

Performance Art From Futurism to the Present

RoseLee Goldberg

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

'It's my bible' – D.J. Spooky

First published in 1979 and now extensively updated, this pioneering book has been expanded with a definitive account of the technological, political and aesthetic shifts in performance art that mark the early years of the twenty-first century. An astonishing increase in the number of works and venues around the world testifies to this art form as the chosen medium for new generations of artists entering the global conversation of art and culture and for articulating 'difference', whether dealing with issues of identity or historical context. The desire for direct engagement with today's most prominent artists explains the wide appeal of performance art to the ever broadening audience for new art. Maurizio Cattelan, Paul McCarthy, Tania Bruguera, Matthew Barney, Patty Chang and Allora and Calzadilla, among many others, can now be seen in the historical context of other innovators in the field from the Futurists and Dadaists to Yves Klein and Laurie Anderson.

With performance now featured in major museums and considered one of the most important artistic forms of the twenty-first century, this is a timely update to the essential guide.

Third edition

On the cover:
Mike Kelley, *Extracurricular*
Activity Projective:
Reconstruction #32,
Plus, 2009.
Photo © Paula Court.
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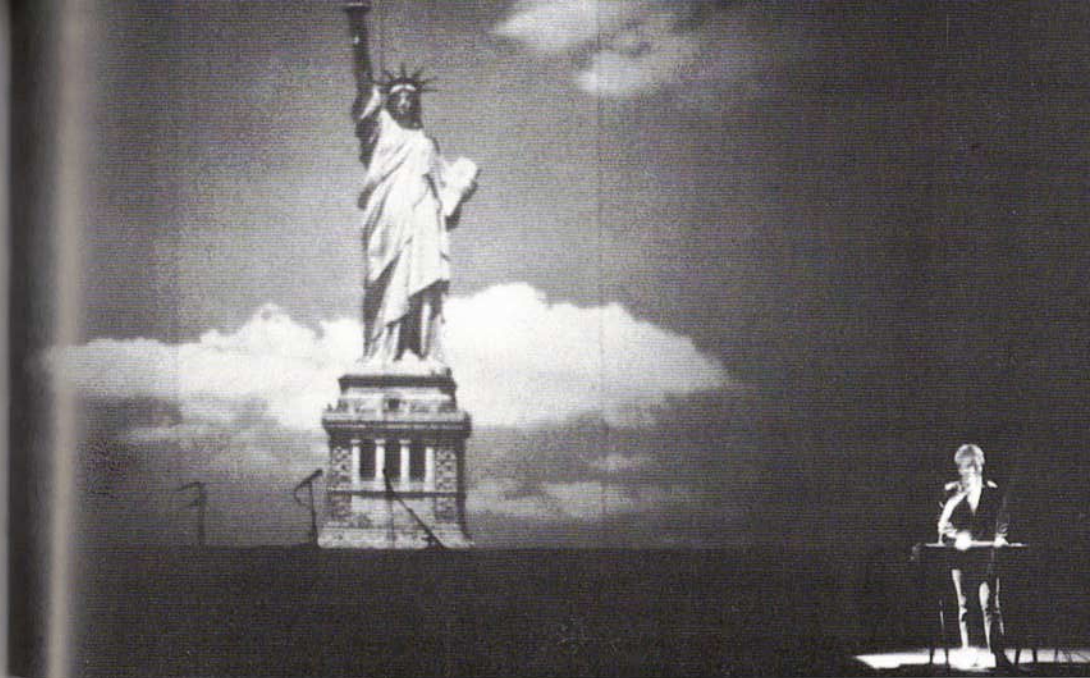


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The media generation

By 1979, the move of performance towards popular culture was reflected in the art world in general, so that by the beginning of the new decade the proverbial swing of the pendulum was complete; in other words, the anti-establishment idealism of the sixties and early seventies had been categorically rejected. A quite different mood of pragmatism, entrepreneurship and professionalism, utterly foreign to the history of the avant garde, began to make itself apparent. Interestingly enough, the generation that created this about-turn mostly comprised students of conceptual artists who understood their mentors' analysis of consumerism and the media but broke conceptual art's cardinal rule, of concept over product, by turning from performance and conceptual art to painting. The new paintings were often quite traditional – many were figurative and/or expressionistic in content – even though they were sometimes also filled with media imagery. Responding to this accessible and bold work, a few gallery owners and their newly affluent clients, as well as the occasional public relations team, insinuated a new, very young generation of artists into the art market; within a few years, by 1982, some artists were transformed from struggling unknowns into wealthy art stars. Thus the eighties art world, in New York in particular, was criticized for its disproportionate attention to 'hype' and the commercial business of art.

