High Performance, Performance Art & Me

by Linda Frye Burnham | Sep 14, 2014 | 0 comments

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I founded High Performance in 1978 as the first magazine ever to be devoted exclusively to performance art, defined then as live performance created by visual artists. I resigned as editor effective January 1, 1986, and this article was published in the spring of that year. During my editorship, 32 issues of High Performance appeared, and the magazine reached 25,000 readers worldwide. (Artist Steven Durland served as editor 1986-1995, and Durland and I co-edited the magazine 1996-1998, after which it ceased publication. For further information, visit the publisher, Art in the Public Interest, where you will learn how to order back issues of HP. There you will also find a link to "The Citizen Artist: 20 Years of Art in the Public Arena," a High Performance anthology.)

PHOTOS: I have not included photos here because of publication rights issues, but I have linked almost every name and artwork title to images and text on the Internet.

What is performance art? I have been asked so many times to define the term, and I find that it can be done only in a most general, non-specific way. We may call it time-based and non-static and intermedia art, but what we have is a definition so broad that it includes work at the opposite ends of any spectrum you care to name. I might as well be asked to define art itself.

Within performance art are all art movements, all art styles. Often those who criticize a work of performance art will seek to do so by proving that it violates a definition: this piece is no good because it lacks elements of anti-establishment rebellion and therefore is not performance art, or this piece is designed so that it may be performed more than once, therefore it is not performance art and so on.

This kind of fence building is the hallmark of frustrated critics (myself included) who fall into the trap of putting their own criteria above what art is actually becoming, and artists know it. I have discovered that artists will step across any line you draw around them. The more we try to document and historify performance, the more wily and slippery and broad it becomes. Sometimes an artist will express her/his displeasure with "the system" by specifically designing a work that foils the sponsor's expectations. The dynamic interaction among the support system, the media, the

artist and the viewer has resulted in a credible picture of the performance artist as revolutionary pioneer, a person destined to stretch art's boundaries, test its limits and research its impossibilities, almost as if on a dare.

In one case, two artists collaborating on a performance found themselves in violent disagreement about its intent. When Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh undertook to spend a year of their lives tied to each other at the waist by an eight-foot rope ("Art / Life One Year Performance 1983-1984"), they eventually discovered themselves in a contextual tug of war, literally pulling each other in opposite directions: He insisted the work was completely formal and she wished to examine its personal and spiritual implications (a split seen by some as a war between New York and California art, and/or a male-female conflict).

On another axis, the ephemeral base of performance art can link it closely to the most transitory and issue-oriented kinds of art, work that is so tied to the crusade of the moment that it writes itself out of a possible place among "great timeless works of art." This sacrificial commitment makes it particularly useful to political activism, especially to issues that are local or peculiar to a small public. However, on the same program about the same issue, there might be included a live work that can speak to any number of issues eloquently and which is issue-oriented only by context.

High Performance (HP) contributes to the definitional crisis by including work we simply appropriated from the nonart world, such as the Mardi Gras parades; a parody religion called "The Church of the SubGenius"; a series of comic books about the real life of its author, Harvey Pekar, called "American Splendor"; an imaginary city invented on a data base by poets and laid over a real city, called "Invisible Seattle." None of these creators called themselves performance artists.

I feel performance art is actually an audience and not a group of artists. This audience was nurtured at the breast of visual art but reared in an information network of which HP is an important part. And to this audience flock creative people from a number of fields, including the traditionally recognized camps of the performing arts. These creators might be called leading edge players in their disciplines who come to the performance art audience because it is tolerant, informed, and adventurous. The result is a bubbling stew of contradictions, filled with ingredients that did not originate with visual art and have comparatively little to do with art history. In some cases, the audience seeks out performers, dragging them into the art world. In Los Angeles this happened to Johanna Went (punk music) and Weba Garretson (cabaret). Garretson arrived at performance art knowing nothing at all about its history but now [1986] finds herself performance coordinator at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE).

In another ironic twist, certain producers seek to ally themselves with performance art for the purpose of acquiring not only its audience but also its sponsors, funding sources, and publicity outlets. Thus, certain theater groups garner more of the spotlight by entering their activities under the relatively spare category of "performance art" in newspaper calendars than they would under "theater." Also, actor-workers who never made a penny performing in theater suddenly find themselves in possession of "artists' fees" because they were included in a museum performance art series funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, which insists that artists be paid. They

gleefully announce that henceforth they are performance artists, since that's more lucrative than performing Equity showcases.

Finally, the definition of performance art has been stretched beyond belief by a new generation of curators who are filling their series slots with such a wide variety of live performers that many purists are shocked. Often this work is so far from the concept of performance art as it was envisioned by visual artists in the early '70s that to them it isn't art at all. These artists declare that performance art is either dead or so defiled that they want nothing more to do with it, and storm back to painting. Chris Burden, Vito Acconci, Allan Kaprow, Richard Newton, and Paul McCarthy (off and on) have retired from performance. Some are disappointed with the field; others are frustrated with the art world as a professional arena, desire to start a business, make some money and raise a family, or they have an uneasiness with the emotional and psychic burdens of dangerous or disturbing performance actions.

All these contradictions, so frustrating to writers and everyone else, are symptoms of fantastic growth, even though performance art has been declared dead a number of times. The performance network annually receives more and more money from the NEA; it thrives in regional art centers; it has achieved a high profile in the press; and it has become a part of school curricula. There is so much of it to be seen that I am often moved to retire from the field for a little peace and quiet. While this increased activity could mean that performance art has passed into a place in the general culture and out of its elite art haven, this transformation is usually viewed by the art world as morbidity.

Emergence from Nowhere: the Virgin Birth of High Performance

Now that we have dealt with the (non)definition of performance art, and it's about as clear as the air over downtown L.A., let's look at its history.

However you define it, there are traces of performance throughout art history, and historians are having fun mining as far back as the Renaissance for performance art by Bernini and da Vinci. While performance is actually the oldest form of communication, probably predating language itself, its contemporary phase is usually traced back to the turn of the century in Europe, in works by the Dada artists and the Futurists. Indeed, the ideas of those movements—eloquent responses to the birth of the 20th century: the age of machines, world wars, and mass communication—are still being exercised today.

More recently, at the end of the '50s, came Happenings. Performance surfaced also in response to the '6os art market boom, providing artists with something to sell which had nothing to do with objects. It has also been suggested that performance answered a need to bring the human figure back into art, which was dominated at the time by abstraction. It would be another 20 years before HP was born, and in between came conceptual performance, body art, and the feminist art movement. The magazine was not the product of years of planning by a credentialed art historian with the sanctions of the New York establishment. It was the impulsive action of a poet/fiction writer, living in the barbarian wasteland of California. Yet HP more than survived: by the end of 1985 it has received seven NEA grants, state and local funding, and hundreds of thousands of dollars in

contributions. I find myself lecturing at institutions like NYU and sitting on panels of experts with the likes of Hilton Kramer. No one is more surprised than I.

