

“UP TO AND INCLUDING HER LIMITS”:
BODY LANGUAGE AND BODY POLITICS IN PERFORMANCE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	3
Abstract	4
Chapter I: Mapping the Terrain	5
Chapter II: Walking through History	10
Chapter III: Setting Theories in Motion	38
Chapter IV: The Erotic Body: Carolee Schneemann (1939 -)	67
Chapter V: The Ecological Body: Ana Mendieta (1948-1985)	94
Chapter VI: The Existential Body: Marina Abramović (1946 -)	119
Chapter VII: Moving Together	148
Bibliography	179

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ABSTRACT

The triangulation of political and feminist theories, the arc of modern art history, and a post-Cartesian perspective on the relationship of mind and body creates a conceptual space within which to consider a particular genre of artmaking—performance art. This dissertation seeks to explore and elaborate that space through selected case studies of works by three artists engaged in performance: Carolee Schneemann, Ana Mendieta, and Marina Abramović. Acknowledging and exploring the relationship between art and politics is essential to this enterprise. Just as the engagement of political themes (e.g., critical analysis of structures of power, or making visible the assumptions underlying social status) may add an activist dimension to the content of art-making, so political discourse may be endowed with an aesthetic dimension, if that is understood as the just and purposeful shaping of assertions of visible presence and effective action in the world. Thus the larger intent of this project is not simply to engage in a hermeneutic approach to the works in question, but to consider how understanding performance in the context of art-making might open ways to an understanding of being and acting in a larger political arena.

CHAPTER I: MAPPING THE TERRAIN

Imagine two images, brought side by side across the centuries. On one side, an engraving of the torso of a sovereign, whose own body is not covered with chain mail, but comprised, upon closer inspection, with the entwined forms of many bodies. On the other side, a photograph of bodies, unclothed and also entwined, caught in a moment of sensual intensity. Each image represents that entity “the body politic.” This is more than an evocative metaphor; it is a way of thinking about how the embodied citizen, the embodied self, participates in the conversations that feed contemporary political discourse.

The first image is, one might recognize, the frontispiece for Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, published in 1651. It is, for its time, a remarkable, even surreal, image, capturing in visual form the interdependence of the corporeal collective of the ruled and the conscious mind of the ruler. The second image, more arcane, is a still photograph from a film of the 1964 performance *Meat Joy*, a work by performance artist Carolee Schneemann.

These images of bodies point to another metaphor, another operative principle, that of “body language.” If language, as most readily understood, is an artifact of mind or intellect, then what is to be made of the expressive and communicative capacity of the body? If the body speaks, what does it say, and how does it say it? If one body speaks, how might another body receive and attend to that message?

This dissertation engages these metaphors and adds to them the inflections of gender as it informs a more general and post-Cartesian sense of embodiment, and

of performativity as it informs a more general sense of expressive capacity that is not only aligned with but constitutive of personhood. These concerns coalesce in an examination of performance art, which arises most fully in mid-20th century but has some important precursors that either set the stage or anticipate defining conditions of the genre.

The connection between art and politics has long been fraught with complications, and this inquiry engages in that conversation with full recognition of those difficulties, primary among them the fear that in the encounter art will be reduced to propaganda, the ideological handmaiden of politics. It is hoped that through this engagement, an understanding of art will emerge with a greater sense of its transformative power, and an understanding of politics will emerge with a greater sense of the importance of the aesthetics or the shaping practices of its discourse.

Chapter II includes a brief history of a very complex and multi-faceted genre. While the focus is on performance as it has come to be defined and manifested since the mid-20th century, it is instructive to begin almost two centuries earlier, with sightings of social behavior—the Dandy and the *flâneur*--that might be considered proto-performative— precursors to contemporary manifestations. This chapter will also provide a context for the individual case studies or performative profiles of three women artists with a long-term engagement in the genre of performance art.

Chapter III engages several theoretical perspectives that inform, and are informed by, the specific manifestations and multi-faceted or hybrid nature of performance art. Questions raised by the linguistic resonance of the metaphoric

constructions “body politic” and “body language” find credible ground in J. L. Austin’s theories of linguistic efficacy. Given that bodies are most evidently gendered (though not constrained by a gender binary), the work of Judith Butler and in particular her concept of performativity, which owes much to Austin, provides a critical context in which to consider the doing (as distinct from the being) of personhood. Michel Foucault’s discussion of *parrhesia*, in consonance with Butler’s framing of “excitable speech,” validates the social and political significance of speaking out, of speech that works against the grain of convention and constraint. Together they also provide insight into the role of personal agency in shaping social performance as a malleable practice. Given that performance art most often takes place in a space that is redefined or realigned for that purpose, the socio-spatial implications of performance are also informed by the work of Jacques Rancière and others.

Chapters IV through VI are devoted to individual studies of the works of three performance artists in the context of the historical and theoretical frameworks previously established. Given the extraordinarily diverse range of artists associated with this genre, any selection of examples is, of necessity, arbitrary even if instructive—the selection of some artists, some themes, has led if not to the exclusion then to the deferral of others; so for example, markers of race, class, and sexual orientation have not been the focus here, although they have figured in other performance works by other artists. While contemporary performance practices emerged in the second half of the 20th century in Europe (e.g., the Situationists) and in Asia (e.g., the Gutai group in post-war Japan) this research has focused on artists

working in the United States and more specifically in New York City, acknowledged as a major (if not primary) center of the art-world during this period. These artists have developed extensive and sustained bodies of work, which examines and illuminates different aspects of gender politics. For the most part, this work is independent of text or speech, so that the actions of the body *per se* are paramount. That they are women is, as will be made clear, critical to an examination of gender politics within, and beyond the art world, which has long over-encoded the female body as object, while marginalizing the woman as subject and practitioner. Carolee Schneemann, one of the earliest to develop performance works in the shifting mid-20th century terrain, to whom homage is paid in the title of this dissertation, was instrumental in shifting the discourse from female sexuality to a more nuanced awareness of sensuality as a profoundly human attribute. Cuban-born Ana Mendieta, like Schneemann, provided a discourse to engage and complicate an essentialist perspective, and explored one of the most venerable alignments—that of woman and earth—in ways that anticipated what would later be expressed in ecofeminism. Marina Abramović, from the former Yugoslavia, instrumental in moving performance art from margin to mainstream, has created works that explore aspects of human behavior—quotidian, ritualized, banal, profound—that invite contemplation of what it means to be embodied and—as a consequence—mortal.

What makes performance art political? What might it tell us, through embodied expression, about the body politic in which we are all entwined? Since the research for this dissertation began, the genre of performance has gained

substantial visibility. At the same time we continue to live in a sociopolitical environment in which bodies and lives are always on the line: vulnerable to fresh assaults of physical violence on the one hand, altered by the transformations of technology on the other. Chapter VII speaks to the redemptive potential of body language, mediated by the capacity for empathy, a feeling response—inspired by and manifested in performance—that radically alters the aesthetic distance from which we might otherwise view forms of art. Engaging performance does not often offer a safe place to stand. But to the extent that we learn how to read performance imaginatively, empathetically, we might learn for ourselves how to perform more creatively in the worlds we inhabit with others.

CHAPTER II: WALKING THROUGH HISTORY

A convenient and conventional point of departure for the history of performance art are the Happenings, *ad hoc* events that were part of the art scene in mid-20th century New York, a city then newly acknowledged as the epicenter of modernity. Because some of its earliest practitioners were painters and sculptors, artists also aligned with the visual arts, performance art—which is also known by other labels (e.g., action art, body art) and associated with specific groups such as Fluxus and the Situationists—is often considered within that context. This is also true because those engaged then and now in its practice often pushed against many aspects of the art world’s ethos and infrastructure: ephemeral rather than durable, unobtainable rather than commodified, creating new spaces for enactment or transforming old ones, and perhaps most importantly, changing (sometimes in radical ways) the relationship between artist and audience. Performance art may also borrow from other forms of performance—theatre and dance in particular—in emphasizing the centrality of corporeal experience, but in the end, through distilling the separate roles of author and performer into a singular body, creates its own hybrid and evocative reality.

To trace the path of performance, let us begin with a very simple activity—walking. It is what signals, in the life of an infant, through the acquisition of mobility, a significant point of entry into the human community, preceding even the speech acts that are more often thought of as validation of such membership. Walking, as emblematic of human movement, also carries with it other implications. What is our range of motion? What domains are open or closed to us as we move about in the

world? To what extent is our movement in the world we inhabit prescribed by our social station as well as our physical capacity?¹

If walking defines the paradigmatic foundation of human action, then it makes sense to consider the ways in which performance, as an aesthetic practice, might find its beginnings in this deceptively simple act. Why do we walk? The most utilitarian answer is, of course, to move ourselves from one location to another. In an age when walking is thought of, in the context of so many other forms of locution, as a rather simple, even primitive means of movement, it has been valorized as a means that is both health-conscious and energy-efficient, if not necessarily one that is in step with the accelerated pace of life in general. Another reason we walk is—put simply—to engage in the act of walking itself as a means of self-reflective physical exercise, one that enables contemplation.² We become more aware of our bodies in the process of this simple act—how we move, how we breathe, how the way we move is felt throughout our bodies; we become more aware, in short, of being embodied.

To the extent that walking moves us into and through differing environments both physical and interpersonal, walking itself becomes a social as well as kinesthetic practice. In this more public context, we may become observers or

¹ To cite walking as a critical marker in the unfolding of human life is by no means intended to overlook the reality of bodies whose mobility is, at birth or some later point, circumscribed or significantly limited—that in itself could be a performative focal point.

² I also appreciate Kathy Ferguson's insight, in conversation, that "walking has an honorable philosophical history: Socrates was a peripatetic philosopher; Nietzsche spent hours walking around his beloved cities; Rousseau wrote 'Reveries of a Solitary Walker' in which different walks enable different autobiographical-philosophical segments."

voyeurs, listeners or conversationalists. Walking in this context provides the occasion not only of seeing and hearing, but one of being seen, being heard; walking becomes a form of performance, in which some form of personal action and some form of audience become conjoined.

It is in this context that we can consider two precursors to contemporary performance art—cultural manifestations that signal or anticipate what were to become essential hallmarks of the genre. The first is the Edwardian Dandy of the late 18th century; the second, the Parisian *flâneur* of the 19th century. While both are historically removed from what are often considered the mid-20th century origins of contemporary performance art, or even earlier 20th century performance activity of the artists associated with Dada and Surrealism, I suggest that they pointed the way toward a new awareness of the role of the artist as actor in the work, not simply producer of the work; in a very real sense, the locus of the artwork began to shift from object to action, from product to process. Both the Dandy and *flâneur* were walkers. Just as importantly, both walked not simply to exercise their capacities for mobility, but to realize their desire to see and be seen. Walking was a way of entering public space and gaining public visibility. The quest for visibility, the engagement of the spectacular, is what links these early actors to contemporary performance.

I suggest also, as we begin this sojourn, that how we understand performance as art—performance art—is enriched by, if not dependent on, our own sense of being embodied. That is, the capacity for empathy, engendered by feeling at a kinesthetic level what it is to inhabit a moving body, will be critical for

understanding the existential as well the political ramifications of performance. The mutuality of embodiment, as distinct from emotional or intellectual engagement, provides an important common ground.

In the late eighteenth century, the Dandy, in the person of George Bryan (Beau) Brummel, set foot on the social stage.³ The aim here is not to provide a detailed account of Brummel's life, fascinating though it was, but rather to extract what are significant aspects of his social performance. Brummel's habits and actions, perhaps initially perceived as eccentric, ultimately coalesced into a type, a style (dandyism) that is still emulated today.

Brummel (1778-1840) was born in a period of political revolution and social upheaval, although those events were at some remove from England, which had been engaged at a distance in the American colonies, and was not directly affected by the violence in France. Those events did however, set in motion a significant shift in the way in which the individual, the person was positioned and empowered in the context of the erosion of the institutions of monarchy and aristocracy. Brummel, son of a well-positioned civil servant, attended Eton and Oxford, but soon left the university when, at the death of his father, he received an inheritance that would provide the means for fashionable self-cultivation, begun at Eton, and social mobility.⁴ Brummel, while at Eton, came to the attention of the Prince of Wales, son

³ In the positioning of the Dandy as a progenitor of the contemporary performance artist I am very much indebted to Professor Moira Roth, an art historian at Mills College. She shared this insight with me in conversation in Spring 2005 when she was in residence at the Department of Art and Art History, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. The extrapolations made here are my own.

⁴ Ellen Moers, *The Dandy: Brummel to Beerbohm*. Moers' study of the genealogy of dandyism and its exemplars remains the definitive historical account, and the

of George III, and after leaving Oxford, was taken into the Prince's escort regiment. The regiment was itself known for its elegant style, and Brummel's inclusion as well as the residual perquisites that came with being an intimate of the Prince (most notable were the seemingly endless lines of credit with tailors and gambling clubs) allowed for a full flowering of Brummel's quest for perfection of social presence. Royal favor had already begun to be withdrawn by the time the Prince was named Regent of England in 1811; Brummel found himself without either prior status or means. However, as Ellen Moers notes, rather than alter his behaviors, he continued to maintain the lifestyle that had come to define him, until one evening, when he left London for Dover and then to Calais, across the Channel, where he lived until 1830. He then served for a brief period as the British consul in Caen, where he lived, with the deteriorating remnants of his former lifestyle, until his death in 1840.

Imagine meeting Brummel at the height of his performative powers. He was small in stature but, at least until his self-exile, of well-cultivated physique, necessary for the wearing of a carefully constructed wardrobe that served, in large part, to create and enhance his social persona. Though later connotations of dandyism assumed a style of excess, Brummel's clothing conveyed a sense of elegant restraint. The Brummel who stepped out onto the streets of London was the product of an elaborate and hours-long ritual of preparation: bathing, shaving, discarding neckcloth after neckcloth in order to achieve the perfectly tied cravat. In his narrative portrait of Brummel and the style he inspired, Jules Barbey D'Aurevilly wrote that "...his clothes...were worn with concern, as though they weighed nothing.

details of Brummel's life are drawn largely from the chapter devoted to him, pp. 17-38.

A Dandy may spend ten hours a day dressing, if he likes, but once dressed, he thinks no more about it. It is for others to notice that he is well-dressed.”⁵

Thomas Carlyle, author of *Sartor Resartus*, noted that “A dandy is a Clothes-wearing man, a Man whose trade, office, and existence consists in the wearing of Clothes.”⁶ Oscar Wilde, a latter-day adherent of dandyism, would say, “One must either wear a work of Art or be a work of Art.” Brummel’s body could be said to have become the canvas or the armature on which the accouterments of style were arrayed, and that his daily ablutions constituted the creative process by which his social persona was readied for public presentation. As noted, the basis for social status was shifting from birthright to other forms of social currency; not born to aristocratic status, Brummel’s cultivation of self was part of positioning himself as a gentleman as manifested in both behavior and appearance.

One other aspect of the phenomenon of Brummel is worth noting here and that is the way in which his emergent identity as a Dandy implicated his masculinity. Brummel never married, though he enjoyed social relationships with women. It is as if any form of intimacy, other than masculine camaraderie, would threaten to pierce and disarrange the formal façade in which so much time and energy was invested, a façade that nevertheless did not feminize its author, but presages the malleable nature of gender categories. Later manifestations of dandyism would appeal to those who preferred ambiguity in gender identify, and one might see echoes of

⁵ Jules Barbey D-Aurevilly, *Dandyism*, 1844, translated by Douglas Ainslee 1896, PAJ Publications, New York, 1968, p. 53. D’Aurevilly himself was known as a Dandy in 19th century Paris.

⁶ As quoted in Moers, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

dandyism in such contemporary personalities as the metrosexual male and the glam rocker as well as in the more thorough devotees, male and female, of the tradition.

Some of the key characteristics of social performance that might be extrapolated from Brummel's unique exemplar include first, an implied critique of the then-prevailing social hierarchy, as he worked to create a new persona that initially distinguished itself by difference and ultimately created a new style⁷; second, the idea that a sense of person could be created through the aggregation of visual characteristics centered in dress and certain behaviors; and third, the dependence of that visual presentation on a ritualized sequence of preparatory behaviors, in which aesthetic considerations were of primary concern.

Moers' detailed account of the history of the Dandy and the dandy tradition traces the interdependent cultural relationships between England and France in the 19th century, and the sightings of others who followed in the tradition, from Disraeli and Dickens to the Count d'Orsay and Baudelaire. For the purposes of this discussion, we shift from London of the early 19th century to Paris of the mid- and late 19th century, from the Dandy to the *flâneur*; with that shift comes the realization of how integral the nature of social space is to social performance. Brummel inhabited an insular world,⁸ in which a crucial part of his performance was dependent not simply on being seen, but on being seen in the right places, by and

⁷ As Charles Baudelaire noted, in his essay "The Painter of Modern Life," "Dandyism appears above all in periods of transition, when democracy is not yet all-powerful, and aristocracy is only just beginning to totter and fall." *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, translated and edited by Jonathan Moyne, Phaidon, London, 1995 (2010).

⁸ D'Aurevilly, op. cit., p. 69. "A Dandy is more insular than an Englishman, for London society is like an island in an island..."

with the right people. Brummel's London, which in many ways was an aggregate of smaller villages that had grown organically,⁹ was markedly different from the city of Paris, newly given a more structured coherence by the grand design of Baron Haussmann. The original Dandy, Brummel, had given rise to a style, an attitude; the *flâneur* was primarily an archetype, a role—a fictive creature who nevertheless epitomized the performative scope of urban mobility. Rebecca Solnit adds that "The only problem with the *flâneur* is that he did not exist, except as a type, an ideal, and a character in literature."¹⁰

The somewhat speculative etymology of the term *flâneur* is pithily summarized by Geoff Nicholson:

The French have truly hit the conceptual jackpot with the word *flâner*, a truly wonderful word in that it means simultaneously to walk and to not walk. It can indeed mean to stroll, but it can also mean the act of simply hanging around, staying right where you are and not walking at all. There is something gloriously perverse about this, and it is, of course, the root of *flâneur*.¹¹

It should be noted too that the *flâneur* was, like the dandy, male; the counterpart *flâneuse*, if used at all, carried the negative connotation of prostitute or street-walker, as women did not otherwise enjoy the same kind of public mobility. The profile of the *flâneur* comes initially from Baudelaire, who created a kind of composite portrait of the new bourgeois citizen who navigated the streets and

⁹ This point is made by Peter Ackroyd in *London: The Biography*, in which he likens the city to a body and expands on that corporeal metaphor in substantial detail. Nan A. Talese-Doubleday, New York, 2000.

¹⁰ Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2000, p.200.

¹¹ Geoff Nicholson, *The Lost Art of Walking: The History, Science, Philosophy and Literature of Pedestrianism*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2008, p. 24-25.

public spaces of Paris amid the crowds who also inhabited them. In the essay “Crowds” from *Paris Spleen*, Baudelaire wrote that

It is not given to every man to take a bath of multitude; enjoying a crowd is an art; and only he can relish a debauch of vitality at the expense of the human species, on whom, in his cradle, a fairy has bestowed the love of masks and masquerading, the hate of home, and the passion for roaming.

Multitude, solitude: identical terms, and interchangeable by the active and fertile poet. The man who is unable to people his solitude is equally unable to be alone in a bustling crowd.

The poet enjoys the incomparable privilege of being able to be himself or some one else, as he chooses. Like those wandering souls who go looking for a body, he enters as he likes into each man’s personality. For him alone everything is vacant; and if certain places seem closed to him, it is only because in his eyes they are not worth visiting.

The solitary and thoughtful stroller finds a singular intoxication in this universal communion...¹²

If Baudelaire created or gave greater visibility to the *flâneur*, Walter Benjamin followed in his footsteps. In a sense, the *flâneur* was for Baudelaire as Baudelaire was for Benjamin in their respective capacity to understand and navigate the complexities of modern urban life and its alterations of physical, social and aesthetic environments. Benjamin seems to echo Baudelaire in noting that “Flânerie could hardly have assumed the importance it did without the arcades...It is in this world that the flâneur is at home; he provides the arcade...with its chronicler and philosopher...The arcades are something between a street and an *intérieur*...The street becomes a dwelling place for the flâneur; he is as much at home among house

¹² Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen* (1869), translated by Louise Varèse. New York: New Directions Books, 1947, p. 20.

façades as a citizen is within his four walls.”¹³ Elsewhere, Benjamin further explores the essential ambiguities of this urban environment and the *flâneur*'s deliberative positioning within it:

The *flâneur* still stands on the threshold—of the metropolis as of the middle class. Neither has him in its power yet. In neither is he at home. He seeks refuge in the crowd...The crowd is the veil through which the familiar city beckons to the *flâneur* as phantasmagoria—now a landscape, now a room. Both become elements of the department store, which makes use of *flânerie* itself to sell goods. The department store is the last promenade for the *flâneur*.¹⁴

Hausmann's transformation of Paris from medieval to modern made the city strange to its inhabitants, and its urban concentration created the crowd of strangers. As Solnit notes, “The crowd itself seemed to be something new in human experience—a mass of strangers who would remain strange—and the *flâneur* represented a new type, one who was, so to speak, at home in his alienation.”¹⁵ Benjamin seems to suggest nevertheless, utilizing a very un-urban metaphor, that the *flâneur* was not, himself, estranged from his environment but developed a different kind of mapping, a different kind of intentionality. “Landscape—that, in fact, is what Paris becomes for the *flâneur*. Or, more precisely: the city splits for him into its dialectical poles. It opens up to him as a landscape, even as it closes around

¹³ Walter Benjamin, “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” p. 68, in *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, edited by Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006.

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century” (1935), in *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 10.

¹⁵ Solnit, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

him as a room.”¹⁶ In this context, Benjamin’s description of the *flâneur* as one “who goes botanizing on the asphalt”¹⁷ is most *à propos*.

On the purposive nature of the *flâneur*’s peregrinations, Benjamin suggests that “The idleness of the *flâneur* is a demonstration against the division of labor,”¹⁸ and that “Basic to *flânerie*, among other things, is the idea that the fruits of idleness are more precious than the fruits of labor.”¹⁹ Solnit, in her essay on Benjamin entitled “Paris, or Botanizing the Asphalt,” notes, “One demonstration of this leisureliness...was the fashion, around 1840, for taking turtles for walks in the arcades. “The *flâneurs* like to have the turtles set the pace for them. If they had their way, progress would have been obliged to accommodate itself to this pace.”²⁰

From the *flâneur*’s identity, one created precisely through performance, the action of walking through the city, one might, as with the Dandy, extrapolate several defining characteristics. Like the Dandy, the *flâneur*’s actions served the purpose of individuation, though in the latter case it was not so much to stand out as a bright thread in the social fabric, but rather to move seamlessly through—or counter to—the crowd milieu. Each performance was also benignly contrarian, one in terms of visual appearance, the other in terms of place and pace. Both offered an inherent and in certain ways literal critique of social mobility, simply, at least to begin with, by walking.

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, “M [The Flâneur]” in *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., M1,4; p. 417.

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” op. cit., p. 68.

¹⁸ Ibid., M5, 8; p. 427.

¹⁹ Ibid., M20a, 1; p. 454.

²⁰ Solnit, op. cit., quoting Benjamin, pp.199-200.

The *flâneur* moved about in an urban environment that underwent not only architectural and spatial but social and political transformation. He also lived in a century that saw significant changes in the art world. The term avant-garde, identified initially with military strategy, came to be applied to that world, signaling a change in what was historically perceived as an evolutionary process of change in focus and dominant style. The combative connotations linked with the avant-garde²¹ were prescient in suggesting the increasingly contested nature of aesthetic discourse. The avant-garde was a critical element in a dialectic of both formal and philosophical alignment, as one “ism” ceded to another as antitheses to the prevailing perspective of “art for art’s sake.” Realism, Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Cubism, Futurism—each added new elements to the vocabulary of modernism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; each ultimately, and perhaps ironically, became part of the mainstream narrative of modernism as a perpetual avant-garde.

Though much less often included in the discussion of avant-garde performance, works by artists associated with Futurism as it developed in Italy might nevertheless be considered as having made a significant contribution to this history. Michael and Victoria Kirby suggest that the oversight might be due to both an antipathy to the Futurists’ alignment with Fascism, and to the Francophilic nature of most narratives of modernism in art, and make a convincing argument for

²¹ As David Hopkins notes, “The term ‘avant-garde’, which was first employed by the French utopian socialist Henri de Saint-Simon in the 1820s, initially had military connotations but came to signify the advanced socio-political as well as aesthetic position to which the modern artist should aspire.” *Dada and Surrealism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 2.

positioning Futurist performance as being a legitimate precursor of and significant contributor to the performative strategies of Dada and Surrealism.²² Futurism, which drew on the aesthetic agenda of Cubism but emphasized the concepts of speed and dynamism seen as essential to modern life and the rise of machine culture, fed developments in a variety of media, including painting, sculpture, writing and performance. Contributions in the medium of performance included the idea of Synthetic theatre or *sintesi*, which connoted a compression of time as well as of content.²³ These short “plays” also engaged the idea of simultaneity or multivocality, evident either in layered dialogue (often non-sensical) or in intermixed narrative. As the Kirbys note, “Above all, the compression of the *sintesi* was seen as a means of intensifying the direct impact of the performance.”²⁴ Futurist performance, dating from 1909, thus anticipated key aspects of Dada and Surrealism to come.

In this context, the expression of the avant-garde spirit that began to emerge in 1915, in response to the devastation of World War I, took on an identity that had less to do with any formal characteristics (unless those were couched as anti-formalism) and much more to do with a liberatory energy. Dada—debates about the origin of the name persist²⁵—had a relatively short life, from 1915 to about 1924, but a remarkably durable after-life, and included, for the first time, an aspect of performance that also contributed to the legacy of this art form.

²² Michael Kirby and Victoria Nes Kirby, *Futurist Performance*. New York: PAJ Publications, 1971, pp. 4-8.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

²⁵ John Elderfield, editor of Hugo Ball’s Dada diary *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* (Flight Out of Time), discusses this at length in his afterword to that volume. Translated by Ann Raimés. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, pp. 238-251.

What is Dada? A virgin microbe.
 Dada is a tomato.
 Dada is a spook.
 Dada is the chameleon of rapid, interested change.
 Dada is never right.
 Dada is soft-boiled happiness.
 Dada is idiotic.
 Dada is not a mystification. It is the entire human mystery.
 Dada is life. Dada is that which changes.
 Dada is nothing, nothing, nothing.
 Everything is Dada.²⁶

As such statements suggest, Dada, though born in part of the dark and desperate time of war and new revolution and imbued with a nihilist attitude—a response to the pervasive senseless nature of the world—was also capable of a kind of manic playfulness, transforming nihilism into creative nonsense.²⁷ As such statements also suggest, a significant part of the work of Dada was linguistic; if the world seemed to have lost its sense of reason and reasonableness, then to speak the truth of that world was to speak irrationally, to make manifest, to perform that lack of sense. Years later, Richard Huelsenbeck, associated with the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, reflected that “Dada was a moral protest not only against the war but also against the malaise of the time; it was an awareness that something was very wrong. The protest arose from a deep creative doubt. One must protest what is morally wrong. To protest what is wrong is a creative act. It becomes a power in itself.”²⁸ This points the way to a key aspect of the Dada philosophy, if one can call it that—the belief that

²⁶ Quotations from Dada tracts and manifestoes, as cited in *Dadas on Art*, edited by Lucy Lippard. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1971, p. 1.

²⁷ “Dada wanted to replace the logical nonsense of the men of today by the illogically senseless.” Hans Arp, quoted in *The Dada Reader: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Dawn Ades, p. 18. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006.

²⁸ Quoted by Hans J. Kleinschmidt, editor, in his introduction to Huelsenbeck’s *Memoirs of A Dada Drummer*, p. xviii. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974.

there cannot be, should not be, a separation between art and life; that art must embrace, not be insulated from, other experience, even the horrific.

Writing of the apparent paradox between the destructive and creative impulse within which Dada was infused, art historian Lucy Lippard has noted that

The Dada gestures of apparent nihilism served a triple purpose. They could “épater le bourgeois” and undermine the regime; at the same time they served to contradict the popular conception of Eternal Art, and provided, often literally, a blank page on which the new spirit could be written afresh...The Dadas were determined to destroy Art not because they themselves could actually reject what art stood for, but because for them it was a weapon important enough to effect change rather than to be embalmed in salons, museums, and universities. Dada was antimaterialist in its stress on change, on temporary media, and on action rather than the construction of lasting objects constantly increasing in value. Like the guerrilla art and theater of the 1970s, Dada dramatized the painful state of the old society while actively working for a new one.²⁹

It should be noted that Dada was anything but monolithic and coherent. There was a diverse (and often personally antagonistic)³⁰ coterie of adherents, and multiple centers of activity at various times in New York, Zurich, Berlin, Cologne, Hanover and Paris, each with its own creative agenda that, varyingly, embraced poetry, visual art, and theatre, often in startling admixtures.³¹ In Zurich, the Cabaret Voltaire was created by Hugo Ball as a gathering place and performance space. Dawn Ades remarks that

Performance, which was Zurich Dada’s primary modus operandi, had its origins in Ball’s idea of theatre as a form of total expression. Belief in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (the total work of art) was widespread at the

²⁹ Lucy Lippard, in the Introduction to *Dadas on Art*, op. cit., p. 11-12.

³⁰ Lippard notes that Robert Motherwell’s anthology *The Dada Painters and Poets* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981 (1951) almost had to be abandoned since Richard Huelsenbeck and Tristan Tzara each refused to participate if the other were to be included; *Dadas on Art*, p. 2.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-7.

time. But Dada's approach was novel. Dada's simultaneous poem, unlike Futurist simultaneity, which aimed to simulate the multiple stimuli of the modern city, was deliberate confusion designed to provoke. As the idea of 'total expression' disintegrated, so did the polite gap between performer/s and audience. Baiting the public became a feature of Dada events and at the same time there was the kernel of an attitude shared by other (future) Dadaists such as Marcel Duchamp: the audience was to be part of the 'work'.³²

One example of this new aesthetic was Tristan Tzara's simultaneous poem "L'amiral cherche une maison à louer" (The admiral seeks a house to rent), one of the first works to be performed in Cabaret Voltaire. The text, which appears as a cross between a concrete poem and a musical score, includes words (not all of them intelligible) in English, French and German, to be read by Tzara, Richard Huelsenbeck and Marcel Janco.³³ In his "Note pour les bourgeois" (Note for the Bourgeoisie) that accompanies the text, Tzara also makes reference to the interactive or audience-participatory nature of the work:

I wanted to realize a poem...which consist[s] in the possibility of letting each listener make links with appropriate associations. He retains the elements characteristic of his personality, mixes them, the fragments, etc., remaining at the same time in the same direction the author has channeled.³⁴

The strategy of arbitrary juxtapositions of words and sounds, working against the conventions of syntax and meaning, found their visual counterpart in collage and assemblage, combinatory processes first associated with early Cubism; such strategy, in retrospect, also seems to anticipate sampling, mash-ups and other appropriative, mixing techniques that are now so engrained in 21st century popular

³² Dawn Ades, editor, *The Dada Reader: A Critical Anthology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006, p. 18.