The artist-as-celebrity of the eighties came close to replacing the rock star of the seventies, although the artist's mystique as cultural messenger suggested a more establishment role than the rock star had played. Indeed, this return to the bourgeois fold had as much to do with an overwhelmingly conservative political era as it did with the coming of age of the media generation. Raised on twenty-four-hour television and a cultural diet of B movies and 'rock 'n roll', performance artists in the 1980s interpreted the old cry to break down barriers between life and art to be a matter of breaking down barriers between art and the media, also expressed as a conflict between high and low art. One major work that made a landmark crossing of these borders was Laurie Anderson's *United States*, an eight-hour opus of song, narrative and sleights of hand and eye, presented at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in February 1983 (it was actually an amalgam of short visual and musical stories created over six years). *United States* was a flattened landscape that the media evolution had left behind: projected hand-drawn pictures, blown-up photographs taken from TV screens and truncated film formed operatic-size backdrops to songs about life as a 'clooosed circuit'. She sung and spoke a love song 'let $x = x$ ', through a vocalizer that made her voice sound like a robot's suggesting a melancholy splicing of emotions with technological know-how. 'O Superman', a song at the heart of the show, was an appeal for help against the manipulation of the controlling media culture; it was the cry of a generation exhausted by media artifice.



156 Laurie Anderson, *United States Parts 1 and 2*, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, 1983

Anderson's endearing stage presence and her obsession with 'communication' were qualities that enabled her to reach the broadest possible audiences. Indeed, in 1981 she had signed up with Warner Brothers (USA) for a six-record contract so that, as far as the public was concerned, *United States* marked the beginning of the 'coming out' of performance into the mass culture. For although by the end of the seventies performance had been accepted as a medium in its own right by the institutional hierarchy of the art world, in the early eighties it moved into the commercial world.

Two other artists in New York set precedents for this transfer: Eric Bogosian and Michael Smith both began as comic acts at the end of the seventies in Lower Manhattan's late-night clubs, and both within five years successfully appeared on the 'other side' while retaining the always paradoxical title of performance artist. In addition, their early achievement encouraged the many disco clubs that opened over the next five years to feature performance as nightly entertainment and thus they spawned a new genre: artists' cabaret.

Eric Bogosian, a trained actor performing in the art context, began in the tradition of solo performers, taking Lenny Bruce, Brother Theodore and Laurie Anderson as his models. He created a series of characters that stepped out of radio, TV and cabaret scripts of the fifties; beginning in 1979 with

158 'Ricky Paul' – a belligerent, macho entertainer with a twisted, old-fashioned dirty humour – he added new portraits that by the mid-eighties comprised a picture gallery of American male types: angry, often violent or hopelessly subdued. Presented in powerful solo performances with titles such as *Men Inside* (1981) or *Drinking in America* (1985/6), they were a cumulative diatribe against an uncaring society. As much concerned with form as with content, Bogosian's portraiture took the best from performance, its imagistic focus and appropriations from the media which were fashionable at the time, and matched them with the finesse and confidence of the highly skilled actor. His approach was to 'frame' each character, emphasizing the clichés and conventions of manipulative acting techniques, while at the same time setting up stark, isolated 'pictures' that reflected the similar concerns of his fine-art peers. This combination, as with Anderson, attracted attention beyond a downtown New York following so that by 1982 Bogosian, as both writer and actor, had acquired producers, the following year a prestigious company of agents, and the year after that, film and TV contracts.