I first heard about performance art in the early '70s. I had read a bit about Happenings when I was in college studying the humanities, and I thought them curious. I imagine if I had lived in New York, I might have fallen in with artists, dancers, actors and others who were, in the early '60s, giving birth to the world of performances, installations, and conceptual events that later captured me. But I was living in southern California, shut in with raising a family, trying to keep up with things through books and the media.

Around 1972 I saw Regis Philbin interview an apparent madman named Chris Burden on late-night television. I wish I had a copy of this interview now [2014: read the interview here], because I remember my reaction as being completely different from my viewing companions. They considered him a raving asshole who had a lot of nerve to call himself an artist. I thought he had a simple vision of reality and an ability to act on that vision.

Thanks to Ms. magazine, I had also discovered feminism, and it was about this time—again thanks to television, that bearer of enlightenment to the shut-ins of this world—I saw a tape of a whole group of performances and installations: Johanna Demetrakas' film of Womanhouse, a feminist art project in Los Angeles in 1972. Womanhouse came somewhere between Judy Chicago's first feminist performance workshop (in Fresno!) and the establishment of the L.A. Woman's Building in 1973. Women in the feminist art program at CalArts had obtained an old deserted mansion in Hollywood, reconstructed it and set up their artwork there. On view for one month were installations and performances that spoke often in alarming and graphic ways about housework, women's role conditioning, nurturing, and body experiences. Individuals or groups had each taken over portions of the house, and Demetrakas' film showed the kitchen painted a sickly flesh color, with fried eggs on the ceiling, transmuting into breasts hanging from the walls. The "Menstruation Bathroom" by Judy Chicago looked like it was filled with used Kotex and Tampax. One female figure was trapped in (built into) a linen closet, while another was plastered into the bathtub. A mechanical bride descended the staircase on a rail, only to crash into the wall at the bottom. Then she went back up to do it all over again.

Womanhouse performances paid ridiculous and endless homage to costume, makeup, and domesticity, while Faith Wilding's "Waiting" offered a simple but devastating definition of woman's life as constant anticipation-waiting as a child to be fed, waiting to be married, waiting for the children to grow up, and finally, waiting in old age for death:

> ...Waiting for the mirror to tell me I'm old
> Waiting for a good bowel movement
> Waiting for the pain to go away
> Waiting for the struggle to end
> Waiting for release
> Waiting for morning

Waiting for the end of the day
Waiting for sleep. Waiting. …

While doing the piece, Wilding rocked in a chair wrapped in a shawl, and I rocked in front of my television set, wrapped in tears.

I don't mean that Burden's pieces necessarily operate on the same wave length as these feminist works, but there is something they have in common, something that can be found in all work by visual artists—a distillation of thought and feeling into a cohesive visual form and a reliance on that visual communication. The transmutation of art from the static into performance added the elements of time and the human body, the very idea of which produced an electrifying effect on my imagination. The possibilities for communication were mind-boggling.

Because of performance art, I entered what I must describe as an altered state of consciousness. In my case, the result has been 32 issues of a magazine and seven books (by the HP publishing company, Astro Artz) in addition to the changes that took place in my view of the world and its effect on my personal life. I say this because it is often difficult to point to the way art changes people and people change their world, and that can make artists feel helpless and hopeless. In my case, I was able, with help, to visualize and actualize that change.

In 1972 I entered UC Irvine to earn an MFA in creative writing. I learned that this was the school where Burden performed Five Day Locker Piece and that there was a whole art school of people just like him. They had already graduated but were active in the area. I started meeting them: Richard Newton, Barbara Smith, Nancy Buchanan, Bob Wilhite, Bradley Smith. Of course, their individual concerns and their methods were not Burden's, but as a group they were motivated and dynamic.

The first live performance I saw that was billed that way was a piece by Bradley Smith in the UC Irvine gallery. Smith installed a huge circle of black plastic in the gallery with the sides heaped up in a border to hold a pool of water. The water reflected everything around it, including the audience (admitted free), which sat waiting on the floor along the pool's edge. As I recall it, Smith entered crawling backwards, dressed in rags and making an indecipherable sound. He crawled all the way around the pool to a group of bushes in the corner and made a fire. The smoke filled the room with a pungent smell of herbs. That was it.

Part of me wanted to scoff-here was a grown man humiliating himself while an audience of over civilized suburbanites reveled in some kind of manufactured primitivism. But once again I noticed shifts in my consciousness, and as I relaxed I realized the piece was working on a level that made new connections, completely nonverbal. If I had had an intensive art education at this point, I might have related the piece strongly to painting or sculpture, but my reaction was perceptual, experiential, not intellectual.

Soon after that, I saw my first performance by Barbara Smith. Historian Moira Roth arranged a small retrospective for Smith at UC San Diego that included photographic and textual documentation on the gallery walls. It was my first experience with this kind of documentation. It provided a historical context for what we saw later, a performance by Smith called "Full Jar, Empty Jar," which compared

Eastern and Western religion. After a series of actions about materiality and its absence, she departed to a separate room. We were told we could visit her individually and ask a question. I was afraid at first. The reactions of people coming from the room seemed so extreme. One person was crying, another laughing out loud. When I entered the room, I found Smith in Buddhist-like robes with a shaven head and red-stained hands. I knelt on a pillow in front of her and asked, "What are you for?"

"I am for you," she replied.

I have always been a storyteller, so I tried to tell everyone I met about what I was seeing and what I continued to see over the next few years in California, New York, and Germany. It seemed to be the news of the century, and I thought everyone would be interested, whether or not they were art-educated. I tried to get my hands on all the reading material available. Art historians didn't seem to regard performance as important, and this caused me to withdraw from the established art world. It was only in Avalanche, the New York magazine by Willoughby Sharp and Liza Béar, or in artist's books like "Assemblages, Environments and Happenings" by Allan Kaprow that I could find anything written about it.

By the end of 1976, I moved into the loft in downtown L.A. where HP/Astro Artz now abides and was attending performances at the Woman's Building, Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, and other artspaces. When I tried writing about the work I was seeing for Artweek, the west coast biweekly, I was told that there was almost no space for writing about performance (certainly none for reviews from unknown writers). I saw clearly that something had to be done.

I told a few people I was going to start a performance art magazine, and they smiled indulgently. Most people feel that starting a magazine is an insurmountable task. But it's quite easy if you don't know what you're doing.

I had a full-time job at UC Irvine in the public information department, and I belonged to the credit union, so I borrowed $2,000 on my signature and got hold of Ken Friedman's mailing list. Friedman was calling himself "Fluxus West" in San Diego and was very active in the mail art network. I had the help and encouragement of Richard Newton, who immediately began to spread the word, collaring people at art openings and forcing them to subscribe.

