, "Performance," p. 65f. Helmut Schober, *Performances 1972-77* (Cologne: Galerie Wintersberger, 1977-1978).

<sup>9</sup> *Documenta 6* 1, p. 286.

<sup>10</sup> James Barth, "Trifid Narrative," *Artforum* 24, no. 6 (1977), p. 781.

<sup>11</sup> *Artforum*, *ibid.*, p. 141f. See "Wolf Vostells Partitur zum Happening Regen," *ibid.*, p. 1521.

Heyward) make it possible firmly to grasp the passing of time, then all these point to the *nonillusory, Dionysiac, temporal being* of performance.

If the early performance movement in the manifestations of Fluxus and Aktionismus is still of interest in its provocative or critical confrontation with depraved civilization, it would seem that today pride of place is occupied by the realization and exhibition of a superindividual temporal experience, and with it the setting up of an intuitive framework within which existential illumination within a group, a community, or a sect can take place. What happens here as the new *aesthetics of existence*, and seeks to suppress the aesthetic illusion, exceeds traditional aesthetic bounds and classifications in terms of dancing, theatre, or films, once again drawing closer to that heterogeneous totality of experience that we know from everyday life. Does this mean that we are about to witness the relating of art to life? Historic memories of Meyerhold's Bio-Mechanical Theatre, Eisenstein's Assembly of Attractions, and Tretyakov's Biography of the Thing can already show us clearly what distinguishes today's agnostic productions by the neoexistentialist performance movement from the revolutionary leveling of the difference between art and life.

WAYNE ENSTICE

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## Performance Art's Coming of Age

*Formalist developments within the art of the 1960s are found to be significant factors in the emergence of performance art in the 1970s, according to the author of the following essay. Wayne Enstice traces the development of 1960s formalist doctrine in Minimalist art and observes that performance art "was an heir to the ablution achieved by formalism."*

*Among those performance artists discussed by Enstice as he traces the development of performance art from its adolescence to the present are Chris Burden, The Theatre of Mistakes of Anthony Howell, and the art of Stuart Brisley, all leading up to "performance art's ability in its mature phase to reinvest the art action with a critical relevance to the experience of the modern world."*

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Modernist doctrine has been performance art's most persuasive influence, but it has not proven to be an entirely mutable resource. Performance artists have had to work through modernist tenets and eventually transform or abrogate them to attain maturity. The modernist aesthetic, generally conceded to have its origin in Manet's acknowledgment of the integral flatness of his canvas, is based on the principle that the survival of an art's identity and its hope for advancement are predicated on its ability to isolate and function within its inherent peculiarities. The most significant expression of modernist language during the 1960s was realized by

painters and sculptors who were collectively referred to under the rubric of *formalism*. Formalism is performance art's filial connection with modernist thought.

Prior to discussing the work of specific performance artists, it is necessary to review the most salient formalist influences and trace the evolution of performance art from its subsidiary position within the formalist sphere to its renewal and concomitant coming of age.

Jasper Johns's paintings of flags, targets, maps, and stenciled numbers, dating from the middle to late 1950s, were a crucial antecedent of formalism. Johns introduced the first significant contemporary espousal of art distinguishing its limits. His paintings' synonymous identification with their real-world counterparts stressed the flatness inherent in painting and challenged the separation between the common object and the art object.

Frank Stella's emblematic abstractions, from the Black paintings of 1959 through the Aluminum and Copper series of 1960 and 1961, extended the application of modernist theory by deducing a painting methodology from the predominant structural reality of the paintings: the constituent acts of making the paintings were dictated by the framing edge. Stella's eschewal of allusion in these paintings declared the alignment between a modernist posture and the "painted object." Stella's avowal of the painted object instigated a rupture with two-dimensional activities and encouraged a group of artists, popularly classified as "Minimalists," to embrace the corporeal.

The works of Tony Smith, Robert Morris, and Don Judd were the consummation of the mutuality of the art object and the common object. They accomplished this by the muting of surface incident and the substitution of primary geometric solids for shape innovation, thereby abbreviating the scope of traditional artistic dexterity and style in sculpture. The vacuity of Minimalist sculpture provoked the viewer to locate the art experience. This process of anxious questioning had two results. First, Minimalism changed the customary subject-object roles for the viewer of an artwork. Traditionally, the artwork exists as object with the subject inside. This allows the viewer to suspend his preoccupation with self and concentrate on the subject of the artwork. However, the immediate and easily retained gestalt of Minimalist sculpture deprived the

viewer of prolonged external stimuli. This incited a reflex action whereby the viewer became a participant as he cogitated on the subject matter provided by his personal state of being. Second, the anxiousness of Minimalism urged the viewer to scrutinize the artist with unusual intensity in an attempt to historicize his intent and process. Art signifying the artist has a long history; it has notable precedents in contemporary art: Jasper Johns made paintings in the 1960s that contained a variety of autobiographical allusions, and Andy Warhol was a progeny of the media. But the unsettling blankness of Minimalism dislodged the artist more completely from behind the craft of making art, to stress his executive presence.

The inevitable dissolution of the venerable objet d'art was accomplished by the Conceptualists. The artist as executor, proposing questions about art's nature, was underlined by the dematerialization of the art object. Thus, as the most rigorous practitioners of the formalist language ratified specific art determinants, the viewer was forced to seek "extra-art" content in other quarters. This achievement yielded an art so thoroughly denuded of aesthetic considerations and so critically dependent on the quality of artistic intent that it created a virtual tabula rasa for art in the late 1960s.

Performance art was an heir to the ablution achieved by formalism. The art object was no longer inviolable, and the artist and his ambition had become the cynosure of artistic energy. Paradoxically, the genesis of art's reinvestment with a life-meaning content was immanent in the astringency of formalism. Liberated from object making, performance artists had the pivotal opportunity to assess their societal function and develop the potential of performance art to approximate reality more closely than traditional disciplines. This should have provided the impetus for performance artists to establish an art that would be stripped of myth and offer an alternative to the framed experience.

Unfortunately, performance art in its adolescence reassembled the object, and the artist as fixed limit became the prevailing mode. Performances too frequently were contrived for the artist to stage an examination of his private physical and psychic composition. The onlooker, allegedly numb to the angst of contemporary reality, became the subject in response to the performance artist's objectification. The viewer was coaxed, through sympathetic identifica-

tion, to perceive the artist's local investigations as a metaphor for a universal life experience.

The realization of this metaphoric expression was crippled, however, because the implications of self-objectification were not definitely understood. Performance artists had to recognize that the conception of the artist as object had built into it the critical capability to discern the artist as nature. The performance artist had to cease perpetuating the language of formalism with its convergence on a framed experience. He had to comprehend that the crucial passage to a more significant form and content in performance art lay in the organic wedding of his art to a social continuum.

Chris Burden, among the most conspicuous performance artists in America, has made approximately sixty works since 1971. A discussion of selected Burden performances is instructive because it illustrates the problematic temper of performance art when it rudimentarily exercises its formalist bias.

*Prelude to 220, or 110* was performed at F-Space in Santa Ana, California, September 10 through 12, 1971. Burden was secured to a concrete floor with copper bands for two hours during each of the three days of the performance. Beside him were two 110-volt lines immersed in buckets of water. The possibility was imminent that a spectator would spill the contents of the buckets and electrocute Burden.

*Through the Night Softly* was performed on Main Street in Los Angeles, September 12, 1973. Burden, naked except for briefs, held his hands behind his back and crawled through fifty feet of broken glass. Most of the spectators were passersby.

*Velvet Water* was performed at The Art Institute of Chicago on May 7, 1974. Burden was concealed from his audience, but it was provided with five video monitors to watch his performance in closeup or wide-angle views. After announcing his intention to "breathe water," Burden repeatedly submerged his face in a sink filled with water until exhaustion from his intake of water forced him to end the performance.

These performances share characteristics that are common in Burden's work. Burden created powerful gestalt figurations under the stress of circumstances, which at their most extreme threatened

him with the very real prospect of bodily injury or death. These inquiries into his physical and psychic energies manifested a noteworthy attempt to endow his art with a humanist attitude, but this intent was rendered impotent by its lack of resolution. The spectator, incapable of aesthetic detachment, was drawn into a ceremony where the moral implications were not clearly articulated. Hypnotized or repulsed by the tense proceedings and denied the release of a distinct and significant purpose, the viewer was unable to transcend the discreteness of the performance. With the meaning of his work eclipsed, Burden was framed in myth. Functioning simultaneously as a human being and as an object, his performances came perilously close to having their reason for being based on the hyperbole of a manufactured hero.

*The Reasons for the Neutron Bomb* and *The Citadel* (both 1978) are more mature works by Chris Burden. *The Reasons for the Neutron Bomb* is composed of 50,000 nickels, each with a match on top, arranged in a grid pattern on the floor. Accompanying the display is a statement by Burden citing the 50,000 tanks deployed by the Soviet Union along the border between Western and Eastern Europe. The Soviet armament is more than double the combined strength of the United States and its Western European allies. According to Burden, this imbalance is the justification offered by our military leaders for the presence of the neutron bomb. *The Citadel* was installed in a room that was painted black and darkened. More than 500 miniature spaceships, hung with black thread, were illuminated by a candle held by Burden. His performance was accompanied by taped sound effects of rockets and simulated space wars.

These works attest to an increased congruity between Burden's sensibility and a more sophisticated grasp of the contemporary artist reconciled with social imperatives. But, their endeavor to address protean, and ultimately abstract, world issues resists a visceral translation and reduces the works to an expression of naïve political rhetoric.

The work of two wellsprings of contemporary English performance art—The Theatre of Mistakes and Stuart Brisley—contributes a more ambitious, advanced, and pragmatic undertaking of the idiom. The Theatre of Mistakes was founded in 1974 by Anthony Howell, a writer and former member of the Royal Ballet. The origi-

nal group “set up a workshop in which every member was both servant and master—anybody could set an exercise instruction, and the others would do it.”<sup>1</sup> It would be irresponsible to deny the heritage of theatre in the work of The Theatre of Mistakes; the influence of Artaud and the No theatre is documented. An accentuation of this lineage is misleading, however, because The Theatre of Mistakes is more decisively a consequence of the formalist evolution. In the introduction to their book, *Elements of Performance Art*, the company made the following statements:

One of the ways the art of painting has been growing is beyond painting. The art of sculpture has been growing beyond sculpture. . . . In growing away from each of the other arts, each art has been growing beyond itself. . . . Each has come across new definitions of itself and has changed by learning how to change. . . . Only the art of what people do, the art of action, has been left out. The art of action may only be supposed through the arts of making such manifestations as objects. . . . How difficult it proves to suppose the action from the trappings—especially now that the art of making objects has grown beyond objects. . . . Everywhere in art we are entertained by exciting possibilities of making. Only there is no art of action. This is one of the concerns of performance art—the reinvention of the art of acting.<sup>2</sup>

*Going* (1977), by The Theatre of Mistakes, is an account of “mannerisms of departure.” It was conceived for five performers clothed in neutral apparel with black shoes; the five acts required approximately sixty minutes to complete. The text and directions of movement are completely scripted. The set includes two chairs flanking a table, one package of cigarettes, a box of matches, and a light suspended in each corner of the performing space. *Going* centers on each performer’s denial of individual characterization in the attempt to duplicate accurately the gestures of the person preceding him. The first person enters and performs a specific exercise connected with the enterprise of leaving. His associates enter in succession and endeavor to repeat each aural and physical gesture, from the most subtle eye and hand movements to the most demon-

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Howell quoted in Nick Wood, “The Theatre of Mistakes,” *Art-scribe*, no. 10 (March 1977), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Howell and Fiona Templeton, *Elements of Performance Art* (The Ting: The Theatre of Mistakes, 1977), pp. 17, 18.



31. The Theatre of Mistakes: *Going*. 1977. (Photograph: Kirk Winslow)

strative urgings and excuses. These formalities recur throughout the performance. Here is an excerpt from the text:

I do think I'd better be going now because I—  
Oh, don't be so silly!  
Really, I must go.  
Ahem.  
I do have to go now.  
Are you sure?  
Why do you have to go?  
If you must, you must.  
'Bye.  
Really.

*Going* is indebted to Minimalism, but it inflects this bias sufficiently to demonstrate the poise of The Theatre of Mistakes. The performance is enacted on an inscribed flatbed plane 4 meters (13 feet) square with a surrounding buffer space for entrances and exits.

The format of "theatre in the square" infiltrates spectator space, and the queuing of the performers in the buffer space before and after each act establishes an intermediary step between the audience and the performance action. These modifications of the proscenium arch relax the work's essential fixity in time and space.

That whole move away from figurative art being little windows into reality, to the field; and the idea of the reality of the painted surface, as one moved near our own times, to painting and work which actually emanates out of the canvas. We've moved that way. We're moving further and further away from looking into little windows.<sup>3</sup>

Integral to the concept of theatre in the square is the locomotion of the audience. Spectators are encouraged to change seats, or even to move around the square throughout the performance to assimilate the interrelationships of the unfolding gestural variations from a number of vantage points. The audience is invited only to look *at* the performers, however. *Going* does not permit penetration of its surfaces. The performers, relieved of characterization and dressed in regulated garb, are objectified. They project the thematic materials of the work from their combined surface for the active receivership of the audience; that is, the weight of dramatic interpretation is borne by each spectator. (This is the reverse of traditional theatre where belief in characterization consumes audience self-consciousness.)

The contrast between *Going* and the work of Chris Burden is dramatic. The collaborative performance of *Going* defines a corporate ego and obviates the hazard of artist mythification. "Everybody's particular personal will, bees in their bonnet, become less able to dominate and make the work obsessional, and that's very healthy."<sup>4</sup> Burden's work, earmarked by obscure and repellent pursuits, is contained by a seemingly instantaneous, solitary-image gestalt. The benign theme of *Going* is easily apprehended by its audience, as its relevance to contemporary social ritual is distinct and straightforward. Multiplied by audience mobility, the thematic permutations of *Going* generate a fugitive gestalt that requires the

<sup>3</sup> Wood, "The Theatre of Mistakes," p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 13.

duration of the performance to assemble. It is the disposition of the intent and theme in *Going* that finally permits its correspondence with a universal life experience.

Stuart Brisley ceased to make objects and began his engagement with performance art in 1966. He has since defined the stature of his work and its critical bent in relation to prevailing art factions:

All art at one time or another involves "Performance." . . . When applied to visual activity in process, in public (Performance Art), it is commonly assumed that what is so named is a "theatrical" art, . . . which has, therefore, only a tangential bearing on the condition of painting and sculpture, etc. In this way the use of categorisation serves to deflect a real challenge to decadent and seemingly apolitical artistic habits, e.g. professional specialist attitudes toward painting and sculpture related to the market, etc. . . . Performance has a more appropriate definition in relation to visual art—to carry out duly: To act in fulfillment of: to carry into effect (*Chambers 20th-Century Dictionary*). It is this aspect which brings the term into focus in relation to "art."<sup>5</sup>

Brisley works throughout Europe. His concepts are frequently derived from his insight into the distinctive cultural nexus of his chosen site, and the realization of his performances rely, ideally, on the collaboration of the site's inhabitants. The corpus of his work is socialist. His commitment to diminishing personal ego, for the purpose of frustrating individualized obsessions in his performances, parallels the stance of *The Theatre of Mistakes*.

The essential basis for the public exposure of process must have a political aspect in the sense that it must be consciously directed towards other people at specific times, and in specific places. . . . The initial concept cannot be realized, until it itself has been overcome, transformed by others with a collective concern, through the public process.<sup>6</sup>

*10 Days, An English Lie, Hunger Makes Free* was performed by Stuart Brisley between December 21 and December 31, 1973, at Editions Paramedia in Berlin. Brisley, as "the figure," was the sole

<sup>5</sup> Stuart Brisley, "Anti Performance Art," *Arte iglese oggi 1960-76, Part Two* (Milan: Electa Editrice, 1976), pp. 416, 417.

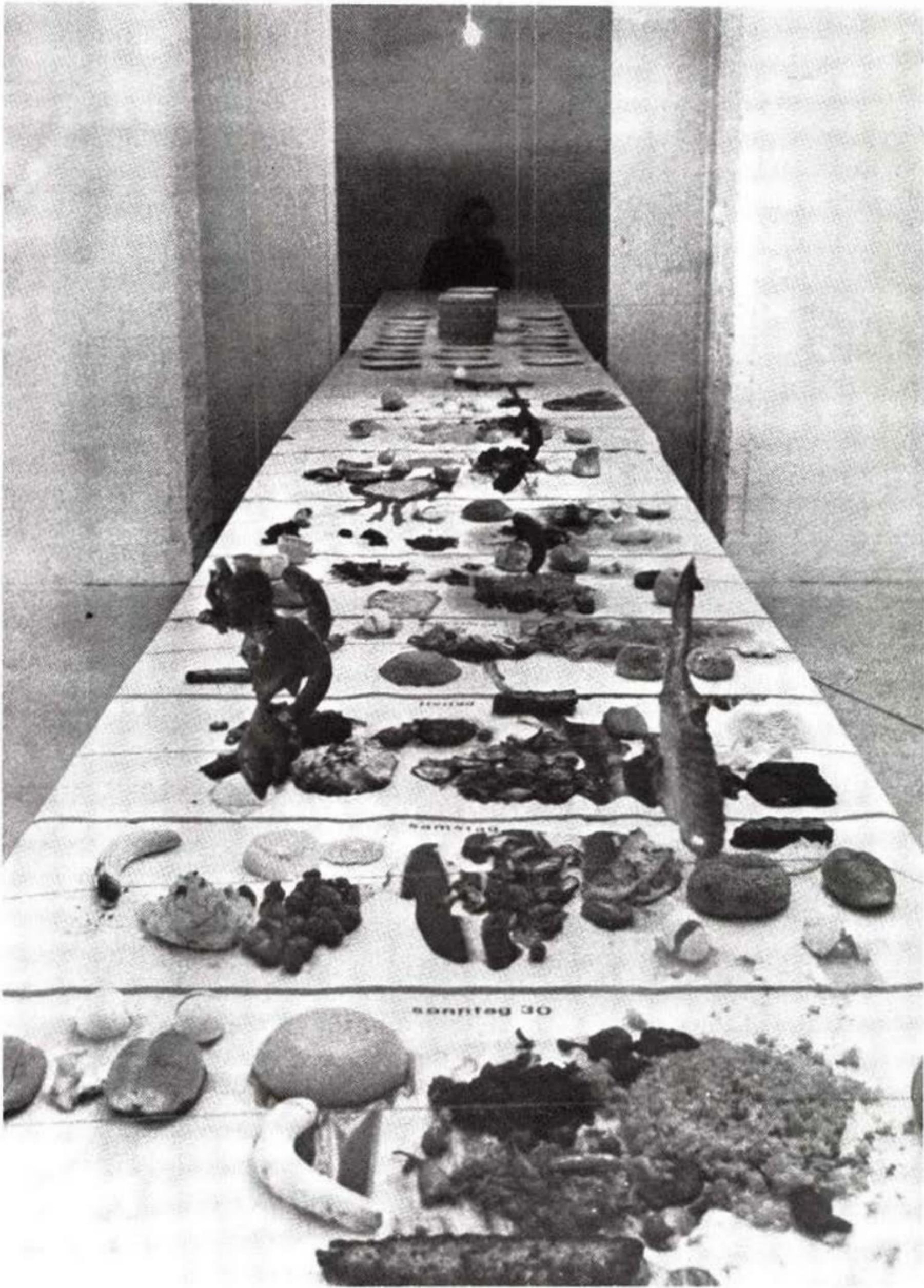
<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 417.

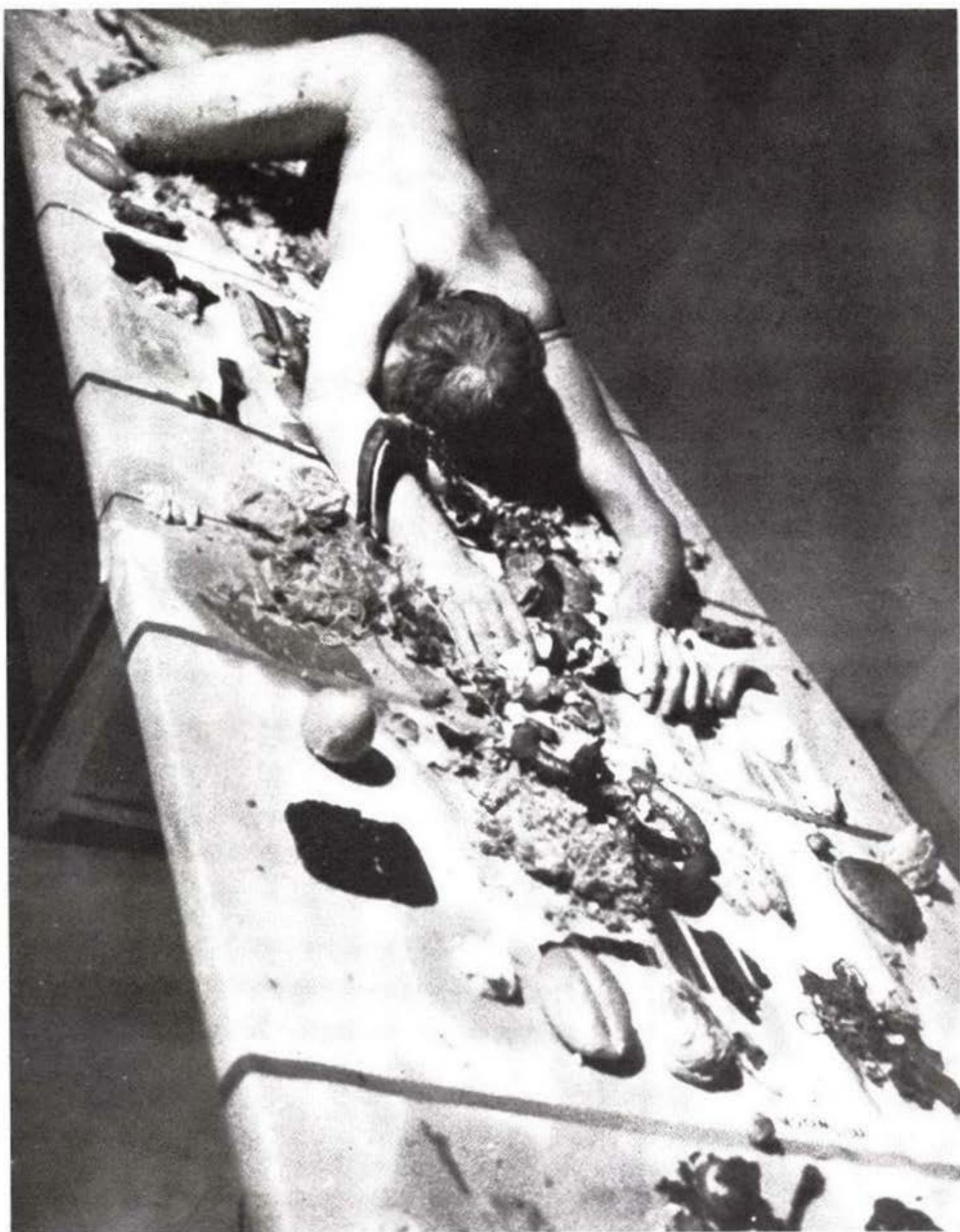
performer. A table, covered with white paper and measuring 10 meters (c. 33 feet) in length, was located between two adjoining rooms, A and B. The center of the table, intersected by the doorway, was marked with tape, and a rope was strung across the doorway to prohibit spectators from entering Room A. One lamp was suspended in Room A; a second lamp sat on the table in Room B. Thirty large white plates were laid out on the table in Room A in preparation for a celebration on the evening of December 31.

The figure ate its last meal for the duration of the performance at 7:30 P.M. on December 21. A replica of the meal was placed on the center of the table at 8:00 P.M., signaling the beginning of the performance. At 8:30 P.M., the figure stood upon the table, above the center line, and vomited the remains of its meal on to the replica. The figure ate two multivitamin pills, one glass of fruit juice, 1,000 cubic centimeters of vitamin C, and one dextrose tablet each day of the performance. The food that the figure would have consumed was laid daily, at noon, in a succeeding, measured compartment on the table in Room B. The figure swept the floor and then sat in a chair at the end of the table in Room A until 8:00 P.M.

An abundant supply of white flowers, champagne, and assorted white foods were arranged on the table in Room A on the afternoon of December 31. The figure, dressed in black with a painted face, entered Room A at 8:30 P.M. in the midst of an audience assembled for the celebration. It walked to the end of the table in Room B, stood motionless for a short time, and then slowly undressed. Naked, the figure dived onto the table and crawled through the accumulation of rotting food. When the figure reached the replica, and the vomited remains of its last meal, it stood erect. It remained still for a few moments in front of the white food, flowers, and champagne. The figure then jumped off the table, walked through the crowd, and exited through a door at the end of Room A.

The success of *10 Days* was contingent upon the efficacy of its images in confronting the moral incertitude of its audience. The direct assault on the viewer's senses in *10 Days* ostensibly yields a comparison with the performances of Chris Burden. But, in contrast with the amorphousness of intent in Burden's efforts, the often repugnant incidents in *10 Days* were transcended by a resolve with





32 and 33. Stuart Brisley: *10 Days, An English Lie, Hunger Makes Free*. 1973. Editions Paramedia, Berlin. (Photographs: Inge Lommatzsch from *10 Days*, Berlin: Editions Paramedia, 1973)

sufficient breadth and clarity of metaphorical context to mitigate the onlooker's aversion.

Brisley rejected the concept of a human-object simultaneity, and thereby the conscription of self-objectification, for his performance in *10 Days*. His role as "the figure" neutralized his identity and baffled inquiries into his individual condition. Anesthetized, the figure "carried out duly" its catalytic assignment. Denied an empathetic response to a particular performer in a localized human predicament, the audience directed its attention to the symbolic processes disclosed by the funereal complexion of the narrative: the figure vomiting, sweeping the floor, and occupying its chair for eight hours; the daily procession of foods; the figure dragging itself through the rotting foodstuffs, and so forth. The audience was urged into collaborating to deflect or augment the unfolding of the performance by the dormant volition of the figure, the availability of food, and the accessibility of the sociopolitical theme. "It is true that this creative collective state is rarely achieved. But without such an intention the activity decays to become one of the more obvious aspects of decadent individualism, no more or less significant than other activities which have not transcended individualism to become common."<sup>7</sup>

Brisley demonstrated effectively with *10 Days* that a personally enigmatic image is antithetical to the maturation of performance art. His authority in the medium was manifested by the displacement of energy from his private figuration to the processes signifying the latent content in the performance. The reflexivity of *10 Days* casts the ultimate responsibility on each spectator to grapple with the innate puzzlement of the social issues insinuated by those processes. *10 Days* is comparable to *Going* in its treatment of formalist syntax as information commandeered from the public domain of contemporary art and used as the context for, and not the definition of, its statement. The physical specifications of *10 Days* were based on geometry, symmetry, and repetition, and its narrative, designed with specific periods of tension and release, was strictly delimited in time and space. But, the enlarged thematic allusions and the intent of collective creative action in *10 Days* blur

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

the formalist constraints and essay the absorption of its art into a more comprehensive social context.

Time was a critical factor in deferring attention from the material to the meaning in *10 Days*. The urgency and effusiveness of the opening and closing of *10 Days* were distinct from the relatively inert middle period. The simple and unvarying gestalt of the figure's daily process was strategic in its reeducation of the public consciousness. This eventually disengaged the spectator from what was known to what was signified in *10 Days*. A more assured realization of Stuart Brisley's ambition to rechannel energy from the object to the event is found in his achievements as community artist for Peterlee New Town, under the aegis of the Artist Placement Group.<sup>8</sup>

Peterlee New Town had its inception in 1950. It was built in the center of six coal mining communities whose aggregate histories and traditions typified the squalor and the communal spirit common to rural English industrial life during the first half of this century. Plans for Peterlee were internally conceived in 1945. It was designed for the purpose of transforming the district and to serve as the nucleus for its inhabitants. Consonant with these plans was the New Town Act of 1946, which authorized the minister of town and country to designate new towns and originate development corporations to construct and manage them. A result was Peterlee New Town and the formation of the Peterlee Development Corporation in 1948.

The Artist Project Peterlee was initiated by an approach from the Artist Placement Group to the Peterlee Development Corporation in 1974, regarding the potential relevance of the contemporary artist to their management of the new town. Stuart Brisley was engaged by the corporation in July 1975 to spend one month in Peterlee developing a project and preparing a study of its feasibility. Brisley's project identified a discontent in the people of Peterlee with the absence of a recorded history for their area prior to the

<sup>8</sup> The Artist Placement Group, established in 1965–1966, places artists in industry, government departments, and with local authorities for specific periods. The artist's function is to recommend and, ideally, accomplish practicable improvements to intensify the people's involvement in their situation.

emergence of the new town in 1950. Brisley's proposal was to assist the people of Peterlee New Town in the collective assembly, "collation and presentation of accounts and experiences of work, and the social, domestic and personal life of people who live, or have lived, in Peterlee New Town, and the six surrounding villages."<sup>9</sup> The corporation estimated the social benefits of the project and agreed to employ Brisley for a one-year consultancy that began January 5, 1976.

Stuart Brisley's project was enthusiastically supported by the inhabitants of Peterlee. A massive accumulation of photographic material and tape recordings and transcripts of conversations with the oldest residents was put on display to chronicle over seventy years of living history. (The project's structure did not make use of a closure, so the process continues.) This collective documentation, gleaned from the perspectives of manifold accounts, functions as a reflexive social mechanism not as an archive for local history. The reintegration of this amassed evidence is helping to furnish the residents of Peterlee New Town with an understanding of their community's historical formation and, thereby, is providing a dialectical tool to influence their present and future identity.

Stuart Brisley's accomplishments during his residency in Peterlee was not a performance art anomaly. On the contrary it was a social performance work of significant proportions that illustrated an effective application of the artist in an area not traditionally recognized as part of art's domain. It provided evidence of performance art's propensity for incorporation into a life situation and the consequent discharge of formalism's myopia from the medium. Brisley's advocacy of a deframed art establishes an alternative to art's customary objectification and the inevitable narcissism of art speaking to art. The Artist Project Peterlee is a prototype that defines performance art's ability in its mature phase to reinvest the art action with a critical relevance to the experience of the modern world.

<sup>9</sup> Stuart Brisley, "Evidence," *Artist Project Peterlee* (report) (1977), unpagged.

# DAVID SHAPIRO

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## Poetry and Action: Performance in a Dark Time

*"Is there a way in which the essential 'writing' of poetry might become part of the performative nature? Is there a way of reconciling the written character of poetry with action? Or is such a reconciliation unnecessary?" These are but a few of the questions David Shapiro poses for himself in the following "auto interview." He touches on the work of Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Robert Wilson, Laurie Anderson, John Giorno, and many others in his attempt to shed some light on the relationship between poetry and performance.*

*He identifies the qualities of "musical theatre" in Ashbery, the "comical No drama" of Kenneth Koch, and Wilson's use of language, which proclaims action and is action. According to Shapiro, "the most exacting theatre of the last two decades may be seen in the lyrics of John Cage, just as Gertrude Stein's dilapidated lyric plays entrance us more than a whole host of more obvious performers and performances." He is suggesting ultimately that poetry joins the other arts in attempting a fresh theatre.*

*David Shapiro is the author of many volumes of poetry and art and literary criticism, including January (1965), Poems from Deal (1969), The Page-Turner (1973), Jim Dine (1981), John Ashbery (1979), and Lateness (1978). He is also a translator, an editor, a teacher, and a violinist and has given numerous performances as a poet during the last twenty years.*

[S]uit the action to the word, the word to the action.

—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III, 2

July 6. Brecht, in the course of yesterday's conversation: "I often think about a tribunal before which I am being questioned." "What was that? Did you really mean that seriously?" I would then have to admit: Not quite seriously. After all I think too much about artistic matters, about what would go well on the stage, to be quite serious; but when I have answered this important question in the negative, I will add a still more important affirmation: that my conduct is legitimate.

—Walter Benjamin, "Conversations with Brecht," *Reflections*

*What is your sense of poetry as performance today? Edgar Allan Poe was excused by Charles Baudelaire from the demerit of being a poor public performer. Baudelaire said the poet was not necessarily a good orator.*

I do think that poetry is always already existing in a polarized condition of speech and writing. Theatrical it is always already, also, because private language is a fiction. Poetry has had rigorous practitioners since Mallarmé, who attempt a kind of private or solipsistic theatre. Studies exist that draw the analogy between poetry and "performative utterance." That is, poetry need imitate less than it may make happen, as in promises or declarations of war. In a practical sense the world witnesses a variety of theatrical expositions using language. But we are most concerned with those in which language may be said to use the situation. Heidegger referred perhaps too numinously to this situation when he made his famous gnomic "utterance" that language speaks in the poem. One doesn't want to use this problematic to invite a merely inhuman theatre: a paradox investigated, for example, by Dennis Oppenheim in his puppet plays.

*Is there a logocentric bias, in Derridean terms, in the sense of poetry as a public maneuver?*

Again, perhaps the familiar issue of whether our culture is biased toward sound, toward center, toward meaning, may be dissolved by the realization that poetic works have always involved a nonsense element and always involved to the *differances* (sic), the delays of writing. Bob Wilson has recently pointed to this in his language works with Lucinda Childs—as when fragments and whole sentences are suddenly placed against the background of her

dances. The simple sentences about a lost dog or pilfered pet seem too comical for some, but they help promulgate action and are action. They also “absent from meaning” and destabilize. John Ashbery’s public readings of his double-columned *Litany* serve to make problematic these issues, and that is their content, these double columns: the domestic comedy of an ego.

*Allen Ginsberg was credited by Robert Lowell as one of the innumerable influences in resurrecting the idea of speech and performance in poetry. Has this influence been mostly a benign one of resurrecting the rapport between a mass audience and the poet?*

Adorno might speak of this as part of the regression of listening, but there is no doubt that one form of neoprimitivism is a species of dissent in the streamlined world of commodity fetishism? In late capital, graffiti are a linguistic theatre, as were the student revolts of the past few decades. In its theatricalism it seemed to proclaim its impotence, and this was Lacan’s snarling tribute to the meretricious nudity of students. If anything like the benign enters into the relationship of poetry and audience, one might feel that the an-aesthetic is motivated by an ideology demanding quietism. Though poetry in its literary aspect appealed to Russian formalists both as militant sound and as mute structure, the mutism may predominate if the sounds are too troublesome for the larger social entity. In the West, as is always noted, the main feature of poetry seems to be its trivializing through permission; in the East, the power of poetry seems to accompany a desiccation of its sensual or, paradoxically, non-sensical element.

*Adorno has said in many essays that music proposed as easiness or seduction has become one of the chief reasons for the social regression in listening. Is this same aspect of regression part of performance today?*

This is a difficult theme. On this, certain critics begin to resemble a mere form of adult censoriousness. The primitivism of which I speak deserves a volume in the history of ideas that would be comparable to *japonisme* or even more to relativism, that is, rather permanent distortions and changes in the cultural matrix. The *Georgia Review* recently (Winter 1982) featured a symposium that meditated on the increasing difference between poetry and

science. The possible consolation of poetry was held to be the romantic scrutiny of individual experience. By and large, I think it is correct to say that one large feature of poetic theatre is the attack on "gray theory." Its weakness would be an antitheoretical component, as in Impressionism.

*Lately, Mallarméan studies have come under the guidance of Austin and Searle's sense of "speech acts" and "performative utterances" as Yale University scholars scrutinize the text for the sense of poetry as largely such an utterance, as a promise, bet, etc.—utterances that make something happen rather than describing a situation. Would you associate yourself with these efforts, and do you see poetry as performance as largely underscoring this antimimetic bias?*

I think it is important, in the light of these meditations, to insist on the Jakobsonian sense of *the dominant*. We would then have a less normative criticism. Some theatre will be seen to be dominantly foregrounding the mimetic, and other theatrical expositions will be dominated by an antimimetic component. The Aristotelian critic will find himself arguing less—and here I take my cue from Gallie and Elder Olson—if he tries to see what is indeed the foregrounded element, both in the artwork and in the critical perspective.

*There is and will be a theatre of mimesis. The political conservatism of some of it need not be used finally as the sole perspective with which to combat a sometimes degraded public naturalism. Gerald Graff and others have tried to attack modernist purity, but they tend to attack only dogmatic versions of modernism. How much are the Russians precursors in all this? Is there a living influence to Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky in modern American poetic performance?*

There is no doubt that we are all Russian formalists, to some extent. Jakobson's collected essays are significant here in both French and American circles. The poems of Pasternak were chief resources in the work of the so-called New York School. The sense of intimate connection in Mayakovsky between speaker and revolutionary audience was an invigorating analogue for Frank O'Hara, who has however been thought of perhaps too sadly as a revolutionary poet without a revolution. He was, at any rate, a theatrical

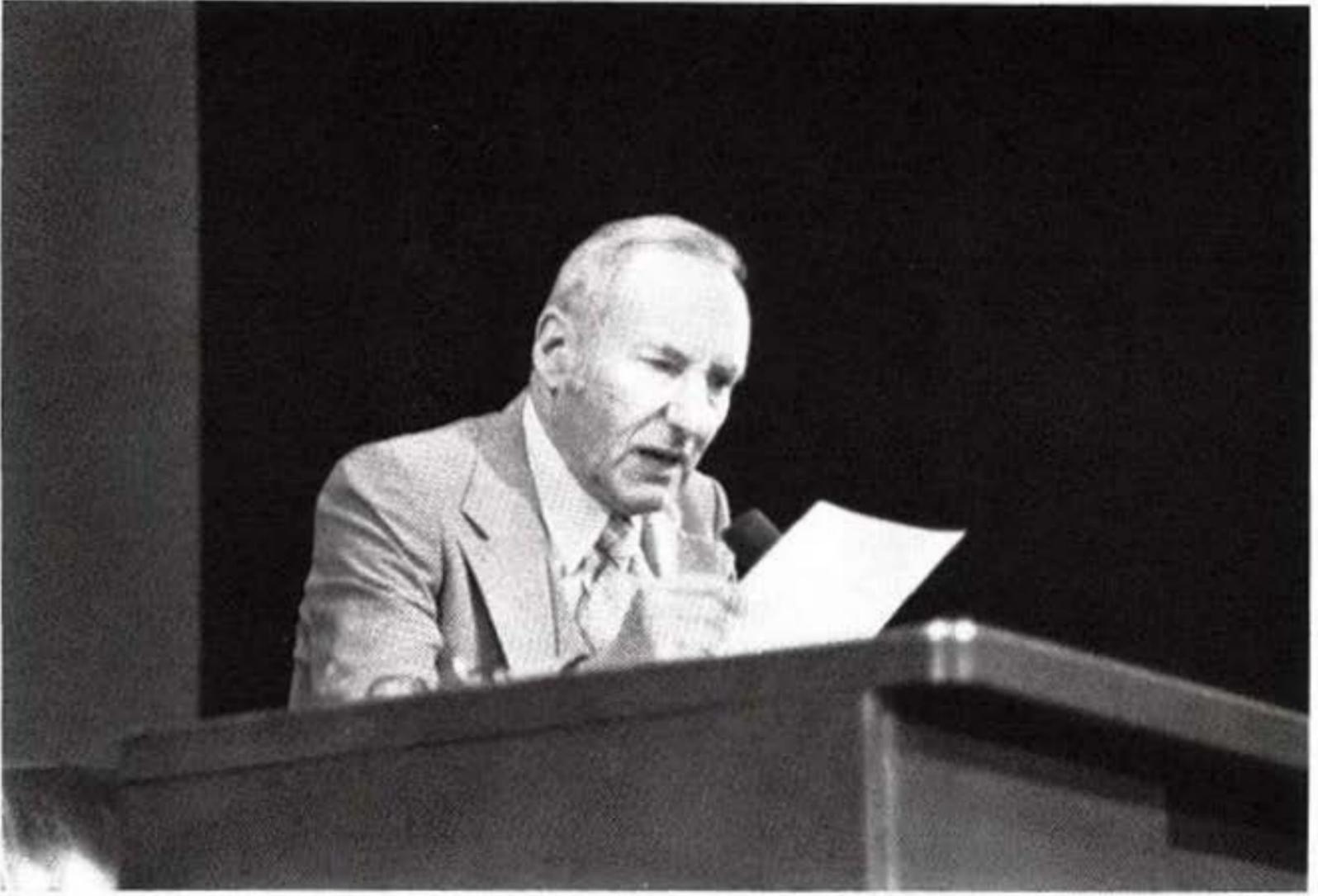
urban poet of the ongoing city. O'Hara didn't need a revolution because he had New York City, in late capital's most savage series of slumps, reversals, and recognitions. In the "no-environment" of New York, O'Hara and others made a poetry that needed and resembled in part the Russian "no-environment" of the surgeries performed by the Revolution.

*Walter Benjamin delivered himself of the darkest counsel in his dissertation on the German Baroque allegorical masque. Could we consider the contemporary poetic performance in this light, or darkness?*

There is a temptation to allegory throughout this period. A chief poetic influence, paradoxically, is the antiallegorical in Ezra Pound. Pound said, "That squirrel there—is just that damn squirrel." Of course, the problem begins for Pound, positivism, poetry, and theatre when the poets of this age have begun to consider what it might mean to be just that simple datum. Eliot, too, required a civilized sense of fact for his good citizen, but Eliot as poet concluded with some of the eeriest allegorical masques. It might be a too easy critique of Eliot and Auden that they retreated into a world where stable quantities could be summoned in such a referential manner. But the comical No dramas of Koch, the campy masques of James Schuyler and Ashbery, and the sound-dramas of, shall we say, Wilson, all combine to remind us of a more analytic use of *Trauerspiel*. Reference in these plays is the problem. Doubt is thrown upon "that damn squirrel."