³³ Reprinted in Ades, op. cit., p. 21.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 21.

culture. It is also yet another way of negotiating sense/nonsense, creating syntactical or other spaces from which new significance might arise. The simultaneous deliberate creation of discomfort through strangeness, coupled with the appeal to one's innate desire to make sense of that strangeness, is perhaps another way of saying that Dada is at once everything and nothing.

This strategy, this aesthetic tactic, points to another aspect of Dada performance that should be explored at greater length, and that is its intentionally confrontational nature. If Dada made much of moving between polarities, seeking to be a moving target for detractors, it was anything but ambiguous in this context. J. H. Matthews, writing in his introduction to his study of Dada and Surrealist performance, notes that "...Dada developed a form of spectacle—the word *manifestation* ('demonstration,' 'celebration,' 'outburst,' 'revelation') being used in French to describe performances put on before the public by those militating for Dada—that was essentially a deliberate act of provocation. From the first, an instinct for showmanship in Tzara guided Dada toward exhibitionism."³⁵ Such provocation, as Matthews notes elsewhere, had as much to do with confounding audience expectation and experience as it did with undermining the textual and technical aspects of theatrical tradition.³⁶ Writing of another of Tzara's works, *Le Coeur à Gaz*, in which the players are parts of the face (Tzara himself was Sourcil [eyebrow]), Matthews states,

"The play fulfills the function for which it was conceived when people watching it feel excluded, denied the chance to participate either

³⁵ J. H. Matthews, *Theatre in Dada and Surrealism*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1974, p. 6.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9ff.

intellectually or emotionally in what is happening before them. Everything hinges upon the author's contempt for the traditional theatre and upon the care he takes to insist that the effect obtained do not result simply from inexperience, ineptitude, or accident. This is to say that [the play] was written for an unsympathetic, or even hostile audience, whom Tzara intended to antagonize, not placate.³⁷

Elsewhere, he also observes that "...we must recognize that misuse of convention [of the theatre] is a means for transforming drama into a vehicle better suited to conveying elements to which Dada and surrealism, each in its own way and for its own reasons, grant importance. Subversion rests upon the distortion and disruption of inherited theatrical practice."³⁸

It is not surprising that such treatment of audiences would result in attrition, and that the element of surprise could not be sustained indefinitely. In retrospect, Dada gains greater significance through the performative range it opened for those who would follow several decades later. Annabelle Melzer summarizes this connection in observing that

There is hardly a theatrical "innovation" perpetrated on our contemporary audiences by the environmental and psycho-physical theatres, the happening and the event, which had not been explored before 1924 by Tzara, his cohorts and disciples. The iconographic fantasy level of the dada plays and performances, the plastic quality of the staging, the innovations of costume and sound, the flow of energies between performer and audience were not equaled in the contemporary theatre until the 1960s. The emphasis on process and spontaneity in the creative act released a set of energies which blew the world of performance wide open.³⁹

Melzer, in her later discussion of the Dada artist and performance theory, suggests that "Dada was at its inception more involved with a style of life than with a system

³⁷ Ibid., p. 34-35.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 274.

³⁹ Annabelle Melzer, *Dada and Surrealist Performance*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994 (1980), p. xiv.

of aesthetics, more involved with existence than with art.”⁴⁰ Automatism in writing found its counterpart in spontaneous, improvisatory action; “This combined stand of anti-art, anti-history, anti-permanence and pro-spontaneity makes it quite a simple step to an understanding of the dadas’ valuing of ‘process’ (the manner by which the work is accomplished) above ‘product.’”⁴¹ Melzer also makes a useful and critical distinction between three kinds of actors: the skilled actor whose technical/physical prowess is foregrounded; the masked actor who disappears behind a mask or role; and the personal actor, who is always already only himself.⁴² It is the last who re-emerges, mid-20th century, to continue the impulse of performance as art.

In his lively recollections of an era in and through which he lived, Hans Richter, a colleague of Tzara and others in Zurich, provides not only a history of Dada, but also a connection between that short-lived but resonant moment and the first mid-century sightings of what would come to be known as performance art. He writes of being told by Marcel Duchamp, in the fall of 1962, of “Happenings” that were then taking place in New York City, and describes one that took place around a massive structure that had been constructed in a tenement courtyard by Alan Kaprow (an early participant in and theorist of performance art.) The structure served as the locus of various individual actions before being destroyed. Richter sums up his response to the event:

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 58.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 59.

⁴² Ibid., p. 60. Melzer notes, as an example of the personal actor, “We can hardly look at Dustin Hoffman in a role without seeing Dustin Hoffman.” One might think of this as another way of frame the convergence of the spheres of art and life.

A Ritual! It was a composition using space, colour and movement, and the setting in which the Happening took place gave it a nightmarish, obsessive quality, although the ‘meaning’ of the ‘action’ was more or less non-existent. This combination of acting, dramatic arrangement, colour and sound recalled the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) of Kandinsky, Ball, and others. It required the collaboration of the public. Of course, Happenings are not paintings, but this one was close to visual art in its traditional sense—and was also Dada.⁴³

If one traces Dada through its creative progeny, one line may be seen to extend from object-art such as Duchamp’s “readymades” through Rauschenberg’s “combines” and Warhol’s cans and boxes, as Dada becomes Pop. Another line, of more concern in the present context, moves through the staged provocations of Tzara and others to those Happenings and the collective works of Fluxus and the Situationists, reemerging in extended bodies of work by individual artists, including those women, the focus of this study, who realized in the genre of performance art its politically liberatory potential.

The scope and manifest diversity of performance art has been comprehensively described by art historian Kristin Stiles:

Performance artworks vary from purely conceptual acts, or mental occurrences, to physical manifestations that may take place in private or public. An action might last a few moments or continue interminably. Performances could comprise simple gestures presented by a single artist, or complex events and collective experiences involving widely dispersed geographic spaces and diverse communities. They could be transmitted by satellite and viewed by millions, appear in interactive laser discs, and take place in virtual reality. The action might be entirely silent, bereft of language, or inclusive of lengthy autobiographical, fictional, historical, or other narrative forms. Performances could occur without witness or documentation, or they might be fully recorded in photographs, video, film, or computers.⁴⁴

⁴³ Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*. London: Thames & Hudson, Ltd., 1997 (1964), p. 212-213.

⁴⁴ Kristin Stiles, “Performance Art,” in Kristin Stiles and Peter Selz, editors, *Theories*

With such an exhaustive range of possibilities, one might ask “What is not performance?” Indeed, the term has come to be applied more frequently, from the over-the-top theatricality of Lady Gaga to the flash mobs created through the technology of social networking. It has also been characterized in its focused intent as “extreme aesthetic behavior” by the performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña.⁴⁵ The latter is worth dismantling briefly for the insight it provides into what might be considered the defining characteristics of the genre. “Extreme”—performance art (much like Dada performance) generally operates outside of or beyond a conventional or hegemonic set of expectations, often testing both the performer’s body and/or an audience’s notions of propriety. “Aesthetic”—performance art, even that which is spontaneous or unscripted, can make the claim to art (or not) by virtue of the considerations of shaping praxis that go into its realization; at some level there is consideration given to its formal or iconographic aspects, its engagement of tangible materials, or the impact it will have on those who observe it. “Behavior”—performance art is a way of moving, a way of acting, a way of doing things, saying things with the body in socio-spatial contexts. Combined, these concepts result in an experience that is potentially transformative for both performer and, if present, the audience as well. Though often ephemeral, or known only through the mediation of some more durable form of representation (e.g., filmic documentation) performance works may create a permanent shift in thought and perception precisely because

and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, p. 680.

⁴⁵ Gómez-Peña, Guillermo, video interview and performance, from Henry A. Sayre, *A World of Art: Works in Progress* series, 1994.

they speak, most viscerally, to other(s') bodies—an idea to which we will return. This shift is also described by Gómez-Peña: “It is true that the performance itself carries a transformative seed, a seed that nests in the psyche of the audience and slowly grows in the weeks and months following the event.”⁴⁶

Since those mid-century days of Happenings and other performance events, artists have explored the full range of possibilities that Stiles has summarized. What follows here is, necessarily, a brief survey of that terrain, but one that is intended to provide a more ample context for the individual artist profiles to follow.

A broad-brush summary of major movements in the western art world in the period following World War II would necessarily include a shift in the major center of the art world from Europe to the United States, from Paris to New York in particular. This was due in large part to the arrival, during the period of war, of emigrés from Europe—artists, writers, and others—who brought with them the strands of modernity that so profoundly shaped artmaking throughout the 20th century. Primary among these was the idea of abstraction as a definitive response to the hegemony of representation—the idea that there was more to be understood and depicted in visual experience than what simply and literally met the eye. Other sources of ideas—the inner life of the mind, the emotive potential of color, the response to the ever-animated pace of life in industrialized urbanized society—these ideas and more sought expression beyond what simple depiction could provide.

⁴⁶ Gómez-Peña, Guillermo, and Roberto Sifuentes, *Exercises for Rebel Artists: Radical Performance Pedagogy*. London: Routledge, 2011, p. 6.

If a connection is sought between this big-picture narrative and the emergence of performance as art—elements of a foundation, as noted, having been laid earlier in the century—one might point to the grand gesture of paint being flung across a canvas that became the signature of the artist Jackson Pollock. In an essay written in 1958, two years after Pollock's death, Allan Kaprow, who would emerge as a central figure in the orchestration of the early Happenings, wrote about Pollock's transformative legacy. Pollock was instrumental in the development of what came to be known as Abstract Expressionism, a synthesis of two tendencies transplanted from Europe in a way that solidified a kind of passing of the mantle of modernity and, in retrospect, was perhaps its last grand manifestation. In Kaprow's analysis, Pollock's anti-formalist approach to painting was both liberation and liability:

With Pollock...the so-called dance of dripping, slashing, squeezing, daubing, and whatever else went into a work placed an almost absolute value upon a diaristic gesture....With the huge canvas placed upon the floor, thus making it difficult for the artist to see the whole or any extended section of "parts," Pollock could truthfully say that he was "in" his work. Here the direct application of an automatic approach to the act make it clear that not only is this not the old craft of painting, but it is perhaps bordering on ritual itself, which happens to use paint as one of its materials.⁴⁷

Kaprow continues, in addressing how a viewer might respond to such works, by noting that

I am convinced that to grasp a Pollock's impact properly, we must be acrobats, constantly shuttling between an identification with the hands and body that flung the paint and stood "in" the canvas and submission to the objective marking, allowing them to entangle and

⁴⁷ Allan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock (1958)," in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, Jeff Kelley, editor. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, p. 3-4.

assault us...The artist, the spectator, and the outer world are much too interchangeably involved here.⁴⁸

In writing of Pollock, Kaprow echoes what had been the century's refrain—that the separation of art and life must and would be broken down, and that both artist and audience would be “in” the work. “Pollock, as I see him, left us at the point where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms, or, if need be, the vastness of Forty-second Street.”⁴⁹ Extrapolating from Pollock's making the very gestural process of painting integral to and visible in the work of art, Kaprow anticipates the advent of Happenings and events, the first of which would occur the following year.

In his essay “Happenings in the New York Scene,” written in 1961 when such events had become part of the ambience, part of the scene, Kaprow, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, but echoing the early appeal to the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, provided a “kaleidoscopic sampling” of the synesthetic experience one might have, before moving on to offer a more analytic discussion of this emergent genre, its characteristics beginning to coalesce while at the same time it seemed to resist being overly aligned with or subsumed within other forms of performance, most particularly theatre—unless one were, like the Dadaists, to rethink theatre itself. “To my way of thinking, Happenings possess some crucial qualities that distinguish themselves from the usual theatrical works, even the experimental ones of today.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

First, there is the *context*, the place of conception and enactment.”⁵⁰ Kaprow goes on to make the point that in contrast to the process by which plays are written to be performed in a theatrical space, or works of art are created in an artist’s studio but presented to the public in a setting such as a gallery or a museum in which certain formal expectations and protocols pertain, “Happenings invite us to cast aside for a moment these proper manners and partake wholly in the real nature of the art and (one hopes) life. Thus a Happening is rough and sudden and often feels ‘dirty.’ Dirt, we might begin to realize, is also organic and fertile, and everything, including the visitors, can grow a little in such circumstances.”⁵¹

A second quality that distinguishes Happenings from plays is the absence of plot or narrative thread (thus making it less dependent on written language to make sense or provide meaning); this unscripted (or minimally scripted) nature of the event allows it to unfold in a more improvisatory manner, like jazz or action painting such as had been developed by Pollock.⁵² Kaprow then moves to identify a third critical feature of Happenings and that is the involvement in chance.

This may initially appear as a corollary of improvisation, but Kaprow pushes the concept further, beyond the capacity to respond to the changing circumstances of a given moment, to a point where one embraces a state of permanent contingency, knowing that one cannot be aware of all the consequences of any act, once set in motion. As he observes, “Chance then, rather than spontaneity, is a key

⁵⁰ Allan Kaprow, “Happenings in the New York Scene (1961)”, in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, Jeff Kelley, editor. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, p. 17.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.18.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

term, for it implies risk and fear (thus reestablishing that fine nervousness so pleasant when something is about to occur.)”⁵³

In making his fourth and final point about what sets Happenings apart as art, Kaprow points to their impermanence—unfolding actions not making objects, with un-precious or perishable materials, not reproducible given their moment-specific, chancy nature.⁵⁴ Though Kaprow noted elsewhere in this essay that Happenings profess no obvious philosophy, he later notes, echoing Huelsenbeck’s appeal to the inherent moral position of Dada, that

The significance of the Happening is not to be found simply in the fresh creative wind now blowing. Happenings are not just another new style. Instead, like American art of the late 1940s, they are a moral act, a human stand of great urgency, whose professional status as art is less a criterion than their certainty as an ultimate existential commitment.⁵⁵

Five years later, Kaprow wrote again about the status of Happenings in an essay entitled “The Happenings Are Dead: Long Live the Happenings!” Despite the impermanence of any given event, the phenomenon itself proved to be remarkably hardy, acquiring something of a mythic status, perhaps even retaining that of an avant-garde. Noting that there were at that point more than forty artists engaged in some kind of Happening in more than a dozen countries, Kaprow for the first time set out what he considered to be the organizing principles of these events, emergent from practice, rather than ideologically mandated. They are worth citing here as they still resonate as touchstones in performance.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 19.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 20.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 21.

1. The line between the Happening and daily life should be kept as fluid and perhaps indistinct as possible...
2. Themes, materials, actions, and the associations they evoke are to be gotten from anywhere except from the arts, their derivatives, and their milieu...
3. The Happening should be dispersed over several widely spaced, sometimes moving and changing, locales...
4. Time, closely bound up with things and spaces, should be variable and independent of the convention of continuity...
5. The composition of all materials, actions, images, and their times and spaces should be undertaken in as artless and, again, practical a way as possible...
6. Happenings should be unrehearsed and performed by nonprofessionals, once only...
7. It follows that there should not be (and usually cannot be) an audience or audiences to watch a Happening.⁵⁶

By the mid-1960s, the collective and collaborative energy that created the initial wave of Happenings had been dispersed, the genre evolving. In his 1967 essay “Pinpointing Happenings,” Kaprow cited a number of instances in which the popular press had co-opted the term to apply to everything from cosmetics to Christmas to the war in Vietnam.⁵⁷

The increased visibility of Happenings and related action-oriented events meant that this new approach to or strategy of art-making ultimately converged with the interests of those who had been marginalized—in the art world, the larger society, or both. Some of those also engaged, beginning in the decade of the 1960s, with the potent narratives of civil rights, women’s rights, and gender liberation, found in the genre of performance a new voice for a new form of political engagement. Performance artists have remained active since the 1960s, though with

⁵⁶ Allan Kaprow, “Happenings Are Dead: Long Live the Happenings! (1966),” in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, Jeff Kelley, editor. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, pp. 62-64.

⁵⁷ Allan Kaprow, “Pinpointing Happenings” (1967), in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, Jeff Kelley, editor. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, pp. 84-89.

varying degrees of visibility and intensity. The last decade—the first of the new millennium—has seen a heightened interest in performance as it has, despite Kaprow's earlier prognostications, become institutionalized, archived, and re-created. As will be shown, Happenings, and the diverse iterations of performance art that were to follow, were implicated in the politics internal to the art world—from what constituted a work of art, to who might legitimately create one, to the workings of a market economy that increasingly drove it. Performance art also continued to address what had been expressed since early in the 20th century—that an art fully engaged in, inseparable from life, could prove to be efficacious in creating a heightened awareness of broader existential issues and an understanding that the artist's body and the body politic were also inseparable.

CHAPTER III: SETTING THEORIES IN MOTION

What emerges in considering the historical unfolding of mobile bodies, whose presence confronts us in often-provocative ways, is a need to find ways to understand such encounters—and understand them not only in the context of a viewing audience, but in the context of their political valence. This chapter is focused on developing both a theoretical framework as well as identifying several analytic tools, understanding the need for a pluralistic, multivalent approach—given the extraordinary range of the hybrid genre of performance—while still being grounded in a holistic, integrated sense of the performing body.

I want to develop further the implications of the linguistic tropes that arise from the notions of the “body politic” and “body language,” understanding that the body, and the female body in particular, already carries a substantial burden of signification. As will be shown in the case studies to follow, numerous examples of performance art by women provide an important counter-narrative to that tradition; they may also run the risk, in some cases, of reinforcing a hegemonic, masculinist, heterosexist frame. Is it possible to think about the body *per se*? Perhaps not, but I want to hold that as an open question.

My point of departure is a metaphor, signaling both the centrality of language—the means by which and the contexts within which it does its work—and the capacity of language (metaphor as a linking device) to place otherwise disparate worlds into dialogue. The metaphor of the body politic has a venerable history, from Plato and Aristotle onward through Hobbes and others; configurations of that entity might be in some formulations, organic; in others, mechanistic. This is not the

occasion to trace in detail the history of the nuances of the metaphor or its interpretation, but two points are germane. First, as philosopher Susan Bordo notes, the “body” in question was human⁵⁸ and, insofar as it was sexed, was male⁵⁹, reinforcing the split with (female) nature; put another way, a distinction was implied between the natural body and the political body. Second, despite the differences in the way in which this body politic was conceived or articulated, an underlying assumption has been that the individual body is an integral part of the larger polity, state, or civic whole. A relevant corollary is that the gendering of each body is a key factor in what part that body might play, and how it is positioned relative to the whole.

If one thinks about “body language” as the voice of the “body politic,” I want to suggest that we consider, first, some specific attributes or requisite aspects of language, broadly understood. I would define those attributes as follows: First, language is expressive—arising from the subject position of the speaking mind, the speaking body. Second, it is communicative—not just “speaking,” *per se*, but engaging those pre-positional linkages of speaking to, or speaking with. Third, it is intelligible—received in a way that opens a space for response and reciprocity.

One might say, upon hearing the words or seeing the actions of another, “I was very moved by what she said / did.” But what does it mean to “be moved” in this way? What kind of resonant movement, metaphorical or otherwise, does this invoke? I suggest that the performative capacity of the body, as evident in

⁵⁸ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: California University Press, 1993, p. 21.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

performance art, resides not only in the articulation of the subject/performer's personhood, but in its power to mobilize, to "set in motion" an other's body as well, creating a relationship that may be collaborative or sequential. Put another way, we might consider performance to engage certain corporeal themes that empathy makes intelligible, and we will return to the notion of empathy at a later point.

Let us, then, begin another perambulation, the point of departure here being the notion of philosopher J. L. Austin, that one can "do things with words."⁶⁰ Austin noted that there were certain kinds of utterances in which the saying constituted a doing, in which the statement itself had the force of action. He then asked,

What are we to call a sentence or an utterance of this type? I propose to call it a *performative sentence* or a performative utterance, or, for short, 'a performative.'...The name is derived, of course, from 'perform', the usual verb with the noun 'action': it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action—it is not normally thought of as just saying something.⁶¹

Austin's distinction between the statement, which would be judged on the basis of its being true or false, and the performative, which would need to be considered in relation to convention and context, marked a significant turning in the linguistic road. Of the performative, a term that as far as is known Austin did invent, he noted, "This is rather an ugly word, and a new word, but there seems to be no word already in existence to do the job."⁶² Austin's diffidence about the term notwithstanding, the notion of the performative capacity of language—its power to make things happen, as distinct from its more passive capacity to state or describe—would itself be

⁶⁰ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955), Oxford University Press, New York, 1965.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6-7.

⁶² J. L. Austin, "Performative Utterances," in *Philosophical Papers*, edited by J. O. Ormson and G. J. Warnock, Oxford University Press, London, 1970, p. 235.

transformative, revealing a new sense of the efficacy of speech and what is also known as the speech-act. Austin did suggest limits of this power by citing the importance of both ritual conventions and situational context in providing a kind of foundation for such utterance; the paradigmatic “I now pronounce you husband and wife” would be diminished or even become nonsensical without a communal understanding of the marriage contract, the authority—and first-person singularity—of the speaker, and the situational and ceremonial frames within which it is often placed.⁶³ Yet if speech-act, convention, and context do converge, it could be said that a new reality, a new kind of truth-in-the-present-tense, emerges. Austin’s linguistic insights become one mark against which to measure other kinds of performance. Austin himself, in working to develop a list of verbs that generated explicit performatives, would later acknowledge that the distinction between constative (statements or descriptions) and performative utterances was not as tidy as initially proposed, and that many statements might, in fact be implicitly performative in nature.⁶⁴ Jonathan Culler, in considering the ways in which Austin’s formulation was taken up in the context of literary theory and criticism, notes that “...the performative brings to center stage a use of language previously only considered marginal—an active, world-making use of language, which resembles literary language—and helps us to conceive of literature as act or event.”⁶⁵ He later addresses the dilemma that emerged for Austin—the permeable boundary between the constative and performative—in stating,

⁶³ Ibid., pp. 237-241. Austin’s discussion of possible “infelicities” when these necessary conditions are absent further underscores the social grounding of speech.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 246ff.

⁶⁵ Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory*. New York: Sterling, 1997, p. 134.

At this stage in the history of the performative, the contrast between the constative and the performative has been redefined: the constative is language claiming to represent things as they are, to name things that are already there, and the performative is the rhetorical operations, the acts of language, that undermine this claim by imposing linguistic categories, bringing things into being, organizing the world rather than simply representing what is.⁶⁶

Culler's discussion of Austin in the context of literary theory underscores another facet of the performative that is critical to the analytic framework being developed here, and that is the aesthetic dimension—the shaping practices (e.g., the “rhetorical operations”) that can be said to create the “form” in performative.

Austin has been invoked by other theorists, but most notably in this context by Judith Butler, whose important next step in this journey was to build on Austin's framing of performative speech in the articulation of the concept of “performativity,” moving from the idea of efficacious speech to a dynamic notion of gender identity, moving from being to doing one's self. If unsettling the very understanding of gender has been integral to Butler's general critique of feminism, the insight that gender is not something one has, but something one does, provides a powerful vantage point for that disruption, which does much of its work in the context of language. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler “troubles” the “[c]ategories of true sex, discrete gender, and specific sexuality [that] have constituted the stable point of reference for a great deal of feminist theory and politics.”⁶⁷ Butler goes on to call into question the categories of “women” and “the body”:

...is there a political shape to “women,” as it were, that precedes and prefigures the political elaboration of their interests and epistemic point of view? How is that identity shaped, and is it a political shaping

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 140.

⁶⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1990 (1999), pp. 163-164.

that takes the very morphology and boundary of the sexed body as the ground, surface, or site of cultural inscription? What circumscribes that site as “the female body”? Is “the body” or “the sexed body” the firm foundation on which gender and systems of compulsory sexuality operate? Or is “the body” itself shaped by political forces with strategic interests in keeping that body bounded and constituted by the markers of sex? ⁶⁸

Part of Butler’s interrogation of the language of sex and gender involves calling into question several dualisms or binaries, including the Cartesian mind/body, the heteronormative male/female, and the existential inside/outside or self/other⁶⁹—all of which, one might note, are heavily invested in boundary maintenance, and what Butler elsewhere calls “the surface politics of the body.”⁷⁰ The imperative to maintain a discrete and coherent being leads to

“...words, acts, gestures and desire [that] produce the effect of an internal core or substance but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.”⁷¹

At this point, Butler makes another critical move when, in the context of a discussion of drag, she notes that

“...we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 164.

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 164-170.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 172.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 173.

dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance.”⁷²

The theatrical nature of drag brings us back to the importance of the aesthetic potential of the performative, or what Butler considers a question of “style”: “Consider gender...as a corporeal style, an “act,” as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where “*performative*” suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning.”⁷³ Despite the fact that “...we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” and that the process of “sedimentation of gender norms” also reinforces corporeal styles that in turn reinforce the heteronormative binary,⁷⁴ Butler’s addition of gender performance to the more conventional categories of sex and gender moves us well beyond nature and nurture with the critical additions of agency and action, and with them the potential for creative subversions of the constraints of those categories. Butler cautions us, however, that gender as performative carries other implications—first, that it not only is, but must be, inherently reiterative, and second, that the performance is not simply expressive of identity but constitutive of it. Butler asks,

In what senses, then, is gender an act? As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and a re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation.⁷⁵

She continues,

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity

⁷² Ibid., p. 175.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 177.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 178.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 178.

tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*...This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as a constituted *social temporality*.⁷⁶

It is, finally, the arbitrary, rather than the “natural” or “essential” quality of gender, and its framing within the conventions of the language of social interaction, that opens the space for other enactments. Butler concludes,

If gender attributes, however, are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal. The distinction between expression and performativeness is crucial. If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction.⁷⁷

The terrain that Butler explored in *Gender Trouble* would continue to occupy her. The materiality of “the body” and the materiality of “sex” (as against, for example, the notion of their social construction) remained problematic; *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* was Butler’s subsequent rethinking (both expanding and repudiating) of a constellation of ideas, including the concept of performativity. As Butler candidly noted,

Matters have been made even worse, if not more remote, by the questions raised by the notion of gender performativity introduced in *Gender Trouble*. For if I were to argue that genders are performative, that could mean that I thought that one woke in the morning, perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day and then restored the garment to its place at night...But if there is no subject who decides on its gender, and if, on the contrary, gender is part of what decides the subject, how might

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 179.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 180.

one formulate a project that preserves gender practices as sites of critical agency?⁷⁸

Butler then poses other questions: “Is there a way to link the question of the materiality of the body to the performativity of gender? And how does the category of “sex” figure within such a relationship?”⁷⁹ Taking up Foucault’s characterization of “sex” as a regulatory ideal,” Butler states that “...‘sex’ not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce—demarcate, circulate, differentiate—the bodies it controls...In other words, ‘sex’ is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time.”⁸⁰ Expanding on the initial formulation of the reiterative nature of performance, Butler observes, “That this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is compelled”; it is this instability that provides the opportunity for non-normative rematerialization.⁸¹ In revisiting the notion of gender performativity in the context of corporeal materiality, Butler reaffirms that “...performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects it names.”⁸² She goes on to add, “...what constitutes the fixity of the body, its contours, its movements, will be

⁷⁸ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”*. New York: Routledge, 1993, p. x. Butler later also cautions against assuming the “voluntarist subject” (p. 15.)

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

fully material, but materiality will be rethought as the effect of power, as power's most productive effect."⁸³

Butler later returns more forcefully to the notion of power in developing additional nuances of gender performativity:

Counter to the notion that performativity is the efficacious expression of a human will in language, this text sees to recast performativity as specific modality of power as discourse. For discourse to materialize a set of effects, "discourse" itself must be understood as complex and convergent chains in which "effects" are vectors of power...The power of discourse to materialize its effects is thus consonant with the power of discourse to circumscribe the domain of intelligibility.⁸⁴

With the hegemonic force of the "heterosexual imperative"⁸⁵ ever the adversary, the discursive power struggle thus extends, as noted in *Gender Trouble*, to border controls, now recast in terms of bodies that matter and those—marginal or beyond the pale—that do not.

The normative force of performativity—its power to establish what qualifies as "being"—works not only through reiteration, but through exclusion as well. As in the case of bodies, those exclusions haunt signification as its abject borders or as that which is strictly foreclosed: the unlivable, the nonnarrativizable, the traumatic.⁸⁶

Butler turned again to J. L. Austin and to another power of language—its power to wound—in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. As an extended musing on such manifestations as hate speech, pornography and the U. S. military's homophobic policy of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," Butler's critique proceeds through a series of questions ("When we claim to have been injured by language, what kind of a claim do we make?...Could language injure us if we were not, in some sense,

⁸³ Ibid., p. 2.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 187.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 2.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 188.

linguistic beings, beings who require language in order to be?"⁸⁷) In the context of Butler's earlier considerations of the materiality of the body, such questions take on added weight in considering both the interface between discourse and corporeality and the power exercised by the one who utters such injurious speech. Citing Austin's distinction between illocutionary (something done in/by the speaking) and perlocutionary (something that happens as a consequence of the speaking) utterance, and the need to situate any speech act within the larger context of socio-linguistic conventions, Butler suggests that what is part of the injury, if not fully constitutive of it, is the "...loss of context, that is, not to know where you are. Indeed, it may be that what is *unanticipated* about the injurious speech act is what constitutes its injury, the sense of putting its addressee out of control."⁸⁸ In a sense, Butler again points to, as she did earlier with specific reference to gender performativity, an inherent instability or volatility in such discourse.⁸⁹ If Culler noted the world-making potential of the performative, Butler reaffirms its opposite:

Language sustains the body not by bringing it into being or feeding it in a literal way; rather, it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body first becomes possible...[but] If language can sustain the body, it can also threaten its existence. Thus, the question of the specific ways that language threatens violence seems bound up with the primary dependency that any speaking being has by virtue of the interpellative or constitutive address of the Other.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 1-2.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁸⁹ Elsewhere, Butler, identifying the term "excitable" within the legal context, notes that "My presumption is that speech is always in some ways out of our control." (p. 15)

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5. Butler explicitly acknowledges Althusser's formulation of interpellation as a calling or a naming.