I sent out a letter to all the performance artists I knew about and invited them to send me photos and descriptions of their performances from the past year. I did not go hat in hand to famous artists to beg for their material (I did notify Vito Acconci, but received nothing in return) because it was obvious to me there was plenty of news in my own back yard. And I wanted to publish people who weren't getting out there, extending this even to those who were new to artmaking.

Newton and I produced the first two issues on an IBM typewriter in my office at UCI on the weekends, spreading out our designs on the big conference tables, using up all the art supplies we could rip off. I borrowed a design from Chris Burden's book which documented his pieces in the early '70s: one full page picture and a straight description of what occurred.

I established this as a format that would be used in every issue until #13 in 1981 and sporadically after that. It was called “The Artist’s Chronicle.” Included in that first issue were pieces by Barbara Smith, Paul McCarthy, Nancy Buchanan, Brian Dailey, Bradley Smith, Bob Wilhite, Richard Newton, and BDR Ensemble of Los Angeles; Tony DeLap, Richard Turner, and D. Gatlin of Orange County (S. Cal.); Jill Scott, James Pomeroy and Paul DeMarinis, and Darryl Sapien and Constancia Vokietaitis of San Francisco; Alison Knowles of New York; Gina Pane of France; and Jurgen Klauke of Germany.

In addition, there was an interview with Suzanne Lacy, who appeared on the cover riding in a dragster. The images, from “Cinderella in a Dragster,” played well with our title, “High Performance,” which was inspired by Newton. There was also an interview with Norma Jean DeAk by Moira Roth and a profile of the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art as an art organization presenting performance. Charles Hill provided some comedy with his “Hot Shorts” column.

I wanted good reproduction, because photographs were so important to documentation, so I had HP printed on coated stock, but in economical black and white. I also wanted consistency, so this melange of articles and documentation lasted for many issues.

To make my intentions perfectly clear, I wrote my first editorial:

> When I was a child in college, there was a Ginsberg poem’ going around with the refrain: “I am waiting for a rebirth of wonder.” For me performance art has that magic. It is an intimate approach to the art experience.
>
> Surely great art is that which holds humanity up to the light in a way not done before, in a way to jar the soul. Great performance art, created live before your eyes, with the added elements of chance, can be remarkably intense.
>
> Documentation of these events is almost antithetical to that ideal. It is almost a violation to request that they be written down, photographed. But as a journalist, I deplore the loss.
>
> And as a writer of fiction, I am drawn to documentation as a form in itself. …
>
> Too much performance art has been lost to art history. Therefore, High Performance is open to any artist who is organized enough to send me good black and white photographs and a clear

description of what occurred. I ask for material directly from the artist because we have relied too much and too long on criticism.

High Performance has no point of view except the reportage of news. And the rebirth of wonder.

[2014: I later discovered, to my chagrin, that it was Lawrence Ferlinghetti who coined that phrase, no Ginsberg.]

In leaving the magazine open, I hoped to offer some sort of spectrum of information to the reader-news from every camp, so to speak. I never tried to give the impression that I was privy to the latest trend, and, though I expressed my own opinion from time to time, I often published articles and documentation of work that was not to my taste. I felt it was important to hear many voices, not to let HP stand for a single school or style to the exclusion of others.

Secondly, I hoped to publish work representative of areas outside the New York City "art capital." New York artists were always included, but it was obvious to me that there were serious artists working elsewhere who were devoted to their chosen locations for a variety of reasons and who were unpublished. Even regional painting is not taken very seriously by (New York) art magazines, and to expect them to care about performance art in Portland, Oregon, seemed hopeless. I wanted to make a channel for that information to reach my audience.

Thirdly, I always believed there was a large audience that could appreciate performance art on some real level. I suppose this is a common daydream of other art writers, but I thought I could bring art to the nonart-educated reading public. So I tried to avoid, by and large, academic writing, art jargon and writing that leaned too heavily on art history. I always asked my writers to explain themselves.

Artists, as broad-minded and liberal as they like to be, don't ever really agree with each other. Making art costs a lot in so many ways, and having paid that price, doing it their own way, they tend to look down their noses at others' choices. Therefore, within the performance world, there are many opinionated individuals grouped roughly into camps. Often one camp does not even regard the work of another camp as art. So, as the publisher of a sampling of all the camps, I was standing on a fence between the formalists and the politicos, between the feminists and the boys' club, between the kids and the grown-ups. Most sinister of all, we were applauded and sneered at according to which groups got the most "publicity" in our pages (a man called us "sexist to the bone" because a certain issue contained more works by women). And then there were the complaints from those who got publicity but didn't like it. If you want to get in trouble fast, publish anything at all about mail art, San Francisco, Russians, or music ("new" or any other kind).

In another uncomfortable bind, I found myself on the fence between pro-New Yorkers and anti-New Yorkers. So-called regional artists are defensive, and they like to sneer at New York success. They also liked to view my publication of New York art as toadying to the establishment. New Yorkers, when they sought to compliment me on the magazine, would say, "Too bad it's not in New York." They love to refer to HP as a magazine about California art and to its viewpoint as "oddly skewed,"

even though, over the years, we have published documentation, features and reviews from 40 states and 15 countries. The idea that the art world could take a California magazine seriously seemed ludicrous, and I have found myself snubbed almost as a matter of course when in the company of certain established writers, artists, and publishers.

Finally, when it came to the style of writing I was trying to foster, it was too pop for the academics, yet East Villagers inform me that HP has the reputation of an academic journal. And as we reached out into the other performing arts and beyond, to parades and parody religions and poetry and comedy, we found ourselves on a fence between art and popular culture.

Staying Alive

From the start of HP, I have watched my peers in publishing become more greedy and money-conscious. Trying to look professional, we brought in advisors who suggested that we should boost our circulation by putting rock stars on our covers and producing benefits starring the likes of David Lee Roth. Magazine publishing normally survives by means of mass marketing and advertising sales. (Federal grants are nice, but very small in comparison to the total budget-they are of relatively little help.) When it comes to single copy sales, the margin of profit is so small per issue that a large volume of sales seems imperative. HP distribution had to be accomplished by a complicated network of small distributors for two reasons: organized crime seems to have a stranglehold on a large part of the system nationwide, and even if we use large independent distributors, they use a scattergun approach to marketing, wasting thousands of copies in search of a market. Over the last eight years we have learned that our readers are literally scattered everywhere, with small concentrations in New York and Los Angeles, but pockets of interest as farflung as Ketchum, Idaho, New Zealand, and Eastern Europe. Talk about needles in haystacks. I had to look so hard for them that for years I knew my subscribers by name.