*Why have the New York School poets been so unsuccessful in writing plays? Or is this to overlook certain forms of success in their comical reductions?*

I would not question that the most exacting theatre of the last two decades may be seen in the lyrics of John Cage, just as Gertrude Stein's dilapidated lyric plays entrance us more than a whole host of more obvious performers and performances. Here, I would underline the musical theatre of Ashbery's *Litany* and his two-character *Fantasia*. The comical in Kenneth Koch has been one of the reasons why a certain form of theory has overlooked him. John Giorno has created a whole corollary to William Burroughs in his creation of repetitive monologues that feature an artificial "Southern" theme. Also, Laurie Anderson's relation to Cage's indetermi-

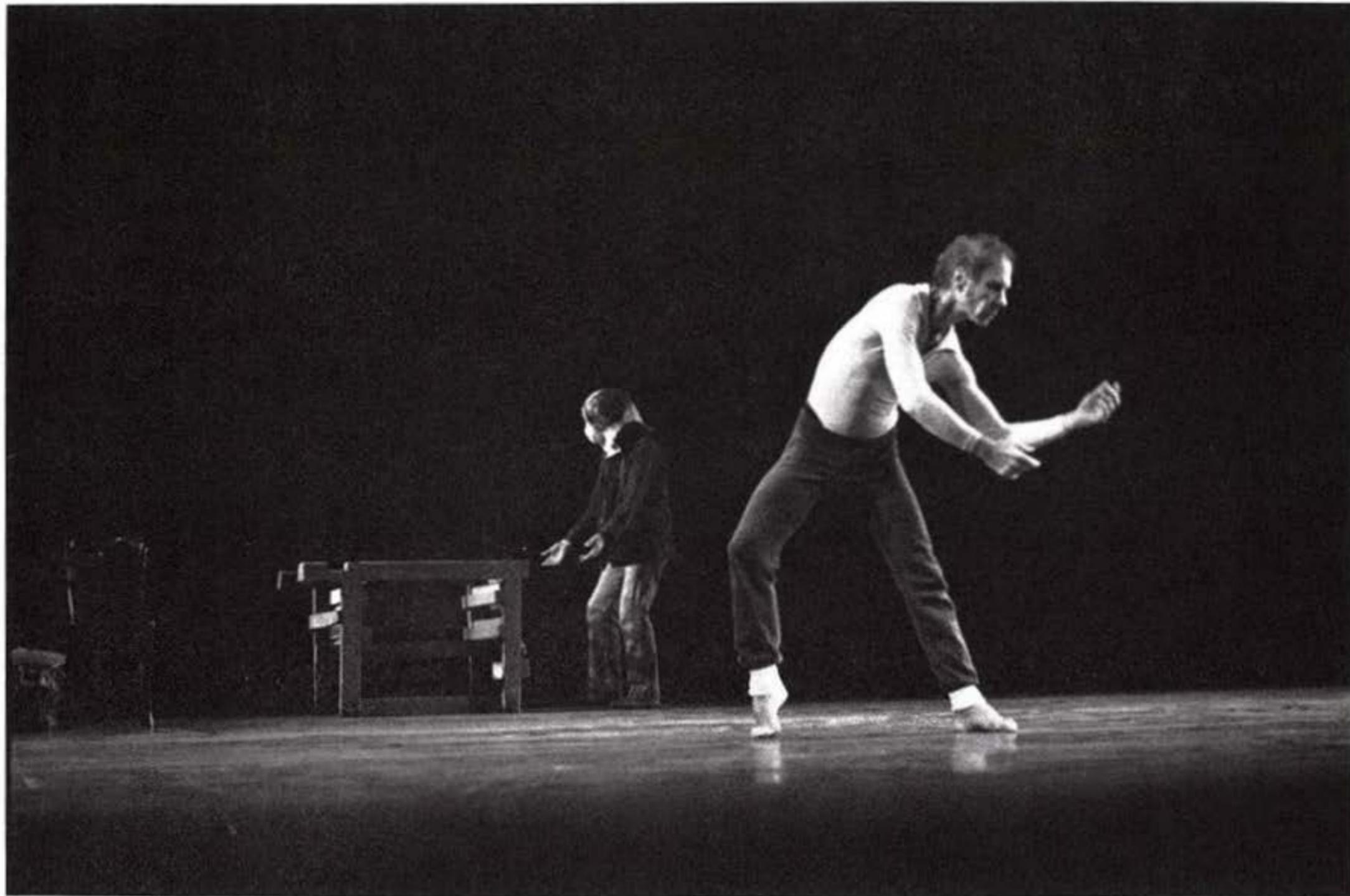


34. William Burroughs: Performance at the Nova Convention. January 1978. Entermedia Theater, New York. (Photograph: Paula Court)

nacies and his comical stories should not be overlooked. It furnishes another sense of coherence to this tradition of phonological doubt.

*Isn't there a false populism lurking in poetry as performance? Again, Vachel Lindsay in his strident public performances might seem more of a precursor here than any tradition of intimism.*

Again, populism seems false, and there are no lack of examples. But the insistence that a public art might exist without degradation is one of the more constant pressures of art. I would agree with Adorno and with more recently Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe that a species of infantilism is always ready to invade this pressure and principle. The desire for a public art often gives way to a desire to yield to artificial expectations, illiterate expectations, degradations of expectations. The best artists, as Walt Whitman insisted in the late nineteenth century, have been capable of humiliating expectations and raising new standards. The Italian communal performances of *Orlando Furioso*, with simultaneous scenes, an intelligent archaism, and a musical, aggressive plein-airiste quality, are examples of a true populism. The collaborative works of Michelangelo Pistoletto and of Robert Rauschenberg on both sides of the Atlantic



35. John Cage and Merce Cunningham: Performance at the Nova Convention. January 1978. Entermedia Theater, New York. (Photograph: Paula Court)

in the last twenty years also point to a truer populism. Perhaps the C major of such things would be Cage's utopianism and his collaborations with Merce Cunningham. Here, poetry has received its final persuasions toward Whiteheadian perfections.

*Is there a way in which the essential "writing" of poetry might become part of the performative nature? Is there a way of reconciling the written character of poetry with action? Or is such a reconciliation unnecessary?*

I would again imagine that the reconciliation of speech and writing might lead to a false end of the problematic, a too abrupt ceasing of the tension in such things. Let us again note a number of false ways to dissolve such problems. One, raised by Greenberg in a sense, might be to hold all art as responsibly committing itself to a neo-Kantian specialization. Poetry might then have as its *telos* a purity that the very poetry, or mad generativity in Greek etymology, derides. Poetry, in Mary Douglass's sense, needs to have danger as well as purity. The antitheatrical in Fried and Greenberg has savage consequences philosophically. The bias toward purity leads to a very impure and weakened art.

*What have been your own activities in performance, your own biases and developments? What is the relationship between pedagogy and performance?*

I conceive of a poetry that would be, like Aldo Rossi's floating Theatre of the World, a nomadic theatre. One hopes for an analysis of the elegy even more than the elegiac. The precursors invigorate one with a sense of the highest *arete*. Eugenio Montale's last poems, Cage's rhythmical distortions in his stories, Boris Pasternak's refusal of all false futurisms, Ashbery's essentially exquisite theatre of windowless monads, Eliot's own meditations on *pathos*—all this would be fruitless quotation for an eclecticism if one didn't also have the desire to generate an art that would be independent but analogous here. The analysis would be necessarily didactic, but refreshed by a sense of Brecht's famous sign: Even a Donkey Must Understand. Neither do I think one can evade the problematic of film, which is always already poetry or its sound element tied to the inextricable image. Film has suffered from its distance from poetry, as poetry has suffered from its distance to that aureate world of

world without aura. I am suspicious of those who do not see the collected works of Wallace Stevens as fulfilling the highest standards of a private, noble theatre, along the line of Kabuki or No.

*What is the extent of the mythos of permission in all this? Surrealistic influence and John Cage seem to mingle here. Is poetry always already music as music has been determined by Cage to be always already the language of the everyday world, in silence, in noise, in nature? How do you escape the sentimental transcendentalism indicated here?*

One student has characterized for me poetry as that which defies all integrity. The genre-dissolving force of language is indeed impressive, as Kristeva has pointed out in her polemic on Bakhtin. Sollers has also underlined this sense of language erupting into history with meaning. And, we must add, if too gnomically, with meaninglessness. Each philosopher has his shadow, said the noble Merleau-Ponty, and so does an era. The shadow of our own time may be analyzed in its examples of a strong theatre of poetry.

# HERBERT MOLDERINGS

TRANSLATED BY ULRICH KELLER

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## *Life Is No Performance; Performance* by Jochen Gerz

*In the following essay about the performance art of Jochen Gerz, Herbert Molderings notes the emphasis on experience as an important characteristic of performance art. "With Gerz, a performance is primarily a technique of self-experience," he writes.*

*Performance art displays a degree of integration of art and political and social activities. This direction is traceable to the French revolutionary events of 1968, according to the author, who goes on to describe performance art as "a metaphor referring to a historical and social state when artistic work was a natural part of collective life."*

*In describing and interpreting the various works by Gerz—works that are presented by the artist only once—Molderings reflects on the social, anthropological, and ethnological factors that are reflected therein. He finds that Gerz's performances and actions "represent an extreme form of utopian art insofar as they aim at the abolition, or dissolution, of art in genuine social intercourse between people."*

*Herbert Molderings has written extensively about art, aesthetics, and the work of Marcel Duchamp. He has organized several exhibitions, collaborating in the organization of the "Paris-Berlin" exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1978. He lives in Paris.*

Rely solely on a living intercourse between people, uninhibited by objects and hierarchical structures.

—A. Mazaev, *Mass Festivities of the 1920s*

Since the middle of the nineteenth century the increasing alienation of human life has been accompanied by a boundless multiplication of pictures and books. These consistently appear where reality is deficient. The function of these media within the bourgeois civilization is to offer phantasmal substitutes for everything that people lose or lack in real life. Jochen Gerz's literary and artistic works never deny their fictive character. They refuse to describe and to embellish a better world that exists only as a literary or artistic projection. Using the tone of a manifesto, Gerz wrote in 1972:

Constantly, the individual and social needs of humanity are described without regard to the social conditions which make it impossible to realize them, and which condemn these needs to exist only in the form of descriptions. Such descriptions are therefore nothing else than positive formulations of substitute needs which are produced daily by the cultural media.

Gerz started out as a writer; his literary origins go back to "visual poetry." This form of poetry developed a special consciousness of language as a tool, and of writing tools in general, thus gradually exceeding the limits of literature and extending to all the phenomena of contemporary culture. The style and the content of the resulting works (books, performances, and environments) are in strict correspondence. It is a style that reflects in an unspectacular way what the artist means to convey. Consistently, his works are based on notes and observations concerning contemporary culture—culture being understood here in a fundamental sense as the human approach to life, that is, as the way people shape their environment (nature and society) and how they cope with their memories (history). Because Gerz analyzes many different aspects of cultural behavior (photography, drawing, television, writing, reading), he has been classified under various categories, for example, story art, concept art, photography, video, and performance art. Apparently



36. Jochen Gerz: *The Centaur's Difficulty when Dismounting from the Horse.* 1976. Biennale, Venice, Italy. (Photograph: H. Schwobel, Düsseldorf)

there are niches for him everywhere, yet he does not really feel at home in any of them, one of the reasons being that artistic innovation is not his only goal.

It is impossible to say where “performance” begins or ends in Gerz’s work. Performance and story art are as inseparable in these works as performance and environment art. In fact, performance seems to be the link that ties together the various aspects of his creative activities. A nucleus of this can be found in the “Photo/Texts” centering on situations that contain performance elements or that could be used as blueprints for performances. But then again performances are sometimes a part of museum installations such as *Leben* (Bochum, 1974); *Was sich beschreiben lässt, das kann auch geschehen* (Rome, 1973); *The Centaur’s Difficulty when Dismounting from the Horse* (Biennale, Venice, 1976); *Purple Cross for Absent Now* (Geneva, 1979). In some cases the museum installation is the residue of a performance that is finished and that took place in the absence of the public. In this category is the *Trans-Sib. Prospect*, Gerz’s contribution to Documenta 6 in Kassel in 1977. It consists of two parts: a real or fictive journey and an environment. The following text informed the viewer of the interrelation between the visible museum exhibit and its invisible—real or fictive—history:

It was agreed upon with the organizer that Jochen Gerz make a journey as his contribution to Documenta 6. Sitting in a compartment on the Trans-Siberian Railroad, he was to travel the distance Moscow–Khabarovsk–Moscow. The windows were to remain covered during the journey, so that nothing outside could be seen from within the compartment.

Thus he was to travel through Siberia, the Taiga and the Amur region to reach the tip of Eurasia and return in the same compartment to Moscow, where after traveling 16,000 kilometers [9,920 miles] he was to arrive again at the point of departure.

He was to take sixteen writing slates on the journey, which was to last sixteen days and nights, one writing slate for each day. He was to place his feet on them.

It was also agreed that there was nothing to be left over from the journey. Any proof of its occurrence was to be burned. So that someone learning of it later could not be sure of whether it had happened or not.

With Gerz, a performance is primarily a technique of self-experience. It is an activity in which he attempts to explore himself and his environment by means of intervening in a given situation. Principally, the artist's intervention is so designed that the other people in this situation (at first pedestrians on the street, later visitors in museums and galleries) are enabled to share a lively experience. The "subjects" of performances and installations are never alien to their location; rather, it could be said that they are identical with the location in a different aggregate state. In this respect Gerz seems to continue the work of the French situationists whose *détournements* of the early 1960s came close to performance art.

Gerz's first books, performances, and exhibitions date back to 1968. Among other things, he circulated little slips that read "Attention, art corrupts." He acts principally as an artist who has become conscious of his profession's critical state. This consciousness can also be considered as the common denominator between Gerz and the Surrealists whose ideas are frequently reflected in his works. The French revolution of May 1968 not only proved that the unshakable solidity of capitalism and the paralysis of the working class are obsolete legends but also broke the spell of capitalist culture on all levels of expression. Living in Paris since 1967, Gerz participated in this movement as a member of the Atelier Populaire and the experimental kindergartens of Censier and Jussieu.

The French revolutionary events of 1968 caused a temporary stir in a petrified situation. In the field of artistic work this meant that art became an integral part of political and social activities. There was no more room for the old, idealistic concept of the artwork as a substitute world for merely contemplative use, or as a self-contained microcosm. Practiced as performance, art became ephemeral and fragmented like all the other activities of life. In contrast to the traditional painter or sculptor the performance artist was not concerned anymore with the organization of colors and masses but rather attempted to provoke a new awareness of social habits and to create interrelations between various patterns of cultural behavior. In traditional art, market and exhibition mechanisms had separated the artist from the people; performance art aimed at bringing them back together.



37. Jochen Gerz as an exhibition object beside his photographic reproduction. 1972. Basel, Switzerland. (Photograph: Stampa, Basel)

Initially, performances took place in public streets and squares. More recently, however, following the decline of the revolutionary movement, performance art retired to the gallery and museum sphere. Gerz's piece *Alternatives to Memory* (staged at the exhibition "Für Veränderungen aller Art" at the Kunsthalle, Basel, 1969) dramatizes this withdrawal. A 900-foot rope was arranged in such a way that it started inside the museum and ended far outside its premises, on a downtown street. At the start a photograph was placed that showed the end of the rope in the street. At the end of the rope, another photograph referred the viewer back to the museum. In connection with a show in the Galerie Stampa in Basel in 1972, Gerz was himself the exhibition. For two hours he posed in the street beside a photograph that represented him at the same spot, in the same attire, and at the same size.

Gerz's performances do not necessarily call for an audience, especially if it is a passive consumer audience. For example, in 1972 he enacted a performance without any onlookers at all. In the north of Paris, close to an expressway, he placed himself 200 feet from a video machine, shouting hello as loudly and as long as he could. Halfway through the video tape his voice had changed considerably; in the end it had become inaudible. Put differently, the distance between the man and the medium had become insurmountable.

In *Stück für 1, 2, 3, 4* (1971) the performance was not carried out by himself but by three gardeners in the Jardin des Plantes who spent several hours pressing grass seeds into a fresh layer of topsoil by means of little trampling steps. This action was recorded by Gerz in thirteen photographs.

In Frankfurt, Germany, he used his fingers in place of chalk or pencil repeatedly to inscribe this sentence on a wall: "These words are my flesh and my blood." Finally blood began to ooze from his fingers and to leave visible traces on the wall.

Gerz stages a performance only once, refusing to repeat it. In his view it is very important that—in contrast to traditional art—performances do not contain a reproduction element. In other words they do not isolate a subject from its original space-time context in order to elevate it to a timeless and spaceless existence in the ster-

ile, autonomous museum sphere. Traditional art can be compared to the mythical King Midas in that it transforms the world into dead, motionless products, just as Midas converted everything he touched into gold. Usually, traces and vestiges are insignificant by-products of life. Modern art activities, however, are often concerned with the generation of their own dead traces, before any thought is given to the establishment of vivid human relationships. This is the reason for the superficial character of most contemporary art. Whatever survives of a performance in the form of a photograph or a video tape is no more than a fragmentary, petrified vestige of a lively process that took place at a different time in a different place. Looking at such records is boring.

Between 1975 and 1977 Gerz created a series of performances (*Ich komme gleich zurück, Eurydike; Nacht, lass den Jäger schlafen; Marsyas; Snake Hoods & Dragon's Dreams*, and others) that go back to Greek mythology (*Greek Pieces*) for their sources and center on the loss of the cult element in our civilization. Put differently, their theme is the mental self-mutilation man has inflicted on himself by his fixation on the instruments, the media, the possession, instead of the being. Not only their content, though, was metaphorical, performance art principally being more than just a formal phenomenon. The practice of performance art is a metaphor in itself. More precisely: a metaphor referring to a historical and social state when artistic work was a natural part of collective life and the daily efforts to humanize life in conflict with nature.

At decisive turning points twentieth-century art has repeatedly attempted to revive the cultic traditions of artistic activities. The origin of Cubism goes hand in hand with the discovery of what is commonly called "primitive" art. When this impulse faded in later abstract painting, it was renewed by the Surrealists. In an exemplary rejection of the petrified objects produced by contemporary civilized art the Surrealists took a special interest in the objects of primitive rituals. In performance art the same act of rejection is coupled with an interest in the ritual element, or the cultic act itself. Art critics have frequently claimed that the performance artist assumes the role of medicine man or shaman in an

attempt to make the public aware of social conventions and to keep human relationships in flux. Consequently, these critics believe the performance movement has been able to reintegrate art into society. However, life is no performance. Only dandies and aesthetes can declare as fact what is really a utopian projection. To be sure, performance art is reminiscent of primitive rituals because it uses the body, dancing, gestures, music, objects—in short: everything—to express an idea. In primitive societies, however, this is a genuine cult, that is, a socially and collectively exercised activity. Performance art, on the other hand, is a completely asocial phenomenon, because the hunter's world and the shaman's world, or the working class and the artistic intelligentsia, are deeply separated in contemporary society. Far from being eliminated, this separation is radically visualized in performance art and seems to represent the principal theme of Gerz and his colleagues in the European performance movement.

Gerz's artistic tools are extremely simple. They can be used without special training at an art academy and without extraordinary skills. These tools include his body, his voice, a television set, a typewriter, a self-made table, a chair, and so forth. Gerz opposes the increasing specialization of painters, sculptors, video operators, and performance artists. Specialization aims at the spectacular. Gerz prefers hybrid forms that cannot easily be classified.

The destination of art in modern society is collection (museum). Two important historical developments are reflected in this fact: First, art has been eliminated from daily life; as we said before, it has become asocial. Second, art has become a form of property; we habitually refer to "art treasures." The collecting represents the victory of petrification over life, of timelessness over history, of objects over people. Art collecting is the product of a civilization that loses itself in a multitude of fetishistic fixations; it is the preoccupation of a society whose interrelations basically follow the pattern set by commodity production. "The only means of communication in the twentieth century is money," states Gerz in his book *Die Beschreibung des Papiers* (1973). Wherever one should expect living relations between people in today's society, we witness a tendency to relate to objects. Examples of this can be found on the job



38. Jochen Gerz: *The Painting Mouth*. 1978. Bonn, West Germany. (Photograph: Horst Hahn, Cologne)

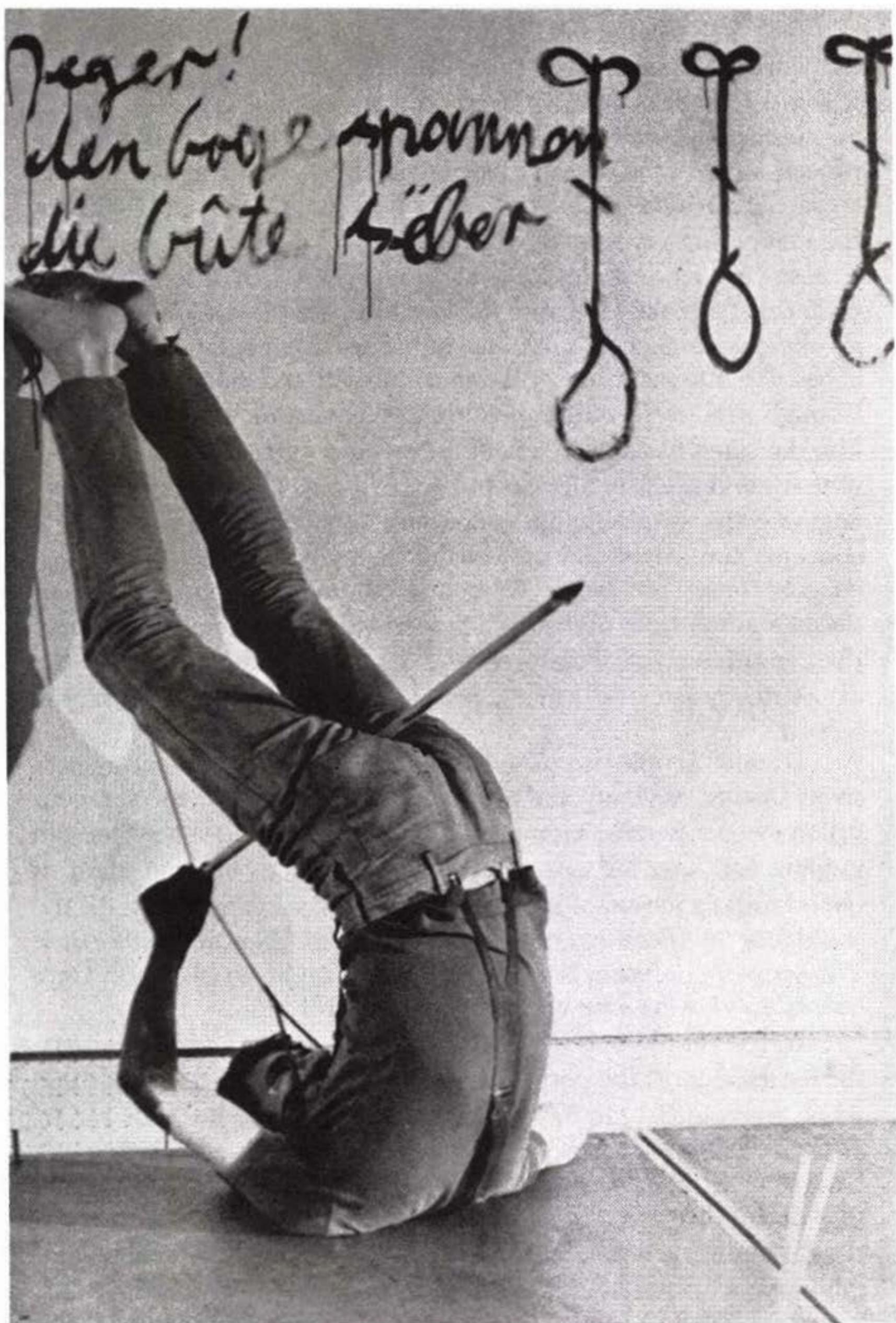
as well as on vacation, in urbanism as well as in medicine, in the realm of nature and in the realm of images, in politics, science, and education. Gerz's artistic activity is a critique of this situation. The only way his work can maintain its critical potential, the only way it can avoid becoming a petrified product itself is to insist on its methodical, instrumental character. Performance art can be considered as the exemplary form of such a critical method.

In 1972 Gerz used a stamp to multiply the slogan "Turn your back on the media—live." There is an antagonism between the laws of genuine artistic creation and the conditions of life under the capitalistic system. This antagonism seems to be the secret theme of almost all significant avant-garde art in our country. The decline of economic prosperity and its deceptive facade reflected in the art of the 1960s give renewed importance to the conclusions reached by André Breton and Leon Trotsky in 1938 in a joint manifesto:

True art, which is not content to play variations on ready-made models but rather insists on expressing the inner needs of man and of mankind in its time—true art is unable *not* to be revolutionary, *not* to aspire to a complete and radical reconstruction of society. This it must do, were it only to deliver intellectual creation from the chains which bind it, and to allow all mankind to raise itself to those heights which only isolated geniuses have achieved in the past. We recognize that only the social revolution can sweep clean the path for a new culture.

Contemporary art manifests itself most convincingly in those areas of Gerz's activities that emphasize the necessity of change in the social relationships conditioning creative activities.

Dreams consist of memories from our individual biographies. Similarly, social utopias—as opposed to chimerical projections—consist of memories from collective history, which are the subject of scientific research. All important developments in modern art are closely related to the evolution of science. Whereas the new findings of the physicists were echoed in Cubism and Freud's psychoanalysis influenced Surrealism, performance art must be seen in the context of the significant advances that have occurred in ethnology and anthropology over the last two decades. Thanks to these disciplines we have gained precious knowledge about differing cultures that existed and, in spite of imperialism, continue to exist somewhere at the periphery of modern industrial civilization. In these marginal cultures art has not been subjected to reification, but has preserved a functional role in cult activities dealing with the difficulties, insufficiencies, and anxieties of man. In his Basel period Gerz devoted some time to the study of protohistory, arriving at the conclusion that for today the most valuable tradition of art is the one that dates back to the earliest stages of human history. Ethnology and anthropology clearly have destroyed the comfortable ignorance that restricted popular knowledge of art to the Renaissance and later periods. Performance art, sometimes hardly distinguishable from a casual gesture, emerges like an artistic regression. It expresses the need for real human relations in art, free of the restrictions imposed by education, money, and social hierarchies.



39. Jochen Gerz: *The Room of the Tomb Reliefs with the Hunter*. 1978. Bremen, West Germany. (Photograph: Horst Hahn, Cologne)

Art worthy of its name has never been calculated for the public, yet it wants to have a public. Gerz, too, does not renounce the public, no matter how well aware he is of the futility of his work. His approach aims at the deepest psychological layers of man, those interwoven with the daily conduct of his life. "J'aimerais le [that is, the reader and viewer—HM] provoquer a l'intérieur de lui-même, le faire circuler entre les mille choses qu'il est." In order to accomplish this, Gerz tries to cause the greatest possible disorientation, or an obvious absence of solutions, in his environments and performances. He intends to reduce man to himself and achieves this goal through precise selection, counting on a viewer who shares with him the same basic experiences and who approaches his "images" with a mind open to all possible associations. Only by consciously negating the unintelligible experience of the work into the daily concepts and behavioral patterns of the individual can this experience become knowledge. Of course, those who expect clear-cut theses and solutions at discount prices will not be able to find more than emptiness and secrecy in performance art, and as long as the art critics praise this aspect, people may even feel quite happy with it.

Usually people are afraid of disorientation. They act aggressively against anybody and anything that confuses them. Yet, confusion is an essential element of human thought. Whenever old guiding concepts fall apart and new convictions emerge, there is bound to be a period of uncertainty. The solution lies not with the avoidance of these contradictions but with their intensification. The deepest confusion is the threshold of insight. In his works Gerz counts on viewers who are not afraid of confusion.

It is certainly not accidental that Happenings and action art, the forerunners of the performance movement, started around 1960 when television began to play a major role in daily life. The resulting banalization of the perception of images devalued painting as a form of artistic expression and caused an obvious conflict with the picture fetishism of the professional art critics. The origin of abstract painting around 1910 reflected the disruption of human communication caused by the emergence of the movies. Similarly, performance art and video experiments are a response to the even deeper disruption caused by television today. Whereas the abstract

picture was a latent antipicture, performance art is the open negation of the picture as object and material.

Gerz's performances, environments, actions, and "pieces" represent an extreme form of utopian art insofar as they aim at the abolition, or dissolution, of art in genuine social intercourse between people. His criticism of specialization, banalization, and reification in contemporary life refers our imagination back to the distant past, fostering a new sensitivity for the essentials of protohistory, that is, classless forms of social existence. This utopian projection attempts to lead people back to conditions under which the separate practice of art and other forms of specialized labor, as well as the family, the state apparatus, and education, become superfluous. "Life is performance" is the exact description of the role that Marx attributes to artistic activities in a communist society. In *Deutsche Ideologie* Marx offers a statement that is significant in this context, even though it is formulated within the limits of the contemporary state of artistic affairs:

In a communist organization of society the artist will not be subjected anymore to narrow local and national restrictions which are purely the result of the division of labor. Also, the individual will not be subjected anymore to an art thus defined which forces him to be exclusively a painter, or sculptor, etc.—labels indicative not only of the narrow restrictions of his economic situation but also of his dependence on the division of labor. In a communist society there are no painters, but there may be people who paint, among other things.

In such a society art will cease to be a divided, specialized, and alienated form of labor for exchange purposes. Supplementing Marx's thoughts in the *Parisian Manuscripts*, one would rather say that art will allow the unlimited development of the natural wealth of human sensuality within the activities and experiences of everyday life and within every individual. Because "the exclusive concentration of artistic talent in a single person and the corresponding suppression of the same talent in the great masses are results of the division of labor."

Performance art subscribes to the utopian concept of recon-

ciling life and art. That is its contradiction and limitation. The removal of that contradiction is not an artistic problem, but a much larger issue involving the revolutionary transformation of our whole life, of our daily existence and its conditions. Performance art makes a radical claim for this transformation.

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# THE ARTISTS



# DAVID BOURDON

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## An Eccentric Body of Art

*In the following essay, which first appeared in 1973, David Bourdon explores the then “new art movement known as body art,” by concentrating on the work of Vito Acconci. Bourdon notes that for Acconci, who had previously written poetry and art criticism, the shift to performance “occurred during a marathon group poetry reading at Robert Rauschenberg’s loft in the late 1960s, when Acconci was asked to contribute ‘a kind of poetry/event.’ ”*

*Through descriptions of some major, early pieces including Following Piece (1969), Claim (1971), and Seedbed (1972), and through a conversation with the artist, the author identifies ideas such as the activation of space, the interaction of the artist and his spectators, and their often subsequent implication in the work itself, which are characteristic of body art.*

*Bourdon concludes: “Obviously, body art is trying to tell us something about the current state of the art world. Aesthetically, it seems to me, it does not add up to very much. But sociologically, I suspect, it is of dire importance. The frequent morbidity and masochism of body works indicate a repudiation of certain values that dominated the art world until a few years ago.”*

*David Bourdon is a senior editor at GEO and the author of books on Christo and Calder.*

On the evening of October 7, 1969, Vito Hannibal Acconci was standing on the corner of 14th Street and Broadway when he spotted a man in a tan jacket. He shadowed the stranger for three hours, and later reported the man’s movements, FBI-style, in an information sheet:

At 7:28, he entered the Italian Kitchen, 124 East 14th Street. . . . At 8:10, he entered the Academy of Music movie theatre, 126 East



40. Vito Acconci: *Following Piece*. October 1969. Street Works IV, New York. (Photographs: Betsy Jackson; courtesy Sonnabend Gallery)

14th Street. . . . At 10:05, [he] left the theatre, after seeing only parts of both movies; he walked east on 14th Street. . . . At 10:23, he entered a building, 534 East 14th Street, between Avenue A and Avenue B. (*Following Piece*)

What was the point of this activity? Acconci, New York poet-critic-artist, had determined to do a three-week-long series of "following pieces." Each day he would choose at random a person on the street and follow him wherever he went, no matter how long or far, until that person entered a private place. The next month Acconci mailed out typewritten reports on different day's outings to about two dozen figures in the New York art world. I received the one quoted above, which was inscribed "Private Piece for David Bourdon."

My reaction, aside from feeling intensely flattered that anyone would dedicate an artwork to me, was mild rage at what I took to be Acconci's gratuitous cruelty. My sympathies were entirely with his "victim," who, in addition to a solitary meal in a spaghetti parlor and a couple of dumb movies, surely had enough to worry about in getting to that apartment on a wild edge of the Lower East Side without being trailed by one of New York's most hirsute and malevolent-looking artists.

Acconci has mounted more bizarre performances. During an entire month in 1971 he waited each night at the far end of a pier from 1:00 to 2:00 A.M., having promised to reveal to anyone who cared to meet him there something that he would normally keep concealed (*Untitled Project for Pier 17*). During certain months in 1970 he invited people to visit his apartment daily at 8:00 A.M. to watch him step up and down on an 18-inch-high stool until he exhausted himself (*Step Piece*). In the relatively formal confines of a theatre he sat onstage and stared at each member of the audience—from left to right, front to back—for fifteen seconds (*Performance Test*). In the informal ambience of a museum exhibition he sporadically performed a piece in which he sidled up to spectators and stood uncomfortably close to them until they moved away (*Proximity Piece*).

Like the work of many of today's artists, Acconci's art is so immaterial and impermanent that it is known largely through documentary photographs. A great many of these photographs show Ac-



41. Vito Acconci: *Untitled Project for Pier 17*. March 27–April 24, 1971. New York. (Photographs: Kathy Dillon; courtesy Sonnabend Gallery)

conci in the buff, and most viewers are quick to realize that he is no Adonis. His physique is wiry, yet paunchy, practically smothered in body hair, and fiercely pimples on the backside. Yet there he is, sitting cross-legged, methodically biting his palm, arm, shoulder, thigh, and calf. He may look like a molting chimpanzee, but he is doing what sculptors have always endeavored to do (although not usually with their teeth), and that is to leave a clear mark. There are additional photographs of him burning the hair off his chest and pulling the bared flesh out in imitation of female breasts. And then there are video tapes of him performing "sex-change" exercises, with his penis hidden between his legs, ostensibly in an effort to learn how to move as a female.

People who are not *au courant* with recent developments in contemporary art might think Acconci belongs in a padded cell. But he is, of course, one of the major bodies in a new art movement known as *body art*—although his work has also been called "conceptual performance" and "theatrical conceptualism." His art activities have been scrupulously chronicled in most of the major art magazines, and he has been invited to exhibit himself all over the United States and in Europe.

In addition to Acconci, the school of body art boasts a few other principal figures. There is Bruce Nauman, who has made numerous video tapes of himself in his studio, performing such exercises as walking backward, bouncing in a corner, and spreading his lips with his fingers. Then there is Dennis Oppenheim, who stretched out on Jones Beach to be photographed in color with an open book spread across his bare chest; five hours later he was rephotographed, this time without the book but with a second-degree sunburn surrounding the white rectangle where the book had been. Finally, there is Terry Fox, who once drew a circle with his own blood on a dirt-covered floor, then reclined on his back in the middle of the circle, clutching various tubes filled with blood, urine, milk, and water. He lay there for six hours—trying to levitate. As the room was locked, we shall never know whether he succeeded.

The primary source of information on this new trend is the New York quarterly *Avalanche*, which devotes its entire current issue [no. 6 (Fall 1972)] to Acconci. Flipping through the pages of *Avalanche*, readers will find an unsettling number of photographs



42. Vito Acconci: *Blindfolded Catching Piece*. June 1970. New York. Black-and-white super-8 and 16mm film, 3 mins. "While I stand blindfolded, rubber balls are thrown at me, one at a time. Each time one hits me, I try to catch it (I try to anticipate when the next one will be thrown)." (Photograph: Sonnabend Gallery)

of artists making faces, trussing their tongues, and hurling their bodies onto walls.

Willoughby Sharp, the publisher of *Avalanche* and the keenest observer of the new trend, as well as its most assiduous promoter, explains that “body works are yet another move away from object sculpture” and that “the artist’s body becomes both the subject and the object of the work.” He goes on to say:

It is not surprising that under the present repressive socioeconomic situation young artists have turned to their most readily available source, themselves, for sculptural material with almost unlimited potential, capable of doing exactly what the artist wants, without the obduracy of inanimate matter.

It was my impression that artists have always been afflicted by repressive socioeconomic situations, but consider what Michelangelo and Brancusi might have accomplished if they had not wasted so much time on all that tough marble.

“Strictly speaking,” Sharp says,

it is impossible to use the body as an *object*. The only case in which a body approaches the status of an object is when it becomes a corpse. Nevertheless, several artists have proposed works that utilize cadavers while others have presented their own bodies as if they were dead.

Suspecting that this might be the first art movement to be of more consequence to coroners than to art historians, I decided to interview Acconci to see whether he was, well, still breathing.

I found him in his apartment, a sixth-floor walk-up off Christopher Street in Greenwich Village. He greeted me amiably at the door and led me through the narrow kitchen, which was piled high with empty film reels and spray cans of fixative and glue. He told me to make myself comfortable in the living room, which was rather sparsely furnished: a mattress in one corner, a pair of black step stools, and an open dictionary (*Webster’s Third New International*) spread-eagled facedown on the floor.

He talked willingly about himself and his art, slowly and emphatically enunciating his words in a harsh Bronx accent. He was born in the Bronx in 1940, studied writing at the University of Iowa, and published short stories and poems in several of the little

magazines. He palled around with that amorphous group known as the New York School of Poets and, like so many of those poets, wrote short art reviews for *ARTnews* for a couple of years. The decisive shift in his work, from poetry to performance, occurred during a marathon group poetry reading at Robert Rauschenberg's loft in the late 1960s, when Acconci was asked to contribute "a kind of poetry/event."

"But isn't it true," I snapped in my best Meet-the-Press style, "that your mother is ashamed of some of the things you've been doing?"

"I can't show my mother anything," Acconci blurted. The last thing he had shown her was the issue of *Arts* magazine with a cover story on him. (The original cover showed his bare torso, from his hairy chest to the top of his pubes; in between, his fingers poised to crush a cockroach against his belly. After the cover had been engraved, some staff members feared the offensive image might deter swank galleries from advertising their Corots and Renoirs. As a result, most of the cover was blacked out and the only thing readers saw was a postage-stamp-size image of Acconci's fingertips with the insect.) Acconci's mother did not mind the cover, but she was greatly upset by the reference to his "sex-change" piece, fearing that he might be homosexual.

"She has the magazine hidden under a pile of clothes in a trunk," Acconci said. "She was much happier when I was writing poetry. Then she could have books out on the table."

Acconci explained that his chief goal was to establish a dynamic interaction between himself and spectators. For the potential viewer of an Acconci piece, however, this interaction can sometimes be a bit perilous. In *Claim*, performed at Willoughby Sharp's loft in 1971, Acconci sat blindfolded in a chair at the foot of the basement stairs, equipped with two lead pipes and a crowbar. Hypnotizing himself into a state of "possession obsession," he threatened to bash anyone who dared to slip past him in the narrow passageway. Upstairs, on the street level of the loft, a video monitor, showing him live, was placed next to the door leading to the basement. The video monitor, he said, acted "as an informational and, more important, a warning device to people. They could see and hear me,

and from that they could decide whether they wanted to open the door and go down to the basement.

“I was talking to myself, saying, ‘I’m all alone here in the basement, and I don’t want anybody to be here with me. If anybody comes down, I’ll try to keep them out.’ And when I heard people come down, I would swing with the crowbar.”

Did anyone succeed in getting past him?

“Oh, no,” he chuckled. “It would have been impossible. If I had hit someone during the first hour, I’m sure I would have stopped, incredibly shocked. But by the third hour, if I had hit flesh, that would have been the sign that ‘this is where I have to keep hitting.’ One of the things I realized I was saying a lot around the third hour was a constant repetitive: ‘I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you.’ I developed a real devotion to this abstract principle of exclusion.”

Acconci’s most perverse encounter with spectators took place in *Seedbed*, which he performed under a sealed wooden ramp in an otherwise empty room of the Sonnabend Gallery in January 1972. The aim of the piece, as explained in hand-lettered wall posters, was to activate the room “by my presence underground . . . by my movement from point to point under the ramp.” The goal was “the scattering of seed throughout the underground area” by means of “private sexual activity,” aided by the sound of spectators’ footsteps on the ramp. “In my seclusion,” the last poster read, “I can have private images of them, talk to myself about them: my fantasies about them can excite me, enthuse me to sustain—to resume—my private sexual activity. (The seed ‘planted’ on the floor, then, is a joint result of my performance and theirs.)”

Visually, the piece was not much to look at: a 25-by-18-foot ramp rose from floor level to a height of 2 feet, where it met the wall. “What I wanted,” Acconci explained, “was a way that my presence could affect a space into and out of which people passed. I saw myself as a kind of undercurrent to whoever was there. One physical way of achieving this was to be under the floor. The ramp was the only functional way to do this.”

*Seedbed* may have been visually drab, but it was quite an earful. Twice a week, on Wednesdays and Saturdays, when Acconci

locked himself under the platform, he carried a microphone and broadcast his obscene ravings in every nuance of polymorphous perversity. One critic, who claims to have fled in horror, complained prudishly that some people actually seemed to be listening. I not only listened but also stomped across the ramp a few times, which produced whimpering pleas of: "Oh, step on me, step on me harder."

As a body artist, Acconci had surely reached a drastic conclusion, for there is no speedier way to objectify oneself than to treat one's own body as a sex object.

The real brilliance of Acconci's *Seedbed*, however, was the way in which it implicated any spectator who came into the gallery. Merely to enter the gallery was to become an accomplice to Acconci's fantasies, to be partially responsible for all those erotic mumblings and moans.

Obviously, body art is trying to tell us something about the current state of the art world. Aesthetically, it seems to me, the movement does not add up to very much. But sociologically, I suspect, it is of dire importance. The frequent morbidity and masochism of body works indicate a repudiation of certain values that dominated the art world until a few years ago. Body art is so antiestablishmentarian that philanthropists and socialites do not even bother to invite body artists to dinner.

Acconci, like most other body artists, does not expect to be richly rewarded for his work. But even he was startled when he returned home last summer, after a successful tour of Europe, with only four dollars in his pocket. Currently he subsists on a monthly stipend of four hundred dollars from the Sonnabend Gallery. The only things he has for sale are 30-by-40-inch collages (combining photographs, text, and diagrams) that sell, but not too frequently, in the one thousand dollar range. The collages are documentary, after-the-fact works, cumbersome visual records of activities that are themselves considered to be the primary artworks.

Nevertheless, Acconci is loaded with plans for the future. "The question," he said, "is how to deal with a certain space and how to apply myself to a space. So as long as there are different kinds of spaces and different kinds of possible relations and connections, I obviously can go on."

As I prepared to leave, Acconci was still talking about the various ways in which he had treated space. As an aggressive agent he had interfered with other people's space. But in his following pieces he had been "on the receiving end, where my space was being controlled by another person.

"Those following pieces varied from six-minute episodes, when someone would get into a car and I couldn't follow, to four- and five-hour episodes, when someone went to a movie or restaurant."

I reminded him that the following piece he had dedicated to me included a restaurant and a double feature.

"Oh, you got the best one!" he said gleefully.

Why was that?

"Because one of the movies had Carroll Baker in it and was called *Paranoia!*"

# VITO ACCONCI

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## Notebook: On Activity and Performance

*The work of Vito Acconci which is discussed in the preceding essay can be seen, in the notes that follow, as concepts of, conditions within, and propositions for performance. Written by the artist in 1971, these notes draw parallels to specific work from that time.*

*Under the heading “Adaptive lines of action,” Acconci writes, for example, “The performance can be set up as a learning process.” It is a proposition that serves as the basis for a number of performances, including Step Piece (1970), and illustrated here, literally, with Learning Piece (1970).*

*In the section “Deprivation, stigma, and invasion of privacy,” his suggestion that “The subject of a performance can be the control (or lack of control) of personal information” can be applied to a performance such as Untitled Project for Pier 17 (1971).*

*Several performances come to mind under the heading “Strategy and interaction”: Proximity Piece (1970), “the performer can become a parasite on the other party”; Performance Test (1970), “If the performer comes into contact with another party . . . the situation can be one that the performer assesses”; and, illustrated here, Security Zone (1971).*

*Acconci concludes, “A performance can be a series of conditional avowals, where the performer will pursue a given course of action if the other party engages (or does not engage) in another course of action,” with which we associate Following Piece (1969).*

1. *Accessibility (availability) of person.* If the artist is a performer, in action, his presence alone produces signs and marks. The information he provides necessarily concerns the source of information, himself, and cannot be solely about some absent object.

