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Performance Art From Futurism to the Present

RoseLee Goldberg

'RoseLee Goldberg has charted new territory by presenting for the first time a clear and accurate history of . . . a continuous development of enormous consequence to the most adventurous twentieth-century art' – Robert Rosenblum

'It's my bible' – Paul Miller (aka DJ Spooky)

First published in 1979, now extensively updated and expanded, this pioneering book has been supplemented by the definitive account of the current technological, political and aesthetic shifts in performance art that mark its transition to the twenty-first century. Performance art is now at the forefront of current art. An astonishing increase in the number of works and venues around the world testifies to this art form as the chosen medium for articulating 'difference' whether dealing with issues of identity, multiculturalism or globalism. The desire for direct engagement with today's most prominent artists explains the wide appeal of performance art to the ever broader audiences for new art in the museums. Mariko Mori, Paul McCarthy, and Matthew Barney, as well as the groups Forced Entertainment and Desperate Optimists, among many others, can now be seen in the historical context of other innovators in the field from the Dadaists to Laurie Anderson.

Revised and expanded edition

On the cover:
Matthew Barney,
Drawing Restraint 7,
1993. © Matthew
Barney. Production still,
Photo Peter Strielman,
Courtesy Barbara
Gladstone

Printed in Singapore



world
of art

Performance Art

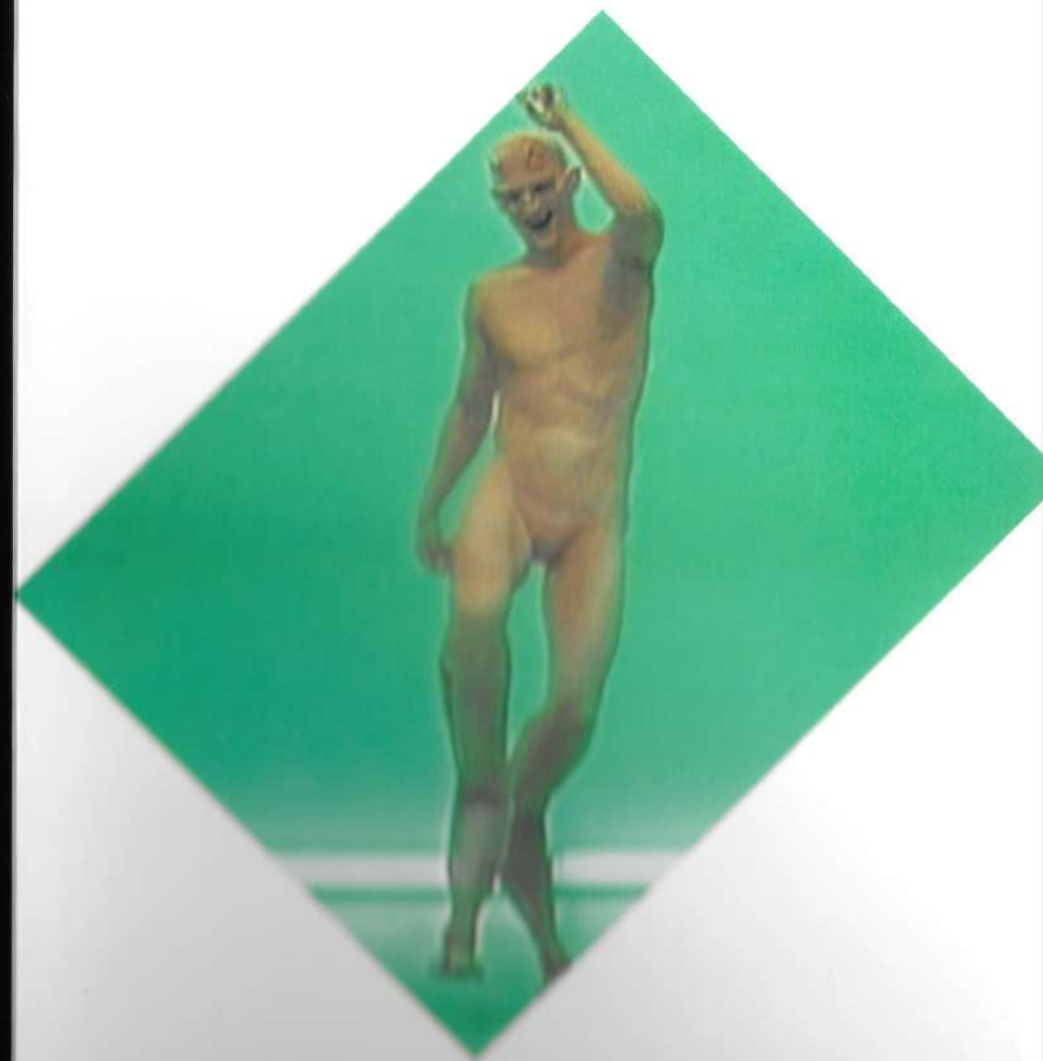
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RoseLee
Goldberg

