



**After the Act**  
**The (Re)Presentation of Performance Art**

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## **The (Re)Presentation of Performance Art**

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**Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien**  
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The publication

**After the Act. The (Re)Presentation of Performance Art**

is based on the lecture series (November 4–6, 2005)

held on the occasion of the exhibition

**After the Act**

from November 4 until December 4, 2005

at Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien

ISBN 978-3-902490-28-5 (MUMOK)

ISBN 978-3-9338821-80-0 (Verlag für moderne Kunst Nürnberg)

Die Deutsche Bibliothek – CIP-Einheitsaufnahme

Ein Titelsatz für diese Publikation ist bei der Deutschen Bibliothek erhältlich.

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### After the Act—The (Re)Presentation of Performance Art

Contrary to its original nature, performance art, has through the historization of its documentary material become an object and imaged based art form. As the trace of a message, this material not only adds to the image archive of art history, but is also part of the ongoing process of the cultural canonization of performance art. Initially as a press image, then as a historical document, and finally as a work of art, these images become part of the cultural archive. The accumulation of these moving and still pictures, sketches, manuscripts, and texts forms the pool out of which at most a handful of images will be filtered to represent the iconic status of a unique performance. The documentation of performance art becomes the bearer of the myth of a lost moment that can only be desired in its non-existence, as a substitute. The ephemeral and unique character inherent to a performance is repeatedly reestablished by means of the staged and medial repetition of its *disappearance* in the course of its historical and social reception. The reception and the historical transformation of the significance of performance from the image to a news value to a cultural commodity bear the marks of a hitherto largely neglected series of a contradictions, confirmations, and blind spots. The starting point for this publication is that interest in performance art cannot begin—and also cannot end—with the authentic experience, but rather runs counter to the ontological myths of origin pertaining to performance art and is to be understood as an ongoing process of an interdependent relationship between event, mediation, and reception.

In the course of the exhibition and the symposium *After the Act* various forms of the medialization and historization of performance art were (re)presented and discussed. The main aim of this book is to continue the debate on a critical and more sophisticated view of the reception history of performance art, which begins with the historization of performance art by means of its documentary forms of representation. The following contributions address historical positions, forms of interpretation and appropriation pertaining to documentation, and questions of medialization, canonization, and insitutionalization. The texts collected here range from interviews with performance artists and those who document performance art to most of the papers presented at the *After the Act* symposium from the fields of performance theory and art history. The *After the Act* exhibition concentrated on the re-staging of the documentary image material in contemporary art and the confrontation of this with the source images. This included showing historical documentary material by Joan Jonas and Terry Fox, and presenting video performances by Bruce Nauman and Paul McCarthy. The objective was to create a dialog between the originals and their artistic appropriation by Carola Dertnig, Daniel Guzmán, Luis Felipe Ortega, and Seth Price.

In the course of the exhibition and the symposium, the basic issue was the mutual relationship between performativity and mediality and its significance for historization, and this led to a number of approaches. Doris Kolesch and Annette Jael Lehmann were concerned with the question of the staging of the regime of the gaze, while Philip Auslander addressed the role of the chroniclers and their absence and presence in the process of transcription and the interrelationship between action and image. In her paper, and in her conversation with Joan Jonas, Babette Mangolte concentrated on identifying and distinguishing between different kinds of performance art and their various forms of medialization, an issue that has hitherto received only little attention. This approach inevitably links up with the question of the definition and overlappings of authorship, as seen in Michaela Pöschl's thoughts on the cinematographic politics of the gaze and of the edit in the action films of Otto Muehl and Kurt Kren. Carrie Lambert-Beatty and Sam Gold looked at the cyclical recurrence of performance art since the early twentieth century and its inherent relationship to perceptions of time and *Zeitgeist*. Ultimately, what is at stake is the extent to which contemporary social political and cultural endeavors to reappr-

priate actionistic gestures of the past are linked to the present institutionalization and commercialization of performance art and its ephemera. How did performance art as a projection surface for utopian and authentic desires come to be an object in cultural memory, and how did it come about that, as a staged medium of "public phenomena of the present,"<sup>1</sup> it was turned into a commodity and thus made accessible for us? Has performance art today become the product of an economy of the cult of the individual, which utilizes nostalgic flashbacks to draw on a past and therefore also "de-fused" dynamic of the individual? Where is the potential for a critical (re)presentation of these works that have already been carried into the canon of art history?

"A person sees the event, he sees himself, he sees himself seeing the event, he sees himself seeing others who are seeing the event and who, maybe, see themselves seeing the event. Thus there is the performance, the performers, the spectators, and the spectator of spectators, and the self-seeing-self that can be performer or spectator or spectator of spectator."<sup>2</sup> (Richard Schechner)

Most performance artists were aware of the necessity of preserving their actions beyond the moment of their performative manifestation. This desire was based on the one hand on the need to influence the art-historical reception of the artist's own work, and on the other hand on the social and economic objective of bringing the work to a broader audience. In most cases the audience present at the event was very small and consisted mainly of friends and colleagues, or of people who were there by chance. In contrast to the fact that these actions, which were accessible only to a very few, are widely known. If the small number of live spectators is compared to the level of awareness regarding specific documentations and performances, then the function and significance of the documentation of performance art as an instrument of mediation and distribution becomes clear.<sup>3</sup> This documentation has become a kind of "first layer of history,"<sup>4</sup> a primary source that provides both practice and theory with models and material to work on.

To what degree was the radically staged authenticity of a performance refracted by the filter of its documentarists? As a spectator, a performer, and a mediating agent, the person behind the camera observes

the action and also enters into a mutually determining relationship with the events through the process of image production. Photographers and filmmakers in the performance scene in the United States, like Babette Mangolte and Peter Moore, or in Viennese Actionism, such as Kurt Kren and Ludwig Hoffenreich, developed their own individual visual language representing their relationship with the action. The presence of the performer is transferred to the presence of the spectator through the camera. As an interface and producer of images the camera assumes a dual function. As in cinematography, the consciousness of the performance lies in the apparatus of its reproduction, which stands between the needs and desires of the actors and the observers. And yet, unlike the gaze of "live experience," the traces of performative events in photography and film are always a joint product of the visual strategy of their documentarists and the selection of those commissioning them. All endeavors for objective reproduction notwithstanding, the documentation aestheticizes the events it portrays purely through its formal temporal characteristics. It reduces it to moments that further bolster the myth of the coincidental and are part of the history of performance art.

According to Philip Auslander, performance art represents the climax of the surplus value in the tension between two contradictory socially determining factors—the media spectacle and the longing for the immediate non-mediated experience. The staged nature of the documentary and the documentary element of the staging in performance art are situated within the force field of a culture of spectacle and hyper-medialization. The relationship of performance art to its staging in images is complex and difficult to define, and does not require the classical and antagonistic distinction between a theatrical and an ontological creation of the image. For Auslander, our understanding of the staging of the documentary and vice versa is mirrored in the treatment of the presence and the absence of the spectators. The claim to the authenticity of "being there" is a stubborn feature of the collective reception of performance art. This is guaranteed above all in its iteration in images. Frequently it is the chroniclers and eye-witnesses who attempt to make a claim on originality and authenticity, a claim that is based on the ephemeral nature of performance art. Applied to the idea of "pure" ontological documentation of performance, the concept of performativity, as Auslander shows, would indicate that "the act of documenting an event as a performance constitutes it as such."

One of the most important documentarists of the New York performance scene in the 1970s is the photographer and filmmaker Babette Mangolte, who draws out the strategies and motives of her own documentary activities in her contribution. Mangolte describes a sophisticated working method anchored between intuition and technology. Where Mangolte's practice differs from that of other chroniclers is in her multi-disciplined activity as a camerawoman, a filmmaker, and a photographer, as well as in her ability to capture the subversive nature and the novelty of the performances she documents, whether these are dance, theater, or art. Her photos and films are a sign of her endeavor for neutral and objective reproduction. At the same time her aesthetic is not only influential as an ideological indicator of their time, but also legible as such.

The following conversation between Babette Mangolte and the performance artist Joan Jonas provides insight into the conditions of work and production three decades after the event. Jonas and Mangolte relate their work together to both historical and current contexts and to the question of the difference between the photographer and the performer. Both see a primary need to reflect on the different forms of performance, from conceptual art to dance to theater, in the context of each specific form of media representation. Mangolte documented Jonas' work for about ten years. Her recordings of the performances of *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* as a photographer and cameraperson were shown as a part of Jonas' entire archive of the *Organic Honey* series, constituting the curatorial starting point of the exhibition. The six times Jonas' *Organic Honey* was performed between 1972 and 1981 were documented in photos and video by twelve different chroniclers, including the artist herself.

The archive on show consists of drawings, notes, more than one hundred developed photographic prints, and several hours of unedited video material.<sup>5</sup> Until today *Organic Honey* has been presented and reproduced as a video, photographs, and objects in installations, exhibition catalogs, and in the specialist press.

*Organic Honey* occupies a special place in the history of performance art by virtue of Jonas' performative treatment of masking, gesture, and visual mirroring, which was echoed before the eyes of the spectators in a broad range of medial transcriptions. The technical recording and simultaneous playback was part of the performance, occupying a place not on the margins but rather in the center of the action. The process of trans-



Joan Jonas, *Archiv Organic Honey*, 1971–1980  
Installation view MUMOK, Photo: Lisa Rastl

forming the live event to the image was made visible through its perpetuation. In *Organic Honey* Jonas staged a dual indexicality of the absent,<sup>6</sup> which, whether as a gesture on stage or as a represented gesture in the image reproduced through media, makes a process visible that is emblematic for performance art as a genre and its historization. This is the moment when what is directly experienced enters into its multiply reproducible continuation, abandoning on the one hand the auratic claim to authenticity in performance art while on the other hand constituting itself in this very disappearance. One aspect of the challenge consists in observing the process of medialization on the level of content and visualizing it independently from its forms of representation. In *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes writes of photography as always carrying its referent with itself: “The photograph belongs to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both [...] In short the referent adheres. And this singular adherence makes it very difficult to focus on photography.”<sup>7</sup>

Twenty years after Barthes, the media studies expert Sybille Krämer, in her theory of the relationship between mediality and performativity, sees the medium not only as the bearer of a message, but also as participating in the translation and the substance of the message, and argues that it can only assume the function of memory through iteration and visual mediation.<sup>8</sup> What takes place is a reference of the media to the works of art that co-creates meaning. In the case of the documentation of performance art there is a relationship of tension that is situated between media generati-

vism and media marginalism. According to Krämer, this means that media also constitute what they convey, but then, after the completion of the medial translation, disappears again in reception and remains below the threshold of our perception.<sup>9</sup> In this context Krämer speaks of a mediality that causes performativity to become evident and at the same time inevitably disappears at the moment of representation via the bearer of the image. The medium thereby not only becomes the message—as for Marshall McLuhan—but also the trace of itself, which comes increasingly to the fore in the course of its historization.

For Annette Jael Lehmann and Doris Kolesch, this is particularly the case for the performance avant-garde in art in the 1960s and 1970s, which concentrated on its medial reflexivity and making the moment of production its subject. In their contribution, the transcription of the performance from the live event to the projected image is anchored in the force field of its original performativity and its media representation. Lehmann and Kolesch discuss various strategies of the use of media that were crucial in the staging of images of the body and performative actions in the early video performances of Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, and Joan Jonas. The recording media play a key role in these performances, inscribing themselves as the trace of a message in the bodily nature of the representation. When we speak of a contingent relationship of performance to its documentation, then this is a mutual relationship that inscribes itself both in terms of media and concept into its documentary forms.

Performance videos and photographs by the American artists Terry Fox, Bruce Nauman, and Paul McCarthy were models for the actions shown in *Remake* (1994–2004) by Luis Felipe Ortega and Daniel Guzmán. All of the monotone sequences of movement in front of the eye of the camera repeat an act of one the role models. A man is seen lying on his stomach and pushing a pot of paint along the floor; another man is seen bracing himself bare chested to spit out a fountain of water from his mouth; a third man repeatedly falls backward into the same corner to bounce back up as if he were made of rubber. Reproductions in black and white in catalogs, art and general interest magazines served as Ortega und Guzmán’s visual sources for these reenactments. The concentration of these short clips clearly shows—and not without a certain irony—the risk inherent to the physical and artistic repetition of gestures that have become famous. The reconstruction of the original as documentation is the product of a



Luis Felipe Ortega & Daniel Guzmán, *Remake*, 1994/2003  
Installation view MUMOK, Photo: Lisa Rastl

mutual process of appropriation. It is the dialectics of appropriation in which the repetition takes its form, and in which, according to the philosopher Rahel Jäeggli, “both the appropriator and the appropriated change.”<sup>10</sup> *Remake* restages the images of performance art that are anchored in the cultural imagination and determined by art-historical descriptions and photographic documentations. The paradigm becomes the placeholder for the performance, whose repetitive character is taken to the point of alienation in the process of imitation. Ortega and Guzmán refer to the reception of performance art as a balancing act between the medial representation of a historical position and the myth of the body continually injuring and testing itself, one which is permanently being re-transformed in cultural memory.

Serving oneself to the heroes of the canon is essential for Seth Price’s *Digital Video Effects: „Spills“* (2004). Two years ago Price came across a home movie in Jonas’ video archive, which had been made more or less by chance in 1972. It shows Richard Serra, Robert Smithson, and Nancy Holt in a heated debate with the New Yorker gallery owner Joseph Helman on the economy of immaterial art. Price then created his own artistic appropriation of the image material, which Jonas had originally not intended for exhibition. He reworked it visually by using a lava-lamp-like video effect known as “spill” that was popular in the 1980s, and then laconically presented the running monitor in a packing carton box. Situated between the *objet trouvé*, pop culture, and appropriation art, Price’s installation *Digital Video Effect: “Spills”* (2004) profits from the myth of its protagonists,

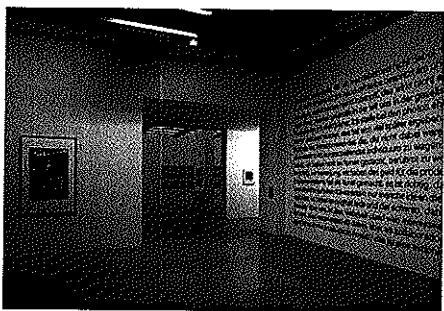


Seth Price, *Digital Video Effect: “Spills”*, 2004  
Installation view MUMOK, Photo: Lisa Rastl

while counteracting their authentic “gesturing”. Guzmán and Ortega, as well as Price all enter into tantalizing relationship with their role models by way of the documentary sources. They make use of their success and at the same time openly and confrontationally speak of the burden of tradition that is the foundation of their appropriations. Both positions use staging to reactivate in the present what has been historically recorded and cemented, so as to shift the appeal of nostalgia onto the surface of their investigation. They counter this retrospective desire by physically eschewing the movements shown, or by masking out and commenting by means of dark spots that partly cover the surface. The documentation of performance art not only serves as a foil for appropriation processes, as Price, Guzmán und Ortega show, but also as a tool that subjects the apparently non-graspable to a new way of reading. In memory the various roles and functions of the protagonists in performance art tend to become blurred. On the one hand they seem to join together in the mythologization of the “pure” authentic experience of a unique action, a kind of chance melding of various elements. On the other hand the praxis of collaboration and thus also of conception together create the cultural understanding of performance art. The question of authorship or the claim to a new symbolic ownership of your own image and its conscious and unconscious inscription into the canon of art is something that many of the original protagonists demand.

It is in this sense Michaela Pöschl’s essay looks at the mechanisms of the production of meaning via editing in Kurt Kren’s early films of Otto Muehl’s actions in comparison to Muehl’s own documentation and action





Carola Dertnig, *Lora Sana*, 2005  
Installation view MUMOK, Photo: Lisa Rastl

films. Working from the perspectives of film theory and art history, Pöschl investigates the mythologization that was particularly inherent to Viennese Actionism, by looking at the frequently repressed origins of the movements medial history. The focus of the analysis, which looks critically at issues of gender, is based on the vicissitudinous relationship between Muehl, the artist, and Kren, the filmmaker and commissioned documentarist, and the strong urge for authorship displayed by both. Can contact prints that were marked and selected by Muehl, and detailed storyboards for actions and notes, provide insight into a history whose image rejects any kind of conceptual basis? Is it possible to read issues of authorship and of the destruction of myths of origin into the representational aesthetics of past events?

In her installation *Lora Sana* (2005), Carola Dertnig also illuminates aspects of the loss of memory in that very artistic movement that was specialized in breaking open the repressed and turning taboo into show: Viennese Actionism. From the perspective of the only female member of the group, Lora Sana (62, actionist and today a producer of ecological cosmetics), who was ignored and hidden from view for over three decades, Dertnig provides retrospective insight to instances long gone. Sana's memories refer to her forgotten authorship in form of a wall text—between transcript and letter—and a series of reworked documentary photographs of Viennese Actionism. Presented directly adjacent to the MUMOK exhibition of its collection of Viennese Actionism, by way of a special opening in an otherwise closed wall that leads to the collection. *Lora Sana* as a

fiction becomes part of the history. The photographic documents and presentation of images by Rudolf Schwarzkogler, Günter Brus, and Otto Muehl serve as Dertnig's models for her fictional protagonist. Reproduced, collaged, and painted over, she adds a further trace of indexicality onto their surfaces. This is the new version of a history that has already been written by others, through which the fictional potential of documentation, memory, and oral narrative—and thereby the apparently so firmly cemented knowledge pertaining to art history—is scrutinized according to its economic value, gender roles, and identity formation. In Kren's and Muehl's films discussed by Pöschl and in Dertnig's photographic reworking and texts the patriarchal relationship of power between subject and object, and male and female performer, that is perpetuated within the documentation of performance art is critically questioned as a consciously staged artistic act, that in the course of history of its reception is further developed. Both in the theoretical and also artistic investigations by Pöschl and Dertnig—the former is also a performance artist—it is the moment of editing, proofreading, and the selection of images and lines of argument that becomes the determining factor for its reception. In other words, it is the excerpts and interventions, the variety and not the singularity of the subjective decision-making processes which through their perpetuation—decades later—reveal the beginnings of a potential reversal of our understanding. The material available provides us with the possibility of critically reviewing art history and looking at it in terms of its constitutive mechanisms.

Consequently historiography itself assimilates its own shifts over time and then reintegrates them into the canon. Through the self-reflexivity of its politics of representation performance art implemented a break with the historical narrative dominant in the 1960s—and thus clearly ripe to be broken with—and yet this break was ultimately defeated by its own means. This paradox reversal is the thematic starting point for the performance *Poor Theater* that was premiered in 2004 by the New York theater company The Wooster Group. Presented and discussed in the symposium by its dramaturg, Sam Gold, the piece took on the function of an interface to the question of the potential for appropriation of past performances that had been raised in the exhibition. Instead of publishing Gold's talk, there is a reprint of the *Poor Theater* brochure and a conversation with Gold, which looks at the cultural contextualization of the initial production and

long-term development of the play, directed by Elizabeth LeCompte. *Poor Theater* is a confrontation based on the word for word reenactment of two performances through their documentation. The first is a 1968 BBC television recording of the play *Akropolis* (1964) by the theater director Jerzy Grotowski. In the same year this play was also performed in New York for the first time. The second is a teaching CD-ROM by the director of the Frankfurt ballet, William Forsythe, which was distributed shortly before he was dismissed by the city of Frankfurt. In both cases, which are thirty years apart, the issue at stake is the beginning and the end of an epoch. The restaging by The Wooster Group refers in minute detail to the technical models and their transcriptive transference from the medium to the live performance. Discrepancies and frictions with the original are investigated, as they can only be played out in their repetition and medial replay. For Gold, *Poor Theater* is the expression of the atmosphere relevant to each time, finding its expression between theatrical restaging and dilettante imitation, and enabling the staging of the temporality of a non-graspable moment in the past.

The temporality that is inherent to performance art and its potential as an ideological indicator of its own time in its image-based forms of documentation is the starting point of Carrie Lambert-Beatty's thoughts on Yvonne Rainer's work from the 1960s. In her investigation, Lambert-Beatty refers to a 1965 photographic record of Yvonne Rainer's dance performance *Parts of Some Sextets*, by the most important American photographer of performance art in the 1960s, Peter Moore. Lambert-Beatty is interested in a historical and work-immanent reference of live art to the possibilities of its own recording and technical reproduction. She analyses how documentary records and artistic staging of performance art embody the cultural-political changes of their own time and give expression to these as a part of the economy of the reproducibility of "unique" events. The photographs that Rainer selected for distribution and historization contain a dual indexicality, in which the moment of the inscription of the light on the film refers to the movement of gestures in space as shown. The focus is on the process of recording as a theme of the work itself, and the ways in it is reflected in the choreography. The difficulty here lies in being able to distinguish between the interconnected parallelities and intertwinings of performativity and mediality, which are both affirmative and paradoxical with regard to each other.

The affirmative claim to the authenticity of a performance is in its constitutive dependence on mediality, neither to be rejected nor to be met with unqualified assent, but rather should be rethought in terms of its parallel distinctions. Performance art, whose constitution is not completed with the event itself, is a processual form of art that is dependent on its reception. As a result performance art, in the course of its medial transcriptions "from the street to the picture on the wall," is subject to a great many shifts caused by reception, which *After the Act* attempts to reflect upon. The strategy in the shadow of remembrance's staging oscillating between the performance and the documentation is an integral part of performance art itself and continues to deserve our attention.

#### Notes

- 1 Martin Seel, "Inszenieren als Erscheinenlassen: Thesen über die Reichweite eines Begriffs," in *Ästhetik der Inszenierung*, Joseph Früchtl and Jörg Zimmermann (eds.), Aesthetica edition suhrkamp vol. 2196, Frankfurt am Main 2001, p. 56.
- 2 Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Pittsburgh 1985, p. 8.
- 3 Since the early twentieth century it has been the reproduction and distribution technologies of photography and film, and since the 1960s the video camera, as both a recording and replay medium, that have contributed to the dissemination and popularity of performance art.
- 4 Quotation from a podium discussion with the photographer and filmmaker Babette Mangolte and the performance theorist RoseLee Goldberg, "RoseLee Goldberg and Babette Mangolte in Conversation," in the course of the exhibition *Art, Lies and Videotape: Exposing Performance* at the Tate Liverpool, United Kingdom, November 2003.
- 5 The latter led to two twenty-minute video works: *Vertical Roll*, which consists of material recorded within the performance, and a documentary video recording the performance from the perspective of the audience of *Organic Honey Vertical Roll* in the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York.
- 6 Christiane Kuhlmann, *Bewegter Körper – Mechanischer Apparat*, Deutsches Tanzarchiv Köln, *Studien und Dokumente zur Tanzwissenschaft*, Peter Lang Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften, Cologne p. 194.
- 7 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 1981, p. 6.

- 8 Sybille Krämer, "Das Medium als Spur und als Apparat," in *Medien, Computer, Realität: Zur Veränderung unserer Wirklichkeitsvorstellungen durch die Neuen Medien*, Sybille Krämer (ed.), Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 2000, p. 73.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Rahel Jäeggli, "Aneignung braucht Fremdheit," in *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 46, June 2002, p. 62.

Philip Auslander

### On the Performativity of Performance Documentation

Consider these two iconic images from the history of performance and body art: one comes from the documentation of Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971), the other is Yves Klein's famous *Leap into the Void* (1960). It is generally accepted that the first image is a piece of performance documentation, but what is the second? Burden really was shot in the arm during *Shoot*, but Klein did not really jump unprotected out a second storey window, the ostensible performance documented in his equally iconic image. What difference does it make to our understanding of these images in relation to the concept of performance documentation that one image documents a performance that "really" happened while the other does not? I shall return to this question below.

In classifying these images and others like them, I propose two categories: the "documentary" and the "theatrical." The documentary category represents the traditional way in which the relationship between performance art and its documentation is understood. It is assumed that the documentation of the performance event provides both a record of it through which it can be reconstructed (at least to a degree) and evidence that it actually occurred. The connection between performance and document is thus thought to be ontological, with the event preceding and authorizing its documentation. Burden's performance documentation, as well most of the documentation of classic performance and body art from the 1960s and 1970s, belongs to this category.



1



2

1 Chris Burden, *Shoot*, 1971  
Performance in F space,  
November 19, 1971,  
Santa Ana California

2 Yves Klein, *Leap into the Void*,  
October 19, 1960  
© VBK Wien, Photo: Harry Shunk

Although it is generally taken for granted, the presumption of an ontological relationship between performance and document in this first model is ideological. This idea of the documentary photograph as a means of accessing the reality of the performance derives from the general ideology of photography, as described by Helen Gilbert, glossing Roland Barthes and Don Slater: “Through its trivial realism, photography creates the illusion of such exact correspondence between the signifier and the signified that it appears to be the perfect instance of Barthes’ ‘message without a code.’ The ‘sense of the photograph as not only representationally accurate but ontologically connected to the real world allows it to be treated as a piece of the real world, then as a substitute for it.”<sup>21</sup> (In relation to Slater’s notion that the photograph ultimately substitutes for reality, it is worth considering whether performance recreations based on documentation actually recreate the underlying performances or the performances as documents. Both the work by Daniel Guzmán and Luis Felipe Ortega included in *After the Act* and The Wooster Group’s *Poor Theater*, a performance discussed at the symposium accompanying the exhibition, in which The Wooster Group recreates performances by Jerzy Grotowski and William Forsythe, clearly play with this slippery question.