If the artist cannot be continuously on exhibit, he can present a situation on which, because of everyday living, he is required to act, wherever he may be at the time. (There might be exhibited, for example, an object that the artist must sometime or other need, and therefore go to pick up or send for; the object exhibited is there in preparation for his use.)

Generating expression—and hence making the information available—need not be an official end of the action but only a side effect. The intention of the performer can be to make unwitting moves, observable behavior unoriented to the assessment of an observer.

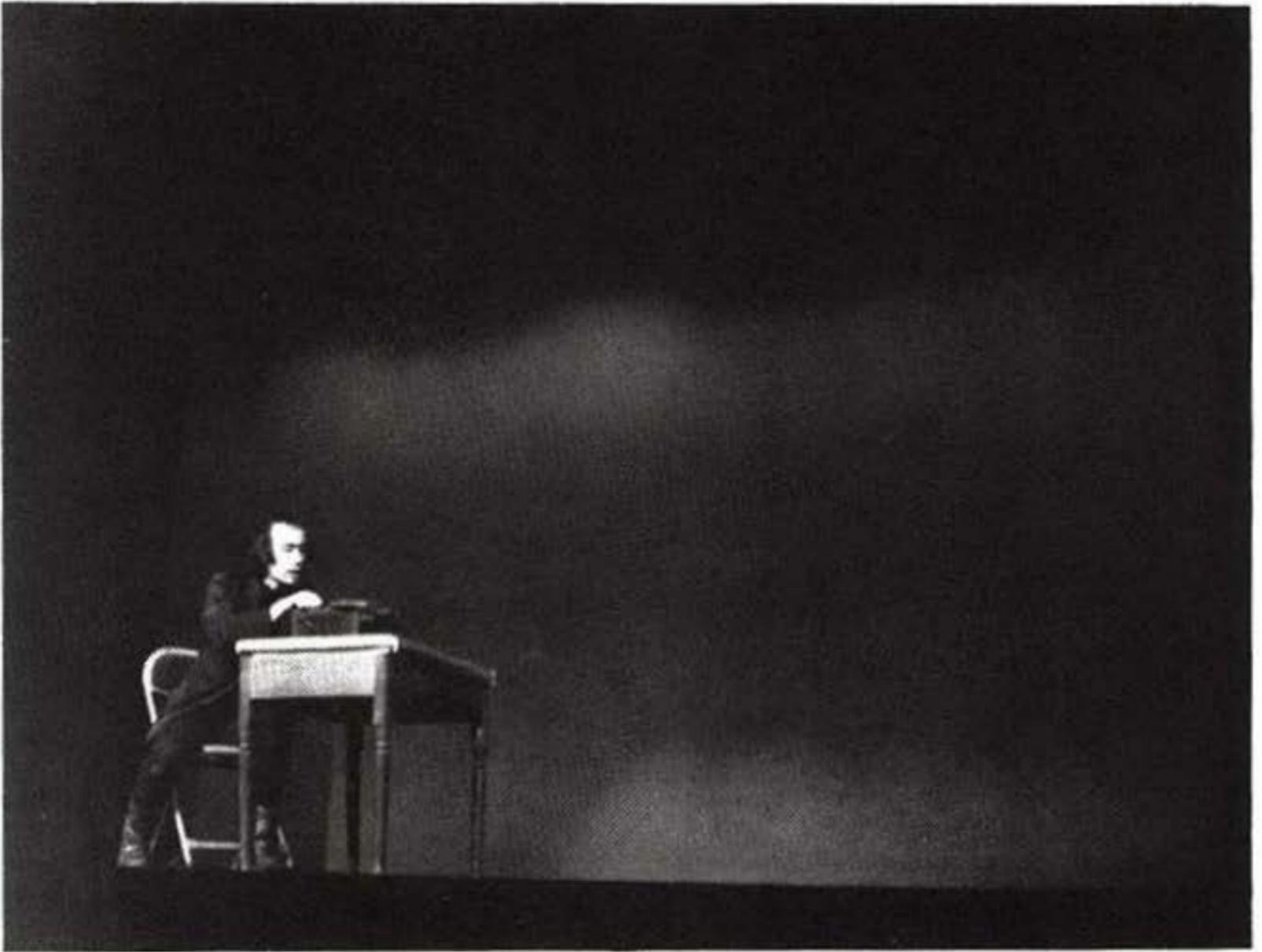
2. *Adaptive lines of action.* A performance can consist of performing (adhering to the terms of) a particular element (a rule, a space, a previous performance, another person). The performer can balance between tactics, selecting an immediate action from his available repertoire, and strategy, choosing where he wishes to be at a future time.

The performance can be set up as a learning process. When the performer makes a move, the consequences of his behavior can control his next move. The use of feedback can steady and bring into unison one stage of the performance, after which can come change as new material is imported and adapted to.

The performer can work as a producer; the performance pattern can be linear—a series of additions of material and energy. Or he can work as a consumer.

3. *Drift.* If there is a lag in feedback, the direction of the performance can be changed. A line of action can be weakened by emergent forces in the surrounding field; the consequences of an action can become increasingly unpredictable.

The performance can begin with an alarm reaction to a stimulus, when the performer is groping because he has not yet specifically developed a system to cope with the task at hand. The performance can take up time as the performer goes through a stage of



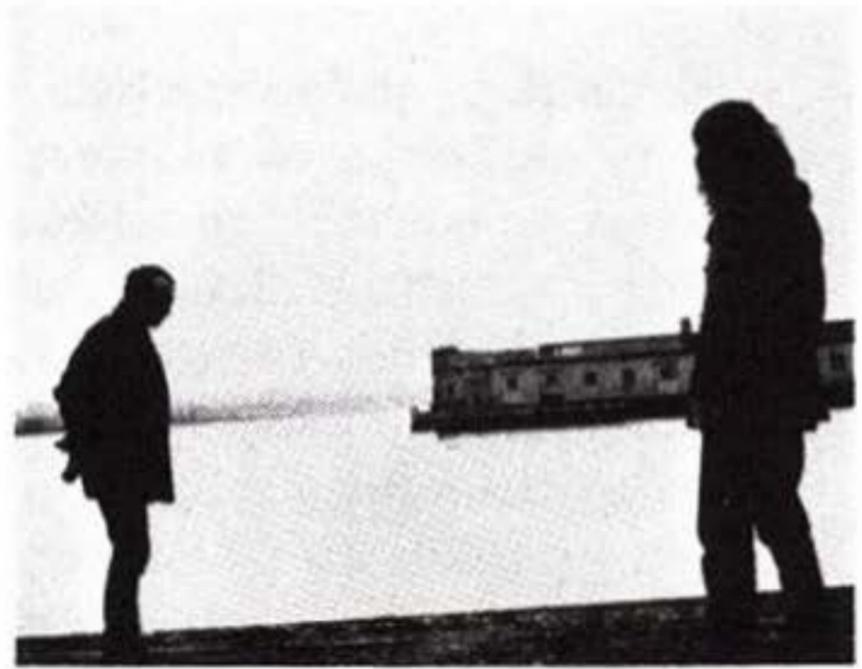
43. Vito Acconci: *Learning Piece*. April 1970. Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut. Time: 1 hr. "Playing, on tape, the first two phrases of Leadbelly's 'Black Betty.' Repeating the two phrases and singing along with them until I judge that I've gotten the feel of Leadbelly's performance, that I'm into him, with him. Going back and adding two phrases at a time until the entire song is learned." (Photograph: Bernadette Mayer; courtesy Sonnabend Gallery)

resistance and adaptation, developing a specific channel of defense. The performance can continue to a stage of exhaustion, when the specific channel of adaptation is broken down.

The exhaustion is reversible if the performer can rest, as part of the performance—if he can "mark time," as things come in and out of focus—or if he can pass to another pattern.

4. *Deprivation, stigma, and invasion of privacy*. In the stage of exhaustion the performer is potentially vulnerable. A performance can provide an occasion for wearing out his channels of resistance and rules of order; it can shift into explicit focus what is ordinarily unattended to; it can produce a deprivation that calls for supernatural reactions in an attempt at stabilization.

How the performer acts, in a certain situation, can be revealed



44. Vito Acconci: *Security Zone*. February 1971. Pier 18, New York. Performed with Lee Jaffe. "1. A person is chosen as my guard and/or opposition party. He is specifically chosen; someone about whom my feelings are ambiguous, someone I don't fully trust. 2. We are alone together at the far end of the pier. I'm blindfolded, my ears are plugged, my hands are tied behind my back. 3. I walk around the pier; I attempt to gain assurance in walking around the pier (putting myself in the other person's control, testing whether I can trust in that control). The other person decides how he wants to use that trust I am forced to have in him. 4. The piece is designed for our particular relationship; it tests that relationship, works on it, can possibly improve it." (Photograph: Kathy Dillon; courtesy Sonnabend Gallery)

to be at variance with the category and attributes that are socially demanded of him. He can be reduced from a "whole" person to a "tainted" and discredited one.

The subject of a performance can be the control (or lack of control) of personal information. The performance can be a means of developing a handicap, or a stigma, that would make control more difficult.

5. *Strategy and interaction.* If the performer comes into contact with another party (another performer, or an observer), the situation can be one that the performer assesses while the other party is trying to penetrate that assessment; the other party can realize that the performer's assessment includes, as one of its features, the fact that the other party will try to penetrate it.

When assessment is the basis of an activity, the performer can become a parasite on the other party, or he can absorb him.

A performance can be a series of conditional avowals, where the performer will pursue a given course of action if the other party engages (or does not engage) in another course of action. What can be at stake in a performance is not a location (and its occupation) but the capacity to move more or less at will.

# ROBIN WHITE

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## An Interview with Terry Fox

*If we were to stretch a line between some of the initial performance activity in the late 1960s and the present moment, we would find the work of Terry Fox all along that long and not particularly level line and at both its beginning and its end. Unlike most of the artists whom we identify among the earliest to present themselves in performances in the 1970s, Fox has continued to work in this area since his first public performance in 1969, Defoliation.*

*In the catalogue for an exhibition held at the Kunstmuseum Luzern in 1982, Martin Kunz quoted from an essay written by Brenda Richardson nearly ten years earlier for an exhibition at the University Art Museum, Berkeley: "Fox has explored in his work an astonishing number and variety of means of evading or rising above the limitations of the body or corporeality: energy transformation and transference; sleep and dreaming; levitation; reincarnation; music; fasting; religious chants or mantras; melting, dissolving, dissolution (wax, liquids, smoke, dust); hypnosis; automatic writing and 'accident'; hallucination."*

*In the interview that follows, Terry Fox raises some of these salient aspects of his work, discusses his relationship to the audience, and how performance has changed since it began, refutes the idea of performance's "claim on art history," and describes performance as "an attempt at a new communication," as "direct confrontation," as "life's theatre."*

*Robin White is editor of View, a series of interview monographs on contemporary artists, and TV Magazine, a quarterly journal. She has written for Artforum and is currently working on a book about alternative television.*

ROBIN WHITE: You'll have to bring me up to date a little bit about what you've been doing. I've actually only seen one piece that you've done recently.

TERRY FOX: What was that?

RW: That was the piece that you did at the Berkeley Museum last September, with Georg de Cristel. When you were working with the—shaver.

TF: The shaver—that was my intermission.

RW: Oh!

TF: It was like a "beard harp," because Georg plays the Jew's harp. He's a Jew's harper from Innsbruck. He wanders around in Austria playing the Jew's harp. I met him when I was in Innsbruck.

RW: He wanders around—you mean, he's like a minstrel?

TF: Yes. With a bag of Jew's harps that are made for him. He wanders around with them through mountain villages and gives them out to people, teaches them to play, forms groups, and moves on. It's wonderful

RW: Yes.

TF: So, in that performance, I used these big bamboo poles—fifteen-foot bamboo poles—that I had down in the bottom space of the museum. It had to do with the architecture of the museum, how it's splayed out in a fan shape, like a deck of cards. I would whoosh these poles through the air, making a deep, breathing sound—left to right, right to left—as long as I could. And when I couldn't do it anymore, then I would take a break and put the shaver against my cheek, move my mouth, and use my mouth as a resonator and make different tones. So I could harmonize with Georg.

RW: Oh!

TF: And Georg was wandering this fan shape the whole time, giving out harps and teaching people how to play, and he would come down sometimes and we would play together and harmonize. The performance was quite long; I think it was four or five hours.

RW: God, you must have become really tired. Are you still using your body as a measurement?

TF: Yes.

RW: It seems from this piece that you are, because you used the one thing until you got tired, and then—

TF: That's always been an aspect of what I do. A lot of what I do deals with exhaustion—proceeds to exhaustion. I mean, I do

something until I can't do it anymore. For instance, a couple of years ago I played an instrument continuously for twenty-four hours in a boat on a river inside a tunnel.

RW: So the work that you're doing now still relates very much to your physical being?

TF: Well, I would say that everything I've done relates to the same thing, and my physical being has had a lot to do with it.

RW: In the past?

TF: In the past, and now.

RW: You use your body as a—as a reference, a standard of measurement.

TF: Sure. You and I both have the same body. So it's universal. It's personal and universal at the same time. Everybody has a liver—you could base work on the liver. Everybody would understand it. Or, the eye—what I'm starting to do now are works with the eye and the ear.

RW: Are you working with the ear and the eye now? In New York?

TF: I don't have any space yet. I'm trying to get space and do it. I want to make objects.

RW: You do? What kind of objects?

TF: Well, you know my performances are usually really pared down in a real simple . . .

RW: Yes.

TF: Sometimes there would be only one object, or two, or three, or four, but—like a performance involves everything I've been thinking about. It is a way of putting it all out at once, but, it ends up being a very concentrated kind of thing because I try to reduce all of the elements, you know, I am constantly reducing them. You get to the point where you only need to do one thing to convey the whole scheme of things. And it will work.

RW: Yes.

TF: Because it will be understandable.

RW: Yes.

TF: It's like the Sioux Indians, before they sing, they give a yell. And it's a one-breath yell that they give, and it's as loud as they can yell it. And in that yell is contained the whole structure of the song that they're about to sing. And, in fact, they base the song on the yell—the same sliding notes, the same harmonies, the same pitches,

the same changes that happen, in a split second in this yell, are carried out into, maybe, an hour-long song. The song is an elaboration of the yell.

RW: An amplification of this very——

TF: Yes, the song presents the material in a much slower way to somebody who's not as intensely involved in it as the singer. The singer hears all those things——

RW: In a yell.

TF: Because he's doing them. But a listener, all he hears is a crazy yell. But, if you sing that yell out, the listeners understand exactly what you did.

RW: So, the performance for you is like the song?

TF: Yes, it's like singing it.

RW: I get the impression that a lot of the work that you do has to do with exorcizing your own feelings of isolation and deprivation?

TF: Yes.

RW: The art, making the art, is a way of getting these feelings out of yourself. Without so much regard to how people would respond or what they would be able to take away from it. Perhaps not so much regard to the universal content of it. I have the impression that, for you, art is a private ritual that requires doing.

TF: I do art because I get pleasure from doing it, or I have to do it, or I need to do it, or I want to do it. I do it—I do it basically for myself.

RW: Yes.

TF: It's true that in terms of audience I don't make it accessible to them. I mean, they have to do certain things before it becomes accessible to them.

RW: What do they have to do?

TF: Well, it's like—performance has changed so much. It's almost impossible to talk about performance anymore. That word means something different from what it used to. There must be a better word, we could say *situation*. I make a situation. The actual situation is what's going on in the space we're in. And the situation involves everybody there, and there is a blend when everybody starts participating. For instance, in Montana, where I played the instrument in a boat in a tunnel for twenty-four hours, people came all twenty-four hours and sang into the tunnel, played instruments,

dropped their dogs in the water, listened with their ears against the ground. Once, in Germany, I did a performance at Documenta where the people threw stuff at me. They were throwing candy and whatever they could get and they yelled all kinds of obscene information.

RW: So, you appreciate an audience reaction, on any level.

TF: Well, for instance, take the opera. The reason you clap so loud and so long is because you've wanted to participate for two and a half hours! Finally you can stand up, you can even stand on your chair and scream out, "Bravo!" So, you get your chance to participate, but not till the very end. But to get back to talking about performance art, I think it's an endangered species. There're a few people doing it, like I'm doing it, but not many.

RW: You still are?

TF: Yes, and I still think it's a viable thing. I think that the original impetus for performance was vital, and it's still—it's really important. In fact, I think it might be more important now than it ever was. But it's so bastardized by people in and just out of art schools, that now performance has become a cliché—every performance exactly the same; you know what to expect, you know it's going to be slides, and prerecorded tape, and so on. And, who can't do that?! You know?

RW: I know.

TF: And that's the reason it's become so popular—who can't do it? But who does it relate to, what does it mean? In New York if we go to The Kitchen, it costs five dollars each, ten dollars to see somebody play a prerecorded tape, I mean, it's really ridiculous. And it's gotten to the point where the audience sits on chairs, you know, and if there are no seats available, then they close the doors. You get reservations——

RW: You can't sit on the floor?

TF: Originally performance was—for instance, my performance at Reese Palley was in between the drywall of the gallery and the real wall of the building, it was between the two walls. A real wall and a fake wall. The space was only three feet wide, and the performance was there, and people managed to fit in there. The audience took care of themselves. I always figure that if they want to stay, they'll stay. If they don't want to stay, they'll go. If they want to sit down, then they'll figure out how to do it, and if they can't

figure it out, then that's too bad for them. Or, if they watched the performance and they didn't understand it—then there's a mental block somewhere. You can't give them all that pabulum, you know, I mean, they've got some intelligence. I still feel that way. The spectators may give up all their preconceptions and just open themselves up to what I'm doing, and get out of it what they can, or, they're going to retain all their preconceptions and get out of it what they can. It may be something different. Or, maybe they're not going to get anything. Or, maybe they're going to laugh and go away. I mean, that's up to them—that has nothing to do with me. I do my best, that's my only job.

RW: How do you feel about political art?

TF: I think the only way you can do political art is to boycott or strike—you can't do it anymore by—by making something political. For example, nobody goes in the next Biennale.

RW: Right.

TF: Nobody. Everybody refuses to be in it. And then, that has some effect—but it doesn't have an effect to put a political work in the Biennale, because it's already——

RW: Because it's already been subsumed by——

TF: Yeah, it's already absorbed by it. I think good political art would be to figure out a note that people could hum to offset the subway noise, say, or sirens. If there were a way, when you heard a siren, to also create a note that would harmonize it, turn it into a pleasing combination, one that might make you feel great—that's the kind of politics I'm interested in. I mean, I really do believe that art is healing—you know, I really believe it.

RW: I agree.

TF: It's constructive, and it's vital, and it's really necessary, but it's hard to verbalize the reasons for it.

RW: I agree. I think that art is regenerating. In a psychological way, it can expand you, heal you, nourish you.

TF: I've done performances that went on for hours, and we all, the people who were there, got so close, you know, that at the end it was just—wonderful. It was like you're sorry to leave or something.

RW: Well, I think it makes quite good sense, then, to be involved in performance art. Because here is a human being, and he's up there offering, or doing something; as opposed to making an ob-

ject, and putting it up on the wall and hoping somebody can relate to it one way or another.

TF: Yes, I try to get closer than that. And it's not just a person up there, it becomes pretty organic. But—the only people that this art exists for are the people that are there. And—it's the only time the art exists.

RW: And that makes it rather special?

TF: It's like any confrontation, it's like a street accident, or a meeting, or—anything. I mean, it just happens between people who met. If you meet a friend out on the street—well, you could document that, video-tape it, photograph it, and send it to an art magazine, or put it in a gallery—but it wouldn't mean anything to anybody.

RW: No.

TF: The meeting just had something to do with the two people that were there, and it's like that with performance, too, it's only for the people who were there. Of course, you can document it if there are reasons for you to do that. But the idea that documentation is the art is totally wrong.

RW: Yes.

TF: It's like life's theatre.

RW: It's the energy that goes back and forth.

TF: And it's only for the people who are there; it's not for anybody else.

RW: So it's not a kind of art that can exist for all time. It does only exist in the time that it occurs. I think that's an interesting thing—I don't think I've ever heard anybody say that performance didn't have some claim on art history.

TF: It doesn't. The whole idea of justifying art through the centuries, saying that performance today relates to Dada and Surrealism—I mean, it doesn't at all. The impetus might have been similar in Dada, but that was a war situation, an anarchistic situation, and it has nothing to do with this art form, which is an original way of trying to communicate. This art form has to do with the day in which it originated, the seventies, not the sixties; it doesn't have to do with hippie or drug culture, either, I don't think. It really is an attempt at synthesizing communication. It's an attempt at a new communication.

RW: When did you do your first performance?



45. Terry Fox: *What Do Blind Men Dream?* April 1969. Union Street, San Francisco. "This was the second in a series of public theatre events. I discovered a beautiful blind lady and asked her to sing on a San Francisco street corner near a gigantic open pit from 5:30 p.m. until dark. Announcements were sent out, and a lot of people came. We made a recording of the work that I still have." (Photograph: Barry Klinger)

TF: I did public theatre, but those weren't really performances, they were—street situations. That was in 1969—I did one a month, and I just made announcements, printed them myself. The performances were on street corners, like one was on the corner of Fillmore and McAllister. One was indoors at Anne Halprin's studio, and it took place simultaneously with Wolf Vostell in Cologne.

RW: So, who came to them? Who did you send the announcements to?

TF: I just put them up all over, you know, stuck them up on walls—especially down south of Market, where I was. All along Third Street. Mostly just friends came. I sent some to people that I admired—artists here and in Europe. For instance, I sent Beuys every one of them. So, when I met him, he sort of knew me, already, although I hadn't really done anything in a gallery. In the one in Anne Halprin's studio, one of the chief dancers, Patrick Hickey, took over and they did whatever they wanted. I didn't have any control. But there was one that I set up—the one where I transposed a blind lady from Market Street to Union Street where she sang and played her accordion in front of a huge construction pit, from sunset until dark. The first performance I did as an art performance was at Berkeley in 1969, for "The 80's" show at the old Berkeley Museum. It was the defoliation of the jasmine plants.

RW: Oh, yes. Now, that was a very political piece. It was about Vietnam. I mean, that's what I thought.

TF: Yes. It was also designed specifically for the people that I knew would be there.

RW: Were they veterans, or were they people that would be sympathetic, or were they people that you were out to shock?

TF: They were extremely rich people who obviously supported the war in some way or another. The garden was one of their favorite places to eat lunch. If you went there on a normal day there'd be two or three very rich-looking people sitting around having lunch—having their bottle of wine there because it was beautiful; it smelled really good, it was real quiet, a wonderful place.

RW: And the museum let you do it? They didn't mind?

TF: Yeah, they let me do it. I don't think they knew how extensive it was going to be. It takes seven years for those plants to bloom, and they were in their sixth year. It was a garden—it wasn't



46. Terry Fox: *Defoliation*. 1970. University Art Museum, Berkeley, California. In front of the museum was a large garden of jasmine plants, which bloom once every seven years. They had been growing for six years and were due to blossom soon. During the opening of the exhibition "The 80's" Fox cremated these plants with a flamethrower of the type used in Vietnam to provide the wealthy people who regularly enjoyed the garden with a concrete example of the type of action they supported with their dollars and their complacency. (Photograph: Barry Klinger; courtesy the artist)

very big, it was like, eight feet by eight feet, and I burned a square—I burned the whole thing with a flamethrower, and it just left a slight border of these plants, and they ended up having to dig them all out—it destroyed them. So, then, the next day when these people came to have their lunch there, it was just a burned-out plot, you know. I mean, it was the same thing that they were doing in Vietnam. Nobody would get excited about napalming Vietnam, but you burn some flowers that *they* like to sit near, and it's like——

RW: But do you think they ever made the connection?

TF: Oh, yeah. Definitely. Definitely.

RW: There was another piece you did about Vietnam. The one with the fish, in 1970.

TF: Yes, *Turgescent Sex*. It was meant to be a political piece. It was a real, direct involvement for me, considering myself as a victim, and identifying with the Vietnamese people, and also considering myself as guilty. The fish represented the Vietnamese and also represented me. There were hundreds and hundreds of knots constricting this fish. So, what can you do? You can't do anything about the war, you could go out in the street and get shot, or you could protest and sign petitions. But nothing was working. I don't know how you felt in those times, but I really felt bad—it was because of being on the West Coast; I think emotions were stronger—I felt terrible. I wanted to release my guilt. So I tied the fish up in all these knots, and my release was to blindfold myself and untie them, releasing the fish from all these bonds. Blindfolded, I untied one knot and put this side of the rope to the left, this side to the right, and then untied the other half of the knot; if I got the strands mixed up the whole thing formed another knot, and—it was like the whole system, the whole war was like that—it was so complex and hard to—to, what do you call it—extradite yourself—

RW: Extricate?

TF: Extricate. And so that's what I did with this piece, always trying to keep the one half separate from the other, so that finally the fish could get removed from its bonds. And then taking the bonds and making a nest out of them and putting the fish in it, and wrapping the fish up with the blindfold, putting it in the nest, and then blowing smoke over it—it was like—it was just like a release, a release from guilt. And it also was personal for me, because it was a labyrinth of circumstances, you know that there must be a way to get out of it, no matter how hard it is, you really can do it—it doesn't matter if there's four hundred knots and they're tied real tight—you just have to go very slowly, one at a time. . . .

RW: Before you began work in performance, you were a painter. When you were making paintings, were you trying to deal with the same subjects or communicate the same kinds of things as you have done since you started to make performances? What I'm trying to get to is do you think that performance art is a good medium for expressing certain kinds of ideas that can't be expressed so well in painting?

TF: Yeah, that was my case, anyway. I became a painter because I started doing it—when I was in high school, I had a shed that I used as a studio, and a big easel, and a palette——

RW: Right.

TF: And books on Michelangelo. I wanted to be an artist, and an artist, to me, was a painter. I sort of got in a trap of being a painter. And continued on, even though, actually, working on a painting was extremely satisfying, the act of doing it was wonderful. But I never liked the product. And I don't think I ever did one good painting the whole time, and that was a long time, too. Ten years. When I started doing performances, I was confronting people, instead of manufacturing this object—you put it out, you put it in a gallery, nobody pays it any attention. I don't know about you, but I can't look at a painting in a gallery for longer than a few minutes even if I really like it. I might come back two or three times and look for two or three minutes each, but, I mean, to stand there for an hour, an hour and a half—in front of a painting——

RW: I think unless you're a painter, or an art historian, it's pretty hard to do.

TF: Yeah, and if you're in a gallery or a museum, you just get glutted after a while.

RW: Oh, that's for sure. Whereas in performance you're hit by the immediacy of the activity. Painting is static, and it's also timeless, it's an object and exists—forever. It's more absolute and more ideal. Performance is the opposite, it's very human.

TF: Well, sure. For me it partly came out of my living in Paris in 1968 and experiencing direct confrontation. The difference between being involved in a direct confrontation and reading about it, say, it's just so different! It's the difference between performance and painting, to me. I decided instead of making something that's permanent, or that moves away from me into another context, I could be responsible for the context of my art.

RW: I've been wanting to ask you why you would do performances that only two people can come and see? Or that no one comes to see? It would be as if it hardly existed at all, wouldn't it, if no one experienced it?

TF: The answer has to do with a kind of integrity or something that any artist has. I mean, you feel a compulsion, or a need to do this thing, and you do it. And if it happens to be a situation where

only two or three people are going to come, it certainly doesn't make a difference. You have to do it anyway, so you do it. And you learn from it. Sometimes I want to do things that are private, sometimes I want to do things that are more—public.

RW: So you don't really need feedback, then, from an audience? A lot of people who do performances—certainly theatre, or concerts—really feed off the audience, the response is back and forth, you know? The audience gets high and the musicians get higher. You don't have that kind of relationship with people who are watching? It's not that important to you?

TF: Well, I try not to pay attention at all to them, or even to look at them. In all my first performances, I never wore my glasses and that's the reason. I could see the audience, but they were sort of blurred, and I could really concentrate on what I was doing. But you definitely get feedback of sorts while you're in a performance—you can feel the atmosphere in the room—it's usually pretty tangible.

RW: Yes.

TF: My relation to the audience is that I do the things the best that I can; I'm involved in the work the most that I can be involved in it; I try and give everything to it. And if I do that, then that's all I'm responsible for, you know? They're responsible for what they get out of it.

RW: I see.

TF: And everybody gets something different out of it. Some people don't get anything out of it. They're there because it's something to go to, and——

RW: I think you really have to go with the proper attitude. It seems to me that most of your pieces are pretty long, and if anything extends over time, it requires a commitment on the part of the people watching it, if they're going to be involved in it. It's not something where you can go spend half an hour and say, "Oh, I'm losing interest now, I'm leaving"——

TF: But it is. You should have that choice. You should be able to leave if you want to. That's one reason for the length of my pieces. I did one performance on Mount Tamalpais near San Francisco in which I played an instrument in conjunction with a small plane which flew overhead . . .

RW: Right.

TF: I think it started at three, two or three, something like that. And I continued on, until nobody was there. Nobody stuck around to the end of that. It got cold and it got dark. The only person who stayed was my friend Al Wong who helped me bring the instrument up. He had the car. But there wasn't a single other person there. Well, things have just changed so much—my earlier performances, people just thought I was nuts, you know, like the first time in New York, at the Reese Palley Gallery—

RW: Right. I heard about that.

TF: I heard people saying, as they were leaving, "He's crazy, you know, he's just nuts." It wasn't the situation of the passive crowd, sitting there in silence, nobody getting up, or leaving, or even moving, until it's all over, no matter how painful it is, or how uncomfortable they are, and then tremendous applause at the end. I mean, that wasn't the point, you know, and there was no such—no such audience. And I've talked to a lot of people who've stopped doing performance, because of that reason.

RW: Why? Because the audience doesn't—

TF: Because they couldn't stand the audience anymore. Performance has been media-ized, or something, so that now it's not any different than listening to a record or watching a film, to go to a performance. Performance now is something completely different than it was before. And I'm not saying it shouldn't change, but there was a reason for it to exist in the first place, and that reason has been subverted or diluted. At the beginning it was very direct, and it didn't deal with entertainment. Entertainment wasn't a part of it at all.

RW: No.

TF: In fact, that's why at first it got a lot of bad press, because journalists thought it was boring.

RW: That's why I said that people have to go with the right attitude. They can't expect to just be entertained.

TF: But that's the attitude they have now. You go to SoHo, you pay fifteen dollars to go to The Kitchen, you sit in chairs, and you watch a performance that's done on prerecorded tape, films, slides—I think it's part of a larger problem in the whole art world. It's the pervasive influence of art schools. These things are just extensions of art-school teaching aids—slide projections and prerecorded tapes—

RW: Well, people like technology, learning how to use technology. And often the technique becomes too important, it becomes an object in itself to be able to use the technology, to make video tapes, for instance.

TF: But anybody could do that, you know.

RW: Well, it's true, anybody can.

TF: I am still interested in making tapes—I've got a real long project that I want to do on tape, but video is similar to painting, it's the same kind of restrictions. So you're going to do a performance and use a tape, and the longest tape you could get is an hour. So your performance turns out to be an hour long. And that's really stupid, you know. You have all these equipment restrictions. You have a given technology and you're seeing what you can do with it. But you can't do anything that the tape recorder can't do.

RW: No?

TF: You can only do things within the limits of the technology, and that's a—to me, that's a terrible restriction.

RW: I think for some people that restriction is an impetus, you know, it's a defining limit, and to take limits and work within them is easier than it is to work with absolute freedom, to work in this nebulous, nether area of defining everything for yourself. That's extremely difficult.

TF: Yes.

RW: And I think that's one thing that's been really hard to deal with about performance. People haven't had a clear definition of what it should be.

TF: Well, they should never have one. That is another thing that happened to performance; once an artist becomes known by people, they expect certain things from you, and communication becomes difficult. One reason for doing a long performance is that—sure, everybody comes with expectations. But even if you have expectations, if the performance is successful enough, you just drop all those; I mean, you'll be able to—to go to a new place that you have never been before.

RW: So, you have to clean out your mind.

TF: And one way to make it happen is by extended time. Those expectations get fuzzier and fuzzier, and then maybe you go through a boredom or anxiety period, and then that goes away, and then you can really get into what's going on.

RW: It seems that there's been a gradual change in the performances that you've done over the years. Now it seems to me that the means are even more spare and that your activity is directed more toward producing sound. Whereas in the past, I think—from what I understand—you worked with more objects, more elements, and elemental physical processes like water dripping, and bread-dough rising. . . . Do you know a lot about primitive sound instruments? Have you ever done any investigations into that?

TF: No. I mean, the only real instrument that I play is the saw, musical saw, singing saw.

RW: That's an instrument?

TF: Sure. And, when I was a kid, I played the accordion. I'm not so interested in instruments, though, because of the same thing we were talking about with painting or video; you're limited to the range of the instrument. Like the piano, the poor piano is just so abused, you know, in art performance. They pound it apart, burn it, drown it—it's pathetic.

RW: It was a gesture that meant something once.

TF: Of course. But I'm not concerned with music too much, and most instruments are entirely to do with musical systems; they are set up in certain scales, and they get certain tones. And no matter how broad the range is, that's what you're left with.

RW: Music is a lot more like language than sound is, more structured and logical.

TF: Yeah. It also has a lot to do with mathematics. But I'd rather be able to stretch a piano wire six blocks and see what that sounds like.

RW: Do you think sound reaches some more primitive and more basic level of consciousness than music?

TF: Yes—I mean, sound just occurs—you get it, and you can't close it out unless you're deaf; you don't have to think about it, you don't even have to be conscious that it's actually happening to you. But it's working on you. I do performances with sound, and it's more sculptural than musical; it has to do with space, filling the space or changing the space, changing the architecture of the space with sound. And moods can change; all kinds of things can happen with sound. Sound can be really deep, you know, it can be really meaningful, really—a good way to communicate.

RW: So, sound can influence the mood of a person in a space—which can influence that person's experience of a space?

TF: Or, totally change the space—completely, you know? In a limiting space, it can make the space even more constricting than it was before, or make it round where it was square before, or—I think there are all kinds of alternatives. But when I do sound work, it's always designed for the specific place where it happens.

RW: You conceive of a certain sound which will be appropriate for a certain space, and you have an idea in mind that you want to change the space and make it be a certain way, and you know what way you want it to be?

TF: Not always, no. I don't know, in the beginning, really what's going to happen. Like that piece I did in Montana. I played a very small instrument, it was a food cover that was only four inches in diameter.

RW: A food cover?

TF: Yes. I'll show it to you. I played this for twenty-four hours in that space, which was a hundred-foot-long tunnel. You could barely hear it outside, you know, it was a really dreamy sound, but this—this little thing managed to set up standing-wave patterns in there that would just create booms, that would be like a—BOOM—you know, and it was unbelievable! Another thing, most of my performances aren't done in a gallery space, they're done in other spaces.

RW: You like basements a lot, I've figured out.

TF: Yes. I like the floor, I really like to be close to the ground. Or, yes, cellars.

RW: Well, let me ask you something else—about the pieces where you were concerned with getting out of your body, transcending your physical limitations. Pieces prior to 1973. Brenda Richardson wrote about them in her catalogue for your show at Berkeley. In these, you would put yourself into a trance situation, or get to a situation of total calm, reaching a plateau of—serenity. Is there a longing to produce in yourself or in the people who are with you an escape from their physical situation?

TF: I don't think *escape* is the right word. I set up a situation, I think we talked about this before, and I feel it is a real situation. It's actually happening and is that thing.

RW: In the catalogue essay, Brenda speaks over and over again about the influence of your stay in the hospital, and your—I suppose I feel that this is something that I wouldn't necessarily like to touch on, but I think it's impossible not to touch on it——

TF: No.

RW: When you were sick, you know, your pieces seemed to be about the experience of being in the hospital, but not so much about—life and death, death and rebirth, and things like that. Was that something that you—thought about, I mean, did you feel like you'd been reborn, in a way, after you'd come out of the hospital?

TF: No, I just felt lucky!

RW: You didn't have any transcendent experiences about coming very close to death, and all these things?

TF: Oh, sure. Yes, I did. But it doesn't seem appropriate to talk about it now.

RW: But does that experience inform the way that you are

47 (*facing page*). Terry Fox: *Internal Sound*. October 1979. Bologna, Italy. The piece was performed in the former Church of Santa Lucia, empty and unused since World War II. The church is filled with dark corridors, spiraling stairwells, puddles of stagnant water, and the constant murmuring of the large pigeon population, whose droppings cover the floors. When The Museum of Modern Art decided to make a performance, I secured the use of the church as an alternative to performing in the museum. As one of the conditions for permission was that only I was to be allowed inside the structure, I resolved to use an eye-size hole in a door as the central point of my performance. I found a wooden covering over a hole in the floor that led to the crypt, which was very resonant, directly in line with the hole in the door, and about 328 feet from it. I stretched two parallel piano wires between the door and the crypt cover at chest height. The wires were attached to either side of the hole in the door at one end and to the crypt cover at the other. I placed an automobile headlight and battery inside the door just below the hole and aimed the beam toward the crypt. After twilight the headlight illuminated the path for the last two hours of the performance. The heavily rosin-coated wires were played by stroking and pulling them gently, producing a sound loud enough to be heard in the street. The words *Suono Interno* ("internal sound") were chalked on the outside of the door along with an arrow pointing to the hole so that passersby could peer in and discover the source of the sound. I played the wires six hours a day for three consecutive days. (Photograph: Enzo Pezzi; courtesy The Museum of Modern Art, New York)



now, so there's a trace of it in every performance, in everything?

TF: Oh, sure it does. Human contact is really important.

RW: We spoke earlier about the universal versus the personal and the self-referential quality in your work and how much of the universal is able to be pulled out of that. It seems that your physical being does, as you said, have a lot to do with the universal quality in your work.

TF: Yeah—well, you didn't see any of the objects I—

RW: No, I haven't.

TF: From the labyrinth. I found a metaphor for my physical being, not my body, a labyrinth. I worked with the labyrinth for years. Everything I did related to the labyrinth. In fact, my work was based exactly, almost scientifically, on it.

RW: Really? Everything was based on that?

TF: Everything. Yes. All the performances, every object I have made for six years. Like you were saying, it's really honed down, universal symbolism. The labyrinth is—I'll show it to you. All the objects are made out of the simplest kind of—nothing, you know—pieces of wire hanger and pieces of wood and—string and paper.

RW: And is the pendulum related to the labyrinth?

TF: Yes. That's a—I mean, talk about metaphor! The labyrinth itself is a metaphor—the actual labyrinth isn't really a *labyrinth*, I mean it's—it's a metaphor for something. And, so, my explorations with it were trying to discover some of the things that it's a metaphor *for*, and—

RW: Is it a—

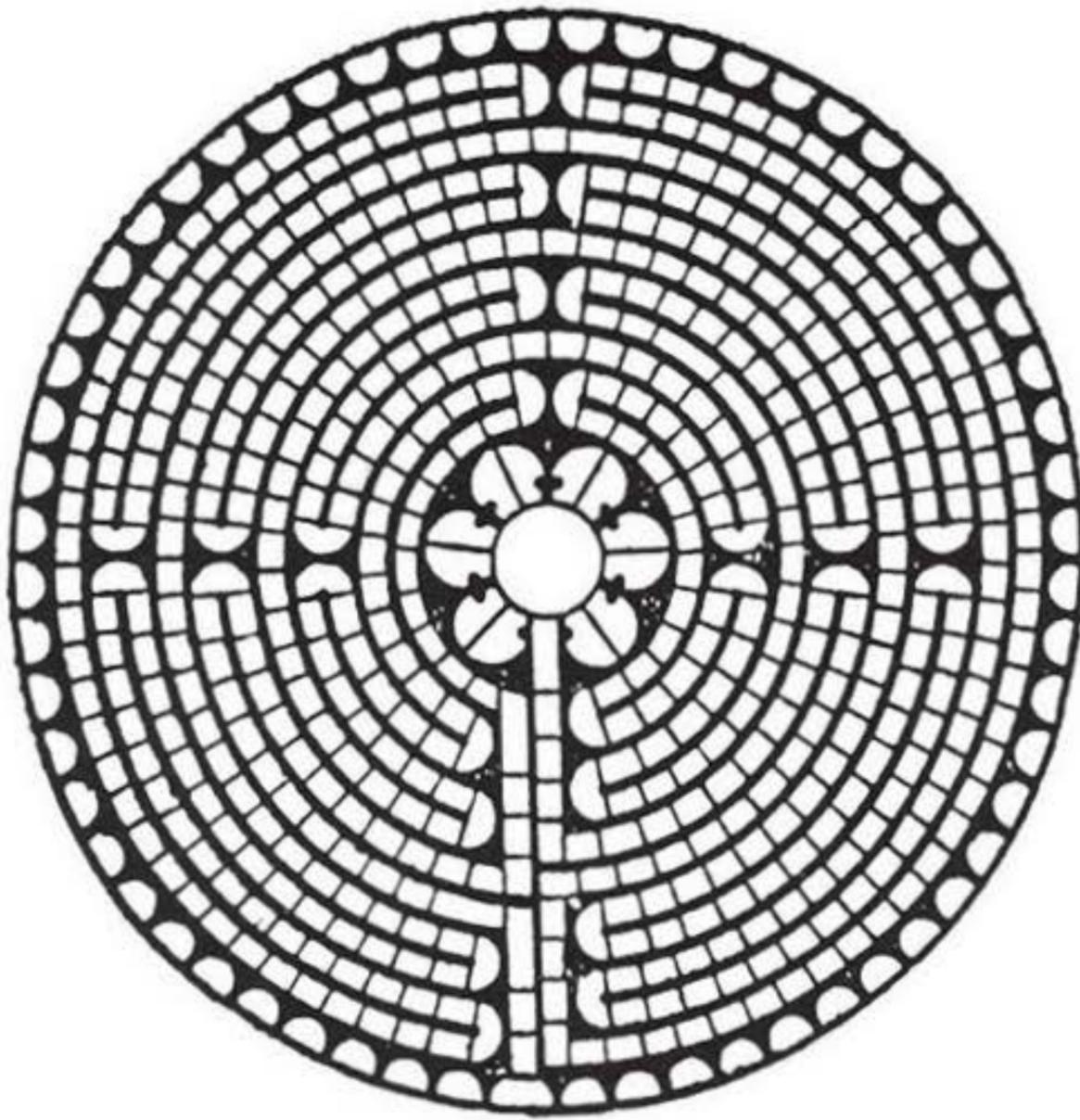
TF: The years of working with it ended up in a very bad way for me—I became—I mean, it really was an obsession. It became really obsessive. That's why I titled the show at Site, in 1977, *Metaphors for Falling*—all the objects.

