



# HIGH PERFORMANCE

1978 - 1982

**THE FIRST  
FIVE YEARS**

Organized by Jenni Sorkin  
Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions  
1 February - 30 March 2003

ENVISIONING

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.

Linda Burnham, Editor and Publisher  
Editor's Note, vol.1, number 1, 1978

# HIGH PERFORMANCE



PAUL COTTON VALIE EXPORT GEORGE MACIUNAS  
ADRIAN PIPER WOLFGANG STOERCHLE

ANTINOV'S JOURNAL by ELEANOR ANTIN  
ANTIN, KAPROW, MONTAND, MEYERS, GAULKE, BEST  
ADRIAN, LACY on TEACHING PERFORMANCE

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## AN ORAL HERSTORY OF LESBIANISM

Storytelling, Theater and Magic for Women Only



L E S B I A N



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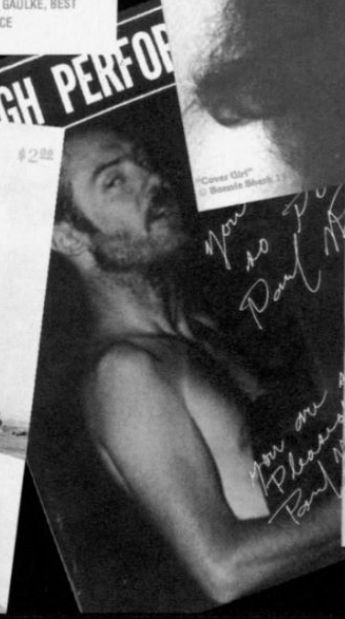
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## HIGH PERFORMANCE

The first international art magazine devoted exclusively to performance art, *High Performance* ran as a quarterly from 1978-1997. Based in Los Angeles, in the midst of a burgeoning performance art movement, the magazine provided a forum for both local and international artists, many of whom in the years beyond the 1970s and early 1980s became known as prominent and highly influential members of the vanguard.

This show examines the legacy of a crucial but nearly forgotten publication that documented the performance art movement both at its inception and in the recent years after many key works had been completed, but not disseminated visually to a national art public. With its radical status and alternative gallery structure, performance art circumvented the traditional commercial gallery system. *High Performance* offered coverage to artists whose practice often challenged the boundaries, conventions and silences of the established art world.

Various referred to as body art, bodyworks, live art, living art, and action art, performance art, as it came to be called,<sup>1</sup> was, for much of the 1970s, an art form with no consistent designation, and thus, no progressive dialogue. An unrecognized discipline flourishing on both the East and West Coasts, artists and critics alike reacted vigorously and negatively to the new art form.

In 1974, Los Angeles-based painter **Walter Gabrielson** published one such diatribe in *Art in America* writing:

Today's Mainstream kick — Process, Conceptual, Performance, etc. — continues the slide in new and more fascinating vulgarities; we must now wade through the spectacle of thousands of little people doing their gawd-awful trendy "pieces." *It is all so easy to do.* At least in the (gasp) past you had to go out and make a painting or something...<sup>2</sup>

*High Performance* provided the necessary critical conditions needed to foster a fruitful discourse, rather than a set of reactionary responses. With no hope of coverage in mainstream art periodicals such as *Artforum*, *ARTS Magazine*, and *Art in America*, Los Angeles-based performance artists were eager for information regarding other cities and outside scenes. Additionally, in the 1970s, without a network of distributors

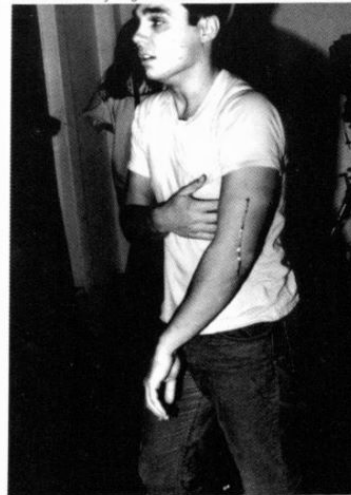
and media organizations, video documentation was less easily duplicated and disseminated than it is today.