Jon Erickson suggests that the use of black and white photography in classic performance documentation enhances photography’s reality-effect (for Erickson, color photographs assert themselves more strongly as objects in their own right). “There is a sense of mere utility in black-and-white, which points to the idea that documentation is really only a supple-



The Wooster Group, *Poor Theater*, 2004 (Sheena See)  
Video-still: © The Wooster Group

ment to a performance having to do with context, space, action, ideas, of which the photograph is primarily a reminder.”<sup>22</sup> Amelia Jones also takes up the idea of the documentary photograph as a supplement to the performance, but to challenge the ontological priority of the live performance rather than to affirm it. She offers a sophisticated analysis of “the mutual supplementarity of [...] performance or body art and the photographic document. (The body art event needs the photograph to confirm its having happened; the photograph needs the body art event as an ontological ‘anchor’ of its indexicality.)”<sup>23</sup> While this formulation questions the performance’s status as the originary event by suggesting the mutual dependence of performance and document (the performance is originary only insofar as it is documented), it also reaffirms the status of the photograph as an access point to the reality of the performance, a position on which Jones must insist since she argues it to defend her own practice of writing about performances she never saw in the flesh.

In the theatrical category, I would place a host of art works of the kind sometimes called “performed photography,” ranging from Marcel Duchamp’s photos of himself as *Rrose Sélavy* (1920–21) to Cindy Sherman’s photographs of herself in various guises to Matthew Barney’s *Cremaster* films. Other recent examples include the work of artists Gregory Crewdson and Nikki Lee. These are cases in which performances were staged solely to be recorded by one means or another and had no meaningful prior existence as autonomous events presented to audiences. The space of the document, whether visual or audiovisual, thus becomes the only space in which



1



2

1 Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp  
as *Rose Sélavy*, 1923  
Gelatin Silver print, © Man Ray  
Trust ars-adagp/VBK Wien

2 Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2:  
The Golden Tablet*, 1999  
C-print, 133,1 x 109,2 x 2,5 cm  
© Matthew Barney  
Courtesy Barbara Gladstone  
Gallery, New York  
Photo: Michael James O'Brian

the performance occurs. Klein's *Leap Into the Void* belongs to this category. Klein had no audience when he jumped and used a protective net that does not appear in the photograph, which is actually a composite of two different shots unified in the darkroom. The image we see thus records an event that never took place except in the image itself.

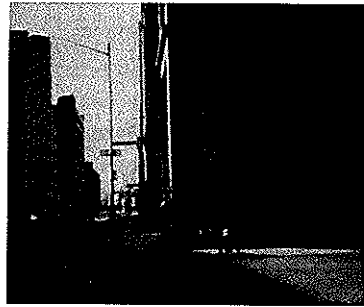
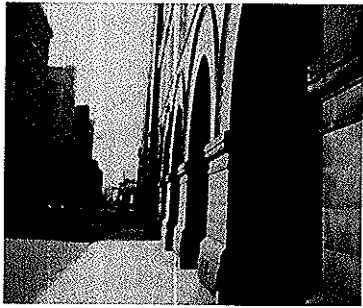
From a traditional perspective, the documentary and theatrical categories are mutually exclusive. If one insists upon the ontological relationship by demanding that a performance must have an autonomous existence prior to its documentation, then the events underlying the works in the second category are not performances at all and the images are not documents, but something else, another kind of artwork perhaps. Erickson gestures toward such a position, without actually adopting it, in his review of RoseLee Goldberg's book *Performance: Live Art Since 1960* when he poses the question: "does [the book] defeat its own premise when it includes the 'performed photography' of Cindy Sherman, video, film stills (Matthew Barney's *Cremaster*), and even the drawings and sculptures of Robert Longo?"<sup>4</sup> Since these are all recordings of one sort or another, how can they qualify as "live" art?

From a different perspective, however, the two categories appear to have much in common. Although it is true that the theatrical images in the second category either had no audience other than the camera or could have had no such audience (because they never took place in real space), it is equally true that the images in both categories were ultimately staged for the camera. Although much of the early documentation of performance

and body art was not carefully planned or conceived as such, performance artists who were interested in preserving their work became fully conscious of the need to stage it for the camera as well as for the immediately present audience. They were well aware of what Jones describes as performance's "dependence on documentation to attain symbolic status within the realm of culture." It is therefore impossible to construe their performances as autonomous events that just happened to be documented. In this respect, no documented piece is performed solely as an end in itself: the performance is always at one level raw material for documentation, the final product through which it will be circulated and with which it will inevitably become identified (justifying Slater's claim that the photograph ultimately replaces the reality it documents). Ideology aside, the central and perhaps only significant difference between the documentary and theatrical modes of performance documentation is that the performances in the former category can be made available to an audience prior to being documented while those in the latter cannot.

Before discussing how significant a difference this really is, I shall place one more piece of evidence into the mix: a performance by Vito Acconci entitled *Photo-Piece* (1969) that raises some trenchant questions about the relationship between performance and documentation.<sup>5</sup> Acconci's verbal description of the performance is simple: "Holding a camera, aimed away from me and ready to shoot, while walking a continuous line down a city street. Try not to blink. Each time I blink: snap a photo." Like many of Acconci's performances of this time, *Photo-Piece* was premised on failure, since it is obviously impossible that Acconci could walk down a street for any length of time without blinking.<sup>6</sup> It also has to do with achieving a high level of self-consciousness in mundane circumstances, as Acconci must become hyper-aware of an autonomic function (and perhaps equally aware of his surroundings) as he walks. Furthermore, as Seth Price suggested to me, Acconci was making art out of nothing, an art without content.

This performance confounds the distinction between the categories of documentary and theatrical images. On the one hand, the photos Acconci produced serve the functions of traditional documentation: they provide evidence that he actually performed the piece and allow us to reconstruct his performance. They do not do so in the traditional manner, however, because they do not actually show Acconci performing: they are photographs *by* Acconci, taken while performing, not photographs *of*

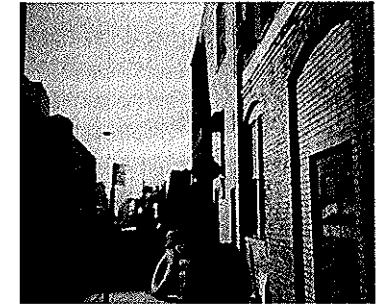


Vito Acconci, *Blinks*, November 23, 1969; afternoon  
"Photo-Piece", Greenwich Street, NYC; Kodak Instamatic 124, b&w film (detail)  
Courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

Acconci performing. They partake of the traditional ontology of performance documentation nevertheless. Since the action of the piece consisted of taking photographs, the existence of the photographs serves as the primary evidence that Acconci executed his own instructions: because the photographs were produced as the performance (rather than of the performance), the ontological connection between performance and document seems exceptionally tight in this case.

On the other hand, Acconci's performance was also very like those in the theatrical category inasmuch as it was not available to an audience in any form apart from its documentation. A look at the photographs shows that the street was deserted—there were no by-standers to serve as audience. More important, the only thing by-standers would have seen was a man walking and taking pictures: they would have had no way of understanding they were witnessing a performance. Acconci's photographs thus are more theatrical than documentary, for it is only through his documentation that his actions exist qua performance.

Acconci's *Photo-Piece* points toward a central issue: the performativity of documentation itself. I am using the term performative in its basic Austinian sense of an utterance or action that in itself brings about the condition it describes. As applied to performance documentation, the concept of performativity would suggest that the act of documenting an event as a performance is what constitutes it as such. This is clearly the case for Acconci's piece since its execution consists of the production of the photographs that also document it.



Perhaps this point will be clearer when articulated to a straightforward definition of performance such as Richard Bauman's:

"Briefly stated, I understand performance as a mode of communicative display, in which the performer signals to an audience, in effect, 'hey, look at me! I'm on! watch how skillfully and effectively I express myself'

That is to say, performance rests on an assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative virtuosity [...]. In this sense of performance, then, the act of expression itself is framed as display; objectified, lifted out to a degree from its contextual surroundings, and opened up to interpretive and evaluative scrutiny by an audience both in terms of its intrinsic qualities and its associational resonances [...]. The specific semi-otic means by which the performer may key the performance frame—that is, send the meta-communicative message 'I'm on'—will vary from place to place and historical period to historical period [...]. The collaborative participation of an audience, it is important to emphasize, is an integral component of performance as an interactional accomplishment."<sup>7</sup>

I will not discuss the issues of skill and communicative virtuosity as they apply to performance and body art here, except to say that in an earlier consideration of Acconci's work, I observed, "critical standards for 'body art' are hard to articulate."<sup>8</sup> The virtuosity of this kind of performance, as well as most performance and body art from the 1960s and 1970s, clearly does not reside in the performer's mastery of conventional performance skills: perhaps it resides in the originality and audacity of conception and execution.

Bauman's other points concerning the framing of an event as performance and the concept of responsibility to the audience are directly germane to *Photo-Piece*, however. Since there was no audience for the "live" performance and the event was not framed as performance for whatever accidental audience may have been present (that is, Acconci provided no metacommunication to tell that audience he was performing, not just walking and taking pictures) it is solely through the documentation that Acconci's actions are "framed as display" and "lifted out [...] from [their] contextual surroundings." It was also through the acts of documenting and presenting the documentation that Acconci assumed responsibility to an audience. It is crucial that the audience in question is the one that perceived his actions solely by means of the documentation rather than the incidental audience that may have seen him walking and photographing on Greenwich Street. It is this documentation—and nothing else—that allows an audience to interpret and evaluate his actions as a performance.

I realize that Acconci's performance is a special case but it is not as special as it may seem. All of the works in the theatrical category I posited earlier have the same relationship to performance as *Photo-Piece*: In all cases, the actions undertaken by the artist and depicted in the images become available to an audience as performances solely through their documentation, and it is by virtue of presenting the photographs of their actions that the artists frame the depicted actions as performances and assume responsibility to the audience. As with the Acconci piece, the audience to whom they assume responsibility is the audience for the documentation, not for the live event.

The performances in the documentary category work differently, at least to an extent, because they generally have a dual existence: they are framed as performances by being presented in galleries or by other means and there is an initial audience to which the performer assumes responsibility as well as a second audience that experiences the performance only through its documentation. But this difference is much less substantial than it may appear. Consider the status of the initial audience with respect to documentation. Whereas sociologists and anthropologists who discuss performance stipulate, like Bauman, that the presence of the audience and the interaction of performers and audience is a crucial part of any performance, the tradition of performance art documentation is based on a different set of assumptions. It is very rare that the audience is documented at

anything like the same level of detail as the art action. The purpose of most performance art documentation is to make the *artist's work* available to a larger audience, not to capture the performance as an "interactional accomplishment" to which a specific audience and a specific set of performers coming together in specific circumstances make equally significant contributions. For the most part, scholars and critics use eyewitness accounts to ascertain the characteristics of the performance, not the audience's contribution to the event, and discussions of how a particular audience perceived a particular performance at a particular time and place and what that performance meant to that audience are rare.<sup>9</sup> In that sense, performance art documentation participates in the fine art tradition of the reproduction of "works" rather than the ethnographic tradition of capturing "events."<sup>10</sup>

I suggest that the presence of that initial audience has no real importance to the performance as an entity whose continued life is through its documentation because our usual concern as consumers of such documentation is with recreating the artist's work, not the total interaction. As a thought experiment, consider what would happen were we to learn that there actually was no audience for Chris Burden's *Shoot*, that he simply performed the piece in an empty gallery and documented it. I suggest that such a revelation would make no difference at all to our perception of the performance, our understanding of it as an object of interpretation and evaluation, and our assessment of its historical significance. In other words, while the presence of an initial audience may be important to performers, it is merely incidental to the performance as document. When artists decide to document their performances, they assume responsibility to an audience other than the initial one, a gesture that ultimately obviates the need for an initial audience. In the long run, it makes no more difference whether there actually was a physically present audience for *Shoot* or any number of other classic works of performance art than it does whether someone happened to see Acconci on Greenwich Street or wandered into the studio while Cindy Sherman was shooting. In that sense, it is not the initial presence of an audience that makes an event a work of performance art to be documented: it is its framing as performance through the performative act of documenting it as such.

I return now to the question I posed at the beginning: What difference does the fact that the image of Chris Burden documents something that really happened and the image of Yves Klein does not make to our

understanding of these images in relation to the concept of performance documentation? My answer is: If we are concerned with the historical constitution of these events as performances, it makes no difference at all. It follows from my assertion that the identity of documented performances as performances is not dependent on the presence of an initial audience that we cannot dismiss studio fabrications of one sort or another from the category of performance art because they were not performed for a physically present audience. My suggestion that performance art is constituted as such through the performativity of its documentation is equally true for both Burden's piece and Klein's. The fact that one could and did occur before a live audience while the other could not and did not is not a significant difference in this context. This also seems to be the case in more pragmatic terms: this difference between the images has had no consequence in terms of their iconicity and standing in the history of art and performance.

If we are concerned not just with the determination of what makes an event a performance, but also with the notion of authenticity in performance, then the distinction between the two images may seem more significant. I alluded earlier to a position that would treat the Klein photograph as something other than a performance because it documents an event that never actually occurred as we see it in the image. This position seems to me ultimately untenable, however. If I may be permitted an analogy with another cultural form, to argue that Klein's leap was not a performance because it took place only within photographic space of would be equivalent to arguing that the Beatles did not perform the music on their *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album because that performance exists only in the space of the recording: the group never actually performed the music as we hear it. I would consider any such claim absurd: Of course the Beatles performed that music—how else are we to understand it if not as a performance by the Beatles? And of course Yves Klein performed his jump.

Those who are particularly concerned with recorded music have discussed the whole question of the relationship between performance and its documentation extensively. The two basic categories of that discussion are similar to the ones I have posited: documentary and phonography, where documentary recordings are assumed to be straightforward capturings of real sonic events and phonography consists in the "sonic manipulation" of music to produce recordings of performances that never really happened

that way. Lee B. Brown, an American philosopher who has addressed these issues, suggests that phonography produces "works of phonoart," a new category of "musical entities" to be considered in their own terms as art works distinct from traditional musical performances.<sup>11</sup>

This is a version of an argument I have already rejected, of course, since Brown solves the problem of the relationship between performances and documentation by insisting that phonography, the aural equivalent of the performed photography I have been discussing, is not a form of performance but constitutes a new kind of musical event altogether. For me, by contrast, phonoart is a species of musical performance, albeit a species that exists only in the space of recording. But Brown acknowledges an important point: that the phenomenological boundaries between documentary and phonography are blurry: it is not always clear "whether a given product is to be understood as a piece of phonoart or a transparent document of a performance." He cites as an example, "the albums of 'duets' that Frank Sinatra recorded a few years before his death. They *sound* documentary," even though Sinatra never actually sang with his partners and "the impression of two singers in dialog with one another is sheer illusion."<sup>12</sup>

One could say exactly the same thing about the Klein photograph: It *looks* documentary even though the impression that Klein leapt unprotected from the window is sheer illusion. At the phenomenal level, there is not necessarily any intrinsic way of determining whether a particular performance image is documentary or theatrical. And even if one does know, precisely what difference does that knowledge make? Are we deprived of the pleasure of hearing Sinatra sing with his duet partners because he did not actually do that? Similarly, is our appreciation of Klein's image of himself leaping into the void sullied by the fact that he erased the safety net from the photograph? Can we not appreciate Sherman's particular ways of embodying an enormous range of characters and images because we never have direct access to her performing body? If we are to insist on a criterion of authenticity when contemplating performance documentation, we must ask ourselves whether we believe authenticity to reside in the circumstances of the underlying performance, which may or may not be evident from the documentation.

Brown implies another possibility worth considering: that the crucial relationship is not the one between the document and the performance



but the one between the document and its audience. Perhaps the authenticity of the performance document resides in its relationship to its beholder rather than to an ostensibly originary event: perhaps its authority is phenomenological rather than ontological. Just as one can have the pleasure of hearing Sinatra sing duets with singers with whom he had no real interaction, so one can have the pleasure of seeing Klein leap into the void or that of contemplating the implications of Burden's allowing himself to be shot. These pleasures are available from the documentation and therefore do not depend on whether an audience witnessed the original event. The more radical possibility is that they may not even depend on whether the event actually happened. It may well be that our sense of the presence, power, and authenticity of these pieces derives not from treating the document as an indexical access point to a past event but from perceiving the document itself as a performance that directly reflects an artist's aesthetic project or sensibility.

Notes:

- 1 Helen Gilbert, "Bodies in Focus: Photography and Performativity in Post-Colonial Theatre," in *Textual Studies in Canada*, 10-11, 1998, p. 18.
- 2 Jon Erickson, "Goldberg Variations: Performing Distinctions," in *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 21.3, 1999, p. 98.
- 3 Amelia Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation," in *Art Journal*, 56.4 (Winter 1997). Obtained from: <http://www.findarticles.com>.
- 4 Erickson, p. 99.
- 5 Some might take exception to my categorizing Acconci's work as performance. While it is true that his work from this period is often classified under the rubric of conceptual art (and could also be considered process art) I make no apology for claiming it for performance. There is precedent for this claim: Acconci is included, for example, in Gregory Battcock and Robert Nickas' seminal collection *The Art of Performance: A Critical Anthology*, New York, E. P. Dutton, 1984.
- 6 For a brief discussion of the centrality of predictable failure to Acconci's work, see Philip Auslander, "Vito Acconci and the Politics of the Body in Postmodern Performance," in *From Acting to Performance*, London, New York, Routledge, 1997, pp. 89-97.
- 7 Richard Bauman, *A World of Others' Words: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Intertextuality*, Malden, Blackwell, 2004, p. 9.

- 8 Auslander, p. 96.
- 9 This observation is intended only to mark disciplinary differences, not to suggest that the ethnographic bent of performance studies provides a superior perspective on performance than the fine art tradition embedded in art history.
- 10 To speak of *recreating* a performance suggests the reconstruction of an object. By contrast, the term *revival* used in English to describe theatrical productions of existing plays suggests the reawakening of an organic entity rather than the rebuilding of a lost object.
- 11 Lee B. Brown, "Phonography," in *Aesthetics: A Reader in Philosophy of the Arts*, David Goldblatt and Lee B. Brown (eds.), 2nd Edition, Upper Saddle River, Pearson-Prentice Hall, 2005, pp. 214, 216.
- 12 Brown, p. 216.

Babette Mangolte

**Balancing act between instinct and reason or how to organize volumes on a flat surface in shooting photographs, films, and videos of performance**

Performance documentation and how to shoot it is what this paper is about. The methodology described here produced photographs that now are considered “historical photographs” and it is “after the act” that those photographs can be read as “organizing volumes on a flat surface.” In the heat of the moment I certainly didn’t feel like reason had anything to do with shooting photographs. I just captured everything as fast as I could. The examination of a practice “after the act,” gives the false impression that above all, shooting photographs is about control. For me it was, and still is, exactly the contrary. Photographing is about relinquishing control. You submit yourself to whims, random thoughts, and haphazardness. Essentially the photographer should be in a reactive mode, far from reasoning. Intuition, whatever way you define it, is a must. Retroactively I am conscious of a slippage between the meaning associated with a body of photographs and the practice that preceded the accumulation of that corpus and the “balancing act between instinct and reason” applies to that slippage.

I came to performance photography because of the need to keep trace of what I was seeing and to record my amazement as a spectator. There was an urgency I felt when, for the first time, I saw Richard Foreman’s play Total Recall in December 1970. What I saw was extraordinary but only four other people were there to see it. Therefore recording it was an absolute necessity. Somebody had to preserve for posterity some traces of



Richard Foreman, *Boulevard de Paris*, 1977, *Ontological-Hysterical Theater*, New York © 1977 Babette Mangolte

the extraordinary originality of the third production of Richard Foreman's *Ontological-Hysterical Theater*.

Richard Foreman's work with his performers was rehearsed and stable over time but most of the other events I saw involved a great deal of improvisation, creating different effects from one day to the next. The transitory nature of those events that seem destined to oblivion was another compelling reason to record them.

The concepts I used at first for shooting photographs were modeled on my training as a filmmaker: the concept of coverage, gathering shots, collecting moments. None came from any preconceived ideas of what a good photograph should be about. Neither was I interested in capturing the singular photo that could be used to publicize the work. The photographs I accumulated, first of Richard Foreman's theater and later of dance and performance art, were devoted to the concept of total coverage by shooting any new visual composition that occurred and discounting any possible interpretation of content. I was helped by the richness of this new tradition in Visual Theater that was the hallmark of Richard Foreman's and Robert Wilson's plays. Editorializing the multiple photographs would come later, I thought, and there might be no need for it. Furthermore, somebody else could do it.

Clearly in my mind, photography was not about passing judgement, on the contrary, it was about absolute objectivity. The justification for shooting the photographs was solely that they should exist. How the photographs could be used was left vague because they were made for others who

would make sense of them, if not now then sometime in the future. Making that work visible for my contemporaries was not my primary impulse. On the contrary, I felt that the originality of the work would be understood only at a future date and perhaps my photographs would help in that discovery.

The photographs should not represent me, or my taste, but should be just about what I was looking at. I felt that selflessness was of great importance in recording photographs that later could stand as documents. I had an enormous respect for the value of archives.<sup>1</sup> Because of my film culture, I already was versed in the various ambiguities attached to the so-called objectivity of a photograph. The whole decade of the 1960s in film, especially in Paris, involved an examination of the fallacies of direct cinema and *Cinéma vérité* and writings, like that of Jean Rouch, which were familiar to me.<sup>2</sup> I knew how the presence of the photographer could distort what was looked at. In the case of theater and dance, in New York, in 1970 and 1971, what I saw was structured by the author-director, the choreographer, or the performance artist, so my presence as the photographer didn't modify what I was looking at. It was not as if I was a filmmaker, as Chris Marker in *Le Joli Mai* (1963) or Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin in *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960), filming real people going on with their lives. Objectivity, it seemed, was still a possible goal and it was important to justify the action of "documentation" rather than "interpretation." The act of documentation was desirable because what I was seeing did not apply to an already known tradition but reflected structures that deployed new compositional rules. The comprehension of these new rules required objectivity.

I started to document spectacles that in those days were called "avant-garde." I had a concept of avant-garde movements from the 1920s and of their historical importance in defining some of the present. But in France, my knowledge of the performing arts had been totally traditional. This is perhaps why I was so struck by the newness of what I discovered in New York on my first visit in October 1970. Using references to what we now call the "first avant-garde" from the 1920s was not so strange in New York in 1970. I therefore adapted to my needs the idea of using automatism like the surrealists had done forty years previously to relieve some of my hesitation about shooting photographs. It was only later that I learned that John Cage had brought to art making his concept of chance.<sup>3</sup> Chance decisions were made visible everywhere in the improvisation techniques of

many theater and dance events since Fluxus and chance were still in the air when I arrived in New York in 1970. In my own practice I merged the two organizational concepts of automatism and chance.

Developing automatism in shooting photographs is not difficult. Essentially it relies on being very fast in setting up exposure, on focus and framing, and to dare to fail if you go too fast. You will get better at it over time, so speed is of the essence. My motto was: Shoot first and think later.<sup>4</sup> At first my strategies were all about trying to get a decent exposure in spite of the low light, and as many shots as possible in spite of the undistinguished background and unpredictable events that unfolded in front of me. There was hardly time to measure the lights for a good exposure, one often had to guess. But guessing right or wrong was not my primary concern as long as I got the shot. Getting it was better than missing it even if technically it wasn't "a good photograph."

The techniques of film emulsion and of film processing that I had learned, helped my ambition to become a cinematographer. The use of photography for scouting film locations was common practice at the time. And the search for an image that would not appear flat once projected on the movie theater screen was another preoccupation of the period. Both film director and cinematographer try to capture volume rather than flatness to bring a three dimensionality to the projected film image. Intuitively I felt that revealing volume was as important in photography as in film, so I privileged the use of normal lens over wide angle but kept my frame with a lot of context around the action.<sup>5</sup> The context, present in all my photographs, validates an objective look at what is there. More than just implying objectivity, the context guarantees it.

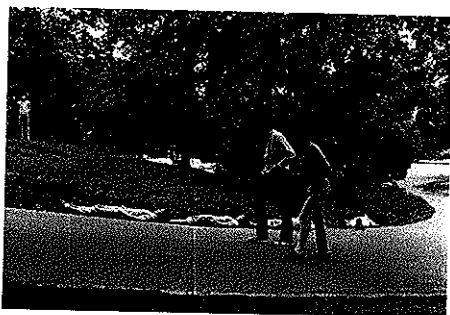
At the time I conceptualized photography as being solely literal and not metaphorical. I certainly believed that a photographer shouldn't impose a specific "style" to what he or she was photographing. Without formal training as a photographer, I felt that a series of photographs was more telling than just one photo and valued photos in bulk rather than in single unit. The contact sheet was extremely important with its multiplicity of shots and its compactness in telling the story behind the event. To make a photo documentation that was as exhaustive as possible by showing all the successive phases of the event was more desirable to me than to shoot one great photo.<sup>6</sup> As we now know, those iconic photos can be misleading.<sup>7</sup>



Yvonne Rainer, *Walk She Said*, rehearsal for *Lives of Performers* at Hofstra University, New York, 1972 © 1972 Babette Mangolte

Although committed to my own method, I knew that artistic practice has to be open-ended and couldn't be about applying rules that would fit all. On the contrary, art making is about inventing new forms. There was no feeling of constraint in regard to the rules I devised for myself. My own rules were somehow optional, as there was no need to justify any of my decisions. Although striving for objectivity in my documentation, I also valued my instinctive reactions in confronting the performance work. It is one of the most fundamental differences between my work as a photographer and my work as a filmmaker. While method and intuition are needed for shooting a film, for photography all you need is intuition. Furthermore, I believe that in shooting photographs, not only is an analytical response not needed, it is even a disadvantage.