RW: I see.

TF: All the objects were metaphors. I had already done the pendulum with the bowed piece of wood, the pendulum around the glass on the floor—for the show—when Kathan asked me to do the print.

RW: Oh!

TF: At the time I was working with pendulums, and I made a big sound in my studio with a pendulum; I'd had pendulums for



48. Terry Fox: *552 Steps Through 11 Pairs of Strings*. 1976. San Francisco. Time: 4½ hrs. "In this piece, based on the labyrinth in the floor of Chartres Cathedral, I stretched 11 pairs of piano wire of 11 different thicknesses across the floor of my studio. They were anchored at both ends for tuning and were stretched over wooden bridges, taking on the shape of a giant harp. The 11 pairs of wires represented the 11 concentric rings of the Chartres labyrinth, the longest pair representing the outside ring, and so on. The wires were played with a soft mallet held in one hand and a 34-foot string tied with 552 knots—the score—in the other. Each knot represented an actual step in the labyrinth. The audience was in a dark loft below my studio, with the sound coming in waves through the ceiling (my floor)." (Photograph: *View* magazine)

about a year, hand-held pendulums and all kinds of pendulums. And it just seemed natural for me to do the etching with that. I didn't know anything at all about etching; I'd never done a print, not even a potato print or anything. I'd never——

RW: And you don't make drawings, either, very often do you?

TF: Oh, I like to draw—a lot. But, I don't make big—drawings, no. Anyway, what happened is I got a book out of the library on etching, and I was reading through it and there were some really great things—and one was how you could just directly put acid on the plate. And so I thought of dripping acid from the

pendulum. And then it was—I mean, I really enjoyed doing that print a lot.

RW: It's beautiful, the print.

TF: The actual working on it was—was really something, I mean, it was really great.

RW: So the labyrinth is a metaphor for existence, for the way that life is—finding this path, from the beginning to the end.

TF: Well, I'm sure it relates a lot to existence. I mean, it interested me at first because of that hospital stuff—cycles of, you know, everybody's life goes in certain cycles. But mine were pretty short—cycle of health, cycle of sick, health, sick, health, sick—and the labyrinth is like a left, right, left, right. The most perfect labyrinth is at Chartres Cathedral, on the floor. To get in that particular labyrinth, you move up halfway towards the center, and then you turn to the left. You do a—a little quarter walk, then come back all the way to the center except you can't step into it, but you walk right around the edge of the center and after sixty-five more turns, then you go back out again. The actual labyrinth, I think, is also kind of an instrument. Because it's on the floor, and when you walk it, you make this very precise pattern in the air, and it works like a magnet, I think. Like, you could charge yourself by walking this thing.

RW: Oh!

TF: It's very long, you know.

RW: So, it gives you energy?

TF: I mean it—you're walking in space in this certain configuration that's really a lot like a magnet, you know, creating electricity. You're doing this revolving pattern and it's not mazelike. Most people associate labyrinth with mazes.

RW: Yes.

TF: You're lost and you can't find your way out. But this is a unicursal path, you don't get lost at all.

RW: Unicursal?

TF: That means an undeviating path. The actual distance from the entrance to the center is twenty feet. But it's one hundred yards to get there. And during that time, you go through every inch of space within that forty-foot-diameter circle. You've hit every inch of space, but in a revolving pattern, continually left, right, left,

right. I mean, I think that was the purpose of the labyrinth, when they built it.

RW: Yes. And now, at this time, have you, more or less—left the idea of the labyrinth in the work that you're doing?

TF: Yeah. Well, I hope I've left the labyrinth by moving here.

RW: Well, New York, you know——

TF: From here, it's new every day.

# CHRIS BURDEN and JAN BUTTERFIELD

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## Through the Night Softly

*Chris Burden is perhaps one of the most well-known figures in performance art because of the risky and dramatic nature of his work throughout the 1970s. According to Jan Butterfield, "labeling Burden as either a 'body artist' or a 'performance artist' is to miss the point. It is not his body per se that comprises Burden's pieces—but his mind. His body is merely a tool with which to pry open the lid to the mind."*

*Elsewhere in this book ("Performance Art's Coming of Age," pp. 145–146) Wayne Enstice cites situations in Burden's work "which at their most extreme threatened him with the very real prospect of bodily injury or death."*

*Butterfield writes that although physical or mental danger is present in much of Burden's work, "It is the presence of this danger, the fear of it, and the resulting apprehension around which his works are structured. The pieces are highly controlled, however, and the actual risks are minimal."*

*Burden himself has stated, "I don't think I am trying to commit suicide. I think my art is an inquiry, which is what all art is about."*

*In the following essay Chris Burden describes ten of his major pieces, done between 1971 and 1974. Jan Butterfield's analysis follows alongside on the left-hand page.*

*Jan Butterfield is a critic who specializes in the art of the West Coast and a lecturer in contemporary art and criticism at the San Francisco Art Institute. Her book about the Southern California phenomenological artists, *Context: Light and Space as Art*, will be published in the spring of 1983.*

My art is an examination of reality. By setting up aberrant situations, my art functions on a higher reality, in a different state. I live for those times.

I don't think I am trying to commit suicide. I think my art is an *inquiry*, which is what *all* art is about.

—CHRIS BURDEN, 1974

Art doesn't have a purpose. It's a free spot in society, where you can do anything. I don't think my pieces provide answers, they just ask questions, they don't have an end in themselves. But they certainly raise questions.

—CHRIS BURDEN

The energy manifested by Chris Burden's pieces is uncannily palpable, its lack of visibility notwithstanding. In a multiplicity of forms it comprises a key portion of his art. The energy that emanates from his works fills up his spaces, communicating itself to participants in a variety of ways, depending on individual receptivity or societal rigidity. It is not always easy to deal with.

Burden's works function on "a higher reality." In presenting public situations in which he functions—protected, removed, and unchallenged—Burden transcends, confounds, and threatens. His private spaces and psychic distances embarrass because they are not easily understood; we can neither share them nor fill them with ourselves. His inquiries frighten because they tell of things we do not want to know or cannot deal with. His fantasies alarm because they are activated. Burden's art asks for "willing suspension of disbelief," for the entertainment of "What if?"—for holding open categories. Pragmatically trained, logically structured, rigidly educated, we find this difficult to do.

Burden received his B.A. degree from Pomona College, Claremont, California, in 1969, where he took courses from John Mason, Mowry Baden, and David Grey. In 1969 he went on to the University of California at Irvine, where he received his M.F.A. in 1971. The Irvine period was fortunate. Nineteen sixty-nine marked the first year of its graduate program under the tutelage of a number of important teachers, among them Robert Irwin, Tony de Lapp, Larry Bell, John Mason, Craig Kauffman, Barbara Rose, and Robert Morris.

As an undergraduate sculpture major, Burden had been making clean, Minimal pieces with handsome surfaces. Bored with those, he executed a group of outdoor pieces and a series of "apparatus pieces," involving spectator participation. In February 1971 Burden had an exhibition at F-Space gallery in Santa Ana, California, for which he created an untitled and still undocumented work.

After having climbed rather precariously up to the swaying platform, spectators, who were at this point already somewhat disoriented, were hit with the curious vision of the sky and the crisp jolt of cold night air, which wafted through the scope onto the face. This piece marked the beginning of the curious kind of remove that has become a hallmark of Burden's pieces as well as an odd kind of spectator participation. As people came into the gallery, individual

*I took most of my courses from Irwin. Tony de Lapp held classes—and he was really the most formal. But Irwin was a lot cooler—he would just come to the studio about once every two months and spend whole days at a time. It was really good, because it was on a one-to-one basis. He would come by for a whole week, and sort of do a total head blitz and then leave. You had to sign up for classes, but I just signed up for about three or four with Irwin; that just kind of took care of school. Most of the time I didn't really see anybody else until the end of the year.*

*Five-Day Locker Piece (University of California, Irvine, April 26–30, 1971). I was locked in Locker 5 for five consecutive days and did not leave the locker during this time. The locker measured 2 feet high, 2 feet wide, and 3 feet deep. I stopped eating several days prior to entry. The locker directly above me contained five gallons of bottled water; the locker below me contained an empty five-gallon bottle.*

*“It was kind of weird really,” Burden says. “The students were all kind of defending me and Conlon was sort of trying to knock me down, and there I was shut up in there, and they were arguing with the art. I was kind of nice really. It was one of the nicer moments.*

*“About 10:30 P.M. the doors were locked and people could no longer come in the building. That was the most frightening period. I had this fantasy, though, that I could always kick the door out. Some nights my wife would sleep on the floor outside in case I really flipped out or something. It was pretty strange. One night the janitor came by and he couldn't figure out what she was doing there.*

*“The important part to remember was that I had set it up. I could foresee the end too (it was not an open-ended situation, which is partially what creates fear). It was not something that was thrust upon me, but rather something I imposed upon myself like a task. I think a part of it is . . . you just keep telling yourself that you just have to wait, because time will ultimately take care of it, that it is inevitable, and that this moment is no more fearful than those that went on before. The first part of the pieces is always the hardest. Once I have passed the halfway point, then I am already there and I know I can certainly make it through the next half. The beginning is pretty shocking. That's when I begin to have all the doubts and stuff, but once I am really into it and halfway through it, it's easy.*

Polaroid photographs were taken of them and kept, without explanation, thus linking the spectators inextricably with the piece. In addition, Burden sat at the far end of the gallery, locked in the bathroom on a little wooden box. A fisheye lens was installed backward into the door so that people could come in and look at him, but he could not see out. "There was," he says, "a nice kind of Peeping Tom aspect to it."

In April 1971 Burden began the *Five-Day Locker Piece*, which marked the beginning of his major work. The piece was executed in partial fulfillment of his master's degree at Irvine, which required graduating students to exhibit works in the gallery.

Word spread quickly on the campus grapevine that a piece of more than usual interest was taking place in the gallery. Students from all over the campus came to the locker to see what was going on. Professors from the art department held classes in front of the locker, including Burden in the discussions. Some, such as New York painter Bill Conlon, initiated group dialogues around the locker.

Burden is extremely soft-spoken, low-key, and matter-of-fact. His vocabulary seldom includes such loaded words as *panic*, *terror*, or *hysteria*. Throughout a discussion of his works, he remains unemotional, exhibiting the quiet sense of control that has become a hallmark of his pieces.

After the termination of *Five-Day Locker Piece*, Burden did *Shout Piece* at F-Space, on August 21, 1971. In this work he sat on a platform 14 feet above the floor, covered with red body paint and illuminated by movie lights. When the people who had received invitations to the exhibition got there, they were aurally bombarded by Burden's voice, which was amplified by three large speakers, repeating over and over again: "Get the fuck out *immediately*. Get the fuck out *immediately*." Faced with physical rejection and with the artist's own presence, most left instantaneously.

As a result of his sculptural training, Burden's pieces have a look and a "feel" that relate them far more closely to sculptural forms than to performance pieces. From initial idea through concept and actual execution, he shapes and formulates his works based on clarity of impact. He hones and molds concepts as if they were physically tangible, discarding those that do not seem cohe-

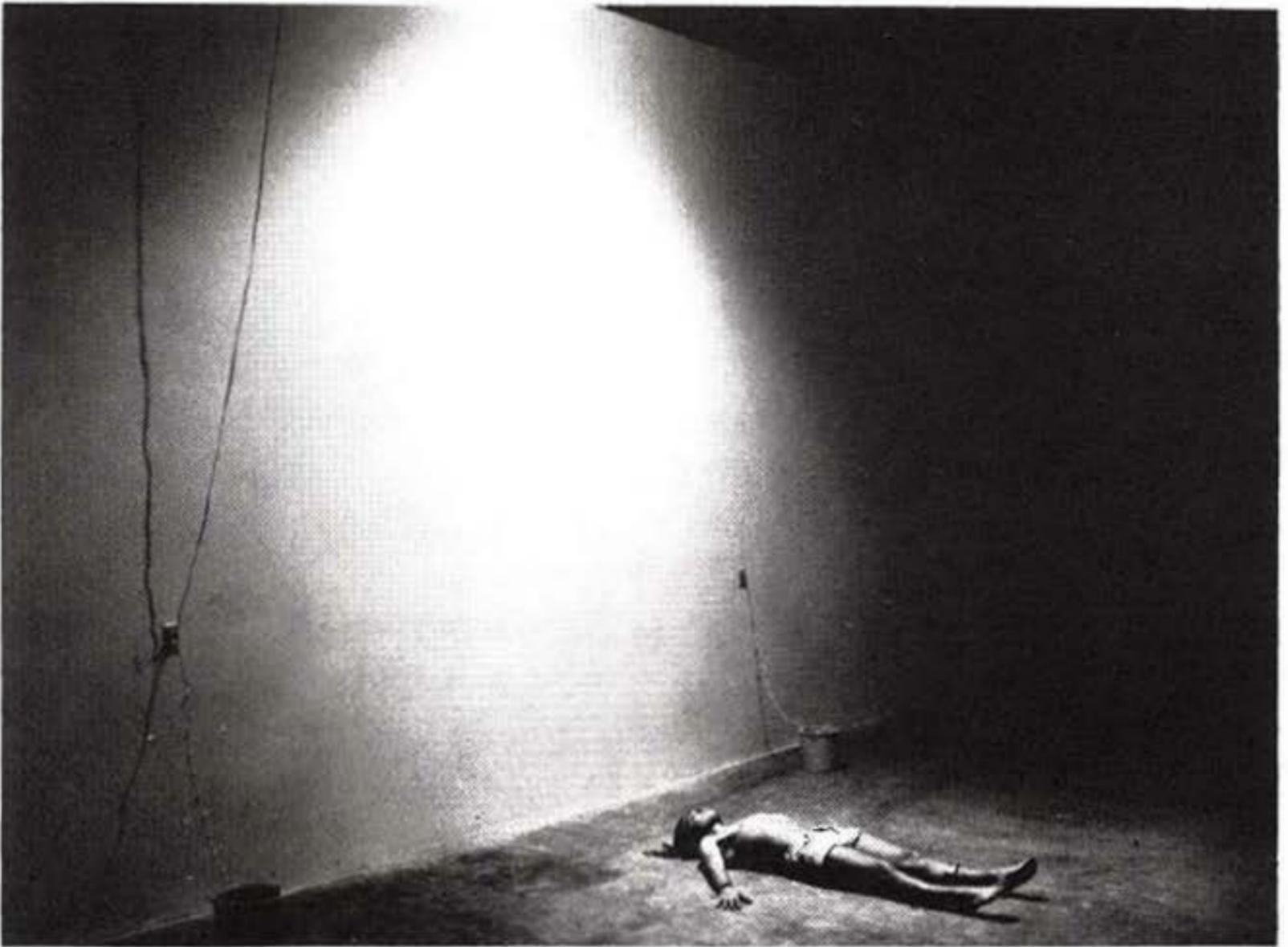
*“To be right, the pieces have to have a kind of crisp quality to them. For example, I think a lot of them are physically very frontal. Also, it is more than just a physical thing. I think of them, sense them that way too. When I think of them, I try to make them sort of clean, so that they are not formless, with a lot of separate parts. They are pretty crisp and you can read them pretty quickly, even the ones that take place over a long period of time. It’s not like a Joan Jonas dance piece where you have a lot of intricate parts that make a whole. With my pieces there is one thing and that’s it.”*

*Prelude to 220, or 110 (F-Space, September 10–12, 1971). I was strapped to the floor with copper bands bolted into the concrete. Two buckets of water with 110 lines submerged in them were placed near me. The piece was performed from 8:00 P.M. to 10:00 P.M. for three nights.*

*“People were angry at me for the Shout Piece, so in 110 I presented them with an opportunity in a sacrificial situation—to atone for the earlier piece. Not really literally, I wasn’t hoping that somebody was going to kick the buckets over, but just by putting myself in that position, it was kind of like a way of absolving myself from the last piece, which was aggressive and hostile. It was also a way of getting recruits for a piece called 220—to show them that I could do it and not be electrocuted, so that I could get others to participate in a piece with me. There was no actual danger, no taunting; if anything, people were apprehensive about getting near me. It was almost as if the buckets were repulsive magnets. Most people stayed very far away. I would talk to people and they would sort of come up gingerly, but they all stayed really very far away as if the floor were littered with banana peels and they might at any point slip and kick the buckets over.*

*“I never feel like I’m taking risks. What the pieces are about is what is going to happen. Danger and pain are catalysts—to hype things up. That’s important. The object is to see how I can deal with them. The fear is a lot worse than the actual deed.*

*“Dealing with it psychologically, I have fear, but once I have set it up, as far as I am concerned, it is inevitable. It is something that is going to happen anyway. Time ticks by and it is going to happen at a certain hour, whatever it is. Sometimes I can feel myself getting really knotted up about it, and I just have to relax be-*



49. Chris Burden: *Prelude to 220, or 110*. September 1971. F-Space, Santa Ana, California. (Photograph: Alfred Lutjeans; courtesy the artist)

sive enough or that he feels are spread too thin. The gestalt must be instantly perceivable; the works must hold together as a single unit.

*Prelude to 220, or 110* was one of the most dramatic and, along with *Shoot*, done shortly thereafter, and *Doorway to Heaven*, executed in late 1974, it was one of the few pieces that presented elements of very real danger. In each case, however, the odds against the presented dangers becoming actual were very slim, more akin perhaps to those taken by a skilled circus aerialist who works without a net than to the risk-taking attitude of Evel Knievel with whose name Burden has regrettably been linked.

That physical or mental danger is possible in many of Burden's pieces cannot be denied. It is the presence of this danger, the fear of it, and the resulting apprehension around which his works are structured. The pieces are highly controlled, however, and the actual risks are minimal.

In fact, it is that terror, that thrill, that anxiety, that makes Burden's pieces impact. The seemingly masochistic element is the most misunderstood. Burden's control over his mind and body is a

cause I know it is inevitable. The hardest time is when I am deciding whether to do a piece or not, because once I make a decision to do it, then I have decided—that's the real turning point. It's a commitment. That's the crux of it right then.

"The thought comes before the conception. The satisfaction is trying to figure out something I feel right about, something that seems strong and correct. That part is always a struggle. That part is really hard and I get nervous about it. Once I have figured out all of the parts and how I want it to go together, and I have a conception of it (when the piece is actually finished in my head), then it is a matter of actually executing it. That is the fairly mechanical part of it. The hardest part really is trying to conceive something and struggling with it. Then the rest is, well, the rest is really the good part."

220 (F-Space, October 9, 1971). The gallery was flooded with 12 inches of water. Three other people and I waded through the water and climbed onto 14-foot ladders, one ladder per person. After everyone was positioned, I dropped a 220 electric line into the water. The piece lasted from midnight until dawn, about six hours. There was no audience except for the participants.

"The piece was an experiment in what would happen. It was a kind of artificial 'men in a life raft' situation. The thing I was attempting to set up was a hyped-up situation with high danger, which would keep them awake, confessing, and talking, but it didn't, really. After about two and a half hours everybody got really sleepy. They would kind of lean on their ladders by hooking their arms around, and go to sleep. It was surprising that anyone could sleep, but we all did intermittently. There was a circuit breaker outside the building and my wife came in at six in the morning and turned it off and opened the door. I think everyone enjoyed it in a weird sort of way. I think they had some of the feelings that I had had, you know? They felt kind of elated, like they had really done something."

Bed Piece (Market Street, Venice, California, February 18–March 10, 1972). Josh Young asked me to do a piece for the Market Street Program from February 18 to March 10. I told him I would need a single bed in the gallery. At noon on February 18, I took off my clothes and got into bed. I had given no other instructions and did not speak to anyone during the piece.

rigidly ascetic one. If there is the thrill of the high-wire aerialist, there is also the restrained withdrawal of the Zen student or the Indian fakir. His works do not make a deliberate attempt to terminate life or to maim the body but, rather, set up situations where *but* for the control, these things could happen.

220 remains the single aberrational piece in the entire body of thirty-one pieces. All of his works before and since have dealt with controlled "knowns," situations or tasks that the artist set for himself to deal with, overcome, or experience. An important factor of his works is the psychic and physical control by which he avoids physical or mental harm. It is difficult, however, to assume that this control can be transferred to others participating in the same situation. In introducing others into this work he subjected them to very real danger, which he had no assurance they could handle. In spite of the fact that the participants were involved of their own volition, I think the question of morality must be strongly raised in connection with this piece.

*Bed Piece* remains the most important of Burden's early pieces. Because it did not initially appear as extreme as *Five-Day Locker Piece*, it lacked the sensational overtones that his work eventually took on. *Bed Piece* was also far more extensive in terms of both its investigations and its implications. If certain aspects of systemic questioning were inherent in *Locker Piece*, they existed in *Bed Piece* as well, but in far subtler and more curious ways. As the piece was neither delineated nor explained prior to execution, it necessitated many physical, practical, and psychological adjustments on the part of the gallery director.

Having agreed on a date for the piece, Burden simply arrived on the appointed day, took off his clothes, and got into bed. For twenty-two consecutive days and nights, he lay in the white-covered bed in the stark white gallery, totally isolated from the outside world, with only his own internal resources to maintain psychic stability. In its Zen-like meditative quality and resultant redefinition of existence, which obscured the boundaries between *this* existence and another, the piece, by Burden's own admission, came very close to pushing him over the edge.

In *Bed Piece*, also, there would appear to be quiet flirtations with death that manifest themselves in other pieces in a more overt

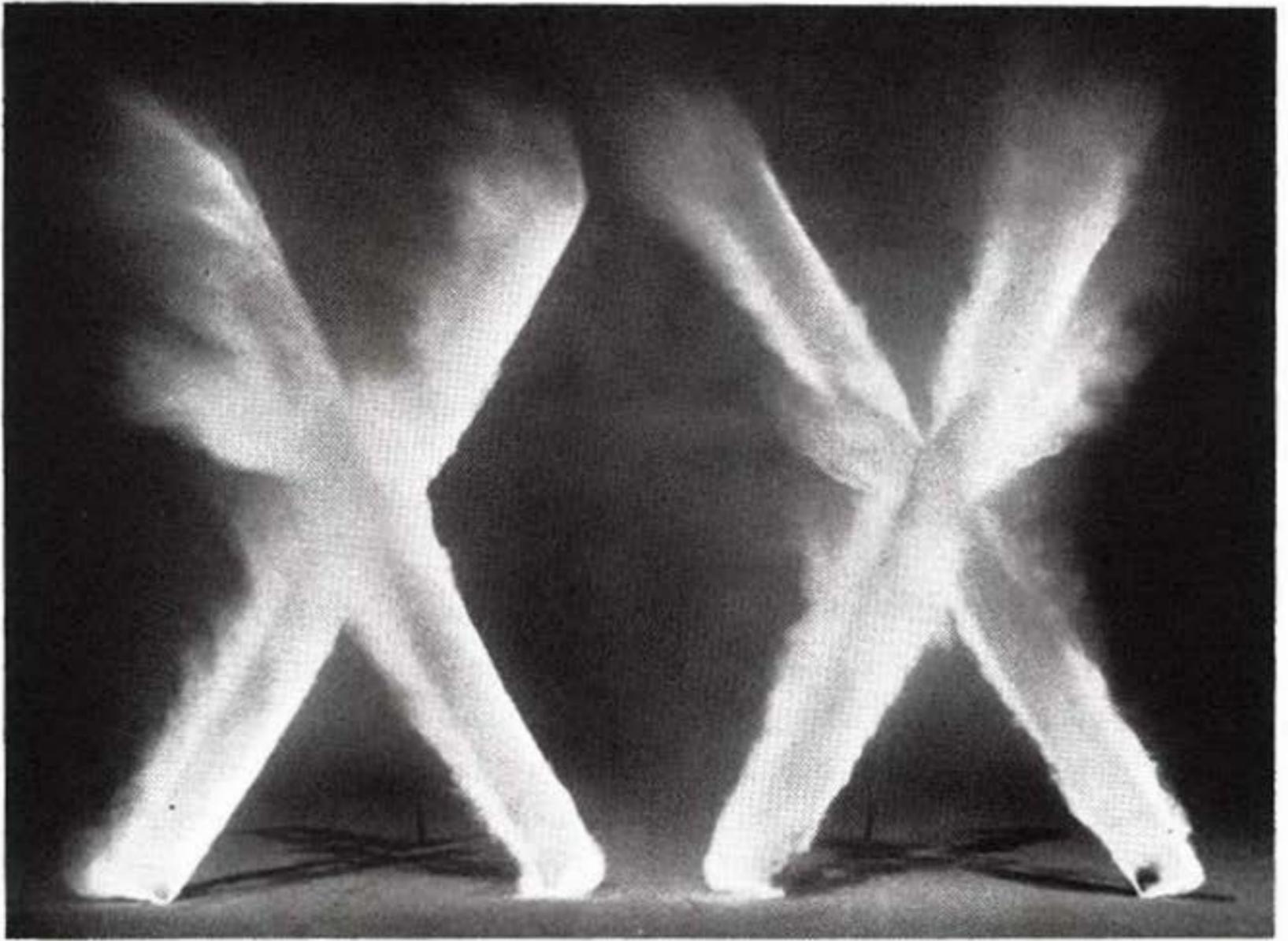
*"I started to like it there. It was really seductive. That's why I considered just staying there—because it was so much nicer than the outside world. I really started to like it, and then that's when I started thinking that I'd better be pretty sure that when the end of the exhibition came—I got up.*

*"About the death thing—I don't think so, no. It's just that the piece was very relaxing. It is very relaxing to do that and all the anxiety about everything, about what is going to happen, goes because there is nothing I can do to change it. And when that happens it is like a tremendous relief.*

*"I had started liking it there and seriously considered staying there, but I didn't because I knew I just couldn't. People were really getting upset toward the end. Stanley and Elyse Grinstein were afraid I had flipped out. Bob Irwin came in and asked me not to do anything crazy, not to let the whole thing come down on my head. I could feel this whole tension kind of building up outside. There was no outside communication and everyone thought I had gone over the edge. As the end came near, I had a sort of nostalgia about it. In the same sense that it was boring in the beginning, but I had no control over it because it was inevitable, at the end I had this nostalgia, this deep regret at having to return to normal. But it was inevitable, and I couldn't do anything to prolong or shorten it. On a certain day I had to get up and it would be over, and it would be gone."*

*Dos Equis (October 16, 1972). On the evening of October 16, I placed two XXs constructed of 16-foot beams in an upright position blocking both lanes of the Laguna Canyon Road. The timber had been soaked in gasoline for several days. I set the XXs on fire and left the area.*

*Dos Equis was just for one person. I do not know who he is or anything. He was just the first one to come upon those big XXs burning in the road. In the classical or traditional sense of going to a museum or gallery to view something maybe it was not art, not by that definition, but to me it was. For whoever saw it, it was a kind of really unforgettable experience. Those fiery crosses must really have burned into that guy's mind. Sometimes I choose to limit the number of people who see a piece because I want those people to have a really strong experience. I did this with the Icarus piece in my studio*



50. Chris Burden: *Dos Equis*. October 1972. Laguna Canyon Road, California. (Photograph: the artist; courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Inc.)

fashion. Here, they are seductive, lulling, and more subtle. In the escape into time suspension, akin to prolonged sleep, was Burden playing about the edges of death? He says not.

Because *Bed Piece* was so private, so inexplicable, it posed many questions. One remains deeply curious about his meditative state, his sensory deprivation. Are they highly pleasurable for him? If he is able successfully to “go away” and to return safely as well, the high must be incalculable. However, the paths to those states of mind are difficult, sometimes dangerous, and perhaps addictive. The withdrawal pangs must be ferocious.

By the end of the first two weeks the novelty of the piece had worn off and people began to be generally concerned about Burden’s well-being. The sheer passivity of the piece had generated a great deal of energy. The Market Street space backed up to Robert Irwin’s studio, and, in fact, shared a common wall. Burden relates that during the course of the piece Irwin stopped living there: “Just the knowledge that I was on the other side of the wall started getting to him.” A Los Angeles couple, well known for their collection and for their close relationships with artists, debated personally

*as well. It is always a toss-up whether or not it is better for a hundred people to see it casually or two people to receive it really strong."*

*Icarus (April 13, 1973). At 6:00 P.M. three invited spectators came to my studio. The room was 15 feet by 25 feet and well lit by natural light. Wearing no clothes, I entered the space from a small room at the back. Two assistants lifted onto each shoulder one end of 6-foot sheets of plate glass. The sheets sloped onto the floor at right angles from my body. The assistants poured gasoline down the sheets of glass. Stepping back they threw matches to ignite the gasoline. After a few seconds I jumped up, sending the burning glass crashing to the floor. I walked back into the room.*

*Through the Night Softly (Main Street, Los Angeles, September 12, 1973). Holding my hands behind my back, I crawled through 50 feet of broken glass. There were very few spectators, most of them passersby. This piece was documented with a 16mm film.*

*Doorway to Heaven (November 15, 1973). At 6:00 P.M. I stood in the doorway of my studio facing the Venice Boardwalk, a few spectators watched as I pushed two live electric wires into my chest. The wires crossed and exploded, burning me but saving me from electrocution.*

*"That [danger] is something I have been thinking a great deal about. I don't know—I guess there was a lot more danger in that piece than I would admit to myself at the time. That's one of those things, you know? I started fooling around with the wires and I really liked the way they exploded and I wanted to do something, to relate it to me. For a long time I thought about pushing them into me and stuff, but there was the very real problem that I could get electrocuted. And then, finally, I had this idea that just as the wires went together they would pop and then they would go into me, and maybe I would get shocked, but the pain from the burst and the explosion would jerk my hands away and save me."*

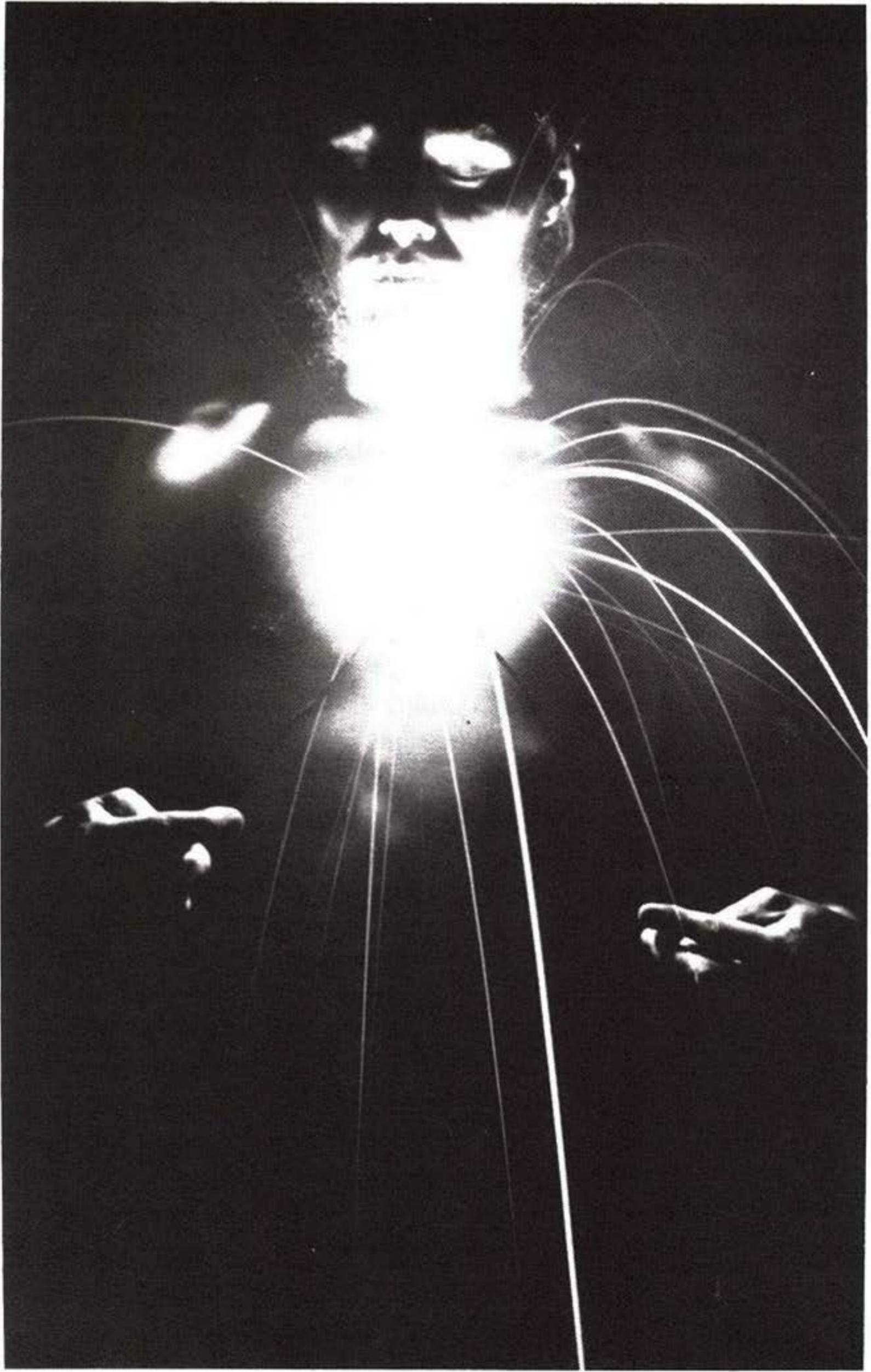
*Trans-Fixed (Venice, California, April 23, 1974). Inside a small garage on Speedway Avenue, I stood on the rear bumper of a Volkswagen. I lay on my back over the rear section of the car, stretching*



51. Chris Burden: *Icarus*. April 1973. Venice, California. (Photograph: Barbara Burden; courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Inc.)



52. Chris Burden: *Through the Night Softly*. September 1973. Main Street, Los Angeles, California. (Photograph: Charles Hill; courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Inc.)



53. Chris Burden: *Doorway to Heaven*. November 1973. Venice, California. (Photograph: Charles Hill; courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Inc.)

about “pulling him out of it,” but apparently made the moral/artistic judgment not to do so.

In addition to individual inquiry, altered states of consciousness, and disruption of systemic procedures, the majority of Burden’s pieces are visually quite beautiful. In many, such as *Icarus*, there are symbolic overtones as well.

By the end of 1973, a large portion of Burden’s pieces had become extremely lyrical. Having executed a number of very aggressive pieces—such as the much publicized *Shoot*, which backfired and painfully wounded him, or *Deadman*, rolled in a tarp on a busy night street, as well as *747*, in which he shot at a jet plane—his works began to mature by dealing with their extension and investigations in different forms. Among the most beautiful of the later pieces was *Through the Night Softly*, which dealt with visual fantasy as well as with the necessity for raising the threshold of pain.

Across the black asphalt pavement of a parking lot, Burden, virtually naked and in the dark of night, crawled his way painfully and tortuously across the tiny, twinkling fragments of glass, breathing with great difficulty, and bleeding from numerous small cuts. The resulting film is both beautiful in its impact and terrifying in its implications, not all of which the viewer is privy to. Here, as in other works such as *110*, *Icarus*, and later *Back to You*, the elements of sacrifice or atonement became overriding aspects.

Three later works, *Doorway to Heaven*, *Trans-Fixed*, and *Oh, Dracula*, while still concerned with psychic extensions, deal almost ironically with sacrifice, ironically in the sense that by definition the term *sacrifice* demands a martyr for the cause, and in Burden’s case the cause is all too often misunderstood.

If among the most beautiful, *Doorway to Heaven* is also the most personally immoral, its sacrificial element too close for comfort. It is the kind of piece that leaves Burden wide open to charges of sensational masochism or even of insanity.

*Trans-Fixed* is a purely sacrificial piece. Without actual or real danger, it is a classic example of the kinds of situations Burden sets up, which *appear* quite terrifying, setting up tension and fear in the viewer, but which, in reality, present only scant dangers for him.

This work, a “crucifixion piece,” was, like all the others, un-



54. Chris Burden: *Trans-Fixed* (detail). April 1974. Venice, California. (Photograph courtesy the artist)

*my arms onto the roof. Nails were driven through my palms onto the roof of the car. The garage door was opened and the car was pushed halfway out into the speedway. Screaming for me, the engine was run at full speed for two minutes. After two minutes the engine was turned off and the car pushed back into the garage. The door was closed.*

*Sculpture in Three Parts (Hansen-Fuller Gallery, September 10–21, 1974). I sat on a small metal stool placed on a sculpture stand directly in front of the gallery entrance, and elevator door. A sign on the stand read “Sculpture in Three Parts. I will sit on this chair from 10:30 A.M. 9/10/74 until I fall off.” About ten feet away, a camera was constantly attended by changing photographers waiting to take a photograph as I fell. I sat in the chair for forty-three hours. When I fell, a chalk outline was drawn on the floor around my body. I wrote “forever” inside the outline. I placed another sign on the stand, which read “I sat on this chair from 10:30 A.M. 9/10/74 until I fell off at 5:25 A.M. 9/12/74.” The chair, stand, and outline remained on exhibit until September 21.*

dertaken with great care and thought beforehand. Burden and several friends shopped in hardware stores for the correct size of nail to be driven through his hands, nails that were later sterilized to minimize the chance of infection and sharpened for easier entry. There was little or no blood, and little pain. The nails went quickly through the hands, which consist primarily of cartilage. Burden says that the most insurmountable portion of the work was not the enduring of the piece itself but rather the necessity to maintain calm in the assistants, who were to help with the car and the garage door, as well as to convince the person who was to drive in the nails “not to choke up on the hammer.”

*Sculpture in Three Parts* tended on the surface to impact less perhaps than any of the previous pieces, but in fact the reverse was true. Riding up in the elevator to the gallery one found the elevator doors opening instantly upon Burden's piece, placed frontally so that he stared directly at the viewer, who could not escape him. Unlike the majority of other pieces, he made eye contact in a blank and curious way, as if he had just been aroused from sleep and found the intrusion both slightly incomprehensible and somewhat of an affront.

It becomes obvious that labeling Burden as either a “body artist” or a “performance artist” is to miss the point. It is not his body per se that comprises Burden's pieces—but his mind. The emphasis is always on those extensions in which he must exist in order to pursue the works he has set up. His body is merely a tool with which to pry open the lid to the mind.

The presence in Burden's works is sensed but not seen. It is a reality in which few can participate. He deals with a variety of barriers—real, psychic, or societal—that set up deliberate stumbling blocks along the path of our knowledge. Even when on occasion it is possible to slip in through the crack between our reality and his, there is the very real problem of whether we can handle it when we are there, and if we can satisfactorily find our way back again. If one has to ask “Why bother?” all other questions are moot. The point is that Burden's art allows us to entertain “What if?” and at the same time shines a light through the night by which we *may see*, if we should choose to do so.



55 and 56. Chris Burden: *Sculpture in Three Parts*. September 1974. Hansen-Fuller Gallery, San Francisco, California. (Photographs: Barbara Burden; courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Inc.)

Oh, Dracula (*Utah Museum of Fine Arts, Salt Lake City, October 7, 1974*). I was invited to do a piece in the foyer of the Utah Museum by the director, E. F. Sanguinetti. The room was filled with Renaissance paintings of religious subjects. Using strips of adhesive tape, I made a large chrysalis for my body. I was mounted on the wall replacing one of the paintings. A lighted candle was placed on the floor beneath my head, and another at my feet. An engraved plaque, similar to those identifying the paintings, giving my name, title of the piece, and the date was placed on the wall. I remained in the chrysalis during museum hours, 9:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. on October 7.

# LES LEVINE

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## Artistic

*Audience response to performance artworks is generally more aggressive and active than response to other visual art forms, such as painting or sculpture. The responses to performance involve dissatisfaction, anxiety, noncommunication, boredom, and consciousness, to name just a few that are discussed in this essay by the media artist Les Levine. Referring to his own works, including Space Walk and Trans-action, Levine analyzes these responses on an immediate and personal level.*

*Levine has exhibited his sculptures, video art, environmental art, and what he calls "media art" widely and has written numerous essays on contemporary art and media.*

What the audience expects from the artist is that you be some heroic figure, which they can look up to. They want you to say, "I'm the greatest fucking artist you have ever seen. I'm the greatest." But as soon as you've said it, the very instant you say it, they say to you, "Look at that artist saying such awful, pretentious, ugly things about himself." But they still have to have the satisfaction of your presenting yourself as a hero.

When you present yourself in such a way that you say, "Here I am trying to sing before you. I can't sing, but I'm trying to sing. And it's totally obvious that I can't sing," then you're no better than they are. That's the way they are. They know they can't sing. Here you are doing what they can do, doing exactly what they do, and you're not being any better than they. You're not allowing yourself to be any better for them. They're embarrassed that you're not any better than they are. They're also irritated, you're not any better than they are. They've relegated everything to professionals. They assume that if you can't sing, you're not supposed to sing. Only doctors are supposed to know about medicine, only newspapermen know anything about newspapers. The system knows only

about itself. Nobody else knows about it. So a person who's not a singer, couldn't sing. That's out of the question. They have this sort of middle-class conception about specialists. And they want the artist to be a specialist. That's what they want from him, that he not fall down on his job. So when they're embarrassed by his being no better than they are, they don't just assume that, indeed, maybe he is no better than they are. They won't accept that. They won't accept the artist saying, "I'm not better than you. I'm just as fucked up as you are."

What they will say is, "He's gone mad." Because being no better than they are is a state of madness. As far as they can see, being no better than they are is totally mad. "He is an absolute psychological case. That man needs treatment." Because they all need treatment. They need the treatment, and now you've given them something that is a serious problem. Now you've given them a model of yourself as themselves. They have some understanding of that model and they start to see that model. So at that point they just automatically assume that something has gone wrong, that they are not witnessing what they are supposed to witness. Their mind will not allow them to authenticate the experience they're having at that time.

It's being dissatisfied with their situation, and the reason they got themselves into that situation in the first place was being dissatisfied with whatever they were doing before.

So the artist is going to straighten it out for us. The artist will show us how to see. The artist will see for us. But the artist tells you he can't see any better than you can.

It's the condition of being alive. The relationship between the artist and whomever is more a universal relationship between everybody and his condition. So the state of dissatisfaction is a universal state for both the artist and the audience, only it's the artist who's pointing it out.

The artist in that situation has got to do something absolute. An absolute form in itself. It can't be questionable. I mean it can be interesting or boring, or randomly exciting, or new or fresh, or dramatic or undramatic. It can be all of those things, but it's got to be them spontaneously. It can't be made to be them. It has got to be those things because that's what it is, that's the nature

of it to be that way. Because when you have decided you will absorb the energy of the audience, and persuade the audience to come toward you in such a way that you absorb the audience's anxiety and present the audience back with the anxiety, that has to be a totally genuine thing.

If it's not a totally genuine thing, if you're attempting to conjure it in any way, I don't think it would work. I think it would be a mess. In that kind of a situation you have got to act as a kind of open screen or open vessel for their vibrations at that given moment. And that's what you've got to feed back. It can't be anything you've essentially created.