Butler's discussion also leads her to review the question of agency; in prior commentary this had to do with (one's own) gender performativity; here it is seen in the context of speech acts that are brought to bear on another's person. Here again language serves as both means and effect:

We do things with language, produce effects with language, and we do things to language, but language is also the thing that we do. Language is a name for our doing: both "what" we do (the name for the action that we characteristically perform) and that which we effect, the act and its consequences.⁹¹

However, Butler also reminds us that speaker and addressee are both implicated; "If the subject who speaks is also constituted by the language that she or he speaks, then language is the condition of possibility for the speaking subject, and not merely its instrument of expression."⁹² What emerges then, is the beginning of an ethical question as well as an empathic dilemma: if speaker and addressee both exist within a shared linguistic frame, each may realize the consequences of language that is injurious, regardless of the speaker's initial intention. As Butler goes on to note,

If performativity requires a power to effect or enact what one names, then who will be the "one" with such a power, and how will such a power be thought? How might we account for *the injurious word* within such a framework, the word that not only names a social subject, but constructs that subject in the naming, and constructs that subject through a violating interpellation?⁹³

However, Butler later also notes that seemingly violative utterances—of context, of person—are not *de facto* counter-productive, another way, perhaps, of underscoring the creative potential of linguistic instability:

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 8.

⁹² Ibid., p. 28.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 49.

...one must understand language not as a static and closed system whose utterances are functionally secured in advance by the “social positions” to which they are mimetically related. The force and meaning of an utterance are not exclusively determined by prior contexts or “positions”; an utterance may gain its force precisely by virtue of the break with context that it performs. Such breaks with prior context or, indeed, with ordinary usage, are crucial to the political operation of the performative. Language takes on a non-ordinary meaning in order precisely to contest what has become sedimented in and as the ordinary.⁹⁴

Butler moves toward closure then in re-calling the performative, noting that “...the social performative is a crucial part not only of subject *formation*, but of the ongoing political contestation and reformulation of the subject as well. The performative is not only a ritual practice; it is one of the influential rituals by which subjects are formed and reformulated.”⁹⁵ Butler goes on to “...raise the possibility of the speech act as an insurrectionary act”, concluding that “Within the political sphere, performativity can work in...counter-hegemonic ways. That moment in which a speech act without prior authorization [here I read performance art] nevertheless assumes authorization in the course of its performance may anticipate and instate altered contexts for its future reception.”⁹⁶

From “excitable speech” to “fearless speech”: just as Butler opened the way for a kind of speech-act that is socially or politically transgressive rather than personally injurious, Michel Foucault engages comparable terrain in his discussion of *parrhesia*.⁹⁷ It is worth considering in some detail Foucault’s discussion, originally

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 145.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 160.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 160.

⁹⁷ Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, edited by Joseph Pearson. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001.

presented as a series of lectures on “Discourse and Truth,”⁹⁸ as it captures many of the rich and problematic nuances of free speech that is also protected speech, while also providing a critical examination of the sociopolitical context within which such speech may take place, and of the nature of the obligation assumed by such a speaker.

Using its etymological roots in Greek philosophical and literary tradition as a point of departure, Foucault outlines five essential characteristics of *parrhesia* and of the speaker or parrhesiast.⁹⁹ The first is the quality of frankness, the speaking of one’s mind without withholding anything and, perhaps more importantly, without the persuasive strategies of rhetorical devices. As Foucault notes, “In *parrhesia*, the speaker is supposed to give a complete and exact account of what he has in mind so that the audience is able to comprehend exactly what the speaker thinks. The word *parrhesia*, then, refers to a type of relationship between the speaker and what he says.”¹⁰⁰

The emergent implications not only of personal conviction but also of credibility anticipate the second characteristic, truth. Foucault moves quickly to distinguish between positive and pejorative connotations of *parrhesia*, noting of the latter that it represents “...a characterization of the bad democratic constitution where everyone has the right to address his fellow citizens and to tell them

⁹⁸ As editor Joseph Pearson notes, the lectures were given at the University of California at Berkeley in the Fall of 1983.

⁹⁹ Where Foucault uses *parrhesiastes* I will use an anglicized version, as does philosopher Joseph J. Tanke, author of *Foucault’s Philosophy of Art: A Genealogy of Modernity*. London: Continuum, 2009, p. 185 and elsewhere.

¹⁰⁰ *Fearless Speech*, p. 12.

anything—even the most stupid or dangerous things for the city.”¹⁰¹ Returning to the literal requisite “to tell the truth,” Foucault considers that the speaker, in sincerely and frankly stating his opinion, is able to do so because he *knows*¹⁰² that what he says is the truth; “The second characteristic of *parrhesia*, then, is that there is always an exact coincidence between belief and truth.”¹⁰³

In noting that the parrhesiast may be known for his courage in speaking the truth, Foucault identifies a third characteristic, danger. It is not sufficient to tell the truth as one knows it; the choice of speech over silence will involve some risk, corporeal or otherwise, to the speaker and yet he, fearless, will speak anyway. As Foucault describes it,

...when a philosopher addresses himself to a sovereign, to a tyrant, and tells him that his tyranny is disturbing and unpleasant because tyranny is incompatible with justice, then the philosopher speaks the truth, believes he is speaking the truth, and more than that, also takes a *risk* (since the tyrant may become angry, may punish him, may exile him, may kill him.)¹⁰⁴

What is of interest and import here is the question that is raised about the sociopolitical status of the speaker (philosopher or not), the kind of power that attends to truth-telling (as distinct, say, from tyrannical or authoritative power), and, as Foucault notes, the integrity that pertains in one who chooses to speak the truth even in the face of danger.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 13; Foucault’s emphasis here.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 14. It is important to note here that Foucault considers how the truth of *parrhesia* differs from the modern or Cartesian notion of evidence, concluding that perhaps “...*parrhesia*, in this Greek sense, can no longer occur in our modern epistemological framework”; that is, that truth-telling now lies beyond the moral qualities or *bona fides* of the speaker per se.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 16.

The question of status is foregrounded in Foucault's discussion of the fourth characteristic of criticism. Here Foucault describes *parrhesia* as "...always a 'game' between the one who speaks the truth and the interlocutor [the one spoken to]."¹⁰⁵

He goes on to note that

...the function of *parrhesia* is not to demonstrate the truth to someone else, but has the function of *criticism*: criticism of the interlocutor or of the speaker himself...always in a situation where the speaker or confessor is in a position of inferiority with respect to the interlocutor...always less powerful than the one with whom he speaks.¹⁰⁶

The fifth characteristic Foucault defines as a sense of duty in truth-telling, the moral obligation to speak even when one might otherwise choose to keep silent. As he notes, "*Parrhesia*¹⁰⁷ is thus related to freedom and to duty." This sense of relationality or the importance of context figures strongly in Foucault's summing up:

...*parrhesia* is a kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relationship to truth through frankness, a certain relationship to his own life through danger, a certain type of relationship to himself or other people through criticism (self-criticism or criticism of other people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty."¹⁰⁸

While Foucault's emphasis has been, to this point, based on the conduct of an individual, he does note, in a discussion of Athenian democracy, that "...*parrhesia* was a guideline for democracy as well as an ethical and personal attitude characteristic of the good citizen."¹⁰⁹ Further it was considered a privilege of citizenship and as "...a requisite for public speech, takes place between citizens as

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 17-18.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 22.

individuals, and also between citizens construed as an assembly.”¹¹⁰ This underscores the relational, one might even say social-contractual nature of such “speech activity.”¹¹¹

Following an analysis of the emergence of *parrhesia* in the plays of Euripides, and continuing an historical survey of its changing nature in philosophical practice, Foucault is attentive to the shift in the function of such speech activity that, for him, results in a crisis that has two key aspects. First, who can speak in such a way? “Is it enough simply to accept *parrhesia* as a civil right such that any and every citizen can speak in the assembly if and when he wishes? Or should *parrhesia* be exclusively granted to some citizens only, according to their social status or personal virtues?”¹¹² The tension between egalitarian and meritocratic positions was, as Foucault notes, heightened by the fact that *parrhesia*, unlike other privileges of citizenship, did not have an institutional or legal basis: “...how is it possible to give legal form to someone who relates to truth? There are formal laws of valid reasoning, but no social, political, or institutional laws determining who is able to *speak* the truth.”¹¹³

A second aspect of the crisis as Foucault defines it, and one that precedes and anticipates the need for an evidentiary basis of truth referred to earlier, is the relationship between *parrhesia* and knowledge and education. “The *parrhesiastes*’

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 22.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 13. Foucault uses this locution specifically, and distinguishes it both from John Searle’s “speech act” and from J. L. Austin’s “performative utterance” in order to also distinguish *parrhesia* and its commitments “from the usual sorts of commitment which obtain between someone and what he or she says.”

¹¹² Ibid., p 72.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 72.

relation to truth can no longer simply be established by pure frankness or sheer courage, for the relation now requires education or, more generally, some sort of personal training.”¹¹⁴ The crisis then (and perhaps still now) thus circulates around the notion of truth; if the requirement of education, even in an environment of free speech, was intended to provide a safeguard against ignorant opining, it may not be sufficient to protect against self-deception that erodes credibility, regardless of the boldness of the speaker. Foucault’s concluding remarks to his lecture series again return to what he calls the “problematization” of truth (a term he defines as a way of framing something historically and philosophically as a focus of reflective praxis, as for example, his work on sexuality or mental illness.)¹¹⁵ That this work—and the conditions that give it rise—is ongoing is reflected in Foucault’s framing of a series of questions that, while they reflect a Socratic world, nevertheless resonate still:

And finally: What is the relation between the activity of truth-telling and the exercise of power? Should truth-telling be brought into coincidence with the exercise of power, or should these activities be completely independent and kept separate? Are they separable, or do they require one another? These four questions about truth-telling as an activity—who is able to tell the truth, about what, with what consequences, and with what relation to power—seem to have emerged as philosophical problems toward the end of the Fifth Century around Socrates...”¹¹⁶

The value of truth as a basis for sound reasoning, and as a means of aligning idealist and materialist conceptions of the world, constitute one dominant strand in the philosophical traditions that followed; the role of truth-telling, of *parrhesia*, as a

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 73.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 171.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 170.

profoundly social activity, informs the tradition of critical inquiry. A case can also be made for its being implicitly performative in spirit.

* * * * *

We began this analytic walkabout in order to follow the implications of the metaphor of “body language” where they might lead us, and in order to identify a set of conceptual tools that would serve in the analysis of specific practices of performance art that will follow. This has involved several leaps across or extrapolations from the work of three theorists—Austin, Butler and Foucault—who have had things to say about bodies, language and performance. I want now, first, to briefly summarize what I find at this point to be some of those tools.

Austin provides the critical point of departure and some important connective material in his formulation of the performative utterance and the insight that language has an efficacy beyond its constative or descriptive capacity; that is, that one can do as well as say things such that the saying and the doing are simultaneous. Further, since the notion of “truth” emerges as relevant throughout, it can be said that the performative mode of speech has the potential to create new truth, new reality. The performative utterance in speech becomes an analogue for body language and body (performance) art specifically, and understanding that this language is thus a project of corporeal hermeneutics.

Butler uses a bit of word-play to move from Austin’s performative utterance to her own formulation of performativity, utilized specifically in the production and maintenance of a nuanced gender identity that may resist (and for Butler, mostly does) heteronormative dualism. Butler’s position is useful in revealing (or, to use

Foucault's terminology, problematizing) both some fractures within feminist theories as well as the perpetual dilemma of how to think about the body. It is perhaps most useful in this context in offering a way of thinking about gender, and gendered personal identity, as something not that one has, but that one does or performs, and, further, has a responsibility for keeping in motion—reiterating, refreshing. Though Butler identifies situations of disparity between sex, gender and gender performance (e.g., in drag performance that deliberately subverts a tidy alignment of these categories), it is not unreasonable to conclude that in general, gender performance that enables one to escape the confines of a heteronormativity found to be oppressive in order to move closer to the truth of one's own person is a valuable practice.

If Butler engages the notion of body language through the idea of gender performance, which may span the spectrum from benign or playfully transgressive to the boldly confrontational, she also takes on more literal speech acts—ones that carry the potential and perhaps the intention of social disruption or psychic injury. In this more recent work, one can see potential connections both with Austin's performative utterances and with Foucault's *parrhesia*, though with the latter, properly understood and practiced, psychic injury to another might be a consequence of truth-telling, but would never be the object *per se*.

Though the social and political conditions of modern society are radically different from Athens of many centuries ago (even if we still idealize the democratic tradition), public spaces still exist, and are still protected, in which the free exercise of speech may take place. We have, perhaps, uncoupled, to our peril, the expectation

of moral rectitude from the exercise of such speech. The exercise of *parrhesia*, even if by other names, and in previously unimaginable conditions or contexts, may still occur, and may still occasion the same questions: who speaks, and to whom, what is their truth, and what is the power of their language? It is not, then, too great a next step to suggest that performance artists, whose bodies are their voices, and whose bodies are often vulnerable and at risk, also participate, as modern parrhesiasts, in the genealogy of this tradition of truth-telling.

In addition to reflecting on these theorists of language as it is socially produced and deployed, I want to identify and briefly discuss a few other facets of or themes in a theoretical framework that will be engaged in the discussion of specific artists and/or some of the questions their work raises. I also want to provide some way-markers to what I hope will be a destination—thinking about why the rather arcane practices of a few artists might be worth examining and how we are to attend to and interpret them.

To a considerable extent, our path must circle back from time to time to the body, and the tension between essentialist and constructivist views about the body, between, as for example framed by Butler and others, the facticity of anatomical difference and the gendered implications that might follow. One often-cited example is the way in which the declaration, on the occasion of new birth, “It’s a girl!” is not only constative—a statement of “fact” but also a performative, solidifying the ascription and inscription of gender. In a context in which the visual and the physical are privileged, how are the most immediately self-evident features of the body seen *per se* (sometimes even *in utero*) and how do they point the way or

determine the less visible but no less critical aspects of the person? Diana Fuss provides a particularly cogent discussion of two key perspectives, noting that “essentialism is classically defined as a belief in true essence—that which is most irreducible, unchanging and therefore constitutive of a give person or thing” while constructionism “...insists that essence is itself a historical construction” and is more concerned with the various systems of representation and discourse by which differences are constructed and maintained.”¹¹⁷

Fuss further notes that “Essentialists and constructionists are most polarized around the issue of the relation between the social and the natural...[W]hile the essentialist holds that the natural is *repressed* by the social, the constructionist maintains that the natural is *produced* by the social.”¹¹⁸ The intent here is not to examine in detail these two positions (Fuss proceeds to build a convincing argument about their mutual dependence and interpolation), nor to provide a detailed taxonomy of the various kinds of bodies that may be and have been invoked. Rather, the key is that the body, a real entity, the habitus of the person, has become radically over-encoded in both politics and art, presenting a formidable challenge to new ways of thinking about bodies, and to the rescue of the body-as-signifier from the excessive constraints of signification.

Each of the individual analyses of the work of specific performance artists will engage issues not only of what is said, but how that saying is produced, which raises questions of style or an aesthetic framework. Another issue, therefore, is how

¹¹⁷ Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference*. New York: Routledge, 1989, p. 2.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

to understand the dialogue, often tension-laden, between aesthetics and politics. The emergence of the genre of performance art necessitated the rethinking of many aspects of the traditional model of the artworld and its attendant social relations and cultural conventions. It also required a reconsideration of the long and often uneasy relationship between art and politics. Jacques Rancière's essay on the politics of aesthetics allows us to move away from the old debates and look instead at the underlying power relationships, discursive practices, and mutually implicating interests that pertain to both arenas of action. As Rancière observes,

[Art] is political insofar as it frames not only works or monuments, but also a specific space-time sensorium, as this sensorium defines ways of being together or being apart, of being inside or outside...It is political as its own practices shape forms of visibility that reframe the way in which practices, manners of being and mode of feeling and saying are interwoven in a commonsense, which means a "sense of the common" embodied in a common sensorium.¹¹⁹

Here one may read yet another, albeit implicit invocation of the body politic (the common sensorium.)

Politics is also understood as a space-framing practice (comparable perhaps to Butler's notion of gender performativity as operative in boundary maintenance), as Rancière notes it is "...the framing of a specific sphere of experience, the setting of objects posed as 'common' and of subjects to whom the capacity is recognized to designate those objects and discuss about them..."¹²⁰ and in which part of the political is having the power to decide who speaks and about what.

¹¹⁹ Jacques Rancière, "The Politics of Aesthetics," posted by Bojana Cvejic at <http://www.theatre.kein.org/node/view/99>.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

Framing and shaping practices, themselves shaped by aesthetic and political concerns, are what Rancière calls “the partition of the sensible—that distribution and re-distribution of times and spaces, places and identities, that way of framing and re-framing the visible and invisible, of telling speech from noise and so on...” Politics and art are two “conditional realit[ies], tied in an “aesthetical knot.”¹²¹ As I understand and will use the term, “aesthetics” connotes the purposeful shaping of sensory experience, which applies across a broad spectrum. “Politics,” in turn, connotes the purposeful shaping practices of social experience. The concept of “purposeful shaping practice” then allows me to ask other questions, and perhaps move to a point of convergence between the two domains: If purposeful, to what end? Whose purpose? What is shaped—materials, time, space, feeling, power? Is the shaping only formal or material, or something more? Does the shaping also occur on the receiving end—is affect or cognitive response also shaped in the process? Who makes a qualitative judgment about shaping—that is, is there “good” or “not good” shaping? What is different about shaped experience that is different from “just” life in general? I can also ask, does a common dynamic provide common ground for politics and aesthetics?

That conceptual common ground (here one is also reminded of Rancière’s “common sensorium”) also translates into concerns about a literal commons, for we must acknowledge that real bodies occupy real spaces, and that performing bodies often engage unconventional spaces and in so doing often transform them. Such engagement may force a rethinking of the private/public divide, a subject of

¹²¹ Ibid.

considerable discussion among feminist theorists because of the gender-based assignments of many aspects of aspects of life—who may do what in each domain, as well as the fact that what may be done (especially things intimately corporeal) in private may not be done in public—that also resonate with a personal/political differentiation. In this context, the work of Michael Warner provides a wealth of insight, beginning with his formulation of multiple “publics,” which while they may exist spatially are perhaps better conceived of as the fluid aggregations created by changing modes and foci of discourse or, as Warner describes them, “intertextual.”¹²² One of Warner’s primary concerns is the management of sexualities that are seen as counter-hegemonic in the context of heteronormativity. At one point he asks, not simply rhetorically, “What kind of world would make the values of both publicness and privacy equally accessible to all?...How would the experience of gender and sexuality have to be different in such a world?”¹²³ His observation that the calculus of gendered performance, implicated by the fact that “...not all sexualities are public or private in the same way”¹²⁴ resonates with Butler’s formulation of gender performance and the double-bind created by the regulatory practices (boundary maintenance) operative in public spheres: on the one hand, the desire to speak/perform the truth about one’s person (one hears echoes of Foucault here as well), and on the other, the constraints on, and consequences of, such performance. Warner develops a nuanced taxonomy of what

¹²² Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*. Cambridge: Zone Books, 2002, p. 16.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

“a public” is, beginning with its discursive core,¹²⁵ including its often *ad hoc* socio-spatial relations through which discourse circulates¹²⁶, and concluding with the observation, very much in line with Culler’s observations about performative utterances, that “A public is poetic world-making.”¹²⁷ This last characteristic would seem particularly relevant to Warner’s notion of “counterpublics”—and to the kinds of spaces created through the discourses of performance art. As he notes, “Counterpublics are ‘counter’ to the extent that they try to supply different ways of imagining stranger sociability and its reflexivity; as publics they remain oriented to stranger circulation in a way that is not just strategic but constitutive of membership and its affects.”¹²⁸ Warner’s idea of “stranger sociability”—what I understand to be benign or amiable encounters with the unknown or the different—seems particularly relevant in understanding the performative underpinnings of publics, and the fact of the inherent plurality not only of such convergences on common ground, but of those embodied beings who inhabit them and move between them.

Kimberley F. Curtis, in a reading of Hannah Arendt’s observation that we are free, but non-sovereign, beings by virtue of our dependence on others, underscores the productive tension between plurality and common ground:

The crucial point here is that our capacity to experience a world in common, to constitute a certain worldly solidity, is utterly dependent upon the engendering ground of plurality itself, upon the aesthetic provocation of multiple, distinct appearing beings. If we can locate a

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

common world at all, therefore, it is paradoxically to be found only where this provocation flourishes.¹²⁹

World-making practices, whether poetic or quotidian, create spaces of performance that are not only political but existential.

We have considered languages—spoken, performed, metaphorical, corporeal—as essential to such world-making, from Austin’s performatives to Warner’s discourses, and we return again to the body itself as the site of language production and meaning-making. We asked earlier what it means to be moved by something said or done. While the structured conventions of verbal language provide a compelling framework for making sense—intellectual, affective—of things said, far fewer guidelines exist for reading and responding to the mobile body shaped by the individualized imperatives of performance, such as those to be analyzed in more detail in the chapters to follow. Where I believe we need to go, a journey intended to be guided by those analyses, is to a new understanding of how the body may act in the production of aesthetic and political experience, and how our reception of that experience may provide richer insight into our own embodied nature. This will involve an exploration, post-Cartesian, of the body as something more than an imperfect vehicle for the mind. As dancer and dance scholar Randy Martin has noted,

To the extent that the body was mistaken for mere form, as a cover for meaning contained within, all political moments have been expressed in terms of consciousness. If the body is recognized both for its

¹²⁹ Kimberley F. Curtis, “Aesthetic Foundations of Democratic Politics in the Work of Hannah Arendt,” in *Hannah Arendt & The Meaning of Politics*, edited by Craig Calhoun and John McGowan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 44.

material substance and its lived practice, then it too presents the possibility of a politics.¹³⁰

Choreographer and scholar Susan Leigh Foster, in her analysis of the concept of kinesthesia, appearing initially in the late 19th century, notes a similar problem: “Pervasive mistrust of the body and the classification of its information as either sexual, unknowable, or indecipherable, have resulted in a paucity of activities that promote awareness of the body’s position and motion...”¹³¹

Elsewhere, Martin emphasizes the role of the mobile body in animating politics as he writes:

Theories of politics are full of ideas, but they have been least successful in articulating how the concrete labor of participation necessary to execute those ideas is gathered through the movement of bodies in social time and space. Politics goes nowhere without movement. It is not simply an idea, decision, or choice taken at a moment but also a transfigurative process that makes and occupies space. When politics is treated merely as an idea or ideology, it occurs in stillness, awaiting something that will bring people to action or mobilize them. But this presumed gap between a thinking mind and an acting body makes it impossible to understand how people move from a passive to an active state. The presumption of bodies already in motion, what dance takes as its normative condition, could bridge the various splits between mind and body, subject and object, and process and structure that have been so difficult for understandings of social life to negotiate.¹³²

By extension, we may also understand “bodies in motion” to be the normative condition, perhaps the *sine qua non*, of performance art and perhaps of life itself, for lived and living bodies are never totally still.

¹³⁰ Randy Martin, *Performance as Political Act: The Embodied Self*. New York: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, 1990, p. 7.

¹³¹ Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance*. London: Routledge, 2011, p. 7.

¹³² Randy Martin, *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998, p. 3.

One final marker in this terrain needs to be put in place and that is the role of empathy as I intend to use it in concluding this project. I suggest that it involves a feeling response—a feeling with, a feeling into, a being moved (in this context, specifically with performance)—that is both affective and sensorial, focused on the ways in which one body may speak to, call to another. Just as performance art may provide greater insight into what it means to be an embodied person, the experiential cultivation of empathy may contribute to a heightened sense of care in the human community, cognizant of its vulnerability, its mortality.

By staging or orchestrating these encounters, unmediated by aesthetic distance or the formal clarity of a two- or three-dimensional work of art, performance artists create new communities, new publics with different networks of interpersonal or social relationships, breaking through spatial constraints and conventions and the boundaries of art and life, and asking us to ponder the ways in which they are connected and interdependent. Performance art takes us out of the ordinary even as it brings art closer to life—the familiar made strange, the stranger made sociable, the natural, queer—making it thus an eloquent medium of political critique, offering an exemplary, surrogate body by which to interrogate the body politic, adding to the dialogue of aesthetics and politics an ethical voice—essential dimensions of the ways in which one body, from a position of power or risk, may engage and speak to another.

CHAPTER IV: THE EROTIC BODY: CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN (1939 -)

Encountering the work...

Within the confines of the artist's studio—an environment of large panels and moving parts, mirrors and panes of glass, works in progress, passages of paint and accumulated props—the artist enters the frame, transforming this casual juxtaposition of materials into a *tableau vivant*. Her body, covered with passages of chalk, grease and paint, offers a new surface for marking; moving, it animates the shifting composition of this space.¹³³

For several hours, the artist is loosely suspended by her feet in an enclosed space, the walls, ceiling, and floor of which are covered with paper. With sticks of charcoal in her hands, she moves her naked body over and across the white expanse, writing her thought, her mark, her body in a kind of corporeal calligraphy that is, in part, imprinted back onto her own skin as she moves.¹³⁴

The artist approaches a table, covers it with a sheet she carries, mounts the table and, after removing a second sheet covering her, applies bold strokes of paint to her face and body. Announcing she will read from a tract entitled “Cezanne, She Was a Great Painter,” the artist embarks on her narration, holding her book while assuming various model poses typical of those in a life-drawing session. At a certain

¹³³“Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions” (1963), illustrated in Bruce R. McPherson ed., *More Than Meat Joy: Carolee Schneemann*, McPherson & Company, Kingston, NY, 1997 (1979), pp. 52-53.

¹³⁴ “Up To And Including Her Limits” (1973-1976), *ibid.*, pp. 224-227.

point, she sets the book aside, and standing upright, begins to draw a scroll from within her vagina, and begins to read.¹³⁵

The work of Carolee Schneemann—painter, collagist, writer, filmmaker, and pioneer in 20th century performance art—has a prepositional quality: it speaks of things within, and emanating out of, the body; of things on and around the body; of things done to and by the body. It is also about the body in a conceptual sense and—in a way that most defines it—about the body as the site of sensory experience that is often erotically charged.

Schneemann, who began her work in the mid-twentieth century years of expressive abstraction and the energized experimentation of the events known as Happenings, encountered—and countered head-on—not only the prevailing masculinity (if not misogyny) of the contemporary art world of postwar Europe and America, but also challenged its legacy of visual representation that, for the most part, positioned women as passive objects of scrutiny, surveillance, and desire. Schneemann's performance works would not only subvert expectations of silence and passivity, but would also contribute to the process of reclaiming and rearticulating, for and by women, their self-defined (and self-realized) sexualities.

Tracing the life...

Schneemann was born in Fox Chase, Kentucky, the daughter of a rural doctor, and raised in rural Pennsylvania and in Vermont. Of her childhood, she recalls that

I was drawing before I knew how to talk—drawing was like breathing for me. All kids draw, but I drew in sequences like stills from a film. I also started keeping notebooks—not only of dream notes, but of dream *drawings*.

¹³⁵ "Interior Scroll" (1975, 1977), *ibid.*, pp. 234-239.

Early in life I recognized that there was a certain ecstasy (akin to the sacred and holy—*orgasm*, even) involved in creating images within a frame...drawing and the erotic had this early bond...¹³⁶

She received her B.A. from Bard College, north of New York City, and her M.F.A. from University of Illinois in Chicago, where her first performance, *Labyrinths*, was staged in 1960.¹³⁷ Trained initially as a painter, her early work, though clearly figurative, utilized then-current ideas about the gestural nature of the act of painting, and the expressive qualities of semi-autonomous marks that coalesced into a coherent whole, building on the early 20th century legacy of Cezanne. She gravitated to New York as a painter, but both she and her work were radically transformed by that milieu, as much due to the prevailing social dynamic as to its avant-garde aesthetics. Like some of the artists in the New York School, she became interested in the potential of mixed-materials or multi-media as an alternative to traditional easel painting.¹³⁸

Schneemann was the first visual artist to work with the Judson Dance Group at the Judson Memorial Church on Washington Square¹³⁹, later also the site of several of her own works. The Judson Dance Group included several members who were transplants from the Dancer's Workshop Company, established in San Francisco by Ann Halprin, who used improvisatory techniques, systematically

¹³⁶ Carolee Schneemann in an interview with Andrea Juno, in Andrea Juno and V. Vale, editors, *Angry Women*. Re/Search Publications, San Francisco, 1991, p. 67.

¹³⁷ Moira Roth, Janet Burdick and Alice Dubiel, "Chronology: History / Women's History / Women's Performance Art," in Moira Roth, ed., *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America 1970-1980*. Astro Artz, Los Angeles, 1983, p. 47.

¹³⁸ Petra Loffler, in Uta Grosenick, ed., *Women Artists in the 20th and 21st Century*, Taschen, Koln, 2001, p. 482.

¹³⁹ Moira Roth, ed., op. cit., p. 130.

documented, to develop a new vocabulary for dance.¹⁴⁰ The group further evolved out of dance classes conducted by Robert Dunn in 1961-62 and presented its first concert in 1962, described later by participant-dancer Yvonne Rainer in Happening-like terms.¹⁴¹ The following year, when Schneemann joined them, the group expanded to include other dancers and visual artists, including Robert Morris and Robert Rauschenberg; they continued performing until 1968.¹⁴² Schneemann participated in sculptor Morris' 1965 work *Site*, albeit in a then-typical—and stereotypical—role. As Roselee Goldberg describes it, Morris, beginning with “a series of white panels which formed a triangular spatial arrangement,

...manipulated the volume of the space by shifting the boards into different positions. As he did so he revealed a naked woman [Schneemann] reclining on a couch in the pose of Manet's *Olympia*; ignoring the statuesque figure and accompanied by the sound of a saw and a hammer working on some planks, Morris continued arranging the panels, implying a relationship between the volumes of the static figure and that created by the movable boards.¹⁴³

Site, the sexism of which could be extensively interrogated, beginning with its appropriation of Manet's iconic work, stands in marked contrast to the works Schneemann herself was creating.