Photographing dance made me utterly aware how important it was to avoid taking a misleading photograph. What you were recording had to reflect the specificity of the choreographer you were documenting. It was crucial not to make the choreography of Trisha Brown look like ballet or even like the choreography of one of her close friends and fellow choreographer Yvonne Rainer. Consider the pedestrian movement used by Yvonne Rainer in *Walk, She Said* or the incremental examination of the organic gesture tailored to one's body in Trisha Brown's *Accumulation* (both from 1972). What you saw were two completely different movements, although they were both linked by their ordinariness. They had very different motivations: *Walk, She Said* was narrative and *Accumulation* was structuralist.<sup>8</sup> Both choreographies called for photographs that showed some of the



Trisha Brown, *Group Accumulation in Central Park*, dance performance by Trisha Brown at Central Park, New York, 1973 © 1973 Babette Mangolte

commonality of the movement but also the variance in the organizational concept. I didn't want my photographs to reduce the performance to a cliché or unduly simplify the work.

The contradiction between objectivity and specificity was a balancing act between two opposite pulls. Avoid judgment in the way you photograph, so refrain from critical commentary in your decisions to record this decisive gesture. It was important to achieve a specificity that requires some critical sense of what you are looking at. What kind of criteria could justify the decision of what was specific and what wasn't? In the case of dance, it was the kind of movement explored in the choreographic work that enabled me to define what differentiated Trisha Brown from Yvonne Rainer. In the case of theater it was the use of deep space and the staging of the entrance and the exit that enabled me to distinguish between Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson. I thrived in the theater proscenium setting, because photographing an event that positioned the audience without any uncertainty was easier. I prepared by looking at rehearsals without shooting, coming the next day to shoot what I was seeing but also what I remembered having seen the day before. I felt I could discover what was specific by just remembering what I had found memorable on a first viewing of the work. While respecting the structure of the performance, I felt free to do some interpretations by merely using my own reactions, based on the specificity I saw in one work that was absent in another.

I ended up with the criterion of the "new," which was very much a key quality in art circles all through the 1970s. Around 1976, I settled on a

practice that shifted back and forth within the bracket of two modes, an automat mode that I called "shooting without thinking" and an urgent mode that I referred to as "shooting the specificity of the work."<sup>9</sup> I also kept the practice of taking as many chances as possible, experimenting with darkroom skills to produce better negatives that had less contrast. This implied spending more time looking at and examining the contact sheets before going back to shoot the same work a second or third time. So I could modify some choices I had previously made and could assess what I had missed and therefore could capture at the next photo session. I reached the point when planning trumped intuition, which could undercut my pleasure. The desire to look is necessary when shooting photographs. To a certain degree, I feel you can only shoot photographs if you take on a totally innocent and naïve position in front of the work. If your planning turns into an obsession, you lose. You should never feel that you have exhausted the material. If you do, you have to stop shooting this particular kind of work.

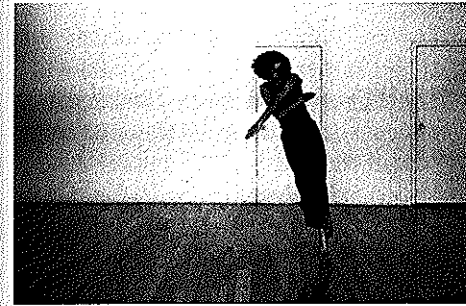
I continued shooting theater, dance, and performance all through the 1970s and became increasingly aware of the significant differences between the three.<sup>10</sup> Theater was more predictable because often it was repeatable and you could go to rehearsal before shooting the dress rehearsal. The challenge was to avoid being trapped in "shooting for the lines." I never listened to the spoken text, as I was solely focused on visual matter.

Dance was more challenging if you dealt with a group piece. Solo work was simpler, because you only had to decipher one dancer's movements. The position of the soloist in relation with the background was not that important and could be neutralized by composition and focus. But in the choreography for a group piece, the dancers' relation to the space was the main problem for the photographer as you had to capture at least two things: the movement of each dancer and the interactions and spatial composition between the dancers. Since the background was important in establishing those variable interactions in a group piece, you often composed the shot with the background rather than without.

For performances in the strict sense of "performance art," often associated with just one performer (Vito Acconci, Joan Jonas, Jack Smith, Stuart Sherman, and later Michael Smith and others), rehearsals were rare. You had little prior knowledge of what you were going to shoot. The photographs were mostly shot during the actual performance in the presence of

an audience that could be anywhere. Often the performance space was unpredictable as well. Interactions with objects used as props were often what the performance was about and you dealt with the issue of scale between the performer's body and small props, which you had no control over. Most artists didn't always carry their preoccupations in staging, audience mode of address, and vocabulary, from one piece to the next. There was a lack of consistency in the work and what had been done in the last performance didn't apply to the next one. What the performance artist implied in the multiple activities shown in the piece was a specific relation between audience and performer. The audience's position in relation to the performance was key to the comprehension of the work.<sup>11</sup> The photographer's challenge was to make visible the interactions between performer(s) and audience in the space. My main guideline was to identify with the position of the spectator in the middle of the audience.<sup>12</sup> I was trying to capture the mental images that would become what an audience would likely remember of the piece. Those often became the "iconic" images for the piece. So my first impulse was to decide where I should physically position myself to photograph. In some art performances this decision was more difficult than in theater or dance. After the camera position, the most important for me was to decide what lens I should use to find the proper scale between the performers' bodies, the actions that are performed, and the space itself.<sup>13</sup>

Although you could be motivated by sound effects to shoot some photographs, the sound as in all other forms of performance, wasn't represented in the photo. It was also impossible to represent how actions could be stretched out or slowed down. Time manipulation was a familiar trope in Robert Wilson's work as he systematically used very slow movement. For instance, one performer would take twenty minutes to cross the stage diagonally while others would move faster or stop altogether. The attention needed to witness a slow movement is tantalizing because the spectator's concentration varies in the course of the movement's duration.<sup>14</sup> Photography deals with composing in relation to a frame that can be precisely defined by the photographer by means of the scenic design or intentionally obliterated via soft focus or close up. But how long it takes to do something that can't really be photographed. You need motion picture or video to render the duration of a performance and the audience's reactions during the unfolding of the performance itself.



Trisha Brown, *Water Motor*, dance performance by Trisha Brown, New York, 1978  
© 1978 Babette Mangolte

The practice of recording dance rehearsal started almost immediately after the Sony Portapak became common. Video appeared at first as a tool for securing improvised movements that could be recaptured later. I think Twyla Tharp was the first who used video as an annotation tool in dance rehearsal starting around 1972.<sup>15</sup> The quality of the video was not good enough to show fully what had gone on to an audience that hadn't been there. So the videotape was just useful for the people that had participated in the improvisation, but it wasn't very readable for an outsider.

Somehow the length of time of most performances, which could vary from a couple of minutes to half an hour to several hours (even 24 hours in the case of some of Robert Wilson's theater pieces), was the first conceptual stumbling block that prevented the use of film for recording performance, not even with the much cheaper Super 8 film. It was not only the cost but also the manipulation of film rolls packaged as three minutes long or ten minutes long and the necessity to edit between all the rolls. Photography was immediate and reactive. Film had to be pre-conceptualized before shooting. The task was even more complicated if what you wanted to film was improvised. How could you plan the filming, in order to make those improvised variations perceptible to the film spectator? To film improvised material you would have needed collaborative effort between the maker of the performance piece and the filmmaker, but the time to do so was not there. Most performance works were conceptualized quickly and performed only once or twice. If collaboration was necessary you needed to distinguish between the "performance," the part of inventing

the event, and executing it as a “performer.” Only the “inventor” could collaborate with a filmmaker, not the “performer”. To film you need distance, to be a performer you don’t. Distance can make the performer self-conscious. It is a lot easier to collaborate if you are detached from the event itself so filming something that is restaged after the act is a lot easier. As a filmmaker, I didn’t feel tempted to film what I was seeing in performance. The exception was the making of my first dance film, choreographed and performed by Trisha Brown *Water Motor* (1978). A series of photographs could provide a chronology of the iconography of the piece, some sense of the maker’s intentions and aesthetics, and therefore be informative and worthwhile. Film was almost doomed to fail if you couldn’t restage the action for the film camera, and that was needed to make an interesting film work. Therefore a choreographer like Yvonne Rainer, who turned to film making in 1972, called herself a filmmaker. What she was doing was a film, not a documentation of her performance work.<sup>16</sup>

You have to examine the similarity and differences between live performance versus the document of the performance to understand why filming it isn’t obvious and also why I, as a filmmaker, didn’t do it. The way we see a live event is not fixed or stable. In live performance the viewer watches with all the distractions of peripheral vision and has enormous choices of what to look at. He can turn his head away, he can look at the audience behind him instead of at the performing area and he can even close his eyes and not look at anything. This is the moment when you shift focus, relax your eyes and come back to the performance space with renewed interest and acuity. But when we look at a document like photography, film or video the first element we see is the frame of the document. We have no reason to drift elsewhere outside the frame. Actually not looking at the document would seem ludicrous. To maintain undivided attention on a video or film taken from a fixed camera position, even if that image is well shot, is not a given. In a live performance, the viewer’s mind is active, analytical, and sensorial. The static document always appears to deliver less and doesn’t encourage sensorial connections or emotional participation. Furthermore, a static camera filming a live performance isn’t using the two key characteristics of film, the power of ubiquity via montage, and the possibility of multiple points of views via variable camera positions. If I had to summarize the essential differences between film and photography in documenting performance, I would say that, for better or

worse, the motion picture camera can mislead while the still camera can be mute.

When I try to understand the performance work of artists I have never seen or met, I intuitively feel that the multiplicity of sources, photographs, videos, films, and texts, like artist statements and critical commentary, are absolutely necessary. From the documentation I need to be able to reinvent what the performance artist was doing. Multiple sources permit me to reconstruct via my own sensibility and imagination the social and artistic context within which the work was invented. I recently discovered that fact in the work of two artists, namely, Lygia Clark and Gina Pane, who were very active in Paris in the early 1970s, while I was in New York. I discovered their work solely through documentation. Although they had worked in the same city (Paris) for several years, they have nothing in common. They both came from an art background but Lygia Clark was all about sensorial experimentation and flexible forms, while Gina Pane was all about control of the self and of her self-image. Looking at the documents you notice that they interacted very differently with their photographers and comparing their archives shows clearly the limits of documentation. You have to fight the documentation in order to rethink the performance and imagine what they did and why.

In my task as an archivist I now value the written text as a more detailed and diversified source for the context and the concepts that explain the artist’s intent as well as the performance impact on others. Writing had to be added to the photo or film documents from the periods that represent the work. But as a maker of those still images and film documents, I testify to their shortcomings. The two categories of visual documentation are the still image that can be iconic or just anecdotal, and the moving image that accounts or at least alludes to time and duration. Both are needed as one shows an immediate access to the iconography while the other shows, process. But we are left with an important question. Can such visual documents mislead the archivist of the future? In a photograph, the background can impose itself on the performer’s body and somehow make it disappear. But it can also strengthen the body’s presence with the right framing and it can expose the body in an amplified context that is part of the work. But the more the performer controls his/her image, the more the background is made to disappear. The photos that Gina Pane staged of many of her works are a good example. These photographs neither convey any sense of the



Robert Whitman, *American Moon*, New York, 1976  
© 1976 Babette Mangolte

space where the event occurred, nor of the audience and its investment into looking at the event. Her staged photos show the end result of the process and evacuate the performance that was the process. In opposition, Gina Pane's video documentation shows some of the process but misleads as to the impact or even duration of the process since the video is made of disconnected fragments of the performance and doesn't represent the time of the performance.

Looking at the photographs of the happenings staged by Allan Kaprow and Robert Whitman in the late 1950s and early 1960s, we see an undistinguishable mix between participation and spectatorship. Participation was what the work was all about. In the late 1960s and in the 1970s, Lygia Clark developed a type of performance that refuses spectatorship and was only about sensorial participation. The only way to produce convincing documents to represent Lygia Clark's ideas behind her work is to combine photography and text.<sup>17</sup> Because her work was about being inside a sensation and not external to it, the image produced by the photo or film camera, which is always outside the body, misrepresents the work. It is about a sensorial change inside the body that literally defies representation, but can be written about.

Now in view of the importance of the image as a locus for the publicity of the work, the rapport background-context / foreground-performance is still as important as ever, but the aesthetics of the 1970s were about bridging art and life so the background was part of the work. Currently, the opposite is the case. For example, just look at the publicity photos of

the Matthew Barney performance and film work used by the Guggenheim Museum New York for his retrospective in 2003. There is no context. Matthew Barney's definition of his work is contained in an iconography that avoids all contexts.

Today you could say that performance photography is used for selling the work as an art logo and is unable to represent anything that helps understand the work. But in the 1960s and 1970s I think photography could at least represent the importance of the architectural design or displacement where the actions or events took place. It could also show the use of public space and the by-standing audience that was central to performance at the time. The photograph could represent how to look at the performance. A performance work like *War* by Yvonne Rainer was staged on two floors in 1971 in the NYU Loeb Student Center. Photographing *War* could make the complexity of the space and the multiple choices of the spectator totally obvious with only a couple of photographs, while filming it was enormously difficult. Why? Because the photograph doesn't necessarily imply spectatorship but it can represent the act of looking, while the moving image always presupposes a spectator. The spectator who watches the film is not necessarily in the same position as the spectator who was present and watched the actual performance.

For the filmmaker who wants to film performance, the big question is how to go about it? Documents versus staged reconstitution, direct address, and Brechtian distance versus immediacy. Is the "mise-en-scène" of the performance "a must" when producing a valid document? My own experience says yes: anything is better than a straight, so-called objective camera position, to produce a film or a video that could pass as a valid substitute for being there if you yourself couldn't be there for the "real thing." "Mise-en-scène" means staging as well as setting and is used in film and critical studies to address the fact that both directing and aesthetics matter. But the term particularly applies to performance art, as performance is one of the few genres that is not based on stereotypes and preset codes of spectatorship and image making. That is why performance films made by filmmakers who do not understand the performance work per se are so often irrelevant. The filmmaker must bring the perspective needed to comprehend a performance work that is ground-breaking in its principles. He/she should not apply the conventions of his/her own medium to filming the performance. Therefore he/she has to invent new rules for filming



the performance work. Camera movements could mislead by highlighting the performer's own movement or by canceling it out. Other decisions like the use of long shot or close ups can produce a very different version of the same moment in the piece and in certain cases totally subvert the work, bringing value from the commercial and advertisement world to a performance that is at odds with those values. You end up with slickness instead of authenticity.

In the 1970s, performance was anchored by a specific sense of time that now in 2005 we have lost, but studying works from that era can reconstitute that sense of time.<sup>18</sup> Every period has a set of assumptions that are somehow so familiar that they are unseen by the participants and the viewers because they are perceived as the norm. But norm changes and the filmmaker documenting or reconstructing performances several decades later has to make obvious those unseen set of assumptions that justify the work and somehow explain them to an audience from another era.

#### Notes:

- 1 Both my parents were historians so the value of archives in writing history became familiar to me at an early age.
- 2 In 1960 and 1961, Jean Rouch, anthropologist and filmmaker, published several ground-breaking texts and manifestos in *Les Cahiers du Cinema*, about the interaction between camera and subject, and how the camera presence affects the subject that the camera documents
- 3 John Cage who I met and worked for in 1974, making slides of one of his music pieces had a profound influence on me.
- 4 It is impossible to use the same logic in film practice. Film necessitates thinking first and shooting second and that is why straight film documentation is rarely very valid. Although it transmits information, this information is not mediated for the viewer and doesn't communicate the sense of being there. Film relies on organizing time and points of view, tasks you can do only after many trials and errors at the editorial phase. But photography editorial is a different matter. Editing photographs establishes just a selection, which doesn't add anything to the photograph. In film, editing is about deciding the order of shots. The meaning of a given shot changes in relation to the shots placed next to it, so order transforms meanings.
- 5 The "wide wide angle" lens creates a distorted perspective that can be misleading if your intent is above all to be objective. What is called the "normal" lens permits the

rendering of a perspective that is similar to the human eye and is considered more "neutral."

- 6 I think the photos that I did of Joan Jonas' *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll* are a good illustration of this practice. Shoot everything even if the photo doesn't read well.
- 7 One famous example is Harry Shunk's photograph of Yves Klein's *Leap into the Void*, from 1960.
- 8 I am using the term "structuralist" the way P. Adams Sitney used in his writings at the time, to describe the films of Michael Snow and Ernie Gehr.
- 9 1976 is the year when I became totally consumed by photography, in all my activities. My film *The Camera: Je, La Camera: I* (1977) analyzes my photo practice and tries to make this practice visible to the film spectator.
- 10 By 1976 the field was more crowded and at dance events I was bound to meet Nathaniel Tileston or Johan Albers, who shot opera, so I never saw him Downtown. The staff photographer from *The Village Voice*, Lois Greenfield, came unto the scene in 1976, and covered only dance. Photographers were specialized and stuck to what they thought was their expertise: either dance, theater, or performance. Peter Moore, who had covered everything in the 1960s, was now concentrating on performance art, and stopped coming to dance when the field became too crowded. I stuck with specific artists and never specialized in any one field.
- 11 It is particularly true of the work of Vito Acconci and Joan Jonas. Allan Kaprow discusses redefining, after Pollock, the position of the audience in art in his text "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock" (*Artnews*, 57/6, 1958), and his own artwork and "happenings" did just that in the late 1950s.
- 12 This is a clear difference to Peter Moore, the preeminent photographer of the 1960s and 1970s, who positioned himself and his camera on the side and at an angle. I was almost always frontal to the back wall of the performance space. I also used some architectural definitions of the space to anchor the frame of my photographs.
- 13 By the mid-1970s I had three Nikon bodies with three different lenses, 35mm, 50mm and 85mm. Zoom lenses couldn't be used in the low light conditions of most performance events.
- 14 John Cage discussed these phenomena of shifting attention and mental drift in his writings from the late 1950s, which I read many years later.
- 15 For Twyla Tharp, who was married to an experimental filmmaker, video was solely a recording medium. Her use of video at the time is not comparable to the video art pioneered by Nam June Paik in the 1960s and Joan Jonas in the 1970s.
- 16 It would be interesting to analyze how the impulse of just documenting versus recreating is present in Yvonne Rainer's first film *Lives of Performers* (1972), as the

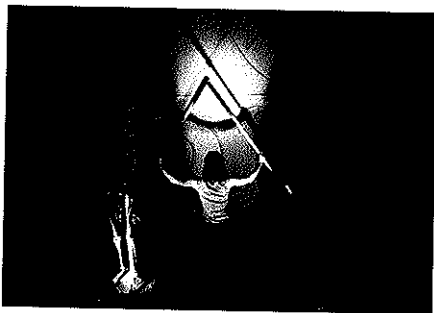
differences between Rainer's performance in *This is a Story About a Woman Who...* (1973) and the film that came from it, *Film About a Woman Who...* (1974), are very striking.

- 17 The well-known image *Mask with Mirrors* by Lygia Clark (1967), an object made of lenses and mirrors to be worn by the participant as goggles, is an example of an image that doesn't represent what the mask does, which is to send back to the participant his own reflected image making it impossible for him to see the outside world. The mask sends you back to yourself. The photograph seems to imply the opposite, like access to a peripheral vision that would be behind you.
- 18 That is what I tried to do in *Four Pieces* by Morris (1993), a reconstruction of Robert Morris' seminal performances from the 1960s that I had never seen. The reconstruction was done in collaboration with Robert Morris.

### A Conversation: Joan Jonas and Babette Mangolte

1979 was the last time Babette Mangolte<sup>1</sup> documented a performance by Joan Jonas.<sup>2</sup> The photographs documenting *Upside Down and Backwards* at the Performing Garage in Soho marked the end of a decade-long working relationship that started in the early 1970s. Mangolte documented almost all of Jonas' performances, starting with *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* (1972), *Delay, Delay* (1972), *Mirage* (1976), *Juniper Tree* (1977), and finally *Upside Down and Backwards* (1979). She was also the camera operator for *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll* (1972–1974), *Glass Puzzle* (1974), and *Funnel* (1974), producing some of the most iconic images of Jonas' early performance and video work.

Mangolte's photographs of *Upside Down and Backwards* stand for a significant period in both their lives. By the early 1980s Mangolte had with few exceptions stopped documenting New York's Downtown performance scene and resorted to her own work as an experimental film maker. In 1977 she filmed *The Camera: Je, Le Camera: I*, followed by *The Cold Eye (My Darling Be Careful)* in 1980. Both films deal with the relationship of vision and power arising from the act of producing images. The same year, 1980, Jonas had her first retrospective at the Berkeley University Art Museum in California, where she performed *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll* for the last time. In the following years Jonas, still pushing the borders of the ideas behind the perception of the body as well as questioning what spectatorship stands for, resorted to a more theatrical form of performance art. Her work shifted from experimenting with the mirroring effect of new



Joan Jonas, *Upside Down and Backwards*, 1979  
Performing Garage, New York © 1979 Babette Mangolte

media to a more semiotic weaving of narratives and images. Both artists since then have continued their poetic as well as conceptual and critical reflections upon art/history, female identity, and the experience of real and illusory space in separate and aesthetically different ways. They continue to produce, perform, teach, and write in the artistic field.

The following conversation took place in the context of the exhibition and the symposium *After the Act* at the MUMOK in Vienna, on November 5, 2005. For the first time Jonas and Mangolte spoke publicly about their shared working experience during the 1970s, discussing the changing circumstances of production throughout the last decades, and their relationship to the work itself from each one of their perspectives. With the years passing by, it becomes increasingly difficult to find challenging voices of equal stamina from both sides of visual production within the field of performance art. Voices of those, not only willing to speak up, but also critically reflective in their ability to discuss issues inherent to the practice of documenting performance art as the ones of Jonas and Mangolte.

Barbara Clausen (BC): How did you start working together?

Joan Jonas (JJ): Babette, you can probably fill in the very first moment when we met. I don't remember exactly how it all started.

Babette Mangolte (BM): I remember, it was in 1972 at the L'Attico Gallery in Rome. There was a series of performances organized by the



Joan Jonas, *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*, 1972  
Gallery L'Attico, Rome © 1972 Babette Mangolte

gallery and there were Joan's performances of *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* and an outdoor piece called *Delay, Delay*. There were several other pieces performed at L'Attico by Simone Forti and Trisha Brown that I had not yet seen at the time. The only person whose work I knew was Yvonne Rainer's, who was performing something that derived from the material I had shot a couple of months earlier for her film *Lives of the Performers* (1972), for which I was the cinematographer and editor. So I kind of knew it was going to be interesting because it was Yvonne's world. Fortunately a friend of mine had a car and drove me to Rome from the south of France. I had my Nikon camera with me and as usual, I shot everything I saw. That was the first time I took pictures of Brown's *Accumulation* piece and of Joan's work. The photographs you see downstairs in the exhibition are from the performance *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* (1972) at the Gallery L'Attico.

JJ: I would just like to say something about the video documentation on view in *After the Act*. What you see is the documentation of the performance *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll* at Leo Castelli Gallery in New York, in 1973, the last version of the *Organic Honey* project. Babette performed the camerawoman in that piece and I think the first time was at Castelli Gallery. Previous performances included different camera operators. You can see her in one of the projections in the exhibition. Of the four on view, two video projections are the documentation of the first and second part in *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll*, while the other two projections are the



Joan Jonas, *Glass Puzzle*, 1973, video still, Camera: Babette Mangolte  
Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York

footage that was shown on the monitors within the performances. From the very first moment when I got the Sony Portapak video camera I wanted to make films. So I constructed a series of image sequences for the monitor that were seen by the audience simultaneously with the live action. The monitor had a special function within the performance: I would continuously look at the live rendered image on the monitor, for the purpose of framing myself. Everything I did was for the monitor. In other words, what you see on view in the exhibition is on no level a work in itself. But I did make several autonomous video works in relation to or out of the material developed in *Organic Honey*. The documentary material on view downstairs is simply one performance.

BM: I was hand holding the camera and going along with the flow of things during the shooting of *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll*. I had no real concept of what you, Joan, were doing in the performance. I was looking through the viewfinder and Joan told me what she wanted, of which I would then make an interpretation. I improvised the camera movements, gliding through the space.