It's so far-out, the idea that creativity itself is the most negative aspect of art. That's really beautiful. The artist in creating or attempting to create something totally destroys the creative process, because the creative process is not to create anything but to allow what is happening to be absorbed by you in such a way that you can express it and clarify it and make it clear. So that when you're making it clear, people might say that what you've done is creative.

The only thing that is creative is to allow whatever is happening to be reabsorbed into itself, which is what the artist does on his highest level. He mirrors it back. Or it is just the making available of that information, however it manifests itself. That is essentially art. Anything other than that is blockage.

I was thinking about how there is a difference between exposing the complete process of how you do something and all the anxieties that go along with it. There's a very critical point at which it cannot become an experience that people can deal with because it's just your own personal sickness or anxiety. People just look at you and say "You have these problems and these problems need attention." So what I think it has to do with, when it really works, has something to do with anxieties that are real. The realization that when the audience realizes that you have these problems that you have to deal with—it's that moment when those problems are its problems. That's what a performance is, rather than becoming separated from each of them. First of all you've got to relate to other people's anxieties. You've got to be their anxieties. You've got to become their anxieties in some way, and therefore it can't be the

kind of anxiety that merely comes out of your own ego, which would destroy the structure and would make it meaningless. It would make people just think, "Well, that's an ego trip." So it's got to be something that is really a pivotal anxiety of anybody, of any person, not just your own problem.

It has to be an underlying cultural anxiety. And somehow it has also to shed light on that anxiety. It has to expose that anxiety in such a way that people can see it as an anxiety and not take it to be part of their equilibrium but see it's not part of their equilibrium, that it's a negative force that's trying to upset them. Trying to pull the rug out from underneath them.

Besides that, the only thing people have to do is feel it. What generally happens with anxiety is that you try to anesthetize it so that you don't feel the pain. You know the anxiety is there because you feel anxiety and you try to get rid of it as quickly as possible, like with American pills, drugs, and so on. The whole point is to feel anxiety because when you totally feel anxiety and begin to understand the nature of it, then it doesn't exist, it just fades away.

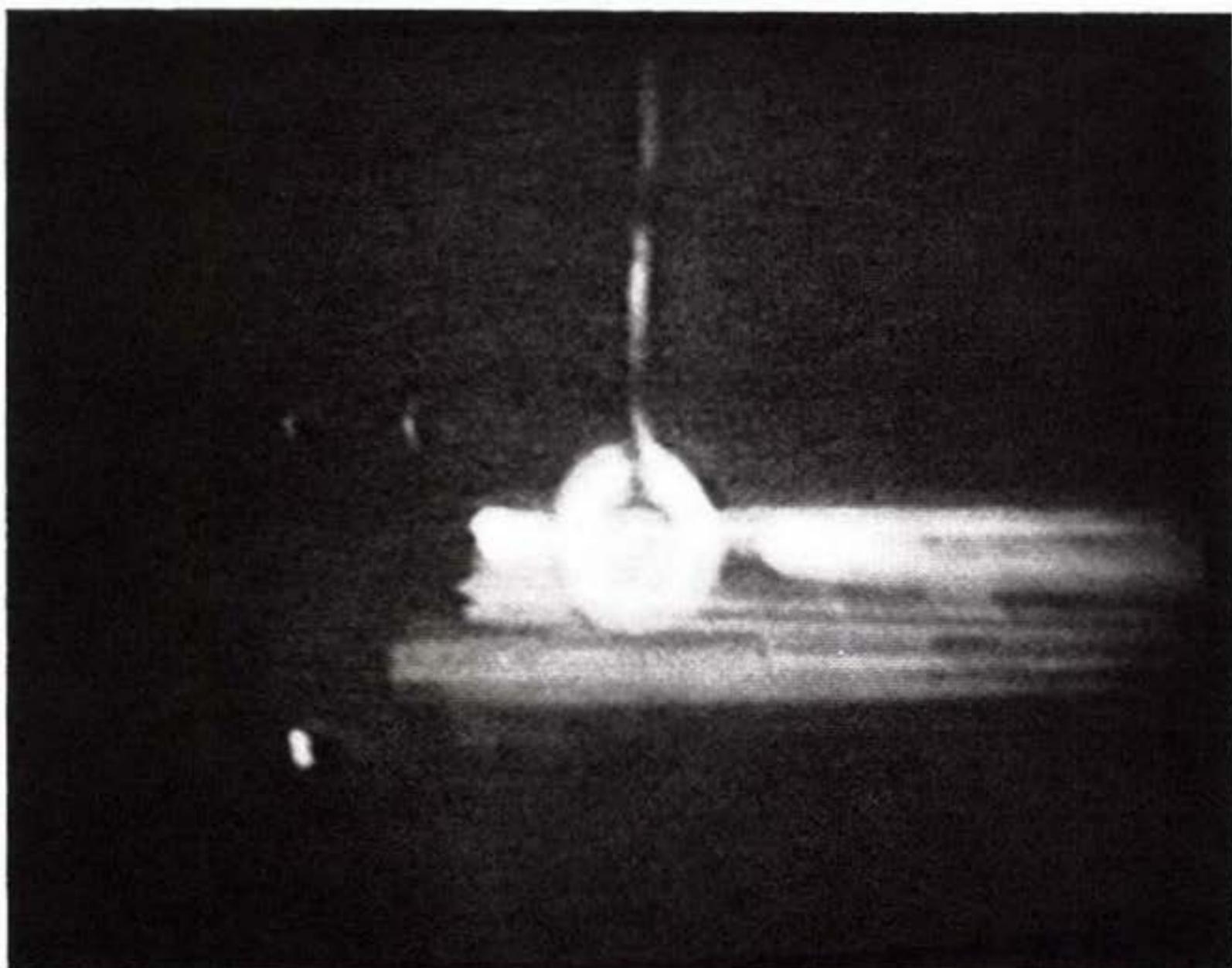
Actually it's more complicated than that. Because the first thing to do is to feel the anxiety. Let it all of a sudden out in the open, let it overwhelm you, let it get out of control, let it annihilate you. Then, second is becoming more aware of that anxiety. Where it arises from. What is the cause that's producing this effect. What is the whole relationship, other than simple neurotic self-centeredness. Once you get into the cause and effect and see the whole landscape, everything changes.

The idea is to center one in one's space. At least demand that amount of reality. That you are here now. If someone is talking to you in a space or having a conversation with you in a space, that you should feel the presence of that person and the communication is based on what is possible to communicate at that moment and not on some secondary notice. I mean if you're in a place and you make some kind of verbal exchange with a person, even though you've made a verbal exchange with that person, there's not necessarily any communication. Nothing has been communicated. Because what you've done really is express the sort of surface-level facade of how society says you must talk to one another, or how you must get along. If you're in a space or a room with people and you

demand that they absolutely respond to you, that they be themselves in this situation, and because they are themselves, you automatically would have to be more of yourself. And so that would be very direct communication. It's very difficult for people. They don't want to do that or they can't do it.

There's the milk. The container of milk on the table there has to do with the idea that all ideas in that kind of space are external ideas. What I meant when I said "There's the milk" is that all things you have in any given situation are external concepts. They're not your concepts. You don't know how you feel about them. The world has these things and you're in the world, so you take these things that the world has at that moment. You go to a supermarket and buy everything that everybody else buys. Not all the things. But you didn't think about whether that stuff should be in the supermarket in the first place. That never occurred to you. That's what I mean about your own communication with yourself. All these things that you think you're thinking, or anybody thinks he's thinking. They're not thinking. They don't think to eat the food that they eat. They went into the supermarket, which is a preset kind of situation, and the supermarket said to them, "You should eat the stuff that is here." And they do it. Then they think, they thought they should do it. But they didn't think they should do it. I think that's an important point. Because then when they talk to somebody, what they're saying to that person is the same thing. All the words that are coming out came out of another supermarket. Not a food supermarket, but another supermarket, a word bank. They deal with it the same way. They think it's all their own words and all their own way of thinking, but it's not. The very least one should demand of life is that you're actually saying what you're saying, and you're actually thinking what you're saying. That's not a very big demand.

*Space Walk* (1969). Well, the camera is on a dolly, which is a thing that moves around a room and it holds a camera nice and steady, but it also makes it mobile. So I'm walking around the room with the camera, with my eye to the camera, looking at everything that is in the room. I go through the room very slowly, looking at everything. Then I come back around the other side and go back out again. It takes about a half an hour to do that. What I'm talking



57. Les Levine: *Space Walk*. 1969. Color videotape performance, 30 mins. (Photograph courtesy the artist)

about in that situation is being lost in the space. About being completely lost in the space that I'm in. Just simply the space that I'm in. The loft I live in. Not any psychological version of space, just that particular space. Of not understanding what it means to me that the wall and floor meet at that particular point. And what relationship to my mind or body has that got? That I could sense that space in any way that I might understand what it means to me. Or what difference is it to me if I'm standing on the floor, whether the ceiling is up or down? Does it mean anything at all to me? Is there any way I can sense that way of thinking about ceiling or floor? There is no way out of being lost.

One of the points that comes up is that the space that is inside is my space and the space that is outside the space is not my space. So the space that is inside the space is the context for my life. But it's not a context for my life, because I'm in the space and I don't understand the space and I don't understand what being in the space has to do with my life. I can understand, for instance, that the things that are in the space are things that I brought in, because I

liked them or wanted them or any combination of reasons. But I don't understand why I brought them into the space that way, and made it that space, and whether this particular space would be ideal for the way I think or not.

Is there anything about this space that I can really sense? I try to think about the things that are in the space, that are in everybody else's space. That's a way of thinking about how much it's not my space, because the things that are in this space are what are in everybody else's space. So it's everybody else's space. And so everybody else's space is coming into my space. At that point I get sort of very irate at the idea that everybody else's space is coming into my space, because I can't understand my space. Because they're making everybody else come into my space. To the point that I can't see what is in the space that is my space. I continue that way and at a certain point I start to think about the audience and the way it would see what I'm doing. I've gone through fifteen minutes of it, right. Fifteen minutes of this kind of movie is not the most exciting thing you've ever seen. It's a slow-moving camera. It sounds incredibly boring. It's like being lost. When you're lost, you're just totally bored with the situation and wish it would end. You're dissatisfied being where you are. Somewhere else will give me what I really want.

It is boring if you demand that it be something else. If you demand that it be itself, then it is not boring. So at that point I start realizing or thinking about the audience's anxiety and trying to change from my own anxiety. The idea that I'm showing it the same thing again and again. How it would be upset by seeing the same thing again and again. Then I get upset with the audience for coming to see something that it didn't care about, that it didn't want to see in the first place. Coming into my space, when it would never let me into its space. But it was willing to come into my space and look at what's happening in my space and be bored with what's happening in my space when it never gave me an inch for its space.

It goes on in that kind of way, building up to the point that the process of doing it becomes part of the experience why you continue doing it. It's an idea originally to see if I could sense the space. But after you're into it fifteen or twenty minutes, that idea is not important anymore. What is important is that the experience of

having gone that far into your own space takes you into something else. At that point you want to see what you can do with that, or what of that can become real for you. It's almost to some degree like some kind of self-induced psychodrama, although *psychodrama* is too complicated a word for it. It's like you're at a place where you are not able to sense anything, but you go through the motions of doing what you do, and you don't sense anything of what you do, and you don't not sense it either. You just do it. But then, you get into a situation that is a sort of a hypothetical, artificial situation because it is a performance. You get into that situation and you create an exaggerated sense of feeling in order to see what you can actually feel. So after a certain amount of time, which is not very long, if you're really doing it well, you begin to realize that you really can feel things. That it's not an either or neither situation, that you didn't pass that way or go through that thing without knowing whether or not you felt it. That time you felt it. If you feel it once, then you want to go on to see what other level you can get to.

It also has to do with the idea that one is feeling all the time as a natural condition, and what happens in just living is that one gets anesthetized by the situation or one creates a condition where one doesn't have to feel, a protective insulation, padding, because if one doesn't feel, it's just not too horrible. Everything gets padded, like your loft.

I got involved in the idea, too, that I hadn't chosen this space, that this space had chosen me. That this space had made a decision at some point that I should come into that space. Of course I realize when you start to think about things that way, people assume you've gone a little crazy. It tends to be insanity if there's not a full understanding. If your understanding is incomplete or if you make one mistake, it's insanity. The actuality is both insane and sane at the same time. Then, in your case, it's not insanity because it's a performance.

I find that to be the main difficulty with theatre or performance. It's that the structure or very nature of performances convinces you that somebody is just performing, acting, playing a role, faking it. When in actuality he should not be performing, but releasing a very immediate mental state or consciousness, cutting through into his reality. It's the problem of not understanding what

you're doing, in terms of showing people something. It's just making it another trip.

In doing something like the *Space Walk* piece, there is no way, in my opinion, that it could work if you were to take the approach that I'm going to sit down and write out what I think should be said as a script about this. The language has to come out of some artificially induced thing. From its own initial artificial state at some point it becomes real, and for that moment it is reality for you, and because it is a reality, you can feel it as a reality for others.

I was interested in the idea, too, of the difference between being in something and looking at it: like the difference between being in a movie in the space where the movie is being made and sitting in the audience watching the movie. If you're in the audience watching the movie, you're seeing a picture and your experience is related to that two-dimensionality, of whether you think it's an interesting or boring picture, or whatever kind of picture it is. But it's just a picture. Whereas if you're in the actual movie, making the movie, in the middle of it, you never see it as a picture. You see it as a sort of environmental space that you're in. Or you don't even read it as a space, it's just an activity that you're involved in. Whereas if you're sitting, you're not involved in an activity. You're just watching a movie. So the level of interest is considerably different.

I also did this piece for Vancouver called *Trans-action* (1974). It's spelled like *transaction*, but it's hyphenated, so it's *Trans-action*. What has happened is that mailers have been sent out to people in the Vancouver area asking them to buy a product, any kind of product, for which they didn't pay any more than a dollar. And with it they were sent a "fact sheet" of about fifteen questions, which they're supposed to fill in. Some of the questions are really simple, like, "Where did you buy the product? Why did you choose that place? Why did you choose the product?" But some of them are evaluation questions, what you thought of the actual transaction, and others are to remember the exact words the salesperson said to you when you purchased the object. So what will happen is all these "fact sheets" will come into the museum with the objects that have been purchased. And that will be the art. Everybody will think that's why I call it *Trans-action*. Everybody will think that

the art is what is now brought in: the packages of toothpaste or whatever those people buy. But the art is in having those people do that. I mean that *action*. All those people going to those stores and filling out these things, that's the art. That's the action involved.

I had the idea that the whole society was going toward a post-conscious state, completely postconscious state. As if no decisions anybody could ever make anymore would really be decisions, that the ultimate high level would be that you have no consciousness at all. You have no sense of consciousness. You are not able to perceive the idea of consciousness. One of the ways I thought one could express that would be doing things that you could react to only viscerally, that you don't react intellectually or any other way; if you try to structure them intellectually, they're mindless or they appear to be mindless. But they're not mindless, they're just not conscious. They're not involved in the concept of consciousness. I can tell you about one of the things I thought one could do. One of them was to take a sheet of paper and put it on the floor, then to put a record on your phonograph and play the record, and stand on the sheet of paper, with some kind of any color on your feet, and without ever looking at the paper dance randomly to the record, trying to sing with the record at the same time. Then when the whole thing is over, when the record's over, which is two minutes, or whatever they are, what has happened on the sheet of paper is the work of art, along with the recording of your voice trying to sing with that record. It would be all this random dancing on a sheet of paper, without looking or thinking. The reason I pick feet is your feet are the least articulate. It's very hard to use your feet as tools, whereas you can use your hands as tools. You can draw things or shape things with your hands. It's very hard to shape anything with your feet. They may be tools, but you haven't been accustomed to articulate them as tools. So that would be something that would be totally without consciousness at all. Because there would be no way you could consciously make it work. Everybody would think that it is completely illogical, but it would work, and the reason it would work and it would probably work very well would be that doing it would have some exact phenomenal relationship to how you express yourself. You wouldn't be able to define what that relationship is, but it would be there anyway. It would be something that could not be intellectualized too easily. Nevertheless, it

would be there, because your body has that sense, in the absence of your mind. Your body is used to navigating your body through space. Your mind is used to making your body do what your body wants to do or your mind wants your body to do, or whatever. But you could make your body work in the absence of your mind. You could make your body do what it's viscerally equipped to do, because it has muscles and nerves and what have you. It probably could produce something that would be just as strong as what your brain could produce, but your brain would take it from a presupposed, logical intellectual position, and your body would take it from a phenomenal, completely unconscious position. But what I'm saying is that I don't think it would matter. It would work anyway.

There're all these guys out on the West Coast who really interest me. They're doing things I think are very postconscious. They just take roles. Maybe that's not the way to express it. They take on a character. Let's say your name is John Doe. You decide that tomorrow, for argument's sake, you want to be Pancho Gonzales, the tennis player. From that moment on you will not respond to people if they don't call you Pancho. If they call you John, you disregard them. You don't hear what they say. If they call you Pancho, then you speak to them. And you always dress in tennis clothes, as if you're always ready to go on the court. People know that you're Pancho and they know they have to talk to you about tennis because that's your thing. You're a tennis player and you like to talk about tennis. So there are all these guys on the West Coast who are involved in that. Their whole art is just involved in what I assume to be some nonintellectual, postconscious role-playing, where the only level of the art is becoming somebody. That's the art. Maybe I'm getting it wrong because I haven't seen it very closely. So I may not be getting a very accurate view of it. But I find it interesting that people would do that.

I love those guys. I was in L.A. with a bunch of them. We were in this apartment getting stoned, and this guy who we were hanging out with gets up and says he's going to the bathroom. He disappears for two hours and when he comes back, someone asks him where he's been, and he says, "I went to the bathroom." Questioned further about how it was, it turned out that going to the

bathroom meant going across town and visiting a woman friend. It totally blew my mind. The idea being the changing of the name of an activity to something else. Right! I'm going to pour some tea and then you chop down a tree. That's really interesting. It's like re-making language. Or trying not to realize that language exists in the form that it exists, which is really nice.

One of the things I thought about this kind of postconsciousness—the first thought I had was knitting. That an artist should give up making art and just start knitting. Get a set of needles and a ball of yarn and just start knitting, and knit every day. Of course, when you tell anybody that idea, he thinks it's utterly ridiculous. But to me it's not that far from practice. In a certain kind of way it is not that far from the idea of just centering on one simple thing, that has no mind levels attached to it, that doesn't go anywhere and can't go anywhere because there's no place for it to go. Just keep doing the same thing all the time. It's a way of staying out of the space of your mind and not going anyplace, because normally when you go out of the space of your mind, you go somewhere else. You look at a movie or you do something else. But knitting, at least the way I thought about it, won't allow you to get into the space of your mind.

It's a non-karma-producing activity. A nonactivity. It's a little too complicated to be able to do it without thinking a little about it. At the same time it doesn't absorb your thoughts enough to get totally into it. It just prevents you from having thoughts. So I did it one night. Knitting. It felt terrific. Getting out of your rotten mind.

I thought it was really nice. I enjoyed it, doing it. I enjoyed doing nothing except just saying the same thing: needle in, wool over, drop back. Just constantly repeating the same kind of thing. Except there were a couple of people there. They got totally freaked out by it. They got the feeling, I'm not sure what feeling they got because they didn't tell me, but I read the feeling to be distress of some sort. They were very distressed by it. Very distressed that somebody was doing this—knitting. Sitting there knitting.

It's very painful when you first stop the mind because the mind is what fills the space.

I felt very strange about why they were so distressed. They

couldn't relate to it at all. They couldn't even get into it on the giggle level, obviously it has some of that aspect to it.

Who were they? One was Frank Lilly, and the other was Françoise something or other. She's some French stage director or something. She was a little more interested in it. She wasn't as distressed by it. She was slightly fascinated. She was sort of wondering, was there something of value in it. She hadn't made up her mind. I sensed that, even though she didn't say anything. But Frank was quite clear about it. It was distressing him. Why do you think that is? Why do you think he would be distressed by it?

It has to do with surrender, surrendering to the situation of just being where you are now. Quieting the mind. You're just watching yourself in space, rather than filling it up heavily with your mind. If you're unaware of it or unaware of what is happening, the loss of ego, which is what it's about, then you find yourself in a very unpleasant situation. The ego becomes threatened. You are taking away the illusions about how it fills space. And when the ego feels threatened, it can be very nasty. I didn't see how it could threaten anybody's ego, though.

There you are in a situation where four people have gotten together and they're really not very close friends. They don't see each other all the time and are not used to occupying the same space together. People have this identity or personality, which is their illusion of who they are, particularly in an alien situation, about how they should act. You are saying, "I am Les Levine." He is saying, "I am Frank Lilly." You each have a special identity in the world, which you occupy physically with your body and your mind and all the things you have done and are doing. That's the way you relate to the space and the people around you. You create your own space. You made your loft, not me. You are Les, and you and Frank are having a social exchange. Then when you take away the ground you both have in common, it can be very frightening. It's as if you're naked and alone in space, with no help and no supports. Knitting, as a device, can do this. It can take away your identity. The way Frank Lilly relates to Les Levine, the way they communicate. It can act like pulling the rug out from underneath you.

Except, it's very relaxing too.

It's not so relaxing. The result may be relaxing. It's like meditation. It can be very painful, because you're dealing with the



58. Les Levine: *Artistic*. 1970. Color videotape performance, 30 mins. (Photograph courtesy the artist)

mind. An example is sitting for an all-day meditation, twelve hours, just sitting watching yourself breathe, and watching all the thoughts as they arise in your head and letting those thoughts fall away as they arise. It can be totally horrible.

But I don't mean relaxing in the sense that you're going to sleep. It doesn't necessarily feel good. That's actually the secret. When it feels lousy, you might actually be making some progress. Getting down to dealing with the space you're occupying.

But don't you feel, given the way our lives are, that it's great to stop and go through some of what is happening in your life. So what if it's painful. Cutting through the speed. Stopping everything. Meditation is very difficult. To knit, just to sit there and watch the process without your mind rushing in and filling your space with a thousand thoughts, is as difficult as thinking about Japan and actually going there. When you think about Japan, you're there instantly, in whatever fantasy you have about it, but to get your body there, to get Les Levine there, is a whole other trip.

Sure, except there's no way of not being lost. Probably there's no way of not being lost, but I think understanding that you are lost, and that we're all lost in space, is probably worthwhile. Absolutely, that's the point.

And then people say, about anything you do, that it's pointless to do, and they don't do anything. That's not very interesting. I don't really know either if being lost is such a bad thing.

That's the point.

I mean it's probably a good thing. Because somehow the only reason you ever want to do anything, really, that is exciting or interesting to you is to find out why you're doing it. And if you knew why you were doing it, you wouldn't do it.

You come up with the realization that the condition of being lost is the beginning condition, is the only condition that exists, and the realization of which is the goal to be achieved totally. To think at any point that you are not lost is just fooling yourself.

# ROB LA FRENAIS

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## An Interview with Laurie Anderson\*

*As the art form most characteristic of the 1970s, the shifts and developments in performance are more readily identified when viewed with the work of artists whose period of research and discovery spans those years. Since her first performance in 1972, Laurie Anderson has brought performance out of museums and galleries to radio and clubs, out of the art world and, as she would say, into the culture. Her performances of United States Part II and her records are, in many ways, responsible for bringing performance to a wider audience here and abroad.*

*In the following interview she discusses, among other things, her use of technology, her theory of "live art," and the lack of a clear definition for performance, which she finds advantageous. Citing the diverse work of Vito Acconci, Glenn Branca, William Burroughs, and Marina Abramović/Ulay, Anderson notes that "the wonderful thing about performance art is it's just completely ill-defined. . . . it crosses over lines, and that's really what makes it live. It's constantly changing the rules."*

*Rob La Frenais is the editor of Performance Magazine. The interview was conducted on October 1981 at Riverside Studios, London.*

ROB LA FRENAIS: What other artists do you identify with? Working artists, living working artists?

LAURIE ANDERSON: In terms of technique, not many. But in terms of intent, probably people like Vito Acconci. In terms of politics, William Burroughs is one of my heroes . . . and also in terms of style, his absolute precision . . . he's just not sloppy and I love that. I

\* Excerpts were edited for publication here by Laurie Anderson and Robert Nickas in New York, December 1981.

mean it's the kind of time I like to use, too. I try to compress my work.

RL: So you've never gone in for endurance work?

LA: It seems too puritanical to me . . . "I'm gonna do this because it's really hard and it refers to working" . . . it doesn't even *refer* to working, it *is* working, there's no metaphor in it at all. You know Chris Burden's aesthetic: I'm not going to talk *about* pain, I'm going to *be* in pain. I think it's interesting to get rid of the metaphor, but I don't choose to work that way myself.

RL: What of your contemporaries?

LA: In terms of music, my favorite music right now is Glenn Branca's. He's a guitarist. That's funny because I really think that guitars are usually sort of irritating, you know, this twangy rock-'n'-roll macho, and lyrics you can't hear, and all that. Glenn Branca's a guitarist who does a lot of real strange rock-'n'-roll stuff which I really like. He uses the guitar so well. His Symphony no. 1 was performed this summer in New York with fifteen people. Crazy . . . very, very precise music, the loudest thing you ever heard . . . incredibly powerful. In terms of European performance artists, Marina Abramović/Ulay. They're real clear. And of course the wonderful thing about performance art is it's just completely ill-defined. It's really kind of exciting—all this totally different work and it's called "performance art," because no one can figure out what to call it.

RL: We have that problem . . .

LA: I don't think it's a problem really . . .

RL: I think "live art" is an easier expression.

LA: Yeah, that's nice and of course then it becomes shady in lots of ways, and it crosses over lines, and that's really what makes it live. It's constantly changing the rules.

RL: I'm going to change tack now. Why is it that you and other American artists can pursue such close love/hate relationships with your country and patriotism? If such obsessions were followed here, it would be a bit like playing with fascism.

LA: In what way would it be like playing with fascism for you?

RL: Well, if a performance artist started going on about England and our culture like that—in fact that's happened to Gilbert and George, they are about the only ones I know that have done anything of this sort. It seems to me that both yourself and

IT'S NOT THE BULLET  
(A REGGAE TUNE FOR CHRIS BURDEN)

I USED TO USE MYSELF AS A TARGET  
I USED MYSELF AS A GOAL  
I WAS DIGGIN MYSELF SO MUCH - DIGGIN ME SO MUCH  
I DUG MYSELF RIGHT INTO A HOLE.

NOW IN A HOLE IT'S SO DARK YOU CAN'T SEE A THING  
IT'S EASY TO LOSE SIGHT OF YOUR GOAL  
IT'S NOT THE BULLET THAT KILLS YOU - OH NO  
IT'S THE HOLE, IT'S THE HOLE, IT'S THE HOLE, IT'S THE HOLE.

LIKE A VENTRILOQUIST, I'VE BEEN THROWIN MY VOICE -  
LONG DISTANCE IS THE STORY OF MY LIFE  
AND IN THE WORDS OF THE ARTIST JOSEPH BEUYS,  
"IF YOU GET CUT YOU BETTER BANDAGE THE KNIFE."

CAUSE IN A HOLE IT'S SO DARK - CAN'T SEE A THING  
IT'S EASY TO LOSE SIGHT OF YOUR GOAL  
IT'S NOT THE BULLET - NOT THE BULLET THAT KILLS YOU  
IT'S THE HOLE, IT'S THE HOLE, IT'S THE HOLE, IT'S THE HOLE.

NOW IT'S NOT GRAVITY THAT'S GETTIN ME DOWN  
THAT'S GIVIN ME THOSE DOWN-AND-OUT LOW-DOWN BLUES  
IT'S NOT THE RAIN THAT'S GETTIN ME WET  
IT'S THOSE HOLES - THOSE BIG HOLES - IT'S THOSE HOLES IN MY SHOES.



January '77

Laurie Anderson

59. Laurie Anderson: *It's Not the Bullet*. 1977. Photograph and graphite on paper, 30" x 22 $\frac{1}{4}$ ". (Photograph: Harry Shunk; courtesy Holly Solomon Gallery)

other artists can talk about flags and America and all this . . . you can play with these ideas, you may not believe in it, that you can play such a *close* game with them without anyone being offended.

LA: Oh, people are offended. First of all, my ideas on politics, to compress them for a second, is . . . the most important thing to me is not to be didactic: (a) I am not running for political office, (b) I don't have the answers even if I were going to run for political office, and (c) as an artist, I consider my job a descriptive one, not prescriptive, you know. I don't have any answers for anybody. Art as propaganda is dangerous, and the best example I know of this is . . . let's say you hear a song. It's an incredibly beautiful song and you just immediately love it, but you can't understand the words; the lyrics are buried. You listen to this song fifty times, and finally you understand the lyrics, and they're awful . . . they're stupid. But it's too late, the song is inside you, there's nothing you can do. This is to me the principal difference between ideas and art. Art enters you first of all sensually, through your ears and eyes, and . . . and it's tricky . . . it becomes a kind of propaganda if you push it inside someone before they have a chance to say, "No, that's not a good idea! That's a stupid idea. Politically I'm against it." So the situation I'm interested in creating is, yes, a sensual one, but one that's airy enough so that people can say, "Well, I'll think about that but I don't have to think about it right now. I'll think about it later, maybe totally disagree with it later. But now, I'll just sit back and watch." I'm not up on a soapbox you know. Well I *am* talking *about* the soapbox. I think that art is a very inefficient carrier of political ideas. And anyway, if given a choice between something I thought was politically, let's say, "correct," and something that was very beautiful and strange, I would choose the second. The last time I tried to work directly in politics was in '72. I was a marshal at a Playboy demonstration at a Playboy Club in New York. We're all marching up and down in front of the club and video was there, all the TV people. And someone who worked at the club came to work and she was saying, "Oh, all these people, what are they doing here?" And she asked me, because I was in charge of the communications aspect of this thing, she said, "How come you're all here?" And I said, "Well, we're protesting the fact that women are treated in a certain way" . . . and she said, "Look, I make 800 dollars a week at this job, I have three kids, I have no husband, this

is the best job I've ever had. If you want to talk about women not making money, why don't you go down to the garment district where women make 75 cents an hour? Why don't you demonstrate down there?" And I said, "Well . . . Good idea!" The thing is the TV crews don't want to go down to the garment district because their steady cam bumps along the cobblestones and it's too dark, and the women just don't want to go down there because they figure . . . we want news, we want to *show* our position in the spotlight. This was the last demonstration I was involved in because it was palpably about a certain kind of PR stunt that didn't work. It was ineffectual politically. Stupid. It was coopted by the news stations to say, "Here are the girls at the Playboy Club . . . this is a swell novelty story."

RL: In that aspect would you say that you are still moving in certain directions in a more indirect way?

LA: There's no way that I can edit out my political ideas from my work. And I don't want to. They're implicit anytime you make anything. My idea with making things like records satisfied me because as a performance artist I produce no real physical objects. And a record . . . it's skinny, it's small, and it's cheap, and it's exactly the piece and everybody gets exactly the same thing, and it's *affordable* and . . . I like that. And I like the idea, also, of using a system like a large record company to do it. I thought for many months before I signed up that other artists are just going to go—Oh God, what a sell-out. You know I talked to a lot of my friends about their positions on that and then decided ultimately to do it and uh . . . I *think* that I'm glad that I did.

RL: You've yet to find out.

LA: I have yet to find out.

RL: I want to ask you some more personal questions. What's your own personal mode of transport? Do you drive a car?

LA: No. I take the train . . . subway. I like New York because it's crowded. And you get shoved in with everybody . . . everybody's on the train. You know. And it's not like L.A. where you're just absolutely isolated from other people. Which is one of the reasons that crime is very different in L.A. Crime there is crazy crime, you go to the desert and cut off someone's fingers and eat them. Crimes of loneliness really. Cabin fever crimes.

RL: Sorry, what?



60. Laurie Anderson with her neon bow. 1981. (Photograph: Paula Court)

LA: Cabin fever. You're in your cabin. C-A-B-I-N. You're sitting there, you know, for thirty years . . . there are these long winters, and you're sitting across from your relatives and pretty soon, you pick up the kitchen knife and you lop one of their heads off. Out of loneliness.

RL: That's a statistic, isn't it, in snowy places like Canada?

LA: Yes it is. That's what you do. And in New York it's much more a practical thing: I need money, I'll go and stick someone up and get the money. It's nothing personal, you know, "Excuse me, sorry but I have to take your money . . ."

RL: So this affects the way you consider the thing about transport. Transport and crime, interesting connection.

LA: Well, they're *very* connected in New York at the moment, well, because of the underground situation—you go underground, you're literally beyond the pale in terms of rules.

RL: When I was in New York, I found it a bit of a joke, really. I went on, and there were these guys edging up towards me, and we said something in very loud English accents . . . , "I say, do you think they're muggers?," and they ran out of, they ran away.

LA: Well, that's perfect. You have immediate street savvy, and that's exactly how to exist there. You did exactly the right thing.

Burroughs has written some wonderful things about the subway. His book *Blade Runner*. The book is set in the future, as all the books are. Medical care would be too expensive for anyone to obtain. And if you're a doctor and you're caught with surgical instruments, you're immediately arrested. So all the operations are performed underground in the New York subway system, in rooms off the tracks. And the kids are runners, black kids in tennis shoes, real fast tennis shoes—they're the blade runners, the ones that deliver the surgical instruments. The brilliant thing about Burroughs is that he concentrates on one aspect—one of his main themes is medicine—and *really* looks on it. What happens when you get sick. You can look at the whole culture that way.

RL: Another question. Do you have a dog?

LA: No. Never had a dog. Uh . . .

RL: Cat?

LA: No animals, no . . . because they leave tracks on my machines! (*Laughter.*)

RL: Right. Why dogs? [in her performances]

LA: Dogs, I guess because there's something really very nice about a voice that isn't articulating into words. I wrote a song called "If You Can't Talk About It, Point to It," which was actually for a sculptor friend of mine who doesn't talk much.

RL: What's your attitude to immortality. Would you choose, for example, to be cryogenically preserved?

LA: I know this isn't answering your question . . . , but actually I do like to take a lot of trips to other kinds of places. I go somewhere with no money and no plans, just to see what's going on. The first trip I did like that was to the North Pole.

RL: Ah, yes, you hitchhiked to the North Pole?

LA: And then to places like Kentucky, very low-tech places.

RL: What happened when you hitchhiked to the North Pole?

LA: I got there actually by bush planes. I started at Houston Street in New York, started hitchhiking up there, and then in Canada I was getting rides with people who were either draft resisters and could never go back to the United States or people who'd been to Vietnam and had gone crazy there, and all they wanted to do was fly little planes around. So, I was just sitting there in the passenger seat and we'd make these crazy dips and dives all over the place. "Watch this! Neeeooww!," you know, real suicide-type

flight pattern. It was a wonderful trip because it was about being utterly alone, and in a strange place.

RL: What do you consider the principal limitations to any ambitions you might have?

LA: Not being able to wake up in the morning and spend just a couple of hours staring out the window. Unless I can do that I feel totally . . . automatic. So, this couple of hours is crucial, and then the rest of the day I'm my own slave, getting things physically done.

RL: You quote, in your show, someone saying, "Are you talking to me or are you just practicing for one of those performances of yours?" Do you consciously allow your work to infiltrate your life and vice versa in that way?

LA: Oh, absolutely. Yeah. Because I don't divide my work and my life—it's not a question of infiltration: that's all I do. That may sound pretty dull but it's really the way I have the most fun.

RL: How do you feel when someone says that sort of thing to you? Does it make you think, well, what am I?

LA: Yeah, of course. Sure it does. And it's an odd situation to be working in this way. Because, basically I see nobody, or a couple of friends. I'm a recluse, and then I go into a room where there are lots of people and do these performances. I do ride the train and go places and meet people that I wouldn't have the chance to meet downtown in the art world. It's like a dormitory there, it really is. All you see are other artists. But I need that kind of contact, seeing what other people are up to. It's the reason I choose to live in a dump like New York. (*Laughter.*)

RL: Don't you think that technology has overreached its own ability to radically change the world, that it can only really work for a privileged few?

LA: Hmm. Depends on who you consider the privileged few. The main question, of course, is what is this new technical innovation, how is it going to improve lives? You have to consider whose life, and who's paying for that life to get improved. Those are the first questions you have to ask. Basically, it's going to do something for someone. Now, in terms of technology affecting people's lives on a daily basis, this is what my work is really centered on. How does a person really cope with being in an electronic world? You turn on a TV and it doesn't work, and unless you're a technician or

## IS ANYBODY HOME?

I LIVE BY THE HUDSON RIVER AND A LOT OF BOATS GO BY. I'VE SPENT A LOT OF TIME TRYING TO FILM THEM, SO I SET UP A CAMERA NEAR THE WINDOW AND EVERYTIME I HEAR A HORN I RUN TO THE WINDOW - BUT I MISS ALMOST EVERY ONE. THEY GLIDE BY SO QUICKLY ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE RIVER, CAMOUFLAGED AGAINST THE JERSEY SHORE. SOMETIMES IT'S HARD TO TELL WHICH IS MOVING - THE RIVER OR THE SHORE - AND IT SEEMS LIKE ALL OF MANHATTAN HAS COME UNANCHORED AND IS SLOWLY DRIFTING OUT TO SEA.

IT'S THE KIND OF TIMING - THE KIND OF SYNCING - THAT'S BEEN GETTING INTO THE SONGS I'VE BEEN WRITING. IT'S LIKE WALKING UPSTAIRS IN THE DARK WHEN YOU THINK THERE'S ONE MORE STEP THAN THERE ACTUALLY IS AND YOUR FOOT COMES POUNDING DOWN WITH TOO MUCH FORCE AND NOTHING UNDERNEATH. . . . OR LIKE THE PIANO WE GOT A FEW MONTHS AGO - ONLY A FEW KEYS WORKED SO WE PUT IT OUT IN THE HALLWAY NEAR THE DOOR AND WHEN PEOPLE COME IN THEY RAKE THEIR HANDS OVER THE KEYBOARD, HITTING THE FEW NOTES THAT WORK. IT'S KIND OF A DOORBELL NOW.

I WAS TRYING TO WORK ON A SONG FOR A PERFORMANCE BUT ALL THE SOUNDS AROUND WERE SO DISTRACTING. IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO CONCENTRATE. MY MOTHER CALLED AND SAID "WHY DON'T YOU COME OUT HERE AND WRITE YOUR SONG? IT'S REAL QUIET WE'VE JUST PUT NEW CARPETS DOWN." WHEN I GOT THERE I NOTICED THAT THE CARPETS WERE SO THICK THAT NONE OF THE DOORS CLOSED. THE ONLY DOOR THAT STILL MOVED WAS THE DOOR TO THE PARROT'S ROOM. IT WAS A SWINGING DOOR AND EVERY TIME SOMEONE OPENED IT IT WHACKED INTO THE PARROT'S CAGE AND THE PARROT SCREAMED AND THE SCREAM FILLED THE HOUSE THROUGH ALL THE OPEN DOORS AND THIS IS THE SONG I FINALLY WROTE.



January '77

Laurie Anderson

61. Laurie Anderson: *Is Anybody Home?* 1977. Photograph and graphite on paper, 30" x 22 $\frac{1}{4}$ ". (Photograph: Harry Shunk; courtesy Holly Solomon Gallery)

an engineer, you probably can't fix it. You're living in a world that's extremely alienating. After this so-called Armageddon if you try to reconstruct even just the electrical situation in your house—forget about anything else—forget about the TV that's sitting there, or *was* sitting there. What could you do? As for the privileged few, there's a phone sitting in everybody's house. I mean everybody's house. And so my work is about what happens when you pick up the phone and try to get through. The last phone call I got in New York was *very* frightening. It was a tape. Phone rang, it was a tape.

RL: What? That's amazing.

LA: And I don't have an answering machine.

RL: Do you regard this as an advanced response to the technology, or a Luddite response?

LA: Yeah. It's a Luddite response. It's just uh . . . I don't want to use that system, and I know it's inefficient not to use it, but I think that I'd rather not give the information or get it than talk to a machine. It doesn't mean that I don't like machines, I love machines. But I want to learn how to use them well.

RL: How far do you think you can go before it seems, then, that the actual hardware is taking over your work? Do you take it to the limit?

LA: Oh, I don't know. I try not to dream of equipment that I don't have. When I started using electronics, I used only what I could afford: things like sixty-nine-cent speakers. I live on the electronic junk street in New York, Canal Street, where things like that are easy to get. I try to use only what I have. You can run into trouble otherwise. The best example of this is students in an art school. Say they're painters and they want to make video tapes, but they don't have any equipment, it's too expensive. So they have to get a deck somehow and then quickly make the tape, maybe without understanding the medium. It's as if a painter wanted to make a painting. He'd have to think about the painting for months and then, one day, go out and rent a brush and make the painting really fast. And then return the brush the next day to the rental place—clean. Obviously, it's hard to make a painting this way. You have to work with the material for a while to find out about it. Any sculptor knows that. You know, when I think I'm finished as an artist, and that I'll never have another idea, it's totally depressing, and the first thing I do is just try to *unclench* a little bit from that attitude.

And second, to just play with whatever tools I have. Because tools will teach you things. I want to control the technology I use. And not to just set them on automatic . . . then it's just some kind of show you've designed and you're the technician. If I'm on tour and a machine breaks down, I have to know something about that machine so that I can fix it.

RL: And you do?

LA: Well, I don't know all the circuitry, but I can do first aid.

RL: What are your views on space travel? Tom Klinkowstein [the telex artist] is so obsessed with it that he's booked space on the space shuttle to send up a small transmitter.

LA: Someone in Zurich gave me a beautiful picture of the first woman cosmonaut. Actually I don't know too much about her. I know she went up, I'm not sure whether she came back. But she did go up, as I believe several women in the U.S.S.R. have. And I think in the United States they're considering sending women.

RL: What, to see what happens . . .

LA: Breeders, you know, just people who are going to colonize, become colonists.

RL: Biological experiments up there?

LA: I don't know. Of course, it doesn't fit into the thrust idea of outer space to have women go, so, you know, as a metaphor it's purely male. In Europe there's a sense of masculinity and femininity that just does not exist in the United States. One of the things I've noticed about coming to Europe is I always go into a shop and I buy one thing, like a dress, a skirt, or some piece of jewelry. And I go home to New York and I look at this dress and I think, *where* am I ever going to wear this thing? In Germany I'm some sort of freak because they figure a woman can't do technological things. Then something breaks, and I know how to fix it, and they go, "Oh, OK. Fix it."

RL: You dedicated your work to Nikola Tesla, and the Tesla Institute in Yugoslavia phoned you up and asked you to go and talk to them. Have you been?

LA: Yes, they asked me to come because I dedicated a few things to Tesla. I met the Yugoslavian delegation and I felt it was like some kind of setup, because it was. I walked into this place on the ninth floor, I was a bit afraid, and there were lots of junkies lying around on each floor, and Mexican families, lots of kids crying

and running around. And I came into this place and it was just lit with three blinking fluorescent lights, and I could hardly see, and there was a vast plate of potato chips on the table, and I had a kind of meeting with these three guys who all kept . . . basically just being very very flirtatious, and it ended with that. I never understood that evening. . . . So I never went to Yugoslavia.