One of Schneemann's early works in the Judson environment was *Meat Joy* (created and performed in 1964 in Paris and London, and later the same year in New York); it subsequently became one of her signature works, not just celebrating the body *per se*, but reveling in its flesh and fluidity. Roselee Goldberg, noted

¹⁴⁰ Roselee Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present*. Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, 1979, p. 90.

¹⁴¹ Roth et al., op. cit., p. 49.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 50.

¹⁴³ Goldberg, op. cit., p. 92.

historian of performance art (and organizer of Performa, current biennial festivals of performance works in New York), described *Meat Joy* as

...a seventy-minute Dionysian spree in which male and female performers painted each other's semi-naked bodies (they wore fur-enhanced bikini underwear), rolled in tight embraces along the floor, crawled through mountains of paper, and threw red meat, fish, and dead chickens into the mix of hair, paint, bodies, and mattresses. A backing soundtrack included "My Guy," "Baby Love," "Noh Ho L'Eta," as well as Parisian street sounds.¹⁴⁴

In its use of intimate but non-sexual body-to-body encounters, the work anticipated in some ways what would later develop as contact improvisation, an important part of the world of post-modern dance.¹⁴⁵ It also manifested a connection with the artist's interest in multi-media, and in this case multi-sensory, experience.

Though Schneemann consistently explored the body's sensorium in ways that moved apart from or beyond the explicitly sexual, she gained early notoriety with *Fuses*, a short, silent film of the artist and her partner, musician and composer James Tenney, in the process of making love, created without the presence of a third party/camera operator, and with Schneemann's cat Kitch as the only onlooker. In a 1977 interview, some ten years after the completion of the film, Schneemann reflected on the work, which not only celebrated a long-term relationship, but was also part of a larger project to push at and break open the boundaries of painting, and interrogate the history of representation of women, women's bodies and

¹⁴⁴ Roselee Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art Since 1960*. Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, 1998, p. 44.

¹⁴⁵ Moira Roth, op. cit., p. 130. It is worth noting that most accounts of Contact Improvisation (CI) credit American choreographer Steve Paxton with its creation. Paxton was a key figure in the work of the Judson Dance Group in the mid-1960s. See also <http://www.contactquarterly.com/contact-improvisation/about/>

particularly women's sexuality, which, as she noted, had only "medical or pornographic models" as reference.¹⁴⁶

Explicit sexual imagery propels the formal structure of *Fuses*. Initially, it was clear to me that people were so distracted by being able to have a voyeuristic permission to see genital heterosexuality that it would take them—if they ever came back to see it again—many showings before the structure was clear: the musicality of it and the way it was edited. *Fuses* is very formal in how it is shaped; that was crucial to making it have a coherent muscular life. Visualized active, erotic bodies deflect the very structures of montage.¹⁴⁷

Schneemann also remarked that

All my work evolves from my history as a painter: all the objects, installations, film, video, performances—things that are formed. But the performative works—which are one aspect of the larger body of work—are all that the culture can hold on to. That fascination overrides the rest of the work. It is too silly, but it is still kind of a mind/body split. "If you are going to represent physicality and carnality, we cannot give you intellectual authority."¹⁴⁸

In *Fuses*, as in so much of her work, it would seem that Schneemann was intent not only on rewriting art history through her own body, but also healing that rupture, mending that estrangement that women have sometimes expressed about perceiving themselves. On another occasion, Schneemann considered that "As a painter you have to *see*...So when I made the film...I wanted to see if the experience of what I *saw* would have any correspondence to what I *felt*—the intimacy of lovemaking."¹⁴⁹ Schneemann thus found ways to be not only image and image-maker (as she had realized in creating *Eye Body*) but also both object and subject in relation to her own work.

¹⁴⁶ Interview with Kate Haug in *Carolee Schneemann, Imagining her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2002, p. 23.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁴⁹ Interview with Andrea Juno, *op. cit.*, p.70.

Schneemann's work, as noted, brought her into contact and collaboration with various art world cohorts, including the Judson Dance Group, Fluxus events, visual artists engaged in staging Happenings, and others. The decade of the 1960s also represented an extraordinary convergence of activism on multiple fronts, in response to the women's movement, civil rights initiatives, and the (undeclared) war in Viet Nam. Though Schneemann was attuned to her geopolitical milieu (*Snobs*, a five-part film/performance work created in 1967, was created in specific response to the war and the photo-graphic documentation of atrocities), her primary focus remained issues of the gender politics both in and beyond the art world—politics which remained quite intransigent even in the face of often-radical performative interventions.

Though Schneemann worked primarily as independently practicing artist, she did teach for a brief period in the late 1970s in the art department of Douglass College, a women's college associated with Rutgers University. She was the first female artist on the faculty, which included Allan Kaprow, Lucas Samaras, and others interested in developing curriculum at both undergraduate and graduate levels.¹⁵⁰ It was one of the early women graduate students, painter Joan Snyder, who actively worked for the inclusion of women on the studio faculty, a campaign that led to Schneemann's hiring.¹⁵¹ Another student, Letty Lou Eisenhauer, who had performed in one of Kaprow's Happenings, remembers a presentation that Schneemann made at Douglass College:

¹⁵⁰ Geoffrey Hendricks, ed., *Critical Mass: Happenings, Fluxus, Performance, Intermedia and Rutgers University 1958-1972*. New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2003, p. ix.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12-13.

I was deeply moved by the self-revelatory quality of her work...If art comes from somewhere deep within the creator, it felt like the inner secret life of Proust or Baldwin revealed, reviled, rendered, renewed, retained, remedied, remembered. Carolee's work has always contained qualities of personal magic and shamanism and the work seems to become more reclusive rather than more accessible. Her connection to the Flux group of performance artists seems somewhat tangential since she has always followed her own instincts. Among my early memories of Carolee is feeling her desire to be part of the mainstream of the art scene (as was the desire of most women artists of the time) and how she was treated with cruelty by the mainstream group.¹⁵²

Though, as is noted, Schneemann was not a central member of Fluxus, it is important to acknowledge the contributions it made to the spirit—and practices—of the times. Fluxus, an international group with anarchist tendencies that began in Germany in 1962 with Joseph Beuys and others, found new energy in the United States in the early sixties with John Cage as mentor and George Maciunas as theoretician and informally acknowledged “chairman.” Working in the creative spaces of concept and production that followed from Dada and Duchamp, Fluxus projects often involved word-play and frameworks for possible actions or events. Maciunas' *Manifesto*, for example, spliced printed dictionary text with hand-written interpolations linked to the word “flux,” so that a line from the dictionary—“...a flowing or fluid discharge from the bowels...”—became reinterpreted as “Purge the world of bourgeois sickness...PURGE the world of dead art, imitation, artificial art, abstract art, illusionistic art, mathematical art...”; and “...the setting in of the tide toward the shore” was coupled with “PROMOTE A REVOLUTIONARY FLOOD AND

¹⁵² Letty Lou Eisenhauer, “Memories of Imagination,” in Hendricks, op. cit., p. 96.

TIDE IN ART..."¹⁵³ The subversion and re-purposing of both texts and things was very much part of Fluxus strategy. Though not against the production of images and objects *per se* (the spirit of Duchamp lived on) Fluxus artifacts (which are often quite elegantly produced) were more intended as ironic incitements to actions with inherently egalitarian potential. As Jacquelynn Baas notes in her title essay for a recent exhibition of Fluxus material,

Fluxus introduced two new things into the world of art: event scores and art-as-games-in-a-box, many of which were gathered into "Fluxkits" along with other ephemera. The idea was to sell these kits at low prices—not through galleries but by mail and through artist-run stores. The events were even more accessible. Sometimes consisting of just one word, they could be performed by anyone, anyplace...Another thing that distinguishes Fluxus is the self-evident nature of its productions: the point is to experience Fluxus artworks for yourself.¹⁵⁴

Egalitarian, even proletarian though the Fluxus agenda may have been, and as compatible as its playful iconoclasm may have been to an artist like Schneemann, in the end the (male) members of Fluxus found her work disruptive—in large part because of the way it foregrounded a liberated view of women's sexuality—and she was "excommunicated" by Maciunas in the mid-1960s.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Illustrated in Jacob Proctor, "George Maciunas's Politics of Aesthetics," in *Fluxus and the Essential Questions of Life*, Jacquelynn Baas, ed., Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2011, p. 22.

¹⁵⁴ Jacquelynn Baas, "Fluxus and the Essential Questions of Life," in Baas, op. cit., p. 47. An event score is akin to a script or a musical score, though minimal (e.g., "Draw a straight line and follow it.") A Fluxkit would be like a set of miniature props that could facilitate an action, albeit only on a conceptual or imagined level (e.g., a kit for committing suicide.)

¹⁵⁵ Kristin Stiles, "Anomaly, Sky, Sex, and Psi in Fluxus," in Geoffrey Hendricks, ed., *Critical Mass*, op. cit., p. 69. Stiles makes the critical point of a double standard operative here as elsewhere, in which male artists could make use of women participants in their sometimes sexually oriented work, but women could not express their sexuality independently.

Journalist Robert Katz, who documented the tragic life and death of Ana Mendieta, captured the ambivalence with which the New York art world of this period responded to and dealt with women artists who, like Schneemann, were caught up in the creative fervor. Of the early 1960s New York scene, he writes,

...ever resourceful [sculptor] Claes Oldenburg created a series of “happenings”—fashionable fun art at the time—that consisted of performances involving sound, moving objects, and people, one of whom was a young painter named Carolee Schneemann, who made nude appearances and earned the tag “body beautiful.” Carolee would go on to become one of the great innovators of the movement, but these earlier versions were usually exploitative of women, who considered body performance art just another feature of male supremacy in the art world...

Women who did take up the genre received “encouragement” from a quarter they least expected. Notoriously insensitive to women participating in the mainstream art world as equal competitors, the same male establishment that had been ignoring their earlier work was suddenly approving of women working with their own bodies, the more attractive the body the better.¹⁵⁶

Katz thus provides another perspective on the prevailing double standard, and captures what could be considered a defining dilemma for women artists, caught between the long history of objectifying appropriation by male artists and their own quest for autonomous expression; caught between sexualized exploitation on the one hand, and their own often-essentialist forms of expression. Did artists like Schneemann liberate women’s bodies, or make them subject to continued misinterpretation and sexist reinscription? An unresolvable dilemma, an unanswerable question? Encumbered by what could be considered a radical iconographic over-

¹⁵⁶ Robert Katz, *Naked by the Window: The Fatal Marriage of Carl Andre and Ana Mendieta*. The Atlantic Monthly Press, New York, 1990, p. 140. Katz notes that the appellation “body beautiful” was included in Lucy Lippard’s article “The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women’s Body Art,” which originally appeared in *Art in America* in 1976, and was later reprinted in Lippard’s *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women’s Art*.

encoding, a woman cannot move freely out into the world; yet divested—both literally and metaphorically—she is challenged to create a new language, and confront the risks of finding a new place in that world. Schneemann's works, concentrated in the 1960s and 1970s, were an embodiment of risk-taking.

Engaging in conversation: themes and theories...

Carolee Schneemann explored characterizations of the female body/her body in ways that could be seen as essentialist in nature (e.g., developing a vagino-centric perspective in *Interior Scroll* as a response to the phallogentric, hypermasculine environment within she was working.) But Schneemann's extensive history of work also focused on the celebratory, sometimes ecstatic nature of the body, within which context a different perspective of (female) sexuality might emerge. While Schneemann's works were very much informed by a then-prevailing essentialist framing of the female body, they also signaled an intent to secure and liberate that body for other projects, particularly in the domain of celebratory erotic potential and a heightened sense of the lived and lived-in body.

Several themes are pertinent to Schneemann's work. The first, following the move made within the linguistic context, invokes the notion of "body language" and what it can do in performance. Language and other forms of social discourse might be considered the metaphoric clothing by which the female body—its contours, its range of motion, its vocabulary of affect and sensation—has been both defined and confined. As noted elsewhere, that has resulted in a radical over-encoding that creates formidable obstacles to rethinking the body, and to strategies of the recuperation of the body (the signifier) from a malignant flourishing of signification.

The work of Rebecca Schneider and Peggy Phelan provide useful tools in this context, as we consider how the body is capable of speaking on its own.

Second, a move can be made from those recognizing those artifacts of encumbrance to understanding their consequence: the constraints on motility and mobility that they create for the female body, in the sense of her ease of activity, and in the sense of how far and where she can move, and what she can do when she gets there. Here the work of Iris Marion Young provides particular insight on how to think of those constraints from the inside, from the perspective of embodiment.

Finally, Schneemann's work can be situated in the context of these issues, recognizing that she has, in her work, done a kind of double-turn: first quite literally divesting herself of corporeal cloaking devices, and placing herself at intentional risk as object of public gaze, and subsequently, by inverting the processes of encoding/inscription, offered her body as a site of new meanings, or meanings liberated of sexist detritus.

What is to be seen in the performing body? What does it say? It may be that many forms of performance art are perceived as extreme, perhaps because it is difficult if not impossible to imagine inhabiting those bodies in action. But if there is something excessive about performance art by women such as Schneemann, it may be the first counter-hegemonic move against the excesses of signification that must be dismantled, unwrapped. Whether in the context of art or otherwise, presentation of self is subject to constant negotiation and internal choreography. In this context, it is the management of excess, the contending signs that wait in the wings, that is inherently political in nature. We must negotiate the actual body, the virtual body,

the literal body, the symbolic body, the sacramental body, the erotic body, the chaste body, the mortal body, the universal body, the unique body, the naked body, the covered body, the desired body, the abject body, the private body, the public body, the natural body, the prosthetic body, the scripted body, the improvisatory body. In any performance, the often-elusive complexities of the body are distilled within a given body; the ephemeral nature of performance leaves behind a sense of the body unspoken, other bodies waiting to speak. That constitutes another kind of excess, an existential residue.

Noted performance theorist Peggy Phelan emphasizes the transitory nature of performance in observing:

Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations; once it does so it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance's being, like the ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance.

The pressures brought to bear on performance to succumb to the laws of the reproductive economy are enormous. For only rarely in this culture is the "now" to which performance addresses its deepest questions valued. (This is why the now is supplemented and buttressed by the documenting camera, the video archive.) Performance occurs over a time which will not be repeated. It can be performed again, but this repetition itself marks it as "different." The document of a performance then is only a spur to memory, an encouragement of memory to become present.¹⁵⁷

Phelan's characterization suggests several strands of significance that are relevant here. First, performance's seeming "excess" is balanced by its temporal austerity; in

¹⁵⁷ Peggy Phelan, "The ontology of performance: representation without reproduction," in *Unmarked: The politics of performance*, Routledge, New York, 1996, p. 146.

a sense that is not without a gentle irony, it can only be fully known for what it is when it is no longer. From this it might be understood that performance through the body speaks of the limits of the body—in particular its mortality; the corporeal limits of duration in time are juxtaposed with the extent of movement in space. Second, Phelan identifies one of the critical refusals that is an inherent part of the genre in its fundamental form—its deployment of “now”-time as a means of resisting (though not always successfully) reification (the “artwork”) and commodification (the valorized object.) (Schneemann, in utilizing ancillary and corollary materials, pushes against the “now”-time of which Phelan speaks as being integral to the fundamental nature of performance.) The irony here, of course, is that performance is often only known, and able to be reflected on, through those artifactual traces of which Phelan speaks, and which for her make it something other than (pure?) performance. This also seems to reinforce a comparable strategy within feminism itself as it addresses and seeks to resist the commodification *per se* of women’s bodies. Third, the invocation of the viewer through the “encouragement of memory” seems to suggest several possibilities.

Whose memory? Memory of what? Another of the key aspects of performance art, in addition to its resistance to commodification, is the way in which it repositions the viewer, often collapsing the psychic or aesthetic distance that may pertain in other contexts. Sometimes this is a consequential response to strong content (e.g., self-inflicted injury) or to the invocation of a reluctant voyeurism (e.g., observing an otherwise private act). But Phelan also seems to suggest that we consider the hook of memory and its connection to corporeal

experience, including perception. One who views a painting or a sculpture might take away and later recall an image and the attendant associations formed at the time of viewing. One who views a performance might take away a sequence of action, perhaps intimations of a narrative. But what might also be taken away is a memory that functions on a different level, one of somatic reenactment—though it was not the viewer’s body that performed, it is, at least in part, that body in which memory resides. If one views, either subsequently or initially, filmic evidence of a prior performance, that memory, though mediated and attenuated, may still “become present” to move one.

In another context, Phelan makes reference to “...the performative quality of all seeing,”¹⁵⁸ and elsewhere notes, “The belief that perception can be made endlessly new is one of the fundamental drives of all visual arts. But in most theatre, the *opposition* between watching and doing is broken down; the distinction is often made to seem ethically immaterial.”¹⁵⁹ Both of these insights reinforce this viewer-repositioning that on the one hand binds two bodies together in distinctive ways, and on the other, because of a resulting intimacy, engenders a different sense of obligation. Even though not engaged in the performance other than as an observer, one may nevertheless be implicated through both perception and memory. Put another way, performance art does some of its work by moving the viewer, at least metaphorically, into another body.

Rebecca Schneider pushes further on this relationship in commenting

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 147.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 161.

The notion of “performance” bears better than “construction” the complexities of complicity, in that it implies always an audience/performer or ritual participant relationship—a reciprocity, a practice—and as such the notion has become integral to a cultural critical perspective which wants to explore the dynamic two-way street, the ‘space between’ of self and others, subject and objects, masters and slaves, or any system of social signification.¹⁶⁰

Schneider acknowledges the difficulties of seeing women other than through the lens of extant signification in observing that “...there is no way a woman can escape the historical ramifications of that representation unless she passes from visibility as a woman, passing as a man. As ‘woman,’ she is preceded by her own markings, standing in relation to her body in history as if beside herself.”¹⁶¹

The doubling/splitting of “woman” is also taken up from a different perspective by Iris Marion Young in her essay “Lived Body vs. Gender.” Responding to Toril Moi’s essay “What Is a Woman?” Young explores Moi’s concept of the lived body (which in turn has a kinship with the work of Merleau-Ponty) as a means of moving beyond the limitations of the sex/gender distinction. Though one might consider that Butler had already done that through the triangulation of sex and gender with gender-performance, Young points out that Butler “...successfully calls into question the logic of the sex-gender distinction, yet her theorizing never goes

¹⁶⁰ Rebecca Schneider, “After Us the Savage Goddess: Feminist performance art of the explicit body, stage, uneasily, across modernist dreamscapes,” in Elin Diamond, ed., *Performance and Cultural Politics*, Routledge, New York, 1996, p. 156-157.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

beyond these terms and remains tied to them,"¹⁶² while "Moi suggests that queer and feminist theorists should make a break with gender altogether."¹⁶³

Young articulates the concept of the lived body as follows:

The lived body is a unified idea of a physical body acting and experiencing in a specific sociocultural context; it is body-in-situation. For existentialist theory, *situation* denotes the produce of *facticity* and *freedom*. The person always faces the material facts of her body and its relation to a given environment....All these concrete material relationship of a person's bodily existence and her physical and social environment constitute her *facticity*.

The person, however, is an actor; she has an ontological freedom to construct herself in relation to this facticity. The human actor has specific projects...*Situation*, then, is the way that the facts of embodiment, social and physical environment, appear in light of the projects a person has.¹⁶⁴

Though Young suggests that the concept of the lived body does certain things better than the category "gender,"¹⁶⁵ she does subsequently develop a robust argument for retaining the concept of gender for its usefulness in addressing social-structural questions (e.g., gendered divisions of labor, heteronormativity) that operate at levels not subject to nor accessible to individual control.¹⁶⁶ Young concludes in acknowledging that the concepts of the lived body (cf. Moi; or Bourdieu's *habitus*) and gender performance (Butler) may indeed be complementary analytical tools.¹⁶⁷

Young's essay "Throwing Like a Girl..." again summons a phenomenological framework in using a study by Erwin Straus as a point of departure for further

¹⁶² Iris Marion Young, "Lived Body vs. Gender: Reflections on Social Structure and Subjectivity," in *On Female Body Experience: Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2005, p. 15.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19ff.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

exploration of women's "situation." Straus used an analysis of textual and visual data of the ways boys and girls threw a ball to reach what amounted to an essentialist conclusion about the noteworthy difference between their methods. Young's cogent critique of the limiting assumptions of Straus' analysis provide her in turn a point of departure in again addressing women's *situation* (as noted above) as it is inflected by particular parameters of whole-body experience, range of motion and sense of self-in-space. Acknowledging her reliance on Simone de Beauvoir's analysis, Young observes

The female person who enacts the existence of women in patriarchal society must therefore live a contradiction: as human she is a free subject who participates in transcendence, but her situation as a woman denies her that subjectivity and transcendence. My suggestion is that the modalities of feminine bodily comportment, motility and spatiality exhibit this same tension between transcendence and immanence, between subjectivity and being a mere object.¹⁶⁸

Young then proceeds to develop an elegant analysis that she proposes will begin to fill a gap that "...exists in both existential phenomenology and feminist theory,"¹⁶⁹ an analysis that offers several ideas that are pertinent in a discussion of the work of female performance artists and Schneemann in particular. Young (making reference to the Straus study) speaks of the "failure to make use of the body's spatial and lateral potentialities" the compartmentalization of movements, i.e., not using the whole body, and the sense of restricted space for movement—all of which would

¹⁶⁸ Iris Marion Young, "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality," in *On Female Body Experience*, op. cit., pp. 31-32.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

appear to be self-imposed limitations stemming from a sense of tentativeness, a lack of trust in one's body.¹⁷⁰

Aligning with Merleau-Ponty, Young further develops her analysis of equivocal "feminine motility" in observing that it derives from "...woman's experience of her body as a *thing* at the same time that she experiences it as a capacity."¹⁷¹ She then links feminine motility to feminine spatiality,¹⁷² which is perceived as echoing or reinforcing comparable limits.

Young returns to the idea of an internal division discussed earlier, "...the fact that the woman lives her body as *object* as well as subject...The source of this objectified bodily existence is in the attitude of others regarding her, but the woman herself often actively takes up her body as a mere thing,"¹⁷³ which can result in a kind of self-splitting, self-alienation. But Young also notes that even should a woman overcome her various inhibitions and "...open her body in free, active, open extension and bold outward-directedness..." she still invites objectification.¹⁷⁴

Engaging in conversation: listening to the work...

The chronology of Schneemann's work includes thirty-eight of her own performances—some of them offered more than once—from *Labyrinths* of 1960 to *HOMERUNMUSE* of 1977-78.¹⁷⁵ As noted, she was also a participant/performer in works by others, and created several films, some documenting her performances, some independent works. Now living in upstate New York as well as New York City,

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 32-34.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., pp 35ff.

¹⁷² Ibid., pp. 39ff.

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁷⁵ Carolee Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy*, op. cit., pp. 282-283.

she remains an active presence in the world of performance art. An examination of three of the solo performances, constitutive of a visual signature, reveals the power of Schneemann's distinctive body language.

“I am image and image-maker”
(Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for the Camera)

Though widely accessible to others through photographic documentation, *Eye Body* (1963) was in many ways a performance Schneemann enacted for herself. (The full title seems to suggest an interest in the photographic eye rather than the human one as her first audience.) She had then recently arrived in New York, in which the domination of abstract expressionism (also known as action painting, a term coined by art critic Clement Greenberg, and personified in Jackson Pollock) and the hegemony of paint were being countered, even challenged by a renewal of some different ideas about form and material. To put this briefly in context, one can consider two major late-19th-early-20th century transformations of the painted surface. One was its liberation from total service to observed reality illusionistically represented, as the two-dimensional plane on which the artist worked became the site of other, no-less-real things—the painted mark itself, harmonies of color, distillations (abstractions) of forms and their relationships, even the artist's own emotive responses to visual sensation. The other, perhaps much simpler but ultimately no less significant, was the strategy of collage—the use of the traditional substrates of paper and canvas for something other than traditional media, as epitomized by the early Cubist works of Picasso. The mid-century flourishing of abstract expressionism can thus be seen as resonant with the first transformation, going even further in privileging the process by which the work was created; the

challenge to easel painting, resonant of the second transformation, was evident in the experimentation not only with process but with a wide range of materials not previously considered the stuff of serious art-making.

Schneemann, widely read and (as revealed in her own writing), possessed of a fierce and free-associative intelligence, would have been aware of this modernist legacy, as well as experientially aware of its sexism. In one of her commentaries on *Eye Body*, she reveals that “...to use my body as an extension of my painting-constructions was to challenge and threaten the psychic territorial power lines by which women were admitted to the Art Stud Club, so long as they behaved enough like men, did work clearly in the traditions and pathways hacked out by men.”¹⁷⁶ Rebecca Schneider also notes that Schneemann “...felt she had partial status, and was personally troubled by the suspicion that she was included only as a ‘cunt mascot’ in the heavily male cliques of Fluxus and Happenings.”¹⁷⁷

Schneemann’s impetus was thus to make her tokenism something to be reckoned with. *Eye Body*, like much of Schneemann’s work, functions on multiple levels. Trained as a painter, she began to move into the domain of installation, constructing a loft environment including painted and reflective panels and kinetic elements. From a more detailed description and documentation of the work,¹⁷⁸ it is evident that she was using, re-appropriating her own body of work—previously created painting-constructions, works in progress, collage material—in the manner of *bricolage*; this was not only pragmatic, but also a move that effectively valorized

¹⁷⁶ Schneemann, in MacPherson, op. cit., p. 52.

¹⁷⁷ Schneider, in Diamond, op. cit., p. 164.

¹⁷⁸ Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics*, op. cit., p. 54-59.

her own creative production. At a certain point, she decided “...I wanted my actual body to be combined with the work as an integral material—a further dimension of the construction.” She continues,

Covered in paint, grease, chalk, ropes, plastic, I establish my body as visual territory. Not only am I an image maker, but I explore the image values of flesh as material I choose to work with. The body may remain erotic, sexual, desired, desiring but it is as well votive: marked, covered over in a text of stroke and gesture discovered by my creative female will.

I write “my creative female will” because for years my most audacious works were viewed as if someone else inhabiting me had created them—they were considered “masculine” when seen as aggressive, bold...¹⁷⁹

Schneemann also addressed the issue of her own nudity, identifying it as another form of re-figuring the female nude that had been subjected to such iconic use in western painting. She wrote of *Eye Body* that

The nude was being used in early Happenings as an object (often an “active” object). I was using the nude as myself—the artist—and as a primal archaic force which could unify energies I discovered as visual information. I felt compelled to “conceive” of my body in manifold aspects which had eluded the culture around me.¹⁸⁰

In *Eye Body*, Schneemann addressed several critical issues that have a metaphoric resonance, including the alignment of her body/her body of work, skin as canvas/female body as site of inscription, and the eye/I that could control the inversion or return of the male gaze, repositioning herself both literally and figuratively, “eye to eye” with the art world.

“My body writes itself into being.”
(*Up To And Including Her Limits*)

¹⁷⁹ Schneemann, in MacPherson, op. cit., p. 52.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 52.

Up To And Including Her Limits (1973-76) began as a work entitled *Trackings* and went through several iterations in different locations. A common and crucial element in these various incarnations was the use of an apparatus (it began life as a tree-surgeon's harness) that allowed the artist to be tethered/suspended, from which point she could explore a range of motion;¹⁸¹ the usefulness of Young's analysis of feminine motility is evident here. As the work evolved, Schneemann became aware of and articulated different aspects, situating it not only in the context of her own life but also, in its creation, interrogating some of the evolving assumptions about performance and the way it worked against the grain of other art-world practices.

Trackings was developed in tandem with another project, a film entitled *Kitch's Last Meal* (an homage to the dearly-loved cat, which had been the solitary observer in *Fuses* and which had recently died.) At the time Schneemann was spending a few days each week at a house in the country and recounts her discovery of the apparatus that would prove to be the inspiration for her work.

...a new neighbor came to prune an old apple tree. He had a harness and ropes by which he raised and lowered himself and tools through the branches...ropes and pulleys had remained irresistible to me and I asked him if I could try them. He said fine, and was perhaps as surprised as I when the impulse to float naked in the harness took effect...Once suspended in the harness—free of normal gravity—something started which was to slowly evolve into a new performance work over the next four years...¹⁸²

After several months of exploring the use of the ropes and harness, in part for exercise, in part as an evolving meditative practice, Schneemann gave the first

¹⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 224-233.

¹⁸² Ibid., p. 226.

public performance of *Trackings* in the Avant Garde Festival #10, organized by Charlotte Moorman.¹⁸³ This took place in Grand Central Station in a series of boxcars, each of which was the site of a performance work, presented simultaneously. Discovering the need to adjust to the limitations of the space, Schneemann recalls,

It was extremely cold in the boxcars; the ceiling was too low to use the harness, too cold to be naked. But once the rope was attached to the ceiling I found that tying parts of my body—a leg, arm, torso—could produce sufficient suspension and torsion to permit the concentration, the inward connection to the subtle response and shift of the rope which resulted in the meditation (what Cage calls “self-alteration”), in no way performed to an audience, but which they could witness... I held a chalk in one hand extended, so that changes in weight, position, motion were charted by the free motion of the hand on the perimeter of the walls & floor it touched. The underlying physical principle came to mind as a seismograph or Ouija Board.¹⁸⁴

In subsequent performances of this work (e.g., University of California at Berkeley, 1977) Schneemann performed nude, and developed a more articulated understanding of the conditions and environment that provided site and context for the work. Likening this work to “automatic drawing” (an approach utilized by Surrealist poets and artists, among others), she seemed intent on developing a minimalist approach, noting that

The solitariness of [this work] depended on my stripping away forms and dimensions I had previously worked with. As *Up To And Including Her Limits* developed into a solo work incorporating film and the random presence of spectators, I realized my intentions were TO DO AWAY WITH: 1. Performance, 2. A Fixed Audience, 3. Rehearsals, 4. Performers, 5. Fixed Durations, 6. Sequences, 7. Conscious Intention, 8. Improvisation, 9. Technical Cues, 10. A Central Metaphor or Theme.

¹⁸³ Ibid., p. 226.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 227.

What was left?¹⁸⁵

What was left, indeed, was the elemental core of a body—flexible, fluid—moving in time and space, conditions noted but not prescribed, visible marks accruing on both artist’s skin and the paper lining the interior of the space, the body always constrained by gravity and the tether that established a point from which to explore its range of motion—and the limit of its reach. This work could also be understood as a canny response to, or feminist reversal of, the *Anthropometries* of color abstractionist painter Yves Klein from the early 1960s. Klein directed his female models to cover their naked bodies with his signature color (IKB, International Klein Blue), then positioned these “living brushes” in front of canvases onto which they pressed themselves, leaving fragmentary imprints of their bodies.