Publisher, founder and editor **Linda Frye Burnham** invented a standard format for the documentation and dissemination of live and ephemeral artworks, creating single and double-paged spreads that paired a photograph with an artist-supplied text chronicling the live event. Operating on an open submission policy from its founding in 1978 until 1982, Burnham published any artist who could provide black and white photographic documentation, dates, and a description of the performance. This section of the magazine was known as the Artist's Chronicle. The inclusion of an original script served to illuminate the ideas presented in the reproduced photographs. Through the publication of artists' texts, *High Performance* provided artists with the means of self-representation, insisting that they use their own voice, rather than that of a critic, to describe and document both their work and its intention. Many of the texts came in the form of original handwritten or typed scripts, which often included

artists' notations, sketches, and greetings.

This documentation comprised the bulk of the magazine and was published alongside interviews with individual artists, articles, news, and occasional fiction, poetry, and artist's projects. Historically important, the Artist's Chronicle contains some of the only existing description and imagery of many early, key performances, many of which were not videotaped. Documenting anywhere from 15-80 artists each issue, *High Performance* provided a broad offering of different kinds of performance, work that varied widely in content and form, from semi-autobiographical narratives (**Rachel Rosenthal**); to collective, activist practice (**The Lesbian Art Project**, **The Waitresses**); to time-based, endurance performance (**Chris Burden**, **Linda M. Montano**), providing a depth and breadth

Chris Burden, *Shoot*, 1971  
Photo courtesy High Performance Archive



1 The origination of the terminology "performance art" remains unclear. According to Steve Durland, The Kitchen was the first space to use it in its brochure text, after the organization moved to SoHo circa 1974. Steve Durland (Editor of *HP* 1986-1997), telephone conversation with the author, October 7, 2001.

2 Walter Gabrielson, "Why Suck the Mainstream if You Don't Live in New York?" *Art in America*, v. 62, (1), Jan/Feb, 1974, 37-38.

previously unseen and undocumented. In 1983, at the request of artists, the magazine began to review performances and the Artist's Chronicle was discontinued in favor of a Reviews section. This represents a meaningful shift in the magazine's editorial policy, and for that reason, this exhibition covers the first 20 issues of the magazine only.

## THE ARTIST'S CHRONICLE, 1978-1982

Assembling performance documentation from a wide range of established, emerging, and student-artists with no proven exhibition record, *High Performance* offered critical reception to an international assortment of artists. Burnham activated a dialogue between artists working in diverse, but insular circumstances,

illustrating what performance was, what it looked like, who was making it, for whom were they making it,

and why.

Burnham has suggested that performance brought the human figure back into an art world, which, at the time of the late 1960s, was dominated by abstraction.<sup>3</sup>

Unencumbered by the constraints of object-based production, performance championed the spontaneous, immaterial qualities of movement and form. Through live, body-based works, artists engaged experiences of autobiography, catharsis, and social injustice, challenging the ideological separations between art and life. Generating a context of liberation, performance granted an appropriate space in which to rage, mourn, regret, heal,

protest, endure pain, enact shamanistic rituals, experiment sexually, experiment collectively, and experiment with movement, sound and non-linear narrative.

Channeling thought and feeling into dynamic patterns of speech, movement, and sound, artists performed body

narratives, formalizing a commitment to revive emotion in art making, unifying aesthetic and psychic experience, rather than treating the two entities as irreconcilable.

Performance created elasticity within the visual arts, articulating the sublimated energies particular to feminist and issue-oriented content, using the power of language and body-based imagery to create new perceptions and posit questions.

A testament to the pluralism, personal enlightenment, social and political activism of the 1970s, *High Performance* created an active discourse surrounding the role of the body and the assertion of the self as an artistic strategy. Non-hierarchical and occasionally alphabetized, the Artist's Chronicle was a serial presentation, comprising the body of the magazine, where the individual practitioner was slotted in-between, next-to, and among other artists, positioning both well-known and emerging artists alongside each other. Contextualizing practices that were ephemeral and solitary in nature, this strategy served to educate artists about each others' intentions, ideas and work. Highly accessible and informative, the Artist's Chronicle was an immense contribution in creating a permanent record of a transitory, time-based practice.