Advertising sales are also problematic. Primary benefits of advertising in HP should go to the alternative art network, which resides firmly below the poverty line. Galleries that sell objects couldn't care less about a magazine for non-static art, and local advertisers see little benefit in advertising nationally. There were ways to change this no-win bind HP was in, but I wasn't willing to try them. I was particularly shaken by the recent Rolling Stone insert to Advertising Age magazine (9 September 1985), 11 pages in which Rolling Stone portrayed itself as the ultimate marketing tool, with a readership that advertisers can take to the bank. They boasted that most of their readers voted for Ronald Reagan, "just like the rest of the country." The magazine is proud that its highest priority is money and always has been. I don't have to tell you what an inspiration Rolling Stone was to an entire generation of journalists and editors, not to mention politically and socially concerned readers. This kind of admission, this kind of aggressive marketing is so cynical that it sickens me.

When I came to the end of possible resources, I intended to retire and do something else. Developing a job in the art world didn't interest me. Neither did any of the prospects I could imagine for continuing HP. I could see no benefit in compromising the magazine to prolong its life. I was inflexible in those principles. It just so happened that a financial backer surfaced who believed in the

same principles and offered to keep the magazine afloat and supply me with a livable salary as editor.

So, while I wanted to sell magazines and spread the news to a general audience, I didn't have to buckle under to commercial compromises. I made only two real changes in my eight-year editorship. First, I broadened the scope of the magazine to include experimental activity in the other arts and their tangents. I learned that artists were interested in breaking down the distinctions between art and everything else: life, politics, commerce, show business. It was a contradiction to draw boundaries around the art form, even though my original intent was to provide print space for those who could find it nowhere else and to save the space only for them. As the field bled into others, so did the magazine.

Second, I began including critical writing. This was a direct response to pleas from the artists themselves and from reader's surveys. We were dealing with art by people who were often quite unknown. Readers needed some kind of critical framework in which to put the art-documentation was not enough. I balked at this for a long time, feeling that it was the artist's voice that was important.

Over time I began to understand the readers' needs and a group of writers gathered around HP who wanted to examine what was going on, to relate it to art history and to culture. The artists' need for feedback was a more real need in my opinion. They welcomed the opportunity to publish their pieces in a magazine, but they needed to hear what others thought-not just their friends and relatives who made up the bulk of their audiences. They needed to know if their ideas were being received, whether communication had been established, and with whom. So we essentially eliminated "The Artist's Chronicle" and emphasized reviews. I learned that reviews serve auxiliary purposes that have to do with resumes, jobs, and grant applications. These concerns create a war zone between the magazine and the artists, and this is most difficult for a sympathetic editor.

The existence of HP raises the very interesting question of how the very appearance of a review or documentation changes the nature of an event, codifies it in some way. The peculiar nature of performance art attracted my interest in the first place. Here was an "art form" that was literally open to anybody. Anyone, even a person who had no art education, could announce a piece and perform it, photograph it, publish it, place it in a resume and. use the printed account as credentials, thereby proving her/himself a performance artist. The performance could take place literally any place, indoors or out, or it could be entirely conceptual and never exist at all. It could mimic, parody or comment on existing phenomena in such a way that it might even be mistaken for that which it was commenting on. It defied description and classification. This work, then, reported in a magazine, took on a ring of something "real." Some readers were attracted and felt they could, or should, attend these events and began to look for them. But reading about an event is entirely different from taking part in it, and many audience members were not prepared for sitting in one place all night long or being in the presence of a sexual action or being privy to personal secrets, or enduring a work that commented on something they held sacred. The audience had personal limits that might not have been apparent to them when reading about work from a safe distance.

So publicity attracted a hostile audience in many cases, which was interesting but painful.

Where's the Money?

There were other aspects of performance art that attracted hostility, but they had little to do with publications.

In 1978 almost every performance event I attended was free to the public. Then money began to be charged "at the door." I attribute this change to two aspects of the performance scene: organization sponsorship and the feminist movement.

During the mid-'70s the alternative art movement sprang up to accommodate and encourage alternative art, that is, the wealth of work by the flood of individuals pouring out of art school who could find no acceptance in galleries and museums and no understanding from the critics. Artists banded together and formed cooperatives to show each other's work, to share gallery and studio space, and to stick up for each other. A system of support gradually began to develop; boards of directors sought funding, and the NEA began to fill the fiscal needs.

These "spaces" saw ticket admission as a way of getting matching money for grants and donations. In other words, contributors wanted to know that there was a demand for the work that was being funded, and an admissions charge was evidence of that demand. It began with voluntary donations, then a sliding scale, then a fixed price of $5 (and more) for everyone.

This process was accelerated by the feminists in the '70s. During a time when tuning in and dropping out was a fairly well-understood way of life, feminists were promoting "getting paid for what I do." Women were suiting up for moving up the corporate ladder while many other people were dressing ratty and going barefoot, getting back to the land or defecting to Canada. Women artists flooded into performance art because i) it was an open door and 2) its flexible boundaries made it a platform for political ideas. But their revolutionary ideas included getting paid, even if one's job was "radical feminist performance artist." Because this group was so aggressive and determined and its audience so guilty and accommodating, part of the feminist program firmly lodged in art thinking, drawing healthy support from the NEA, which staunchly fosters artists' fees.

And so performance artists set about the tricky task of mixing art and money.

It's curious that the amount of money obtained at the door is usually of little to no help, even in the largest spaces. The percentage of the budget earned by door money is about the same, no matter how large the house. Most performance artists never break even, especially those who rise to the level of museums and other top art showplaces, and especially those who are provided with "expenses" and "fees" through grants. The larger the audience and the larger the budget, the more likely artists are to go over budget and into their own pockets. Unlike the actor in a play, the performance artist is also the producer, so all available money goes into the production, usually including the artist's fee. This kind of outlay is rather pathetic if it amounts to gambling on a "star" appearance to further one's career. But where can you go after you've played MOCA, MOMA and BAM? That's it, the top of the heap. Unless there is some sort of freak mass appeal in the work that

might sell it to the record, TV, or movie businesses, you get nothing but a flicker of fame, a tiny parking place in art history.

I have seen artists go into hock for a whole year to pay for a museum appearance. Cheri Gaulke is working four part-time jobs to pay off the $5,500 she sank into "Revelations of the Flesh." It premiered May 2, 1985 at the Wilshire United Methodist Church as part of the "Explorations" series sponsored by the Museum of Contemporary Art and others. A noble effort on behalf of art but a questionable effort on behalf of a career in performance art.