Michael Smith's transfer was not as complete as Bogosian's, but he was an early example of the performance artist/entertainer that, in many different forms, characterized the general direction of the art in the early eighties. With his stage persona Mike, Smith worked on the edge between performance and television, making video tapes and performances that were a combination of both. In *Mike's House* (1982), presented at the Whitney Museum, a TV studio was constructed – complete with actor's dressing room and kitchenette – the centre of which was a 'living room'. Rather than perform in person, Smith appeared in a half-hour tape on the 'living room' TV; *It Starts at Home* showed Mike on the telephone to his obnoxious 'producer' Bob (actually Bogosian's voice), discussing the possibility of a major TV comedy show.



157 Opposite: Ann Magnusson, *Christmas Special*, performed at The Kitchen Center, New York, 1981

158 Eric Bogosian in an early cabaret performance as 'Ricky Paul' at the short-lived Snafu Club, New York, August 1980

159 Karen Finley strains against urban domesticity in *Constant State of Desire*, a solo theatrical performance at The Kitchen Center, New York, 1986

160 Tom Murrin in his *Full-Moon Goddess*, a fast-paced act of less than ten minutes, using 'found-on-the street' material for his costume; performed at PS122, New York, 1983



This picture of a performance artist dreaming of becoming a celebrity in the media world, perfectly captured the ambivalence of the performance artist: how to make the crossover without losing the integrity and the protection – to explore new aesthetic territory – of the art world. Not that being discovered by the media was the only goal of the new performance entertainers who featured nightly at downtown Manhattan's East Village clubs such as The Pyramid, 8 BC, The Limbo Lounge or the Wow Café, and the East Village's own 'institutional' showcase, PS 122 (the main presenters of artists' cabaret between 1980 and 1985). Rather, these artists chose to break new ground at a distance from the more established venues and performers. They made rough, quickly sketched works that explored the edges between television and real life, without suggesting that they were ready for either. Post-punk media scavengers and mass culture connoisseurs, they created their own version of art cabaret with some old-fashioned pizzazz from favourite TV and vaudeville shows, touched here and there with a little seediness that sufficed for parody.

Despite the odds of working in settings where there were few guarantees of an attentive audience, and the fact that the clubs were trying to make profits, which put pressure on the artists to actually succeed in their mission to attract general audiences, many artists made riveting work. John Kelly created mini dramatizations of the artist Egon Schiele's angst-ridden biography; Karen Finley defied the passivity of her audiences with threatening themes of sexual excess and deprivation; and Anne Magnusson appeared as various TV soap-opera stars. Others, like The Alien Comic (Tom Murrin) and Ethyl Eichelberger, came from years of experience in experimental theatre to use the raw, energetic venues for their new work. Murrin's comic was a fast-paced story-teller of East Village sagas, while Eichelberger took the drag act beyond its preoccupation with transvestism into the realm of romance and satire with his collection of hysterical, historical divas from Nefertiti and Clytemnestra to Elizabeth I, Carlotta of Mexico and Catherine the Great. Indeed, for many the particularities of club performance provided useful limits: the result was work that was unusually sharp in its focus and lucid in its execution.

John Jesurun, a film maker, sculptor, and former TV production assistant, benefited from just such a setting; he thrived on the 'real circumstances' (a commercial club) and on the 'real' audience that were, like himself, members of the media generation. His *Chang in a Void Moon* (June 1982–83) was a 'living film serial', presented in weekly episodes at The Pyramid Club, which used staging techniques adapted from movies: camera pans, flashbacks or jumpcuts. Jesurun did not simply take out pictures from the media or hold up fine art to the cultural mainstream. Rather, he stepped right inside film and television, opposing the realities of celluloid and flesh and blood or, as Jesurun



161 John Jesurun's high-tech theatre disturbs the boundaries between the media and real life. In *Deep Sleep*, performed at La Mamma, New York, in 1986, a young boy is imprisoned in film, never to return to the flesh

put it, 'the juxtaposition of truth-telling and lie-telling'. In *Deep Sleep* (1985), for example, four characters began on stage while two appeared larger than life on screens suspended at either end of the performance space. One by one, each was drawn onto the film, like genies through the lip of a bottle, until a solitary figure remained to tend and maintain the projector. In *White Water* (1986) live actors and 'talking heads', on twenty-four closed-circuit monitors surrounding the audience, engaged in a ninety-minute verbal battle over illusion and reality. Timed like the 'tick-tock' of a metronome so that live and recorded dialogue inter-wove perfectly, Jesurun's 'video theatre' was an important indicator of the time; for its high-tech drama was as much an example of the prevailing media mentality as of the new theatricality of performance.