Performance Art

From Futurism to the Present



Thames & Hudson world of art

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The artist's body

This attempt to translate the essential elements of one discipline into another characterized the early work of the New York artist Vito Acconci. Around 1969, Acconci used his body to provide an alternative 'ground' to the 'page ground' he had used as a poet; it was a way, he said, of shifting the focus from words to himself as an 'image'. So instead of writing a poem about 'following', Acconci acted out *Following Piece* as part of 'Street Works IV' (1969). The piece consisted simply of Acconci following randomly chosen individuals in the street, abandoning them once they left the street to enter a building. It was invisible in that people were unaware that it was going on; Acconci made several other pieces which were equally private. Though introspective, they were also the work of an artist looking at himself as an image, seeing 'the artist' as others might see him: Acconci saw himself 'as a marginal presence . . . tying in to ongoing situations . . .'. Each work dealt with a new image: for example, in *Conversion* (1970), he attempted to conceal his masculinity by burning his body hair, pulling at each breast – 'in a futile attempt to produce female breasts' – and hid his penis between his legs. But such private activities only underlined even more emphatically the self-contradictory character of his attitude; for whatever discoveries he made in this process of self-searching, he had no way of 'publishing' them as one would a poem. It became necessary, therefore, for him to make this 'body poetry' more public.

The first public works were equally introspective and poetic. For example, *Telling Secrets* (1971) took place in a dark deserted shed on the Hudson River in the early hours of the cold winter morning. From 1 to 2 am, Acconci whispered secrets – 'which could have been totally detrimental to me if publically revealed' – to the late night visitors. Again this work could be read as the equivalent of a poet jotting down private thoughts which once released for publication could be detrimental in certain contexts.

The implication of others in his subsequent performances led Acconci to the notion of 'power-fields' as described by the psychologist Kurt Lewin in *The Principle of Topological Psychology*. In that work, Acconci found a description of how each individual radiated a personal power-field which included all possible interaction with other people and objects in a particular physical space. His works from 1971 dealt with this power-field between himself and others in specially constructed spaces: he was concerned with 'setting up a field in which the audience was, so that they became a part of what I was doing . . . they became part of the physical space in which I moved'. *Seedbed* (1971), performed at the Sonnabend Gallery, New York, became the most notorious of these works. In it Acconci masturbated under a ramp built into the gallery over which the visitors walked.

These works led Acconci to a further interpretation of the power-field, designing a space which *suggested* his personal presence. These 'potential performances' were just as important as actual performances. Finally Acconci withdrew from performance altogether: *Command Performance* (1974) consisted of an empty space, an empty chair and a video monitor, the soundtrack inviting the viewer to create his or her own performance.

While many of Acconci's performances suggested his background in poetry, those of Dennis Oppenheim showed traces of his training as a sculptor in California. Like many artists of the time, he wished to counteract the overwhelming influence of minimalist sculpture. According to Oppenheim, body art became 'a calculated, malicious and strategic ploy' against the minimalists' preoccupation with the essence of the object. It was a means to focus on the 'objectifier' – the maker – rather than on the object itself. So Oppenheim made several works in which the prime concern was the *experience* of sculptural forms and activities, rather than their actual construction. In *Parallel Stress* (1970) he constructed a large mound of earth ¹²⁶ that would act as a model for his own demonstration. Then he hung himself from parallel brick walls – holding onto the walls with his hands and feet – creating a body curve which echoed the shape of the mound.

126 Dennis Oppenheim, *Parallel Stress*, 1970



Lead Sink for Sebastian (1970) was designed for a man who had one artificial leg, the intention being similarly to act out certain sculptural sensations, such as smelting and reduction. The artificial leg was replaced by a lead pipe which was then melted by a blowtorch, causing the man's body to tilt unevenly as the 'sculpture' was liquidized. In that same year, Oppenheim took these experiments further in a work which he executed on Jones Beach, Long Island. In *Reading Position for a Second Degree Burn* he was concerned with the notion of colour change, 'a traditional painter's concern', but in this case his own skin became 'pigment': lying on the beach, a large book covering his bare chest, Oppenheim remained until the sun had burnt the area exposed to it, effecting a 'colour change' by the simplest means.

