Performance
live art since the 60s

RoseLee Goldberg
Foreword by Laurie Anderson
for my family, Dakota, Zoë, Pierce

acknowledgments

My dear friend and editor extraordinaire Nikos Stangos (1936–2004) commissioned my first book, Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present in 1979, and brought into existence, with perfect timing, my subsequent books, right up to the time he departed Thames & Hudson to concentrate on his own writing and poetry. Nikos lives on in every line I write, with love, admiration and gratitude.

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CHAPTER 3  the body: ritual, living sculpture, performed photography

In the early '60s, Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, Carolee Schneemann, Yoko Ono, and Shigeko Kubota, among others, insisted on the body as the main locus of ideas about art. Provocative, disturbing, elemental, their often nude or partially nude performances in the artists' own lofts or alternative galleries were charged with meanings that functioned on both a visceral and intellectual level. On the one hand, viewers were transformed willingly or not, into voyeurs, sucked into a vortex of contained eroticism surrounding the performers. On the other hand, many viewers quickly understood the intended ironies of the various surprising and sometimes shocking gestures. Shigeko Kubota executed her *Tigura Painting* (1965) squatting over a large sheet of paper, with a paint-drenched paintbrush pinned to her underwear; it could be read as a sharp attack on a male-dominated art world with its bravura action painting. Manzoni's earlier *Life Drawing* (1960), in which he cavalierly signed the back of a nude woman, provided proof for Kubota's critique. Commenting on the gap between the original and the artist's role in translating or re-presenting that original, Manzoni's gesture paralleled Yves Klein's *Anthropometries of the Blue Period* (1960), an event in which the artist used nude women performers as "living paintbrushes." Following his instructions the women drenched their breasts, bellies, and thighs with sponges dipped into the large pools of thick paint at their feet, and pressed their bodies firmly on to sheets of canvas like so many rubber stamps, all in full view of a well-dressed audience. Klein was celebrated for both the conceptual daring (his ironic commentary on the "real" material of painting) and the sly humor of this work. But when Carolee Schneemann appeared nude in her own work, *Eye Body* (1963), as a live extension of a painted assemblage, making much the same point as the male artists regarding the relationship of the live body to painting and canvas, she was rebuked or ignored by reviewers indignant that a female artist could insert her nude self into her art work. It seemed that a fully dressed intermediary was required to direct the action, as Klein, Manzoni, and Robert Morris (in *Site*, 1964) had done in their performances. Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964), in which the audience was invited to cut off her clothes as she sat unmoving before them, also broke through the invisible frame around the male artists' work, drawing the audience directly into contact with her, essentially defining the artist in the process. At the time, Ono remembered, this

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YVES KLEIN

*Anthropometries of the Blue Period*, 1960

Klein used a naked model as a "brush" to make paintings. Before an invited audience, the model pressed her body, covered with blue paint, on the prepared canvas.
the body: ritual, living sculpture, performed photos