Towards theatre

By the mid-eighties, the overwhelming acceptance of performance as fashionable and fun 'avant-garde entertainment' (the mass circulation *People Magazine* called it *the art form of the eighties*) was largely due to the turn of performance towards the media and towards spectacle from about 1979 onwards. More accessible, the new work showed attention to décor –

costumes, sets and lighting – and to more traditional and familiar vehicles such as cabaret, vaudeville, theatre and opera. On large or small scales – in an opera house such as the Brooklyn Academy of Music or on an intimate, ‘open stage’ such as London’s Riverside Studios – dramatization of effects was an important part of the whole. It is interesting that performance came to fill the gap between entertainment and theatre and in certain instances actually revitalized theatre and opera.

Indeed, the return to traditional fine arts on the one hand, and the exploitation of traditional theatre craft on the other allowed performance artists to borrow from both to create a new hybrid. The ‘new theatre’ gained the licence to include all media, to use dance or sound to round out an idea, or splice a film in the middle of a text, as in Squat Theater’s *Dreamland Burns* (1986). Conversely, ‘new performance’ was given the licence to acquire polish, structure and narrative, as in James Neu’s *Café Vienna* (1984) which, in addition to its unusually layered stage (peeled back, wedge by wedge as the action progressed), had a fully-fledged script as its most unusual aspect. Other works, including Spalding Gray’s autobiographical tours of landscapes from his past, such as *Swimming to Cambodia* (1984), and his and Elizabeth LeCompte’s *Trilogy* (1973–), initially presented at The Performing Garage (an experimental theatre), were later seen as often on the performance as on the theatre circuit.

162 Squat Theater’s *Dreamland Burns*, 1986, written by Stephan Balint, began with a twenty-minute film depicting a young girl’s move into her first apartment, and ended with urban redemption in a ‘thriller movie’ setting



163 Jan Fabre, *The Power of Theatrical Madness*, 1986, a highly stylized melodrama of eighties romance and sexual violence against backdrop-slide projections of Mannerist paintings

In Belgium, Jan Fabre’s highly theatrical performances, such as *This Is Theatre As It Was To Be Expected And Foreseen* (1983) or *The Power of Theatrical Madness* (1986), mixed overtly expressionistic acting with violence, both physical and metaphysical, as well as imagery drawn from artists like Kounellis and Marcel Broodthaers. Highly staged, action-packed, stressful and often repugnant – in one scene in *Theatrical Madness* frogs jumping about the stage were covered with white shirts and then apparently stamped on by the actors, leaving blood-stained linen on stage – Fabre’s work was a hybrid of visual cut-outs from performance and climactic portrayals of psychological states culled from literature and theatre.

In Italy, several young artists in their early and mid-twenties had grown up on Fellini, American film and television imports, and frequent appearances of Robert Wilson (whose work was seen far more regularly and completely in Europe than in his native United States), as well as rumour and the infrequent appearances of Laurie Anderson. These new artists were the enthusiastic creators of a genre dubbed Nuova Spettacolarita by the press, or Media Theatre by its proponents. In Rome and Naples where the two most active groups were based (La Gaia Scienza and Falso Movimento), the spectacles of the cities themselves formed the backdrop to their early work. Falso Movimento, formed in 1977, first created short events and installations that were concerned with language and film and which were in line with a

Talking Heads, was a grand opera; conceived as a twelve-hour spectacle whose separate parts were designed for and reflected the contributions of five nations (Holland, Germany, Japan, Italy and the United States), it was intended for the Olympic Arts Festival in Los Angeles. Although it has never been performed all together, its individual parts presented a monumental picture-book of images from the American Civil War, blended, for example, with contemporaneous photographs of Japanese Samurai warriors. It was a slow-moving visual history-board peopled with men and women the height of buildings, historical characters such as General Lee, Henry IV, Karl Marx and Mata Hari, and animals from the ark – elephant, giraffe, zebra and tiger. Wilson wanted his 'history of the world' to reach a large, popular audience. 'It's meant to be the way rock concerts are', Wilson remarked, recalling his first attendance at a rock concert. 'They are the great opera of our time.'