Oppenheim believed that body art was limitless in its application. It was both a conductor of 'energy and experience' and a didactic instrument for explaining the sensations that go into making artwork. Considered in this way, it also represented a refusal to sublimate creative energy into producing objects. By 1972, like many body artists involved in similar introspective and often physically dangerous explorations, he tired of live performance. Just as Acconci had done with his power-fields, Oppenheim devised works which suggested performance but which often used puppets rather than human performers. The little wooden figures, accompanied by recorded songs and phrases, continued to ask the fundamental questions raised by conceptual art; what were the roots of art, what were the motives for making art, and what lay behind seemingly autonomous artistic decisions? One example was ¹²⁷ *Theme for a Major Hit* (1975) where, in a dimly lit room, a lonely puppet jerked endlessly to its own theme song.

127 Oppenheim, *Theme for a Major Hit*, 1975

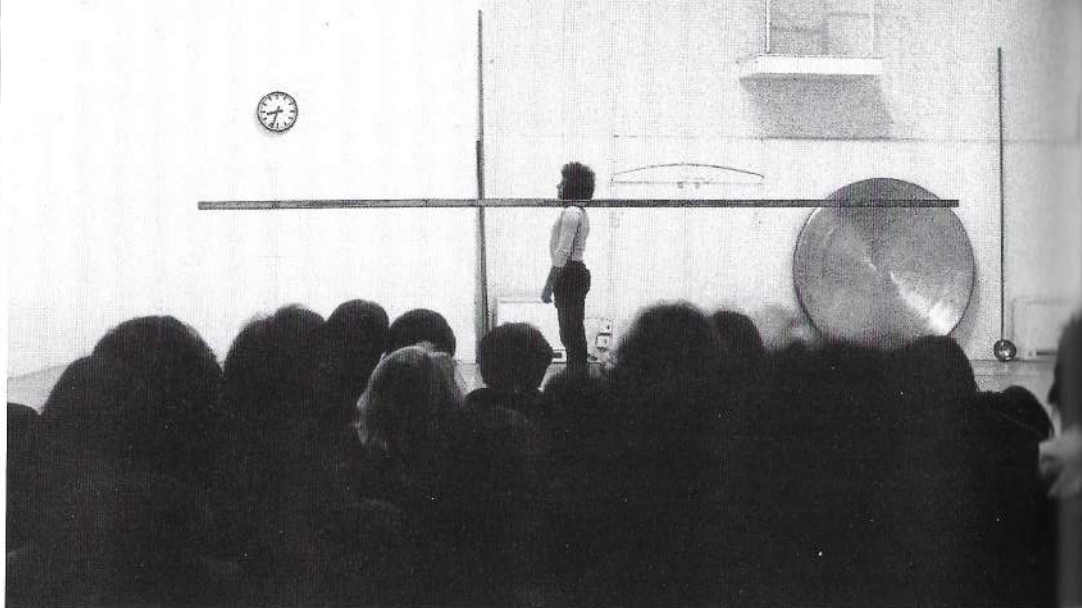


The Californian artist Chris Burden went through a similar transition to that of Acconci and Oppenheim, beginning with performances that carried physical exertion and concentration beyond the bounds of normal endurance, and withdrawing from performance after several years of death-defying acts. His first performance took place while he was still a student, in the students' locker-room at the University of California, Irvine, in 1971. Burden installed himself in a 2' x 2' x 3' locker for five days, his only supplies for this tight-fitting stay being a large bottle of water, the contents of which were piped to him via the locker above. In the same year, in Venice, California, he asked a friend to shoot him in the left arm, in a work entitled *Shooting Piece*. The bullet, fired from fifteen feet away, should have grazed his arm, but instead blew away a large piece of flesh.

Deadman of the following year was another all-too-serious game with death. He lay wrapped in a canvas bag in the middle of a busy Los Angeles boulevard. Luckily he was unhurt, and the police put an end to this work by arresting him for causing a false emergency to be reported. Similarly death-defying acts were repeated at regular intervals; each could have ended in Burden's death, but the calculated risk involved was, he said, an energizing factor. Burden's painful exercises were meant to transcend physical reality: they were also a means to 're-enact certain American classics – like shooting people'. Presented in semi-controlled conditions he hoped that they would alter people's perception of violence. Certainly such danger had been portrayed on canvas or simulated in theatre scenes; Burden's performances, involving real danger, had a grandiose aim: to alter the history of representation of such themes for all time.