In the early '60s, Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, Carolee Schneemann, Yoko Ono, and Shigeko Kubota, among others, insisted on the body as the main locus of ideas about art. Provocative, disturbing, elemental, their often nude or partially nude performances in the artists' own lofts or alternative galleries were charged with meanings that functioned on both a visceral and intellectual level. On the one hand, viewers were transformed, willingly or not, into voyeurs, sucked into a vortex of contained eroticism surrounding the performers. On the other hand, many viewers quickly understood the intended ironies of the various surprising and sometimes shocking gestures. Shigeko Kubota executed her Vagina Painting (1965) squatting over a large sheet of paper, with a paint-drenched paintbrush pinned to her underwear; it could be read as a sharp attack on a male-dominated art world with its bravura action painting. Manzoni's earlier Life Drawing (1960), in which he cavalierly signed the back of a nude woman, provided proof for Kubota's critique. Commenting on the gap between an original and the artist's role in translating or re-presenting that original, Manzoni's gesture paralleled Yves Klein's Anthropometries of the Blue Period (1960), an event in which the artist used nude women performers as "living paintbrushes." Following his instructions the women drenched their breasts, bellies, and thighs with sponges dipped into the large pools of thick paint at their feet, and pressed their bodies firmly on to sheets of canvas like so many rubber stamps, all in full view of a well-dressed audience. Klein was celebrated for both the conceptual daring (his ironic commentary on the "real" material of painting) and the sly humor of this work. But when Carolee Schneemann appeared nude in her own work, Eye Body (1963), as a live extension of a painted assemblage, making much the same point as the male artists regarding the relationship of the live body to painting and canvas, she was rebuked or ignored by reviewers indignant that a female artist could insert her nude self into her art work. It seemed that a fully dressed intermediary was required to direct the action, as Klein, Manzoni, and Robert Morris (in Site, 1964) had done in their performances. Yoko Ono's Cut Piece (1964), in which the audience was invited to cut off her clothes as she sat unmoving before them, also broke through the invisible frame around the male artists' work, drawing the audience directly into contact with her, essentially defacing the artist in the process. At the time, Ono remembered, this

**YVES KLEIN**

*Anthropometries of the Blue Period.*

Klein used a naked model as a "b paintings. Before an invited audience pressed her body, covered with a canvas.
work was rejected by several male colleagues “for being animalistic”. Nevertheless, she was pleased by its impact and repeated Cut Piece several times.

Although it would take almost thirty years of feminist scholarship to unravel the very different uses of the body by male and female artists of this period, and properly to credit these women artists for their pioneering and highly considered examination of the body as a measure of identity, taboo, and the limits of masculine/feminine emancipation, their belief in the body as prime, raw material, opened numerous territories for artistic investigation. By the ’70s, so many artists had turned to incorporating their bodies in their performances, that the term “Body Art” was broadly applied to a great variety of work. Some considered the body as material for ritual or “Aktions,” such as the orgiastic and aggressive events of the Viennese artists Hermann Nitsch and Günter Brus. They viewed the body as so much flesh, draping intestines from eviscerated lamb carcasses over performers in rites connected with the primitive cult of Dionysus, in which the tearing of animals and eating of raw flesh generated a state of ecstasy and frenzy. Others treated the body more tenderly, like Ana Mendieta who used it in touching spiritual ceremonies with traces of Santeria. Like the Viennese, she used blood as a cleansing material, but, unlike them, she viewed blood as a substance with healing and connective properties and as a force of female creativity. Others saw Body Art as the “site” for formal art propositions, such as the spatially defining works of Vito Acconci, Dennis Oppenheim, or Monika Baumgartl. Others utilized it as a tool for transformation—often of appearances, particularly as they related to gender, and these transformations were recorded in image-rich photographs. Urs Lüthi, Katharina Sieverding, and Jürgen Klaucke exhibited in a 1974 show entitled Transformer: Aspekte der Tränsvestie which placed images of these artists alongside the similarly androgynous musicians and image-makers Brian Eno, David Bowie, and Lou Reed. Sieverding created photographic works with her partner Klaus Mettig, in which their male and female faces, similarly made up and coiffed, became almost indistinguishable, while Urs Lüthi had himself photographed in the process of transformation from male to female. Their association with the visionary theatricality and suggestive lyrics of the rock musicians gave these artists a seductive edge.