“I celebrate the ecstatic, erotic body”
(*Interior Scroll*)

Schneemann’s *Interior Scroll* is perhaps one of her most problematic, if not controversial performance works—problematic in that it appeals to essentialist formulations of the female body; controversial in that, though it was only presented twice to relatively small and receptive audiences, the extant documentation by which it is more widely seen and known suggest that Schneemann has somehow crossed a line, working not just on the surface of her body (as for example, in the other works described here), but also from within the most intimate space of her body: the performance culminates in the reading of a scroll drawn from her vagina. In the artist’s willingness to make herself vulnerable in this way, to literally open her body, *Interior Scroll* has much in common with *Fuses*.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p 227.

Interior Scroll also resulted in part from the artist's exploration of the idea of "vulvic space" and its connection with serpent forms as Goddess attributes in ancient and matriarchal cults.¹⁸⁶ In her analysis of pre-historic artifacts, many of which emphasized the elements of female anatomy linked to procreation, Schneemann reveals that

I thought of the vagina in many ways—physically, conceptually: as a sculptural form, an architectural referent, the source of sacred knowledge, ecstasy, birth passage, transformation...This source of "interior knowledge" would be symbolized as the primary index unifying spirit and flesh in Goddess worship. I related womb and vagina to "primary knowledge"; with strokes and cuts on bone and rock by which I believed my ancestor measured her menstrual cycles, pregnancies, lunar observations, agricultural notations—the origins of time factoring, of mathematical equivalencies, of abstract relations.¹⁸⁷

While much of Schneemann's performance work does not engage written or spoken text, her own voluminous writings provide critical grounding for the performances. The use of text in *Interior Scroll*—and the particular texts used—are thus significant. In the first part of the performance, the artist announces she will read from a book entitled *Cezanne, She Was a Great Painter*; Schneemann did in fact write and self-publish a book with that title. In other writing she speaks of "Cez-Anne," perhaps a playful reference to the historical fact that the works of a number of women artists were initially attributed to men, on the assumption that women were incapable of producing significant art—a sentiment parodied in a portion of the text on the scroll, in which the male protagonist says [of Schneemann's films]

But don't ask us
To look at your films
We cannot

¹⁸⁶ Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics*, op. cit., pp 152-161.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

There are certain films
 we cannot look at
 the personal clutter
 the persistence of feelings
 the hand-touch sensibility
 the diaristic indulgence
 the painterly mess
 the dense gestalt
 the primitive techniques¹⁸⁸

Schneemann's multivalent approach is again apparent in this work. The relation of body and text is once again invoked, although this time the body originates ("speaks") the text in a radically different way, rather than being the passive surface upon which others may write. Feminine spatiality is again interrogated by being internalized; even stripped of the lore of gyno-archaeology, the facts of anatomy remain. Framing elements from art history and studio praxis are alluded to, at times with an admixture of playful irony and wistful contemplation. *Interior Scroll* is intimate without the explicit sexuality of *Fuses*; celebratory without the visceral carnival of *Meat Joy*. No less risk-taking than other of Schneemann's performance works, it offers a nuanced response her poignant query "What was left?" in affirming the primacy of the body, and the value of speaking from the inside out.

¹⁸⁸ Schneemann, in MacPherson, op. cit., p.238.

CHAPTER V: THE ECOLOGICAL BODY: ANA MENDIETA (1948-1985)

Encountering the work...

The outline, the silhouette of a body appears, delicately impressed in a field of low-sprouting plants, discernible in an area of flattened leaves and stems.¹⁸⁹ It appears in raised ridges of mud and stone at the edge of a shallow pond.¹⁹⁰ It appears as a line of gunpowder on a fallen tree trunk or as a firework-studded armature, to burn intensely, then disappear.¹⁹¹ It appears in the sand at ocean's edge, outlined with blood-red powdered pigment that comingles with the rising tide.¹⁹² It appears as a mass of snow and ice, to soften and dissolve in the warming air.¹⁹³ It appears as an assemblage of burnt and thorny twigs and branches in a niche of an abandoned basilica.¹⁹⁴

If, as essayist Annie Dillard, has noted, "Nature's silence is its one remark,"¹⁹⁵ then the *Siluetas* of Ana Mendieta can be understood as a muted, antiphonal refrain, nature and body conjoined in intimate exchange. Although Mendieta engaged her body in several series of performative endeavors, it is the *Silueta* (silhouette) series

¹⁸⁹ Illustrated in Olga M. Viso, *Ana Mendieta: Earth Body: Sculpture and Performance, 1972-1985*. Hatje Kantz Verlag and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany, 2004, pp. 4-5. Mendieta created and documented this work in 1979.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10. The author notes: "...this documentation of an earth-body work executed in Amana, Iowa, was never printed as an independent photograph in the artist's lifetime. It exists only in the original slide format that Mendieta used to record her work in the landscape."

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 20, 218-219.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁹³ Helena Reckitt, ed., *Art and Feminism*, Phaidon Press, Ltd., London, 2012, p. 99.

¹⁹⁴ Viso, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

¹⁹⁵ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*, Harper & Row, Publishers, New York, 1982, p. 69.

that most powerfully establishes a gestural vocabulary—a totem, a sign, a track—that serves as the artist’s singular remark, speaking simultaneously of place and displacement, of presence and absence. The *silueta*, life-sized in these “earth-body” works, also appeared in Mendieta’s drawings—sketched in a notebook, incised on leaves, inked on fibrous amate paper—in various iterations, but always, like a litany of form, suggesting the contours of the body.

Tracing the Life...

The powerful and reiterated desire to connect with the earth, and the very literal and experiential manifestation of that impulse in Mendieta’s work, might be linked to a number of sources or defining events, beginning with the circumstances of her early life. Born in 1948 in Havana, Cuba, Ana Mendieta was part of a family with strong political ties to the shifting centers of power in that country.¹⁹⁶ Her paternal great uncle Carlos Mendieta, initially imprisoned and then exiled for his role in a failed attempt to overthrow President Gerardo Machado, became President in 1934, but resigned rather than become a puppet leader under Army Sargeant Fulgencio Batista, who was elected President in 1940, and continued to wield power, officially and otherwise, until his overthrow by Fidel Castro in 1959. Ana Mendieta’s father Ignacio took a position in law enforcement in the government of President Grau San Martin, who defeated Batista in 1944. In this context, Ignacio met Fidel Castro, then a law student at the University of Havana; their shared opposition to Batista (who regained the Presidency in 1952) created a strong bond.

¹⁹⁶ Laura Roulet, “Ana Mendieta: A Life in Context,” in Viso, op. cit., pp. 224-239. Roulet’s detailed chronology provides a comprehensive overview of Mendieta’s life.

Following the revolution in 1959, Ignacio was, as a reward for his early support of Castro, given a position in the Cuban Ministry of State. A routine background check mandated by the new government revealed that Ignacio had had prior involvement with U.S. interests, including a period of employment with the Chrysler Corporation. Given an opportunity to join the Communist Party and retain his position, he declined and was blacklisted, thereafter continuing to profess allegiance to Castro but secretly involved in counter-revolutionary activities.

In 1960, Cuba nationalized all U. S.-owned interests; fearing that the state would then move for state guardianship of all Cuban children, families began to participate in Operation Peter Pan, the planned emigration of children six to sixteen to the United States.¹⁹⁷ After the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, the Mendieta family sheltered a Cuban counter-revolutionary who had escaped capture. Ignacio, who had engaged Ana and her older sister Raquelín in helping to distribute anti-Castro literature, made arrangements for the girls to leave Cuba under the auspices of Operation Peter Pan. Without family in the U. S., they were initially placed in a group home for disturbed and neglected children in Dubuque, Iowa, before moving to a series of foster homes. It was five years before the girls would be reunited with their mother Raquel and brother Ignacio, who were able to leave Cuba in early 1966 and resettle with the girls in Cedar Rapids; their father had been arrested and imprisoned for suspected collaboration with the C. I. A. It was not until 1979 that the entire family was reunited in the U. S.; the following year Ana made her first return

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 226. As Roulet notes, this operation was sponsored jointly by the Catholic Church and the U. S.; more than two hundred fifteen thousand Cubans emigrated to the U. S. between 1959-1962.

to Cuba. As her cousin Kaky recalled of that visit, Ana collected “...earth from Cuba and sand from Varadero [the family beach house]. Those were the two things she took back from her first trip. Later on she used to tell how she kept them in her apartment in New York as one of the most important things she had in her life...”¹⁹⁸

In 1965, the year her father was imprisoned, Mendieta graduated from high school and entered Briar Cliff College in Sioux City, transferring two years later to the University of Iowa, where she received her Bachelor of Arts and began graduate work in 1969. It was here that Mendieta began a decade-long relationship with Professor Hans Breder, who became both mentor and lover, while she sometimes served as model and muse. Through a program of visiting artists, Breder brought to Iowa a number of artists and critics, most of them New York-based, who provided exposure to conceptual art, kinetic art and body art, as well as other practices that marked the changing status of art-making as object-making, and the changing relationship between art and life.¹⁹⁹

Mendieta traveled to Mexico for university-sponsored archaeological field research in 1971, the first of several trips that provided opportunities for the creation of site-specific works. By the time Mendieta received her first Master of Fine Arts degree in Painting in 1972, she was already engaged in more innovative practices. As she revealed,

When I realized that my paintings were not real enough for what I wanted the image to convey—and by real I mean I wanted my images

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 235.

¹⁹⁹ The most revelatory account of Mendieta’s Iowa years (1961-1978) is provided by investigative journalist Robert Katz in *Naked by the Window: The Fatal Marriage of Carl Andre and Ana Mendieta*, The Atlantic Monthly Press, New York, 1990, pp. 132-147.

to have power, to be magic. I decided that for the images to have magic qualities I had to work directly with nature. I had to go to the source of life, to mother earth.²⁰⁰

Early body-based work included exploration of gender identity and, in 1973, precipitated by the rape and murder of a university student, several works that re-enacted the experience of rape. Work in Mexico carried overlays of both pre-Columbian and Catholic references—works from this period point to a growing interest in the use of her own body in performative actions inflected with the specific nuances of these experiential or cultural contexts. A common element in several of these works, for example, was the use of (animal) blood or blood-red pigment, redolent with varying associations of violence, menses, sacrament and ritual—perhaps a means of capturing the magic of which she had spoken.

Mendieta continued to use her own body in various works in 1974 and 1975, documenting them in slides (some of which were printed in her lifetime, many of which were not) and short films. In 1975, she created the first work, *Alma Silueta en Fuego* (Soul Silhouette on Fire) in which she utilized a surrogate structure, "...a substitute for her body, which she then ignites."²⁰¹ This led, the following year, to the creation of numerous *Siluetas* when she was again in Mexico, and the emergence of two distinct profiles: one, a shape with rounded sections that one might identify with head, chest/breast, and abdomen and legs; a second, incorporating the head and body but with arms upraised so that hands are aligned at the level of the

²⁰⁰ Roulet in Viso, op. cit., p. 230.

²⁰¹ Ibid., p. 232.

head.²⁰² This latter position, which might be read as a gesture of submission, was, for Mendieta, a bodily echo of *el árbol de la vida* (the tree of life.) As Mary Sabbatino notes in describing a performance of 1976, “The *árbol de la vida* is an ancient form of a benevolent goddess symbolizing the transmutation of the Divine into the human.”²⁰³ Both variants were employed in the numerous *Siluetas* that would follow. In 1977, Mendieta received a second Master of Fine Arts in mixed media, and continued the creation of *Siluetas* in snow and ice, and with pyrotechnics.

Beginning in 1978, Mendieta was based in New York, though she would return to Iowa during the summers until 1980, when her relationship with Breder ended. Among her early contacts was Carolee Schneemann, who would continue to provide support and inspiration.²⁰⁴ Later that year, Mendieta was elected to membership in the A. I. R. Gallery, a feminist artists’ cooperative that would provide a venue for the exhibition of Mendieta’s work, as well as a like-minded community of artists engaged in and committed to the women’s art movement, a corollary of the second wave of the women’s movement. In the fall of 1979, during a solo exhibition of her photographs at A. I. R., Mendieta met the sculptor Carl Andre, who was

²⁰² Ibid., p. 233. Roulet notes that “In September, at Old Man’s Creek, Iowa, Breder photographs Mendieta standing in a goddess pose, nude and covered in mud, against a tree—*Untitled* (Tree of Life).”

²⁰³ Mary Sabbatino, “Ana Mendieta: Identity and the *Siluetas Series*,” in Gloria Moure, *Ana Mendieta*, Ediciones Polígrafa, Barcelona, 1996, p. 153.

²⁰⁴ Carolee Schneemann, at a symposium in October 2010 organized to honor Mendieta, noted that “facing cultural resistance was something that she and I constantly could discuss once we became friends...The struggle has to do with the confines of essentialist theory, which was a way of constraining and marginalizing our fuller historical implications.” This might be read to indicate that Schneemann saw Mendieta having to deal with some of the same then-extant art-world prejudices that she herself experienced, which assumed that the contribution women artists could make would be limited and peripheral. This reading seems more likely than one that acknowledges a feminist critique of essentialism *per se*.

participating in a panel discussion entitled “How has the women’s art movement affected male art attitudes?” Her involvement with the gallery and its cohort decreased as her involvement with Andre grew.

Mendieta’s first return to Cuba in 1980 was a personal marker of a period of general easing of travel between the U. S. and Cuba, first with an exchange of political prisoners and then with expatriates visiting relatives, and later, as for Mendieta and others, with cultural exchanges and tours. During these visits, she located and worked at several sites that allowed a more literal and visceral reconnection with her homeland. From 1980 on, Mendieta was increasingly sought after for visiting-artist residencies and the creation of site-specific works, and was the recipient of several major awards, including a John Simon Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, two NEA grants and, in 1983, the Rome Prize, for which she moved to the American Academy in the fall of that year. While in Rome, Andre (with whom she had earlier begun a relationship) joined her for collaborative work and travel in Europe. In January, 1985 Mendieta and Andre married in Rome, continuing to live and travel in Europe until their return to New York in August. On September 8, from a window of the apartment she shared with Andre, Mendieta fell thirty-four stories to her death. Andre was tried but not convicted for her death, but has never entirely escaped the doubt and, for some, the anger that still surrounds the manner of Mendieta’s death. In 1993, members of the Women’s Action Coalition marked the paucity of women artists in the opening exhibition (in which Carl Andre was included) of the Guggenheim Museum’s SoHo branch (subsequently closed) with

signs reading “Carl Andre is in the Guggenheim. Where is Ana Mendieta? Donde está Ana Mendieta?”²⁰⁵

Engaging in Conversation: Themes and Theories...

Mendieta, like Schneemann, worked in an art-world that, despite the growing visibility of women artists and the rising energy of feminism, remained the domain of men. Unlike Schneemann, however, there is no evidence to suggest that Mendieta was engaged, between 1970 and 1985, in the gender politics of that world as a militant, even though she was, at least for a time, a member of the (women)-artist-run A. I. R. Gallery and through that association, circulated with a number of women who were activists in this endeavor. That group of women included critic Lucy Lippard, who had been one of those invited by Hans Breder to Iowa during Mendieta’s graduate years, and who had first brought her to national attention.²⁰⁶ The path of Mendieta’s life, as noted, was certainly shaped by geopolitics; the effects of gender politics, particularly as they converged with art-world praxis, suggest additional connections and inflections.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ Olga Viso, *Unseen Mendieta: The Unpublished Works of Ana Mendieta*, Prestel, Munich, 2008, p. 19. The volatile relationship between Mendieta and Andre, juxtaposed with the legal wrangling and public outcry that followed her death, is the focus of Robert Katz’s account in *Naked by the Window*. Jane Blocker, in *Where is Ana Mendieta?: Identity, Performativity and Exile* (p. 1), also takes the demonstration in 1993 as emblematic of Mendieta’s elusive position vis á vis both her work and as a woman in a male-dominated art-world.

²⁰⁶ Lucy Lippard, “Transformation Art,” *Ms. Magazine* 4, no. 4 (October 1975), cited by Roulet in Viso (2004).

²⁰⁷ Jane Blocker notes, however, that Mendieta’s identity politics focused more on race/ethnicity. She was a woman artist, but she was also self-identified as a woman of color, and worked most directly to support minority artists, particularly those from Latin America. See Blocker, op. cit., p. 48.

What shaped Mendieta's vision and voice? What do they show and tell us? Understanding how art works, and how artworks mean, is often an admixture of knowledge and speculation, reason and imagination—and Mendieta's work invites all of that, though the artist and her work can and will certainly speak on their own. However, the work of interpretation might also begin by turning the question around, and asking what thinking with and through Mendieta's work provides as a fresh perspective on other ideas engaged by feminist theories, so that that work and those ideas become mutually informing.

Much of the work of feminist scholars, including feminist art historians, working in the first decade (1970s) of the women's movement, might be characterized first as acts of reclamation, resifting history to unearth those few women who also created. That work also involved interrogating the evaluative criteria, so that women artists were not simply judged by a male standard and found lacking; a third agenda focused on changing women (and particularly women's bodies) from objects of depiction to agents of creative action. All of this was enough to enliven the debate, but not sufficient to unsettle deeply entrenched institutions and practices. If patriarchy was often bemoaned as the problem, matriarchy was often invoked as the answer. As Lucy Lippard notes, "With the rise of the new feminism in the late 1960s, women's longing for a history and mythology of our own found an outlet in a revisionist view of prehistoric matriarchies."²⁰⁸

While an appeal to the matriarchal tradition is now muted, overlain with historicity and nostalgia, and met, on occasion, with disdain or dismissal, it did serve

²⁰⁸ Lucy R. Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*. Pantheon Books, New York, 1983, p. 41.

at the time to focus inquiry both within and beyond the art-world, and some of the questions it raised—about the iconic nature of the female body, about the earth-body that sustains human life—still remain poignant, relevant, even urgent.

One approach in the appeal to matriarchy was artifactual: the pre-historic archaeological evidence of totems and talismans, decorated vessels and ritual objects coalesced around a renewed articulation of Goddess culture, perceived as visible in the breasts, hips, buttocks, vulvae and a diverse vocabulary of symbolic forms and markings that celebrated the shape and procreative capacity of the female body. The most comprehensive survey of this area of material culture is that of Marija Gimbutas, author of numerous books in her field of European archaeology and archaeomythology, including *The Language of the Goddess*—a rich lexicon, or, as the author herself suggests, “a pictorial ‘script’...the grammar and syntax of a kind of metalanguage by which an entire constellation of meanings is transmitted.”²⁰⁹ Based on extensive study of Paleolithic and Neolithic sites and objects (or object fragments), Gimbutas sought to make a convincing case for her reading of what she saw as an all-embracing symbolic metalanguage (the existence of which remains controversial) as well as a persuasive argument for the enduring significance of a matriarchal “script.” As she notes,

The world of the Goddess implies the whole realm in which she manifested herself. What were her major functions? What were the relations between her and her animals, plants, and the rest of nature?...The main theme of Goddess symbolism is the mystery of birth and death and the renewal of life, not only human life but all life on earth and indeed in the whole cosmos.²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess*. Harper & Row, Publishers, San Francisco (1989), p. xv.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. xvi-xix.

This theme—particularly acute when we confront our own mortality—is taken up again by the author when she notes, in concluding,

Life-givers are also death wielders. Immortality is secured through the innate forces of regeneration within Nature itself. The concept of regeneration and renewal is perhaps the most outstanding and dramatic theme we perceive in this symbolism.²¹¹

It is worth noting also that Gimbutas acknowledges the tri-partite alignment of Goddess, Nature and Mother, but cautions against conflating their functions or identities: “Earth fertility...is not a primary function of the Goddess and has nothing to do with sexuality. The goddesses were mainly life creators, not Venuses or beauties, and most definitely not wives of male gods.”²¹² Gimbutas’ scholarship as regards pre-historic matriarchal social structures is less useful now than the elaborate taxonomy of artifactual evidence her research produced.

The issue of a woman-centered visual language was also critical to those active in the early years of the women’s art movement. The dilemma could be stated thus: If women artists wanted to become more visible, to get out from under or behind their male counterparts and claim a place they felt was rightfully and distinctly theirs, they had to create something worth looking at, something not seen before. If their status was largely determined by gender politics, then could the answer reside in gender-inflected imagery? For some, that led to an approach such as Gimbutas espoused: a new embrace of ancient symbols. For others, it was not so simple. Lippard, in an essay entitled “What is Female Imagery?” based on a discussion with several women in the arts, noted that

²¹¹ Ibid., p. 316.

²¹² Ibid.

...“female imagery” was first used, and should continue to be used, to mean female *sexual* imagery. That wasn’t understood and it got all confused. I prefer “female sensibility” because it’s vaguer, even more impossible to pin down. There is a lot of sexual imagery in women’s art—circles, domes, eggs, spheres, boxes, biomorphic shapes, maybe a certain striation or layering. It’s more interesting to think about fragments, which imply a certain antilogical, antilinear approach also common to many women’s work.²¹³

Architect Susana Torre countered by observing that

Feminism shouldn’t be an interpretation of this world, but a transformation of it. Right now the issue of sensibility is secondary to the issue of consciousness. Female consciousness is different from male consciousness, and it’s still in the process of being structured. It’s impossible to give a tight definition of something that’s in the process of becoming...²¹⁴

The discussion, that also included painters Susan Hall and Joan Snyder, and art historian Linda Nochlin, was inconclusive—not surprisingly—in terms of clearly identifying what women’s art would look like, except if it were overtly “feminine.”

Lippard concluded by noting that

Before the movement, women were denying their identity, trying to be neutral, and intentionally making art that couldn’t be called “feminine.” When somebody said, “You paint like a man,” or “You write like a man,” you were supposed to be happy, and you *were* happy, because you knew you were at least making neutral art instead of feminine art—god forbid. So now we’re bending over backward in the other direction, insisting that there are clichés that define women’s art.²¹⁵

That same year, writing for the catalogue of the 9th Biennale de Paris, Lippard confessed that

²¹³ Lucy Lippard, “What is Female Imagery?,” in *From the Center: feminist essays on women’s art*. E. P. Dutton, New York, 1976, p. 81. This essay originally appeared in *Ms* magazine, 3, No. 11 (May 1975.)

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

I am still emotionally and contradictorily torn between the strictly experiential or formal and the interpretative aspects of looking at art. But the time has come to call a semisphere a breast if we know damn well that's what it suggests, instead of repressing the association and negating an area of experience that has been dormant except in the work of a small number of artists, many of them women. To see a semisphere as a breast does not mean it cannot be seen as a semisphere and as endless other things as well, although the image of a breast used by a woman artist can now be subject as well as object. By confronting such other levels of seeing again, we may be able to come to terms more quickly with that volcanic layer of suppressed imagery so rarely acknowledged today.²¹⁶

Lippard's differentiation between the "experiential/ formal" and the "interpretative" was a crucial one, as it seemed to open a negotiable space for women artists and for feminist art without formulaic delimitation of the boundaries of that space. She would also later note,

...there is a uniquely female expression, although whether this is "innate" or the result of social conditioning is still a controversial question. Either way, women's social, biological, and political experiences are different from those of men; art is born of those experiences and must be faithful to them to be authentic. Therefore, to deny the fact of a women's art is to neutralize and falsify what women are learning from our new approach to history: that one of the roles of female culture has always been to reach out and integrate art and life, idea and sensation—or nature and culture.²¹⁷

A year later, in 1976, Lippard surveyed contemporary art with a particular eye for "body art," acknowledging in a similar manner that

I have no strict definition of "body art" to offer, since I am less interested in categorizing it than in the issues it raises and its relationship to feminism. Early on, the term body art was used too loosely, like all art labels, and it has since been applied to all performance art and autobiographical art rather than just to that art that focuses upon the body or body parts—usually the artist's own

²¹⁶ Lucy Lippard, "The Women Artists' Movement—What Next?," in *From the Center*, p. 148.

²¹⁷ Lucy Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*, p. 42.

body, but at times, especially in men's work, other bodies, envisioned as extensions of the artist him/herself.²¹⁸

Lippard, like others, was responding to a new trend or new strategy in art-making—a shift from symbolic body-referent imagery to the use of the body itself as tool and material, and often, by inference, the gendered subject (though some, like Schneemann, had been active in this context since the early 1960s.) Lippard was also astute in calling attention to the dilemma faced by women who, in making use of something so personally theirs, also found it hard to avoid the centuries of sexualizing objectification to which their bodies had been subjected. The dilemma involved not only having to navigate the obstacle course created by centuries of sexist representation, but in so doing, to find a way to deny the body in one way while attempting to honor it in another (perhaps another way of speaking about the internal splitting to which Young and others refer.)

When women use their own bodies in their art work, they are using their *selves*; a significant psychological factor converts these bodies or faces from object to subject...A woman using her own face and body has a right to do what she will with them, but it is a subtle abyss that separates men's use of women for sexual titillation from women's use of women to expose that insult.²¹⁹

The quest for new imagery that would serve women's cause, and the engagement of bodies in art-making (while not employed exclusively by women), can be seen as part of that larger project of reclamation, and part of the interrogation of the iconic status of the female body that is part of the legacy of the matriarchal tradition. This requires, perhaps, a capacity to live with the tension

²¹⁸ Lucy Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art," in *From the Center*, p. 121. This essay originally appeared in *Art in America*, 64, No. 3 (May-June 1976).

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 124-125.

created by the rich archive of material artifacts (such as is so comprehensively codified by Gimbutas) and the inherently speculative nature of assumptions about the sociopolitical matrix within which they were created. Lippard offers a useful if cautionary distinction in noting, “There is no proof of wholly matriarchal *governments*. But there seems little doubt that matriarchal *religions* existed in every part of the world and dominated in the most ancient cultures. Traces of the matriarchal tradition remain in the matrilineal and matrilocal customs of some primal societies today.”²²⁰ Peggy Reeves Sanday, in her study of gender roles and sexual inequality in several tribal societies, provides additional insight in commenting that “In societies where the forces of nature are sacralized...there is a reciprocal flow between the power of nature and the power inherent in women. The control and manipulation of those forces is left to women and to sacred natural symbols; men are largely extraneous to this domain...”²²¹

A second connection to that tradition that can be explored, one also germane to Mendieta’s work, is the development of the ecofeminist perspective. While a full discussion of ecofeminism(s) is not the focus here, it is an occasion to consider how the language, and particularly the metaphors, of matriarchy, as echoed within an ecofeminist context, provides additional discursive resources.

Naming has an important function in recognizing and legitimizing an enterprise, so it is worth noting that the term “*ecofeminisme*” was first used in 1974

²²⁰ Lippard, *Overlay*, p. 41-42.

²²¹ Peggy Reeves Sanday, *Female Power and Male Dominance: On the origins of sexual inequality*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981, p. 5.

by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne²²², in that same decade of the women's movement that Gimbutas was conducting her research and Mendieta was creating an increasingly mature body of work. The intent here is not to posit a direct or causal connection, but to suggest a possible convergence, even a "something-in-the-air," in which an exploration of a "first principle" of women's existence might have been taking place. The connection between "woman" and "nature" has long been a staple element in the voicing of gender-based dualisms, with "man" and "culture" positioned in opposition.²²³

What kind of conceptual work-space is created by the elision of nature-woman-goddess-mother? Which inflection will prevail—the procreative, the spiritual, the nurturing? Ecofeminism, like feminism per se, is hardly monolithic, and is subject to robust forms of internal contestation. Those who foreground its implicitly spiritual foundation might be countered by those who secularize the "goddess" as an ethical agent of balanced caretaking. Those who embrace the essentialist metaphor of Mother Earth (and the mothering she in turn merits) might be challenged by those who would advocate for a more pragmatic stewardship. Although ecofeminism carries with it the indictment of the controlling and often violative practices of male dominance over women/nature, it also carries the liberatory potential of an alternative vision of living as a part of, not apart from, the sustaining environment of the natural/non-human world. As Kathy Ferguson notes

²²² Cited by Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva in *Ecofeminism*, Fernwood Publications, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1993, p. 13, and notes, p. 21.

²²³ Sanday, in a critique of Sherry Ortner's articulation of the "universality of female subordination," based on the nature/culture dichotomy, questions the immutability of these alignments, but notes that if Ortner's logic is followed, men have the right to control women because it is "culture's job to control nature." Op. cit., p. 4-5.

in her essay on “Cosmic Feminism,” “...the longing for a consciousness that can participate in rather than dominate the world of trees and grass, ocean, mountain and sky, is pervasive.”²²⁴

As Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva note in their collaborative work on Ecofeminism, thinking about relational responsibilities ranges from the spiritual to the political and socio-economic, but begins with a strong attitudinal grounding in the former: “An ecofeminist perspective propounds the need for a new cosmology and a new anthropology which recognizes that life in nature (which includes human beings) is maintained by means of co-operation, and mutual care and love.”²²⁵ Further, they consider that

Ecofeminism is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice. It asserts the special strength and integrity of every living thing...We see the devastation of the earth and her beings by corporate warriors, and the threat of nuclear annihilation by the military warriors, as feminist concerns. It is the same masculinist mentality which would deny us our right to our own bodies and our own sexuality, and which depends on multiple systems of dominance and state power to have its way.²²⁶

What is critical to Mies’ and Shiva’s argument is their ability to move between the individual/corporeal and the collective/cosmic and, in the refusal to separate the spiritual from the political, to provide a vision of reality infused with a potential for re-enchantment, even while ecofeminism often does its work at a literal grassroots level.

²²⁴ Kathy Ferguson, *The Man Question*, The University of California Press, Berkeley, 1993, p. 101. Ferguson’s formulation of Cosmic Feminism (pp. 96-120) provides a nuanced corrective for some of the problematic aspects of ecofeminism, including both its appropriation of the pre-modern/pre-historical, and its spiritualism.

²²⁵ Mies and Shiva, op. cit., p. 6.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Exploring further the symbolic connections between woman and nature that undergird both a patriarchal hierarchy and an ecofeminist philosophy, Karen J. Warren identifies a number of possible kinds of connections including—most pertinent in the context of the arts—those that are symbolic and, especially, linguistic. Where such language is potentially sexist (and even the seemingly benign “Mother Nature” does not escape scrutiny), Warren notes,

Some theorists focus on language, particularly the symbolic connections between sexist and naturist language, i.e., language that inferiorizes women and nonhuman nature by naturalizing women and feminizing nature...The claim is that language that so feminizes nature and naturalizes women describes, reflects, and perpetuates the domination and inferiorization of both by failing to see the extent to which the twin dominations of women and nature (including animals) are, in fact, culturally (and not merely figuratively) analogous.²²⁷

Warren’s insights are of particular value when it comes to thinking how Mendieta speaks about her work, and how such language, like imagery, must follow a careful path. The gendering of nature in such terms as “fertile land” and “virgin timber,” as well as in the phallic implications of “plowing the earth” and “sewing the seed,” is widespread and inescapable.