As a commissioning and retaining repository of visual and historical information, the run of *High Performance* is an invaluable archive of information that is otherwise lost, unavailable or destroyed. The Artist's Chronicle provides necessary names, locations, dates, and imagery, facilitating scholarship into a largely overlooked and easily misconstrued era. More importantly, as a primary source, the magazines offer a path back, permitting entrance into a heady and innovative cultural moment.

## THE COVERS

*High Performance* featured documentation from individual artists' performances on both



Jürgen Klauke, *Transformer*, 1972-73  
Photo by Betzel Verlag





Maura Sheehan  
Environmental Painting, 1982  
Photo by Evan Burnet-Smith  
and John Drake

the front and back covers of each issue. The magazine commenced with **Suzanne Lacy's** inaugural cover, photo documentation of a travelling fairytale piece, *Cinderella in a Dragster* (1977).

With a strong penchant for equality, of the first 20 issues (1978-1982),<sup>4</sup> women and men received nearly equal numbers of covers. The eight women featured individually were: **Suzanne Lacy, Linda M. Montano, Carolee Schneemann, Theodora Skipitares, Bonnie Sherk, Rachel Rosenthal, Maura Sheehan, and Laurel Klick.** Additionally, issue 8 (Winter 1979/80) featured a feminist collective, **The Lesbian Art Project.**

During this same period, seven men were granted covers: **Paul McCarthy, Hermann Nitsch, Chris Burden, Richard Newton, Stephen Seemayer, Wolfgang Stoerchle, and Alex Grey.** Many depicted provocative images, some of which would today be deemed obscene, offensive, or otherwise unprintable. Such covers include **Richard Newton** in drag; filmmaker **Stephen Seemayer** bearing the weight of a giant cross upon his back; Lesbian Art Project members **Arlene Raven** and **Catherine Stifter** kissing; a collaged image of artist **Wolfgang Stoerchle** arm-wrestling with then-president Ronald Reagan; and a mud and blood-covered blindfolded male participant in **Hermann Nitsch's** *Orgies Mysteries Theatre* (1978) having a glass of animal blood poured down his throat.<sup>5</sup>

That *High Performance* did not shy away from violent or even graphic sexual imagery is evidenced by its steadfast commitment to the **The Lesbian Art Project**, whose eight-paged documentation of their 13-night performance at the Woman's Building, *An Oral Herstory of Lesbianism* (1979), included an explicit oral sex photograph by **Tee Corinne**, which had graced the cover of the performance program. The magazine's local printer refused to print the image and as a result, a new printer was found and retained.

As an act of defiance, within the space of two pages, Burnham repeated the image six times.



Tee Corinne  
*An Oral History of Lesbianism*, 1978  
Solarized photograph, 6.5 x 5"  
courtesy of the artist

Like the B-side of a record, *High Performance* allocated back covers to a lesser-known work by the front-cover artist or often, an altogether different artist. Slim and bound with staples, with glossy performance stills on both covers, the magazine adopted the look and feel of an artist's book project.

For commercially distributed magazines, back covers are prime advertising space; consistently earmarked for full-page gallery ads, art periodicals offer no exception. Turn over any pre-1980 issue of *Artnews*, *Art in America*, *Artforum*, *Flashart*, and even the 1970s hipster magazine *Avalanche*, and a New York gallery show is billed in a full-page ad. In the 1980s, when corporate advertising and exhibition sponsorship became the norm, things shifted a bit, and an Absolut Vodka advertisement (Absolut Schnabel, Absolut Haring) with an artist-themed bottle was not uncommon, even for magazines with not-for-profit status. In addition to *High Performance*, the only magazine that has consistently rejected this model is Britain's *Art Monthly*, which has shrewdly used its back covers as a table of contents since its inception in 1976.