RL: How funny!

LA: Yeah, it was very strange.

RL: Yet you'd had this phone call from Yugoslavia and it had ended up with that.

LA: Yeah, and then they showed me some movies that were half sort of blue movies and half movies about Tesla. It's one of the many dead ends.

RL: It sounds silly, but what do you think of the Soviet Union?

LA: Well, you know the cold war's on again and the U.S.-U.S.S.R. boogie-boogie men are back. As an American, I'm poorly informed about the U.S.S.R. because we get very *tilted* ideas of what's going on in our press. One of the reasons I'm happy to leave the United States, in a lot of ways, is that I can get different kinds of information. It's very difficult to get information anywhere, even in Europe it's really quite hard. A lot of my friends have gone to China and have come back with just some very crazy kinds of stories. They met people who asked questions like "Do you really have robots in the United States?" And the artists said, "Sure we do." They wanted to throw them off the track, so they told them, "Yes, everyone has lots of robots." And they asked, "Do many of you live on the moon as well?" And the artists said, "Yes, a lot of our friends live on the moon, and we travel around all the time in outer space." And the Chinese said, "Really?"

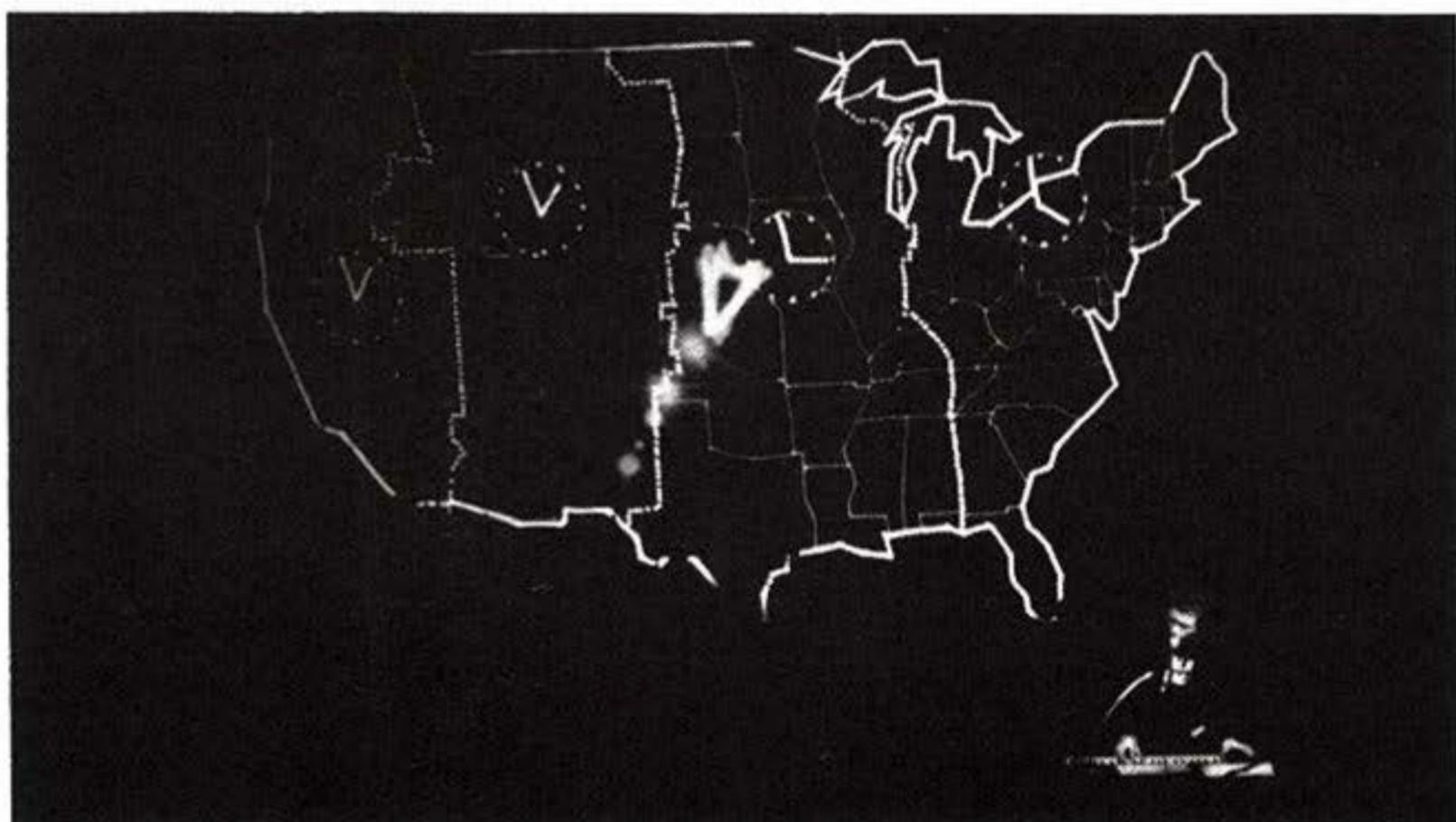
RL: I was talking to an American recently, and I also read this, that postwar U.S. avant-garde art was deliberately exported by the CIA to counteract European social realism in the fifties. Have you heard that one?

LA: No, but I think in a lot of ways it's one of our national pastimes to think about what the CIA might be doing and giving a lot of credit to the CIA that they shouldn't have. I think one of the things which happened in the postwar United States is that suddenly Americans had a sense of themselves that was quite different,

and they felt more powerful, unlike at the present moment, and more hopeful, and new, and that they could make their own art, and they felt they didn't have anything to do with what happened in Paris and they could say, "I'm gonna make a giant blue painting. That's it. Or I'm gonna take my brush and go flang flang flang." And then, after that, the intellectuals came along, people like Barnett Newman, and, by the way, this is my half-baked theory about performance art and live art—my theory is that it began with this kind of heroic, gestural, physical situation, artists who said, "I paint because I like paint. That's why I paint." Then you get guys like Barnett Newman, who was very smart. And he's a person who's sitting in the same bar talking to the people who write about art. And he's been painting a blue painting, and he's talking about the *meaning* of this blue paint. An extremely articulate guy who is capable of saying things like "Aesthetics is to me what ornithology is to birds." Now, in fact, he didn't really believe that, because much of his work was about talking about the edge, the field, and the tension, and this and that. Much of his art is about the language that surrounds it. He's standing by his blue painting, looking at it, and talking about it. And that's, I believe, the generation ahead of what's called live art, which is people *really* standing next to blue in real time, saying, "Blue is . . ." They come out of a tradition which has been very *talky*. The theory has bound itself into the work so tightly that it in fact generates another form. That's my own half-baked theory.

RL: A couple of explanations now. What is the "hand that takes?" [from "O Superman"]

LA: It's one of the gestural signals. In the first section, the transportation section, all the movements, images, and sounds are stereo, panning left to right. A kind of windshield wiper that does *this (arclike movement)* constantly. And each section has a direction and a hand signal that signifies the structure of the work. And also a diagram for the whole piece. It's a kind of long, slow, Ping-Pong game. In the second section, the political section, the axis switches to a vertical one. Everything drops. Sounds and images rise and fall. The gesture is one of power (*Flexes arm.*) and judgment (*Arm drops.*). The third section is the money section. The physical arm gesture for money is *this (grabbing movement)* and



62. Laurie Anderson: *United States Part II*. October 1980. Orpheum Theatre, New York (presented by The Kitchen). (Photograph: Paula Court)

the sound-image axis shifts to a kind of suction, it's like being on a fast road.

RL: Do you think that the human being is going to evolve very fast?

LA: Let's just take women, for example. Look at what women tried to do in the late sixties and seventies, the seventies particularly, and the backsliding that's happened since then. You can't legislate relationships. They're too deeply ingrained. Too deep in women, too deep in men. Maybe in a thousand years, but not in twenty, things could be different.

RL: I get the feeling from U.S. artists working in communications that, sooner or later, everyone is going to have access to communications, and things are then going to be OK.

LA: I'm not so thrilled by getting linked up to everybody, getting a direct *in* to their brains. I like the mystery of *not* being able to do that.

RL: We're just getting CB here, they're legalizing it, and my immediate feeling is "I don't want to talk to that person . . . in the car in front of me."

LA: Exactly.

RL: They're making such a big fuss about it, but I just don't believe the British could be so pally with each other.

LA: The most important thing is that people learn to talk to each other. Electronics is only a mediator. Its effectiveness depends on how well it's used. I like electronics because it's fast, like the brain—its circuitry.

RL: Finally, why is there such a great U.S. appetite for UFO contactee experience and the like?

LA: We just hope someone comes down and talks to us, you know. We just like to talk.

# DAVID SHAPIRO

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## Notes on *Einstein on the Beach*

*In the following essay David Shapiro describes the Robert Wilson–Philip Glass collaboration, Einstein on the Beach, as “a theatre that tends toward pure plot . . . Opera as Joseph Cornell box . . . opera . . . as flat and usable as a map . . .” And he adds, “Here all is spectacle . . . but . . . not mere spectacle.” In these notes, populated by Alfred Jarry, Jasper Johns, Paul Cézanne, and others, the author investigates the performance through its structure, its architecture, and its time. He finds in Wilson “the necessary shamanism required to heal us,” and in Einstein on the Beach “the highest and lowest and furthest and nearest reaches of the human spirit.”*

*David Shapiro is the author of many volumes of poetry and art and literary criticism, including January, Poems from Deal, The Page-Turner, Jim Dine, John Ashbery, and Lateness. He is also a translator, an editor, a teacher, and a violinist and has given numerous performances as a poet during the last twenty years.*

To Christophe de Menil

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Nothing is more attractive to a poet than the wordless theatre. It is an ideal that has lured Paul Valéry to the dance and to a mental theatre, as in his dialogues, plays, and *Monsieur Teste*. One might think of Robert Wilson’s best work as having quixotic scale, in which as a designer of seemingly theatrical mental interiors he

searches for an absurd amount of truth in funnily disproportionate items: a bed floating away for a half hour to refreshingly simple music by Philip Glass. His repetitions remind us that as William James said there is no repetition: only persistence. His plays, along with those of the improvisational pieces of Kenneth Koch (*The Gold Standard*), Gertrude Stein, and John Ashbery, are the few one could place next to the classic poetry of our period. His *coups de théâtre* are even conventionally thrilling. He has devised a tableau vivant to become a minute particular, then a grand particular. It is and promotes such thinking and listening. For once, as Martin Heidegger remarked about the sentence, "Language speaks in the poem," we are taken nowhere but find ourselves where we are already. It is sufficient theatre and finds its exuberant collaborators in the wise passivity of its audience.

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1. Opera as Joseph Cornell box, containing, as the critic and painter Fairfield Porter said it did, the highest and lowest and furthest and nearest reaches of the human spirit.

2. In Roman Jakobson's sense, the opera is dominated by the metonymic sense—all is contiguity, surround. Yet the train, the bed, the field are also metaphorical, that other pole on the axis of the "poetic."

3. Certainly, this is an uncertain mystery play without dominant "referentiality."

4. Aristotle deposes spectacle, an element of drama beneath plot and diction. Here all is spectacle. Diction degree zero. Plot degree infinity.

5. Theatre of indifferentism. An opera as disinterested as an analyst. Opera as round. Opera electrified, even when we're not. Terrible to think that all phonemes might be saying "does eat oats."

6. In Europe it was known as the circus, and behind it of course, is the tradition of the carnival, Alfred Jarry, farce, Grand Guignol, Antonin Artaud, Stein's neglected plays. And so this is peculiarly a synthetic accomplishment, an achievement that assim-



63. Robert Wilson: *Einstein on the Beach*. 1975. The Metropolitan Opera House, New York. (Photograph: Babette Mangolte; courtesy Byrd Hoffman Foundation)

lates almost all elements of surrealism, the “new realism,” and so forth. Its parodies, paradoxically, are not humiliations but restorations.

7. On stage nothing is colloquial or purely demotic. Context makes the merest movement here dance within the quotation marks of the stage.

8. The patriarchal judge says, “Paris has a background of history. . . . These men prefer the darkness.” Nothing is as sad as this dictionary of clichés, which is indeed distinct from a cliché. “Her kisses can melt the gold in a man’s teeth.” An encyclopedia of *sottises*, *bêtises*, *l’absurde*. Suddenly interrupted by the stuttering, still, sad voice of the child in aphasia: “Would I? Would I?”

9. The play appeals through a seemingly healthy regressus ad parnassum in matters sexual. Eros here is a veil interposed between inner and outer chaos. The mind is skeptical of the conversion this opera may afford.

10. Every entrance is a relief. The diagonals in the play, threads and triangles, are part of the geometric zeal of the central *topos*, if there is one, the drastic diagonals of a split in the culture, a split between culture and nature.

11. Symmetry reigns here and it is impossible not to be suspicious sometimes of the music that seems to come as much out of the totalitarianisms of rock as out of Indian persistences. The question is often, How may *coups de théâtre* make a theatre?

12. Here the phonological component abides. The perky little colloquial movements are also like the vowels that dominate in the solfège cadenzas of bliss. Not the importance of being earnest, but the importance of “of,” the importance of being, the unimportance of import.

13. The opera has what one might call Quixotic Scale. It is the scale of a Desire equivalent to some Hegelian Emptiness. As American as Einstein and New Jersey, this meditative theatre, filled with lamentoso interpolations by a darker saxophone as radio schedules are recited sadly.

14. Is this our artistic-scientific Stonehenge, longed for by the Structuralists? Certainly this is a very effective piece of myth. The split imagery (trial scene divides, binary oppositions of partners during Knee Joints, and so forth) could be effectively traced as in Claude Lévi-Strauss’s monograph to a repressive masked society

attempting to heal itself. But is this a successful meditation between nature and culture? Meditation through amplification?

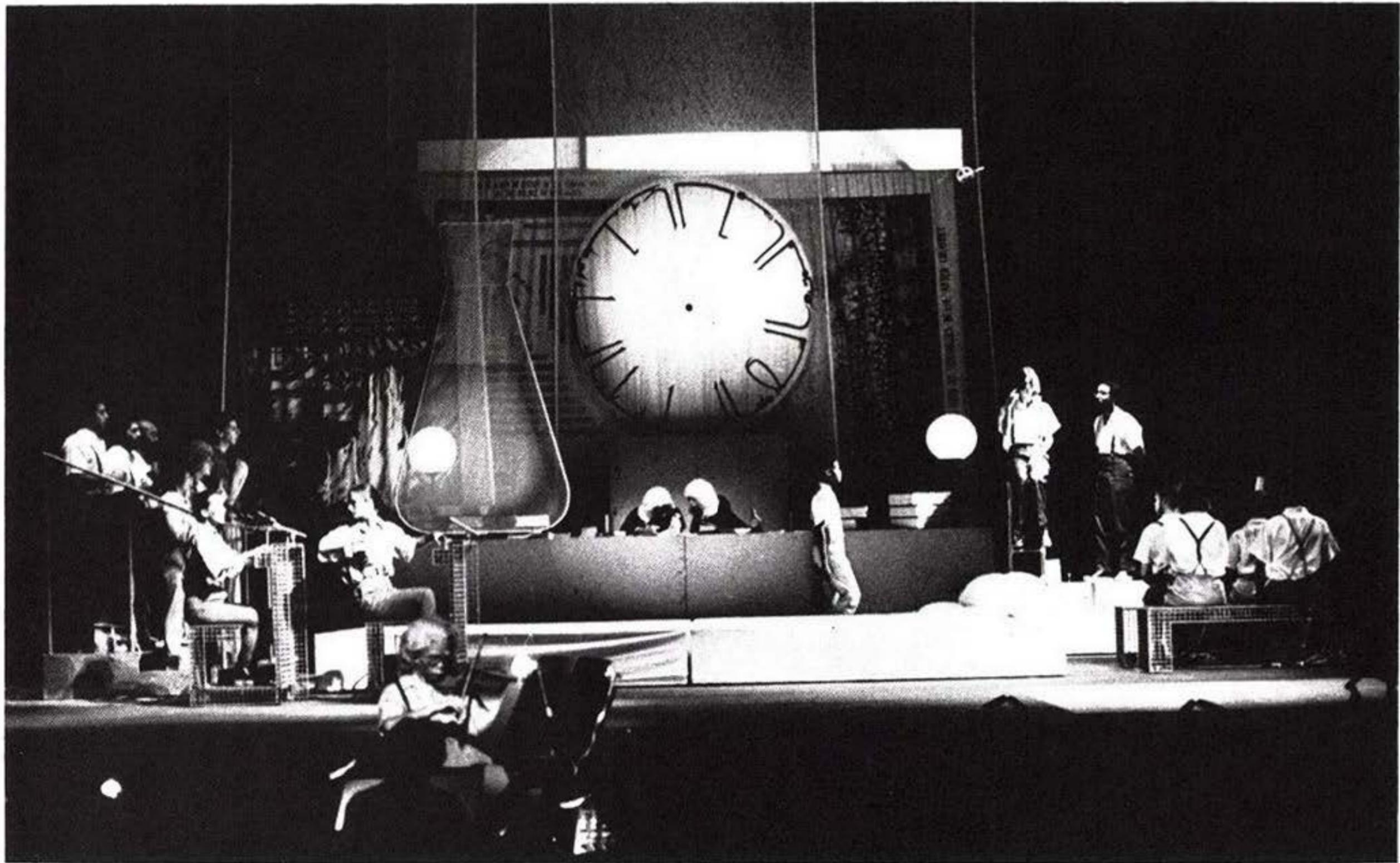
15. The phonemes here are in context as complete texts of the incomplete. Never have so few numerals been repeated by so many. . . . The music seems unaccountably full. Possibly because it is setting the canonically "empty" elements of the phonological.

16. Luckily the opera is not one of suspense. Wilson has selected well the static myth of Einstein, who suffers as fixedly as operatic Oedipus. One thinks of Einstein's "God does not play dice." He said this to the quantum mechanicians, who resemble a Jocasta in their aleatory zeal. The opera's intuitive and random elements play over a very fixed solemn structure. As the catalogue says, structure is the subject. Melancholy festival of late science, late art, late criticism. No turmoil, the antinomian heresy writ large.

17. Two judges, an old black man and a child. That is, we are being judged by the child and by what we have rejected. What might Jean Piaget say about an opera in which the formal intelligence is arraigned by the earlier stage? Language as disturbance. Wilson, like Jakobson, has had a career of involvement in problems of aphasia. He has built opera and other works paradoxically around this locus classicus of physiological deconstruction of language.

18. We are reminded by constant iterations that we "have been avoiding the beach." Nature, chaos. The Hopi, like Wilson, have no simple word for wave. Repetition of numerals functions here as a hysterical Jasper Johns, a reminder too of the de Saussurean arbitrariness of meaning. Meaning as position and difference. Each note seems to say So what. Opera in a slow retreat from Logos? No, logotherapy in opera with presentational, not representational, dominant.

19. Wilson converts the opera into something as flat and usable as a map. Here opera draws attention to itself as a self-regulating whole, not by the usual thickening of language but by the deliquescence of so many seemingly central resources. While there is a little bit of the merely magical to Wilson, there is much of the necessary shamanism required to heal us in a restless universe agitated in its smallest parts. Still, one might be skeptical, because it is most wonderful in its very lack of explanatory power. Often its architecture seems merely good interior design. It is shattered as



64. Robert Wilson: *Einstein on the Beach*. 1975. The Metropolitan Opera House, New York. (Photograph: Babette Mangolte; courtesy Byrd Hoffman Foundation)

the fruit dish of Paul Cézanne. But the point of pointlessness is to be at once shattered and whole, like the fruit dish of Cézanne. We suffer through it as in its melancholy scene of the eclipse of our clock. Time, our former absolute sun, now dreamily obscured by theory. One is reminded of the trauma Einstein occasioned in his enduring witness to relativism. Yet does not a sly dice-playing god reign over this essentially collective dream theatre?

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Wilson's new opera resembles Wallace Stevens's  
"Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion"

*It is a spectacle. Scene 10 becomes 11,  
In series X, Act IV, et cetera.*

*People fall out of windows, trees tumble down,  
Summer is changed to winter, the young grow old.*

*The air is full of children, statues, roofs  
And snow. The theatre is spinning round,*

*Colliding with deaf-mute churches and optical trains.  
The most massive sopranos are singing songs of scales.*

*And Ludwig Richter, turbulent Schlemihni,  
Has lost the whole in which he was contained.*

*Knows desire without an object of desire  
All mind and violence and nothing felt.*

*He knows he has nothing more to think about.  
Like the wind that lashes everything at once.*

Aristotle has praised plot as an element more significant than diction. Wilson has almost avoided diction in his drama and has made not a plotless theatre, as is supposed, but a theatre that tends toward pure plot. The subject matter of his theatre, the subject of John Ashbery's poetry, is simply the way things happen and happen to recur or not to recur in surprising and parsimonious distributions. Thus redundancy or copiousness in both of these artists has such effect. He has been praised and overpraised for his tableaux vivants/tableaux mort, but even this element is not mere spectacle. Spectacle here has become plot, as in Francis Ponge and Boris Pas-



65. Robert Wilson: *Einstein on the Beach*. 1975. The Metropolitan Opera House, New York. (Photograph: Babette Mangolte; courtesy Byrd Hoffman Foundation)

ternak, praised once by Ashbery for their religion of the exterior of things. John Northam has done an extended study of stage settings in Hendrik Ibsen, how the painter Ibsen does more than set a stage but calculates the interiority of all his designs. Each stage set is a galaxy of mental images. Wilson's designs seem about as cunning as a Cornell box and remind one of the usual bathos accepted as theatrical design.

Wilson, his choreographer, and composer all delight in both minimum movements—the hand on the table twitching—and the maximal orchestrated energy—eight or more gymnasts loping in drastic diagonals. Thus his theatre tends toward the whole palette and wants to register all possibilities of that palette. This is a synthetic theatre.

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From Jail to Jungle, 1967-1977:\*

The Work of  
Charlotte Moorman  
and Nam June Paik

*The idea of collaboration is not unknown in performance. The events of John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Robert Rauschenberg, as well as those of Allan Kaprow and various Fluxus members, not to mention the work of Gilbert and George, Abramović/Ulay, Robert Wilson and Lucinda Childs more recently, and of countless others attest to this fact. One of the lengthiest and most successful is the collaboration between the video artist Nam June Paik and the cellist Charlotte Moorman. They have worked together, as well as separately, since 1964 and continue to do so.*

*Paik has created situations in which Ms. Moorman plays the cello in a gondola in Venice's Grand Canal, on top of an amphibious landing craft in a jungle, dripping wet after having dived into a tank of water, and in various costumes and masks, as well as in various states of undress. She has even discarded her instrument altogether to "play" Paik as a "human cello." Together they have pioneered new areas such as "video performance" and live "satellite performance."*

*Perhaps their most famous collaboration was on Paik's Opera Sextronique (1967), for which they were arrested, jailed,*

\* Pierre Restany's title for the tenth anniversary of *Opera Sextronique* and the première of the video tape *Guadalcanal Requiem*, February 10, 1977, at Carnegie Hall, New York.

*tried, and found guilty of "an act which openly outrage[d] public decency." According to Moorman, the case tested "the limits of artistic censorship" and resulted "in the changing of that law" for which they were arrested. Along with photographs of the performance and the arrest, the judge's 10,000-word decision is reprinted here in an abbreviated form. In addition, there are photographs of another Moorman/Paik collaboration, Guadalcanal Requiem (1976), and Moorman's performances of pieces by other artists.*

From *New York Law Journal*, May 11, 1967

## **PART IE**

**by Judge Milton Shalleck.**

PEOPLE, &C., v. CHARLOTTE MOORMAN—Eliminating all unnecessary accusatory verbiage as surplusage, the charge against this adult female defendant is that at about 10:15 P.M. on February 9, 1967, in 125 West 41st Street, New York County, she "did perform an act in which she did wilfully and lewdly expose her private parts in a theatre where others were present" allegedly in violation of section 1140 of the Penal Law, and at the same time committed a "violation of section 43 of the P. L. [by an] 'act which openly outrages public decency'."

The setting and affidavit are simple. The supporting facts, later set forth, are also uncomplicated. The problem presented is not, however. For it touches upon current approach to a way of life which is puzzling—not alone to observers but to those participants who are striving to achieve what to them, too, is inexplicable—or nearly so, anyway. . . .

If I were Mr. Sterne's Shandy I might write this entire opinion and decision in this vein and style:

Among the more wondrous of God's many physical creations is that of human female breasts. Both utilitarian and functional, they serve, at least, as a source for the lacteal nourishment of tender new-born children—a most basic part in life. In the minds of many the breasts are not less important for their attractiveness, sexually, in arousing libido in the human male, with their consequent essential erotic role in male-female relations.

The pristine beauty of human female breasts has been immor-

talized by painters and sculptors and writers of poetry and prose. . . .

But in no poem, in no prose respected by the test of time have I read, in no valued oil, in no statue or bust accepted for its imagery, technique and beauty as art, have I seen, either visually described or portrayed, a picture of a nude or "topless" cellist in the act of playing that instrument—or, for that matter, a similar description or portrayal of a "topless" waitress with breast pendant over a plate of hot soup or cup of steaming coffee! I wonder if anyone has. . . .

What may be disturbing is "The Other Culture" led by that limited number comprising the underground (as it is called)—those "happeners" whose belief it is that art is "supposed to change life" as most of us know it. A situation which impelled the London *Sunday Times* to say that "The arts today, and especially the visual arts, are a kind of brothel of the intellect . . ."

However "Events" or "Happenings" need not be so, even to the accepting minority. They can just be an aspect of "The New Theatre," which has the "tendency to reduce or eliminate the traditionally strong division of drama, dance, opera, etc." It is conglomerate. It is a performance in which "Not only do the individual elements of a presentation generate meaning, but each conveys meaning to and receives it from the other elements." . . .

One may ask: "What took place here to warrant police interference?" The very first witness, Officer Mandillo, described for defendant's first "piece" a fully darkened stage and theatre when suddenly appeared three small light groupings on defendant (like flashlight bulbs) which gave just sufficient illumination to outline her body. It appeared nude to him. And where were the lights? One each attached to defendant's breasts and one (he said) in the vicinity of defendant's vagina. She then played her cello. He thought it was a Bach piece. Are further descriptive words necessary? Hieronymus Bosch could not have painted a weirder picture than that testified to. . . .

The greater number of this "select" audience "by invitation only" was lured to the theatre by an announcement sent to them by mail. It consisted of a 13" x 8" paper on which, in the background, was a photograph of defendant scantily clad in a bathing bikini suit holding her cello and bow with her left hand. Superimposed thereon was printing, in part proclaiming the defendant's playing on the night of February 9, 1967, of Mr. Paik's *Opera Sextronique* and in less bold type stating that "after three emancipations in 20th century music (serial-indeterministic, actional)" she had "found



66. Nam June Paik: *Opera Sextronique*. February 9, 1967. Performed by Charlotte Moorman at Film-Maker's Cinematheque, New York. (Photograph: Dick Preston; courtesy the artist)

there is still one more chain to lose . . . that is . . . *Pre-Freudian Hypocrisy*." There then follows in part:

"Why is sex a predominant theme in art and literature prohibited only in music? . . . The purge of sex under the excuse of being 'serious' exactly undermines the so-called 'seriousness' of music as a classical art, ranking with literature and painting. Music history needs its D. H. Lawrence, its Sigmund Freud."

Who could doubt, after reading this invitation that the acceptor was to witness the unpurging of sex in "serious" music and the loosening of the chains which theretofore had stifled the "predominant theme" of sex in music? . . .

Defendant's testimony was clear. She was a "mixed-media artist emphasizing the cello." She was inspired to her new kind of undertaking by John Cage in 1958. It gave her the power to create "a non-musical sound"; and she so performed, uninhibited, in Germany, Italy, Sweden and Denmark, where she was not arrested. . . .

One of the defendant's experts—an art critic and columnist for an evening newspaper (who "cannot speak for society at large")—

testified that defendant's performance serves in a "curious way," this new kind of art of "events," "situations," "phenomena": that this experimentation in "terms of sound" has redeeming social values, for the "concert stage is dying." . . .

Another of her experts was even more specific. He stated that the performance, which he saw, was "an attempt to tweak the nose of our society . . . relative to our difficulties with sexual matters especially with pubic matters and the breasts. We pretend they do not exist. Paik says you are interested in these things. Here they are. I'll light them up for you. Wiring the female body is a very fine irony. To point up these parts is of social value." . . .

An assistant editor of a famous weekly, mostly pictorial, magazine, who specializes in the art field of painting, sculpture, "mixed media dance," etc., thought the performance which he saw was "great wit." He "found it very amusing." He believed that it was "premeditated" and "controlled"; and although the "innocence of the naked figure can be despoiled" it was not so here. . . .

The present statute which is alleged to have been violated by the defendant is concise:

"A person who wilfully and lewdly exposes his person, or the private parts thereof, in any public place, or in any place where others are present . . . is guilty of a misdemeanor" (Penal Law, section 1140, in part). . . .

I am, for all above, constrained to deny defendant's motion to dismiss for failure to prove a prima facie case (which was reserved when the People rested) and to deny defendant's motion to dismiss for failure, when both sides rested, to prove her guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. I find her guilty of a violation of section 1140 of the Penal Law, the remaining charge.

From *The New York Times*, May 14, 1967

## **OBSERVER: SEATED ONE DAY AT THE CELLO**

by RUSSELL BAKER

WASHINGTON, May 13—Naked above the waist, Miss Charlotte Moorman sought to play the cello in a New York theater last February and was brought to justice, which, in the person of Judge Milton Shalleck, found her guilty this week of indecent exposure.

In addition to receiving justice, however, Miss Moorman also



67. Nam June Paik: *Opera Sextronique*. February 9, 1967. Film-Maker's Cinematheque, New York. Charlotte Moorman being arrested for her performance of *Opera Sextronique*. The art critic David Bourdon is trying to assist Charlotte, who was taken away by helmeted policemen and sixteen police cars. (Photograph: Peter Moore; courtesy the artist)

received a judicial lecture on the theory of clothing, during which Judge Shalleck again betrayed the man of law's notorious innocence of the artistic process. Specifically, the judge suggested that Pablo Casals would not "have become as great if he had performed nude from the waist down."

This is a highly arguable proposition. Aside from its being incompetent, irrelevant, and immaterial, there is not one scintilla of evidence to support it. For all we know, Casals might have been even greater had he not been forced to keep a layer of wool between his knees and his cello.

The judge's difficulty in the Moorman case seems to have arisen from an excess of zeal to preserve musical clothing conventions, for his basic ruling seems to have been sound enough. As anyone who has had to sit through a cello concert given by anyone much less skilled than Casals must agree, his decision that Miss Moorman had committed indecent exposure was undoubtedly justified.

**DRESS IS IRRELEVANT**

The crime has nothing to do with how a cellist dresses, however. It was not necessary, as Judge Shalleck did, to go to the constitutional issue of clothing. The briefest summation of the facts suffices to establish guilt. ("You attempted to give a cello concert in public?" "Yes, your honor." "Are you Pablo Casals?" "No, your Honor." "This court finds you guilty of indecent exposure.")

The theory that the artist must dress in the costume of his trade is one of the heaviest burdens the arts have to carry, and it is sad to see the judiciary fumble an opportunity to free them from it.

The painter in his uncomfortable jeans and overstuffed hair, the writer in his shaggy tweeds, the ad man in his monogrammed undershirts—all are victims of society's insistence upon keeping its creators in uniform; but the musician is the most abused of all.

If he wants to succeed in popular music, he is compelled to wear those ankle-high shoes, skin-tight pants, and electronic shirts that the youthful record consumer insists upon. If his field is Beethoven and Mahler, he has to dress like a penguin. If a woman, she has to wear those long floor-length drapes associated with Count Dracula's ladies-in-waiting.

As a consequence, people who want to hear them have to dress up to do so. After all, if you are to be entertained by penguins you want to look at least as respectable as a monkey. (Whence the term "monkey suit" for the uniform that audiences don to hear Beethoven.)

The result has been to contribute to the aura of stuffiness that repels so many from what is stuffily called "serious" music. If the orchestra is overdressed, we are invited to believe, the music is "serious." From here it is an easy exercise in acrobatic logic to reach Judge Shalleck's position that a musician with his pants on is a better musician than he is with them off.

**AT A CELLO CONCERT?**

In convicting Miss Moorman, Judge Shalleck dismissed her artistic attainments by stating that her performance was "born not of a desire to express art but to get the vernacular sucker to come and be aroused." The mind boggles at the notion of even the most vernacular sucker becoming aroused at a cello concert, but let that point pass and suppose that Miss Moorman's performance had been critically acclaimed as one of surpassing artistic excellence.

The question then becomes whether art out of costume is in-

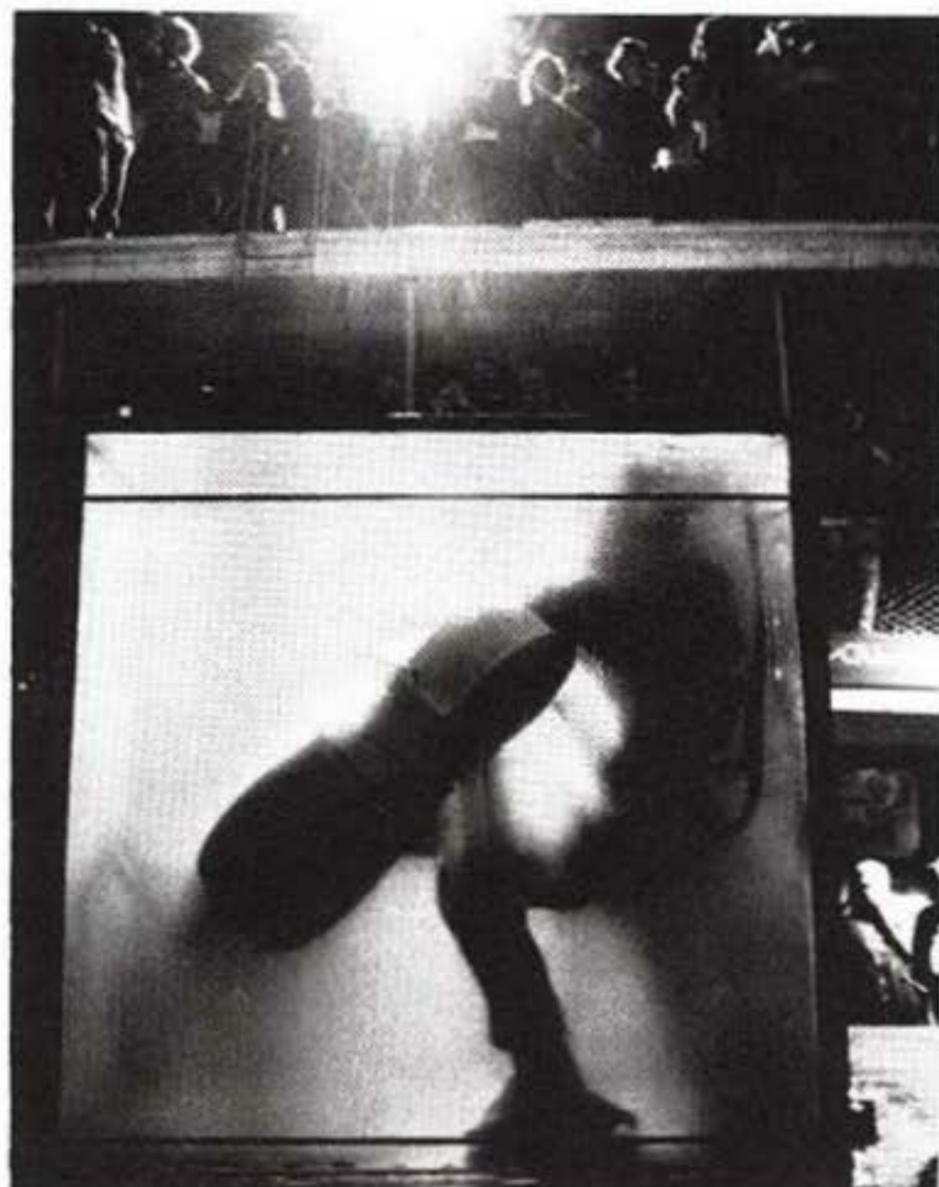
decent. The answer we will probably get is that no “serious” artist would perform without his artist’s suit, and the fact is that if he tried he would certainly be blackballed from the Serious Musician’s Association.

In our closed professional sects, we all insist on our colleagues wearing the uniform of the trade—painters in white overalls, journalists in gravy-stained neckties, doctors with Cadillac shine on their trousers, rock-’n’-rollers in electronic shirts, bankers in pin-stripes, actors in ascots, lady cellists in Lady Dracula weeds.

#### IN THE SAME BOAT

Though violations are unlikely to be branded “indecent,” the violator, no matter how good he may be, will be advised that he could be even better at his trade if only he would comply with the uniform regulations. And so, we are all in the same boat with Judge Shalleck when he reasons that Casals would have been a poorer cellist without pants.

It is too bad about Miss Moorman. It would have been pleasant to relieve the somnolence induced by cello concerts, but her crime was greater than indecent exposure. She violated the Social Uniform Code.



68. Charlotte Moorman with Jim McWilliams: *The Intravenous Feeding of Charlotte Moorman*. 1972. The performance, at the ninth annual Avant-Garde Festival of New York aboard the riverboat *Alexander Hamilton* and on the pier at the South Street Seaport Museum, was an underwater event performed in a deep-sea diving outfit that was inspired by Ms. Moorman's very serious surgery for tumors at New York Hospital that year (once again dependent on lifeline tubes). (Photograph: Peter Moore; courtesy the artist)



69. Nam June Paik and Charlotte Moorman: *Untitled*. 1977. Documenta 6, Kassel, West Germany. A satellite telecast beamed to Tokyo, New York, Boston, and Moscow from West Germany. (Photograph: Ludwig Winterhalter; courtesy Nam June Paik)



70. Mieko Shiomi: *Cello Sonata*. July 13, 1977. A performance by Charlotte Moorman on top of the 500-year-old clocktower of Castello Regina Cornaro, Asolo, Italy. (Photograph courtesy the artist)



71 and 72. Nam June Paik: *Guadalcanal Requiem*, 1976. Solomon Islands. (Photograph: Frank Pileggi)



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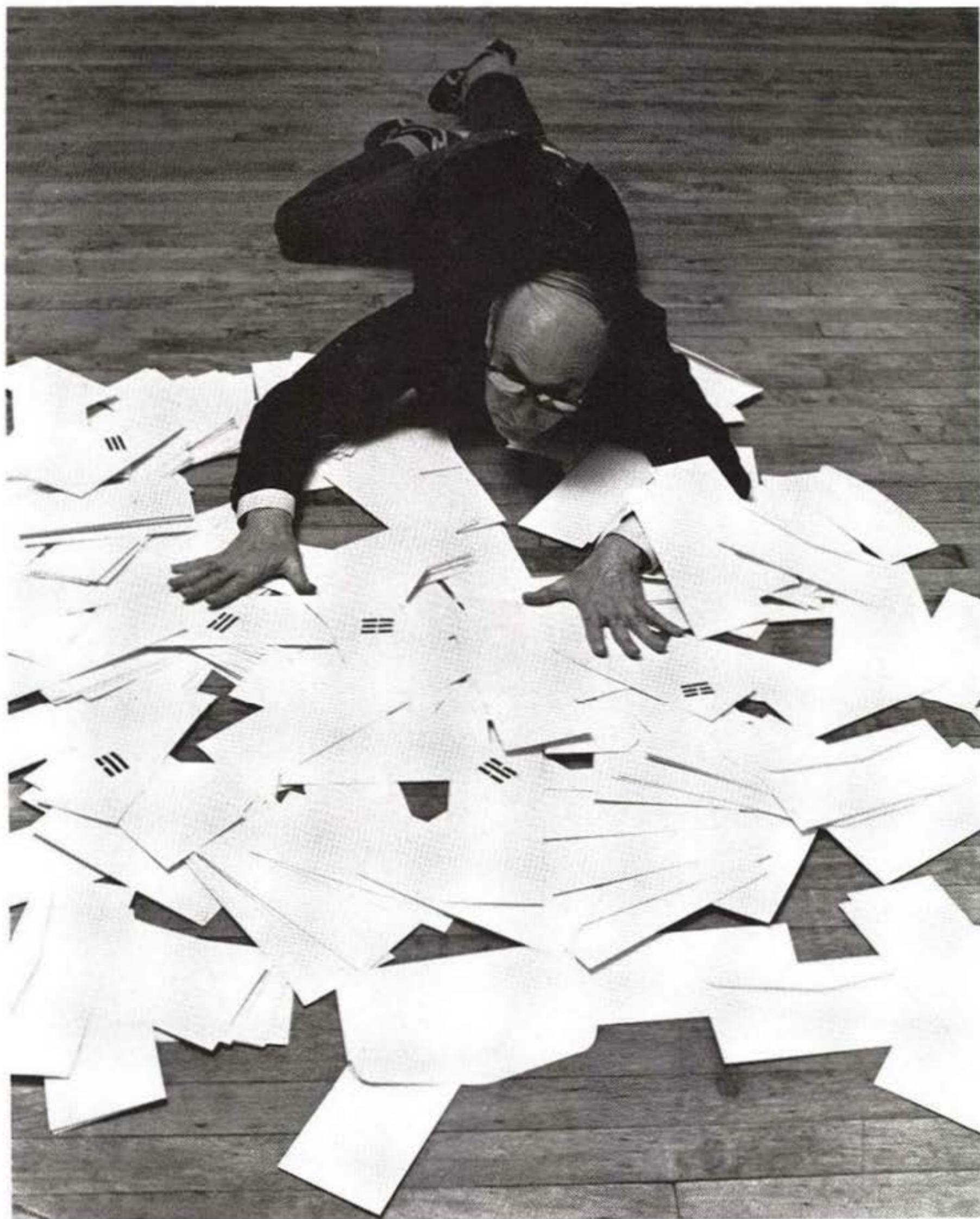
A GALLERY OF  
PERFORMANCES



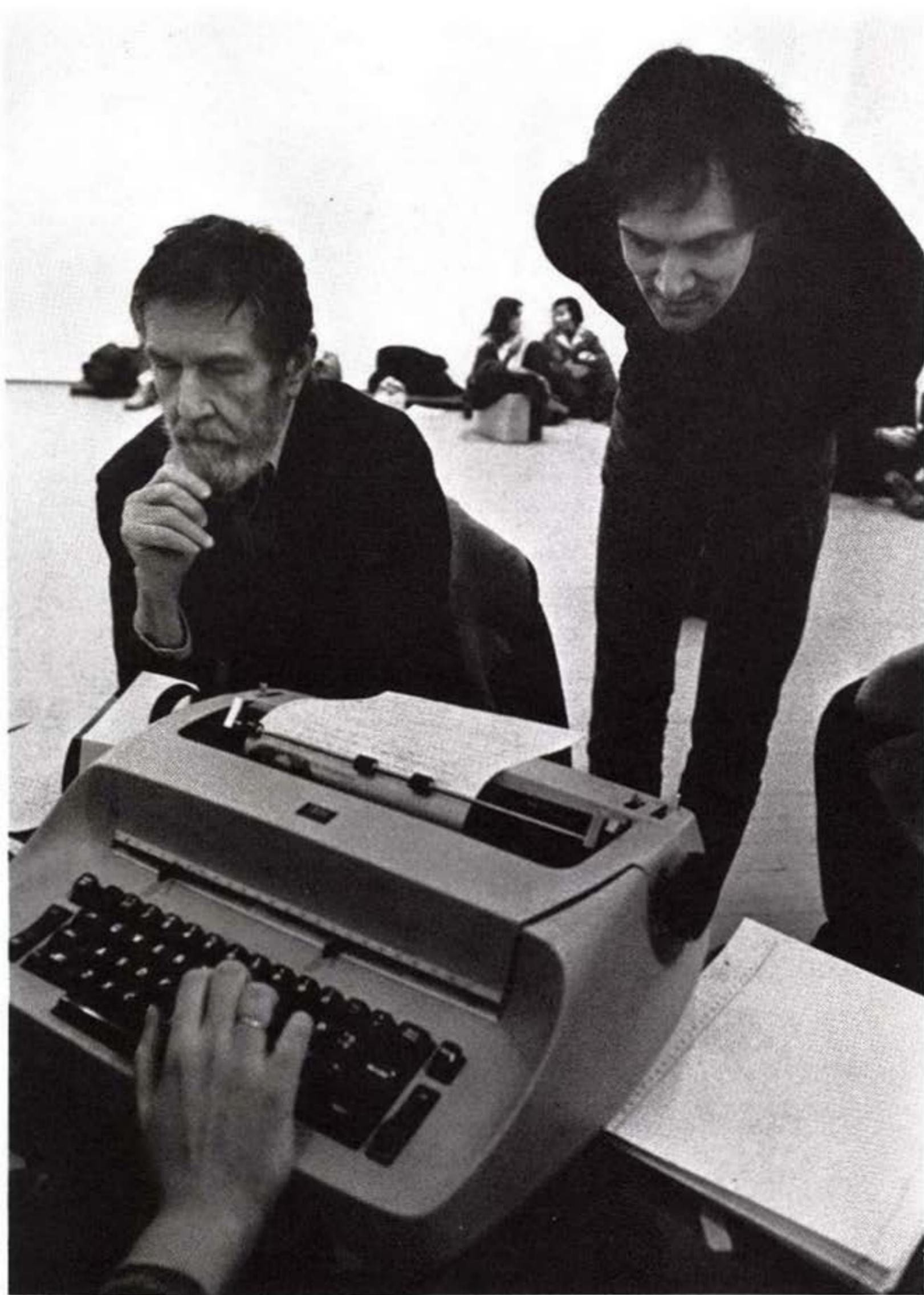
73. Colette: *Justine Goes to Hollywood* (from "Art on Stage"). August 1981. Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Texas. A multimedia performance with Visual Art Band #5, The Beautiful Dreamers. Music, sets, and costumes by Justine of Colette is Dead Co. Ltd. (Photograph courtesy the artist. Copyright © 1981 Colette-Justine)



74. Marina Abramović/Ulay: *Relation in Space*. July 1976. Biennale di Venezia, Venice, Italy. Time: 58 mins. Two bodies repeatedly pass, touching each other. At higher speeds they collide. (Photograph: Jaap de Graaf; courtesy the artists)



75. Vincenzo Agnetti: *Title III* (detail). 1980. Black-and-white photograph. The entire piece consists of the photograph with a Cor-Ten steel sculpture, 58" x 35". (Photograph: Alberto Rizzo; courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Inc.)



