

Performance

Janet Kraynak

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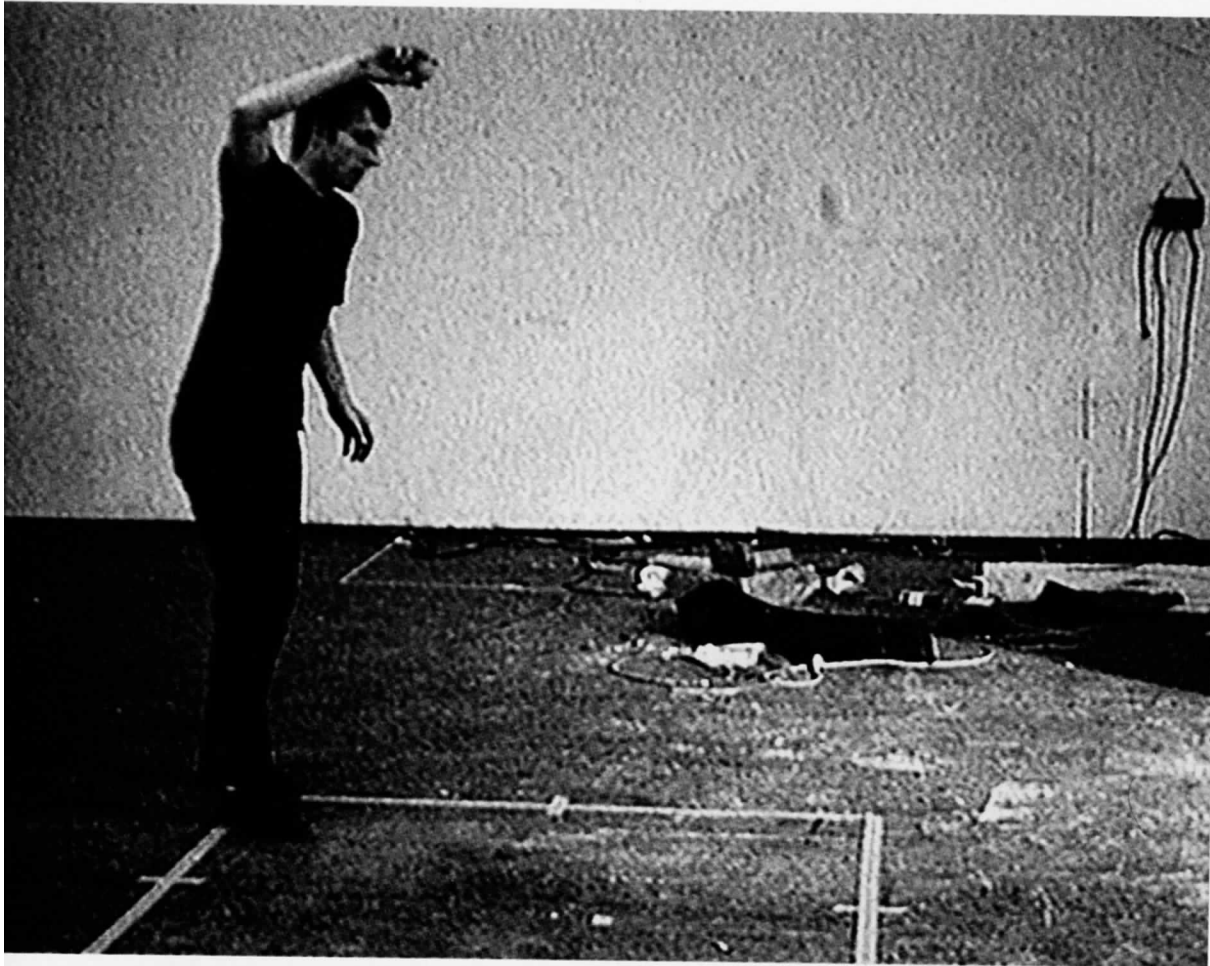
PERFORMANCE

The subject of countless exhibitions, articles, and scholarly publications, “performance” nonetheless remains a troublesome term. Much of this difficulty stems from the fact that performance upsets the conventional categories of art history. Performance is not a movement or a school with an identifiable set of practitioners; instead, it is a strategy adopted by a range of artists who interpret it in vastly different and even contradictory ways. Performance is not a medium but hybridizes different media, thus challenging the very notion of a medium. It is not a distinct discipline but breaches disciplinary boundaries—from music and film to literature—to participate in the broader interdisciplinary turn of the humanities in the sixties. Rather than a fixed idea, performance raises complex interpretive questions regarding the ongoing transformations of the nature of art in the postwar period.