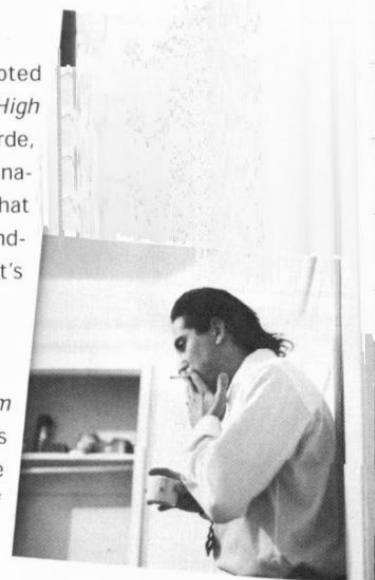
## REWIND: RECONSIDERING ARTFORUM AND AVALANCHE

While there is no magazine devoted exclusively to performance art before *High Performance* within the American avant-garde, both *Artforum* and *Avalanche* merit examination, the former, as the first art magazine that gave the West Coast national artistic standing, and the latter, for its inclusion of artist's projects and texts.

### Artforum

From its inception in 1962, *Artforum* reigned as one of the leading art periodicals throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The magazine is significant within the history of

Richard Newton  
*The Man Who Could Eat Glass*, 1980  
Photo by Eric E. Iglar



4 Of the first 20 issues, two issues featured posters and graphics from festivals, and two more issues were combined editions: #11/12 (Fall/Winter 1980) and #17/18 (Spring/Summer 1982). This comprises a total of 16 possible magazine covers, of which women received a 9:7 majority.

5 The covers were from the following performances: Richard Newton (*I take you to a room in Brawley and we smell onions*, 1975); Stephen Seemayer (*Pope Video*, 1980); The Lesbian Art Project (*An Oral Herstory of Lesbianism*, 1979); Harry Kipper in Hermann Nitsch's *Orgies Mysteries Theatre* (1978).

*High Performance* in that it was based for its first five years in California, from 1962 until 1965, in San Francisco, and from 1965 until 1967, in Los Angeles.

Much to the dismay of the artists and curators living and working in the city, in the summer of 1967, *Artforum* left Los Angeles. What had begun as a maverick publication situated in the West quickly became part of the New York publishing establishment. *Artforum's* national presence had offered a respite from the regional cultural anxieties that plagued a city dominated by the commercial film industry. By shifting its attentions East, the magazine undermined the confidence it had begun to instill in the LA art scene. Leaving Los Angeles meant losing representation, and ultimately, ground in New

York. With no other publications based on the West Coast, *Artforum* left behind a void in the coverage and critical attention paid to the cities of Los Angeles, San Francisco and the West Coast at large. In changing allegiances, it silently encouraged New York to do the same.

*High Performance* can be construed as a direct reaction against *Artforum's* trademark characteristics: the dense and analytical essays of writers such as **Michael Fried**, **Rosalind Krauss**, **Annette Michelson**, and **Barbara Rose**. With few exceptions, *Artforum* had a roster of heavyweight art historians masquerading as critics, with a conscious agenda to champion artists who mattered and diminish those who did not through

carefully constructed arguments that belied personal prejudices and educational influences. Even in print, though, there was little consensus among the magazine's writers as to how criticism could enhance the experience of viewing art. *Artforum* was an ideological battleground on which textual wars were waged, creating a high-stakes atmosphere that resulted in the collective refutation of Greenbergian Formalism.

Discarding the serious and sometimes mind-numbing rigor of *Artforum*, *High Performance*, on the other hand, rejected art criticism altogether as a model by which to experience and analyze art production, affirming the fundamental importance

of the artist's own voice in the viewing process.

*High Performance* had no stake in redefining art history, no

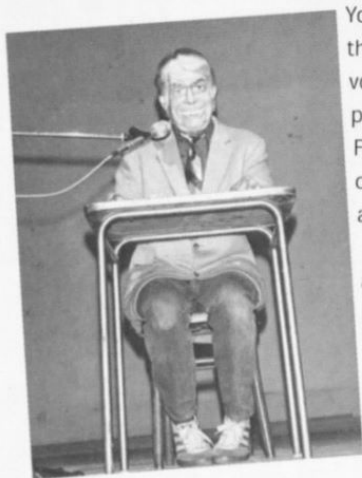
theories to push, and no academic cause to advance. Through its open call for submissions, *High Performance* embraced inclusion. Its willingness to view artists as writers and thinkers helped to grow and refine a critical discourse, enriching the field through an expansion and encouragement of interdisciplinary practice.