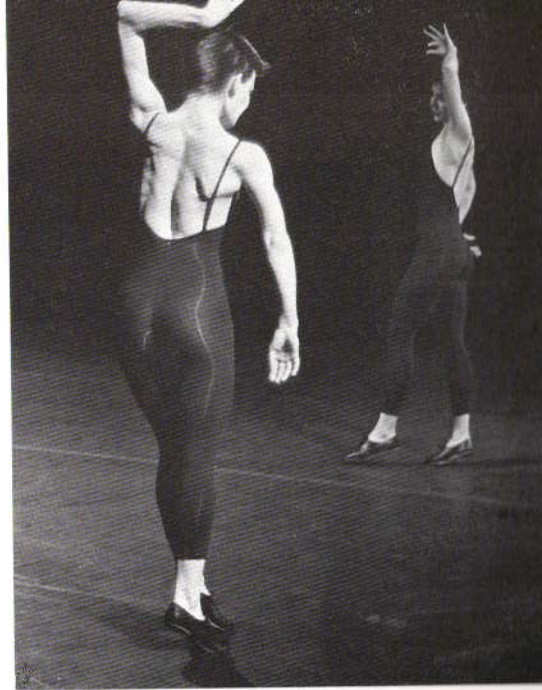
Dance Theatre

It is not surprising that dance paralleled these developments by moving away from the intellectual underpinnings of the seventies' experiments to work that was both far more traditional and entertaining. With a renewed interest in highly trained bodies, beautiful costumes, lighting and backdrops, as well as in narrative, the new choreographers took what they had learned from the preceding generation and blended those lessons in 'accumulation', natural movement and choreography of geometric patterning with classical dance techniques and recognizable movements appropriated from a broad spectrum of dance. From the seventies, they also retained the practice of working closely with artists and musicians, which meant having elaborately painted sets designed by 'media generation' artists, and rhythmically charged music that was a blend of punk, pop and serial music.

Karole Armitage, trained by Cunningham and Balanchine, typified this extrovert mood. With her long limbs and perfectly tuned body, she joined the musician and composer Rhys Chatham and his 'out of tune guitars' to create a dance piece that captured the sensibility of the moment. *Drastic* 168 *Classicism* (1980) – a collaboration which included Charles Atlas who was responsible for the décor – was a concoction of punk/new wave aesthetics, with its seedy glamour, pop sophistication and its colour chart of blacks, purples and splashes of phosphorescent green and orange. It was also a balance of classical and anarchistic approaches to both dance and music: dancers and musicians literally clashed on stage, the dancers ricocheting off the musicians who could barely hold their ground though at the same time they beat out a wall of sound and forced the dancers to create 'louder' movements (a mix of Cunningham and Balanchine's) to match the increasing intensity of the music. Similarly, Molissa Fenley pulled dance from its minimal aesthetics



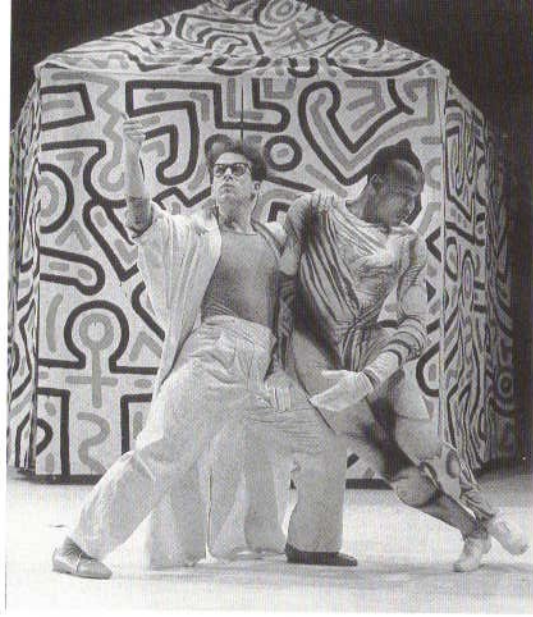
168 Karole Armitage, *Drastic Classicism*, 1980, with Rhys Chatham