JJ: You were the camerawoman, doing your job. For me the performing was about framing details of my image making. The difference between *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll* and *Glass Puzzle*, was that the latter was not a performance, but was only staged for the camera. The difference of your work in *Glass Puzzle*, Babette, and *Vertical Roll*, which was a live



Joan Jonas, *Mirage*, 1976, Anthology Film Archive, New York  
© 1976 Babette Mangolte

performance, was that we set the whole thing up in my studio. There was no audience and the camera work was part of the interplay between the figures in the set of the space, and the camera.

BM: *Glass Puzzle* was very interesting to work on, because there was a series of rehearsals before the final shoot and many decisions came from the way the sun light was falling on you and how it highlighted your reflected image on the video monitor. We used natural daylight and movie lights to create the effects in *Glass Puzzle*. It was a very organic working process, coming out of experimenting with the space where Joan was working. When the light of the setting sun shone into your loft, we would use the reflection on the surface of your TV set. And really, *Glass Puzzle* was made at a time when it was still laborious to edit video, it was constantly shifting between pressing the pause button and then start again, but you obviously had mastered it. It was not an easy process to work with a Sony Portapak reel-to-reel video in 1974.

JJ: You could go to a studio and do slightly more than that. Actually, *Glass Puzzle* was edited in sections and came out of *Vertical Roll*, also shot off the TV set.

BC: What were the circumstances while documenting *Mirage* in 1976? Was it important to follow the narration of the story during the set up for the photo shoot?

JJ: Did we set up the shoot for *Mirage*?

BM: Yes. You just held the pose long enough to make it obvious that a photograph was to be made. The piece was performed at the Anthology Film Archive in New York. The screen was used to project a film that I had shot and Joan had set up. The white screen was a projecting screen and a framing device. It was a very contained space, restricting movement. I think I was also manning the film projection for the performance. I forgot.

JJ: I used the film screen as a structuring device in the performance. I am interested in what you, Babette, said about intuition in your lecture. I think it is because of your technical skills and experience that you are able to experiment with your intuition.

BM: It was important not to pass judgment or make an interpretation of the pieces I documented or shot. Besides, I'm not a trained photographer, I'm a film person and I think in terms of the film frame. The action was totally organized by Joan, I just followed.

JJ: *Mirage* was a set up performance documentation, following the narration of the piece—I would hold up props and take positions one after the other, in order to document them. It was also about capturing the space itself. You got into the space and captured the details. The Anthology Film Archive was a particular, special place for me where I had learned the history of film. In the photographs of *Mirage*, Babette captured the set up at the Anthology Film Archive, where the contrast of black & white was part of the composition within the space.

BM: For *Mirage* I made sure the negatives were not overly contrasted, because of the contrasted subject of the black space with a white screen. I chose a mid tone exposure and that is the reason these photographs have a lot of details to them.

JJ: It is a difference when you shoot during a performance. For example, Peter Moore, who took many photographs of my performances in the 1960s, always situated himself at the back of the room. In his photographs you often see the heads of the audience in the foreground. But in order to

do the pictures for *Mirage*, it was really important for me to think of the site itself as a visual image. The desire to document was about my involvement and interest in picture making not so much about distribution.

BM: I remember the movements you made, you were stomping violently in place. Because of the intensity of the movement I tried to capture the moment like dance. In other words, it seemed necessary to photograph it like dance because I did not want to misrepresent the movement. That is what I meant in my argument yesterday.

JJ: Shortly after, there was an Italian publisher who made a book of the photographic series Babette took of *Mirage*. I have never shown the whole series in a gallery context. I used some of them along the way in my installations, but they were inconsequential. The first big installation of a performance, which included visual documentation material of the performance, was for my retrospective at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in 1994. I tried to re-constitute my performances in the exhibition space and make them three-dimensional. There is no specific viewpoint that the audience is limited to. Which means, that even if there was a stage in the performance, for example, I would re-construct it as such, becoming part of the installation. The installation of the pieces was very much about a multiplicity of simultaneous actions and visual elements, including photographs. So I'm glad I have them to use in my installations. I would put everything that had to do with the work into the space, arranging it in a certain way. It's about trying to create a situation, which is about information, a form of re-presentation, an assemblage. In the end one has no idea how one's work is perceived.

BC: How did performance art change in the early 1980s?

BM: Yes, it definitely was very different in the early 1980s. The newcomers to performance wanted to become stars. There was a point in the early 1980s when solo artists, like Michael Smith came onto the performance scene in New York. His work was very much about looking at himself, reflecting his own position in the art world. It had a certain aesthetic of "look at me I want to be a star" written on it.

JJ: Well, it was influenced by Vaudeville.

BM: Yes, it was inspired by popular theater and had nothing to do with the context in which, for example, your generation was working in.

JJ: It was probably a reaction against it.

BM: That is very likely. When he asked me to take some images of his work I found it amusing the first time around, but then I dropped out. I was not particularly interested in that kind of work at the time. There were also other reasons why I stopped working in the performance scene in the 1980s. At the time, I only accepted jobs taking photographs of unusual pieces like Richard Foreman's play *Miss Universal Happiness* at the Performing Garage and Brown's *Lateral Pass* with a set by Nancy Graves'. My last performance photographs were of Dana Reitz's dance performance *Severe Clear* in 1985.

BC: So it was more about just switching from black & white to color?

BM: The idea and debate around the use of color really comes from a historical context, which is rooted in the technology of black & white film. It has nothing to do with black & white being more authentic, and color less so. There were technical reasons why performance art was documented in black & white photo stock and not in color. Color film stock was much slower and I was mostly interested in shooting fast movement, which you couldn't do with color stock. It was about my way of looking at things and what I was skilled in. If it is static anybody can photograph it. What is interesting to photograph is movement. It's performance and it's exciting. At the time, when you wanted to document movement you were restricted to work in black & white. Brown's performance *Lateral Pass* (1985) was very colorful and I shot it in color as well as in black & white. For the sake of the appearance of the dance piece the color images were necessary to do it justice. But I wasn't happy about the poor result of the photographs for the dancers. The pictures were too grainy and blurry because of the slow shutter speed. The technique of color was not up to date at the time. I accepted it and decided to focus on my own film work. These concerns ceased to

exist of course, when Kodak started producing color film stock, which was faster, had less grain, and had good color rendition.

JJ: It is difficult to document one's work, because it takes a lot of time. So often you need to put on a special session, just for the documentation. Normally, I don't hire a lot of different people. The last piece *Lines in the Sand* (2002) was documented at the Kitchen in New York by friends. For *Volcano Saga* (1986), for instance, I had a whole day for the images and I hired a photographer. I chose which moments in the piece were to be documented. There are different solutions. And now recently, with the last piece, *The Shape, The Scent, The Feel of Things* (2005), someone took images of the rehearsal and I was not happy with them, because the rehearsal character was too apparent. It's problematic and it takes a lot of time, effort, and money, partly because it is so difficult to pinpoint what exactly you want in advance. Today, I video-tape everything. Anyway, that is a different story.

BM: Today, most audiences at a performance have no patience for the photographer. I used to have no problem with being a photographer taking pictures in the real time of the performance until the late 1970s. It was after that, in the early 1980s when I felt an unease with my presence especially with me using a Nikon and not a Leica. When you press the shutter, the Nikon is very noisy; the Leica is not a reflex camera, so it is silent. Peter Moore used a Leica. He was a good friend, he really helped me and he told me he used a Leica because he did not want to disturb people. I could not care less. (Laughter). At one point though, not even I could do it because it suddenly felt too antagonistic towards the performer. I feel I need a sense of urgency when I shoot a performance, that just isn't there during a rehearsal. It is easier to have this sense, when an audience is present. So shooting only during rehearsal dampened my spirit and undercut my intuition.

BC: Maybe we can open up the discussion. Carrie [Lambert-Beatty], in your essay *Moving Still: Mediating Yvonne Rainer's 'Trio A'* from 1999 you discuss the factor of vanity in the performer's choice of the documentary images. In contradiction to their aesthetic principles they, at times, are the most spectacular of their lot.

Carrie Lambert-Beatty: I asked Yvonne Rainer why so many of the figures in the photographs of *Trio A* look so poetic and beautiful. And she responded that one should not forget the simple vanity that is a factor present in choosing an image. She picked the image that she thought looked good. My response to that was that what you think looks good is based on a whole history of what dance photographs are.

BM: That was not the case for Brown's choice of images. She was very specific in selecting her own photographs. They were her images only and not similar to other performers, neither Balanchine, nor Rainer.

JJ: I don't think it is necessarily about the spectacular. For me the process of selection is about creating an image of the piece that represents the idea. For the exhibition here, it was a curatorial decision to show everything from my archive in New York. It is important to know that I never showed those Lary Bell photographs. He was photographing me while I was rehearsing *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* at the Ace Gallery in 1972, right next to his studio, in Venice, California. Those photographs used to feel awkward to me, but now they are interesting. Attitudes change over time and yes, it has a lot to do with vanity.

BM: Many of the photographs I took of *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* that are on view in the exhibition, I did not make prints of at the time. There were these huge contact sheets from which you, Joan, selected a couple of photographs and that was it. Of course they are also in my collection because I always make a copy for myself. For *After the Act* I reprinted seventeen photographs I had not seen as prints before. I discovered that the ones I did for you originally were not as good as the ones now chosen for the exhibition. So it is interesting, you don't always have time to actually see everything and your choices can vary with time.

JJ: Back then the demand for a series of photographs was low. Now people are interested in performance again. I think there are two reasons for that. For one, the language of performance art seeped into all other artistic languages. There are all these younger artists who are doing videos and video installations that are using the language of performance art. When I started teaching in the mid-nineties many of my students did not

know where it came from, because they did not know the history. Anyway, that is one thing, and it has become apparent, and people are more and more interested in that language. And the other thing is that in times of upheaval and political change, like in the 1920s and 1960s, performance suddenly comes back. It becomes a necessity because people have to speak in a different way. Like in the women's movement, a lot of women used performance and video to articulate their demands.

Carola Dertnig: In regard to linking art and politics, performance can and has been seen as a political tool, just think of Leslie Hill's article *Suffragettes Invented Performance Art*<sup>4</sup> from 1985, that deals with these cultural and social relationships in a very poignant way.

BC: In a few days Marina Abramović will perform a series of performances called *Seven Easy Pieces* at the Guggenheim in New York.<sup>5</sup> She is reenacting famous performances from the past of others and herself, in addition to a new piece of her own. Babette has been commissioned to do the film documentation of the work. Within the current trend of these revivals, what is the difference of an artist reenacting works from his/her past, and a younger artist appropriating and taking up the heroes of the past?

JJ: Marina's work has been significant and I have great respect for it, so I'm curious to speak about the work, but one has to go and see it first. Paul McCarthy's and Mike Kelly's reenactment of Vito Acconci's work in their 1995 video *Fresh Acconci* is an interesting and successful example to me. Personally speaking, I think a simple reproduction is not really interesting. It's kind of a waste of time, because there is no pushing the piece itself forward in any way. Of course if someone else's body performs another person's work, that might be something else. In this sense the pieces in the exhibition *After the Act* set a mark of difference to the original works. In theater, work is restaged all the time, it is part of the genre, think of Robert Whitman restaging his work. So what is the difference in theater performance and performance art in relation to the term re-enactment?

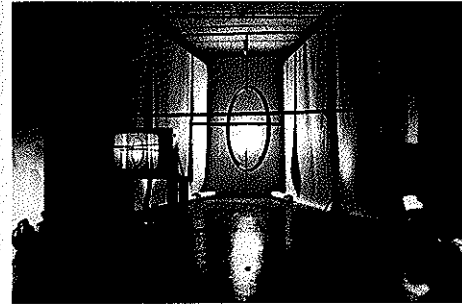
BM: I'm not going to present you my own understanding of what re-enactments can be or not. I called what Robert Morris asked me to do in the film *Four Pieces by Morris* (1993), a re-construction. It was a film, not a

performance. It permits the piece to be experienced in a different context by a generation that could not see the original. As a pure reproduction I agree with you, it is uninteresting. In case of Marina Abramović's upcoming performances it is about something else. She thinks that performance work should be copyrighted. The idea is based on the fact that if she re-enacts Vito Acconci's *Seedbed*, she is the person under the wood floor. It was a piece done in 1972 at the Leo Castelli Gallery, and by the way, the only piece I saw in its original form at the time. The fact is, Acconci's copyright continues and because of her re-enactment, *Seedbed*, the performance again comes alive. The specific creativity of the original performance artist is stopped if it's not re-performed live. It is an argument against the impact of documentation, because even if you create a secondary audience, it is not enough to generate something. For Abramović, performance is about the body's presence and its physicality. The live characteristic of the body is absolutely essential, that is one of the main points of *Seven Easy Pieces*. Besides, she is doing the pieces in a different temporality. Neither Bruce Nauman's *Body Pressure* (1974), Joseph Beuys' *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965), nor Valie EXPORT's *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969) were originally performed for seven hours.

JJ: Well basically, all of Bruce Nauman's work was only done for the camera.

BM: Abramović is also re-staging one of her older performances, called *Lips of Thomas* from 1975. It was originally only an hour long and will now go on for seven hours like all the other pieces. She will be struggling back into them. And there is a new piece, which I can't talk about, it has to be a premiere. There is a specific order that actually makes sure that, regardless of how the body is marked or scarred by the prior performance—like the candles in Gina Pane's *The Conditioning* (1973), or the slash of the razor in *Lips of Thomas*—it does not affect the next day's performance. There is an immense amount of physical work and she is training like an athlete now. Her work is more about endurance than about image making.

Christian Janecke: The author's intention for a re-enactment may be honorable, but I think it is important to realize, that the art market's interest is not to be neglected. In the 1990s there was an active discourse on per-



Joan Jonas, *Funnel*, 1974  
The Kitchen, New York © 1974 Babette Mangolte

formance and performativity in Germany, in the U.S., and in Great Britain. It was very lively in itself. But this discourse on performance had a lack of physical fulfillment, as it was only based on intellectual debates. The performances that were discussed and analyzed at that point had already happened. They were gone, and this gap between theory and practice had to be filled. There was the desire to fill this void with re-enactments of, for example, the early Gilbert and George happenings in London. The art market was calling for it.

Philip Auslander (PA): This also leads us to the question of what we consider a performance artwork to be. Is it an original act, or is it repeatable like a theater script?

JJ: Well there are all these definitions of performance art. I always think of it as a sliding scale between conceptual art and theater. Some performance art exists mainly in our heads, like Chris Burden getting shot in the arm in his performance *Shoot* (1971). This is true despite the reality of its execution and the few iconic images left. Performance can effectively live on through a rumor or a story. Whereas my work, for example, cannot be described in the same way. It's the same reason that makes encyclopedic books on the history of performance art, despite their historical value, somehow problematic. Because, as you were saying Philip, they capture everything under that title. This lack of differentiation is one of the problems we have when we speak about performance art in general.



PA: It's just interesting for me to imagine a moment where presumably there could be a lot of productions of Acconci's work going on at the same time.

BM: I agree with Joan, that in many ways the Acconci piece from 1968, that you, Philip, spoke about in your lecture is not really a performance. It clearly is on the side of conceptual art and not at all like Joan's work, which is close to the theatrical. A conceptual piece might be a lot easier to re-enact than a performance like *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll* or *Funnel* (1974), because of the wealth of imagery and decisions made in relation to the familiarity Joan had with the objects and the props she used. One has to know, that the 'text' for these performances were written for specific tools, like the Sony Portapak camera. That means, when you speak about past performances, one has to be aware of the fact that these tools have changed.

Notes:

- 1 Babette Mangolte is an experimental filmmaker living in New York City who also has an extensive archive of performance and dance photographs shot mostly in New York City in the 1970s and 1980s. Lately she has turned to writing on her own film and photo practice to reflect on the interaction between aesthetics and technologies. Throughout the 1970s Mangolte documented the entire available spectrum of performance art, ranging from theater to dance, to the visual arts. She was the camera-operator for Chantal Akerman's, Michael Snow's, and Yvonne Rainer's films.
- 2 Joan Jonas' early experience in sculpture and dance, her integration of new media as a vehicle of perception of the body, space, and time into her video-performances such as *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*, *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll* (1972 to 1974), *Glass Puzzle* (1974), *Mirage* (1974), and *Funnel* (1974), all documented by Mangolte, has made her one of the pioneers of video and performance art. Jonas' video installations, drawings and performances are shown internationally. She has had retrospectives in the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (1994), the Galerie der Stadt Stuttgart (2000), the Queens Museum of Art, New York (2003) and most recently in the Jeu de Paume, Paris (2005). In October 2005 her performance *The Shape, The Scent, The Feel of Things* premiered at Dia Beacon, New York and was reperformed in 2006.
- 3 Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Moving Still: Mediating Yvonne Rainer's 'Trio A'", *October*, no. 89 (1999), pp.87-112.

- 4 Leslie Hill, "Suffragettes Invented Performance Art", in *The Routledge Reader in Politics and Performance*, Jane De Gay and Lizbeth Goodman (eds.), London and New York, Routledge 2000.
- 5 Marina Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces*, November 9–15, 2005, Guggenheim Museum New York

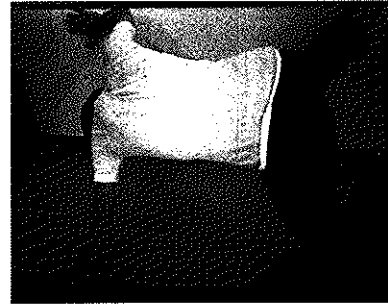
Doris Kolesch / Annette Jael Lehmann

**Inter/Actions? Staging the Self and Medialization in  
Bruce Nauman, Joan Jonas, and Vito Acconci**

From the mid-1960s, the performances and actions of artists such as Bruce Nauman, Joan Jonas, and Vito Acconci increasingly made use of a new medium that soon came to play a central role: video. The works of art in question can neither be conceived nor produced without video. The deliberately self-reflexive use of the medium of video and an interest in the technical dispositives of recording are important here. In this essay, we will therefore argue that technical media like video, used in the context of significant areas of performance art, do not serve to reproduce or document the various performances, but rather are fundamental to the practice of (re)presentation within production aesthetics. The artists interact with the media dispositives, with the technical, social, and aesthetic factors pertaining to the medium, and their performances consist of the reflexive presentation of this interaction. Employing this initially heuristic concept of interactivity, central characteristics of the use of the media in the context of performance and video art in the 1960s and 1970s will be analyzed. Our understanding of interaction is not identical to the traditional concept of interaction, which denotes the relationship between medium and public particularly in the context of the use of computers and also in the realm of installation art. In the works by Nauman, Jonas, and Acconci, we argue, (inter)action stands at the forefront between the artist and the medium—this interaction *is* the performance. In the following we will investigate

whether this interaction between artist and medium, in this case video, is a form of artistic conception and self-reflection, and also if this interaction can be understood as an artistic strategy that aims to break open and transcend traditional genre definitions and conditions of production aesthetics.

“Initially the immediacy of video’s medium interested me.”<sup>1</sup> If these words of Bruce Nauman were interpreted as a programmatic statement on his work with the new medium since the mid-1960s, seeing him appealing to the directness of the replay of his actions as the sole aesthetic quality, then this would be an unfairly limited reading. Nauman’s work with his body, which he undertook especially in minimalistic actions, characterizes a complex use of the media that cannot be imagined without an interactive dimension. Since the mid-1960s, Nauman concentrated on single sections of the body and monotonously repeating movements, as in works like *Lip Sync* (1969) or *Bouncing Balls* (1969). This reduction accentuates his interest in sculptural and object-like effects, whereby the medium of video occupies a key function in the realization of a formal aesthetic. Writing on the use of video in the *closed circuit* installation, Rosalind Kraus noted as early as 1976: “One could say that if the reflexiveness of modernist art is a doubling or doubling back in order to locate the object (and thus the objective conditions of one’s experience), the mirror reflection of absolute feedback is a process of bracketing out the object.”<sup>2</sup> It is noteworthy here that the image medium plays a decisive role in the evocation of object effects. In this sense, Nauman’s use of video turns out to be the central element of his artistic conception: it is video that makes it possible to stage the body as a moving object in space, with the movements following primarily formal principles—up, down, left, right, lively, dead, material, immaterial, etc. This is how Nauman describes the strictly calculated movements in his video *Wall-Floor-Positions* (1968): “Standing with my back to the wall for about forty-five seconds or a minute, leaning out from the wall, then bending at the waist, squatting, sitting and finally lying down. There were seven different positions in relation to the wall and floor. Then I did the whole sequence again standing away from the wall, facing the wall, then facing left and right. There were twenty-eight positions and the whole presentation lasted about half an hour.”<sup>3</sup> The sketched-out principles of order and the choreographed movements lead to image sequences that also have a sculptural effect.



Bruce Nauman, *Wall Floor Positions*, 1968  
16mm film, b&w  
Photo: MUMOK, Rastl/Deinhardstein

In *Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)* (1968), which follows on a similar basic conception, Nauman produces a particular effect through the positioning of the camera. It is placed upside-down, or turned by 90 degrees, and records the artist over approximately sixty minutes, as he walks with his arms behind his back and his legs thrust forward on a square drawn on the floor, alternating between bending his torso down or leaning back. The camera position determines the perception of the space and the movements, and leads to the impression that the artist is walking on the wall. The camera eye shifts and alienates the usual dimensions of up and down and determines the perceptual framework of what is shown. The starting point of Nauman’s actions with the body is therefore actually an impossible spatial situation, whereby the staged movements are performed by means of a simple video special effect. The movements again follow a strict and meticulously planned choreography. In Nauman’s words: “The body then falls forward onto the raised foot and the other leg is lifted to again make a straight line with the body (which now forms a T over the support leg). The body swings upright with the non-support leg swinging through the vertical and into the 90-degree position, as at the beginning. Three step-turns to the right and then three step-turns to the left will advance you two paces—each three steps advances you one step.”<sup>4</sup> What is notable here is that Nauman combines a formal structuring principle with a minimalist conception. This takes place on the basis of a performative use of the body, which is staged as moving sculpture, with the use of the image medium transforming the materiality and the plasticity of the body into an object-

like figure. The particular shift in accent that Nauman's use of the medium of video implies becomes clear: it is not the direct action and the physical presence of the body that are in the foreground, but rather its representation in an image, or, more precisely, its transformation. Unlike a traditional sculpture, which is characterized by a lack of movement or stasis, Nauman's body sculptures are made dynamic and set in motion by the media properties of video, in particular its process-based and temporal means of recording. In other words: the body of the actor performs calculated movements that possess the status of an object and are recorded and replayed as sequences of images by the medium of the video. The material presence of the work of art is replaced by the media representation. What really matters, therefore, is that video works less as a reproducing and representing medium, but rather makes it possible for Nauman to implement his artistic strategy. More than that: his artistic practice and aesthetic conception are entirely based on the media dispositive of this visual recording machine. The concept of interaction must thus be further defined as an open circulation of various dimensions of artistic practice, including the performative use of the body, a sculptural language of image, and the technical conditions of the medium of the video, none of which can be separated out from the others, as they all relate to each other in mutual interdependence.

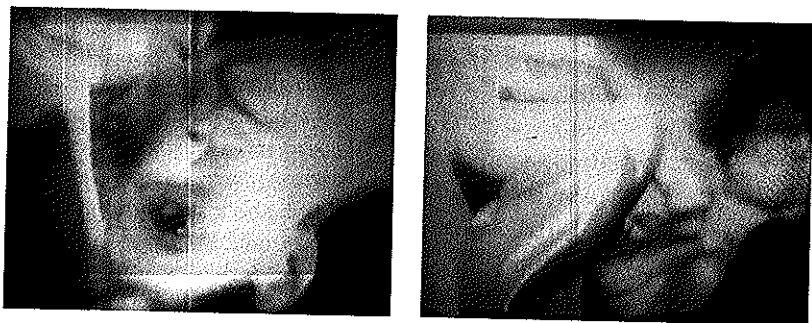
Around 1970, the performance artist Joan Jonas purchased a portable video camera (Sony Portapak) and began to develop performances for and in front of the video camera. *Left Side Right Side* (1972) is one of the first works to address questions of identity, gender, and perception in this medium. As has been shown in some detail, this work was strongly influenced by feminism and psychoanalysis, including Jacques Lacan's theoretical work on the ego-consciousness and the mirror stage. The artist places a mirror and a monitor next to each other and takes up her position in front of them. A camera films her face and shows the pictures on the monitor, while a second camera, placed behind Jonas, films both her face in the mirror and the monitor at the same time. During the entire video the recordings shift between the perspective of the first camera and the second, doubled perspective. *Left Side Right Side* is seen as a key work, of the experimental use of the new medium of video, even if its approach is rather formal and extremely reduced. In a further sequence in this work an additional element is added to the reduced gestures, and here too the issue is the ability to see double. Jonas draws labyrinthine patterns on a board,



Joan Jonas, *Left Side Right Side*, 1972  
Video, b&w, sound, 8 min 50 sec  
Courtesy of the artist

which appear via mirroring and recording by the monitor in alternating configurations now on the left and then on the right of the video screen.