76. William Anastasi: *You Are*. February 1978. The Clocktower, New York. "The Narrator" (John Cage, left; Anastasi, right). The Narrator describes the viewers; the stenographer takes shorthand notes of the narration; the typist transcribes the notes; and the assistant attaches the pages to the wall as they are finished. (Photograph: David Behl; courtesy the artist)



77. Eleanor Antin: *Adventures of a Nurse*. 1976. Antin rehearsing for the performance with her cast of paper dolls. (Photograph: Philip Steinmetz; courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Inc.)



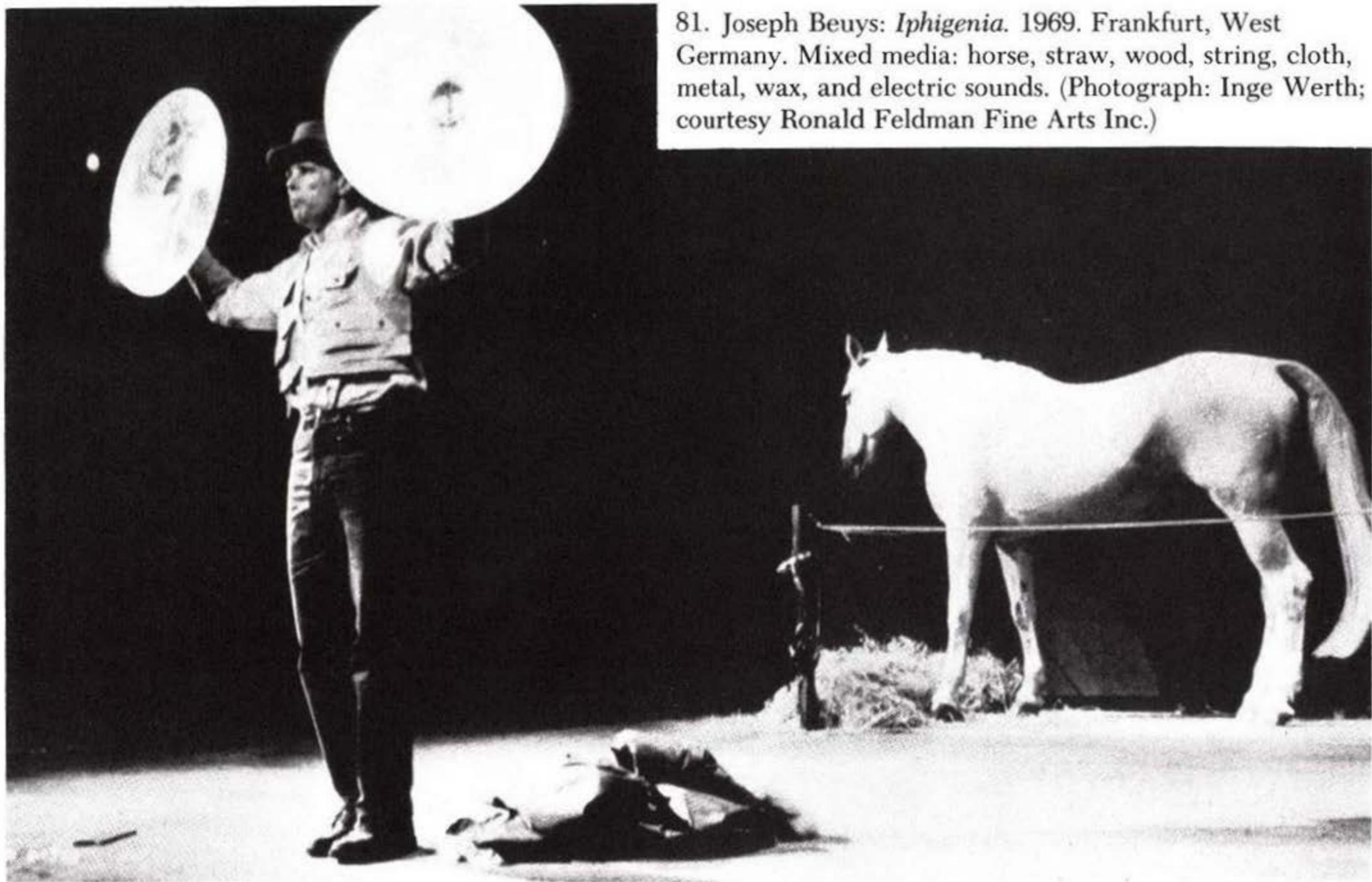
78. Jared Bark: *Zero G*. February 1976. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.  
(Photograph: Babette Mangolte; courtesy Holly Solomon Gallery)

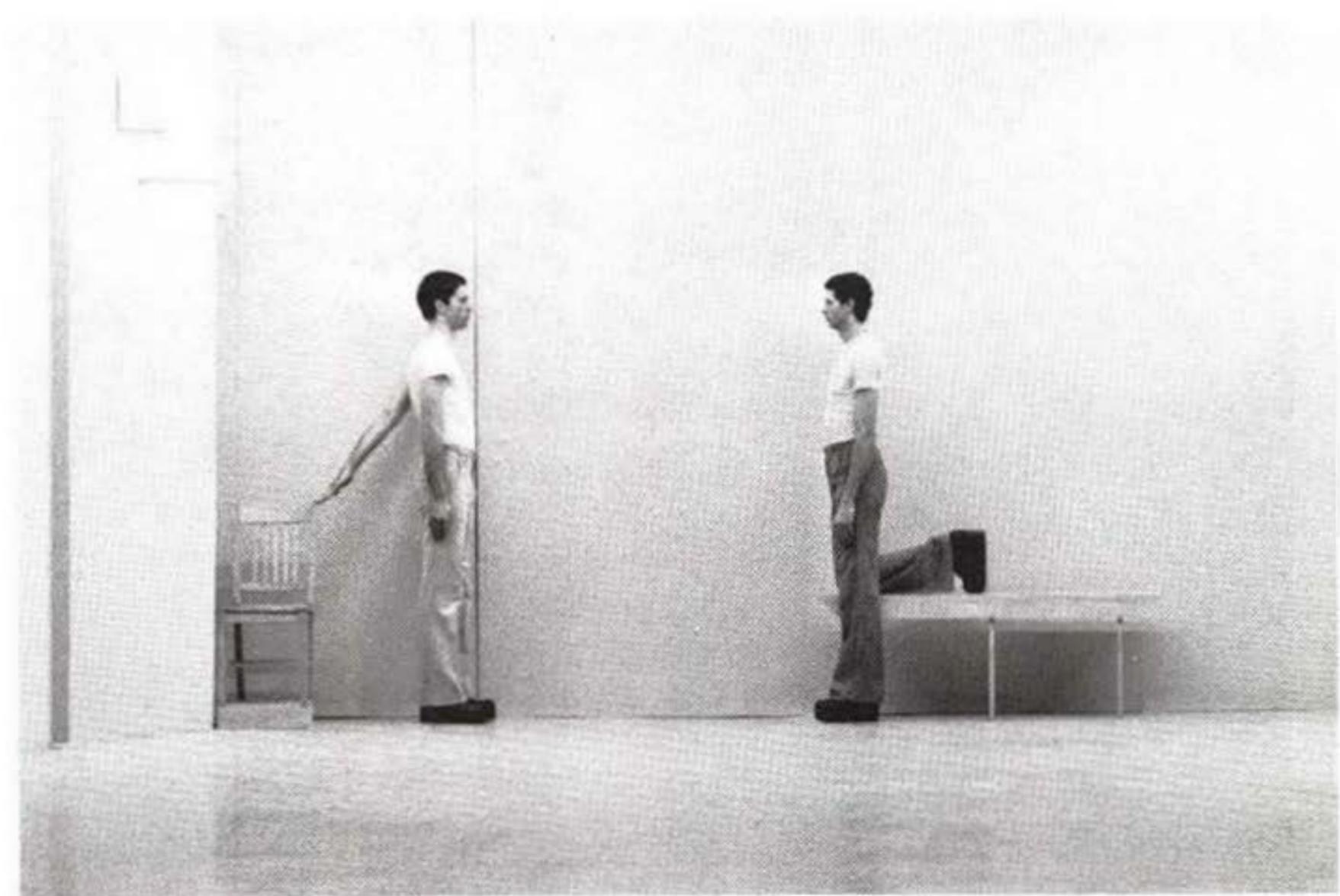
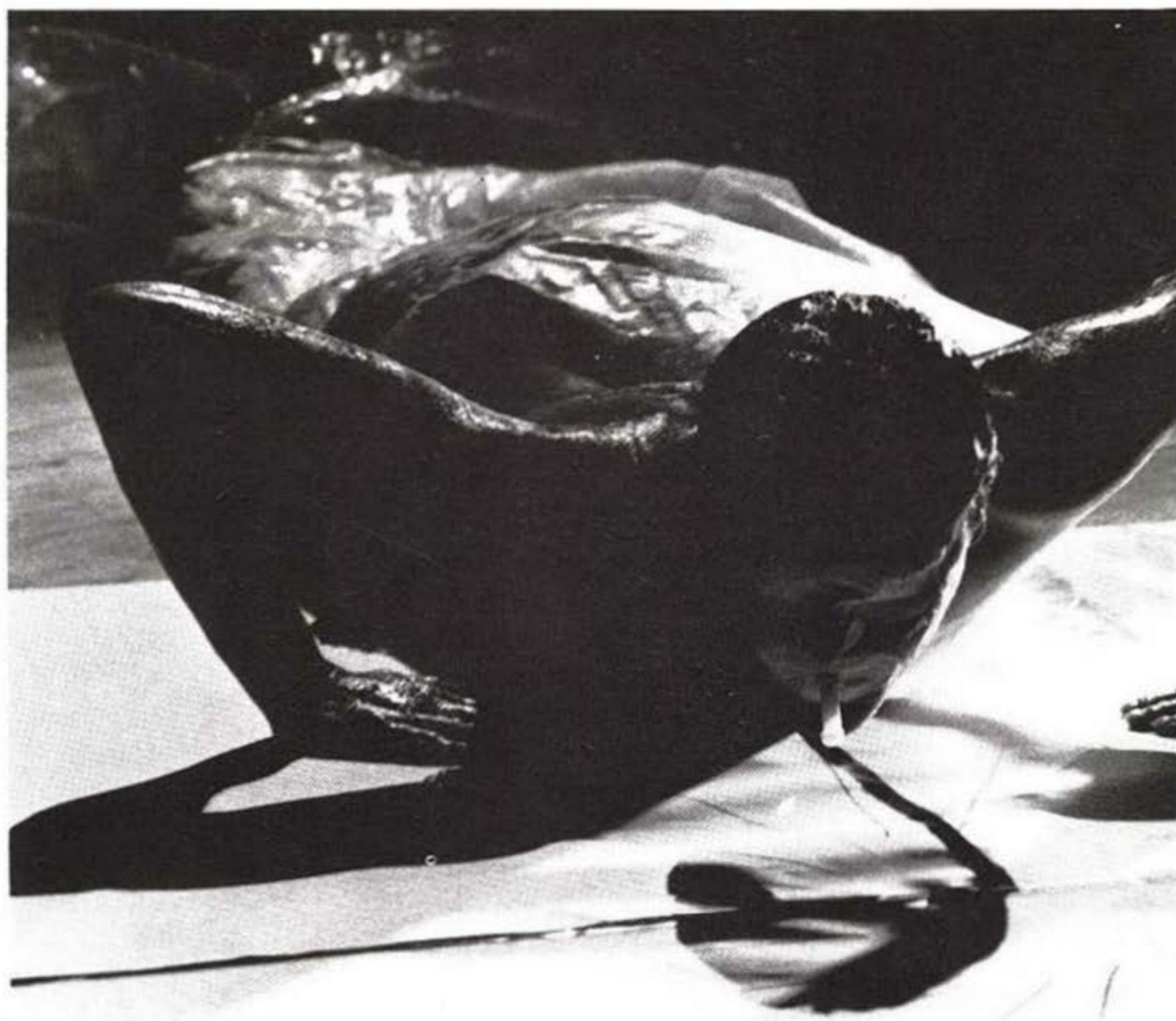


79 and 80. Connie Beckley: *Convergence*. November 1981. Graz, Austria. "It seemed that perspective was needed, for I no longer could follow at close range. I went more slowly, keeping it in sight as it blended into its surroundings. From my distant vantage, I tarried in reflection and, finally, from desire to know it once more, I proceeded with anticipation to the only point, my point, visible on the horizon. But it was the vanishing point, where all questions, all speculation, and response were compacted into a pinprick, whose density took up no space and cast no shadow." (Photograph: Ferdinand Neumüller; courtesy the artist)



81. Joseph Beuys: *Iphigenia*. 1969. Frankfurt, West Germany. Mixed media: horse, straw, wood, string, cloth, metal, wax, and electric sounds. (Photograph: Inge Werth; courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Inc.)







82. Gaetano K. Bodanza: *K. Bodanza Born October 30, 1979?* October 30, 1979. Palazzo dei Diamanti, Modern Art Gallery, Ferrara, Italy. "The action takes place in a space containing a closed plastic tube (46' x 2') simulating the intestines, at the end of which is a square plastic surface of the same dimensions as my body. A girl, seated with her back to the scene, operates a tape recording of Wall Street stock exchange rates. My eyes, ears, nose, and mouth are sealed with adhesive bandage. I breathe through a straw. I enter the tube and squeeze through it slowly, as the grease inside impedes my progress. I finally tear the tube with my hands to simulate the breakthrough of birth. Now the square becomes my living, human space. The girl gets up, prepares a solution that looks like melted gold, and stamps me with a gold cross surrounded by two circles. I clean my body and disappear from the scene of the action." (Photograph: Marco Caselli; courtesy the artist)

83. Scott Burton: *Pair Behavior Tableaux*. February–March 1976. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. (Photograph: Robert E. Mates and Mary Donlon; courtesy the artist)



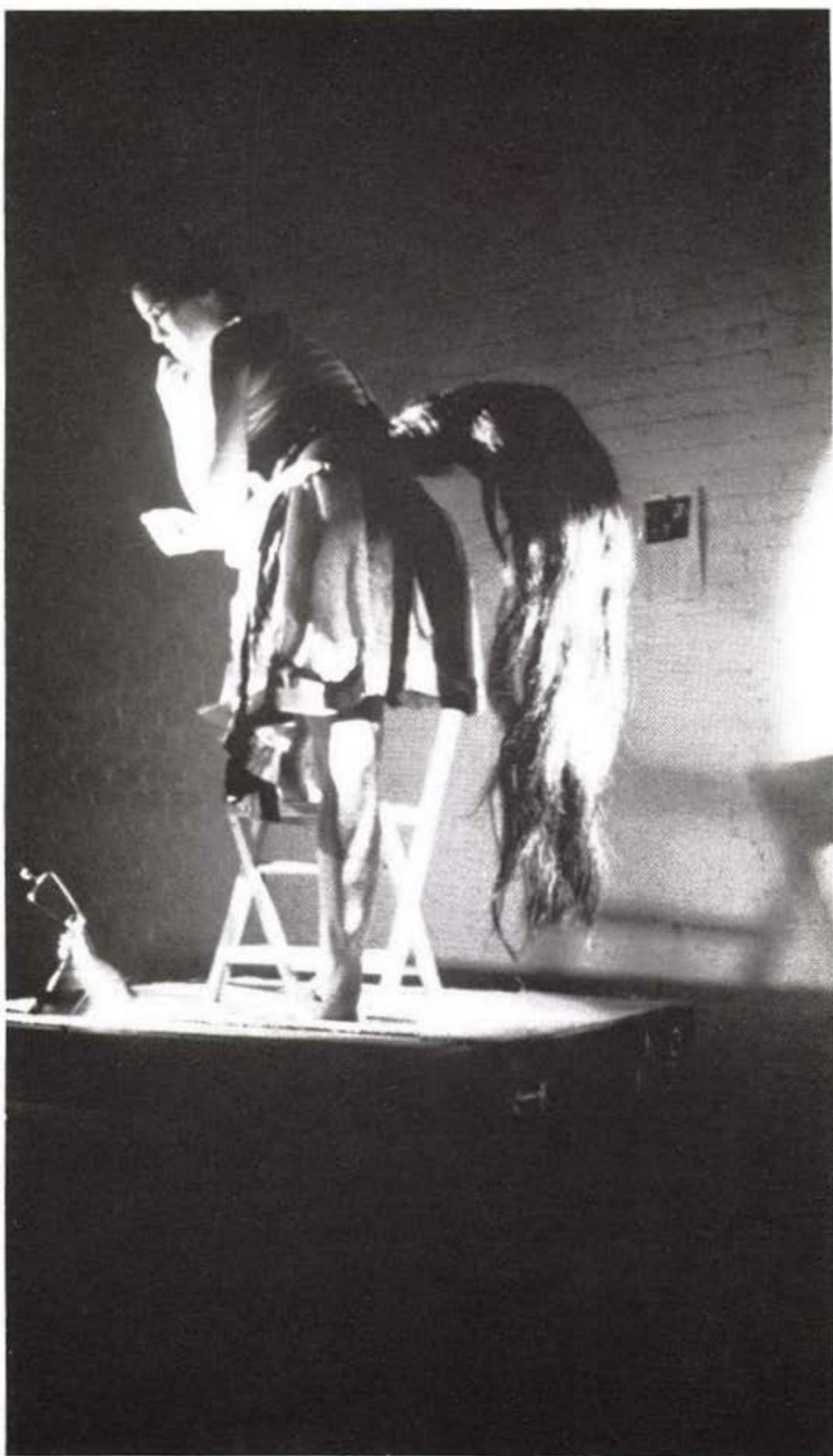
84. Disband: *Disband at the Dustbowl*. May 1981. The Kitchen, New York. Ingrid Sischy, Ilona Granet, Martha Wilson, and Donna Henes. (Photograph: Paula Court)



85. Jean Dupuy: *Grommet #7*. 1977. Organized by Jean Dupuy, Grommet Studio, New York. Sixteen performances/sixteen artists seen simultaneously on two floors through grommets. (Photograph: Babette Mangolte; courtesy the artist)



86. Mary Beth Edelson: *Up from the Earth*. 1979. Reykjavik, Iceland. Private ritual. (Photograph courtesy the artist)



87. Rose English: *Adventure or Revenge*. March 1981. Just Above Midtown Gallery, New York. From the series "Women Performance Artists from London and L.A.," sponsored by Franklin Furnace. (Photograph courtesy Franklin Furnace)





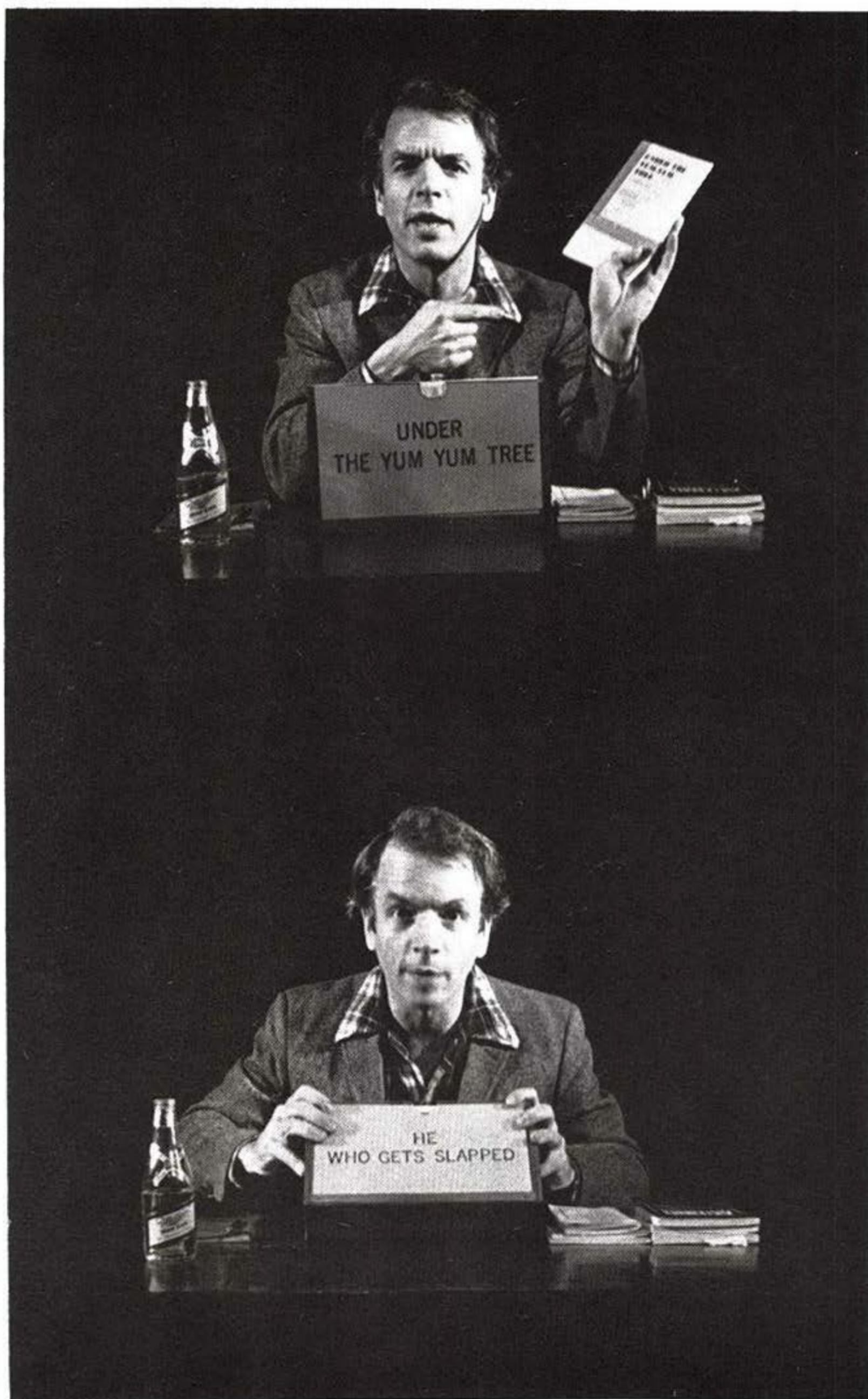
88 and 89. Valie Export: *Restricted Code*. February 1979. Städtische Galerie, Munich, West Germany. "The body as a medium for expression is a restricted code; because society exerts control over the individual by the body, control of the body becomes social control. What is natural body and what is cultural body, what is cultural expression and what is animal expression? Is there natural behavior of the body at all, can it be reached? Between formal and informal behavior of the body, between these questions as stated, the expressive movements of my play *Restricted Code* are moving." (Photographs: Michael Schuster; courtesy the artist)



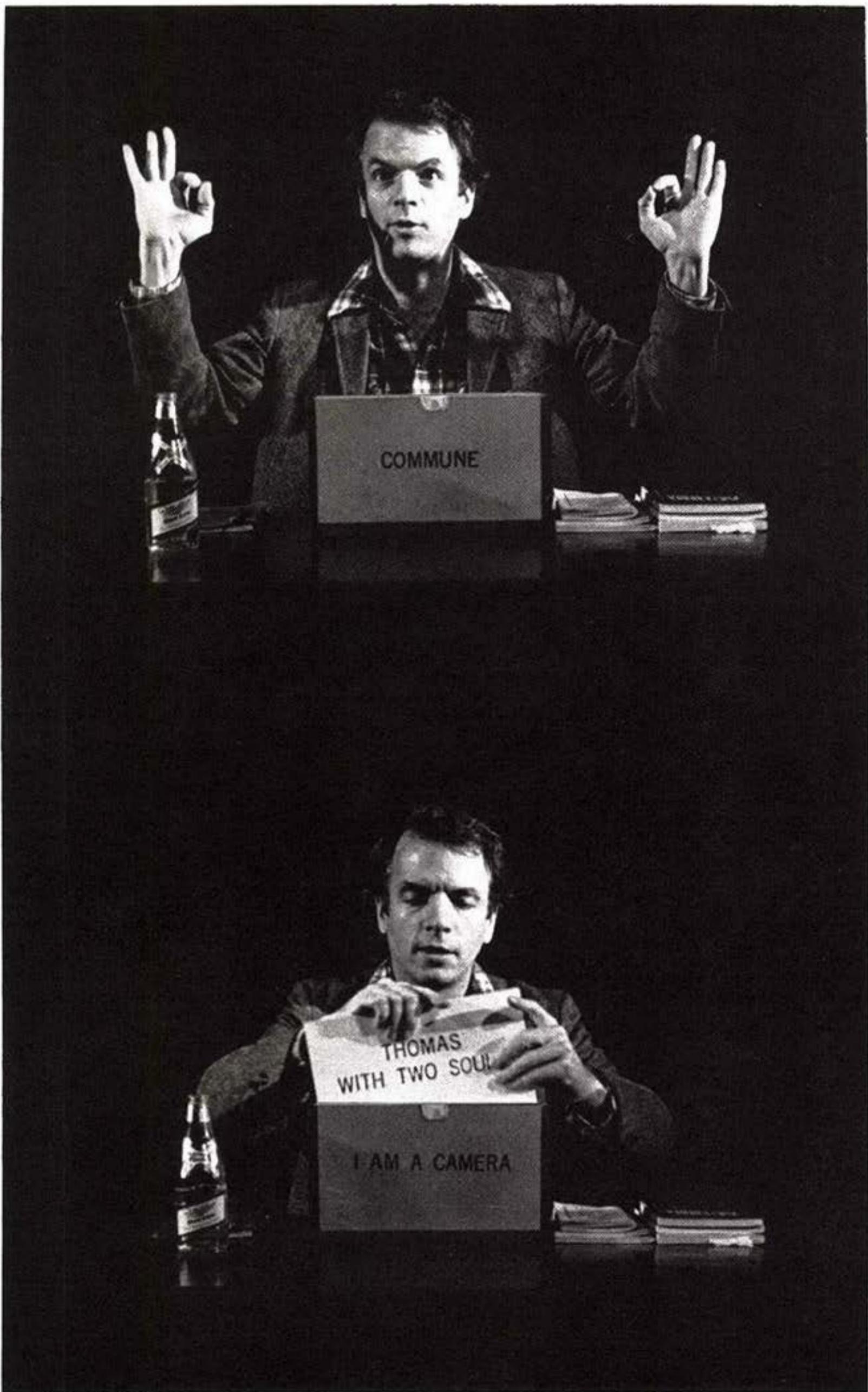
90. Feminist Art Workers (Cheri Gaulke, Nancy Angelo, and Vanalyne Green): *Customs*. March 1981. Open Space, New York. From the series "Women Performance Artists from London and L.A.," sponsored by Franklin Furnace. The Feminist Art Workers drank water and smoked as if they were on a panel discussing their own work. Later, they threw eggs, showed slides of a marriage performance, played a recorded telephone conversation, and cleaned up after themselves. (Photograph courtesy Franklin Furnace)

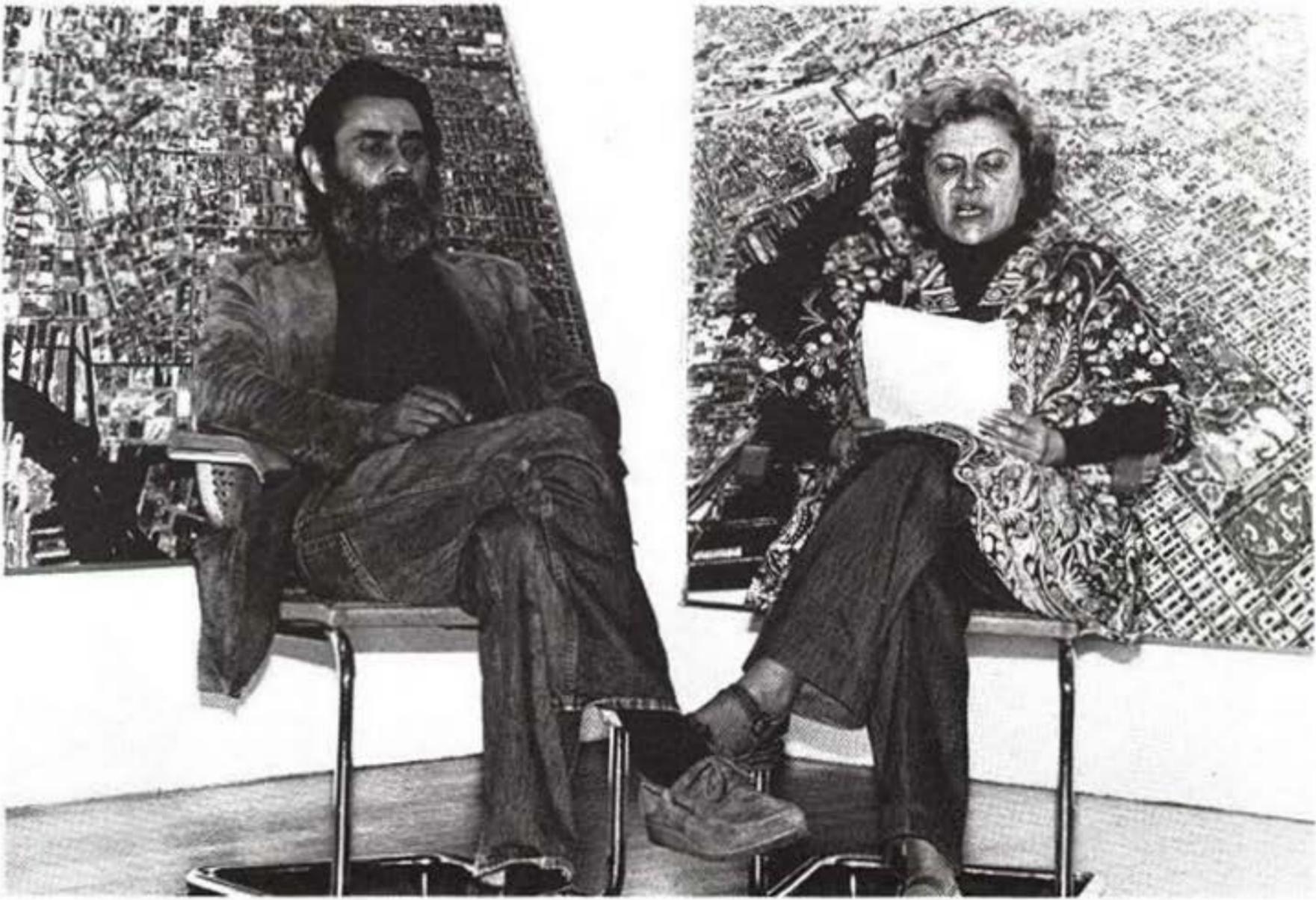
91 and 92 (*opposite*). Tina Girouard: *Spread*. 1978. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Illinois. Above: Scene 6, "Future Fight"; below: Scene 9, "Flour Fight." (Photographs courtesy Holly Solomon Gallery)



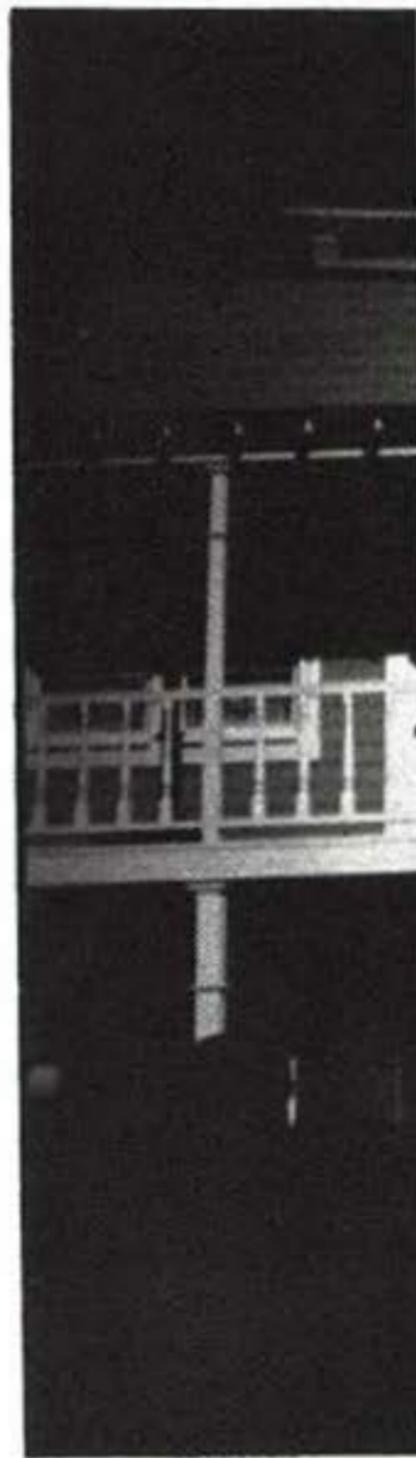


93. Spalding Gray: *A Personal History of the American Theater*. 1980. Performing Garage, New York. Gray's sixth autobiographical monologue. (Photograph: Nancy Campbell; courtesy the artist)





94. Helen and Newton Harrison: *Talking Water*. 1981. New York. (Photograph: Peggy Jarrell Kaplan; courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Inc.)



95. Julia Heyward: *Intimate Parade*. January 1980. The Kitchen, New York. (Photograph: Paula Court)



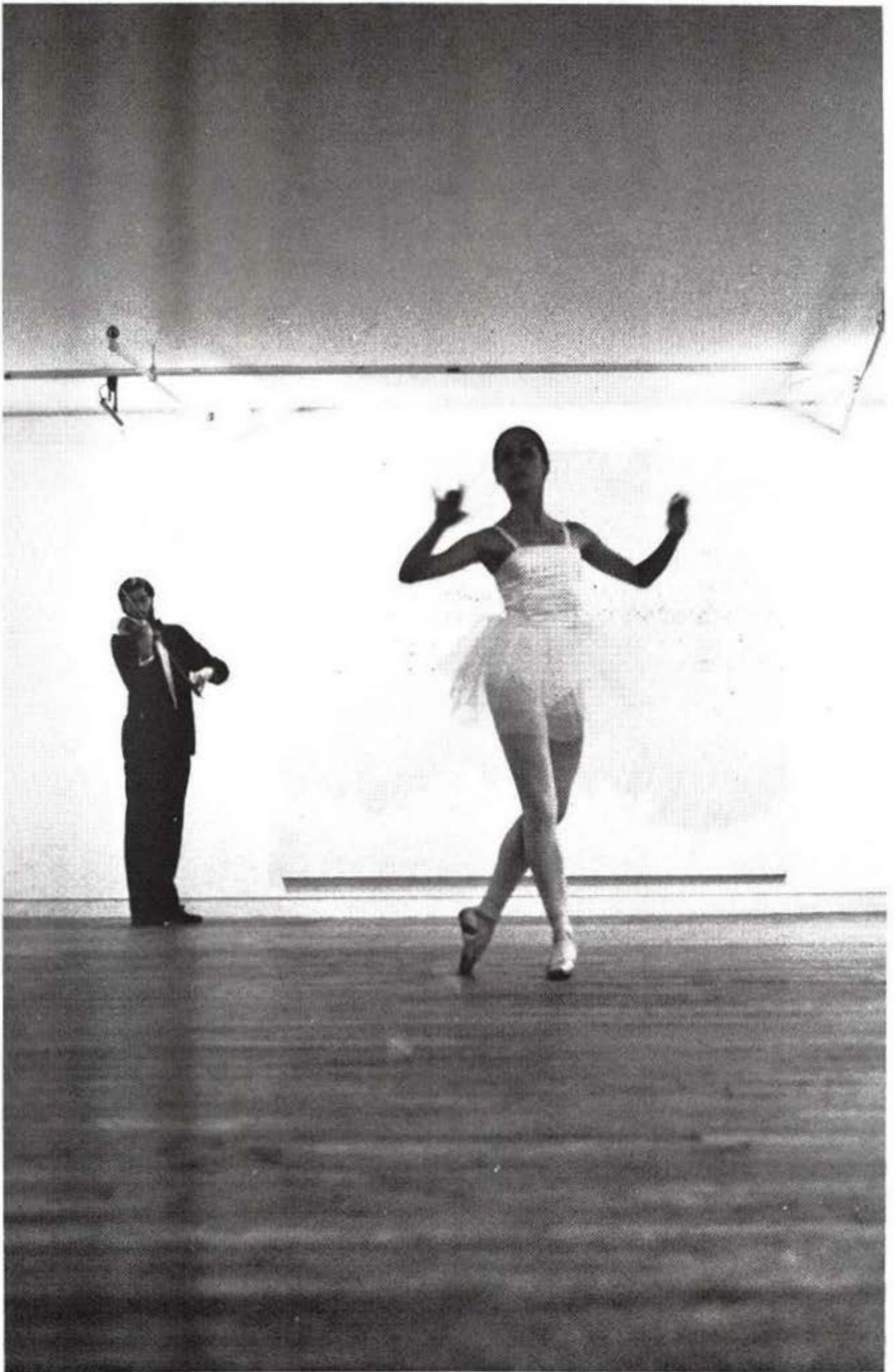


96. Joan Jonas: *Double Lunar Dogs*. 1981. Performing Garage, New York. (Photograph: David Crossley; courtesy Performing Artservices, Inc.)