169 Molissa Fenley's combination of high speed and choreography based on the shape of the body is seen here in *Hemispheres*, 1983

directly into the eighties with impossibly fast, non-stop motion designed for bodies trained like hers – equally gymnast and dancer – in works such as *Energizer* (1980), a whirlwind discourse on the placement of arms, heads and hands. In *Hemispheres* (1983), she appropriated from an image-bank of dance 169 movements that suggested an Egyptian hieroglyph or a frieze of Greek warriors; palms were turned up as in Indian classical dance, or an elbow was crooked as in a Balinese curtsy, while a hip movement might recall a popular samba. Overlaid with music specially composed by Anthony Davis, Fenley's *Hemispheres* (referring to the brain), set out to be a reconciliation of opposites: present and past, analytical and intuitive, classical as well as modern. The sheer physicality of the work made it both demanding for the dance specialist and delightful for a larger audience.

For Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane, another way to reach the general audience was by breaking yet one more seventies taboo, that of partnering. The cornerstone of classical dance, they sought to give the *pas de deux* new form, and their own partnership provided the key: tall, with a bone structure chiselled like an African wood sculpture, Jones stood a foot above Zane, who in both personality and shape suggested a Buster Keatonish character out of



170 Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane's *Secret Pastures*, 1984, with Jones as the creature created by the mad professor (Zane), was indicative of a return to narrative and décor in dance of the 1980s

vaudeville. Jones was a highly trained and lyrical dancer and Zane a photographer who turned dancer when he was 25. Their combined choreography was one of movement design and elaborate theatrical effects, while the relationship that their partnering suggested gave their early material an intimate autobiographical character. Works like *Secret Pastures* (1984), however, transcended the personal: it had a company of fourteen dancers; a narrative involving a mad professor and his monkeys on a beach strewn with palm trees, created by the media artist Keith Haring; a zany, circus-like score by Peter Gordon and highly styled clothing by the designer Willi Smith. With these accoutrements it crossed the High-Low bridge linking avant-garde diversity with accessible American modern dance, such as that of Jerome Robbins or Twyla Tharpe. For these choreographers, 'informing popular culture' was an important goal, 'not pop culture informing us', they argued, and *Secret Pastures* laid vivacious claim to being an example of avant-garde pop.

Many dancers, on the other hand, continued to work with the more esoteric guidelines established by the preceding generation, even though they too added costuming, lighting and dramatic themes to their creations. Ishmael Houston Jones used improvisation as a key choreographic motif in works such as *Cowboys' Dreams and Ladders* (1984), which he created with the artist Fred Holland; Jane Comfort in *TV Love* (1985) used her signature repetitions, and her fascination for language as the rhythmic undercurrent to her dance, in a parody of TV chat shows. Blondell Cummings in *The Art of War/9 Situations* (1984) mixed silence and sound, gestures, video and pre-

recorded texts in semi-autobiographical, intimate dances that illuminated aspects of black culture and feminism, while referring to a book of the same title written in the 6th century BC. Tim Miller re-created vignettes from his youth, such as *Buddy Systems* (1986), where dance was used to punctuate or defuse emotional states or to link one body gesture to another. Stephanie Skura, by contrast, covered all dance territory in parodies of its recent history: *Survey of Styles* (1985) was almost a quizz show, with movements mimicked from seventies and eighties choreographers as the subjects of her guessing game.

The ultimate dance theatre was that of Pina Bausch and her Tanztheater Wuppertal. Taking the permissive vocabulary of the seventies as her yardstick – from classical ballet to natural movements and repetitions – Bausch devised adventures in visual theatre on the scale of Robert Wilson's. These she mixed with the kind of ecstatic expressionism associated with northern European drama (with German precedents such as Bertoldt Brecht, Mary Wigman and Kurt Joos), thus introducing dramatic and compelling theatre that was also dramatic and visceral dance. Just short of being actual narratives (although words were often shouted by one dancer or another), Bausch's dance dramas explored in minute detail the dynamics between women and men – ecstatic, combative and eternally interdependent – in various body languages determined by the strikingly individual members of her company. The women – long-haired, powerful and exotic, and in many different shapes and sizes – and the men – just as varied in bulk and appearances – made movements that were repetitive, obsessive and