Taking a bolder position on the question of linguistic traps, Joni Seager says unequivocally, definitively undercutting the gendering of our planet,

The earth is *not* our mother. There is no warm, nurturing, anthropomorphized earth that will take care of us if only we treat her nicely. The complex, emotion-laden, conflict-laden, quasi-sexualized, quasi-dependent mother relationship (and especially the relationship between *men* and their mothers) is not an effective metaphor for environmental action...It is not an effective political organizing tool: if

²²⁷ In Michael E. Zimmerman, J. Baird Callicott, George Sessions, Karen J. Warren, and John Clark, eds., *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1993, p. 259-260.

the earth is really our mother, then we are children, and cannot be held fully accountable for our actions.²²⁸

Seager thus presents a greater challenge, though not an unsurmountable one, for understanding the work of an artist like Mendieta, for whom the creation of “earth-body” works carried multiple associations, including a yearning for homeland and childhood home. This raises an important issue, for all bodies are sited, requiring a habitus of some sort. For Mendieta, that deeply felt need conjoined the familial and the geographic; while the earth may not be our mother, she does, more surely, provide a home. In her essay “Ecofeminism and the Longing for Home” Karen J. Warren speaks about various aspects of what is meant by “home,” identifying connotations of house or place of dwelling, an “intentional community” of felt connections, and a bioregional affiliation.²²⁹ She also asks, however, if one can long for home even if already at home in one of these contexts. In answering in the affirmative, she posits a fourth, ecofeminist, reading of home as “...a house, intentional community, and bioregion where one’s individual and community basic needs, life-affirming values, and sustaining relationships are met.”²³⁰ Warren then continues,

This is the sense of *home* in which one can say, with deepest respect and veracity, that the earth is our ultimate home: it is where we dwell, form intentional communities, and live in relationship with nonhuman nature...[If the body is also an ecosystem] then our

²²⁸ Joni Seager, *Earth Follies: Coming to Feminist Terms with the Global Environmental Crisis*. Routledge, New York, 1993, p. 219.

²²⁹ Karen J. Warren, “Ecofeminism and the Longing for Home,” in Leroy S. Rouner, ed., *The Longing for Home*. University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1996, pp. 217-218.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, p 218, italics in the original.

embodied selves are also our *ecological self*...the whole, *embodied*, interactive, social, *relational self*.”²³¹

Engaging in Conversation – Listening to the Work...

The question “Why make art?” has been pondered in so many ways, but still remains elusive, something of a mystery. Ana Mendieta, reflecting on her unsettled adolescence in Iowa, would later confess that by the time she was seventeen, she had decided that two paths lay ahead of her—criminal or artist.²³² In a 1983 interview, she revealed,

I know if I had not discovered art, I would have been a criminal. Theodore Adorno has said, “all works of art are uncommitted crimes.” My art comes out of rage and displacement. Although the image may not be a very rageful image, I think all art comes out of sublimated rage.”²³³

Let us consider that art-making, and the way in which she chose to make it, was, for Mendieta, not only a means of redirecting intense and volatile feeling, but also a way of making three simple but elemental, existential statements.

“I am here.”

Just as walking can be as simple as putting one foot ahead of the other, art-making can begin with putting charcoal to paper—that is, making a mark: how simple, how powerful. Mendieta understood that power, despite an inauspicious beginning in a high-school art class.²³⁴ Mark-making also becomes paradigmatic for making one’s mark on the world, a means of creating evidence, whether durable or

²³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 218-218, italics in the original.

²³² Christine Redfern & Caro Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, The Feminist Press, New York, 2011, p. 22. See also Katz, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

²³³ Quoted in Charles Merewether, “From Inscription to Dissolution: An Essay on Expenditure in the Work of Ana Mendieta,” in Gloria Moure, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

²³⁴ Katz, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

ephemeral, of one's presence in the world. In the long record of human material culture, we marvel at potent images of pre-historic fauna created by cave-dwellers' hands; we may also contemplate poignant imprints or stencils of hands themselves—from caves in the Iberian Peninsula, Patagonia, aboriginal Australia.²³⁵ No mark is more eloquent in creating a human-corporeal presence in saying, "I am here." The hand becomes both the instrument of mark-making and the token of the maker. For Mendieta, art-making as mark-making in this context might be understood to serve as countering the displacement of her childhood, re-grounding her in the world. It is worth noting that before she left Iowa for New York, Mendieta had fabricated a branding iron in the shape of her own hand, which she used to burn imprints in the earth and on other surfaces.²³⁶ Other performative works involving her hand include "Rocked Hand" (1970) in which one hand, palm-up on a bed of rock, is slowly covered by rock fragments by the other hand,²³⁷ and "*Rastros Corporales*" (Body Tracks, 1982), in which the artist covered her hands and arms with blood and tempera paint and, having placed them on a sheet of paper pinned to a wall, slowly sank to her knees to create an elongated track.²³⁸

"With you I am joined."

Mendieta's extrapolation from hand to body seems both logical and natural, as the idea of marking/imprinting became more important, and the focus on the

²³⁵ Jean Clottes, *Cave Art*, Phaidon Press, London, 2008, pp. 102, 304. See also Gimbutas, *op. cit.*, pp. 305ff.

²³⁶ Katz, *op. cit.*, p. 146. See also Blocker, *op. cit.*, pp. 29ff.

²³⁷ Viso (2004), p. 166.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

receiving surface shifted. Hans Breder, her mentor and lover, recalls her first work that joined body and earth:

...It is 1972...Ana announces that she has an idea for a piece. She undresses, lies on the lawn and asks one of the students to cover her body with grass. Somebody takes photographs. In the photographs her body blends into the ground.²³⁹

Like hand to cave wall, Mendieta's body in direct contact with the earth became a signature, a way of working, a way of mark-making, that would continue to evolve with new iterations, new materials. In a real sense the earth became her collaborator, an intimate partner. In a 1983 interview with Linda Montano, herself a performance artist, Mendieta acknowledged that

I continue to use my body to communicate with the world, so that things I have learned are things that I have experienced and internalized. I'm five feet tall, so I even measure things with my body. I started doing imprints to place myself and my body in the world. That way I can do something, step away from it, and see myself there afterward.²⁴⁰

It can be said that the acting of imprinting thus engaged both displacement and replacement, along with the echoing of self with a surrogate presence, a presence that would more forcibly come to the fore as Mendieta's work continued to evolve. In a grant application written in 1982 to the New York State Council on the Arts, as part of a request for funding to support a book project documenting a series of sculptures (*Ruprestrian Sculptures*) Mendieta had done *in situ* in Cuba, in a cave outside Havana in the preceding year, she wrote:

²³⁹ Katz, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

²⁴⁰ Linda M. Montano, *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2000, p. 395.

Art must have begun as nature itself in a dialectic relationship between humans and the natural world from which we cannot be separated.

It was during my childhood in Cuba that I first became fascinated by primitive art and cultures. It seems as if these cultures are provided with an inner knowledge, a closeness to natural resources. And it is this knowledge which gives reality to the images they have created. This sense of magic, knowledge and power found in primitive art has influenced my personal attitude toward art-making. For the past twelve years I have been working out in nature, exploring the relationship between myself, the earth and art. I have thrown myself into the very elements that produced me, using the earth as my canvas and my soul as my tools.²⁴¹

Mendieta's joining of earth and body may thus be considered a kind of double reunion—between personal and place, but also between person and nature's persona, maternal or otherwise. She wrote, on another occasion, "I make sculptures in the landscape. Because I have no motherland I feel a need to join with the earth, to return to her womb."²⁴² Jane Blocker further explores this invocation of motherland in suggesting that Mendieta's emigration was, in fact, an exile, and that the quest for reunion between woman and nature was equally a quest for reunion with nation, and by extension, the cultural (including religious) anchors it provided.²⁴³ In another but equally important sense, the joining of earth and body collapses the gendered distinction between nature and culture in engaging nature itself—earth, air, fire and water—in art-making.

"Through you I endure."

Mendieta's markings on the earth, either with her own imprint, or with sculpted or constructed *Siluetas*, are only a step, a breath away from literal interment, being laid

²⁴¹ Mendieta, Ana, *A Book of Works*, Miami Beach, Grassfield Press, 1993, p. 41.

²⁴² Quoted in Blocker, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 50; and see especially chapter 3, "Exile," pp. 69-89.

to rest in the earth—intimations of mortality are a subtext of these works, cast in more poignant relief through their juxtaposition with the natural environment. That environment is often framed as eternal in that it possesses such abundant capacity for self-renewal through observable cycles of life, death and rebirth. Thus the union of mortal (human) body with eternal (earth) body may offer the hope not so much of overcoming mortality as we know it, but of living anew, differently embodied. Mendieta's yearning for re-union could thus be seen not as being subsumed in the earth—giving up her body—but of being transformed, taking on the power, as Sanday might formulate it, of sacralized terrain, a reading consonant with the ritualized nature of Mendieta's earth-body works. Jane Blocker considers that "For Mendieta, the earth is fundamentally defined as a primeval origin. It is constituted by a temporal relation with the body in which the earth is an eternal force prior to history and the mortal body is bound to time clocked by earth's movements."²⁴⁴ Blocker cites Mendieta's own observation that "Through my art, I want to express the immediacy of life and the eternity of nature," and notes further that "...for Mendieta, the body, the human, is bound to history, both to death and to culture. Because the earth supersedes history, it is extraordinarily powerful."²⁴⁵

The artist who desires immortality through her work is not likely to choose performance as her medium; if anything, it is the inherently ephemeral nature of performance that suits it to themes of mortality and transience. Mendieta came closer than many in establishing, early on, as part of her praxis, the photographic and filmic documentation of those performances as a means of making them more

²⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 55.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 56.

durable. Such documents make possible more contemporary reflection on Mendieta's work, which took the natural environment as both point of departure and point of return. Given what often appears, to Seager and others, as a global and demonstrably disastrous disregard for that environment—have we forgotten to “live as if nature mattered”?²⁴⁶—Mendieta's work can still be heard as a quiet call to listen again to that plea—both personal lamentation, and call to action.

²⁴⁶ From *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*, Bill Devall and George Sessions, Gibbs M. Smith, Inc., Salt Lake City, 1985.

CHAPTER VI: THE EXISTENTIAL BODY: MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ (1946 -)

Encountering the work...

You enter a room in which the artist has placed a table, on which she has arranged seventy-two objects, ranging from gun, bullet, blue paint... to ...olive oil, rosemary branch, apple. Many are everyday things, some less usual. Most are benign, some potentially harmful. The artist, willing herself to be passive, has provided the following instructions: “There are 72 objects on the table that one can use on me as desired.” For the following six hours, those in the room, one at a time, select something and use it.²⁴⁷

The darkened room is minimally furnished—two freestanding copper sinks and a copper tub, filled with water; three video projections of the artist, her father, her mother. In the middle of the space, the artist herself, wearing a long white gown, sits atop a mound of 1500 fresh beef bones. Over the space of four days, for six hours each day, she washes the bones, carefully picking the flesh and cartilage from them, her gown becoming blood-stained, while singing folksongs from her childhood.²⁴⁸

The gallery is bare, save for its back wall, on which have been constructed three cubicles, open at the front, and raised several feet off the floor, reachable only by ladders propped against the bottom edge. The rungs of the ladders are knives, placed edge-up. Each cubicle is minimally furnished: a commode and shower in the first, table and chair in the second, wall-mounted sink and sleeping platform in the

²⁴⁷ *Rhythm 0* (1974), illustrated in Marina Abramović, *Artist Body*, Edizioni Charta, Milan, 1998, pp. 80-93.

²⁴⁸ *Balkan Baroque* (1997), illustrated *Ibid.*, pp. 364-369.

third. For twelve days, twenty-four hours a day, consuming nothing but water, moving across the gaps that separate each compartment, the artist inhabits these rooms, in which all daily and bodily functions are performed in view of those who come and go in the gallery. Somewhere, a metronome marks time.²⁴⁹

From her first performance-oriented works of 1969 to a retrospective of her work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2010 (in which several earlier works were re-performed by her and others), Marina Abramović has emerged as one of the most enduring of the artists engaged in performance since the mid-20th century. This is not without a quotient of irony, as the issues of endurance (the human limits thereof) and duration (both the sustaining of action, and the inevitable recognition of mortality), articulated through the inherently ephemeral nature of performance, are themes that underlie much of her work. A series of thoughtfully calibrated tensions energize even in the most seemingly simple of performances—between the body and its corporeal limits, including the tolerance of pain; between the lived body and the history and memory that reside within it; between personal biography and national narrative; between bodies and objects; between the artist and those with whom she engages as viewers or viewer-participants—all in the service of heightened awareness of being present in the world.

Tracing the Life...

Abramović was born in Belgrade to parents who had both fought in Tito's army during World War II and became part of the post-war Communist elite; Her

²⁴⁹ *The House with The Ocean View* (2002), illustrated in Kristine Stiles, Klaus Biesenbach and Chrissie Isles, *Marina Abramović*, Phaidon Press Ltd., London, 2010, pp. 96-109.

genealogy also included Serbian Orthodox clergy as well as Communist heroes.²⁵⁰ The sense of drama inherent in the geopolitical landscape of post-war Yugoslavia was echoed by the domestic dramas played out in the family home. Shortly after her birth, the infant Marina was sent to live with her maternal grandmother, and did not return to her parents until the birth of a brother when she was six—reunion was compromised by competition and jealousy.²⁵¹ Her relations with her parents remained taut, with tensions that can best be described as Oedipal—closeness to father, rivalry with mother—a set of relationships that might be considered paradigmatic in the context of her continued devotion to Josip Broz Tito, leader of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from 1945-1980, even while a willing emigré from the country of her birth.²⁵²

Abramović's early interest in art was expressed in childhood drawings, often inspired by dreams. She attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade between 1965-1970, a period also marked by her joining the Community party in 1966, and by the political actions that took place in multiple venues in Europe and elsewhere in 1968.²⁵³ Abramović and her fellow students took part in demonstrations in the hope that Tito would accede to a set of demands that included a multi-party system and freedom of expression without fear of reprisal, as well as more modest demands

²⁵⁰ Jovana Stokić, "The Art of Marina Abramović: Leaving the Balkans, Entering the Other Side," in Klaus Biesenbach, ed., *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2010, p. 23.

²⁵¹ Kristine Stiles, "Cloud with its Shadow," in Stiles, et al., op. cit., p. 48.

²⁵² Ibid., p. 57. Abramović's photographic *Portrait with Tito* (2004) shows the artist, standing with legs apart, wearing high heels and black stockings, holding a formal photograph of Tito in front of her obviously bare breasts, perhaps a reminder of the seductive nature of politics, and the conflation of familial and national affiliations.

²⁵³ Ibid., p. 10.

like a student cultural center that would include better facilities for art-making. Tito acquiesced to a few token demands, including the student center that later became the venue for one of Abramovic's early sound installations.²⁵⁴ Disillusioned at the time, however, by this display of autocracy, she burned her Communist Party card.

Her own work by then had shifted away from painting (in which the cloud motif of her childhood drawings had continued to predominant) to an interest in using other materials. As she noted in an interview, "Why did I have to use something two dimensional when I had the freedom to use anything I wanted? I could use fire and water and the body and sound."²⁵⁵

From 1970-1972, Abramović worked at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb, already becoming known for her sound installations as well as solo performance works. Though works in the early 1970s were, though body-based, more conceptual, and minimal in staging, the themes and experiences of family relations and national turmoil would later resurface. These early works, like the *Rhythm* series, each focused on singular concepts that tested physical limits of various kinds. Each work had an operative premise, if not a formal script—an idea and a set of conditions that would provide the point of departure for the action, the outcome of which could not be fully known at the start, and which thus carried an inherent quotient of risk. In *Rhythm 10* (1973), with which the series began, the artist laid out a large sheet of white paper on the floor, on which were placed twenty knives of various types. At either side was a tape recorder that captured the sound of the knives as well as the artist's (involuntary) utterances. The performance consisted of spreading out the

²⁵⁴ Interview with Klaus Biesenbach in Stiles, et al., p. 10

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

fingers of the left hand, with the right hand picking up a knife and, as rapidly as possible, sequentially striking the papered floor in the spaces between the fingers. If the knife struck flesh, that knife was set down and another one picked up, until all knives had been used. The tape was replayed, serving as an auditory guide for a repetition of the performance. The second performance was again recorded, and the two versions of the action played back simultaneously, as the artist sat kneeling on the blood-stained white paper and listened to the doubled sound of the knives.²⁵⁶

Other works in the *Rhythm* series, created in 1974, were inherently but intentionally risk-laden: *Rhythm 5* involved the use of a burning star (understood as the emblem of the Party) in the center of which the artist lay; after this performance, which had to be interrupted because the artist was at risk of suffocating from lack of oxygen, she wrote, "I am confronted with the limits of my body...After this performance I ask myself how to use my body in and out of consciousness without interrupting the performance."²⁵⁷ The subsequent two works, *Rhythm 4* (breathing in front of a blower until succumbing to the high air pressure) and *Rhythm 2* (taking medication intended to treat acute catatonia and schizophrenia and filming the response) were created to address that question.²⁵⁸ With *Rhythm 0*, described earlier, the artist engaged her audience more fully, providing them with the tools and materials through which they might interact with her body. Her brief note at the

²⁵⁶ Marina Abramović, *Artist Body: Performances 1969-1998*, Edizioni Charta, Milan, 1998, pp. 56-61.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 76-79, 70-75.

end of the documentation of this work said simply, “I conclude my research on the body when conscious and unconscious.”²⁵⁹

Thomas McEvelley, who has documented Abramović’s work for several decades, provides a more detailed account of *Rhythm 0*, which began with the proposition of the artist’s total passivity and lack of demonstrable will.

The piece was a classic of passive provocation. It began tamely. Someone turned her around. Someone thrust her arm into the air. Someone touched her somewhat intimately...In the third hour all her clothes were cut from her with razor blades. In the fourth hour the same blades began to explore her skin. Her throat was slashed so someone could suck her blood. Various minor sexual assaults were carried out on her body. She was so committed to the piece that she would not have resisted rape or murder. Faced with her abdication of will, with its implied collapse of human psychology, a protective group began to define itself in the audience. When a loaded gun was thrust to Marina’s head and her own finger was being worked around the trigger, a fight broke out between the audience factions.²⁶⁰

Rhythm 0 embodied a number of key ideas that would continue to inform the artist’s subsequent work: the willingness to take risks, even in potential life-or-death situations; the complex relationship, even a kind of co-dependence that develops through performance with viewers or viewer-participants; and the cultivation of a powerful sense of total commitment to being present, being in the moment—the kind of concentration or paying attention that risk-taking requires.

In 1975, while in Amsterdam, Abramović met German-born artist Uwe Laysiepen. Ulay, as he came to be known, had also been cultivating a performative practice centered on an interrogation of self-identity, including a two-year period when he dressed as a woman and circulated among transvestites and transsexuals;

²⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 80.

²⁶⁰ Thomas McEvelley, *Art, Love, Friendship: Marina Abramović and Ulay Together & Apart*. McPherson & Co., Kingston, NY, 2010, pp. 38-39.

he spent another year presenting himself as mentally defective, exploring and emulating the self-presentation of people with significant physical deformities in order to transform his own.²⁶¹ Abramović and Ulay recognized in each other both kindred spirits and collaborators, in work as well as in life. Between 1975 and 1988, the two artists working together created a series of works that explored and defined relationality—no longer the solo body in space and time, but the more complex actions of two bodies that move together in space and time with a sense of mutuality and trust. *Relation in Space*, performed at the Venice Biennale in 1976, remains one of their unique but paradigmatic performance works, based (like Abramović's earlier solo works) on a simple premise. Here, two naked artists walk past each other to opposite walls, turn and walk back, slightly increasing their pace with each passage, until they are running and, inevitably, colliding with each other. As art historian Kristine Stiles considers,

Abramović/Ulay's action cannot be copied, repeated or re-enacted without losing its historical integrity and aesthetic elegance, for it was a moment shared and created between two artists, their public and a camera. This work belongs to the 1970s, when the mere presentation of the nude body in a simple action within an art context could elicit authentic excitement and even awe as the public confronted for the first time the radical possibility of the body's visual, non-verbal, non-narrative communication.²⁶²

Other relational works involved the artists sitting back to back with their long hair bound together, slowly fraying and unwinding (*Relation in Time*, 1977); and the artists, mouths together, breathing in and out as the single breath with which they had begun was eventually exhausted (*Breathing In Breathing Out*, 1978.) Perhaps

²⁶¹ Ibid., p. 39.

²⁶² Kristin Stiles, in Stiles et al., p. 74.

the most engaging of these works from the 1970s, one that obligated the viewer-participant more than others, was *Imponderabilia*, performed in 1977 at a museum in Bologna. In this work, the two artists, again naked, stood facing each other, less than two feet apart, in the main doorway of the museum. Those seeking to enter had to pass between the two artists and also had to decide which way to face in so doing, knowing that it was likely that their (clothed) bodies would come in contact with the artists' naked bodies. Though their intention was to be a "living door" to the museum for three hours, the performance was stopped by police after ninety minutes.²⁶³ *Imponderabilia* was re-created with other performers as part of Abramović's retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 2010.

Developing a statement entitled "Art Vital" that was tantamount to a personal manifesto (e.g., "no fixed living place, permanent movement, direct contact..."),²⁶⁴ Abramović and Ulay began a kind of nomadic life, traveling to various venues for performances, but also taking extended periods of time for travel more directly linked to their respective philosophical and meditative quests that grew out of a shared interest in Buddhism. It was, however, their time in the Australian outback, where they spent three months in 1980, isolated for long stretches, that contributed to the ultimate refinement and quietude that characterized another key work, *Nightsea Crossing*.²⁶⁵

This work, performed several times between 1980 and 1987, required the two artists to sit opposite each other at a table (their own dining table was always

²⁶³ Marina Abramović, op. cit., pp. 150-157.

²⁶⁴ Kristine Stiles, in Stiles, et al., op. cit., p. 74.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 81ff.

used for this purpose, shipped as needed to different venues), hands folded in their laps, each regarding the other, for hours or perhaps a whole day at a time. Without outward voicing or movement that provided means of communication, the two artists drew on their respective training in meditation to concentrate on the experience, moment by moment, by being present, and in the presence of another. A variation of *Nightsea Crossing*, in which Abramović sat at a table all day for the duration of the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, allowed for museum visitors to sit in silence with Marina.

The ending of the relationship and collaborative endeavors between Abramović and Ulay in 1988 was also marked by another epic performance work, conceived before their separation and called, poignantly, *The Lovers*. Beginning at opposite ends of the Great Wall of China, Abramović and Ulay walked for three months to a point somewhere near the middle, where they said farewell to each other.²⁶⁶

Beginning in 1989, Abramović began to create a series of objects, interactive in nature and by design, the purpose of which was to invite others into the performative experience. Of these works, she wrote,

After walking the Chinese Wall I realized that for the first time I had been doing a performance where the audience was not physically present. In order to transmit the experience to them I built a series of transitory objects with the idea that the audience would actively take part. The basic structure was sitting, standing and lying.

As I was building the objects I paid a lot of attention to the materials I used. I limited myself to materials like copper, iron, wood, minerals, pig blood and human hair. I believe these materials contain certain energies.

²⁶⁶ illustrated in Klaus Biesenbach, op. cit., pp. 146-151.

I do not consider these works as sculptures, but as transitory objects to trigger physical or mental experiences among the public through direct interaction. When the experience is achieved the objects can be removed.²⁶⁷

The artist's disinclination to consider these works as sculptures may come, at least in part, from an understandable reluctance to align them with both a formalist tradition, and with the conventional expectations of how one "interacts" with a piece of sculpture (generally an experience that privileges the eye rather than engaging the whole body.) Nevertheless, these "transitory objects," thoughtfully designed and carefully fabricated, have a minimalist elegance that must be considered part of their initial attraction. *Black Dragon*, for example, created in 1990 and deployed at various sites in Europe and in Japan, consists of multiple sets of three tablets, created from various materials including red clay, clear, smoky and rose quartz, snowflake obsidian, hematite and chrysocolla. Each set of three is positioned vertically on a wall, in a configuration made clear by the instructions for the public, which read:

Face the wall.
Press your head, heart and sex
against the mineral pillows.

Duration: limitless²⁶⁸

Other works in the *Dragon* series, linked to the auspicious colors of red, white and green, are more elaborate, providing wall mounted panels with cantilevered extensions on which participants may stand, sit or lie, heads always in contact with

²⁶⁷ Marina Abramović, *Public Body*. Edizioni Charta, Milan, 2001, p. 84.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

a mineral pillow.²⁶⁹ There is an inner logic to these works, in that they support the stable positions of the body at rest, positions that in turn may serve as precursors to contemplation and self-reflection (as in *vipassana* yoga.) This also seems evident in Abramović's use of simple chair, table and bed forms in other works (including *The House with The Ocean View*)—no complex or arcane apparatus here, but domesticated, familiar forms that may further serve to furnish and make comfortable a world that, initially at least, is strange. Yet the artist also cautions,

All the transitory objects have one thing in common: they do not exist on their own; the public must interact with them. Some objects are here to empty the viewer, some to give energy, and some to make a mental departure possible.²⁷⁰

Other object-works created in the late 1990s seem less benign, though programmatically they shared the common intention of immobilizing the viewer-participant in order, one assumes, to facilitate a mindful state. *Escape* (1998) consisted of a frame that not only cuffed the limbs and neck but shut out auditory sensation.²⁷¹ *Soul Operating Room* (2000) included various interactive components that placed bodies in a medicalized setting, including “blending-in coats” (white coats such as doctors or laboratory technicians might wear), a “Soul Operation Table,” a “Time Energizer,” a “Rejuvenator of the Astral Balance” and the “Reprogramming Levitation Module.”²⁷² *Soul Operating Room* may have had a rehabilitative intent in the context of millennial angst, but might also be read as

²⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 114-141.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 234.

²⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 250-255.

²⁷² Ibid., pp. 256-284.

injecting a note of irony or dark humor that now seems incongruent in the context of Abramović's larger body of work.

In tandem with these objects, the efficacy of which depended their contemplative use, Abramović developed a series of *Transitory Objects for Non-Human Use* that moved closer to pure sculptural form while recapitulating the paradigmatic items—bed, chair, table—that figured so strongly in other work.²⁷³ Here their potential accessibility is undermined by radical changes in proportion (e.g., long legs that put them out of human reach), transforming them from utilitarian to symbolic in nature while still resonant with a sense of home. A third series of *Power Objects* moved further into the domain of the totemic object and ritualized process, incorporating figures crafted of beeswax, bound with bandages and splattered with pig's blood.²⁷⁴ The artist also incorporated a text entitled *Spirit Cooking* in an installation utilizing some of these "power objects;" it reads like instructions for a performance but also like a conjuring of a reunion with a lover.²⁷⁵

Given Abramović's persistent interest in engaging the audience and transforming the passive viewer into the active viewer-participant, it is not surprising that she would also conduct workshops—not as a teacher *per se*, and not solely as a prelude to the creation of a performance work, but more like a guide in the process of greater self-awareness and self-reclamation. The *Cleaning the House* workshops (1979-2003) were week-long sessions characterized by clearly-set and quite stringent limits (e.g., fasting, abstinence, silence.) During the course of each

²⁷³ Ibid., pp. 342-377.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 380-387.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 389-401.

day, participants progressed through a series of exercises the artist herself had used in her own preparation; “Each exercise is designed to help further understanding of how our body and mind function. Walking backwards holding a mirror before our face for orientation helps us see reality as a reflection.”²⁷⁶ Though constrained from speaking, workshop participants were encouraged to keep journals of their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. One characteristic insight was that

The hardest thing is trying not to do anything; even when we do not move, we cannot stop thinking...Due to our culture we have gotten used to doing things; we feel well and complete when we do something; we search for plenitude through activity...I was very interested by the alteration of daily temporal perception that our body and mind produces with meals and visual stimuli. I NEVER FELT SO VIVIDLY THAT THE PASSAGE OF TIME DEPENDED ON ALL OUR BODILY ORGANS. The workshop did not give me anything I expected but changed everything I already had.²⁷⁷

Focusing on a discovery that underscores a central aspect of Abramović’s work and its emphasis on body language, the corporeal voice, another participant revealed that

Silence has an intensity in the performance that I consider unrivalled. That is what I discovered during Marina’s classes as an element for the performance...When no words are spoken, everything is said. The performance transforms silence into a perceptible sound. That is what is clear to me in Marina’s work.²⁷⁸

The period following the ending of Abramović’s relationship with Ulay also saw the development of new solo performance works, as well as works that were more complex in visual and physical structure, incorporating installation and objects as well as performance. In *Cleaning the Mirror I* (1995), the artist washed a

²⁷⁶ Marina Abramović, *Student Body*. Edizioni Charta, Milan, 2003, p. 49.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 112-113.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

human skeleton; in *Cleaning the House* (1996) she sat in the middle of a pile of bloody cattle bones, performing the same task. The latter performance was also recreated as part of the autobiographical work, *Balkan Baroque*. The timing of these works cannot be seen as coincidental, given the occurrence of the Croatian War of Independence (1991-1995), the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-95) and the war in Kosovo (1996-99.) Art historian Kristine Stiles suggests that one reading of Abramović's cleaning tasks was as an act of ritual atonement not only for those most recent brutalizing conflicts, but also for earlier acts of massacre of Serbs by Croats during World War II; she considers that "Given this history of fratricide, Abramović's performances incriminate everyone in the former Yugoslavian nation, yoking intimate acts of purification onto the polluted social body to insinuate that the crimes of the state are also those of its citizens."²⁷⁹ While Abramović's own performances are sometimes but one component in a larger installation, these explorations in which individual bodies converge with the body politic possess a distinct quality, almost as if the artist seeks to rewrite history through her own body, understanding that what is unsayable in words one might be able to articulate through the silence of the body. Another related performance work, created as a multi-screen video installation, is the *Balkan Erotic Epic* (2005), based on the artist's research into pagan and folk rituals of the region.²⁸⁰ Staging the performance on homeland soil, Abramović gathered men and women to enact the metaphors of fertility and fecundity, the men literally sowing their seed in the earth, and the women offering their breasts and exposing their sex to the rain.