Sculptors, like Gilbert & George, presented themselves as Living Sculpture, painter Miranda Payne hung on a wall as a Living Painting, while Pat Oleszko used her body as a mannequin for her elaborately constructed costumes. Such extraordinary long-term commitment to their chosen guises showed an eagerness on the part of these artists to give daily form to the art-life equation. They actually lived inside their art, and for some, also created homes to match. Colette, Mr. Peanut, the Mud Man, Luigi Ontani, were all instantly recognizable in public as living, walking works of art, on permanent exhibition. At the other extreme, artists
such as Chris Burden, Marina Abramović and Ulay, Gina Pane and Valie Export, engaged in acts of extraordinary endurance, insisting that their unnerving and frequently dangerous undertakings were learning experiences of a deeply cathartic nature. For them, pain and fear could be understood as the material of the work. "What you are afraid of," Abramović has said, "is exactly what you are supposed to do. When you do things you like, you never change." They were just as demanding on viewers who, whether they liked it or not, found themselves witnessing and, in certain cases, abetting dangerous and harmful actions. Chris Burden had himself shot in the arm by a friend in a gallery in Santa Ana, California, in a work entitled Shoot (1971), and in 1974 in a Naples gallery, Marina Abramović in Rhythm O placed a loaded gun on a table among seventy-two other objects (a knife, scissors, a long-stemmed rose, among them) which the members of the public were invited to use on her as they pleased.

Body Art was a laboratory for studies of all sorts, from the psychoanalytical, to the behavioral to the spatial and perceptual. While the term "body language," was widely used by the media to refer to the signals that people unconsciously made to one another with their bodies, the academic community referred to "powerfields"—social psychologist Kurt Lewin, described the waves of psychological tension rippling through any inhabited space. Of more unnerving concern, was the material which French philosophers of the late '60s, led by Gilles Deleuze, revealed in rigorous studies of psychoanalysis and literature about the metaphorical nature of masochism. Vito Acconci created an original powerfield with his work Seedbed (1972) in which he masturbated under a wooden ramp built into a downtown gallery, over which visitors walked. Rubbing his body against the floorboards, "distributing semen across the floor," all the while talking into a microphone, Acconci thus "connected" with his audience through a space that was psychologically charged by his ongoing commentary and the sound effects of his actions. Dan Graham explored Bertolt Brecht's principles of alienation, connecting performer and viewer by designing situations that had discomfort built into the work. In Performance, Audience, Mirror (1977), the audience, seated on chairs in front of a large mirror, were forced to become witness to their own movements and to read each other's self-conscious body language. To increase their unease, Graham walked back and forth in front of them, scrutinizing their actions and commenting into a microphone on what he saw. Dennis Oppenheim used his body as a transmitter of sensations, particularly those that extended his understanding of painting or sculpture; in "Two-stage Transfer Drawing" (1971), his son Erik ran a marker along his back, which he then duplicated on a wall. Rebecca Horn and Bruce McLean, each in quite different ways, constructed "body machines"—instruments that would transform their bodies into objects of startling theatrical design. Horn's canvas "sails"
attached to her arms and legs, and McLean’s body casts that held his body in poses copied from stylish actors of the ’50s, resulted in symbolically rich tableaux. From the vantage point of the ’90s, the radical work of the ’70s has become a minefield for a new generation of artists. It is appreciated for its uncompromising realism and for the raw and unmediated ways in which artists confronted often brutal experiences in real time, in collusion with audiences, as if each event were designed to pry open new levels of understanding of extreme psychological or perceptual states. The intensity of this work, had a far-reaching effect on performance artists, on choreographers and on many younger artists working with photography. It was in direct contrast to the media-saturated art of the ’80s, with its contrived aesthetic of high spectacle that acted as a scrim between artist and viewer. Combining the raw gestures of the ’70s with the stylish media twist of the ’80s, and directly inspired by Cindy Sherman’s earliest photographs of herself in hundreds of constructed settings, the “performed photography” of the ’90s, aptly named and curated in a recent exhibition by Jennifer Blessing at the Guggenheim Museum, is a direct descendant of live performance. Large scale, often life size, and brilliantly colored (employing the latest in digital photographic equipment) these theatrical and frequently autobiographical narratives by artists such as Catherine Opie, Yasumara Morimura, and Inez van Lamsweerde, draw viewers up close: looking at these photographs takes time and curiosity, and produces the sensation of watching an elaborate private performance of the kind that clearly lay behind these detailed images. They also pick up the thread of the earlier polymorphous sexuality and theatricality of the “transformer” artists.