In *Vertical Roll* (1972) Jonas continues her experimental investigation of the medial dispositive of video in the 1970s, taking a new approach. This work concentrates on a specific technical feature of the medium; Jonas experiments with a technical setting error of video that makes the picture "roll" on, so that rolling stripes continually appear on the screen and disturb the continuity of the sequence of images. Technically, as Jonas notes, this works as follows: "A vertical roll results from two out-of-sync frequencies, the frequency signal sent to the monitor and the frequency by which it is interpreted."<sup>5</sup> The rhythm of the roll is accentuated in the circa 17 minute tape by a staccato-like beat, a kind of metallic banging noise. The limits of the video image become apparent, both in its being within a "box" and in the temporal dimension of linear process, and Jonas uses these structural properties of the medium to deconstruct and stage the image of her own body. The fragmentation of the video image by the distorted image format makes it possible to represent the body itself as fragmented and artificially assembled. The video consists of seven parts in all, with portraits of the artist's face as the opening and closing sequences. At the beginning, Jonas' face is moving against the direction of the vertical roll, upwards from the lower edge of the screen, until it comes to occupy the entire screen and a hand also becomes visible—the hand that is striking out the metallic beat on a hard surface. The following sequences are all introduced by fades. First the body of a masked woman in satin trousers and a



Joan Jonas, *Vertical Roll*, 1972  
Video, b&w, sound, 19 min 30 sec  
Courtesy of the artist

bustier is recognizable—the same figure that we recognize as “Organic Honey” from an earlier Jonas work of that name. The figure moves from a sitting to a reclining position, a movement that is continually interrupted by the contrary movement of the vertical roll. This opposition leads to distortion of the image and of perception, which is intensified in the third part of the tape. A static image of a seated naked woman is rotated by 90 degrees, giving it an illusionary effect as if she were changing her position. Vertical roll is not only used to manipulate the movements in the image, but also to create a montage of parts of the body, such as a pair of legs that seems to be cut off from the body and hopping independently. The same is true of the images of the torso, which is seen flimsily dressed and turning around its own axis. Here the distortion caused by vertical roll is intensified by the increasing lack of focus of the image.

This video stages a withdrawal—the denial of a coherent visibility of the female body. It is our contention that this does not primarily take place so as to prevent voyeuristic reception, but rather in resistance to an attitude of reception that is known in film theory as “suture.” This concept denotes technically evoked illusionistic identification with what is shown, which is achieved particularly through the impression of coherence and closure. Jonas’ work displays a formal aesthetic interest in a new representation of movements that undermines the conventional perception of moving images. She thereby fills in an intermediate space between synchronous image sequence and the fixed and motionless image, between revealing and hiding the body and its masked representation, between the availability

and the withdrawal of what is shown. This liminal basic feature of the video can be seen as the real point of reference to a performative aesthetic. And this although the action or performance that leads to the recordings is subordinated to this aesthetic aim of staging images or sequences of images. The female body is staged by Jonas’ alienated moving image, with a changed and extended scope for action. The space where this action takes place is the virtual, technically manipulated space that is provided by the medium of video. The work is therefore not based on the aesthetic premise of a discreet and direct materiality or body that the technical medium records but cannot adequately reproduce, but rather precisely an explicit (inter)action of the bodily actions with technical conditions and possibilities. It is only the technical dispositive that creates the extended space for movement and therefore also representation. This facilitates the extension of the action and creates alternative possibilities of visualizing bodily movements. The space of media representation is structured by the formal principle of the serial roll and a technical alienation effect that constitutes the tension between the visibility and invisibility of the bodily whole.

In Jonas’ *Vertical Roll* the fixable surface of an image of the body is dissolved so as to make visible the borders that thereby become both perceivable and at the same time are also transcended. In this manner, the image space of the video becomes a playful space that has no prescribed outer border, permitting acts of transgression and displacement to the degree that the parameters of the staging of the self are weakened and an autonomous aesthetic value of the images takes over. This means that those aspects of self-staging and self-mirroring that are often emphasized, and with them the exploration of artistic or female identity, are in fact not the main issue in this work. Here, in contrast to the classical mirror situation, video is not used primarily as a monitor of the staging of a self-image or portrait, but as a medium of the production of alternating moving images of the body. This medialization of aesthetic strategy should not be confused with a trend toward de-subjectivation, but amounts to the implementation of an artistic concept that attempts to intimately combine theatrical actions with the production of images. The continuous challenge to and breaking through the spatial borders of the frames, and the limitations posed by the physical screen, corresponds to this. This transgression of the prescribed image space and the displacement of a coherent image of the body take place so as to create bodily fragments that literally get out of line. The

internal borders of the viewer's perspective are thereby also displaced and their traditional function is rendered ineffective. Jonas' video *Vertical Roll* realizes a staging of the body as withdrawal and at the same time as a literal stepping outside the role/roll.

Since the late 1960s, Vito Acconci used film and video not only to document his performances, but also soon began to use video independently, concentrating on interaction with the audience. Acconci's interest in behavioral psychology led him to investigate human interaction in space, the borders and dynamics of which he aimed to consider and present artistically in what he called "performance areas" and "power fields." The question to be considered in the following concerns the degree to which interaction with the audience takes place via interaction with the dispositive of video, and the conditions and potential of the medium, and—so our thesis—thereby exhausts itself and is even partly transcended.

In the video *Theme Song* (1973), and in a similar way in *Turn On* (1974), Acconci attempts to run against and question the limits of the screen by employing two key means—the camera adjustment and the use of the voice. He wishes to break through the frame and the limitations of the screen. The aim is not only to intensify face-to-face communication or to maximize proximity with the viewer, but to break through the pictorial space, playing to the full a game with the conditions of the medium and the means of representation. First the qualities of the medium of video and its dialectic of the presence and absence of the physical performer are tested. Acconci's cliché-like attempts to gain the favor of the viewers are performed against the background of lines from songs by Bob Dylan, the Doors, and other pop music, which he plays back from time to time from a cassette recorder. At first the specific meaning of the video seems to lie in the fact that the viewer is directly looked at and spoken to. The lines that open the monologue run: "I can't see your face in my mind. ... Of course I can't see your face. I have no idea what your face looks like. You could be anybody out there, but there's gotta be somebody watching me. Somebody who wants to come in close to me. ... Come on, I'm all alone ... I'll be honest with you, O.K. I mean you'll have to believe me if I'm really honest. ..." The failed attempt to break through the dividing line between the realms of production and reception cements the cliché of the impossibility of direct communication and indicates the unavoidable self-referentiality of the monologue. In her influential essay "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,"



Vito Acconci, *Theme Song*, 1973  
Video, b&w, sound, 30 min  
Courtesy of the artist, © Vito Acconci

mentioned above, Rosalind Krauss describes this self-referentiality using Vito Acconci's video *Centers* (1971) as a characteristic of early video art.<sup>6</sup> The self-referentiality is not the manifestation of any ostentatious communication with the audience, but rather the distrust and rejection of the ability of the symbolic system of language to engender meaning and its ability to take effect interactively.

In his *Some Notes on My Use of Video* (1974) Acconci writes: "I can push up against the screen as if to throw myself on the viewer as if to fight the neutrality of the situation, push myself through." The attempt to stage the transgression of the borders of the image takes place mainly with close-ups, showing Acconci lying on the ground, with his face as close as possible to the camera and slightly distorted by the wide-angle recording. The close-up or medium shot are frequently used to show portrait or close views of the artist, in many of which the head appears out of proportion to the body, particularly to the legs. The central element of the video is an intimate address to the audience. Acconci speaks directly to the viewer with a deep voice, and begins a monologue that is intended to make him seem seductive and irresistible. The self-staging thus derives its key interactive dynamics from the combination of visual and audio elements. Acconci makes the fullest use of the media conditions of his use of the voice; hearing, like sight, is a sense that works over distance, but, unlike sight, it would seem that it is not a sense that provides distance but rather involvement and participation. The human voice differs from mere sounds in that it has a specific appellative character, always directed to some other; it wishes to

be heard and answered with words or actions. The mediatized voice, divorced from the body, leaving time and space behind it at will, nonetheless appeals to the listening subject, but now under quite different conditions of communication. In Acconci's video this opens up an irritating connection between intimacy and publicity, proximity and distance, intensity and reflection.

The work *The Red Tapes* (1976–77) is a video with these key elements, whereby the artist explores his own identity through references to American history. He constructs a rich poetic text that dominates the entire work. *The Red Tapes* develops a complex amalgam of narrative elements, photographic images, music, and spoken language. Here too the carefully staged transgression of symbolic framings and medial methods is important. The video is divided into three chapters, and the sequences of images are structured as an arrangement of spatial configurations, but the central structural element of this work over 140 minutes is the voice. Acconci writes on this: "The method of the tape is the alteration of blank screen and image; when the screen is blank (when the screen is gray, neutralized), there is an undercurrent of voice—voice breaks into language, language breaks into image, gray fades into picture."<sup>7</sup> A structural constant is given in the alternation between a gray screen and visual sequences, with the voice corresponding to the gray screen. The image sequences and the gray screen and the voice thus constantly alternate. Acconci's video thereby emphasizes the relationship between what one sees and what one hears, staging the voice as acousmatic, as a sound that is heard but whose source (in this case the speaker) is not seen.<sup>8</sup> The acousmatic voice is a seemingly unlimited, omnipotent, or even omniscient voice, which is so effective and fascinating because it appeals to the imagination of the listeners and introduces a further visual dimension into the perception of the video. The rhythmic structure or image sequence and voice determine the perception of the video, even if what is shown does not appear to actually reinforce this. In *Red Tape 1: Common Knowledge* the thematic focus is on the exploration of the self (Acconci is shown in close-up); a landscape is represented by a photographic image, and the voice articulates a mysterious story. *Red Tape 2: Local Colour* is essayistic and analytical; the camera perspective is broader and is seen as a body in the context of architectonic and sculptural spaces. Here too the difference in the use of the voice is crucial. Acconci notes: "Whereas the voice in Tape I was novelistic, the voice in Tape II is essayistic:



Vito Acconci, *The Red Tapes*, 1976–1977  
Video, b&w, sound, 140 min  
Courtesy of the artist, © Vito Acconci

the language attempts to formulate a grammar, establish rules, sets itself up as an analyzer." *Tape 3: Time Lag* shows a theatrical space, in which Acconci and a number of actors perform scenes from a "rehearsal of America," with a broad range of themes from the autobiographical to the social and references to literature, psychoanalysis, cinema, art, and popular culture. *Red Tapes* is therefore an extraordinary testimony of the 1970s in which Acconci attempts to determine a stance within the mythical discourses of American culture and society.

The emphasis here is, however, not on the communicative and referential function of language and signs, but rather on the role of the voice beyond symbolic and logocentric systems. It is significant that the voice is deep, sonorous, and rather rough, as its expressive value beyond any semi-otic function becomes the central location for the physical presence of the artist. It guarantees the materiality of his body, and, as Roland Barthes wrote in his essay "The Grain of the Voice," "it has us hear a body which has no civil identity, no 'personality,' but which is nevertheless a separate body," doing this as "movement from deep down in the cavities, the muscles, the membranes, the cartilages."<sup>9</sup> This voice gives the absent body medial presence and suggests physical contact. Video thus offers the possibility of perceiving voice in pictorial space as more than just the carrier of the staging of the self, going beyond that to achieve a direct relationship to the body of the performer and the physical binding of the viewer to the visual sequences. This is less a question of the effect of the illusion of direct experience and the presence of the body, than an interplay of visual and audio

dimensions that can be explained as having the function of an index. The voice in this video works as an indexical indication of the body of the performer. It is that mark and trace that points to the direct presence of this physicality and fixes it as an imprint in the visual sequences. The deliberate use of the voice as described by the artist proves therefore to be an aesthetic strategy pertaining to the use of the medium of video. The performative staging of the self takes shape only through this relationship between physical presence and absence. In short, in this work in particular Acconci develops the connection between performance and reproductive image medium by means of the auditive dimension of the voice. The voice in the video functions as a resonating space for the images of the body and stages the key rhythmic appearance of the image spaces. The image space of the video medium thereby, as it were, opens up its surface dimension and produces an extended and deepened resonating space that aims for physical (re)presentation beyond pure visibility. This correlation between optical and acoustic means of perception ultimately also demonstrates that this is not a case of an optocentric form of perception staging the body and its visibility as a surface, but rather an understanding of the body that attempts to create an extensive resonating space for all the senses.

Notes:

- 1 Bruce Nauman, in Robert C. Morgan, "Eccentric Abstraction: From Biomorphic Sensualism to Hard-Edge Concreteness," *Flash Art* 144 (1989), p. 77.
- 2 Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October*, no. 1 (1976), p. 57.
- 3 Bruce Nauman, in Willoughby Sharp, "Nauman Interview," *Arts Magazine* 44 no. 5 (1970), p. 26.
- 4 Nauman, in Coosje van Bruggen, *Bruce Nauman*, New York 1988, p. 115.
- 5 Joan Jonas, in David Ross, *Joan Jonas, Scripts and Descriptions*, Berkeley 1983, p. 74.
- 6 Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism", in *October*, no. 1 (1976), reprinted in Gregory Battcock (ed.), *New Artists Video: A Critical Anthology*, New York 1978, pp. 43-64.
- 7 Vito Acconci, cited from: <http://www.eai.org/eai/tape.jsp?itemID=1369>.
- 8 On the acousmatic voice see Michel Chion, *La voix au cinéma*, Paris 1992.
- 9 Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image, Music, Text*, New York 1997, p. 182 and p. 181.

Michaela Pöschl

### Otto Muehl, Kurt Kren: Cum Shot Asses and Assholes

"Da hab' ich alle Verhältnisse abg'streift"

If viewers are to be given the power of seemingly all-seeing, all-knowing voyeurs, a film must obey certain rules: films should (in the main) do without all elements that disrupt their own illusion of reality; viewers should read the moving images as a reproduction of reality. In other words, the medium of film represents various codes that are intended to be accepted as a reproduction of the conditions for perceiving reality.

Body art and the representation of body art in film very often propagate the body of the artist as "naked truth." Here too, a long chain of substitutes opens up *behind* this truth, behind an unambiguous "That's the way it is." The American art historian Amelia Jones describes these representatives as "The sequence of supplements initiated by the body art project the body 'itself', the spoken narrative, the video and other visuals within the piece, the film, photograph, text and video documenting it for posterity announces the necessity of 'an infinite chain, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence, or originary perception.' (...) Body and performance art expose the contingency of the body/self not only on the other of the communicative exchange (the audience, the art historian) but on the very modes of its own (re)presentation."<sup>2</sup> It is the "apostrophes" embodied by films, videos, photos and texts that produce precisely that which they have apparently taken from the live



performance: presence, truth, directness. In Vienna in the 1960s, there was an intense exchange—one that was not cultivated to this extent either in other European contexts or in the USA—between Actionists and artists working with film who, in constantly changing roles (filmmaker, Actionist, cameraman, actor), had the chance to reorient their position, and mutually influenced and challenged each other. In this climate of diverse mutual influence, each personal approach could in the end be all the more exactly formulated, defended and practiced.

In this spirit, Otto Muehl described his 12th “material action,” *Mama und Papa*, carried out on August 4, 1964, in the “score” as follows: “Mama lies naked on the table, covered with a plastic sheet. Papa stands next to the table in a black suit, draws a long rope from his trouser pocket and ties Mama to the table. Papa blows up some balloons that are lying under the plastic with a pump. Papa hurls a balloon filled with tomato sauce against the wall. Papa tears up a balloon that is filled with feathers. Papa places a balloon filled with tomato sauce on an easy chair. The balloon bursts when he sits on it with all his weight. Papa unties Mama and rolls her onto her stomach. Papa places an artificial rose between her buttocks. Papa bites his way through a tomato over the rose and cracks an egg. Papa sprinkles potting soil and sand; he lets ten kilos of flour trickle onto Mama and the rose. Papa pours blue paint, sour milk and tomato sauce onto Mama. Papa uses a siphon bottle to wash away the vegetables and the sand from Mama’s arse. Papa rolls Mama onto her back. Papa lies down next to Mama, takes the siphon bottle, places it between his legs and sprays the ceiling with it. Papa puts a big tomato between Mama’s teeth and bites through it. Papa places a balloon filled with tomato sauce on Mama’s stomach and lowers himself onto it until it bursts. Mama sits up, and Papa throws flour at her from a meter away and sprays her with tomato juice and raspberry juice. Papa stuffs tomatoes, spinach, handkerchiefs and confetti between Mama’s legs. A naked man lies down on the table; Papa rubs cooking oil over him, powders him with flour and wraps him in plastic tubes. Paper roses are placed between the tubes and the man’s skin. Papa gives the man an inflated balloon. While the man produces noise with the balloon by rubbing and pressing it, the head of a man, covered with a paper carry bag, appears between Mama’s legs through a hole in the table. The naked man bursts the balloon. Papa bursts a feather-filled balloon with a candle and throws black pigment into the air. Papa removes the plastic bag from the



Kurt Kren, *Mama und Papa* (Materialaktion Otto Muehl), 1964  
16mm film, color  
© VBK Wien; Photo: MUMOK, Rastl/Deinhardstein

man’s head and smears his bald head with eggs, pasta, sauces and talcum powder. Papa sticks plastic flies on the man’s head, puts false teeth in his mouth and covers his face with self-adhesive paper. Mama kneels over the bald-headed man and gives him her breast to suck. Papa jumps on the table, crawls up behind Mama, places a balloon filled with sour milk between himself and Mama and bursts it, while holding on to Mama as tightly as he can. Mama turns around and shows the audience her arse. Papa rubs skin cream and feathers into Mama’s arse. The bald-headed man blows up a balloon with liquid paint under Mama’s arse and pricks it. The bald-headed man disappears under the table. A chest without a bottom is placed on the table. Mama climbs into it and disappears through an opening in the table. Papa fills the chest with balloons, climbs into it, bursts them by jumping up and down on them and disappears in the chest.”<sup>3</sup> When reading this score, one can imagine, or I imagine now in 2005, how boring the action must have been in 1964. No scandal? Or: what was scandalous then, what is scandalous today? In what tradition was the artist Otto Muehl embedded, which norms did he want to see reproduced?

Before Kurt Kren carried out Muehl’s request to film his 12th “material action,” he negotiated the right to do what he wanted with the film material. “After some to and fro, he [Muehl] finally agreed. The films of the ‘actions’ are not documentaries,” Kren said in an interview 20 years later. “When he saw the first film [6/64 *Mama und Papa*], he went a bit pale in the face. He had imagined it somewhat differently. He wanted a pure documentary for himself.”<sup>4</sup> “When you see a normal film,” Kren states,

describing the difference between “pure” documentation and his films of “actions,” “you always get from the beginning to the end. And with these films you get the beginning and the end at the same time in the middle and it repeats itself.”<sup>5</sup> In 1968, Muehl noted in his manifesto *Film & Materialaktion*: “Kurt Kren took apart and shortened the movement sequences of the action, and changed the order by editing and montage,” and concluded that: “This did not just break up the external structure of the action, but also partly cancelled out the scandalous content.”<sup>6</sup> This manifesto was printed in Birgit Hein’s book *Film im Underground* in 1971. In the same year Kren wrote to Hein: “Peter showed me your book. It turned out wonderful! But I have to complain about one thing: that Muehl’s lousy pamphlet from ’68 is in it again. He writes that in my films on his material actions I also partly cancelled out the scandalous content. That is complete garbage! Muehl’s actions back then were still bloody boring. Plus, I was the one who put in some of the scandalous content in the first place. I had an argument with Otto about this pamphlet a few years back. He admitted that his claim was nonsense. And now the same shit’s in there again.”<sup>7</sup> What is for certain is that Muehl staged *Mama und Papa* for three cameras, and that there were no passive viewers in the studio. Present were Muehl, a woman and two men (as models), the photographers Ludwig Hoffenreich and Siegfried Klein, and the filmmaker Kurt Kren. And what is for certain is that Otto Muehl’s 12th “material action” *Mama und Papa* became Kren’s sixth film: *6/64 Mama und Papa*,<sup>8</sup> 16 mm, 4 min, color, silent.

*6/64 Mama und Papa* breaks up Muehl’s movements, brings them to a halt, chops up the image, the codes that potentially signalise “reality.” He counteracts the illusion of a continuous movement, narrative logic and coherence, as well as the authority of the actionist artist. Emancipating itself not only from the traditional expressive canon of cinematic composition in image and sound, “pure” documentation, but also from the reality staged by Muehl. In Kren’s “body cinema,” man is no longer the measure of all things. Michael Palm speaks of a “cinema of intensities and presence,”<sup>9</sup> in which there is constant repetition, and in which the body is freed both from a Before and After and from a dialectic of the whole and its parts. Kren’s radical fractionations lead to a constantly new construction of the image, and prevent the reconstruction of a representative image and the fixing of identity.

*6/64 Mama und Papa* was the first film that Kren did not edit in the camera, but afterwards at the cutting table according to a precise plan. The individual takes were numbered in order, and the first frame of each take was stuck to a carton as an orientation aid. There were 82 takes, which Kren broke up and divided into several segments on the basis of the editing plan. He pre-determined only the length, and not the images, of the various sequences.<sup>10</sup> Kren counters Muehl’s “material action” with his serial short-cut procedure and convolutes masses of continuous shots in this, his first film of an “action.” He often returns to significant images as leitmotifs, and creates circular movements running throughout the film. Kren meticulously weaves the wild frenzy playing in front of his lens into geometric figures. Alternating shot/reverse shot sequences jump back and forth between individual frames and ornamentize the Actionistic tumult as strict geometric patterns. Manic repetitions decompose the bodies on the screen into an amorphous mass. The colorful nature of the film makes the naked bodies both plastic and haptic, and lends them a strong materiality.

Muehl’s “material action” was intended to destroy structures and meanings of a normative reality constituted to form a new and better one: “I am against forms of order that are no longer congruent with any reality,”<sup>11</sup> “the material action is a method of extending reality, producing realities.”<sup>12</sup> Kren translated the gesture of working on the body/thing-as-material into film. The result *6/64 Mama und Papa* is a documentation the form of which adapts to the nature of the “material action” as a moving, painterly, spatial collage—and thus by no means corresponded to the demands for truth on the part of the Actionist Muehl.

One could say that Kren took the words “material” and “action” seriously, but not the staged aura. In *6/64 Mama und Papa* he breaks up the image—the codes that represent “reality”—, and works against the illusion of continuous movement and narrative logic, as well as the authority of the action artist. In his “body cinema,” man is no longer the measure of all things.<sup>13</sup>

Although Muehl, coming from painting, had apparently rejected all the norms in that medium, in the body (and, in the end, in film as well) he looked for “the truth,” and its standardized mechanisms of the production of meaning that he otherwise doubted. “In the material action, [people] are cracked open like an egg and show their yolk,” Muehl wrote in 1964. According to Muehl, people do not appear here as “people ... [or]

as sexual beings,” but as “bodies with certain characteristics.”<sup>14</sup> While Muehl declared the body to be material, and insisted on the meaninglessness of self-referentiality of the material, it was mainly naked women who served him as material. Actions like *Mama und Papa* thematize neither the “nature” of tomato juice, nor of sour milk, body powder or Nivea cream: they are also about establishing an imaginary identity of the artist. “[A]rtistic creativity is shown to be a form of melodrama, played out ... over the bodies of women (...). Put simply, woman as sign becomes a central symbol in the construction of artistic identity,”<sup>15</sup> Lynda Nead stresses. Art of the early 1960s was above all an expression of the situation of white male artists who claimed that their own exclusive concept of “freedom” was absolute, quoted Marcuse and emphasised that it wasn’t “the picture of a naked woman showing her pubic hair” that was obscene, “but the one of a general in full regalia displaying the medals he has earned in a war of aggression.”<sup>16</sup> Otto Muehl, too, declared the nakedness of the women he used as models to be an anti-bourgeois statement, while he himself acted in *Mama und Papa* in a suit. By insisting on the “nature of the body,” Muehl ignored the various (im)possibilities of capturing and shaping body images and bodies. The liberated body postulated by Muehl was the male body, or, better said: his own. In the context of painting, he criticized the medium and the conventional role of the artist, but in action art Muehl did not look as self-critically at his own position of power as man and artist.

“In my films, I would like to make it clear that there is no such thing as a non-manipulated film. I wanted to show this by means of obvious manipulation, for example in *Mama und Papa*.<sup>17</sup> Kren countered Muehl’s *idée fixe* of a liberated, free individual with a large number of jump cuts and interruptions. And when Muehl saw the film, he turned pale, according to Kren. The action artist was not satisfied, perhaps because in Kren’s films he no longer stands out from the ensemble as the master of the situation. Who was the master of the situation? While Muehl commanded, mounted and soiled bodies, Kren’s camera crawled under the bodies, climbed up on them. Extreme shortenings, rare views and highly detailed close-ups show Kren’s involvement. In *6/64 Mama und Papa*, he fetishizes certain parts of the body (like breasts and bottom) of the actress and produces extremely close-up images. On the other hand, the camera offered the opportunity for keeping at a distance from what was happening—it is the camera, after all, that stops Kren’s gaze from being returned by the woman. At the scene it

was his camera, and at the editing bench the montage, that guaranteed him proximity *and* distance. In the end, Kren had more power over what was happening than Muehl. “I was able ... to say stop now, and put in a new film, refocus or wind up the camera.”<sup>18</sup> Kren also showed his power as an image-producer in the picture itself. We see him again and again—filming the naked woman—in the mirror.<sup>19</sup> Despite all the quality of Kren’s deconstructive strategies: in the avant-garde movements of the 20th century, knowing about certain culturally traditional male fantasies often only led to their reproduction. In her essay “Der Mythos des ‘Ganzen Körpers’. Das Fragmentarische in der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts als Dekonstruktion bürgerlicher Totalitätskonzepte,” Sigrid Schade analyzes the figure of the fragment in the works of the Cubists, Dadaists and Surrealists as a tool to counter the “unity” of bourgeois illusionism, which leaves behind it a “painful trail of exclusion, splits, destruction, extermination and repression.” Schade comes to the conclusion that these artists’ images of women, even when alienated through artistic procedures, still partly reflect the old patterns of “woman as flower, fruit, mother, prostitute.”<sup>20</sup> Even if Kren uses jump cuts to orchestrate the codings of reality (and his participation in it as artist), even if the cuts are rapid, the images of the body torn apart and fragmented: I know this sight of naked women’s arses, breasts and pussies, slimy, bespattered.