Whatever happened to performance for art's sake? I prefer to make my money somewhere else than at the door of a performance. In my appearances as a performance artist, I have avoided this charge, or deducted my portion of the door from the admission charged by the space. This courtesy sends a message to the viewer. Some say such a philosophy makes the artist a victim, a chump who is simply giving work away for nothing. For 95% of performance artists, that's the way it turns out anyway, but most people pretend it doesn't. So here we have an audience of game individuals who not only have to drive across town in traffic at 8 p.m., but have to pay $5, $10, $I5, or $20 for the privilege of watching something from which they do not know what to expect. There have been no press previews, no advance reviews telling them whether or not it will be the kind of work they can count on to be "good," so they enter like lambs to the slaughter or the opposite, they have chips on their shoulders. What if the piece is too long or too short or insulting or embarrassing or dangerous? Only the most tolerant person, with the most intensive art sympathies, is going to survive most of these experiences without feeling a little pushed, a little cheated, a little disappointed.

The pressure is too much for most artists. They can't get used to watching people cringe. Hence the terrible phenomenon of audience pandering. Which brings me to the difference between performance art and theater.

The Difference between Bad Theater and Good Performance Art

I have the strangest professional memories. I remember lying in bed with Linda Montano in the middle of an art gallery sharing our memories about our mothers. I remember dropping 4,ooo baseball players (on baseball cards) into Dodger Stadium with Richard Newton during the seventh inning stretch. I remember trying to get Donna Henes out of jail after she was busted in L.A.'s Pershing Square for celebrating the Equinox without a permit. I remember running down a dark street in Rome with a crowd of people, following Paul McCarthy dressed like a pig. I remember feeling my way across a plowed Montana field in the full moon, following Dennis Voss, "The Mechanic of Isolation." I remember serving as an official in Steve Durland's 5-Minute Performance Olympics, choosing the winner by counting the barks emitting from Puck, the Canine Applause Meter (who barks when people clap). I remember a New Year's Eve spent wading knee deep in popcorn with a crowd who painted all night as Bob and Bob sat on a platform high above our heads, admonishing us to "Forget Everything You Know."

So you tell me. Why is it that, as a panelist on the subject of "Theater and Performance Art, What's the Difference?" I had to listen to co-panelist Lee Melville, the editor of Dramalogue, tell the

audience that there is no difference between performance art and theater because, after all, performance art is always done on a stage, isn't it?

This remark seems to throw into the deep past the sorts of performance art remembered above. The fact that "theatrical performance art" is more well known now can be attributed to funding, publicity, and general support and to the prominent success of certain artists. There is a functioning system that makes it easier and career-smarter to program performance art through theatrical venues. Theatrical works in important places cannot be ignored by the established press, simply because of the prestige attached to a major theater or museum.

For most people who have only recently become acquainted with performance art, the piece is on the stage and the audience planted firmly and safely in their seats, observing the action as if in an orthodox theater. Far less emotional risk, no shocks to the psyche, no danger of actual contact with the art or of getting it on your clothes. For this lopsided view we can thank the notorious successes of Laurie Anderson and Robert Wilson and Robert Longo and Ping Chong and the flock of prominent artists who have taken to the stage in the last ten years.

The fact that theatrical performance art is more visible than other kinds, however, does not eliminate the question of whether or not performance art and theater are different from each other.

The difference between the two has been a hot topic for years. It needs a well-funded, well-publicized seminar with a catalog. The subject poses many fascinating questions having to do with the intentions of visual art and theater, how they intersect and what happens when they cross, and what all this has to do with the viewer.

The greatest stumbling block between "theatrical" performance artists and theater audiences is that performance art is visually and conceptually based. Artists who are used to gallery and loft audiences will look past theatrical technique and place a much higher value on visual metaphor and concept. Theater audiences, on the other hand, are consumed with a love of the theatrical crafts: acting, directing, playwriting. If a piece is miscast or under-rehearsed, they throw fruit.

Now, oddly, a great play, one that presents a unique concept and vision but also includes great theater technique will satisfy an art audience. But a great piece of performance art can infuriate a theater audience. For example, Kedric Robin Wolfe's "Warren's Story" (October-November 1985) at The Wallenboyd, Los Angeles, was a monolog aided by such props as a blow torch, a barber's chair, and a pair of elevated buckets full of water. Wolfe told a story about his uncle Warren, a war hero. It progressed to reveal Wolfe's own sexual history, the birth of a child whose conception was a collaboration between himself, a girlfriend and his brother, and the subsequent death of that son in the terrorist bombing of the Marine base in Lebanon. Steven Durland and I and several other performance viewers appreciated his imaginative blend of visuals and autobiographical narrative. But local theater critic Dan Sullivan of the L.A. Times wrote, "Since performer Kedric Robin Wolfe got a standing ovation [. . .] he must have something to say to an audience. I'll be hornswoggled if I can

see what it is. [. . .] Up against professional storytellers, who know how to carve a tale without doo-dads, this performer would be in deep trouble" (15 October 1985).

Performance art critics guard against seduction by technique and can actually become bored by a reliance on great acting, whereas theater critics are driven to the wall by what they perceive as bad timing or mechanical devices that don't work. If performers speak in their own voices, revealing their own vulnerabilities, some theater critics recoil from the "bad acting," expecting a good actor to disappear into the role.

Performance artists like to defend themselves—or rather remove themselves from the critical arena—by claiming that they aren't *doing* theater, they're *using* theater, and the piece is actually *about* performance. They insist that even though they are using a proscenium stage, a curtain, actors, scripts, cues, lights, music, and fixed seating for the audience, they are not doing theater. But to the viewer without indoctrination, it sure as hell looks like theater. If these artists are going to use what looks like theatrical method, they must not expect theater audiences to throw out thousands of years of convention just because a visual artist feels it isn't needed.

Besides, the history of the theater in the 20th century is every bit as experimental as the history of art. The time has come for the exponents of each field to learn each other's histories, especially critics, whose job it is to comment upon the melange that performance and theater have made.

This gap in knowledge is most apparent in California performance artists, particularly those working in Los Angeles. There is a vast difference in coastal theater histories. The mark experimental theater has made on southern California is so negligible it almost cannot be discerned. There simply has been no lab theater, no Living Theatre, no Performance Group, no Wooster Group, no Squat Theater. For most Angelenos, the experimental theater work in the Olympic Arts Festival was a complete eye-opener. That kind of work had to be done in Los Angeles by performance artists. When performance artists began to tread the boards, they expected to attract theater critics, but they didn't expect it to be so bloody. I say, if artists can't stand the heat—if they don't wish to be judged by theatrical standards—they'd better get out of the theater.

The Music's Getting Ugly

But theater is not the only private catbox being soiled by performance art. The outcry that greets performance art when it approaches other "disciplines," incorporating dance, or film, or singing, is the outcry of "professionals" who view performance artists as know-nothing dilettantes. Why would a performer get up and sing, they wonder, if s/he is not a singer and doesn't know how to sing? This controversy always reminds me of the art cartoon showing a couple of ordinary people standing in front of a work of modern art with a caption that amounts to "I could have done better than that!" The presence in performance art of singers who can't sing, dancers who can't dance and actors who can't act obviously points to the fact that performance art is not about doing something well but more often about structure and perception.