The body as a dramatic field or as a tool for masquerade characterizes some of the most interesting work of the 1990s. Matthew Barney transforms his body and those of fellow performers, into half-human, half-animal creatures who romp in a strange Wonderland of his own making. Luminous-skinned and desexed—their genitals decoratively altered or altogether obscured, hoofs and horns extending from feet and foreheads—these odd urchins play with fairytale grimness in and out of focus of a watchful camera lens. Presented as film or video tapes, Barney’s performances nonetheless startle with the effect of live events. Mariko Mori, on the other hand, stages performances in which she appears as a character from a futuristic Japanese cartoon—vinyl-shiny, with pointy hats, plastic tutus, winged ankles and cat’s eyes—on street corners in Tokyo, or on artificial beaches in one of Japan’s fabled oceanariums. These performances are finally shown as room-sized, many-panelled photographs. Some are also presented as video installations. Like Barney, Vanessa Beecroft, Patty Chang, and others, Mori reeks in an aesthetic that seems to be made in a post-media world: after MTV, after Blade Runner, after Pulp Fiction, their exquisitely presented figurines.
stitched, polished, and powdered with all the elegance of a school of seventeenth-century fops, lead the way in envisioning a haute cultural style for the fin de siècle.

In total contrast to the rampant hedonism that such post-media imagery implies, the notion of the body as a powerful weapon for redirecting our thoughts towards a preponderance of social ills—domestic violence, abuse, deathly plagues—has re-surfed in the ’90s, recalling similarly self-afflicting performances from the ’70s. There have been extraordinary and breath-stopping actions by artists. Ron Athey in one performance carved letters into the back of a fellow performer who was HIV positive, rubbed paper towels over the wound, and hung the bloodied towels on clotheslines above the audience, exploiting the public’s terror of AIDS. The late David Wojnarowicz sewed his lips together in a silent protest against that same epidemic. The late Bob Flanagan created a hospital room in the middle of an exhibition space where visitors could witness his painful daily battle with cystic fibrosis. These all have the same immediate shock of the real as Burden or Pane’s early work, with the added jolt of blame for inexcusable political machines that turn too slowly to contain the tragedies of modern diseases. It is termed “endurance art,” as in an exhibition of photographs at New York gallery Exit Art, and “masochistic performance” by critic Kathy O’Dell, who has carefully analyzed its ’70s origins in a socio-political context, ascribing its tendencies, in part, to the traumatic crises wrought by the Vietnam war. The body art that has re-emerged in the ’90s is of a far more virulent and highly publicized strain than before. The close proximity to death that AIDS has forced on young people since 1981, the homophobia that blamed AIDS on the gay community, the mainstreaming of highly charged and previously private images in street and print advertising—of homosexuality, animal sex, even the “heroin chic” of fashion photography—have all upped the ante of the kind of art material which will attract attention and provoke outrage. Yet, no matter how such sensationalism is co-opted by the commercial world, the work of those artists using the body is aggressive, real, and live: the imagery they invent is not for the purpose of selling something else—a perfume, a pair of sneakers—but in order to open a disquieting discourse on contemporary politics and daily life.
DENNIS OPPENHEIM  
*Parallel Stress*, 1970

Oppenheim's early performances were quite literal illustrations of the physical sensations of making sculpture; the weight of gravity, the support of mass, and the artist's body as the force that shapes material. This work was first photographed at a point of extreme stress, when Oppenheim had been hanging between two walls of concrete blocks for ten minutes. The second photograph, taken at a different location, shows the artist in the same position, freed of the strain and demonstrating another "sensation" of sculpture. These documentary photographs were exhibited as essential components of the work.