The literature professor and art theorist Ferdinand Schmatz points out that the Actionist method of “chopping up bodies, concepts and ideologies” cannot be separated from conventional reality (which is governed by language). “Was syntax really replaced by cuts, the pen by the razorblade, semantics by blood?” Schmatz asks, and comes to the conclusion that the Actionist concept of “reality” and “body” was not able to hide the fact that there is no absolute congruence between subject and object. “The paradoxical thing about this,” says Schmatz, “is that Actionism seemed to confirm this theory, even though it had set out to refute or destroy it.”<sup>21</sup> Muehl wrote in 1968: “cuts in films are bad, when they are meant to illustrate past time or an event.”<sup>22</sup> Since his third ‘action’ in February 1964, all ‘material actions’ had been filmed on 8mm by various people. These silent 8mm films were at first only intended to document and record the happening, along with photos. Inspired by Kren, who filmed and was successful with his films, Muehl began to produce 16mm sound films from 1966. He produced these films under his name. They were shown at festivals, often

together with Kren's films, and were subsequently distributed by P.A.P. in Munich like the latter.

In his first films, Muehl drew on Kren's editing techniques. In *Grimuid* (1967, 16mm, b&w, 10 min; Sound, camera: Kronberger), one sees grimacing faces in a series of jump cuts. But he gradually gave up these attempts at formal arrangements. In 1968 Muehl began shooting in a single take, which resulted in the actions being greatly simplified: In *Amore* (1968, 16mm, color, 3 min; Sound, camera: Spermint) a man is whipped by a group of naked people; in the first part of *Satisfaction* (1968, b&w, 12 min; Camera: Spermint), Muehl, Schwarzkogler, Günter and Anna Brus stand immobile for minutes in front of the camera in various poses. In keeping with Muehl's credo, "for me it is not interesting what happens with the camera and the film, but what is done in front of the camera,"<sup>23</sup> at the end of the 1960s, the sexual actions in front of the camera became increasingly pornographic, and editing and montage were completely dropped. And here, the opinions of critics and theorists are divided. As early as 1974, one could read in Hans Scheufl and Ernst Schmidt Jr.'s *Subgeschichte des Films* that "Muehl's contempt for aesthetic considerations has a negative effect on his work. The formal aesthetics of his early material actions and the often grotesque fantastic nature of his [...] film actions lose greatly in effect when they are merely filmed."<sup>24</sup> In 2002, Scheufl repeats that "With *SS und Judensterne*, a poor work in every regard, Muehl ended years of active film production, with which he was unable to achieve any formal individuality."<sup>25</sup> Birgit Hein, on the other hand, gave Muehl's filmic development a positive assessment, and noted with regard to his rejection of editing: "He however only achieves the realization of this concept (giving up editing) in his last film. Muehl changed the style of his actions a lot over the years; he gave up using materials like food and paint and started doing purely sexual actions (...) While he still edited the various films in *Sodoma, Libi 68, Apollo 11, Satisfaction, Campagnerreiterclub, Scheißkerl, Amore* and *Fountain*—following traditional concepts of cuts and rhythm, and composing some very beautiful images, in his new series, *Investment* (1970), he abandons the compositional methods that could be classified as artistic, which had up to now been a way of getting around the pornography laws, and arrives at a much more provocative, home-cinema-like documentation."<sup>26</sup> These different evaluations based on two differing modes of historicization do not necessarily have to be seen as competing,

however. The form of the home-porn film can be seen as one artistic form among others and stands functionally beside Kren's advanced aesthetic essays. However, I find inadequate reflection on media embarrassing—particularly in the case of body art. I am very prepared to recognize Muehl's late, unedited films as "formally individual." But this does not explain the glaring lack of reflection and theoreticization in the construction of meanings.

Muehl's "home-porn" films were in keeping with the trend; the theme of porn was en vogue among artists in the 1960s. The social background was the fierce debate on pornography that flared up in 1969 about the public screening of hardcore porn films (in which the sexual act was no longer just simulated, but really carried out).<sup>27</sup> Kurt Kren's *21/68 Danke* envisaged railway wagons showing porn films at their windows in the evening on weekends,<sup>28</sup> and in 1969, for *Der Voyeur*, Hans Scheufl projected a porn film close to the screen so that the image was very small and not visible from the auditorium. Consequently Scheufl asked the viewers to come onto the stage to look at the film. Ever since Jack Smith's tranvestite orgy *Flaming Creatures*, banned in the United States because of the close-ups of penises, the mythos of the underground film as the mythos of the forbidden, sexual, began to grow. Andy Warhol, who called Smith his role model, made *Blue Movie* in 1968, in which Viva and Louis Valdon allow themselves 90 minutes for foreplay, coitus and afterplay. Since 1963, Warhol worked with a motionless camera shooting with only one take (in *Sleep* he filmed a sleeping John Giorno for six hours). A model for Muehl's unedited "home-porn movies": "and then my world record: the first public sexual intercourse as art. This is often wrongly credited to Andy Warhol. What is important is that he never carried it out himself and he meant it to be a film anyway."<sup>29</sup> In contrast to Muehl, who ignored the reproductive medium, Warhol was concerned with the codings of reality and its reduction to medial communication. "If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, and there I am,"<sup>30</sup> Warhol announced. *Blue Movie* is just as unspectacular as *Sleep* and *Empire*, which shows the Empire State Building for eight hours in a single take. In a film program in which his films *Grimuid* and *Wehrertüchtigung* were shown at the Artcenter in Vienna, Otto Muehl announced: "Otto Muehl has now become the cine-magus of Vienna. States of emergency and prosperity are revealed before a fixed camera..." And he describes his proximity to



Andy Warhol, *Sleep*, 1963  
16mm film, b&w  
© VBK Wien 2006

pop art: “the pop-artist Muehl looks into himself, and because he doesn’t see anything there, he curses the managers and flees into the woods.”<sup>31</sup>

Someone who is unaware of Muehl’s naïve belief that the reproducing apparatus and film reception have no effects on the action, and who is not offended by sexual acts will enjoy looking at his late, unedited films. I like looking at them. What becomes very apparent in the films is Muehl’s machismo. The invisible text behind this is my knowledge of how Muehl later made use of the weakness of others: minors, women, men.<sup>32</sup> From a formal point of view, Muehl produced interesting films. Mostly, home-porn films are deathly dull, even those by prominent figures like Pamela Anderson. Deciding against editing also means deciding against the tension of the spectacle. The grotesque fantasy of Muehl’s ‘actions’ captured in unedited form on film can sometimes counteract this boredom.

In 1973 Muehl said farewell to Actionism, having realized that art is often no more than a state-secured place for political dissenters, assigned to them by the state because it has an interest in rendering criticism harmless in the form of art. He wanted to improve reality, “cast off all relationships,” and in the end, consistently enough, turned his back on art as a vehicle for doing so. As a logical step, Muehl transferred the utopian Actionist dream, the project of the political left in the 1960s, from art to private life. His films on ‘material actions,’ on the other hand, were “art,” and as such were received in the context of avant-garde film. They were intended to convey the quality of the actions to a wider audience. Conveying political content camouflaged as art is a tried-and-true method both in art history and in

political strategy. However, Muehl’s short-sightedness started at the point where he equated the film edit with the state and used the pornographic, “really real” content of his actions *and* films to justify labelling them as “art.” In doing so, he completely disregarded the function of the reproducing medium. Muehl’s equation went: film=action=revolutionary=good.

Muehl was of the opinion that Kren’s editing obscured reality, and emphasised that: “The state has an interest in seeing film as an artwork, rated ‘commendable!’”<sup>33</sup> Muehl defined the ‘action,’ on the other hand, as a revolution of reality: “film does not go beyond what happens. If something good happens, the film is good too.”<sup>34</sup> He justified the quality of his films with the quality of his actions, and they were to be seen in as complete and unedited a form as possible. Here, Muehl was taken in by exactly the same phantasm of the image as “window(frame) on the world” that he had set out to destroy. Coming from painting, the Actionists wanted to destroy painting as a substitute for reality. The effect of illusionism that painting promotes in its function as representative (and which Muehl rejected), the readiness to read specific codes as reality, represents—seen from an art-historical point of view—a repression of editing. And one origin of this repression can be localized in the Renaissance—in the development of central perspective, the production of purportedly “naturally homogeneous” bodies in a continuous space. “We have our educational ideal to thank for this repression of discontinuities,” writes Sigrid Schade, “the production of the bourgeois male, autonomous subject, identical with itself and ruling over nature, as a fiction of itself.”<sup>35</sup> While he totally rejected central perspective—the production of a seemingly “natural” and homogeneous space—in painting, Muehl wanted to see it represented in Kren’s films of actions. In the same measure that Muehl ignored his own authority, Kren’s cuts make it clear that Muehl drew a veil of “naturalness” over his own power. Kren’s cuts demonstrate that “documentary” always means the processing of what is seen, that the meaning of bodies is not buried in the action artist (and models’ bodies) but also takes place in contexts of reception where viewers, readers and interpreters interacted with body images. *6/64 Mama und Papa* criticises the attempt of the action artist Muehl to build a direct bridge between action and viewer with body and film. No more than scores, manifestos, texts, eyewitness reports, films, photographs and videos, body-art too does *not* represent a direct experience, the truth, or an unambiguous “That’s how it is.”

Notes:

- 1 Titus Feuerfuchs in *Der Talisman* by Johann Nestroy. ["I've cast off all relationships"]
- 2 Amelia Jones, "Presence in Absentia. Experiencing Performance as Documentation," *Art Journal* 56.4 (Winter 1997), pp. 14; quote within quote: Jacques Derrida, "That Dangerous Supplement," *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore 1976, p. 157.
- 3 Otto Muehl, quoted in Stephen Dwoskin, *Film Is: The International Free Cinema*, London 1975, p. 197f. For more see *materialaktion 2'64* and *mama & papa. material-aktion 64-69*, published by Otto Muehl 1964 and 1969.
- 4 Kurt Kren, quoted in Hans Scheugl, "Die Filme. Eine kommentierte Filmographie," in Hans Scheugl (ed.), *Ex Underground. Kurt Kren*, Vienna 1996, p. 166.
- 5 Kurt Kren in an interview with Paul McCarthy (1979), *ND5*, October 1985, p. 19.
- 6 Otto Muehl, "Otto Muehl: Film & Materialaktion (1968)," in Birgit Hein, *Film im Underground*, Frankfurt/Main, 1971, p. 172.
- 7 Kurt Kren in W&B Hein, Christian Michelis, Rolf Wiest (eds.), *X-screen, Materialien über den Underground-Film*, Cologne 1971 (no page mention).
- 8 The number before the slash refers to the placement of the film within Kren's oeuvre, the number after the slash to the year it was made. Kren said the following about the numbering of his films: "I started with numbers only, the chronological number of the film. I started with number one, and then a slant, and the year. But after awhile this became confusing. Then I began to make films of other people's actions, and titles began to show up. Then even the first five films began to be titled" (Kurt Kren. Interview by David Gerstein and David Levi Strauss, *Cinematograph* 1, 1985, p. 14).
- 9 Michael Palm, "Which Way? Drei Pfade durchs Bild-Gebüsch von Kurt Kren," in Hans Scheugl (ed.), *Ex Underground. Kurt Kren*, Vienna 1996, p. 116f.
- 10 "It is to make myself a kind of limit, but I can also go beyond," Kren said about his editing plans (Kurt Kren. Interview by David Gerstein and David Levi Strauss, *Cinematograph* 1, 1985, p. 14).
- 11 Otto Muehl, "Der M-Apparat," in Josef Dvorak, Adolf Frohner, Otto Muehl, Hermann Nitsch (eds.), *Die Blutorgel*, Vienna 1962 (no page mention).
- 12 Otto Muehl, "Die Materialaktion (1964)," in Dieter Schwarz, Veit Loers, (eds.), *Wiener Aktionismus*, vol. 1, Klagenfurt 1988, p. 270.
- 13 See Michael Palm, "Which Way? Drei Pfade durchs Bild-Gebüsch von Kurt Kren," in Hans Scheugl (ed.), *Ex Underground. Kurt Kren*, Vienna 1996, pp. 116.
- 14 Otto Muehl, "Die Materialaktion (1964)", in Dieter Schwarz, Veit Loers, (eds.), *Wiener Aktionismus*, vol. 1, Klagenfurt 1988, p. 270.
- 15 Lynda Nead, "Seductive Canvases: Visual Mythologies of the Artist and Artistic Creativity," *Oxford Art Journal* 18.2.1995, p. 59.
- 16 Herbert Marcuse, quoted in Peter Gorsen, *Sexualästhetik, Zur bürgerlichen Rezeption von Obszönität und Pornographie*, Hamburg 1972, p. 73.
- 17 Kurt Kren an interview with Hilde Schmölzer in Hilde Schmölzer, *Das böse Wien. Gespräche mit österreichischen Künstlern*, Munich 1973, p. 108.
- 18 Kurt Kren in an interview with Peter Tscherkassky, *Blimp*, Autumn 1988, p. 6.
- 19 Kren's approach to bodies and things were modelled on the writings of Dziga Vertov: "I approach things and move away from them," Vertov wrote in 1923, "I crawl under them, I climb on to them ... I thrown myself on my back ... I fall and climb together with falling and rising bodies." (Dziga Vertov, "Kinoki-Umsturz," 1923, in Franz-Josef Albersmeier, (ed.), *Texte zur Theorie des Films*, Stuttgart 1990, 34). Vertov also translated his theory into pictures. In the film *Der Mann mit der Kamera* (1929) we see the cameraman filming while crawling, climbing or lying on the street—always close to the action.
- 20 Isebill Barta, Zita Breu, Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat, Ulrike Jenni, Irene Nierhaus, Judith Schöbel (ed.), *Frauen Bilder Männer Mythen*, Berlin 1997, p. 247.
- 21 Ferdinand Schmatz, "Wiener Aktionismus und Wirklichkeit," in *Sinn & Sinne, Wiener Gruppe, Wiener Aktionsmus und andere Wegbereiter*, Vienna 1992, p. 15f.
- 22 Otto Muehl, "Otto Muehl: Film & Materialaktion (1968)," in Birgit Hein, *Film im Underground*, Frankfurt/Main, 1971, p. 172.
- 23 Otto Muehl, *Mama und Papa. Texte und Fotodokumentation*, Frankfurt/Main 1969.
- 24 Hans Scheugl, Ernst Schmidt Jr., *Eine Subgeschichte des Films. Lexikon des Avantgarde-, Experimental- und Undergroundfilms*, Frankfurt/Main 1974, p. 624.
- 25 Hans Scheugl, *Erweitertes Kino. Die Wiener Filme der 60er Jahre*, Vienna 2002, p. 139.
- 26 Birgit Hein, *Film im Underground*, Frankfurt/Main 1971, p. 172. Amos Vogel also gave a positive assessment of Muehl's films in 1974: "The Austrian avant-garde artist Otto Muehl is probably the filmmaker who causes the most offence. But it is a grave error to dismiss Muehl's works as mere pornography..." (Amos Vogel, *Film als subversive Kunst. Kino wider die Tabus—von Eisenstein bis Kubrick*, Alexander Horwath (ed.), St. Andrä-Wördern 1997, p. 250).
- 27 In the mid-1960s, cinemas had begun showing softcore films, films in which the pubic hair of the actors can be seen, but the sexual act is still only simulated. From 1969, the hardcore debate flared up, spilling over from the USA to Europe.
- 28 And talking about 12/66 *Cosinus Alpha*, his longest film, Kren said: "We wanted to sell it like a porno film, but it didn't work. There was always problems with money." (Kurt Kren. Interview by David Gerstein and David Levi Strauss, *Cinematograph* 1, 1985, p. 14). Because Muehl and he wanted to sell the film as porn, he said, he hadn't cut

- out as much as usual, and so the film was "a few seconds too long" (Kren in Hans Scheugl, "Die Filme. Kommentierte Filmographie," in Hans Scheugl (ed.), *Ex Underground*, Kurt Kren, Vienna 1996, p. 172).
- 29 Otto Muehl, "Warum ich aufgehört habe", *Neues Forum*, Issue 228 (Special issue: Actionism), January 1973, p. 43.
- 30 Andy Warhol, quoted in Russell Ferguson (ed.), *Hall of Mirrors, Art and Film Since 1945*, exhibition catalog, New York 1996, p. 179.
- 31 Otto Muehl, *Cinema Direct Art*, program with screenings of *Grimuid* and *Wehrtüchtigung* on 20 October 1967 in the Artcenter in Hohenstauffengasse in Vienna (two copied A-4 pages).
- 32 The basic structures in the commune, which was dissolved in 1990, were free sexuality, collective property, joint education of children and the promotion of artistic creativity. The reality may have been rather different. Robert Fleck, *Die Geschichte der „Muehl-Kommune“*, Cologne 2002.
- 33 Otto Muehl, quoted in Elisabeth Büttner, Christian Dewald (ed.s), *Anschluss an Morgen, Eine Geschichte des österreichischen Films von 1945 bis zur Gegenwart*, Klagenfurt 1997, p. 273.
- 34 Otto Muehl, „Otto Muehl: Film & Materialaktion“ (1968), in Birgit Hein, *Film im Underground*, Frankfurt/Main 1971, p. 171f.
- 35 Sigrid Schade, "Der Mythos des ganzen Körpers," in Isebill Barta, Zita Breu, Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat, Ulrike Jenni, Irene Nierhaus, Judith Schöbel (eds.), *Frauen Bilder Männer Mythen*, Berlin 1997, p. 247.

#### Theater

2004 · POOR THEATER  
2002 · TO YOU, THE BIRDIE! (Phèdre)  
1999/2005 · HOUSE/LIGHTS  
1995 · THE HAIRY APE

#### THE ROAD TO IMMORTALITY

1987 · FRANK DELL'S THE TEMPTATION OF ST. ANTHONY  
1984 · L.S.D. (...JUST THE HIGH POINTS...)  
1981 · ROUTE 1 & 9

2004 · ERASE X (a dance piece with Joji Inc.)  
1998 · DANCES WITH T.V. AND MIC (with Vincent Dunoyer)  
1981 & 1983 · HULA & FOR THE GOOD TIMES (two dance pieces)

1985 & 1988 · MISS UNIVERSAL HAPPINESS & SYMPHONY OF RATS  
(written for the company and directed by Richard Foreman)

#### Radio

2002 · »THE PEGGY CARSTAIRS REPORT«  
2000 · »RACINE'S PHÈDRE«  
1998 · »THE WOOSTER GROUP'S THE EMPEROR JONES BY EUGENE O'NEILL«  
(each radio piece was a BBC Radio 3 Broadcast of a Festival Radio Production)

#### Film & Video

2003 · »HOUSE/LIGHTS DVD AND DOCUMENTARY«  
2000 · »THE EMPEROR JONES«  
    »WRONG GUYS« - in progress  
1994 · »RHYME 'EM TO DEATH«  
1992 · »WHITE HOMELAND COMMANDO«  
1986 · »FLAUBERT DREAMS OF TRAVEL BUT THE ILLNESS OF HIS MOTHER PREVENTS IT«

1994 · FISH STORY  
1993 · THE EMPEROR JONES  
1991/2003 · BRACE UP!  
1984/1988/2000 · NORTH ATLANTIC

#### THREE PLACES IN RHODE ISLAND

1979 · POINT JUDITH (AN EPILOG.)  
1978 · NAVATT SCHOOL  
1977 · RUMSTICK ROAD  
1975 · SAKONNET POINT

# Poor Theater

A Series of Simulacra

## manifesto



# THE WOOSTER GROUP

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# POOR THEATER

## Part 1

**Jerzy Grotowski:** The company investigates the Polish Laboratory Theater

- » Opole/New York (Source: the Polish documentary film "A Postcard from Opole")  
Elizabeth...Sheena See; the rest of The Company as themselves
- » The Tour Guide (Source: a minidisc recording of the Group's visit to Wroclaw in 2003)  
Tour Guide...Kate Valk; Kate...Joby Emmons; Sheena...Ari Fliakos; Elizabeth...Sheena See; Scott...Scott Shepherd
- » The Translator (Source: a video of the Group watching Akropolis on video)  
Translator...Ari Fliakos; Elizabeth...Sheena See; Scott...Scott Shepherd; Sam...Joby Emmons; Kate...Kate Valk
- » The Rehearsal (Source: the film of Grotowski's "Akropolis", made for British T.V.)  
Elizabeth...Sheena See; the rest of The Company as themselves

## Coda

**Max Ernst:** A company member represents herself as the artist...

- (Source: "Beyond Painting" by Max Ernst, "Max Ernst", a documentary film)  
Elizabeth...Sheena See; the rest of The Company as themselves

## » Intermission «

## Part 2

**William Forsythe:** The company pretends to be Ballett Frankfurt

- » Frankfurt/New York (Source: "Just Dancing Around", Mike Figgis' film of Ballett Frankfurt)
- » Improvised lecture demonstration  
(Sources: various lectures by William Forsythe and an interview with Forsythe by Roslyn Sulcas)  
Billy...Scott Shepherd; The Interviewer...Sheena See

## PROGRAM NOTES

**Simulacrum** *Oxford English Dictionary:* 1. A material image, made as a representation of some deity, person or thing. 2. Something having merely the form or appearance of a certain thing. 2b. A mere image, a specious imitation or likeness of something. *Websters New 20th Century Unabridged:* 1. An image. 2. A mere pretense or semblance; vague representation; counterfeit; travesty; sham.

### Notes for Part One:

**Jerzy Grotowski** Theater artist, born in 1933 in Rzeszow, Poland. Grotowski founded The Theater of 13 Rows in Opole, Poland in 1959, then moved the company to Wroclaw in 1965 to become the Polish Laboratory Theater. Works he created with his company include *Akropolis*, *The Constant Prince*, and *Apocalypse Cum Figuris*, which all appeared in New York in the late 1960s. In 1984, the Polish Laboratory Theater was disbanded after Grotowski left Poland to pursue theater research. He died in 1999 in Pontedera, Italy.

**Stanislaw Wyspianski** Wrote *Akropolis* in 1904 as part of a trilogy. The action of Wyspianski's *Akropolis* takes place in Cracow Cathedral on the night of the Resurrection. The statues and the characters in the Cathedral tapestries come to life and relive scenes from the Old Testament and antiquity. For the Polish Laboratory Theater's *Akropolis*, Grotowski used Wyspianski's text but set the piece in a concentration camp.

"Authors, the great authors of the past, were very important to me, even if I struggled with them. I stood face to face with Slowacki or Calderon, and it was like Jacob's fight with the Angel: 'Tell me your secret, for us living today.' But if I understand your secret, Calderon, I am going to understand my own. I don't speak with you as with an author whose work I will stage, but I speak with you as with my great-grandfather. That means I am in the process of speaking with my ancestors. And, of course, I am not in agreement with my ancestors. But at the same time, I can't deny them. They are my base; they are my source material. It's a personal affair between them and me."

--Jerzy Grotowski

**Max Ernst** Artist, born in Brühl, Germany; studied philosophy at Bonn. A major figure in the early 20th Century art movements of Dada and Surrealism, he worked in France and then in the USA until he died in 1976. Ernst experimented with collage, photomontage, and surreal images, and in 1925, executed his first frottages (rubbing color or graphite on paper laid over a textured surface.) A series of the frottages was published in his book *Histoire Naturelle* in 1926.

"A raining day in a seaside inn found me gazing at the floorboards of my room. My gaze became excited - then obsessed by the sight of the boards. There were a thousand rubbings set deep into the grooves. I decided then to investigate the meaning of this obsession and to help my meditative and hallucinatory faculties, I made a series of drawings by placing on the boards sheets of paper which I rubbed with black lead. I gazed at the drawings and surprisingly, the hallucinatory succession of contradictory images was before my eyes, superimposing themselves one upon the other."

--Max Ernst

#### *Notes for Part Two:*

**William Forsythe** Choreographer, born in 1949 in New York. In 1973, Forsythe joined Germany's Stuttgarter Ballett as a dancer and later began choreographing works for the company. In 1984, Forsythe created Ballett Frankfurt, developing works with an international company of dancers over the next twenty years. Works include *The Loss of Small Detail*, *In the Middle Somewhat Elevated*, and *Eidos:Telos*. The city of Frankfurt disbanded the company permanently at midnight on August 31st, 2004. After the closure of Ballett Frankfurt, Forsythe established his own private company.