In the critical literature, the most dominant understanding of performance entails the displacement of material objects by the execution of actions on the part of the artist: the immediacy of bodily presentation undermines the intermediary nature of representation. By foregrounding the ephemerality of the event and the significance of a live witness, performance is intimately linked to the temporal present and, more broadly, to a concern with time. Traditionally, art objects are understood to be “timeless”—not only literally, as static things, but also conceptually, in the sense that the meaning of art is thought to be unchanging over time. Through different performance structures, many artists expressly challenged both these ideals. Robert Morris’s *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*, for example, wryly comments on the duration of its own making as well as the “time” or experience of viewing/hearing as integral to an understanding of a “completed” object.

Through the temporality of performance, the artwork itself is also redefined, transformed from an *object* into an *event*. On the one hand, this shift introduces the possibility of art’s disappearance or “dematerialization,” to use the term coined in the sixties by critics Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, who identified performance as one example of art’s decommodification, in which the production of lasting, exchangeable things was rejected. On the other hand, performance’s event structure spurns the development of alternative formal strategies. In Eleanor Antin’s *Carving*, for example, the artist’s daily weight loss is captured through a serial production of photographs subsequently presented in a chronological grid. In other examples, time is figured not as linear and ephemeral but as ongoing and repetitive, as in the “maintenance” project of Mierle Laderman Ukeles or the sanitation performance of the collective Hi Red Center, in which time is thematized as the endlessness of domestic labor.

The “medium” of performance is often thought to be the body, given its prevalence in much performance work (replacing such traditional materials as paint, for instance). But the significance of the body was by no means universal for artists working in the sixties. Most prevalently, women artists, working within the political feminist movement, incorporated their bodies in performances, actions, and sculptural works in order to call attention to how the body is culturally “marked” with differences such as gender. Subsequently, the nature of bodily identity was further differentiated to include class, race, and sexuality. The significance of the body in performance, therefore, moves beyond the privacy of the artist’s singular identity to engage the “social body,” opening up a larger theoretical project of the late sixties in which the body is under-



Bruce Nauman, *Bouncing Two Balls Between the Floor and Ceiling with Changing Rhythms*, 1967–68.

stood not as a natural, biological entity but as a socially determined object.

While the proximity of performance to themes of time and the body seems evident, its crucial role in the emergence of language-based practices in the art of the sixties is often overlooked. Performance and language merge through the linguistic concept

of the *performative utterance* or the *speech act*, which emphasizes the relationship between words and action. The instruction or proposal work, one of the most ubiquitous textual forms in art of the late sixties, exemplifies this notion of performativity. In these works, which first systematically appear in Fluxus art and then are further investigated in