The body in space

At the same time that artists were working on their bodies as objects, manipulating them as they would a piece of sculpture or a page of poetry, others developed more structured performances which explored the body as an element in space. For example, the Californian artist Bruce Nauman executed works such as *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* (1968), which had a direct relationship to his sculpture. By walking round the square, he could experience at first hand the volume and dimensions of his sculptural works which also dealt with volume and the placement of objects in space. The German artist Klaus Rinke methodically translated the three-dimensional properties of sculpture into actual space in a series of *Primary Demonstrations* begun in 1970. These were 'static sculptures' ¹²⁸ created with his partner Monika Baumgartl: together they made geometric configurations, moving slowly from one position to the next, usually for several hours at a time. A wall-clock contrasted normal time with the time it

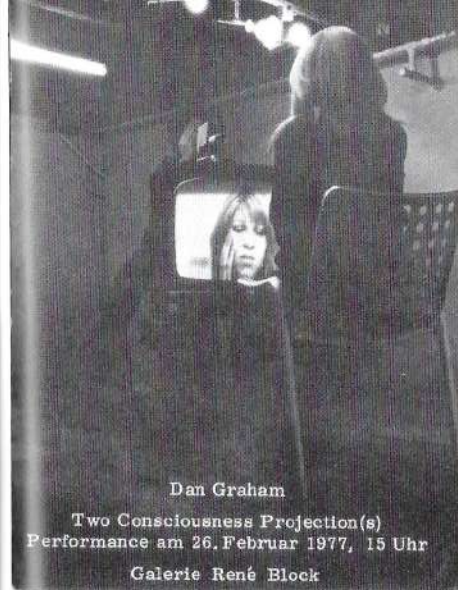


128 Klaus Rinke, *Primary Demonstration: Horizontal-Vertical*, performed at the Oxford Museum of Modern Art, 1976

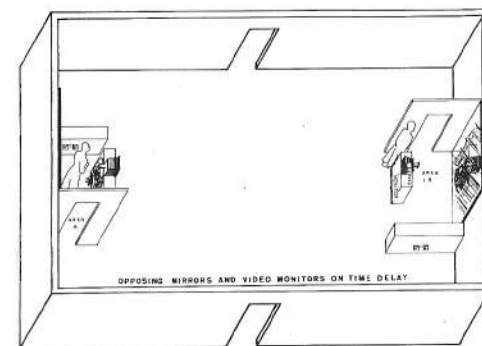
took to make each sculptural shape. According to Rinke, these works contained the same theoretical premises as stone sculpture in space, but the additional elements of time and movement altered the viewer's understanding of those premises: they could actually see the *process* of making sculpture. Rinke hoped that these didactic demonstrations would change the viewer's perception of their own physical reality.

Similarly, the Hamburg artist Franz Erhard Walther was concerned with increasing the viewer's awareness of spatial relationships within real space and real time. In Walther's demonstrations, the viewer would, through a series of rehearsals, become the recipient of the action. For instance, *Going On* (1967) was a typical collaborative work, consisting of a line of twenty-eight pockets of equal size sewn into long lengths of fabric laid out in a field. Four participants climbed into four pockets and by the end of the work had climbed in and out of all the pockets, changing the original configuration of the fabric through their actions. Each of Walther's works provided a means for the spectators to experience the sculptural object themselves, as well as to initiate the unfolding design. Their active role in influencing the shape and procedure of the sculptures was an important element of the work.

The study of active and passive conduct of the viewer became the basis of many of the New York artist Dan Graham's performances from the early seventies. However, Graham wished to combine the role of active performer



Dan Graham
Two Consciousness Projection(s)
Performance am 26. Februar 1977, 15 Uhr
Galerie René Block



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 TRISHA BROWN WALS
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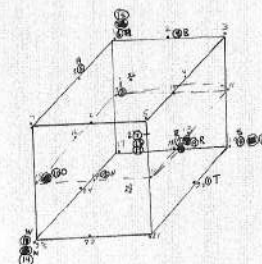


129 Dan Graham, *Two Consciousness Projection(s)*, invitation card to event presented in February 1977 at the Galerie René Block. Photo from a performance in 1974 with Suzanne Brenner, at the Lisson Gallery, London

130 Graham, diagram for *Opposing Mirrors and Video Monitors on Time Delay*, 1974

131 Trisha Brown, notation used in preparing *Locus*, 1975

132 Brown, *Locus*, 1975



and passive spectator in one and the same person. So he introduced mirrors and video equipment which would allow performers to be the spectators of their own actions. This self-scrutiny was intended to set up a heightened consciousness of every gesture. In *Two Consciousness Projection* (1973) 129 Graham created a situation which would increase that consciousness even further, since two people were asked to verbalize (in front of an audience) how they viewed one of the partners. A woman sat in front of a video screen which showed her face, while a man looked through the video camera trained on her face. As she examined her features and described what she saw, the man, at the same time, related how he read her face. In this way, both the man and woman were active in that they were creating the performance, but they were also passive spectators in that they were watching themselves performing.