²⁷⁹ Kristine Stiles, in Stiles, et al., p. 37.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

In the last decade, Abramović has been at the center of what has been emerging, not without attendant irony, as a kind of institutionalization of performance. *The House with The Ocean View* (2002), created in part in response to the destruction of September 11, 2001, was installed in the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York, one of the city's major commercial galleries. In 2005, the artist created *Seven Easy Pieces* at the Guggenheim Museum, a performance *tour de force* in which, over seven nights, she “re-performed”—with their permission—works by five other artists as well as one of her own before appearing on the final night, standing, somewhat goddess-like, in the central space of the museum in a voluminous tent-like gown.²⁸¹ *Seven Easy Pieces* both recapitulated a history of performance in the second half of the twentieth century, in some cases legitimizing, perhaps taming what had initially been considered radical, and also made problematic one of its validating premises, namely its ephemerality, its resistance to commodification.

Similar concerns might be seen to attend *The Artist is Present*, the major retrospective given Abramović in 2010 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. If *Seven Easy Pieces* established the sense of a performance legacy, Abramović has seemed intent on adding to it. The exhibition incorporated photographic and video documentation of numerous earlier works, and re-performance of some of them by others. In the central atrium of the museum, the artist herself was present each day, prepared to sit and be present with any viewer who sought to become a participant. In contrast to her more formally complex installations and performances, Abramović's simple silence reaffirmed a core principle of her work—a commitment

²⁸¹ Illustrated in Klaus Biesenbach, *op. cit.*, pp. 186-201.

to being present, and to intensifying the sensory and other dimensions of the experience of the here-and-now.

Engaging in Conversation: Themes and Theories...

There can be no question of the centrality of the body in the work of Marina Abramović—but can it also be asserted that the gendering of the body is significant, and makes a difference? The periods of solo performance that frame the time during which she worked with her male partner Ulay might provide one perspective—if the singular female body is subject to the male gaze, how is the male body positioned? Does Ulay’s presence neutralize or deflect that gaze? Or reinforce conventions of heteronormative representation? That Abramović performs both clothed and unclothed, and has continued to thus perform even as she has experienced the corporeal changes of age—those conditions provide yet other perspectives on the way the body continues to be engaged and deployed in her work.

Abramović has clearly set herself apart from an alignment with the feminist agenda that compelled other women artists working in the 1970s and after; in a recent interview, she stated, “I am not a feminist...I am just an artist.”²⁸² Earlier, in an extended interview given on the occasion of retrospective exhibitions of work in Valencia and Alicante, Spain in 1998, the artist responded to a question about this alignment in saying,

I never had anything to do with feminism. This comes from my Yugoslav origin. In our country the female, the woman, is very strong. She is at the same level as the man...they are just equal...I never felt this repression. I took my rights and I have always felt strong. I think that being vulnerable, being weak, is a rational choice of women and

²⁸² Interview with Andrew Goldman, *The New York Times Magazine*, June 17, 2012, p. 14.

not her genetic choice...this represses women and then they turn the whole thing against men in the form of feminism. However, I think that reality is completely different. I think that all energy, all power is so much in the hands of women and it always has been genetically like that.²⁸³

It is possible to understand Abramović's disavowal, even indictment of feminism—not idiosyncratic by any means—as conditioned by her own personality and individual position of power and familial privilege; that this is further inflected by her reading of “national character” (with its patriarchal and communist roots), quite apart from a distorted if not mis-reading of feminism *per se*, makes for a more complex task in thinking about her not as “just an artist” but—given her engagement of her own body—as a *woman* artist. Indeed, there is much in Abramović's work that would seem to point beyond gender to the human condition in general.

However, there are at least two aspects of the artist's work that might be responsive to a consideration of the inflection of gender, and provide different readings because of that: the cultivation of pain, and the insistence on presence. Put another way, violence and visibility can be said to have different significance for the bodies of women and men.

As noted, it is evident that a significant number of Abramović's performances intentionally work to the limit of capacity or endurance; this may be defined by physical exhaustion, or an extended but pre-determined time frame. But some works are also framed and paced by the infliction of pain. Sometimes that action is not fully or directly intentional, but rather the outcome (more or less inevitable) of

²⁸³ Interview with curator Pablo J. Rico in *Marina Abramović: The Bridge/El Puente*, Edizioni Charta, Milan, 1998, p. 76.

the performance agenda, as in *Rhythm 10* (when the artist cuts herself in the process of wielding the knives) or in *Rhythm 0* (when the artist sets the scene for things to be done to her.) There are other works, however, in which the experience of pain was more directly linked to the action. *Art must be Beautiful, Artist must be Beautiful* (1975), an undercurrent of anger running through a pithy commentary on aesthetic conventions, consisted of an hour in which

I brush my hair with a metal brush in my right hand
And simultaneously comb my hair with a metal comb
In my left hand.
While doing so, I must continuously repeat
“Art must be beautiful,
artist must be beautiful”
until I hurt my face and damage my hair.²⁸⁴

On another occasion, in *Dissolution*, one of five sections of *Spirit House* (a 1997 work performed for video), the artist, bare to the waist, her back turned to the camera/viewer, whipped herself repeatedly. Her performance notes read simply, “I whip myself to the point where I don’t feel the pain anymore.”²⁸⁵

One of the most elaborate litanies of self-testing is found in the program for *Thomas Lips* (1975), later re-performed as *The Lips of Thomas* in *Seven Easy Pieces* in 2005 at the Guggenheim Museum. In the space of two hours, Abramović slowly ate a kilo of honey, drank a liter of red wine, broke the wine glass with her hand, cut a five-pointed star on her abdomen with a razor blade, whipped herself beyond the point of pain, then lay down on a cross made of blocks of ice, a heater mounted over

²⁸⁴ Marina Abramović, *Artist Body*, op. cit., p. 106.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 370.

her abdomen to make the blood flow more freely. The performance ended (as did *Rhythm 0*) with members of the audience intervening to remove the blocks of ice.²⁸⁶

Where all performance might be said to inform us of what can be done with and by the body, Abramović (like others) also seems intent on exploring and manifesting what can be done to the body—and the imagined things that might produce sensations of pleasure pale in comparison to those invented to produce pain. The key question here is, what work does pain—as feeling, as apparent symptom or consequence of action—do as an aspect of Abramović’s performance, for the artist herself, and for viewers or viewer-participants?

One possibility is that it functions as a test of emotional control; if it is easy to cause some women pain because they are weak, but if some women (as in the artist’s Balkan worldview) are strong, then a stoic response to what would cause pain in others is emblematic of that strength. Another possibility is that it is proof of life; as Abramović comments in her notes for *Spirit House*, “As long as the blood stream flows, a body can be hurt by outer heat. It, however, cannot burn or be burnt until the blood flow stops, which means the body is dead. On the contrary, the spirit does not burn in any condition...”²⁸⁷

This last thought also suggests yet another possibility, echoed in the artist’s expressed intent in *Dissolution*, that the capacity to endure pain becomes a means of transcending it, moving the mind and body into another place. Does the body become, at some point, numb or insentient in the presence of pain, or does it shift into another register of sensory experience? This would also seem to accord with

²⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 98.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 370.

the artist's meditative practice, which has provided her with extraordinary discipline, and the capacity to maintain a kind of integration, even in the face of the fragmentation that pain can produce.

Though Abramović is not inclined to feminist critique, one might also consider that if, following one rhetorical line, the body is the object of the gaze, which necessarily comes to rest on and explore its surface, then wounding that surface may disrupt or subvert that gaze, or change its emotional valence from desire to...something else.

Few have written so eloquently, one could say feelingly, about a subject as ineffable as pain as Elaine Scarry. Scarry's analysis is pertinent here in that it can inform an understanding of what Abramović's actions, assumed to result in her pain, mean for her viewers. Imagine, for example, watching the performance of *Rhythm 10*, taut with apprehension as the artist's agenda becomes clear and one begins to wonder when and if she will stab herself next. If, as is quite possible, one has accidentally cut oneself with a knife, there is a curious mix of anticipation and perhaps a little shiver of memory of one's own experience. But knowing how one felt is not knowing how the artist feels; if one has not injured oneself, the gap, what Scarry calls the "unsharability" of pain, is even greater. As she reflects,

Thus when one speaks about "one's own physical pain" and about "another person's physical pain," one might almost appear to be speaking about two wholly distinct orders of events. For the person whose pain it is, it is "effortlessly" grasped...while for the person outside the sufferer's body, what is "effortless" is *not* grasping it....So for the person in pain, so incontestably and unnegotiably present is it that "having pain" may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to "have certainty," while for the other person it is so elusive that "hearing about pain" may exist as the primary model of what it is "to have doubt." Thus pain comes unsharably into our

midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed.”²⁸⁸

How is it that what arguably may be the most intense of feelings (apart, perhaps, from sexual release) is at the same time so difficult to grasp? Scarry posits that this unsharable quality, this perceptual or emotive gap is ensured through its resistance to language²⁸⁹; one can, at best, move obliquely by means of metaphor or analogy in hopes of some approximation, and then, perhaps, only after the most intense moment has subsided—the moment of pain may reduce one to incomprehensible utterance if not altogether mute. As she notes, “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.”²⁹⁰ Scarry also comments elsewhere that it is the fact that pain has no referential content (i.e., nothing more comprehensible to which it might be linked or compared)—“It is not *of* or *for* anything”—that adds to its resistance.

Pain, for all its negative connotations, does serve as a warning system, a protective mechanism for the body as it learns what to avoid; selective experiences of pain provide valuable insulation against more significant trauma; and is one’s emotional repertoire complete without some experience of pain, psychic and physical? Abramović’s embrace of pain in an aesthetic context may provide vicarious release, a surrogate catharsis for her viewers. But what of a performance such as *Rhythm 0*, in which the artist’s passivity in fact resulted in the infliction of

²⁸⁸ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985, p. 4.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

pain by her viewer-participants? Writing of the legacy of Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty and several more extreme mid-20th century practitioners of Body Art (an alternate name for performance art), Francesca Alfano Miglietti noted that "Art no longer wants just spectators, but now chooses to have witnesses...accomplices...The body as blood, skin, limbs, senses. But also body as fear, panic, anguish, depression, tension"²⁹¹—and, one might add, pain. In Abramović's performance, which tested not only her limits but those of her audience, viewer-participants were in fact given not only a choice of implements, but an ethical choice as well.

Understanding the capacity of pain to concentrate attention in the moment provides a transition to a second important aspect of Abramović's work, and that is the emphasis on presence. One may speak of being present, of being in the presence of something or someone, or acknowledging that there is no time like the present, even no time except the present; presence has both temporal and spatial implications. One also understands that the core of performance art, regardless of how it may be documented, extended, or preserved, exists in the "now" (and, as directly experienced, in the "here"), perhaps re-performed, but never fully replicable. It is evident that a synergy exists between Abramović's long-term interest in eastern spiritual practices (Buddhism in particular) with their accompanying meditative practices (which may begin in the "now" in order to move out of time) and her approach to performance (which is all about presence, but also about duration.) On the occasion of the retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, Abramović reflected that

²⁹¹ Francesca Alfano Miglietti, *Extreme Bodies: The Use and Abuse of the Body in Art*. Skira Editore, Milan, 2003, p. 21.

Performance is a mental and physical construction that I step into, in front of an audience, in a specific time and place. And then the performance actually happens; it's based on energy values. It is very important that the public is present; I couldn't do it privately; that wouldn't be performance. Nor would I have the energy to do it. For me it is crucial that the energy actually comes from the audience and translates through me—I filter it and let it go back to the audience.²⁹²

Shifting perspectives, one must also consider what presence means from the position of the viewer or viewer-participant, also embodied. Speaking about body-relatedness, Arthur Frank asks “Is my body the flesh that ‘I,’ the cognitive, ethereal I, only happen to inhabit, or is whatever ‘I’ am only to be found as my body? Do I *have* a body, or *am* I a body?”²⁹³ Frank goes on to ask, in terms suggestive of Abramović’s perception of her connection to audience, “What is my relationship as a body, to other persons who are also bodies? How does our shared corporeality affect who we are, not only to each, but more specifically *for* each other?”²⁹⁴

While these formulations of presence seem to suggest a direct and immediate connection between the performance artist and her audience, Amelia Jones sounds a cautionary note: “It is my premise...that there is no possibility of an unmediated relationship to any kind of cultural product, including body art.”²⁹⁵ Writing specifically about Abramović’s 2010 retrospective as a salient case in point, Jones argues that

²⁹² Marina Abramović, in Klaus Biesenbach, op. cit., p. 211.

²⁹³ Arthur Frank, excerpted from *The Wounded Storyteller*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1995, and anthologized in Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco, eds., *The Body: A Reader*. Routledge, London, 2005, p. 319.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 320.

²⁹⁵ Amelia Jones, “Temporal Anxiety/‘Presence’ in *Absentia*,” in Gabriella Giannachi, Nick Kaye and Michael Shanks, eds., *Archaeologies of Presence: Art, Performance and the Persistence of Being*. Routledge, London, 2012, p. 203.

'The Artist is Present' exemplified the politically dangerous trend toward reifying precisely that which is still being claimed as 'authentic' in its supposed transfer of unmediated emotions and energy. In short, 'The Artist is Present' exemplifies what is lost when performance is institutionalized, objectified, and, by extension, commodified under the guise of somehow capturing the ephemeral. You can't 'curate,' plan in advance, or otherwise *present* 'presence'; it is something that *happens* of its own accord through interpersonal encounters.²⁹⁶

In short, though the retrospective signaled a victory of sorts in validating performance as museum-worthy, it also exposed the consequences of what happens when "now" becomes history.

Engaging in Conversation: Listening to the Work...

From her earliest sound environments and solo performances to the MoMA retrospective in 2010 (the latest but likely not the last event), the work of Marina Abramović manifests a substantial range of ideas and interests engaging bodies, objects and spaces. One might, however, discern several recurring themes that inform the work and provide strands of continuity in the context of this creative diversity, beyond the more focused readings based on iconography or biography. These suggest that while one might begin with a reading that reflects conditions pertinent to a gendered/female body, Abramović also seeks to look beyond/post-gender to more general conditions of existence.

"I choose what I fear, pushing my body to its limits."

It is evident that risk-taking—pushing the body—has been integral to much of the artist's work, with those risks involving time, space, bodies, relations. If women in particular have lived with constraints not solely inherent within their

²⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 198.

physical bodies, but also with those imposed by cultural conventions, then a performative response that tests and perhaps ultimately disrupts those constraints may be both logical and creative (whether this leads to art or anarchy is another matter.) If bodies are meant to be clothed, unclothe them. If bodies are meant to be purposive, have them do nothing. If bodies are meant to move, have them sit still. It has been noted that contemporary performance art draws on, in part, a legacy of thinking that seeks to dissolve the boundary—itsself an artifact of limit-making—between art and life, and many of the actions aesthetically framed in Abramović’s work reposition some of the most elemental, quotidian movements and gestures as one means of such dissolution. Her more aggressive agenda also includes testing the body itself, testing endurance to the point of exhaustion, testing corporeal integrity with self-wounding. Yet she also suggests the liberatory potential of such testing, in reflecting

You must confront your own fear. If you’re afraid of pain, you have to find out what this pain is. When you open the door to pain, you’ll find out that you actually might be able to control it. You’ll be free from the fear of pain—which is a great feeling.²⁹⁷

A corollary realization, then, is that pushing the body to its limits, whether through the discipline of performance or some other means, becomes an instrument of self-defining and self-knowing.

“I exist at once as two I, two myselfes.”²⁹⁸

Abramović has written in various contexts about being conscious and unconscious (as, for example, in her notes about the *Rhythm* series), as well as about

²⁹⁷ Klaus Biesenbach, op. cit., p. 211.

²⁹⁸ From the artist’s dream diary while in the Australian desert, 1979, quoted in Stiles, et al., op. cit., p. 130.

her ideal relationship with an audience—both of which suggest an awareness of a kind of double sensibility that may be one way to understand what it means to perform the self. To say “I exist at once as two I...” need not suggest a pathological splitting of the self, nor invoke the Cartesian model, but may rather permit one to imagine two “mindbodies”—one looking out, one looking in, within the self-reflexive praxis that performance may facilitate.

Two other contexts are applicable here. First, to the extent that Abramović has used photographic and filmic media both to document live performance and has also integrated those forms within performance works (as, for example, in *Balkan Baroque* and her more recent work-in-progress, *Biography*), technology has made possible her replication—and who is to say that one is more or less “real” than the other? A corollary of this double reality, of course, is the re-performance of her work such as took place during the 2010 retrospective, for can it be denied that she continued to inhabit the work in some way? Second, given the way in which Abramović conceives of her connection with her audience—correlative, collaborative—it seems clear that each might be seen as an extension of the other. Is the singular, autonomous “I” too much valorized? As Arthur Frank suggests, we might better think of the *dyadic* body:

The dyadic body...represents an ethical *choice* to place oneself in a different relationship to others. This choice is to be a body *for* other bodies...The choice to live as a dyadic body points towards an ethics of the body. Dyadic bodies exist *for* each other: they exist for the task of discovering what it means to live for other bodies.²⁹⁹

“I am here and now; be with me and forget about time.”

²⁹⁹ Arthur Frank, in Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco, op. cit., p. 321.

On the final evening of *Seven Easy Pieces*, performed at the Guggenheim Museum in 2005, Abramović appeared at the top of large tent-like construction in the central atrium. The staging was highly theatrical, but her statement to the assembled audience was simple: “Please, just for the moment, all of you, just listen: I am here and now, and you are here and now with me. There is no time.”³⁰⁰

Given that time as much as space is integral to performance, it might seem that the artist has created another conundrum. How can there be no time, given that our very bodies are marked and measured by a sense of both temporality and temporariness? If we understand, however, that performance often does its work not only through disruption of the ordinary but by replacing it with something extra-ordinary, we might consider that Abramović sought to move her audience to not think about time, or to be aware of it in another way. As noted, the focus on the “here and now” (and thinking about time, if at all, as simply a succession of “now”s) is one way in which to concentrate the connection between artist and audience. It has also been central to the artist’s meditative practice, which in turn served and complemented works, such as *Nightsea Crossing*, that required stilling the body and clearing the mind for hours at a stretch. At the same time, the artist is aware of the dilemma, perhaps unresolvable, of emulating such practice in daily life.³⁰¹

Abramović has also understood performance to counter the manner in which viewers may interact with two- and three-dimensional works of art, when that

³⁰⁰ Biesenbach, op. cit., p. 200.

³⁰¹ Marina Abramović, in interview with Mary Jane Jacob, in *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, Jacquelynn Baas and Mary Jane Jacob, eds., University of California Press, Berkeley, 2004, pp. 186-195.

interaction may be measured in mere seconds or minutes. She commented on one occasion that

To me it is very important to introduce time in performance, because our time is becoming shorter and shorter. This is why I'm now struggling to make performance of longer and longer duration...[until] performance becomes life itself."³⁰²

Not thinking about time also means not thinking about mortality; the artist also acknowledged that

I don't want an audience to spend time with me looking at my work; I want them to be *with* me and forget about time. Open up the space and just that moment of here and now, of nothing, there is no future and there is no past. In that way you can extend eternity.³⁰³

As noted, Abramović has been almost alone in sustaining a decades-long performance practice and is now continuing to more firmly establish a legacy with the creation of an Institute that, building in part on the *Cleaning the House* workshops, will preserve performance art in all its seeming impermanence. She has also, not surprisingly, even created the performance outline of her own funeral celebration.³⁰⁴ As her biographer James Westcott concludes,

Abramović has always accepted that the moment of body art passed after the 1970s. But she has never been so accepting of the fact that the experience of sheer *duration* hasn't remained an important aspect of contemporary art. It's as if Abramović has realized, as she gets older and approaches death, that duration will be ultimately more powerful than endurance. Endurance and its demonstrative pain was confrontational, altering the consciousness of the performer more than the audience; and, as her peers of the 1970s discovered, it's not easy to sustain through a career, let alone beyond that career. But duration, as engaged by Abramović, can create a shared

³⁰² Marina Abramović, in Biesenbach, op. cit., p. 211.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ James Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies: A Biography*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2010, p. xiii.

experience...Working with duration, Abramović can seize the one thing she will always have, at least until she dies: time.³⁰⁵

³⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 309.

CHAPTER VII: MOVING TOGETHER

Poetic imagination or intuition is never merely unto itself, free-floating, or self-enclosed. It's radical, meaning root-tangled in the grit of human arrangements and relationships: *how we are with each other.*

The medium is language intensified, intensifying our sense of possible reality.

Adrienne Rich³⁰⁶

This peregrination has brought us from the late 18th century to the early 21st century in search of an understanding of human action, shaped both aesthetically and politically, through the frame of the genre of performance art and, more specifically, through the gendering of those who act in this context. While the initial concern has been the work of three individual women, performance artists whose sustained and cumulative bodies of production—understood through the trope of body language—have been the sites of this inquiry, the focus here will expand to consider the hybridity and diversity of the genre, and to suggest ways of thinking about the situatedness of those artists and their praxis within a larger social context, understanding—to extrapolate from Adrienne Rich—that being attuned to “how we are with each other” is critical to the well-being, perhaps even the survival, of a human community.

Rich's essay “Permeable Membrane,” which provides a contemplative way-station in this journey, is replete with corporeal metaphors and frames of reference

³⁰⁶ Adrienne Rich, “Permeable Membrane,” in *A Human Eye: Essays on Art in Society, 1997-2008*. W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 2009, p. 96; italics in the original.

as it speaks about the act of writing (“Working on a draft, I move by touch through what I can’t see clearly”) and the qualities of poetry and art:

Art is a way of melting out through one’s own skin. “What, who is this about?” is not the essential question. A poem is not *about*; it is *out of* and *to*. Passionate language in movement. The deep structure is always musical, and physical—as pulse, as breath.³⁰⁷

Rich also points to the connections between the corporeal and the communal, the singular and the social (“the interpenetration of subjectivity and social being”) in looking keenly at the malaise of contemporary society for which poetry might effect a remedy: “Dissatisfaction, impulse to look at the world anew, scrape at the wounds, refuse popular healings and panaceas, official concoctions”;³⁰⁸ and later, “We want to believe the fever can break, the sick body politic come back to life.”³⁰⁹ Rich concludes by invoking

...a permeable membrane between art and society. A continuous dialectical motion. Tides brining the estuary. Rivers flowing into sea...Likewise: the matter of art enters the bloodstream of social energy. Call and response. The empathetic imagination can transform, but we can’t identify precise loci or transformation, can’t track or quantify the moments...Nor how newly unlocked social energies, movements of people, demand a renewed social dialogue with art: a spontaneous release of language and forms.³¹⁰

Rich’s siting of the poetic imagination happens in a way, with references to bodies, that is both literal and metaphorical, and one need only exert one’s own imagination a bit further to place the body artist within the same evocative frame of reference. Here too, language—in this instance, the language of the body—possesses the capacity not only to connect but also to transform.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 97. Italics in the original.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 97.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 98.

³¹⁰ Ibid., p. 99.

In developing a larger awareness of what is being referred to as the situatedness of the artist's body, it is useful to reflect first on what might be understood as the emergence of the modern person, traced earlier as proto-performative creatures embodied in the Edwardian Dandy and the Parisian *flâneur*. While not artists *per se*, they nevertheless contributed to a genealogy of social and urban-spatial mobility that would emerge as critical to contemporary life, as well as to the consciously aestheticized actions with which we have been concerned. Engaging in the paradigmatic activity of walking as a *modus operandi* (perhaps *modus vivendi*) contributed at least two things—first, an awareness that the social exchange of seeing and being seen was closely linked to one's ability to be mobile in public; and second, that while cultivation of a personal style, linked to conscious self-presentation, might be an important corollary (especially, as has been seen, for the Dandy) the means of mobility—praxis acquired almost without thinking—pointed toward forms of artful action that could operate independently of specialized training.

This inherently egalitarian approach to engaging the body in both social discourse and aestheticized action continued to unfold in the performance activities linked to the avant-garde movements of the first half of the 20th century, motivated as they were by transgressing, even dissolving the art-life boundary. What emerged as performance art in the second half of the century can be understood as distinct from the more specialized and formalized traditions of both theatre and dance—even as it was informed by and also appropriated aspects of those traditions—in part because it was less bound, if not totally unbound, by the physical discipline and

aesthetic boundaries of these genres, as well as by the separation of author/choreographer and performer. It should also be noted that while the Dandy and particularly the *flâneur* were figures of modern life, the performance art that has been the focus of this discussion is aligned more with the post-modern, arising as Abstract Expressionism was supplanted by not one but two aesthetic counter-moves in Pop and Minimalism, signaling an emerging multi-vocality that was reinforced by the increasing visibility of artists who had previously been marginalized, including those who more openly challenged the then-prevailing (and still evident) sexism, racism and heteronormativity. The extent to which these shifts and ruptures within the art-world paralleled and reflected similar actions in the broader social context might suggest that the long-held desire to bring art and life into closer arrangement might in fact be realizable. It is worth noting in this context that Abstract Expressionism, positioned as the last great move of modernity in art, did in fact contain the seeds of its own transformation. As critic Harold Rosenberg, writing contemporaneously, noted,

At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or “express” an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.

The painter no longer approached his easel with an image in his mind; he went up to it with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him. The image would be the result of that encounter.³¹¹

And later:

³¹¹ Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” in *The Tradition of the New*, Grove Press, Inc., New York, 1961, p. 25.

The new American painting is not “pure” art, since the extrusion of the object was not for the sake of the esthetic. The apples weren’t brushed off the table in order to make room for perfect relations of space and color. They had to go so that nothing would get in the way of the act of painting.³¹²

To speak of painting not as object, but as event or encounter now seems unremarkable, but in the wake of the iconic photograph of Jackson Pollock flinging paint onto a canvas—the (some would say ejaculatory) gesture seen around the world—it would be difficult if not impossible to think of art-making as “pure,” if by that we may understand that the artist was no longer effaced by the compelling surfaces he might create, but had now stepped in front of them—no longer just a skilled hand, but a body, active and entire.

Sally Banes, writing about what was in her estimation a pivotal year in the critical decades of the 1960s, speaks engagingly about the newfound and energized sense of corporeality that pervaded this period:

The early Sixties artworks are rife with impudent body images. Robert Whitman’s sensuous *Happenings*, Tom Wesselmann’s *Great American Nude* series, Claes Oldenburg’s bulging soft sculptures, the Baudelarian cinema, the physicalized drama of the *Living Theater* and the *Open Theater*, the concretions of Fluxus, performance poetry, and, above all, the dance pieces by choreographers, composers, and visual artists asserted the concreteness, intimacy, and messiness of the human body as not only acceptable, but beautiful...

...the Sixties artists took the knowledge and power of the body to new extremes. Their insistence on a festive, liberated, material body took many forms...In their hands it became an effervescent body that exuded what they saw as the amazing grace of fleshly reality.³¹³

Performance art as it has developed is fundamentally hybrid in nature.

Located within the narrative of art history, it has drawn on painting and the plastic

³¹² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

³¹³ Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1993, pp. 189-191.

arts, as is evident in the work of Schneemann, Mendieta and Abramović; it has also been informed, as noted, by new forms of theatre (as formulated, for example, by Antonin Artaud and Berthold Brecht.) At the same time it has examined and at times strategically isolated the actions and events of the mundane and the every-day, acknowledging them as legitimate both in and of themselves as well as when re-contextualized in performance. Put another way, it can be considered that the very hybridity of performance art is a form of resistance to categorization—resistance that reinforces its general stance of countering other art-world conventions, including venues, markets, issues and audiences. It can also be said that hybridity of performance art, by its very nature, creates the “spaces-between” within which new world-making—a kind of interstitial activism—can occur. What changes when the work of art is not a settled product but a live process? What changes when that work is encountered not in a gallery or a museum but in a church, a club, a garden, a street? What changes when viewers are challenged to move beyond their privileged but passive sight and draw on a richer sensorium of experience, up to and including their own bodily participation?

Performance art has been referenced as a genre, a category of art praxis, even as it has been described as resistant to categorization. The examples selected for analysis, while they may have much in common with other instances of performance in terms of changing some of the most fundamental of framing conventions of the art-world, are but a small part of a much broader spectrum of both historical and contemporary performance. The genre—both figuratively and quite literally a “moving target”—may thus be positioned in a number of different

ways in relation to an analytic framework. To consider the implications of the changes posited earlier, for example, is also to consider the way in which performance art has functioned as a form of counter-hegemonic counter-culture—counter-hegemonic in that it undermined the privileging of paint and attendant formal conventions, and counter-cultural in that it set in place an alternative way of art-making, and world-making—constituting, in short, both a breaking down and a building up.

We have positioned performance art as a form of language, corporeal in nature, and the performance artist as one who utilizes that language. Raymond Williams provides insight into the way in which language, more generally understood, operates within a social context, a perspective from which we might reasonably extrapolate. Williams notes, “We then find not a reified ‘language’ and ‘society’ but an active *social language* ...” and subsequently observes, “Signification, the social creation of meanings through the use of formal signs, is then a practical material activity; it is indeed, literally, a means of production.”³¹⁴ Williams also provides a way to think about the place of the individual, who must both learn and internalize signs and their systems of use in commenting that

...we can see that just as all social process is activity between real individuals, so individuality, by the fully social fact of language (whether as ‘outer’ or ‘inner’ speech), is the active constitution, within distinct physical beings, of the social capacity which is the means of realization of any individual life. Consciousness, in this precise sense, is social being.³¹⁵

³¹⁴ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977, pp. 37-38, italics in the original.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

The realization that language is an integral part of social activity, of social process, then allows us to consider the ways in which language might be used in that context. As noted, language can be used to name, to describe, to identify, to make reference, to express; it can, of course, also be used to persuade, to permit, to prohibit, to codify—in short, to regulate or control the very social activity, and social consciousness, of which it is a part. Language may thus be understood as relating to the creation and maintenance of hegemonic practice. One possible way to think about this would be to consider that language and hegemony exist in a kind of symbiosis: language provides the content and the conduit for the circulation of ideas and for social communication, while hegemony regulates what moves through that linguistic circuitry, and (for example, with ideology) may also provide some of the conceptual freight.