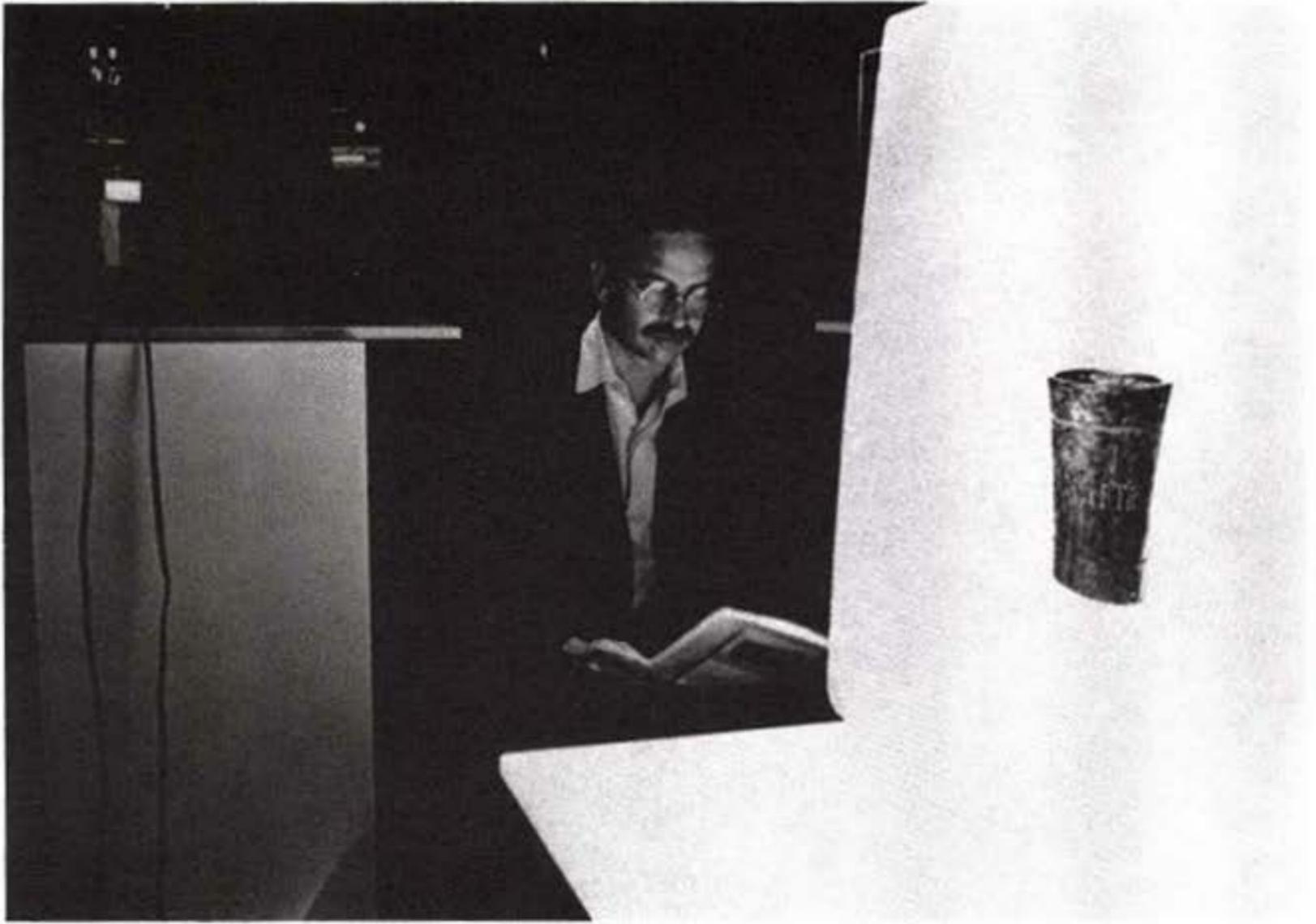


97. Sonia Knox: *Echoes from Ireland*. March 1981. 626 Broadway, New York. From the series "Women Performance Artists from London and L.A.," sponsored by Franklin Furnace. The artist, who is Irish, stepped through barbed wire while cassette tape recorders wrapped in gauze produced phrases about being Irish in England. (Photograph courtesy Franklin Furnace)

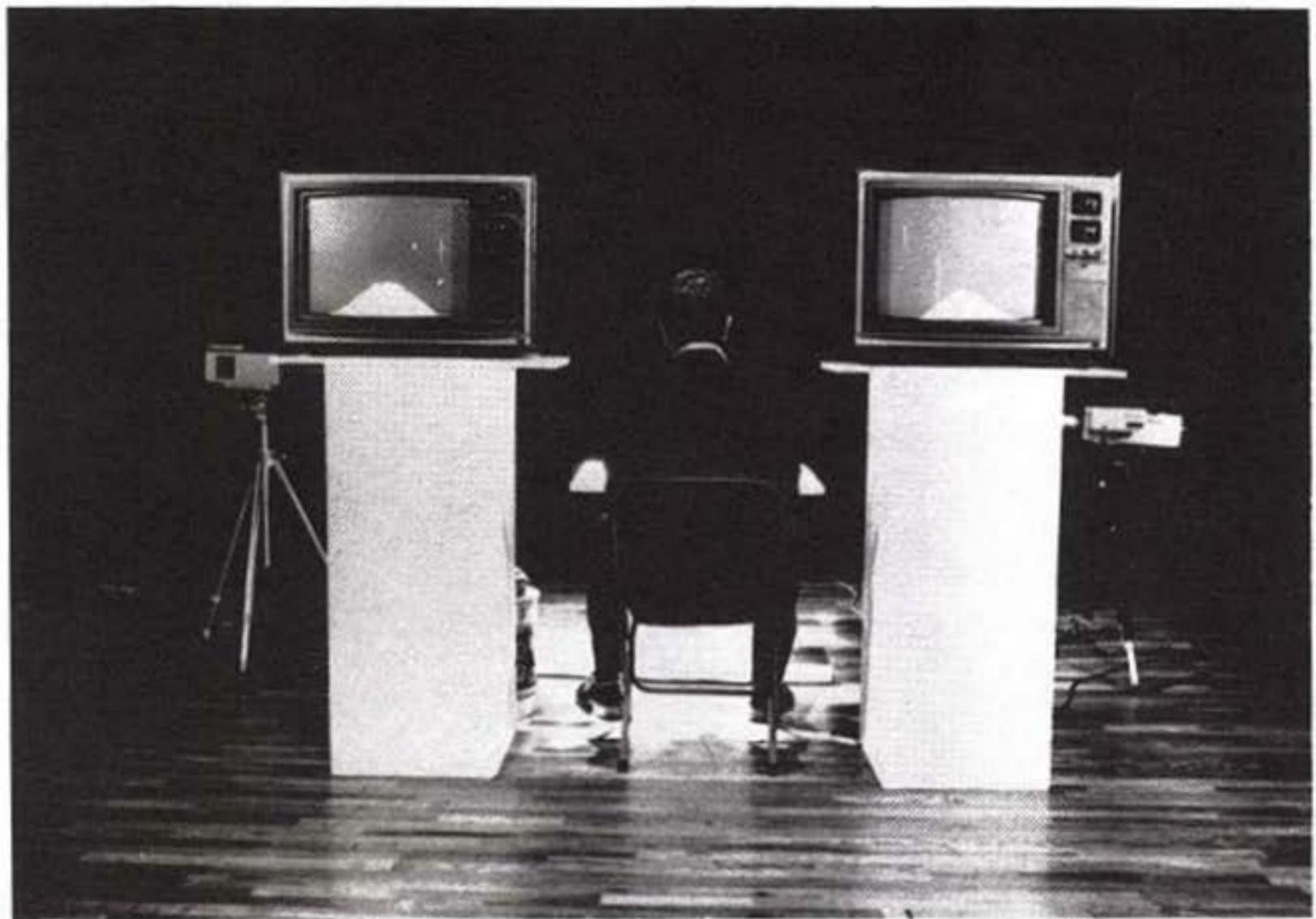


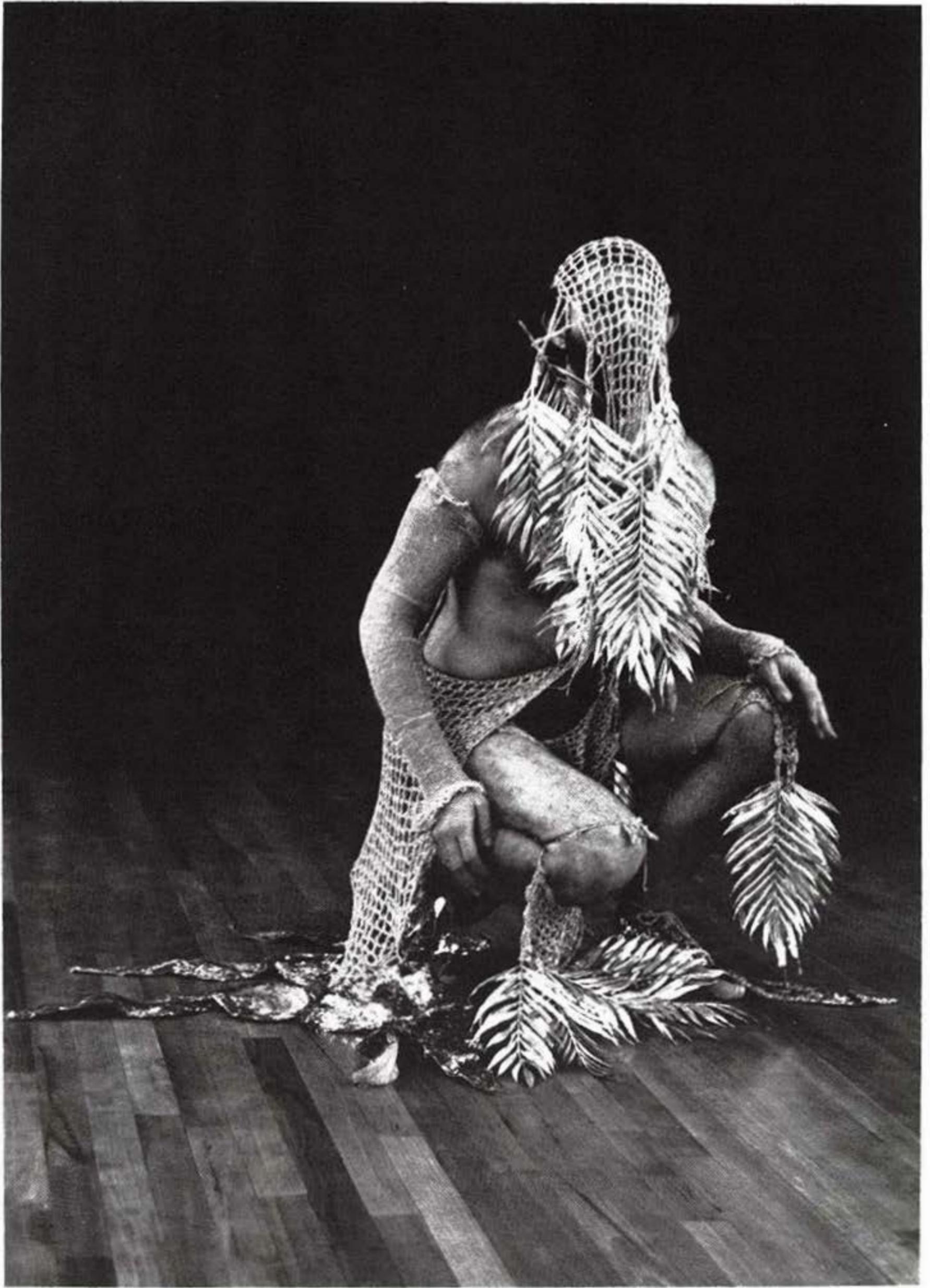


98. Jannis Kounellis: *Da Inventare sul Posto*. 1972. Sonnabend Gallery, New York. Oil painting on canvas, 97" x 115"; two performers and a violin. (Photograph courtesy Sonnabend Gallery)



99 and 100. Richard Kriesche: *The Image and the Magic*. 1978. Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, California. (Photographs: Michael Levine; courtesy the artist)





101. Robert Kushner: *Gold* (from *Sentimental Fables*). May 1980. Performance in the artist's studio, New York. (Photograph: D. James Dee; courtesy Holly Solomon Gallery)



102. Leslie Labowitz: *Sprout Time*. March 1981. Franklin Furnace, New York. From the series "Women Performance Artists from London and L.A.," sponsored by Franklin Furnace. In dim light the artist appeared naked and sprayed her bean sprouts while her audiotaped voice spoke about her mother, who had been imprisoned in Auschwitz, and about death. When the lights came up, she was clothed. She talked to the audience about art, survival, life, and how her bean sprout business was both survival and art and symbolized life for her. Then she said the business was for sale and auctioned it off for \$500. She prepared wheat grass juice, sprout salads, and spirulina for the audience. The Sprout Man appeared briefly to sing a song and play the piano. (Photograph courtesy Franklin Furnace)





103. Leopoldo Maler: *25 HP*. September 1980. Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland. A visual metaphor of the fiction of power, using a twenty-five-horsepower car, twenty-five horses, and forty performers carrying banners displaying phrases relating to the horsepower formula, and power in general. The art critic Clement Greenberg was in the car, an unwitting participant in the performance. (Photograph courtesy the artist)

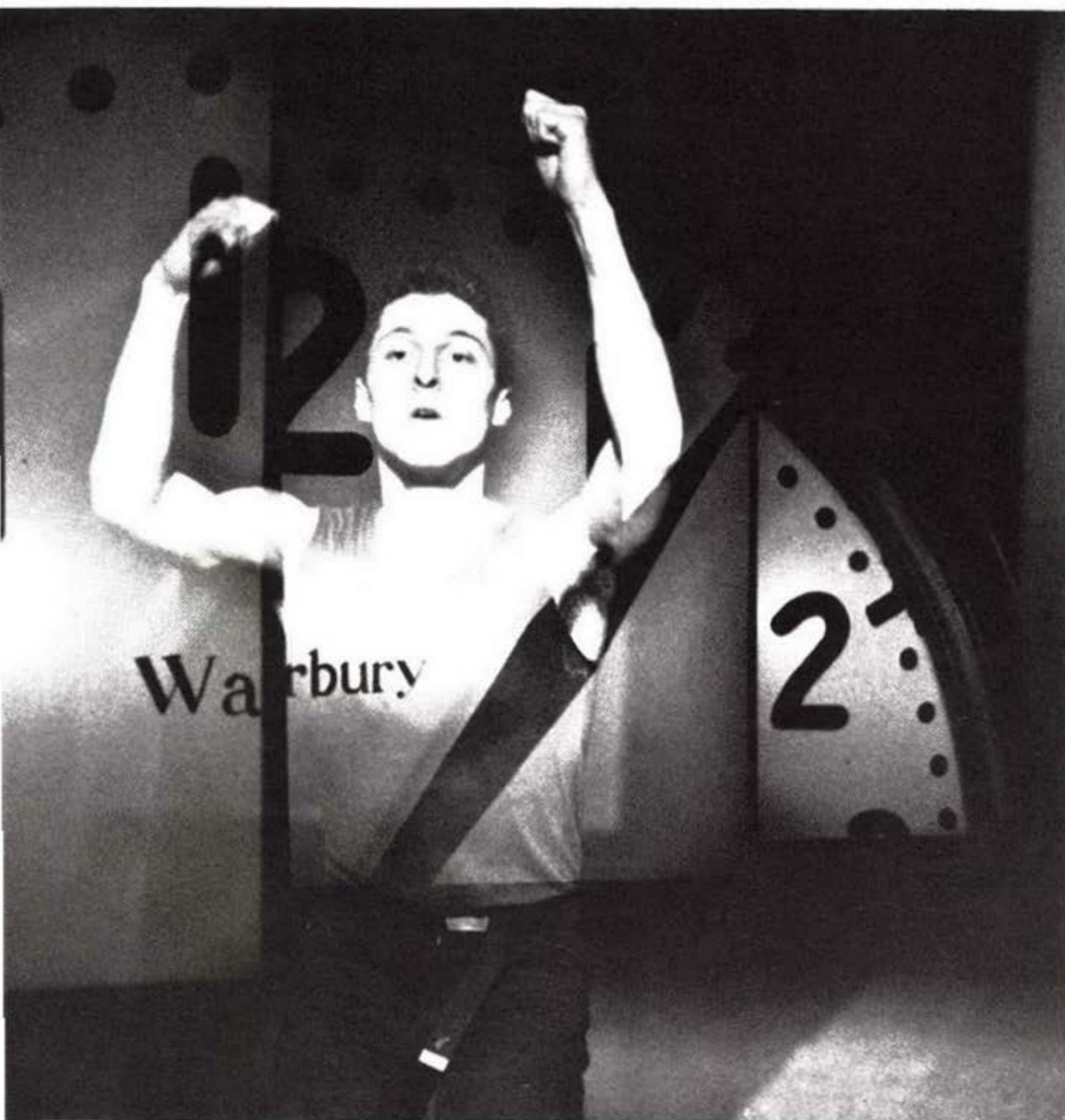
(*Opposite*)

104. Tom Marioni: *Liberating Light and Sound*. 1979. Gallery Pellegrino, Bologna, Italy. Drum brushing on marble with gold-plated wire drum brushes. (Photograph courtesy the artist)



105. Stephen Paul Miller and David Shapiro:  
*Harrisburg Mon Amour, or Two Boys on a Bus.*  
February 1980. Performed by Taylor Mead, The  
Kitchen, New York. The play was written by the two  
poets in April 1979 during a bus ride from New York  
to Pennsylvania at the height of the Harrisburg  
nuclear scare. Using a tape recorder, both writers  
created characters approximating themselves. Mead  
performed both roles, with musical interventions by  
Laurie Anderson. (Photograph: Rudy Burckhardt;  
courtesy Stephen Paul Miller)

106. Tim Miller: *Postwar*. January 1982. Dance Theater Workshop, New York. (Photograph: Lois Greenfield)





107. Nice Style Pose Band (Garry Chitty, Robin Fletcher, Bruce McLean, and Paul Richards): *High up on a Baroque Palazzo*. 1974. The Garage, London. (Photograph courtesy RoseLee Goldberg)



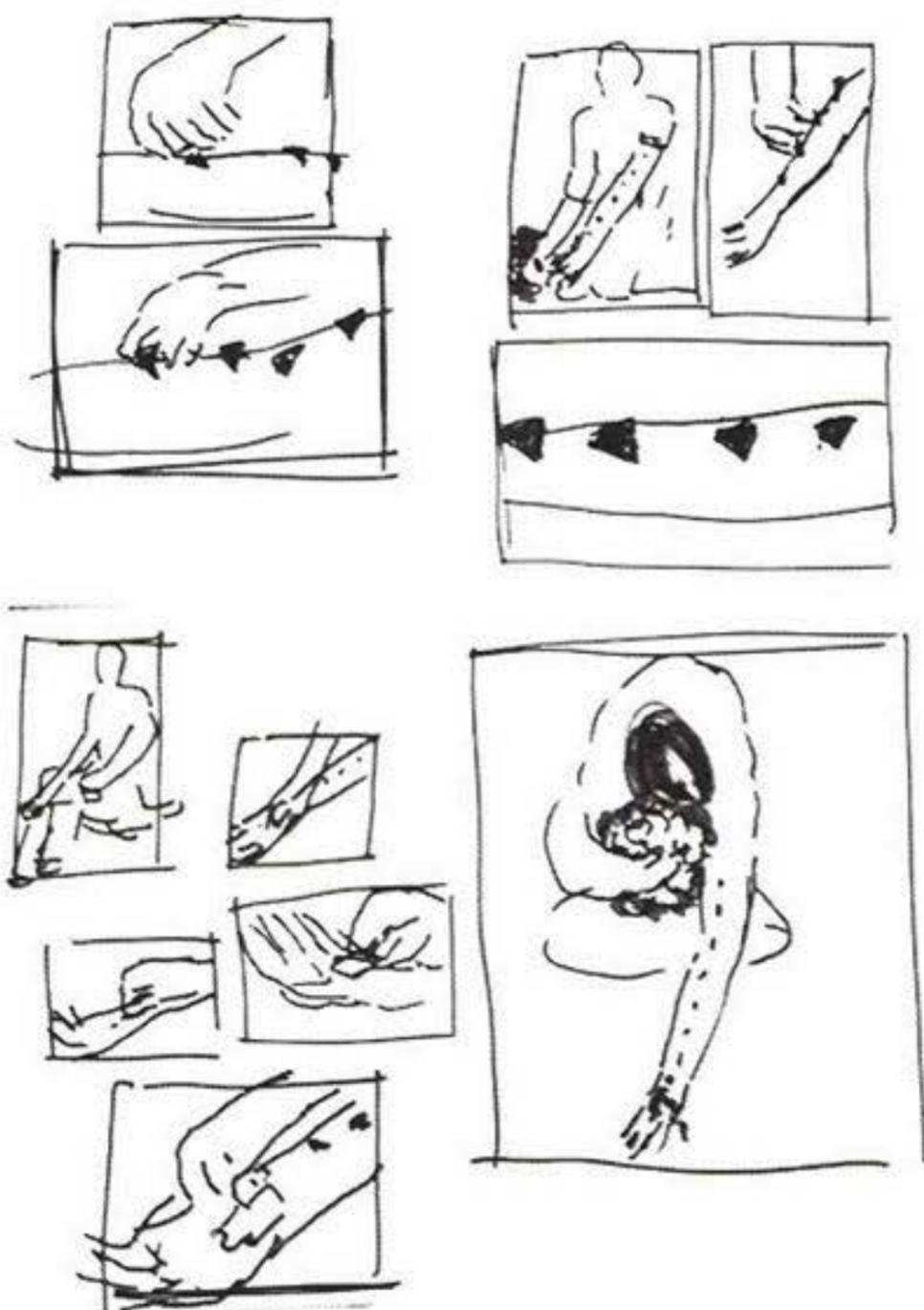
108. Hermann Nitsch: *48th Action*. 1975. Galerie Stadler, Paris. (Photograph: André Morain; courtesy Galerie Stadler)



109. Luigi Ontani as Christopher Columbus. 1975. Columbus Circle, New York. (Photograph: Gwenn Thomas; courtesy RoseLee Goldberg)

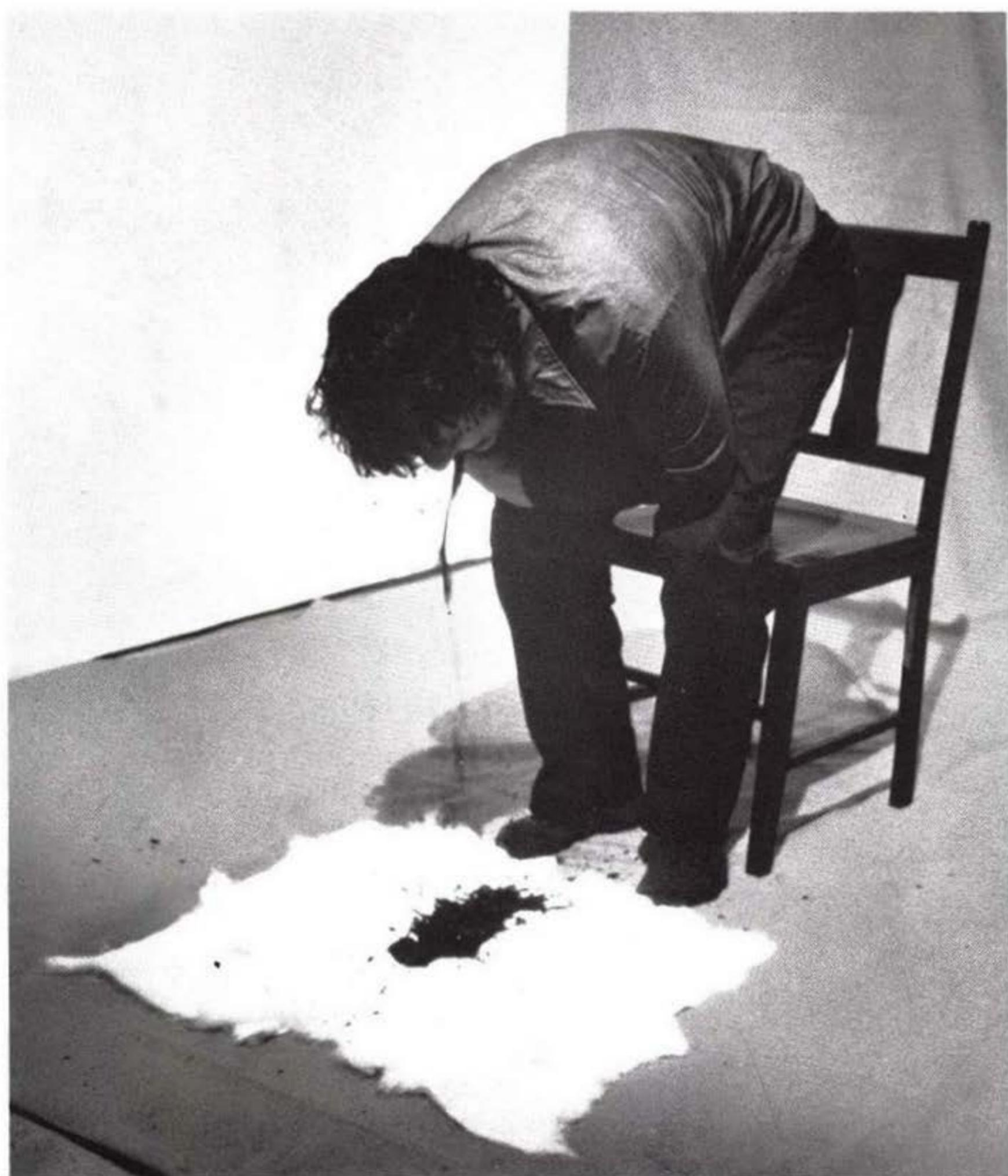


110. Dennis Oppenheim: *Attempt to Raise Hell*. 1974. Seated figure with metal head, metal bell, and spotlight. At intervals the head suddenly lunges forward, striking the bell. "The sound of metal clashing fills the room as well as the mind." (Photograph courtesy Sonnabend Gallery)



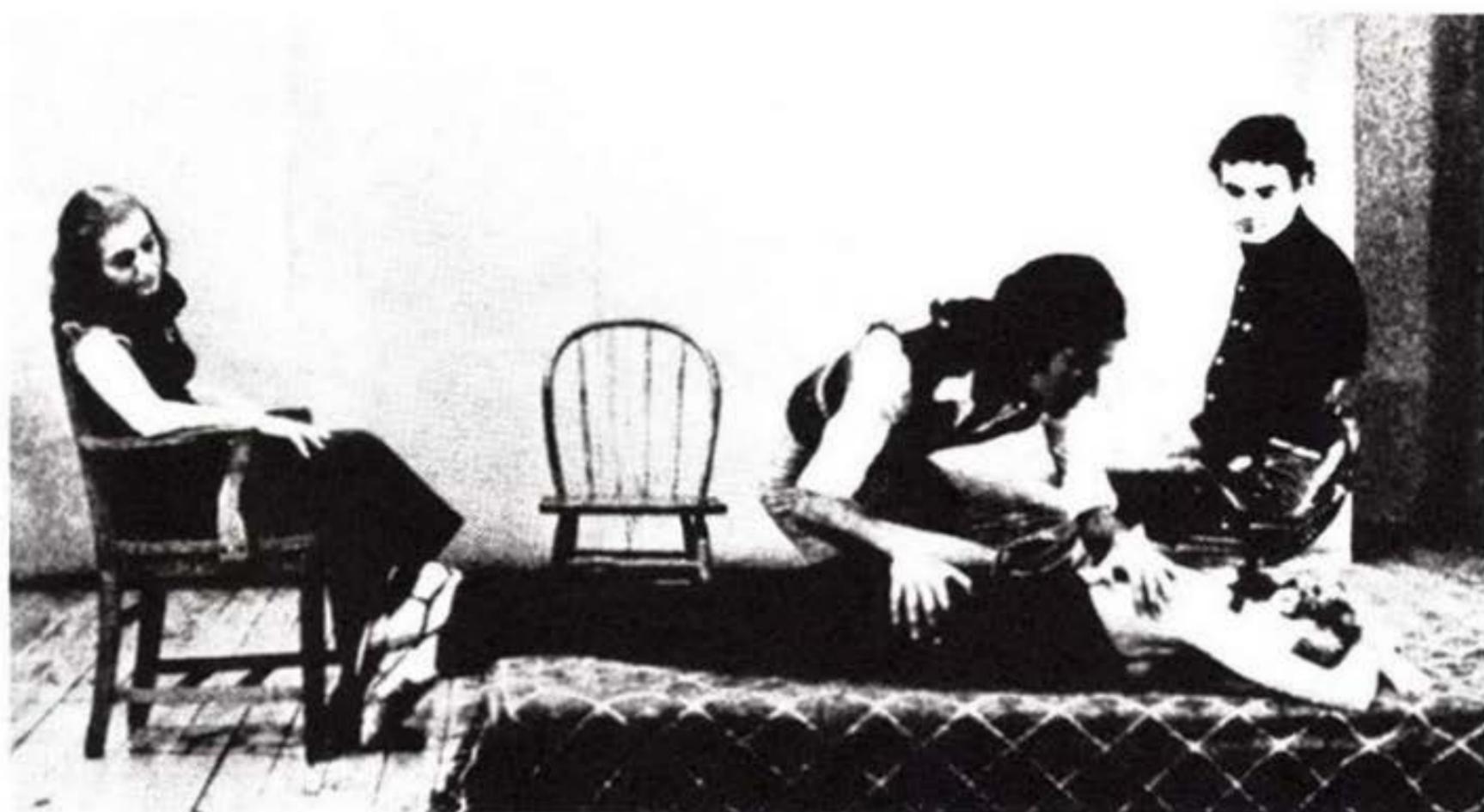
111 and 112. Gina Pane: *Sentimental Action*. 1973. Galerie Diagramma, Milan, Italy. Drawings for the performance and a detail of the action. (Photographs courtesy the artist)





113. Mike Parr: *The Emetics; Primary Vomit (I Am Sick of Art)*, *Red, Yellow and Blue*. 1977. Australia. This series of pieces was presented in three radically different contexts. *Yellow* was presented in the lavatory of a pub, and *Blue* was presented in a commercial gallery. (Photograph courtesy the artist)



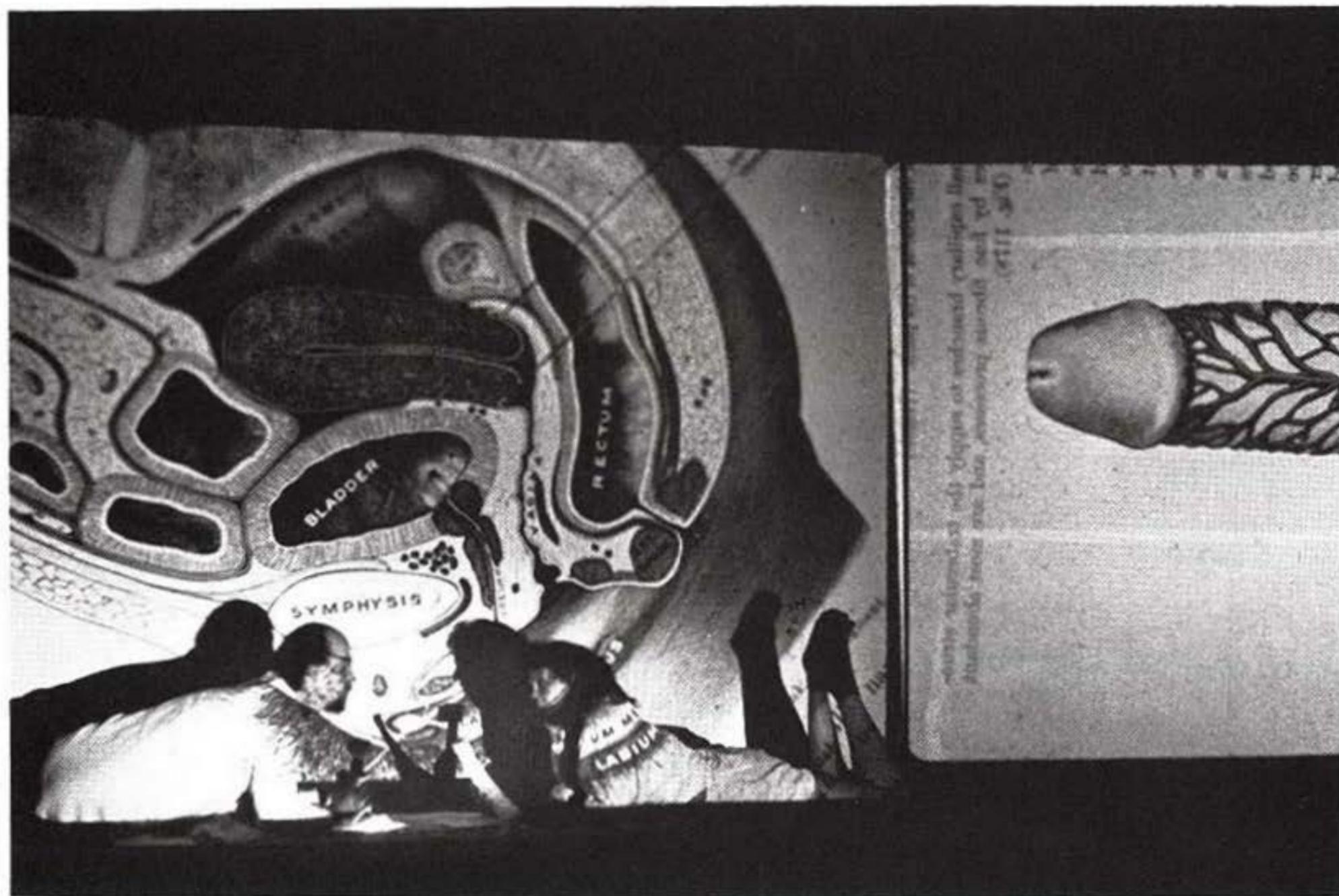


115. Yvonne Rainer: *Lives of Performers*. 1972. Black-and-white film with sound, 90 mins. Shirley Soffer, Fernando Torm, Valda Setterfield, and John Erdman. (Photograph courtesy the artist)

114 (*opposite*). Lucio Pozzi: *Cook, Chat, and Billiards*. December 1981. Robert Freidus Gallery, New York. Time: 3 hrs. Yellow and Blue sat on a couch and on an armchair. They talked in sign language, much of the time about music or sounds. Black (Pozzi) was standing in front of the kitchen counter facing the public. The counter was covered with photographs—rejects from photo lab wastebaskets and from art schools. Two photos were planted in the pile—one of a Vietnamese general summarily executing a suspected Vietcong guerrilla in Saigon in 1974, the other depicting a scene of the Soweto riots in 1976.

Black had a well-aligned battery of scissors from small to large. Choosing the appropriate pair each time, he spent the three hours of the action cutting the photos into small strips and dumping the cuttings from a salad dish into a big pot of boiling water, stirring, and covering it with a lid.

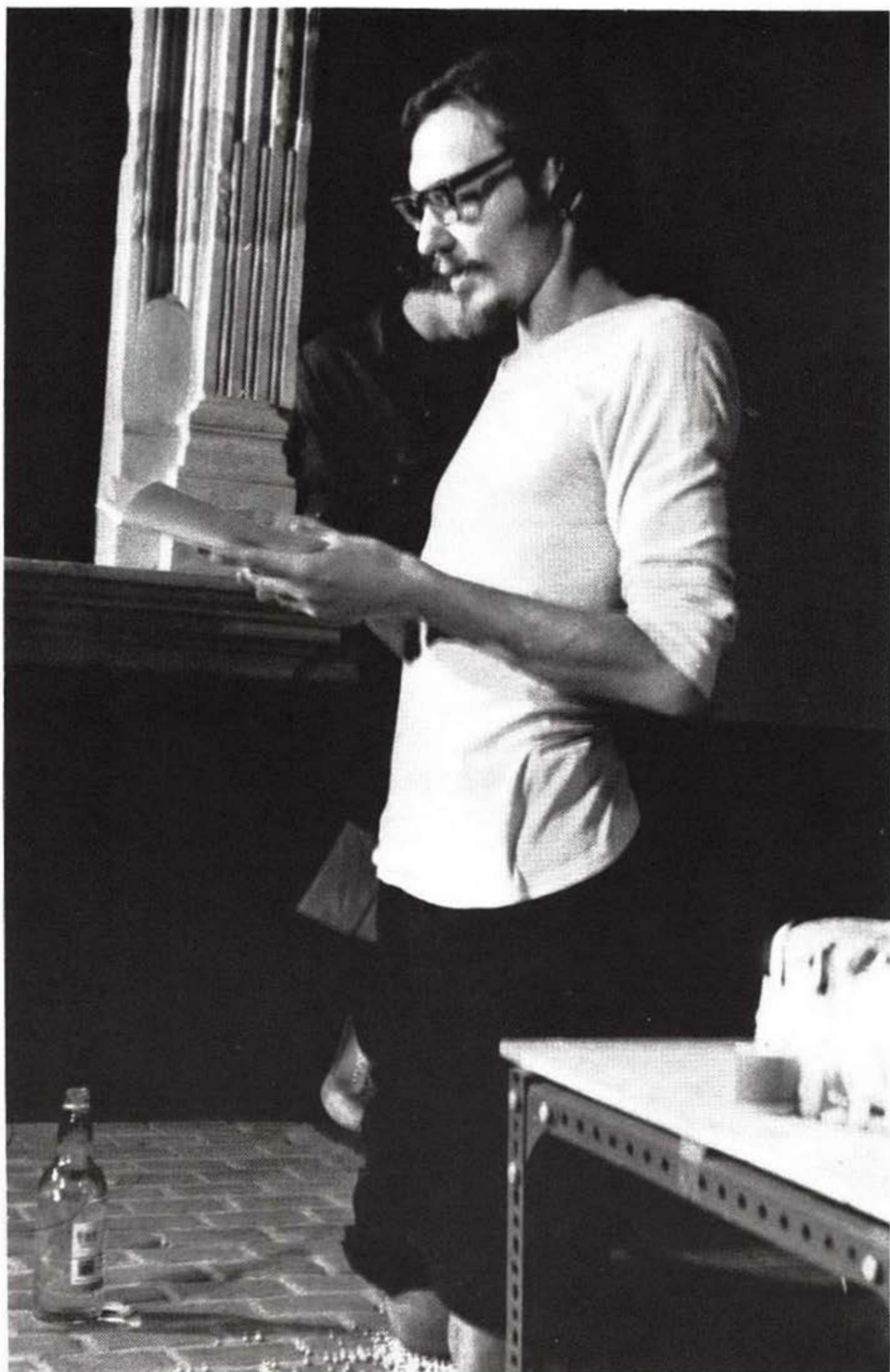
Green and Pink played pool. The actors of each situation were not relating to the others or to the public. They were like self-sufficient universes. (Photograph: Betty Sussler; courtesy the artist)



116. Carolee Schneemann: *Dirty Pictures*. 1980. Five performers, slides, film, live and taped sound. *Dirty Pictures* is a *vinculum*, a copulation of domestic and preliterate erotic artifacts, that answers the question: Can a lonely, impoverished lexicon find happiness in a forgotten mining town? The figures in front of the three-screen projection are D. Owen Patterson and Carolee Schneemann. (Photograph: B. J. Ciurej and L. L. Lochman; courtesy The Art Institute of Chicago and Artemisia Gallery)



117. HA Schult: *Venezia Vive*. March 1976. Venice, Italy. Schult filled the Piazza San Marco with 350,000 newspapers as his unofficial participation in the 1976 Biennale. (Photograph: Stefan Moses; courtesy the artist)



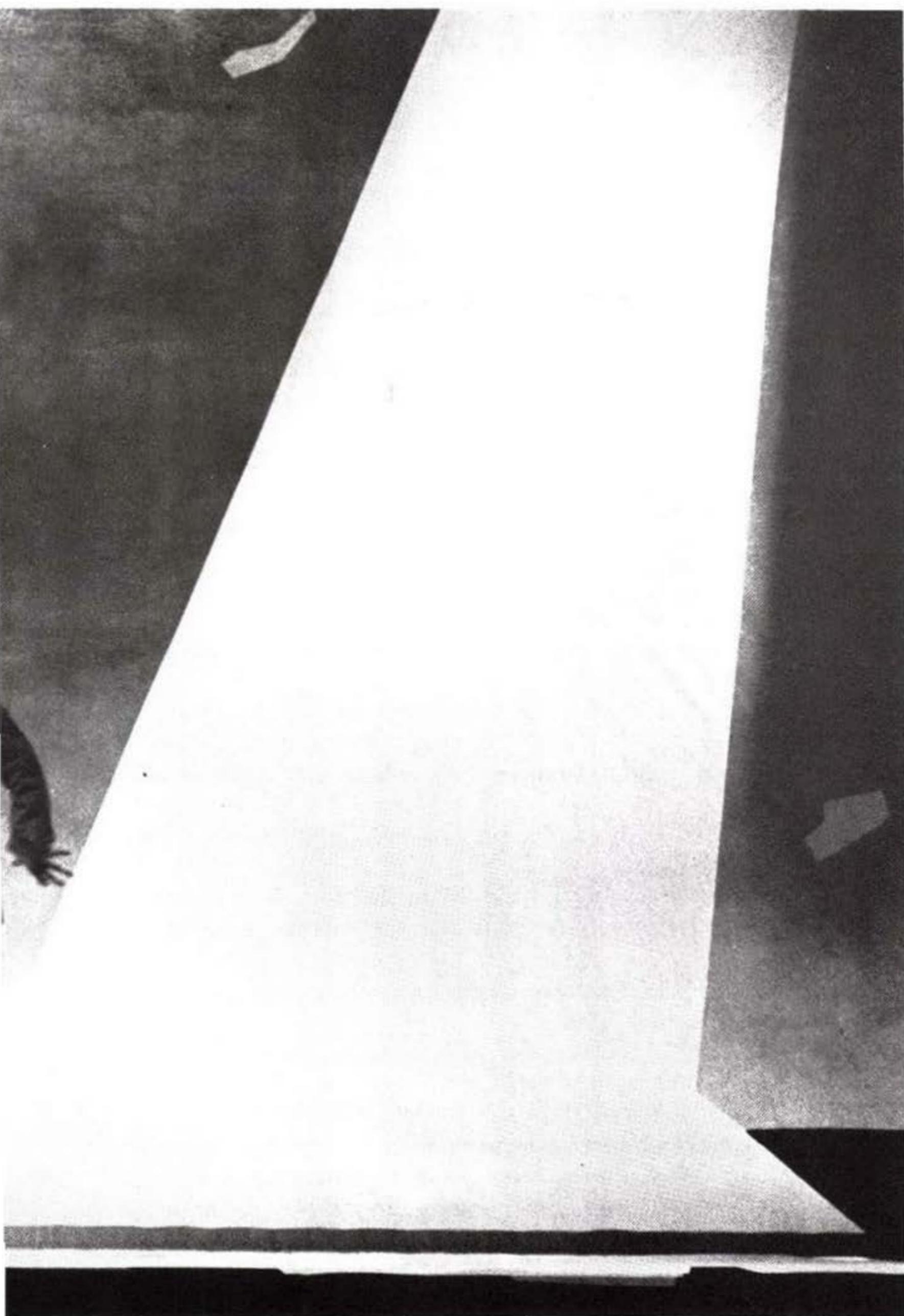


119. Hannah Wilke: A chewing gum performance to create a sculptural portico around the Albright-Knox Art Museum. July 1976. Buffalo, New York. (Photograph: Hannah Wilke; courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Inc.)

118 (*opposite*). Petr Štembera: *Lecture*. July 1976. Zsolnay Museum, Pécs, Hungary. "Kneeling on peas beside an improvised table, I read, over and over again, the same chapter from Heidegger's book *Um Wesen der Wahrheit*. After each reading I drank a draught of vodka. On the table was the bottle of vodka and a bowl containing leavening dough surrounded by burning candles. The piece was proposed to come to an end when the dough had overflowed the bowl, putting out the candles, or when I would no longer be able to read because of drunkenness (which happened about twenty minutes after I had begun). I regained consciousness about eighteen hours later." (Photograph: Tomas Aknai; courtesy the artist)

120. Robert Wilson:  
*The Man in the  
Raincoat*. 1981.  
Theater der Welt,  
Cologne, West  
Germany. (Photograph:  
Gert Weigelt; courtesy  
Byrd Hoffman  
Foundation)





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# THE ART OF PERFORMANCE

## A Critical Anthology

"Before man was aware of art he was aware of himself. Awareness of the person is, then, the first art. In performance art the figure of the artist is the tool for the art. It *is* the art."

—GREGORY BATTCKOCK

"Performance means getting down to the bare bones of aesthetic communication—artist/self confronting audience/society."

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Performance is the art form most characteristic of the 1970s. The essays collected for this anthology were written between 1971 and 1981, covering performance from the Renaissance to the present, with a focus on the 1970s. The essays offer a wide variety of ideas from the points of view of critics and of the artists themselves. Numerous performances are documented throughout the book as well as in the section of photographs called "A Gallery of Performances."

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Gilbert and George: *The Red Sculpture*. 1974. Sonnabend Gallery, New York. (Photograph: Bevan-Davies; courtesy Sonnabend Gallery)

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