Graham's theory of audience-performer relationships was based on Bertold Brecht's idea of imposing an uncomfortable and self-conscious state on the audience in an attempt to reduce the gap between the two. In subsequent works Graham explored this further, adding the elements of time and space. Video techniques and mirrors were used to create a sense of past, present and future, within one constructed space. In a work such as *Present Continuous Past* (1974), the mirror acted as a reflection of present time, while video feedback showed the performer/spectator (in this case the public) their past actions. According to Graham, 'mirrors reflect instantaneous time without duration . . . whereas video feedback does just the opposite, it relates the two in a kind of durational time flow'. So on entering the constructed cube lined with mirrors, the viewers saw themselves first in the mirror and then, eight seconds later, saw those mirrored actions relayed on the video. 'Present time' was the viewer's immediate action, which was then picked up by the mirror and video in rotation. The viewers therefore would see before them what they had recently performed but also knew that any further actions would appear on the video as 'future time'.

The New York performer Trisha Brown added a further dimension to the viewer's notion of the body in space. Works such as *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building* (1969), or *Walking on the Wall* (1970), were designed to disorient the audience's sense of gravitational balance. The first consisted of a man, strapped in mountaineering harness, walking down the vertical wall-face of a seven-story building in lower Manhattan. The second work, using the same mechanical support, took place in a gallery at the Whitney Museum, where performers moved along the wall at right angles to the audience. Similar works explored movement possibilities in space, while 131,132 *Locus* (1975) related the actual movements in space to a two-dimensional plan. The performance was devised entirely through drawings, and Brown worked on three methods of notation simultaneously to achieve the final

effect: first she drew a cube, then she wrote out a number sequence based on her name which was then matched with the intersecting lines of the cube. She and three dancers choreographed a work determined by the finished drawing.

Also in New York, Lucinda Childs created several performances according to carefully worked out notation. *Congeries on Edges for 20 Obliques* (1975) was one such work where five dancers travelled on sets of diagonals across the space, exploring throughout the dance the various combinations indicated in the drawing. Similarly, Laura Dean and her colleagues followed precise 'phrasing patterns' indicated on the score, as in *Circle Dance* (1972).

The influence of American new dance exponents was felt in England where the Ting Theatre of Mistakes set up a collaborative workshop in 1974 to continue the earlier experiments. They put together the various notions developed by American dance pioneers from the fifties and sixties in a handbook, *The Elements of Performance Art*, published in 1976. One of the few such explicit texts on the theory and practice of performance, the book outlined a series of exercises for potential performers. *A Waterfall* (1977), presented on the forecourt and one of the terraces of the Hayward Gallery in London, illustrated some of the notions expressed in the book, such as task-oriented actions, theatre in the round, or the use of objects as spatial and temporal indicators. This particular work developed from the company's interest in structuring performances according to so-called 'additive methods'. With performers positioned at various levels on a large scaffolding, and holding containers, water was conveyed up and then down again, creating a series of 'waterfalls' each one hour long.

Ritual

In contrast to performances which dealt with formal properties of the body in space and time, others were far more emotive and expressionistic in nature. Those of the Austrian artist Hermann Nitsch, beginning in 1962, involving ritual and blood, were described as 'an aesthetic way of praying'. Ancient Dionysian and Christian rites were re-enacted in a modern context, supposedly illustrating Aristotle's notion of catharsis through fear, terror and compassion. Nitsch saw these ritualistic orgies as an extension of action painting, recalling the Futurist Carrà's suggestion: you must paint, as drunkards sing and vomit, sounds, noises and smells.

His *Orgies, Mysteries, Theatre* projects were repeated at regular intervals 133 throughout the seventies. A typical action lasted several hours: it would begin with the sound of loud music – 'the ecstasy created by the loudest possible created noise' – followed by Nitsch giving orders for the ceremony to begin. A slaughtered lamb would be brought on stage by assistants, fastened head