"I guess I've been more of a, an identifier, yhh? ...a tagger, than a creator. I would say that my technique is a composite of admiration. (laugh) You know? Of just looking at people and going 'that's extraordinary...' Even, [this person] who you...I know you studied with...umm...is a genius. And I tried to fit...yhh? I tried to analyze what made him a genius. Yhh? And so, uh, I would say 'okay, good' and then after a while I'd begin to find it, it had in...uh umm...what do you call it?...inhabited my body. And, just became part of me. I guess we all get infected by each other to a certain degree."

--William Forsythe (from a transcription)

### Poor Theater, A Series of Simulacra Interview Sam Gold and Barbara Clausen

Since 1975, The Wooster Group has been one of the leading experimental theaters in the United States. Under the direction of Elizabeth LeCompte, the ensemble has produced more than fifteen theater and media pieces, where new forms and techniques of theatrical expression play a pivotal role in bringing technologically sophisticated and evocative uses of sound, film and video into the realm of contemporary theater. Their pieces are constructed as assemblages of juxtaposed elements: radical staging of both modern and classic texts, found materials, films and videos, dance and movement, multi-track scoring, and an architectonic approach to theater design. This interview was conducted in New York, in the midst of rehearsals for Sam Gold's upcoming production of *Edward II* at the Juilliard School Drama Theater in New York. Gold is an Associate Artist at The Wooster Group in New York, where he works as dramaturg and assistant director for *Poor Theater* and the company's 2006 production of *Hamlet*.

Barbara Clausen (BC): What were the initial thoughts behind making *Poor Theater*?

Sam Gold (SG): Well, one of the instincts behind the making of *Poor Theater* was to go back to the moment in the mid 1970s when Liz LeCompte broke away from Richard Schechner and the Performing Group,

and started making different work. In a certain way The Wooster Group was born in a reaction against Jerzy Grotowski's practice which influenced Schechner greatly at the time. *Poor Theater* was about investigating this giant of the avant-garde theater world, this looming ghost father figure. The William Forsythe piece is about the end of something. It came about when we were sitting in a rehearsal and someone came down with the newspaper and read that Forsythe's company the *Ballet Frankfurt* had disbanded. Forsythe was an extremely well-funded post-modern ballet, the very definition of postmodern performance. All of a sudden Forsythe's company is closed down and everyone is asking themselves if Postmodernism is over. Because they didn't just say they are taking his funding away but were interested in going back to a more traditional ballet. So where are we? There is something about this piece which is displaying this history from the beginning to the end.

BC: So does *Poor Theater* deal with The Wooster Group's own positioning in performance history as a kind of continuous process?

SG: *Poor Theater* is a meditation on The Wooster Group's journey from where they came from and how they can make work now. That was really the question that gave birth to the idea of *Poor Theater*. It's a sort of post 9/11 question. Here we are, a company, a collective of artists living in downtown Manhattan, right near the World Trade Center wondering how we can go on and what next. This led to thinking about how we got started in the first place. So there is this company that was born in the late 1970s out of having their NEA funding get cut, for having made work that really challenged the kind of bourgeois art-making system in the States. Two decades later, the opposite: the last piece before *Poor Theater*, *To You Birdie (Phèdre)* (2002), had two movie stars in it and got reviewed in *Entertainment Weekly* with a B+. The Wooster Group as an artistic institution has on some level been completely commodified. Willem Dafoe and Steve Buscemi and others who started at The Wooster Group are now in mainstream Hollywood movies like *Spiderman*. Many people in this country have only heard of The Wooster Group because of Dafoe's participation. In some ways, the institution has become part of the exact system it acted against. They got enveloped into the system. I guess it's part of a dialectic.

BC: When I saw *Poor Theater* in the Spring of 2004, there was a segment that I felt bound the present and the past together. You would see black and white footage of Wooster Street going down towards Canal. It was snowing and that just enhanced and triggered this feeling of nostalgia, for something one was never part of. I first thought it was old material before I realized I was tricked by the quality of the medium.

SG: You mean the snow video, where they go off to Canal Street. That footage was shot in connection to Part I on Grotowski. At the end of the 1968 BBC footage of Grotowski's *Akropolis*, which we used at the end of Part I, the audience is left with the performers inside a wooden box, not knowing that the performance is over. What you see on documentation footage is that someone gets up and says: "Ladies and gentlemen the performance is over." Then you watch everyone leave the theater. The idea was to do our own simulacra of this particular part of the video. We wanted the audience to have the experience of leaving the theater and going out on to the street visually. In our case it happens to be Canal Street, in downtown Manhattan and there is a lot of our own history connected to this place. It's also about this other part of the story which is not mentioned. *Dionysus in 69* by Schechner was one of the first pieces that made the *Performing Garage* and that space famous in 1969. It was a piece in which Grotowski's methodologies were used. At the end of the piece the performers opened the garage door and went outside and paraded down the street. It was also this kind of reference to the beginning of the use of that garage in Soho and the journey that started from that moment onwards. Now it's cafes, shops, and art galleries. It didn't look like this when Schechner walked out there. And you also don't see the Twin Towers anymore.

BC: What remains is still feeding on the rawness that it once eliminated.

SG: Yes, it's a relic, a ghost. You know we keep using the words reenact, simulacra, recreate but I think there is another term that fits quite well and seems important, which is resurrect. That goes back to some kind of religious sense.



The Wooster Group, *Poor Theater*, 2004  
(left to right) Ari Fliakos, Kate Valk, Scott Shepherd, Jennifer Tipton, Sheena See, Joby Emmons  
Photo: © Paula Court

BC: Suggesting the term “resurrect” is interesting, because it means giving life back to something that has ceased to exist. So whose corpse are we talking about?

SG: The corpse of 1960’s performance, or perhaps just the footprint of it. We spoke a lot about the idea of the footprint, the marking of lost space itself when we were working on this piece. There was something in the newspaper every day. There were discussions about the new World Trade Center and how they are going to deal with the footprint of those buildings, the ghost of those spaces. Which is also on the cover of the program for *Poor Theater*. Forsythe is very influenced by Daniel Libeskind and he was talking so much about the footprint of these buildings. In that sense there is a kind of resurrection of that ghost. How can we culturally deal with the footprint of the ghost of that space?

BC: What was specific about *Poor Theater* was its linear structure.

SG: It was a move on LeCompte’s part to not work the way she had been working. When we started approaching the material, there was no interest in interlacing all the material, making a beautiful environment and doing what people expect The Wooster Group to do well. The desire was to create something that felt like a great departure from the piece before, *To You Birdie! (Phèdre)* (2002), which was large scale, complicated, technically layered, and very successful. It was a point where LeCompte was

starting to really look back over her life as an artist and that made her want to go all the way back to the beginning. What were things like when I became a theater director? Why did I do theater opposed to painting? It was always about making the opposite, “poor” Theater.

BC: As in producing “poor” quality on purpose?

SG: “Poor” in every way you can think of. The piece only had four actors, no technical virtuosity, it was going to be junky and simple. To some extent this is part of the instinct that structures the piece in two parts. The program for the show is very explicit about what is happening. We want the viewer to know exactly what is happening, as opposed to other work where there isn’t the need for that. It was always understood and important that we reveal all the sources. There is an interest in knowing what the primary document is that we are re-constructing. You are always kind of acknowledging, noticing, and dealing with the fact that we are reconstructing, simulating, faking all those things, and pointing them out. There was a distinct interest in naming the sources.

BC: Finding a way of speaking a language that isn’t your own?

SG: Like wearing a mask. We had days when we would train all the Grotowski’s exercises like the “plastiques” and the “corporals.” And all the actors hated doing that. It was not that The Wooster Group had a desire to go back to the working methods of Grotowski. Both Grotowski and Forsythe developed codified working methods for performers. Which I think is one of the exciting reasons for The Wooster Group to approach specifically these two people together. So, both methodologies are about enabling the performer. For The Wooster Group to approach both of these figures is to rub up against those methodologies and for the performers it is about wearing those ways of working as a kind of mask.

BC: How could you reach the expectations of re-enacting a piece like *Akropolis* from 1965?

SG: There is this kind of image in a Grotowskiists’ mind of a diletante version of *Akropolis*. Now *Akropolis* is about taking this Polish nation-



The Wooster Group, *Poor Theater*, 2004  
(left to right) Scott Shepherd, Ari Fliakos, Kate Valk  
Photo: © Paula Court

alistic play about the history of Poland and setting it in Auschwitz. There is a lot at stake in terms of Polish history, in terms of the Holocaust, and in terms of things that have a lot of weight and meaning in peoples' lives and personal cultural histories. You are also asking what you are doing with an experience that was so important in terms of content. The Wooster Group, I think, does not go about things particularly from the side of content and that reveals itself. When LeCompte, who actually saw the original New York performance of *Akropolis* in the late 1960s, spoke about the desire to hear and see this piece in the Performing Garage again, never did the issue of Auschwitz enter the conversation. That might be a red flag for someone who has such a close connection with the material and the content of the piece. So these are two very major issues, the dilettantism of re-enacting Grotowski and meeting the expectations and memory of those who saw *Akropolis* at the time, for whom it surely was an extreme, emotionally complicated experience. The other thing is that Grotowski spawned a million companies working with his methodology. When he came to New York he did these workshops and master classes. There were all these people, teachers, to disseminate the work of Grotowski. I think that Grotowski spoke about it with a lot of disdain. He hated the idea that people were taking his work and doing it badly. He was so against this dilettantism that he spawned.

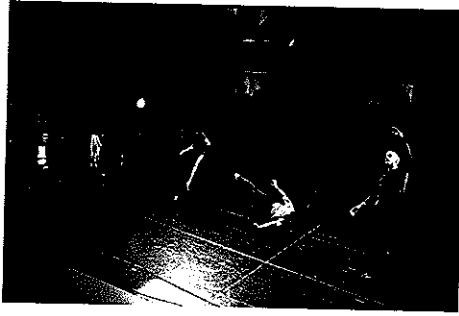
BC: When you re-enact material from a historically specific time—how far can you de-contextualize it, and then re-contextualize it within your own experience?

SG: When I first got to The Wooster Group rehearsing *Akropolis* I had quite a difficult time with these issues. At the end of Grotowski's *Akropolis* there is a little wood box, called a "mansion" with a hole in the top and the entire cast of the piece is singing a song. It's some ritual, ceremonial, religious song and the main character in the song is King David the Harpist and he is leading the people to the Promised Land. What they do while they sing the song is, they all get into the box, which represents the crematorium. And they all die in the crematorium in Grotowski's *Akropolis*. The audience is left sitting in the theater knowing that all the performers are in this box and that no one is getting out. On the documentary footage someone comes out and announces the end. Everyone has to get up and leave, the actors are not coming out again for a curtain call because they are in the crematorium. During rehearsals, it was a creative and fun environment and everyone was messing around, trying to figure out what we were going to do. We wound up adding the Marx Brothers and John Wayne Western music to the scene. Everyone ends up shooting each other with guns and saying lines from *Rio Grande* while they all jump into the "mansion". We were figuring out the piece, treating it lightly, and that was important to the process. On the other hand, I was always reflecting back on the content of what we were referencing, the Holocaust, which was never really addressed at the time. The content is not the place in which the piece comes out. I think that is where I, as a young artist, learned a ton about working from the company.

BC: Was it the controversy that got you interested in working with The Wooster Group?

SG: Yes, they were approaching these taboos, wrestling with them, complicating them, exposing things that just blew me away. In a certain way, wearing black-face in *Route 1 & 9* (1981) twenty years before, has as much to do with wearing a mask the same way as a Grotowski mask. It's a theatrical form, it's a style of performance that interests the Wooster Group in a formal way. Of course there is nothing naïve about the company in terms of their approach to content.

BC: So content is side-tracked rather than confronted in a straightforward way?



The Wooster Group, *Poor Theater*, 2004  
(left to right) Sheena See, Kate Valk, Ari Fliakos, Scott Shepherd  
Photo: © Paula Court

SG: The company is really interested in moving from and working towards formal concerns that have all of these content problems attached to them. That's why the company almost always starts from a classic text. You can really work through structure and form and let all of that content attach itself and deal with it kind of secondarily as you develop the piece. Because of that you have the luxury to not go straight after your primary interest, but to just see where it takes you. If you have enough time, it will take you where you are supposed to go.

BC: This reminds me of the working method Babette Mangolte mentioned during the symposium. She was talking about emotionally taping into a form of objectivity while shooting photographs of performances. Which of course is a paradox. The point is, she is technically so brilliant that she can do that.

SG: If you set up a structure that you can become very versed in then you can set up a situation where you don't need to consciously think about where you are going.

BC: All very self-reflective methodologies.

SG: Being that clear about structure, takes a certain degree of self-reflexivity as its outset. Like for example, the Max Ernst segment came very late in the process. We had been performing the piece for six months the

year before we ever even got to the Ernst. For me the Ernst and his technique of "frottage" is a solid metaphor for the way in which we were approaching Forsythe and Grotowski. Ernst said: "I'm looking at this blank canvas and I don't know how to go on." Well where are you going to start? So he starts by taking a piece of paper and putting it on the floorboards of his hotel and rubbing black led onto it and then just looking at it to see what he has got. So that instinct to rub up against what is already there comes from being frozen, stuck. He calls it the "virginity complex." The coda on Ernst is the link between working with Grotowski and with Forsythe.

BC: That says a lot about the relationship between mediality and performativity. Using the performing body as if it were a medium of transmission. There is an image where Sheena See is semi-transparent. She looks like she is rubbed onto the parquet. So how does The Wooster Group "rub" up against these mediations of methodologies?

SG: It's about taking on the status of a medium. Instead of studying the Grotowski and Forsythe method and training it in a way they would have you do it, The Wooster Group will feed video onto video and then onto monitors while feeding the sound on to the ears. Channeling the methodology of Grotowski and Forsyth through technology. The performers become like a technological medium themselves, through which the corporal, performative methodologies are translated into space.

BC: It's about re-routing gesture?

SG: Similar to the way Grotowski was really interested in channeling deep inner spiritual life—that is something I have always been really interested in about the piece. That was his kind of goal with the performer. We can approach archetypes, we can find this spiritual center by singing our ancestral songs, by breathing in this particular way, by moving in this way. It is about channeling something, that is not who you are. The performers of The Wooster Group put in their in-ear devices and start hearing these particular Grotowski performers—Zygmunt Molik, Ryszard Cieślak, Rena Mirecka, and Zbigniew Cynkutis—by doing so they start channeling the performers through technology. Somehow in the same way Grotowski tried

to channel these archetypes through these particular actors back in 1963. There is this peculiar way through technology which is completely opposite to what Grotowski wanted.

BC: You accomplish this by working with the documentation of performances. Like learning Forsythe's dance method from recordings on a CD. One can almost see the danger of Kate Valk and Ari Fliakos getting too good at the end.

SG: Exactly. Forsythe is interested in taking choreography out of the hands of the choreographers and into the hands of the performers. There are parallels in both methods. The interest was that you could buy the CD-Rom and learn the modalities of improvisation that Forsythe created. And once you would have those modalities you would have a vocabulary for improvising dance. It's obviously funny and bad and there is a kind of diletantism to it, which is exciting and I loved watching the improvisation early on in Part II of *Poor Theater*. It was a total mess because they were really just marking it. It turns out, after nine months they became really good at it. That's the great irony about it. Which means you can actually train yourself in Forsythe modalities by watching his CD-Rom for a long time. Valk and Fliakos got so adept at the modalities that the piece became a different piece of its own.

BC: That would be the opposite of channeling, just clinging on to the technology.

SG: One of the most important factors was to work with the distance between the primary source and the re-enactment. There was an interest to keep the failure and tension of that gap. It was never about doing *Akropolis* exactly how they did it, because it's impossible. What was interesting to us, was having an audience watch us "rehearse" it. To try to fail to wear it and not wear it comfortably. With Forsythe that distance was being dwindled to the point where instead of it being different it started to really match. In the Grotowski part it's very to the point because it's a kind of simulated rehearsal experience so there are all these markings of things that are being spontaneous and messed up. Like people getting caught in mike-cables and getting tangled. And technical difficulties that we have to stop

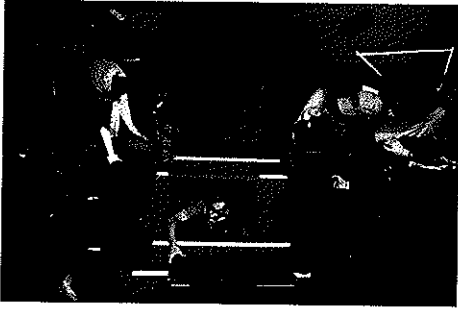


The Wooster Group, *Poor Theater*, 2004  
(from top to bottom) Kate Valk, Sheena See, Scott Shepherd, Ari Fliakos  
Photo: © Paula Court

for a sound problem we have to go back on something, and all those incidents are completely choreographed. There is a kind of simulated spontaneity of the rehearsal. So you get this sense in the first part of the gap being very choreographed into the piece to see us try and not be doing it exactly. To see us go through, fail, and figure it out. It's all those scenes where the performers look at the screen trying to figure out what they are seeing and to then do it. So there is this distance between the audience seeing the real performers on the TV while the actors on stage repeat everything a little late. This delay is built in.

In the second part that delay is very different because it is a lot less explicit. Because they're improvising off of material that is not seen by the audience, whereas in the first part you are seeing it. You are seeing the Grotowski footage on a flat panel, where as in the second part you are not seeing it. The distance was made explicit by the performer's inability to be the same body as the Forsythe dancers were. But as the performers got better, the distance was getting to the point where instead of it looking explicit, it just looked like we were doing a bad job, trying to make a dance improvisation. Other structural elements had to evolve to make that gap explicit again. And it became a lot more about the words, the lecture demonstration of Forsythe.

BC: It was much more about the re-enactment of the author being one of the protagonists. In the lecture portion Scott Shepherd is considered explicitly in the program as Billy.



The Wooster Group, *Poor Theater*, 2004  
(Kate Valk), Photo: © Paula Court

SG: Yes. At an earlier point, he was just the choreographer and it was done more as if The Wooster Group was a dance company which was similar to Forsythe. By the end he became Billy. Everything he says is taken from primary source material from Forsythe. It's all Forsythe's words from interviews, a BAM (Brooklyn Academy of Music) dialog with Roslyn Sulcas—which was recent. We were working on *Poor Theater* and Forsythe came to New York with a piece at BAM and we went to the dialog and recorded it and started using it right afterwards. I think there is something really interesting and difficult in the notion of taking someone's words out of the context that they were said and putting them in the midst of our performance.

BC: Did you mix what Forsythe said at different times in Shepherd's text?

SG: Yes. To a degree it's improvisation. The sound technician is feeding Forsythe's words into Shepherd's ear. Shepherd is channeling Forsythe. He has Forsythe's words in his ear. And he just says exactly what he hears.

BC: So he is a ventriloquist's doll of the sound engineer?

SG: He is a medium for it and becomes Forsythe. He channels Forsythe. It's different every night. The sound engineer is deciding what words go where. There is something so virtuosic about what Shepherd is

doing and it's completely hidden from the audience. He can go from describing one story to suddenly switching to the middle of a very personal story of Forsythe choreographing a piece about his wife. There is a randomness to taking this narrative and totally de-constructing it in the midst of the performance.

BC: So in Part II the distance that is first so enhanced in Part I is suddenly relinquished.

SG: In certain ways Part I and II are the opposites. Part I is designed to look as if it's a kind of present tense rehearsal, but really it's extremely choreographed. Whereas the second half is to look as if it's an extremely designed event but it is totally improvised and haphazard. So there is a flipping of methodology in a way that makes the first part very explicit and the second part very hidden.

BC: *Poor Theater* is able to come to a closed circle with both those issues. Not muting out the tension, but actually posing the question of tension between finding an answer to a current situation and critically rekindling some historicist, nostalgic moment. Why do you think this idea of re-enacting visual documents or acts of the past is so in the air right now?

SG: I certainly don't have enough authority on cultural theory to say why it is in the air right now, that people would be starting this rubbing exercise. At the time it didn't feel like it was in the air. It felt like it was a very risky thing to take this piece that everyone had so many associations and connections with and fail at doing it again. We were setting ourselves up for total failure. I think it comes down to the same question that stood at the beginning of *Poor Theater*. Why make work, or how to make work? When Max Ernst is talking about rubbing, it is really about the question of how to continue working.



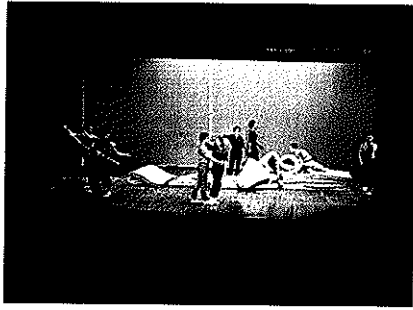
Carrie Lambert-Beatty

### Time Management

In the most frequently reproduced photograph of Yvonne Rainer's 1965 dance *Parts of Some Sextets*, the stage of the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, becomes a bright box thickly framed in black. Dark margins focus attention into the image's central space, where ten people in jeans, sweats, and t-shirts are caught in the midst of a range of activities. A couple downstage center looks almost ballroom-ready, while a woman paces the back of the stage in an ordinary, sidewalk stride. Worker-like, a man wedges both arms under a mattress to shovel it off a pile of its mates. Half-a-dozen more mattresses, splayed flat or folded in loose curls, snake along the midline of the stage.

What this photograph tells us depends on the way we approach it. We can, in the usual manner, read through the image, so that it tells us about Yvonne Rainer's work in dance. It functions perfectly well this way, illustrating how this New-York-based choreographer replaced costumes with street clothes and exchanged spinning, leaping, and emoting for a range of more everyday kinds of physical activity. But this photograph can also tell us a bit about performance documentation itself. For it corresponds closely to a set of commonsensical, but ultimately contradictory demands that are often placed on photographs of live art. These were articulated in a 1974 essay in *The Drama Review* by the theater scholar Ronald Argelander.<sup>1</sup>

For Argelander, there were two priorities for the documentarian. One was to counter the inherently selective procedure of still photography, for, in his words, "the act of selecting ... distorts."<sup>2</sup> The second priority was



Yvonne Rainer, *Parts of Some Sextets*, 1965  
Activities Nos. 5, 3, 22 at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford March 6, 1965  
Photo: Peter Moore, © Estate of Peter Moore/Licensed by VAGA, New York

to record the performance as seen by the audience. While other photographers might take liberties with focal distance or cropping, or even hold special sessions in which they could get onstage to photograph the performance from within, Argelander's ideal photo-documentarian was devoted to "capturing as much of the total visual experience of an actual performance as possible and getting it from the point of view of the audience."<sup>3</sup> The difference is in the object of documentation: not the performance work as a thing in itself, for Argelander, not its meaning or emotion but the experience of viewing it.

To this end, it was crucial for the photographer to forgo the temptation of the close-up—which for Argelander, are very, very bad—and instead to provide information to "establish" the shot. The unusually thick margins around the stage space in the photograph of Rainer's dance serve this function, visually guaranteeing that no selective cropping has occurred, while the especially broad stretch of mostly illegible darkness below the stage signifies the all-important "point of view of the audience." Not surprisingly, the image was taken by Peter Moore, whom Argelander singled out as the exemplary performance photo-documentarian. Consider the slight but noticeable skewing in his photograph, its double mis-registration of rectangular stage space with rectangular film frame. There is a slight rotation in depth, so that we see more of the wings off stage right than stage left. This conveys information about the depth of the stage, but more crucially, it gives us the coordinates of the camera, and therefore of our own point of view. This sense of being situated—of a position in this time, this place—

is amplified by the slight tilt down and right of the whole image frame, an angle which suggests a handheld camera, or one imperfectly locked into its tripod—in any case, one used by a real person, on the fly. Together, these skewed angles lend to the photograph a sense of both spatial and temporal situatedness or contingency that maps onto that of the live event: we are seeing this moment of the performance as it would have appeared to someone sitting toward the back of the house and slightly stage left, that night in Hartford.