When talking about art that intersects with other disciplines, performance artists excuse themselves by offering the possibility that attitudes nurtured in visual art, when applied to other arts, bring a

fresh approach and new connections between forms or ideas that would be taboo under conventional rules. That these experiments are perceived as failures so often is, on one level, mystifying. Contemporary performance artists often consider the presence of the audience necessary before the thing can be said to have been tried at all. But audiences with developed tastes have no patience for being used in this way, and for most people, if part of a work fails, the whole thing is spoiled. Audiences expect every piece to be perfect instead of applauding the aspects which do work, those which open doors and posit solutions. On the other hand, if an artist is going to use "singing" or "dancing" the same way a painter might use the color red, then the artist should know as much about "singing" and "dancing" as the painter knows about red.

On October 8, 1985 I witnessed the Los Angeles premiere of "The Garden of Earthly Delights" as interpreted by Martha Clarke, one of the founders of Pilobolus. I was stunned by the visuals, the incorporation of the music and the aerial dances, yet all around me people were walking out. I heard a woman two seats away say, "Let's get out of here. The music's getting ugly." And in exasperation, they vacated their $20 seats. I don't know who these people were, or how much they had seen, but obviously we were viewing the work from very different points. As much as we would like to have an objective judgment passed on each work of art, it is clear that it can't be.

Sasha Anawalt in the Herald Examiner guessed that audiences walk out of a performance by Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch because they are not accustomed to the company's angst and repetition of gesture without the benefit of a discernible climax. This didn't bother me about Bausch, because I had been taught by performance art to look for different kinds of structure and to pay attention in a different way.

To take this a step further, however, I find it interesting that, since Bausch's 1985 BAM pieces, I have heard two separate art-viewers (one a Californian, one a New Yorker) say: "I don't need to go see Pina Bausch any more." Not that Bausch has changed-these two viewers had no further use for Bausch's current focus. Some work opens a door in your mind through which you don't need to pass time and time again. Unlike the classics—the great ballets, symphonies, and operas-—these works do not need to be repeated because they are not shows of talents or craft per se. Thus, when Meredith Monk came to L.A. and spent the first half of her MOCA program on a piece that was ten years old, a voice bawled from the balcony, "Why are you so boring, Monk?" I sympathized with this comment, however rude, for I didn't need to be retold the things Monk pioneered in the early '70s. These are part of our vocabulary now, and perhaps all they were intended to do in the first place was to expand our vocabulary. Likewise, who would wish to re-experience Burden's shot in the arm or Acconci's masturbation under a gallery ramp? As eccentric as these actions might have seemed at the time, in a sense, somebody had to do them, or we wouldn't know what we know today. We must revise that question we still ask about a performance: was it good? Instead we should ask: were you changed?

Who Draws the Line?

As it became apparent that HP wasn't going to go away, I began to receive more material than I could use. The last "Artist's Chronicle" in 1983 contained only about 1/3 of the submissions received.

It was obvious after a time that I wanted to hear from artists everywhere, including Odessa, including Tallahassee. There were people out there who were not only isolated from the art world, they couldn't even raise an audience (and sometimes, in the case of material that was smuggled out of Iron Curtain countries, they were not allowed to). Soon, it was obvious some people were preparing pieces for the sole purpose of documenting them in the magazine and, in a few cases, sending documentation of performances that never happened. As horrifying as this might be to art historians, it never bothered me at all. Performance was so conceptually based that sometimes the suggestion of a performance was as valuable as actually doing it. See any page in Yoko Ono's "Grapefruit" (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970). Of course, if the documentation stated that there had been a performance and I knew there hadn't, I did not publish the piece.

In only one case am I guilty of "censorship." It was a piece I found morally objectionable: the artist played to a festival audience an audiotape of sounds he said were a recording of his sexual intercourse with a woman's corpse in Mexico. This was rape, whether or not the woman was alive. I told the artist he had violated the spirit of a human being and if that had been my sister's body, I would have seen that he was punished. In some way, that woman was my sister. The artist's crime was compounded by the fact that the piece was presented simply as an act with no reflection or content whatsoever. Why did he do it? There was no clue. Did he wish to make some statement about death? About women? We were not given anything to contemplate except the idea that a man could fuck a corpse. This we know already. (There is some feeling that the artist was lying, that he never actually committed the act. This is immaterial, for the piece would be the same whether he did it or not.)

I thought a long time and concluded that to publish the piece was to take part in it, to extend it, and I decided the buck stopped with me. I published a small paragraph in Issue #11/12 in 1980 that stated he had performed a piece that was morally objectionable to me, but if the readers wanted documentation, they could write to HP and I would forward the request to him. HP was the catalog for the festival, and this piece was the only one undocumented. I could have discussed my reasons, but even this, I felt, was carrying it forward. I had no idea the issue would be later fanned to flame by WET, an L.A. magazine, or that I would be crucified for censorship on the L.A. Pacifica radio station by a bunch of liberals. The controversy around this piece was very good for the local art community. So much discussion was provoked that, in the long run, the piece did what art does. But that is because it fell on very fertile ground—community primed by feminist vigilance against art that promotes violence against women. I regret I did not carry that discussion into HP.

In fact, I did later publish a story about the work of Alex Grey, another artist who performed the same act, but the documentation of his "Necrophilia" was dominated by what transpired in his psyche afterward—what HAPPENS to a man who fucks a corpse and calls it art. For this artist, it was a psychic event in which he felt he was put on trial for the violation of a human spirit and was sentenced to make positive art for the rest of his life.

The responsibilities of journalism are, for me, a mixture of aesthetic and ethical proposals. Artists may break laws and taboos and conventions, but they must be ready to face the music. And so must curators and sponsors and publishers who become a part of carrying such works forward.

Sometimes this is the very issue an artist is trying to force when s/he puts the system up against the wall. And sometimes there is a moral decision to be made, for once I am involved, it is my life in the balance. I absolutely refuse to separate art and life.

Let There Be Life

The history of performance art has been permanently colored by those who wish to use it as a life tool. This is the legacy of feminist performance art and the sizable notoriety it achieved in the art world of the '70s.