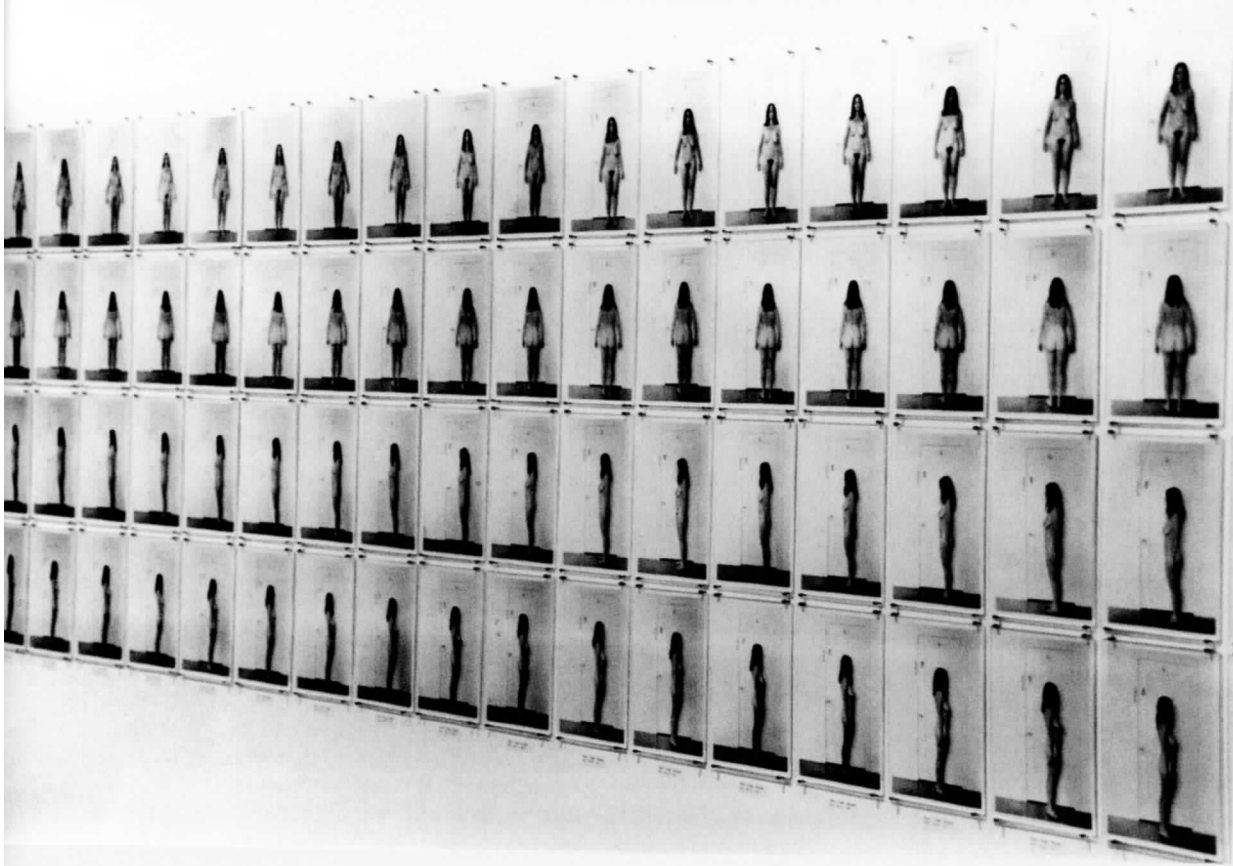
Hi Red Center, *Cleaning Event*, 1964. Photograph: Minoru Hirata.



Conceptual art performances are represented as sets of instructions, which may or may not be executed and thus may or may not acquire other material forms. Often, however, the ambiguous nature of both the art object and the very premise of “materiality” is foregrounded. Robert Barry’s *Closed Gallery*, for example, can be seen as exemplifying Conceptual art’s resolute immateriality—nothing, ostensibly, is produced. An event occurs, nonetheless, in that the exhibition as a “non-exhibition” is realized through the circulation of a linguistic statement on announcement cards. In Alison Knowles’s

Make a Salad, on the other hand, the performativity of the instruction piece undermines the status of performance as a single, nonrepeatable event: the linguistic instruction bears the potential for an infinite chain of like performances.

As the above discussion demonstrates, the interdisciplinary nature of performance perhaps represents its most crucial contribution. Indeed, for many artists, performance provides a means of looking outside the limited framework of the visual arts into other disciplines, including the performing or “temporal” arts (i.e., theater, music, film, and



dance). For example, artists associated with Happenings and Fluxus art drew upon experimental theatrical practices of such playwrights as Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud, creating performance pieces in which audience members functioned as active participants rather than mute witnesses. Similarly, in Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*, audience involvement is explicitly solicited; it assumes, however, a confrontational stance, forcing the audience to face ethical questions regarding the consequences of its actions.

The composer John Cage looms as a major ref-

erence in the development of diverse performance practices in the sixties. A number of artists had personal contacts with Cage through his now-famous classes at the New School for Social Research (1956–60). The composer's ideas were also widely disseminated: the consideration of found sounds and noise as "musical" elements (thereby expanding the range of legitimate artistic materials and forms of labor) and the examination of the structure of the performance event, the audience, and the role of the musical score were addressed and expressed in the framework of performance. JK