Now, everyone knows that we are doing no such thing, at least not in any simple way. Yet Argelander's insistence that the proper documentary image is the one that transparently conveys the audience's experience is not media naïveté. It is evidence of the author's place in a particular intellectual history. For Argelander's statement on performance photography dates from the period of the emergence—and was published in what would be one of the mouthpieces—of the field of Performance Studies, the interdisciplinary endeavor shaped in large part by the imperative to take drama back from literature.<sup>4</sup> Scholars in Performance Studies privileged theater in its performative rather than textual dimension, as temporal event rather than literary object. This explains, on the one hand, Argelander's repeated emphasis on the audience and its experience, for these were precisely the factors that dropped out when theater remained a province of literature. On the other, it explains his advocacy of the impossible goal of a *totalizing* documentation, for an emerging field of scholarship required an archive, necessarily as inclusive as possible.<sup>5</sup>

But placing Argelander's thoughts on performance photography in the history of performance studies does not exhaust the weirdness of an essay whose investment in the *particular* point of view is matched only by its desire for a *total* record. If anything, it amplifies, as not Argelander's alone, the odd imperative to preserve that which is valued precisely because of its ephemerality. In fact, both Argelander's essay and the then-emerging field of performance studies of which it was part can be understood as part of a larger history. Argelander's fantasy of a representation that would open onto the actual, situated moment of live performance while also preserving its totality in an accessible package is, but for its date, a perfect example of the conflicted relationship to contingency that the film scholar Mary Ann Doane finds in the dense history of photography, cinema, and modern philosophy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>6</sup>

There are many accounts, of course, of the period when it seems every intellectual, inventor, engineer, and artist in the industrialized world became obsessed with the problem of time, as industry's demands for standardization and efficiency and capitalism's ever-more-pervasive equation of time and value spread into the domain of lived experience (this being the era of Greenwich Mean Time, the time-motion study, the efficiency expert, and, of course, the cinema).<sup>7</sup> Most also emphasize the intellectual countermeasures that emerged—the valorization of chance, accident, and immediacy of impression, or the obsession with temporal continuity by philosophers like Henri Bergson. But Doane's approach, in her 2002 study *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* is particularly useful for its insistence on thinking modern temporality through the *interdependence* of two dimensions: on the one hand, generalizing, rationalizing structure; on the other, contingency, or that which is particular, undetermined, ephemeral, situated. Doane argues that there is a reason these two temporal complexes always intertwine in texts and practices, from Peirce or Bergson to Edison and Marey. Where human activity is increasingly governed by standardized time, "chance and the contingent are given the crucial *ideological* role of representing an outside, of suggesting that time is still allied with the free and indeterminable."<sup>8</sup> Experiences and representations of the contingent make the constraints of standardization tolerable. But the flip side of this effect is that, constituted as the opposite of rationalization, contingency will always threaten to dissolve experience into the meaningless "riot of details" Baudelaire feared would be let loose in an unmoored modernity.<sup>9</sup> It will necessarily require containing.

The persistence of this problematic into the later twentieth century is hinted at by the Moore photograph of *Parts*. You see this as soon as you look from the dancing bodies to the mattresses strewn among them. The posture of the man on the pile—it happens to be the artist Robert Rauschenberg—and the way the bend in the mattress he shovels is repeated by others in the array lets us reconstruct a series of actions. Each mattress has been "peeled" off the stack and left to fall as it may; each has then been pushed and displaced by the mattress that had been beneath it, as it, in turn, was peeled. The mattresses are collectively legible as the record of a specifically serial action, not unlike the waves of hardened lead that Richard Serra would pull along the floor some four years later in  *Casting* (1969), whose most famous photographs are also by Peter Moore. In  *Casting*, which

involved repeatedly flinging molten metal and then dragging out the resulting form, the further one looks from the seam of wall and floor, the older is the trace. Time is similarly spatialized in Moore's image. The further one looks from the man doing the peeling, the further back one sees in time. While as a whole the instantaneous photograph chops into the performance's timeline, the mattress pile slices along it.

Another way to put this is to say that Rainer has made a dance that lets the still image do more than it is supposed to. This photograph is a document not only of a single moment of a dance, and not only also of a swath of that dance's temporal extension, but in addition, of the quality of that dance that I want to draw out: its historically-specific dialectic between two conflicting but interconnected attitudes toward time. Doane's central proposition about the turn of the twentieth century is that its representational technologies, especially cinema, performed a crucial cultural role by representing, *but thus also managing and containing* the contingent.<sup>10</sup> My claim is that art like Rainer's did for the 1960s what photography and film did for the period of their emergence. It produced a socially-resonant, deeply dialectical management of time. And my implication—though it cannot be much more than that—is that all of us, in our deployment of past performance and its documents, are similarly engaged.<sup>11</sup>

The dance *Parts of Some Sextets* was built of thirty-one distinct activities—bits of what the choreographer referred to as "movement material." Each had a name, and these suggest the work's range: from "Human Fly" to "Solo beginning with shifting of weight" to "Crawl thru below top mattress." The actions designated by some of the names have been lost to history, but it is clear that there were at least four types: relatively elaborate, choreographed phrases that Rainer called "the 'dancey' stuff"; passages of walking and running; static formations, as when the dancers all sat together on top of the mattress pile; and tasks, usually to do with manipulations of the mattresses, like the one called "Peel one at a time" that Rauschenberg is performing here. The activities sometimes came singly, but more often a number were performed at once, and actions recurred over the forty-odd minutes of the dance. An audience member recalls the effect as a deft coordination of activity, describing it as orchestrated, contrapuntal, complex.<sup>12</sup>

*Parts of Some Sextets* is also often remembered as especially playful. Many of the activities were distinctly athletic, and the dance was the occasion for some of the photographs that best convey the joyful liveliness of

postmodern dance. But in this photograph—which Rainer herself favors—nobody is at a physical extreme. Arms, if extended, are not quite stretched, legs are only narrowly scissored open. Bodily positions are more or less closed, and postures are erect, stable, pedestrian. In this, Moore's photograph offers a visual equivalent for Rainer's particular breakthrough in *Parts of Some Sextets*: the development of a style of moving oriented toward ordinary behavior. Rainer described it this way: "no rhythm, no emphasis, no tension, no relaxation. You just do it, with the coordination of a pro and the non-definition of an amateur."<sup>13</sup>

Although two years earlier she had made a dance that consisted entirely of jogging, and although activities as quotidian as eating a pear or brushing one's hair had been part of the repertoire of Rainer and her Duchamp- and John-Cage-inspired peers since at least 1962, the task-like quality of movement showcased in *Parts of Some Sextets* marks a turn in Rainer's work. In an essay written shortly after its debut, Rainer explained that she felt she had exhausted one tendency in her work, "the 'imitations-from-life' kind of eccentric movement that someone once described as 'goofy glamour,'" and she seems exhausted herself as she reports no longer being able to "call on the energy and hard-attack impulses that had characterized my work previously."<sup>14</sup> This was not just a personal crisis, but an art-historical shift, as the youthful abandon, the anything-goes and why-not attitudes that had given New York-based avant-garde art its energy since at least the late 1950s came to seem unsatisfactory. Certain other tendencies, while present all along, were now emergent—a linked set of concerns that included modular or serial structure and neutral or impersonal presentation. The quotidian quality of performance Rainer extracted from the Judson soup was part of this transition. It received new prominence and importance in *Parts of Some Sextets* because Rainer here renounced a very different type of dance activity for which her early work had become known: the quirky, oddball, silly, or grotesque material inspired, as she put it, by the loony bin and the New York City subways.<sup>15</sup> In the absence of screaming fits and spastic groping, a certain worklikeness came into focus.

For this quality, the mattresses were crucial. During an earlier improvisation Rainer had been intrigued by the experience of carrying a mattress around the performance space. "Something ludicrous and satisfying about lugging that bulky object around, removing it from the scene and re-introducing it. No stylization needed. It seemed to be so self-contained

an act as to require no artistic tampering or justification."<sup>16</sup> The mattress allowed her to isolate the operation that she would center on in *Parts of Some Sextets*, and that the critic Michael Kirby (who had attended a performance of *Parts* in 1965) would identify as the defining tactic for movement performance in the 1960s: "'danciness' has been replaced by the muscular dynamics of everyday life."<sup>17</sup>

It is easy to understand ordinary movement performance in its found-object mode: actions like running, eating, or talking displaced onto the dance stage. It is harder to characterize task-like performance—a mode of behavior, a type of execution, that has the *quality* of these everyday actions even if it is invented, unusual, or dance-like. One way people have done so since the 1960s is to emphasize this movement's way of using time. A year after the breakthrough of *Parts*, Rainer would describe the task-like movement quality of her new dance *Trio A* as "a control that seems geared to the actual time it takes the actual weight of the body to go through the prescribed motions, rather than an adherence to an imposed ordering of time." The critic Annette Michelson would echo the principle in 1969, explaining that recent avant-garde dance had been "predicated on the distinction between a time one might call virtual as against a time that is operational, the time of experience, of our actions in the world." In the mid-1960s, Rainer and her peers had "install[ed] within the dance situation a real or operational time," Michelson explained, "redefining it as a situation within which an action *may take the time it takes to perform that action*."<sup>18</sup>

Art historians are used to this concept of experiential time in discussions of the 1960s, in part because Rosalind Krauss applied Michelson's notion so clearly in her writing on the theatricality—the time-based situatedness—of 1960s sculpture. Specifically referencing Rainer's performance work as a source, and reproducing an image of *Parts of Some Sextets* as a marker of the trend, Krauss argued in *Passages in Modern Sculpture* that the most important sculpture of the 1960s was, like theater, constituted and experienced in duration—in the time it takes to see it. This was as opposed to the art defended by the modernist critic Michael Fried, who was committed to work that "one experiences ... as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything..."<sup>19</sup> Through the debates over sculptural theatricality, real or operational time in 1960s art has been understood by means of a contrast with the high-modernist abstraction of pure presentness.<sup>20</sup>

But New York artists and critics were not the only intellectuals in the industrialized world becoming interested in what Michelson dubbed operational time in the 1960s—and modernist timelessness was not the only temporality against which operational time was being defined. The temporality of task-like performance as it emerged in the 1960s is remarkably similar to a way of using and experiencing time that ethnographers, historians, and social critics, as well as development experts and social engineers, were just then identifying as the norm in societies organized by non-industrial modes of production.<sup>21</sup> Consider the following examples: an interval of time called “a rice cooking”; an egg boiled for as long as it takes to say a Hail Mary; or (my personal favorite) a period of time designated by the phrase a “pissing while.” They could not come from more varied contexts—twentieth-century Madagascar, colonial Chile, and early modern England, respectively—but when held up against capitalist norms, they seem to share something. Instead of measured time being used to structure tasks, activities or tasks are being used to measure time. All are examples given in a now classic 1967 paper by the British cultural historian E. P. Thompson, who was concerned to trace the shifts in time-sense effected by the demands and incentives of industrial capitalism, whether in eighteenth-century England or 1960s Mexico, using the sociologist Wilbert Moore’s phrase “task-orientation” to describe the temporal system typical in non-industrial societies.<sup>22</sup>

In presenting activities that “took the time it takes” to perform them, Rainer and her peers were, like the historian, isolating, abstracting, and presenting to spectators a task-oriented temporality. But, like Thompson’s study, *Parts of Some Sextets* suggests that in the 1960s this task-oriented time could only be understood against the ground of a precisely opposite temporal model. For this dance was built on a deep tension between the task-oriented temporality of its movement and the time structure of the performance as a whole.

Rainer created the dance using a long chart whose vertical axis represented the thirty-one choices of movement material, and whose eighty-four horizontal units corresponded to consecutive, thirty-second intervals of time. She scattered points more or less randomly on the chart. Each mark was at the crossing of a physical activity and a time unit, and in this way determined when along the timeline of the dance each activity would be performed. Since more than one mark might be made in the same

column, multiple actions could be performed simultaneously; since marks might be made in several boxes in the same row, the same activity could be repeated many times. Rainer assigned performers’ initials to each point, did some fine-tuning in terms of the logistics of who could be where at what time, and *Parts of Sextets* was made. It was, essentially, a timetable dance.

In 1964, Marshall McLuhan described the temporality of modernity as time understood in “visual, abstract, and uniform units”; time was subdivided in the machine age to “impose uniform succession on the time sense.” Two years later, Guy Debord explained that in capitalism, “the time of production, time as commodity, is an infinite accumulation of equivalent intervals.”<sup>23</sup> But what was really bothering commentators on industrial time in the mid-1960s wasn’t the application of such structure to production, but to the time that ought to be considered nonproductive or free. For this reason, the specifically ludic nature of the ordinary activity in Rainer’s *Parts of Some Sextets* is significant, as her best critic, Jill Johnston, seems to have recognized. Despite its playfulness, she described the piece as looking like “a large experimental cage for conditioned responses of some sort.” And she complained specifically about what she called its “static time structure.” “There is something even slightly grotesque,” she wrote, “about playground activity subjected to signal commands at regular intervals.”<sup>24</sup>

Something slightly grotesque, yes, but surely also slightly familiar. Though she might not have realized it, Johnston’s image of regulated freedom, of standardized play is a powerful picture of the stage in the industrialization of time that she, and Rainer, were living through. McLuhan wrote in 1964 that any *true* leisure must exclude the model of time as a container,<sup>25</sup> and the political philosopher Sebastian de Grazia had made the case in 1963 that the very concept of “free time” was the mirror image of the industrial model of labor: “Being considered the opposite of work, and work being now calculated by time, leisure too must be figured the same way [...] leisure is counted off in quantities of time.”<sup>26</sup> Johnston’s discomfort with *Parts of Some Sextets* may have arisen from seeing in this dance a picture of the condition in which seemingly unregulated behavior is fit to temporal containers; certainly her image of the dance’s ordinary movement “strangled by a rigid time structure” recalls de Grazia’s description of Americans in the 1960s, “cooped up in time.”<sup>27</sup>

E. P. Thompson closed his essay on the enforcement of industrial time-sense with a meditation on present and future conditions in devel-

oped capitalist nations in the 1960s, where automation held out the promise of diminishing work-hours and increasing time for leisure. He allowed himself to imagine the possibility that even as their industrial time-sense was being exported to the newly-industrializing areas of the world, at least citizens of already capitalist ones might, in their expanded leisure time, “re-learn some of the arts of living lost in the industrial revolution.” Thompson hoped that his study might help in this rediscovery. Contemporaneous ordinary movement performance like Rainer’s could likewise be considered a temporal tutorial for post-industrial Americans. But the problem, as Thompson recognized, was that as long as industrial time-sense simply got extended to the hours freed up in the “automated future,” there would be no gain at all. Liberated time would be exploited by the growing industries of leisure, just as labor hours were consumed by traditional industry.

Several of the activities in *Parts of Some Sextets* are characterized by a kind of industrial playfulness. I’m thinking of the repetitive heaving of the mattresses we see Rauschenberg doing in the full-stage image, and of the activity in which one dancer wormed her way over the other dancers’ bent arms as if they were a bodily conveyor. In both cases task-like activity takes on a specifically linear, repetitive, and unidirectional form that seems to flirt with the imagery of mechanical processes, with assembly line and conveyor belt. This is much as minimal sculpture, with its modular repetition or seriality, its logic of one thing after another, gestures toward the logic of industrial production. But while minimal sculpture’s likeness to industry always seems faintly anachronistic—why was art compelled to turn to industrial models in the first flush of the Information Age, just as those models were losing their hold on the cultural imagination, if not their actual role in the organization of the U.S. economy?—Rainer’s rendering of playful activity along industrial lines speaks to the *specific* anxieties of its late capitalist moment.

Here it seems significant that the choice of the thirty-second-interval structure was a blind spot in Rainer’s account of the dance. “How I decided upon the system that I ultimately used is now not too clear to me,” she wrote.<sup>28</sup> If the dance’s structural tension between *movement* performed in task-time and *performance* organized by clock-time works through a period preoccupation with capitalism’s structuring of the very leisure its technology promised to provide, then Rainer’s lacuna might be explained as a product of the historical rather than personal unconscious. For what



Yvonne Rainer, *Parts of Some Sextets*, 1965  
*Corridor Solo and Crawling Through* at the Wadsworth Atheneum  
 Photo: Peter Moore, © Estate of Peter Moore/Licensed by VAGA, New York

would then appear is a correspondence, however unintentional, between Rainer’s organization of performance and the way time was being exploited by the leisure industries, rather than labor, in the 1960s. It was in television, for instance—the preeminent “machine of amusement,” where the day is broken into sixty- and thirty-minute units, and where watching-time is sold to advertisers in thirty-second increments—that leisure was most effectively contained, rationalized, and made productive in the postwar period; in television that the problem of free time and structure was most effectively engineered.

That there is an echo of TV-time in *Parts of Some Sextets* can only be speculation. (Recently Rainer noted that she was not even exposed to television until she was thirty—but this is to say, sometime in 1964–65). Yet the possibility makes it all the more important to acknowledge that though her *vision* for *Parts of Some Sextets* had been of a rigid, regular series of intervals, when the dance was enacted Rainer was surprised. “I did not realize until later that a given duration can *seem* long or short according to what is put into it,” she wrote. For the viewer, the amount and kind of incident in a given interval affected its perceived duration, so that “My scheme [...] did not really produce the insistent regularity I had thought it might. However, by the time I made this basic discovery I had begun to like the irregularities of the piece.”<sup>29</sup>

I find this “discovery” fascinating. On the one hand it means that in the end the dance’s delicate balance of two temporalities—that of the task and that of the timetable—tipped toward what Mary Ann Doane calls

“the ideological role of suggesting that time is still allied with the free and indeterminable.”<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, the very fact that Rainer could have forgotten even for a second, let alone the months in which she was working on this piece, that time goes faster when things are more interesting—this seems to me evidence of just how thoroughly the model of spatialized, rationalized time infected consciousness in the twentieth century.

#### Notes

- 1 Ronald Argelander, “Photo-Documentation (and an interview with Peter Moore),” *The Drama Review: TDR*, vol. 18, no. 3, September, 1974, pp. 51-58.
- 2 Argelander, “Photo-Documentation,” p. 52.
- 3 Argelander, “Photo-Documentation,” p. 51.
- 4 The New York University Graduate Department of Drama became the Department of Performance Studies in 1980.
- 5 In his words, to address their “lack of reliable or accurate visual material to work with.”
- 6 Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press, 2002.
- 7 Major works in this genre are Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1983; and Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991.
- 8 Emphasis mine.
- 9 Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, (trans.) and (ed.) Jonathan Mayne, New York, Da Capo, 1964, p. 16.; cited in Doane, pp. 11-12.
- 10 Doane, p. 230. She argues that the ideological function of cinema as a medium is precisely to depict, and manage the contingent.
- 11 Every time we show or publish a performance photograph, we are managing time—rehearsing and playing with the way it is thought and used in our cultures. My contention is that, to a degree that has not yet been acknowledged, the rise of documented performance as a privileged field in and for the history of art since the late 1950s is part of a specific history of time.
- 12 These terms were all used by the film scholar P. Adams Sitney, who attended the Wadsworth premiere in 1965 (interview with the author, Los Angeles, 31 March 2005). Steve Paxton, one of the original performers, also described it as “well orchestrated” (email to the author, 17 April 2005).
- 13 Yvonne Rainer, “Some Retrospective Notes on a Dance for 10 People and 12 Mattresses Called *Parts of Some Sextets*, Performed at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford,

Connecticut, and Judson Memorial Church, New York, in March, 1965,” in *The Tulane Drama Review*, vol. 10, no. 2, Winter 1965, pp. 168-178, 170.

- 14 Ibid.
- 15 As she explained in the same year as *Parts of Some Sextets*, recently she had been working to “eliminate the bizarre or expressive elements in favor of a more abstract non-associative dance idiom.” Goodman, Saul, “Brief Biographies: A Monthly Series About Dancers You Should Know,” in *Dance Magazine*, 39 (December 1965).
- 16 Rainer, “Some Retrospective Notes,” p. 168.
- 17 Michael Kirby, “Objective Dance,” in *The Art of Time: Essays on the Avant-Garde*, New York, E.P. Dutton, 1969, pp. 103-116, 111. After seeing *Parts of Some Sextets*, as editor of the Tulane Drama Review Kirby commissioned Rainer to write the essay about her dance published in the journal in 1965. (Yvonne Rainer, conversation with the author, 12 April 2005). Later, Kirby would be Argelander’s dissertation adviser, and he was still editor of *TDR* when Argelander’s essay on photography was published.
- 18 Michelson pp. 55, 57, emphasis in the original. See also Sally Banes, who wrote that in post-modern dance from Huddle to Trio A “time was flattened and detheatricalized, stripped of the dynamics of phrasing typical of modern dance and ballet: preparation, climax, recovery.” Banes, “Introduction to the Wesleyan Paperback Edition,” *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, Wesleyan University Press, 1987, p.xvii.
- 19 Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” in *Artforum*, June 1967, reprinted in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, Gregory Battcock (ed.), Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995, pp. 116-147, 146.
- 20 Pamela Lee has contributed another dimension to the discussion of theatrical temporality by arguing that it was time understood as “recursive and shuddering like an echo, the time of an expanding new media and the articulation of its logic within and by art.” (*Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2004, p. 39). Reading Fried in part through Smithson, she stresses the endlessness of literalist time, linking it to the logics of recursion (a circular, temporal process of self-reference in which a thing is tested and defined by the repeated application to it of a set of rules or conditions) and autopoiesis (self-production) as found in systems theory (pp. 44-45).
- 21 Marshall McLuhan was one of many postwar thinkers interested in, as he put it in 1964, “not only work, but also eating and sleeping, came to accommodate themselves to the clock rather than to organic needs.” (*Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1997, p. 146). E.P. Thompson, in the 1967 article discussed below, would cite Pierre Bourdieu’s comments in “The attitude of the Algerian peasant toward time,” in *Mediterranean Countrymen*, J. Pitt-Rivers (ed.),

Paris, 1963; Henri LeFebvre, *Critique de la Vie Quotidienne*, Paris, 1958; Stanley Udy, *Organization of Work*, New Haven, 1959; and Wilbert Moore, *Industrialization and Labor*, Ithaca, 1951. See also Guy Debord's chapter on time in: *Society of the Spectacle*, (trans.) Donald Nicholson-Smith, New York, Zone Books, 1995; McLuhan's entire chapter on the clock in *Understanding Media*, and Sebastian de Grazia, *Of Time, Work and Leisure*, New York, The Twentieth Century Fund, 1962.)

- 22 Thompson, E. P. "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism" in *Past and Present*, 38 (1967), pp. 56-97. Task-oriented temporality overlaps with ideas associated with agricultural time. While it would include cases where temporal experience is organized by natural phenomena—tides, daylight, seasons—the idea of cycle versus linearity is less significant here. Approaching the problem as a historian, Thompson was nevertheless acutely conscious that his was a contemporary concern, for time sense was a real site of conflict in the emerging global economy, as in the second half of the twentieth century "development" introduced capitalist incentives and discipline throughout the third world. See also Wilbert Moore, *Industrialization and Labor*, Ithaca, 1951. Moore thought capitalists establishing operations in the third world would get better results from workers still steeped in task-oriented temporality if they indexed pay to tasks rather than time.
- 23 Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 27.
- 24 Jill Johnston, "Waring—Rainer," in *The Village Voice*, 6 May 1965, reprinted in *Marmalade Me*, Hanover, NH, University Press of New England and Wesleyan University Press, 1994, pp. 49-53. I don't mean to imply that it was immediately obvious to the audience that the dancers were responding to cues at 30-second intervals. Johnston had to ask Rainer what the system was, but did so only because she was aware that there was something static and regular about the dance's structure that was in tension—that strangled or suffocated, to use her terms—the movement material.
- 25 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 153.
- 26 Sebastian de Grazia, *Of Time, Work and Leisure*, New York, The Twentieth Century Fund, 1962, p. 63.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 312.
- 28 Rainer, "Some retrospective notes," p. 172.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 173. In 1963, the artist Robert Morris, with whom Rainer would begin to share a home the following year, had produced a number of works specifically engaging ideas of measurement and standardization. *Enlarged and Reduced Inches* and *Three Rulers* play with the difference between actual, perceptible size and the arbitrary units in which it is measured.
- 30 *Op. cit.* Emphasis mine.

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## Impressum

### Symposium November 4–6, 2005

Concept: Barbara Clausen  
Assistant and Editorial staff: Manuela Ammer,  
Anna Artaker  
Academic Coordination: Achim Hochdörfer  
Public Relations: Barbara Hammerschmied  
Marketing: Wolfgang Schreiner, Daniela Birk  
Audiovisual Technician: Michi Krupica  
Art Education Program: Jörg Wolfert,  
Johanna Gudden & Team

bm:bwk  
Printed with the support of the Austrian  
Federal Ministry for Education, Science and  
Culture in Vienna

BUNDESKANZLERAMT ■ KUNST

### Publication

The publication is based on the symposium  
*After the Act. The (Re)Presentation of  
Performance Art* held on the occasion of the  
exhibition *After the Act. The (Re)Presentation  
of Performance Art* (November 4–December 4,  
2005) at Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung  
Ludwig Wien.

Published by  
Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig  
Wien  
Barbara Clausen

Museumsplatz 1  
A-1070 Wien  
T: +43 1 52500  
F: +43 1 5251300  
www.mumok.at  
ISBN 978-3-902490-28-5 (MUMOK)

Concept: Barbara Clausen  
Production: Nina Krick  
Coordination: Kazuo Kandutsch, Nina Krick  
Graphic Design: Susanne Klocker / Liga  
English Copy Editor: David Quigley  
Translations: Timothy Jones (Pöschl),  
Greg Bond (Clausen, Kolesch/Lehmann)  
Print: Gerin Druck, Vienna  
Paper: 115 g Plano Fine  
Print Run: 500 copies  
Printed in Austria

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photographers, their heirs or assigns, 2007  
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Verlag für moderne Kunst Nürnberg  
Luitpoldstraße 5  
D-90402 Nürnberg  
+49 911 2402114  
+49 911 2402119  
E: verlag@moderne-kunst.org  
www.vfmk.de  
ISBN 978-3-9338821-80-0

Distributed in the United Kingdom  
Cornerhouse Publications  
70 Oxford Street  
Manchester M1 5NH, UK  
T: +44 161 2001503  
F: +44 161 2001504  
E: publications@cornerhouse.org  
www.cornerhouse.org

Distribution outside Europe  
D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, Inc.  
155th Sixth Avenue, 2nd Floor  
New York, NY 10013, USA  
T: +1 212 627 1999  
F: +1 212 627 9484  
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