Whether the establishment likes it or not, art history now includes works by artists such as Barbara Smith, Linda Montano, Mierle Ukeles, and the artists of the Woman's Building in Los Angeles. Smith uses live pieces to confront questions of her own happiness and comfort and art's place in them. About "Ordinary Life" (1977), she wrote: "I turn to question the audience to see if their experiences might enlighten mine and break the isolation of my experience, to see if performance art puts them into the same dilemma" (HP #1, 1978). Montano has cordoned off whole sections of her life as art, in which every act she performs is to be seen as an art work simply because she has declared it so. In "Home Endurance" (1973), she stayed home for a week and asked friends to visit her, documenting all thoughts, foods, phone calls and visits. Ukeles' work on sanitation and maintenance began in 1969 with a manifesto, "Maintenance Art—Proposal for an Exhibition," which challenged the delegation of housework to women. Then she extended her work beyond feminist content in order to reveal the conditions of work and the stereotypes of maintenance workers on all levels. For "Touch Sanitation Show" (1980), she resolved to "face and shake hands" with all 8,500 sanitation workers in New York City's Department of Sanitation, saying: "Thank you for keeping New York City alive." The artists of the Woman's Building have organized exhibitions and performances around the theme of lesbianism, as well as other performances about incest, rape, and child abuse.

Art history now includes massive demonstrations concerned with political and racial attitudes. Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America was organized nationwide by Lucy Lippard, among others. In January 1984 some 200 cities held simultaneous performances, poetry readings, exhibitions, marches, demonstrations, and film and video showings in solidarity with Central American groups suffering intervention by the U.S. government.

"Target L.A.: The Art of Survival" (August 1982 and September 1983), organized by L.A. Artists for Survival and directed by Cheri Gaulke, revealed the many ways in which L.A. is a prime target for nuclear bombing. "Artists Missing in Action" (July 1981) was a large performance organized by the Arts Coalition for Equality outside the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. It protested the museum's '60s show, which exhibited no art by women or minorities. Smaller demonstrations dealing with rape were included in "Three Weeks in May" (1977) by Suzanne Lacy; "In Mourning and In Rage" (1977) by Lacy and Leslie Labowitz was a media event that included a coalition of artists and antirape groups. John Malpede has received funding from the NEA and the California Arts Council and sponsorship from the Inner City Law Center to make performances with, about, and for the homeless.

Especially within California performance, there is an art that tries to right the world, that plucks images and philosophies and histories and musics from the whole of human knowledge and tries to roll it together into one great ball of meaning to turn humankind from its fearful path. Jacki Apple, Rachel Rosenthal, Nancy Buchanan, and Cheri Gaulke take the world on their shoulders, lug it onto a stage, strain beneath its weight, and face critics who tell them they are making bad theater. Surely there is another response.

Meanwhile, I hear constantly that the really good performance in New York is in the clubs, and that the new art will be clothes and that I should be checking out the fashions in the floating dance halls. But I see artists like Tim Miller exploring the agonies of growing up gay, doing for gay men what feminist performance artists did for gay women ten years ago. Abstract art and fashion art serve to remove feeling from art, to leave undisturbed the deep sleep we are falling into, where we feel nothing and nothing touches us.

Let emotions belong to the theater, the art critics say. Artists can only be concerned with ideas and philosophies. And the real purists turn away from performance altogether because the very presence of the "hot" human body implies emotion, and emotion flows dangerously close to propaganda and self-indulgence. During the '60s and '70s, performance reached out to touch its audience, and now the audience has retreated so far that performance can't reach it.

In the '80s, they beg: let us have no more nude bodies, no more personal confessions. No hippie values, no more '60s, no more California. Artists are buying into the conspiracy, pandering to the audience, advertising fascism, fresh haircuts, and fake personalities.

The Revenge of the Kids

In current performance, there is a conflict that is artistic and generational. The Carolee Schneemann-Allan Kaprow generation—the original vanguard of contemporary performance—is a generation approaching or going well beyond fifty. The newest crop of performance artists in their twenties have managed to cook up an art that is about as offensive to their elders as it can be, for it seems to pay homage to junk culture and television. (In this, it parallels a similar movement in painting.) Where Eleanor Antin expressed herself with a manufactured persona to examine issues of importance to her, her students are using personalities borrowed from Saturday morning cartoons, sitcoms, soap operas, and The Late Show. In these works, lives are not lived but portrayed by bad actors in terrible teleplays and B movies, and the artists seem trapped in their costumes. Sadly enough, this may be true. What at first looked like irony, or at least sarcasm, seems now to be frank admission to a sort of pleasurable dementia. The parody is virtually identical to the real thing.

Writers really sweat to read this work as a new postmodernist language commenting cleverly on the nature of the media and their audience, while others find it an obvious slap in the face to a generation of parents who left their children with the electronic babysitter while they were out taking part in political demonstrations, experimenting with open marriage, finding themselves through therapies, coming out gay, taking drugs and founding the women's movement. What's your

worst nightmare, Ms. 1965? Little Kimberly dressed up like a Jetson and declaring herself a victim of TV brain damage, a lobotomized zombie?

The older generation, trapped in our own permissiveness, repeat to ourselves that we must remain open-minded, that this generation has its own language, just as ours did, and there is meaning in this mystery. To reject it as art is to admit to advanced age and hardening of the artistic arteries, so we try to stay trendy, hoping what we fear is not true: that everybody is getting more stupid, that the Conspiracy is winning, and that we really are entering the End Times.

The good news is that not all young performance artists use this idiotic cabaret-TV-parody mode (a chief feature of which is cross-dressing—feminists, take note). Among these artists are young people—like the California-based group called "Eisenhower"—who seem to be awake at least part of the time. They have a whole history of performance art tucked into their MFAs and 32 issues of HP. They are politically committed, anti-sexist, anti-racist and excessive. Some of them are studying with Chris Burden and Paul McCarthy at UCLA.

My attention turns to performance artists of all generations who oppose theatrical and cabaret performance. For these artists, the "audience" is a group of participants or witnesses, and the performance is an experience or journey. Pleasing the audience or the critic does not enter into consideration, and the work cannot be termed entertainment in any traditional sense (nor can it be easily consumed, digested and swallowed by the Conspiracy). It is rare that an artwork of this kind is repeated, no matter how good the reviews are or how available the funding. Much of it happens outside the theater/gallery context, in unusual settings or out-of-doors, and the setting influences the context of the piece. The artist relates not only to art history, but to the environment—in its physical, social, political, and spiritual dimensions.