Williams acknowledges the critical contributions of Antonio Gramsci to the discourse on hegemony in clarifying an important distinction regarding the social sphere in which hegemony operates. Williams notes that Gramsci distinguished between two key regulatory powers that operate in the social sphere—the overt apparatuses of disciplinary state power, and the implicit guidance in the “general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group” to which the masses “spontaneously” consent.³¹⁶ It is the latter that is understood as hegemony, which Williams characterizes in noting that “...the more normal situation is a complex interlocking of political, social, and cultural forces, and ‘hegemony’,

³¹⁶ Antonio Gramsci, “The Intellectuals,” in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, eds., International Publishers, New York, 1971, p. 12.

according to different interpretations, is either this or the active social and cultural forces which are its necessary elements.”³¹⁷ Williams also clarifies the important distinction between ideology as a worldview pertinent to the interests of a particular (dominant) class, and hegemony, which, more than a system of ideas and beliefs, is suffused throughout a “...whole lived social process as practically organized by specific and dominant meanings and values.”³¹⁸ Williams subsequently makes a critical connection between hegemony and culture:

Hegemony is then not only the articulate upper level of ‘ideology’, nor are its forms of control only those ordinarily seen as ‘manipulation’ or ‘indoctrination’. It is a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living: our sense and assignment of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world...It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society...It is, that is to say, in the strongest sense a ‘culture’, but a culture which has also to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes.³¹⁹ (110).

Returning to the idea, stated earlier, of the processual nature of social activity, two key elements might be added: first, the understanding that hegemony too is not a fixed system (Williams notes that “A lived hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or a structure”³²⁰) and as such may be vulnerable to crisis or rupture; second, following the first, to the idea of a prevailing hegemony we need to acknowledge the possibility of a counter-hegemony or alternative hegemony.³²¹ One may consider this process of hegemonic flux in either organic or dialectic terms, but both reinforce the idea of possible change, whether incremental or radical, in the way in which hegemony operates. If this model can be

³¹⁷ Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

seen as applicable to the art-world (itself understood as a sub-culture within society at large), then it becomes important to ask what is at stake for those in the dominant position, and what are the points of vulnerability in the processes that support the maintenance of that position, such that alternative agendas might emerge that may be either oppositional or transformative. The fact that, as noted particularly in the work of Abramović, performance art has evolved to incorporate aspects of institutional structure, raises the question of the sustainability of the counter-hegemonic—does it wither, or become the new hegemony? Williams concludes his discussion of this dynamic by considering that

It can be persuasively argued that all or nearly all initiatives and contributions, even when they take on manifestly alternative oppositional forms, are in practice tied to the hegemonic: that the dominant culture, so to say, at once produces and limits its own forms of counter-culture...[but]...cultural process must not be assumed to be merely adaptive, extensive, and incorporative. Authentic breaks within and beyond it...have often in fact occurred...The finite but significant openness of many works of art, as signifying forms making possible but also requiring persistent and variable signifying responses, is then especially relevant.³²²

Dick Hebdige's study of Subculture provides another perspective on methodological approaches to the examination of the ways in which the hegemonic operates. Hebdige develops a critical language around the idea of style and its "subversive implications" as the manifestation of a Refusal (what can be read as counter-hegemonic) that results in what he identifies as a subculture.³²³ One thing that seems immediately significant about Hebdige's taxonomy is the way in which it is physical/visual markers of a style (he refers to them varyingly as "mundane

³²² Ibid., p. 114.

³²³ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: the meaning of style*, Routledge, New York, 1979 (2008), p. 2.

objects”, “a form of stigmata”) become the signs which encapsulate a wider range of meaning and affect, “...so the tensions between dominant and subordinate groups can be found reflected in the surfaces of subculture—in the styles made up of mundane objects which have a double meaning.” He notes further that “the meaning of subculture is, then, always in dispute, and style is the area in which the opposing definitions clash with most dramatic force.”³²⁴

Hebdige, consonant with Williams’ reading, notes the nature of hegemony as a “moving equilibrium”³²⁵ that resists the permanence and normalization of forms, thus setting the stage for the operation of subcultures, which not only provide resistance to dominant cultures on a structural level, but also on a level in which elements of material culture may be symbolically re-purposed, re-signified, or, as Hebdige notes, “...the challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is not issued directly by them. Rather it is expressed obliquely, in style.”³²⁶

He goes on to say,

The struggle between different discourses, different definitions and meanings within ideology is therefore always, at the same time, a struggle within signification: a struggle for possession of the sign which extends to even the most mundane areas of everyday life...Style in subculture is, then, pregnant with significance. Its transformations go ‘against nature’, interrupting the process of ‘normalization’. As such, they are gestures, movements toward a speech which offends the ‘silent majority’, which challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus.³²⁷

³²⁴ Ibid., p. 3

³²⁵ Ibid., p. 16.

³²⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

³²⁷ Ibid., pp. 17-18.

This insight offers a valuable context within which to consider the work of performance artists, and in particular the women who “struggled for possession of the sign” that was, in fact, the body in which they lived.

Throughout this discussion and the larger project of which it is a part, language has been referenced and invoked—as the voice of the poetic imagination, as the connective tissue of social relations, as a tool deployed by both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces. Art-making as we have traced it may be said to have its own visual language, with a vocabulary of iconographic elements and a syntax of formal structure and material coherence. We understand language, by extension, as a capacity of the body—pre-verbal, or non-verbal—that provides another register of expression for the conditions and experiences of human life; body language as the voice of the body politic has been positioned as a primary metaphor. Underlying each of these framings, each of these cited endeavors, it would seem, is an assumption about the power of language, its efficacy. The fact that we can do things with language and through language goes well beyond a sense of utility or economy.

In this context, tracing J. L. Austin’s formulation of the performative utterance also goes well beyond what is an interesting but ultimately limited linguistic concern; Austin provides a point of departure rather than a destination in this journey, as the concept of the performative has gained greater viability through what others, including Judith Butler, have done with it. Austin’s notion that in certain specific instances, saying something constitutes a simultaneous doing, seems so simple, but it should be noted that this “speech-act” is made more complex by its

social context, as the speaker's authority and credibility must be affirmed as a basis for the validity of the act itself.

Judith Butler provides two theoretical tools related to speech-acts. Building on clear etymological linkages, she has more fully developed the concept of performativity within the specific context of gender identity, i.e., gender is not so much something one has as once-given (as, for example, an ascribed marking of the body and identifying a set of relevant behaviors) but rather something that one does as a continuing praxis (and thus something for which one takes creative responsibility.) She has thus provided us with a critical tool in the general analysis of works of performance art in which women's bodies have been the primary actors. In addition to this operational insight, Butler has also provided a qualitative one in her discussion of excitable speech, which may be understood as speech intended to wound, or to disrupt the usual flow of social discourse and to destabilize social relations (i.e., function in a counter-hegemonic manner.) Butler does caution, however, that such speech holds consequences for both speaker and addressee, for excitable speech is also performative.

There is an evident connection between Butler's formulation of this more energized form of speech and Michel Foucault's reading of *parrhesia*, generally read as fearless speech. Foucault makes clear the relational aspects of this mode of speech—between the speaker and what is said, between speaker and the one to whom it is said—and the risk inherent in thus speaking. To the extent that *parrhesia* is bound up with one's obligation to speak truth to power, it also has a performative dimension in being constitutive of citizenship. While *parrhesia* is rooted in an

historical moment in Greek philosophical tradition, it may also serve as paradigmatic for contemporary life, and more specifically for the performance works examined here. Put another way, it is possible to see Schneemann, Mendieta and Abramović, (as well as others) as contemporary parrhesiasts, risking the speaking of the truth of their bodies, but also making an inherent appeal to a corporeal community. The inherent risk of performance art may not rise to the level of life-risk (as Foucault's reading would suggest) but it certainly rises above the level of a simple contrarian sensibility.

Eros, oikos, thanatos—the three performance artists considered here offer three distinct inflections of corporeality: the erotic body (Carolee Schneemann), the ecological body (Ana Mendieta) and the existential body (Marina Abramović.) Such inflections are intensified by the further markings of gender, and the additional freight of such signification that women's bodies bear. The fact that each has chosen to bare her own body in performing is indicative of a desire to set aside the accretions of meaning gathered through centuries of objectification and representation, visual or otherwise. Their own bodies, set in motion, work also to re-write the stories that women's bodies tell. In addition to the themes identified as central to each body of work, there are two that serve as a kind of general subtext but which have generally been unvoiced in discussions of the work, and will be addressed only briefly here. The first is the idea of the beautiful, long a touchstone for formulations for aesthetic quality, long an elusive ideal for many women. To say that Schneemann, Mendieta and Abramović are beautiful women may seem unremarkable, or perhaps even beside the point (attractiveness of physical

appearance never having been a criterion of excellence when judging male artists, for example.) But to consider the possibility that their performances depended to a considerable extent both on their having beautiful bodies, and on their being comfortable within them, substantially complicates a reading of the work. Could these performances have occurred through bodies in any way at variance with an ideal? Did these performances serve to re-inscribe, re-essentialize rather than to liberate these bodies from such a standard?

A second undercurrent centers on the idea of nature and the natural. One framing of the persistent dualism with which the world is often cleaved is that of nature and culture, with women, and particularly women's bodies, positioned with nature as its exemplar, and men (and particularly men's minds) positioned with culture as its maker. Such assignments made it possible to generally exclude women until relatively recently from art-making (at least in western traditions) as well as from other domains; despite the fact that what has been thought of as natural often elides with what comes to be thought of as "normal," women's entry into such domains was "un-natural" or abnormal. Another dilemma then that is posed by women's performance art is the confrontation it orchestrates between the "natural" body and its cultural context, which, if not "un-natural," is rife with artifice.

"Up To and Including Her Limits"—the title of this dissertation, though borrowed in part from Schneemann's work, is, however, applicable to all, as each has confronted not only the limits—social, political, physical, intellectual, aesthetic—imposed by a gender-conscious and gender-biased environment, but has also tested her own capacity for creative action. We might think of this limit not as a

boundary beyond which one can go no further, but (as Rich suggests) a “permeable membrane,” or a liminal zone, a locus of new encounter—between one hegemonic or cultural impulse and another, between one subjectivity and another, between appropriation and resistance.

At the same time that performance works by these women explore important aspects of what it means to be embodied—of sexuality, of human nature in relation to nature writ large, and of finite temporality—they also point to the ways in which those concerns become part of the larger, multi-vocal human conversation about finding a habitus—a home in body, space and time. At the same time that these works—by their nature ephemeral—spoke of and to other times, the traces that persist are still capable of speaking now—not timeless works of art, but still of our time, reminders that bodies can and must continue to matter.

As noted earlier, this study has positioned each artist with specific reference to the nature of her corporeality. It should be understood that this constitutes a point of departure for inquiry, not a collapsed characterization of the artist herself or of what is, for each, a rich and complex trajectory of work. It signals both some themes that are integral to that work as initially performed, as well as ones that may continue to serve as points of connection between artist and audience.

Carolee Schneemann invokes the erotic body. By this we mean the body that knows, that understands, that feels itself to be the site and source of sensation and pleasure that derives in part from an intense sense of “liveness,” being here and now, but not for always (*eros* and *thanatos* are irrevocably conjoined.) This characterization comes explicitly from the artist herself (“I celebrate the ecstatic,

erotic body”) and is to a considerable extent about herself and her own body awareness; it is also evident in her creation of key works such as the collaborative performance *Meat Joy* and the film *Fuses*, both of which involve encounters shaped by very different degrees of intimacy. *Meat Joy* might be read as foreplay, with the emphasis very much on play. In contrast, *Fuses* becomes the visual equivalent of orgasm, as Schneemann sought to make the intense joy of that feeling visible to herself. The erotic body will thus be read also as the sexual body—and with that reading enters a thicket of signification. Much more can be said than is possible here about female sexuality, about the female body as object of desire, and about female bodies defining and finding their own objects of desire—but one theme that Schneemann’s work surely foregrounds is the importance of the distinction between the erotic and pornographic—a contentious distinction for feminist and other theorists. Perhaps one way to begin with this is to understand, as does Schneemann, that the erotic life emerges from the sentient body rather than being imposed upon it.

Ana Mendieta is aligned with what we have called the ecological body, in large part because of her own formulation of the “earth-body” that dominated so much of her work. As noted earlier, this linguistic linkage symbolized several connections that were crucial to Mendieta, largely because they had been attenuated or broken: long periods of separation from family and of exile from her homeland, motherland. The themes of presence and absence, expressive in part of a yearning for home, serve as a subdued litany for much of her work, and provide some insight into the fact that the artist ultimately replaced her own body with surrogate

silhouettes—as if to suggest a presence, but not in the present. For Mendieta, the subtext of women and nature touched on earlier was more dominant, and rather than resist the essentializing implications of this connection (including matriarchal mythology), it could be said that Mendieta embraced it, because it did the work of allowing her to heal the connections that had been broken. Leaving her mark on and in the earth was a means of reframing and re-forging that connection. Where we have spoken of women’s bodies as surfaces to be written on, Mendieta inverted that process in writing herself back into the earth’s narrative. The *Siluetas* served not only to join her body and the earth, but also to juxtapose, to counterbalance body-time with earth-time—another way of coming to terms with mortality, for which the ephemeral nature of the work itself might serve as a sign. To speak of the ecological body suggests two related paths of inquiry that allow us to expand on ideas inspired by Mendieta’s work: first, that we might do well to cultivate an attitude of care for our body, other bodies, comparable to what we espouse for our natural environment, recognizing the vulnerability of each; and second, that we cultivate that attitude because our bodies are our habitus, and the earth is our home.

Marina Abramović’s work speaks through the existential body, so characterized for three primary reasons: first, because it so often deals with the contingencies, the uncertain conditions, the limits of personal control that might be seen as hallmarks of contemporary life; second, because the locus of meaning and meaningfulness may as readily be found (or made) in quotidian events as in those that are extreme or risk-laden; and third, because a dominant and recurring theme is reaffirming not simply the condition but the act of being present in the world.

Abramović's performance works are, perhaps more than those of Schneemann and certainly more than those of Mendieta, concerned with manifestations of relationality—between bodies (self and others), between bodies and collaborative objects, between bodies, time and space—all of which serve as both navigational and location-finding devices for the sense of presence. One might also consider that, like Schneemann's eroticism and Mendieta's union with earth, Abramović's continued reaffirmation of being present, often articulated in the simplest, most seemingly mundane of actions, was her response to mortality. In the context of the emphasis on presence, it is important to consider the ways in which Abramović negotiated the issue, so problematic for performance artists, of the way in which performance can be mediated not just through forms of documentation that may stand in for the originary event (something all three artists, and others, have done) but also through the re-performance of works, and through the unscripted or improvisatory engagement of viewer-participants.

We have alluded on a few occasions along the way to the role and response of viewers and viewer-participants, and to the ways in which performance art in general substantially altered the conventional positions of artist and audience, as well as other factors that governed that relationship, such as new spaces of action. We have also suggested that, if we think of performance as one form of body language that is shaped by both aesthetic and gender-political practices, the works and themes discussed here constitute the content of those corporeal utterances. Further, the connection, through the work that foregrounds the (female artist's) body to the bodies that see and otherwise experience the performance, can be

considered the source of both an embodied conversation and a community, or one among many possible publics engaged in “poetic world-making,” as suggested by Michael Warner—publics as spaces of performance that are not only political but existential.

The idea of relationality that emerges in Abramović’s work and, by extension, in much of performance art as further acknowledgement of its hybridity—shifting the focus from artist/audience connections to the positioning of the genre with the larger art-world—can be considered in different contexts, of which three seem particularly relevant. We spoke earlier of Rancière’s formulations on the politics of aesthetics and the role of boundaries (here one thinks of Schneemann’s “limits”) as operative in that context.

In his essay “Problems and Transformations in Critical Art,” Rancière approaches the idea of boundaries in a different way, beginning with that transformative early 20th century strategy of collage, which “...prior to mixing paintings, newspapers, oilcloth or clock parts, mixes the strangeness of the aesthetic experience with the becoming-life of art and the become-art of ordinary life.”³²⁸ Here Rancière appears to echo the modern artist’s quest for the dissolution of the art-life divide. If we think about the progeny of collage—bricolage, sampling, mash-ups, even the postmodern mining of historical styles and history itself, we can see the rightness of Rancière’s observation that “The blurring of boundaries is as old as

³²⁸ Jacques Rancière, “Problems and Transformations in Critical Art” (2004), in Claire Bishop, ed., *Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art*. Whitechapel and MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2006, p. 84.

'modernity' itself."³²⁹ As part of his discussion, Rancière identifies four new forms of art that, for him, provide concrete examples of this new state of aesthetic boundary-crossing: the game, the inventory, the encounter and the mystery.³³⁰ Of these, the third relates most specifically to performance art:

Relational art [another term, like invitation, for the encounter] thus intends to create not only objects but situations and encounters...What is at stake is the transformation of these problematic spaces that conceptual art had opposed to art's objects/commodities. Yesterday's distance towards commodities is now inverted to propose a new proximity between entities, the institution of new forms of social relations. Art no longer wants to respond to the excess of commodities and signs, but to a lack of connections.³³¹

Some of the works discussed by Rancière in the context of relational art are taken up in more detail in writer and critic Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*. He notes, "The possibility of a *relational* art (an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space), points to a radical upheaval of the aesthetic, cultural and political goals introduced by modern art."³³² And elsewhere,

...what if...this represented the historical chance whereby most of the art worlds known to us managed to spread their wings...? This "chance" can be summed up in just a few words: *learning to inhabit the world in a better way*, instead of trying to construct it based on a preconceived idea of historical evolution. Otherwise put, the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist.³³³

³²⁹ Ibid., p. 85.

³³⁰ Ibid., pp. 88-92.

³³¹ Ibid., p. 90.

³³² Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*. Les presses du réel, Digon-Quetigny, 2008, p. 14.

³³³ Ibid., p. 13, italics in the original.

Bourriaud's conclusions about both the social-relational and ethical implications of relational art align with expectations about the possibilities offered by performance art.

Bourriaud also notes, in a manner particularly relevant here, that "Art is an encounter,"³³⁴ and that "Each particular artwork is a proposal to live in a shared world, and the work of every artist is a bundle of relations with the world, giving rise to other relations."³³⁵ These ideas are particularly resonant in the context of performance art and the ways in which it embraces the idea of relationality precisely through altering if not collapsing the boundary structures that buttress other forms of art.

Krzysztof Ziarek's *The Force of Art* allows us to think about relationality in a dynamic way that engages both the nature of the work that art does (as in the multiple implications of "artwork"), but also the idea of the kind of energy invested in that work, as expressed in his distinctive coinage "forcework." For Ziarek, the question of power, often seen as the domain of the political, needs to be addressed in new ways:

My approach...is meant to change the aesthetic optics that still determines much discussion of art, and to offer a new way of understanding art's intimate yet critical relation to the very modalities and operations of power in today's society...I approach art as a force field, where forces drawn from historical and social reality come to be formed into an alternative relationality. I call this transformative event "forcework"...[which] refers to the manner in which artworks redispense relations on the micro-level of forces—underneath the sedimented relations, so to speak, between objects, bodies, substances, and the operations of power forming them. Such transformation cannot be described in traditional terms, because it is

³³⁴ Ibid., p. 18.

³³⁵ Ibid., p. 22.

not a matter of form and content [NB: elsewhere, art is considered an event], of images and statements, of the seen and the said, or of the sensible and the intelligible.³³⁶

Ziarek's formulations, in which art is so dynamically activated, provides a point of alignment between work and performance, a connection explicitly made in his discussion of the double sense of terminology:

Thus the notion of 'artwork' comes to play a double role here, not just as an art *object* but also as an art *work*: its 'labor,' performance, act, in a word, its force. Revealed in its full complexity, the artwork is the reciprocal animation of the nominal and the verbal sense of the 'work,' the event of the actualization of art's status as an object into the performance of its work.³³⁷

While the work of Rancière, Bourriaud and Ziarek all deal with aspects of what one might think of as the infrastructural aspects of art-making and art-work, particularly as they are understood in a socio-political context, Davide Panagia returns us to relationality defined in more personal (though no less political) terms. In concluding *The Political Life of Sensation*, and dealing with "an ethics of appearance," Panagia begins with a discussion of the compelling nature of photographic images, against which one might read one's own recollections of performance either live or mediated by filmic means; his analysis brings back into play the sense of the corporeal (which must include the affective.) Beginning with a reflection on the photographs that emerged from Abu Ghraib (which could be described as "coerced performance") Panagia reflects on the nature of such photographic evidence and the stories it tells.

³³⁶Krzysztof Ziarek, *The Force of Art*. Stanford University Press, 2004, p. 7.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Panagia uses Barthes' language of advenience, which can be understood as a way of getting at when things enter our structures of consciousness; put another way, when do we start paying attention? In a more unmediated form like performance, how is the wait-time and the subsequent degree of engagement different? Panagia further identifies a central question in his own analysis: "What are the ethopoetic [ethical/aesthetic] practices of cultural interface that constitute contemporary citizens as subjects of perception?"³³⁸ One might consider here the archetypal *flâneur* as well as those performance artists who place themselves intentionally as "subjects of perception."

Concern for the ethics of perceptual experience are also evident in Panagia's observation that

As political life continues to be more and more complicit in acts of image-creation and transmission, it becomes increasingly urgent that we engage the strategies of perceptual competence that allow appearances to count as sensible...to an analysis of the practices of perception in political life."³³⁹

Further, it seems in his reference to "the theatocracy of democratic life"³⁴⁰ that Panagia embraces the alignment of appearance and performance. How we attend and how we respond are defining conditions, understanding that we cannot stand apart, with an innocent or disinterested eye; that we are, as he suggests, complicit in and by our very presence.

A second perspective on relationality that regrounds us in the corporeal, and to which, initial reference having been made, a closer look should now given, is

³³⁸ Davide Panagia, *The Political Life of Sensation*. Duke University Press, Durham, 2009, p. 153.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

empathy. Following its linguistic roots (*empathia*, *Einfühlung*, “feeling into”), we can begin by considering that empathy is a distinct, and a particularly situated, invocation or mobilization of affect, beyond a specific affect itself. Earlier reference was made to the idea that we can “be moved”—that is, have a felt response to an experience. While engagement with works of art might elicit such responses across a broad spectrum of feeling, empathy constitutes a different order of experience in that it suggests, even requires, investment in the interpersonal. Further, it says, in effect, not simply that “I understand what you are feeling” but rather “I feel what you are feeling”—there is, thus, a consonance between persons, not person and object. What is suggested here, in seeking to acknowledge the presence of empathy as a possible response to performance art, as a manifestation of relationality, is that empathy accords not solely with the interpersonal, but with the intercorporeal. We have suggested that performance art is a hybrid genre, that is, constituted of an internal diversity, mixing, or aesthetic miscegenation or, as Rosenberg suggested, no longer “pure.” Empathy thus might also be understood in relation to the encounter through a parallel diversity or complexity of response that attends each face-to-face, each bodily connection, shaping what is between as well as what is within. Stating that, questions arise: can the body be the source of feeling, not simply the vehicle of its expression? Are there feelings with which it may be impossible to empathize? Can a body marked in one way by gender or race or age or able-ness “feel with” another body, differently marked? By asking these questions, we suggest that another of the things performance works may do, beyond changing the terms of seeing and being seen, is to substantially (perhaps radically) alter the terms of

affective engagement. The capacity to empathize, especially in the context of the different, the strange, the unfamiliar, is also, it is suggested, the capacity to imagine connections and find common ground, for which shared embodiment may provide a critical point of departure.

Recent research by Clare Hemmings provides further insight into the features of the interpersonal dynamic at work in empathy that are also germane in this context. While Hemmings' work is specifically focused on feminist research and theory-building (e.g., feminist epistemology) and the use made of specific concepts such as empathy, it is possible to extrapolate productively from that work as it might be seen to apply to the relation between artist-performer and viewer or viewer-participant. Hemmings (in summarizing other research) notes that "Empathy is understood both as a way of challenging the subject/object distinction...and as a way of confronting the authority of the speaking or writing subject who represents others."³⁴¹ She continues, "The empathetic critique is twofold, suggesting the importance of *feeling as knowing* on the one hand...and on the other hand, it emphasizes the importance of moving beyond the subject and towards intersubjective practices and modes of knowing."³⁴² Hemmings traces the distinction between a productive form of empathy and what she terms "failed empathy," tantamount to a "sentimental attachment" that may simply tell the other how they feel. Aligned with Lorraine Code, Hemmings considers that "In Code's view empathy is akin to a feminist 'ethic of care' that values intersubjective experience as

³⁴¹ Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2011, p. 198.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 198, italics in the original.

part of what is and can be known and is an important way of recognizing knowledge as embodied but not static.”³⁴³ Hemmings also notes that Maria C. Lugones, in adding a cross-cultural perspective, recognizes that the experience of moving toward another may be accompanied by a sense of discomfort that should be explored rather than avoided.³⁴⁴ In summarizing the distinction between “good” and “bad” empathy, Hemmings returns to the key issue of subjectivity in stating that “...good empathy will emphasize the independent life of the other subject; bad empathy will project itself onto the other who can only become a subject in the empathetic one’s image, and then only subsequently.”³⁴⁵ (Put another way, one could say that good empathy can learn to be comfortable with diversity, the difference of the other, while bad empathy cannot.) While Hemmings’ discussion continues beyond what can be considered here, what is relevant to our examination of the artist-performer is the affirmation of intersubjectivity (“subject/other-subject”³⁴⁶ in her formulation, rather than subject/object, as one might presume in a conventional viewer/artwork context.) Good empathy, perhaps better defined as a “feeling with” rather than “feeling in,” thus acknowledges a “limit” but also understands it as traversable.

Interpersonal, intercorporeal, intersubjective—we have proceeded in a context that, while it has been focused on understanding how the body as an entire sensorium has been inspired to act and to connect with other, and despite the various appeals to the frame of language, has at the same time tended to privilege

³⁴³ Ibid., p. 200.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 200-201.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 201.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 203.

the visual, from the inward turn of self-perception to the outward engagement in the spectacular, from the embodied eye of the performer to the embodied eye of the viewer or viewer-participant. While we may not wish or be able to subvert this privilege, we can perhaps re-situate it in a way that aligns it more closely with our understanding of the empathic response and the mutuality of engagement that performance works offer. What is proposed then, is the idea of double vision.³⁴⁷

The phrase “double vision” might, at first, seem to connote a seeing double, a flawed sense of vision, an aberration of sight, in which things are out of focus, edges and contours blurred, perception vulnerable to distrust. We could however, think of redefining that idea in order to capture a better sense of how we might experience the world of performance works we have begun to explore here. Double vision, as differently understood—perhaps the perceptual counterpart to empathy—could, in fact, be the very capacity required not only to engage these works, but to engage the world not simply as an embodied eye or embodied mind, but through a mindful and feeling body. Perhaps somewhat ironically, the work of cultivating a sense of double vision begins with educating one’s own eye, cultivating the capacity to imagine beyond one’s own world. In this context, as we have noted of the politics operative within the art-world itself, this means being attuned to the mechanisms by which certain persons and practices have been privileged, and others excluded; to the

³⁴⁷ This discussion builds on prior research done in the context of cross-cultural art criticism, and developed for presentations at “Frontiers of Transculturality in Contemporary Aesthetics,” an international conference in Bologna, Italy in 2000, and subsequently at the East-West Philosophers Conference in Honolulu in 2005. While this work focused on reading contemporary art-making in the indigenous culture of Hawai‘i from a non-native or settler perspective, I believe that the concept is also applicable to reading across other boundaries, including those of gender and genre, and is thus utilized here.

standards by which works of art and the work of art-making have been judged and valued; and to the assumptions that regulate the various transactions that circulate, from production to consumption. Performance works did much to interrogate if not overturn many of the existing protocols of the art-world; as a crucial corollary, performances by women, as seen here, sought to change the terms of engagement by which women's bodies were seen. It is important to note here that while the focus of this research has, of necessity, been narrowly framed, it can point to a larger whole, a world transected by multifaceted identities, where some boundaries are erased while others are ever more persistently asserted, where centers and margins, mainstreams and backwaters continue to shift, and where a changing someone, including ourselves, is always the "other." In the face of what we perceive as radical dissimilarity and contentious difference, however the boundaries are drawn, can we find common ground in our own corporeality? Can we see eye to eye?

A century and more ago, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote poignantly of the Negro as

...born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others...One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals within one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.³⁴⁸

Du Bois' formulation of double-consciousness may represent the shadow side of double vision as conceived of here, but it alerts us to a crucial fact: it is the oppressed, more often than the oppressors, who may possess the capacity, born of

³⁴⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Bantam Books, New York, 1903 (1989), p. 3.

necessity, for seeing the world from multiple perspectives. Given that what Du Bois posits as double-consciousness was most likely linked to overt and physical oppression, it is also important to consider whether such capacity also arises when the oppression is covert and/or ideological (as, to cite a pertinent example, with the apparatuses of patriarchy.)

That capacity, made virtuous and more benign, might be seen as akin to Yeats's "negative capability," the ability to hold in creative tension two things that seem at first to be opposite, contradictory, even irreconcilable; to understand the ways in which differences are mutually implicating, mutually defining; to engage in dialogue where two (or more) voices may continue to be heard, without seeking an end to the conversation, without forcing a synthesis that suppresses vital differences—a capacity, in short, to create and dwell in hybrid spaces.

Another creative re-inscription of double vision might be "double-take," as in taking a second look, moving beyond the superficial, stereotypic, unreasoned and unthinking; moving also beyond fascination, desire, fear or revulsion, moving beyond the discomfort produced by the unfamiliar, the strange. Yet another way of thinking through double vision is to cultivate, even embrace the times and spaces in which we move from the egocentric one to the relational two (akin to what Arthur Frank, cited earlier, has called the dyadic body), in which we might have face-to-face encounter, two clear-seeing sovereign beings, engaged in mutual regard, in respectful reciprocity, committed to collaborative world-making.

Artemaking may often be a solitary endeavor, privileging one actor; the political begins with two. When Carolee Schneemann speaks of being both image

and image-maker (object of desire and desiring subject), when Ana Mendieta yearns for home, for union with the earth, when Marina Abramović senses herself to be two entwined selves, integrated through the work that affirms her presence in the world, they speak in part from their gender-inflected positions—complex positions both attributed and performed—that reveal a doubling, a “two-ing” of vision. At the same time, their work may be read as an invitation to meet them (even if not face-to-face), not simply to see their bodies, but to reflect on what bodies are capable of saying, and how it is we, embodied, are to be with each other.

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