JOAN JONAS  
*Jones Beach Piece*, 1970

Jonas created several outdoor performances in which the viewers were placed some distance away so that everything seemed smaller and flattened against the natural setting, whether beach or empty parking lot. Sound—sometimes the clapping of wooden blocks or the banging of metal sheets—was also a delayed experience as it traveled across the landscape. Jonas always directed as well as performing in her own work, and constructed her performances with an awareness of film techniques, "the cut" and "montage" among them. Exploring time, space, the body, and the land, her work also showed her strong interest in folk culture and the curious ceremonies of everyday life.
CHRIS BURDEN
Shoot, 1971
Trans-fixed, 1974

Burden's unforgettable dramas were shocking in their literalness. In Shoot he actually had a friend shoot him in the arm from a distance of 1.5 feet. Burden claimed that all those in the gallery where this took place were implicated in his act of self-inflicted violence through their failure to intervene. Performed in Los Angeles, a few miles from Hollywood's studios of make-believe, Burden's real act, with real blood and acute pain, seemed to probe the distancing effects of cinema with its over-loaded violence. In Trans-fixed, also shocking in its realism, Burden was nailed through the palms of his hands to the roof of a Volkswagen, the car was pushed out of the garage, and remained in the road for two minutes with engine running at full speed. "screaming" for him. The work can be read as representing the sacrifice of people to automobiles in a city of freeways. These sensational acts had a tremendous impact on other performance artists, in part because they emphasized the absolute reality of performance art over other forms of drama in theater. As iconic images, they seem to transcend the acts themselves.
HERMANN NITSCH
Aktion Eindhoven, 1983

Nitsch, after seeing a show of Abstract Expressionism in 1959 in Vienna, wrote that he “immediately understood all the implications of this phenomenon.” He identified the expressive process of pouring paint with his ideas for a dramatic, emotionally driven, non-literary theater, mingling Catholicism, Romanticism, and Dionysian myths. His first performance developed from a series of action paintings in 1962.

In a long white shirt, he was tied to a wall as if crucified, while Otto Mühl poured blood over him. Nitsch's actions, his Orgies Mystery Theater, with its cacophonous music and the carcasses of sheep or bulls, became increasingly complex. In the early days, the police often stopped the deeply unnerving events; thirty years later, they are watched with the reverence accorded to art works of historical significance.
RON ATHEY
*Martyrs and Saints*, 1993

Athey performed in nightclubs for years before presenting *Martyrs and Saints* in an art space. “The heart of my work,” he wrote, “has always been in bringing overdone gothic religious tableaux to life.” Using “medical based s/m techniques,” and a cast that “took pride in being marginalized (not only being s/m queers, but having hard-core physical appearances)” he created “a pageant of erotic torture and penance.”

STELARC
*Sitting/Swaying: Event for Rock Suspension*, 1980

Stelarc’s actions recall Indian fakir rituals for spiritual enlightenment. For him they concern the “cosmic and the superhuman.” The artist, he believes, can combine biology and technology to become “an evolutionary guide” for the human body of the twenty-first century.

GINA PANE
*L’Escolade*, 1971

Pane’s body was her “artistic material” in the most literal sense; she might burn it or cut it—in this piece she climbed a ladder whose rungs were embedded with blades. Yet each new level of self-induced pain was for her a metaphor for the social and political oppression she so keenly felt in post-’68 Europe.
MARINA ABRAMOVIC
Cleaning the Mirror, 1995

For twenty years Abramović has made reference to the Yugoslavia she left behind in the early ‘70s, but none so forcefully as her most recent performances Cleaning the Mirror (1995) and Balkan Baroque (1997). Wearing a long white shift, and seated in a dank, poorly lit basement (in a New York gallery in Cleaning, and in a cellar in Balkan for the ‘97 Venice Biennale) Abramović scrubbed endlessly at massive cowbones, removing the grit and blood with a large scrubbing brush dipped regularly into a large pail of water at her knees. Increasingly bloody and distraught, Abramović, who began the process as a kind of “religious rejuvenating ritual,” was soon mesmerized and overwhelmed by the horror of her task. The metaphor for ethnic cleansing in Bosnia was lost on none who observed the artist sink uncontrollably into deep sadness as the work progressed. Weeping and exhausted, Abramović created an unforgettable image of grief for her times.