I think of Suzanne Lacy, who organizes enormous works involving whole communities of people and examines such topics as racial stereotyping, women's history, and aging. In "Whisper, The Waves, The Wind" (1984, with Susan Stone), 100 aged women of all backgrounds were seated at tables in the sand, using a San Diego beach as a forum for their experiences with aging. Patrick Zentz listens closely to the earth and creates performances on his Montana ranch with sound sculptures that are designed to play music corresponding to the lay of his land and the action of wind and water upon it. In August 1985 a performance titled "Instruments for Day" consisted of the 24-hour recording of sounds from the Creek Instrument, the Horizon Instrument and the Run-off Drum, all placed on Big Springs Ranch. Bill Harding [2014: now know as Gene Pool] works with living grass as an art material. He grows it on automobiles and business suits, sometimes dressing the audience in them. Marina Abramovic and Ulay are preparing to walk toward each other the length of the Great Wall of China and photograph it from the air. They've created a number of works about setting and stillness. In 1977, for example, in "Relation in Time," they sat motionless with their hair bound together for 17 hours. In 1981 ["Nightsea Crossing"], they lived in central Australia for three months, spending the greater part of each day sitting motionless. Tehching Hsieh has dedicated whole-year segments of his life as art. His first "One-Year Performance" began in 1978, when he locked himself inside a tiny cell in his New York studio. He talked to no one and heard nothing but the sounds of the disco below him. Frank Moore is a spastic artist, totally disabled by cerebral palsy from birth. He

has produced narrative videotapes about his handicap, such as "Fairytales Can Come True" (1980) and produced the "Outrageous Beauty Revue," a live sex show that ran for three years at Mabuhay Gardens in San Francisco. In performance he engages individuals in private "erotic play," which is sometimes videotaped. Chris Burden is preparing a piece for the Henry Gallery in Seattle called "Museum Busters" [renamed "Samson"] in which two enormous wooden beams are held against the walls of the entryway by means of a large jack that pushes them further apart as each visitor enters the gallery through a turnstile. Theoretically, they will, at some point, destroy the walls of the gallery if enough entries are made. The point, Burden says, is to make visitors aware of the way in which the public "wears out" the gallery (Kirby Olson, "Art and Death in Seattle," HP #32, 1985). Many of these works are shocking and questionable, but at least they make it inconvenient for the audience to fall asleep in their theater seats.

So Who Needs It?

Why do we, the art viewing public, need to experience this kind of thing on a regular basis? The world is changing at an alarming rate; we feel in a constant state of disturbance, and some of us have many questions. How can this be true if that is also true? How can X and Y exist, really, side by side? The answers, we have learned, are so often found in perspective. We learn to understand life when we learn to look at things in different ways. That is what I ask of art today. Unlike cautious popular culture, which makes only what the audience will buy, art asks us to make great leaps, impossible connections which bring new answers to unanswerable questions. And perhaps we need live art so that we can gather in groups and assimilate new perspectives together, at the same instant. Being in the audience isn't easy. We express an inordinate fear of being "bored" by performance art, of wasting our precious time. The artist has us trapped in some sense, under time control. Time, then, the element which lifts performance art away from static art and into its own rich realm, is also its weakest element. If time is ill spent, there is hell to pay.

I have just given up ten years of my prime time to the experience of performance art, and I am not without my doubts about how I spent those years. I could have chosen to relieve hunger or work with runaways or write a novel, do something my children could understand and my parents could brag about. As I look back over the last ten years, I feel like Andre Gregory in "My Dinner with Andre": sort of nauseated at what I've been through. Like some group sex orgy or an intense adventure on hallucinogens, the experience leaves me a bit sick to my stomach and suspicious of myself. I asked to be enlightened, but in the bargain I feel coerced, embarrassed and exhausted.

Performance artist Paul McCarthy said, "It is my belief that our culture has lost a true perception of existence. It is veiled. We are only fumbling in what we perceive to be reality. For the most part we do not know we are alive" (LAICA Journal, January-February 1979). In his performances he takes his witnesses on a journey in which he exhibits beastly characters, wearing their twisted psyches on the outside, displaying for us what humanity has actually become. His performances are called disgusting and impossible for some people to watch. McCarthy and others who make shocking images of human existence might be regarded as the soul of man crying out for help, in a state of extreme emergency. Maybe we are using performance art to snap us out of it. As the Rev. Ivan

Stang (Church of the SubGenius) said, “You’re still looking where They’re pointing, when you ought to be looking all around” (“Quit Your Job and Praise Bob,” HP Issue #24, 1983).

It is not easy to slip back into everyday life after assimilating this work, for so much of it is about human abuse. When we allow ourselves to experience disturbing states, are we opening ourselves up or closing ourselves off? We seem to be willing to let Hollywood try to scare us to death, and each year the movies get more violent, more anti-human, which means we are becoming harder, more able to withstand shocks. In his new novel, “Less Than Zero,” Bret Easton Ellis depicts young people who are engaged in and witness to the most degrading acts yet remain unaffected by them. After watching a young girl shoot up with heroin, or a snuff movie, or a gang rape, the main character feels something between ennui and a headache, takes no action, and goes on with his life as it was. Ellis assures us that his novel is not far from the truth. We seem to have a lust for that which will make us tougher, and deader; ready, in fact, for death.

What does art do? Is it part of the problem? In trying to live near the cutting edge, or at least write about it, I find that I am neither happy nor rich, and I have achieved a flickering vision of enlightenment that has left me so off-balance that I am in a state of perpetual sea-sickness. I see America choosing, in its pursuit of happiness, a life of mediocrity and an entertainment that offers an illusion of reality. I begin to understand why. For reality is change, cruelty, pain, ecstasy, heartbreak and death, and we live it vicariously by keeping it safely on tape. We even put performance art on tape.

As marginal as it might be, performance art makes me feel alive sometimes, and that can’t be bad.

Linda Frye Burnham
Santa Monica, 1986

Afternote

During the ’70s Chris Burden committed a number of simple gestures over which it is possible to lay not only interpretations from the sculptural context (so logical, so succinct) but also readings from theater, psychology, sociology, politics, economics, communications, transportation, science, astronomy, and criminology. Jarring glimpses of human nature, and so simple, the actions of an artist/philosopher with a voice that came from you and me. His work is a key that unlocks a shared language. He has not chosen to articulate very much about his work, except that it represents, among other things, a “fuck you” to established attitudes. The jury is probably still out as to whether his work will be remembered by the writers of art history books, but to a significant number of artists it was a turn in the road. For us, he is a link between what went before and what came after. I really laugh when I hear older art critics cast aspersions on Burden’s work, trivializing “Five Day Locker Piece” (in which Burden imprisoned himself in a school locker at UC Irvine as his five-day graduate show) or “Shoot” (the infamous one-second sculpture in which Burden had himself fired upon with a rifle). Robert Hughes dismissed Burden in “The Shock of the New.” But if a body of work is significant to a lot of artists, shouldn’t a critic make way for it somehow, eventually? If I had Robert

Hughes around my coffee table, I'm not sure I could say anything more illuminating than, "It was too late for you, but it was not too late for me." Burden once said, "I wanted them (these events) to really be there instead of making illusions about them, because it gives society a broader range– makes the world fuller . . . or at least somewhere in the world there's a B-car and there's somebody who got shot on purpose to see what it would feel like." (view 1978).