171 Pina Bausch's *Kontakthof*, 1978, had men and women in line formation as part of a repetitive choreography that was an elaborate essay of everyday self-conscious gestures



fastidious. They were played out over long hours as behavioural discourses between the two sexes. Walking, dancing, falling, strutting or just sitting, women and men held and shoved, caressed and tortured one another in extraordinary settings. In *Auf dem Gebirge hat man ein Geschrei gehört* ('On the mountain a cry was heard', 1984), the stage was inches thick in dirt. In *Arien* (1979), it was inches deep in water. In *Kontakthof* (1978), a high-ceilinged dance hall was the setting for mesmerizing choreography constructed from closely observed gestures of self-conscious men and women; straighten tie/straighten bra strap, pull down jacket/check petticoat, touch eyebrow/adjust lock of hair, and so on, until the cycle of movements, endlessly and rhythmically repeated, first by the women, then by the men, and together in various combinations, created its own dazzling momentum.

With a ritualistic intensity that recalled European body art of the sixties, and with symbolism ascribed to materials like earth and water, Bausch's dance theatre was the antithesis of the media-conscious work emanating from the USA. Slow, penetrating, almost funereal, in browns, blacks, creams and greys, her dances eschewed easy accessibility and instant pleasures. Equally timeless and tirelessly physical was the Japanese dance theatre *Butoh*, an almost untranslatable term that 'black dance or step' approximates. It was a dance form of slow-motion movements and exaggerated gestures, sometimes juxtaposed with incongruously shocking music or performed in utter silence. Austere and mysterious, the *Butoh* performers' Zen-like goal

was to achieve spiritual enlightenment through rigorous physical training. They were often naked, skins dusted with white or ashen clay, and the resulting impression given by these still, contorted figures was that they were part fetuses, part bound mummies, thus symbolizing *Butoh*'s chosen subject of the space between birth and death. Intricately tied to ancient Japanese traditions – both priestly, as in the dances of *Bugaku*, and magically theatrical, as in *Noh* – exponents such as Min Tanaka, Sankai Juku, and Kazuo Ono in Japan, or Eiko and Komo and Poppo and the *Gogo Boys* in New York, have in common their fascination with the body as an instrument of transcendental metamorphosis. A work by Sankai Juku called *Jomon Sho* ('Homage to Pre-History – Ceremony for Two Rainbows and Two Grand Circles', 1984), is a seven-part, randomly arranged cycle of life's cataclysmic events. Members of the group first appear as four amorphous balls lowered from the theatre's ceiling and eventually unravel into fully grown men hanging upside down from a rope, which suggests both umbilical cord and noose. Gracious and grotesque – another section, *To Ji* ('Incurable Illness'), has the performers propelling themselves across the stage, limbless in finned sacks – these ritualistic and solemn performances related to a large body of iconic work, both Eastern and Western, that in its powerful physical presence attempted to reveal spiritual elements in the visual landscape.

Live Art

Attempts to commercialize cabaret-style performance were made during the early 1980s by several television and film companies, particularly in New York but no less in Sydney and Montreal. In England, performance took off in a range of new directions. Several artists elaborated on Gilbert and George's powerful 'living sculpture' theme, although their motives were based on a different, eighties concern: that of the role of painting in late twentieth-century art. *The Living Paintings* (1986), a series of works by Stéphen Taylor Woodrow, were developed in response to a renewed interest in painting and to several major European exhibitions that showcased the large-scale work being made at the time. Hence Woodrow's 'living paintings', presented as part of the Living Art Festival at London's Riverside Studios in the summer of 1986, comprised three figures literally mounted on a wall. Painted in solid grey and black, from hair to shoes and socks, and looking more like a sculptural frieze on a large public building than a flat painting, their startling stillness during gallery hours was intentionally broken from time to time when a figure moved an arm or bent at the waist to touch the head of a passerby. Monumental and yet still painterly – the folds of their coats were so thick with paint that they cast shadows like those in a *trompe l'oeil* painting – these figurative, three-dimensional compositions were also entirely in keeping with the visual arts'

172 The Japanese *Butoh* group, Sankai Juku, in *Kinkan Shonen*, on their visit to New York in 1984