It is interesting to try to envision how differently things might have been had *Artforum* remained on the West Coast. Los Angeles might have attained second-city status a decade earlier, rather than during the market boom of the 1980s. *Artforum* might have become a publication with immense hometown support, and loyalty, possibly quelling *High Performance* before it began. Instead, California became home to a number of small, unusual publications run by artists and not-for-profit spaces.

### Avalanche

Published quasi-quarterly, *Avalanche* (1970-1976) was a New York publication that ran for thirteen issues, devoting itself exclusively to art world news, interviews and documentation projects, both of land art and early performances by artists such as **Vito Acconci**, **Carl Andre**, **Bruce Nauman**, **Robert Smithson**, and **Dennis Oppenheim**. Publisher and sometime artist **Willoughby Sharp**, along with editor **Liza Béar**, authored the majority of each issue, but all artists received bylines for their photographic documentation, whether or not written texts were included in their contributions.

Borrowing the chic conversational style of *Interview* magazine, Sharp undermined conventional criticism by hanging out with artists at their studios, homes, and cafes, and then publishing a record of the ensuing dialogue. His flair for wisecracking banter and unnecessary detail, such as unedited asides about whose marijuana they



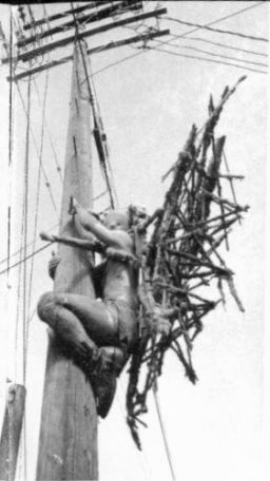
Paul McCarthy  
*A Tale to Two Cities*, 1980  
Photo courtesy  
High Performance Archive



Sandra Binion  
*Homage à Odilon Redon*, 1979  
Photo courtesy  
High Performance Archive







Kim Jones  
Telephone Pole, 1978  
Photo by Ed Sloane



The Waitresses Ride the Toast, 1981  
Photomontage by Jerri Allyn  
New York MTA poster project  
Sponsored by Creative Time

were smoking, enhanced the resulting articles, lending a flamboyant and entertaining flourish to a (literally) mellow intellectual exercise. What the interviews lose in serious analysis they gain in accessibility and spontaneity, offering younger, perhaps more candid versions of now-established art world figures. Offering fresh and sometimes abrasive viewpoints that challenged common assumptions about artmaking, the artists were characteristically laconic, even sarcastic, in their responses:

Sharp: *Then we come back to where we ended the last time: who is your art for?*

Nauman: *To keep me busy.*<sup>6</sup>

Ever hip and attentive, Sharp proved talented at drawing out the snide young rebels.

As cutting edge as *Avalanche* was, it was still primarily a male space, unsympathetic to the work produced by the feminist movement. Even with a female editor, **Liza Béar**, women were almost completely eliminated from the magazine. While *Avalanche* devoted three covers to women (**Yvonne Rainer**, **Ulrike Rosenbach**, and **Barbara Dilley**) in all its thirteen issues, it ran feature articles with less than one female artist per issue. *Avalanche* perpetuated a rugged individualism, exemplified by the few women it chose to portray, most of whom were the only woman working within all-male peer groups, creating female exceptions among communities of male artists. *High Performance* reversed such a trajectory, offering women unprecedented exposure in print.

With strong feminist leanings and a female editor, *High Performance* took its cue from feminist art practice, privileging community and pluralism over exclusion, individuality and a restricted critical agenda. Firmly rejecting the inclusion of dance, theater and music, Burnham delineated clear boundaries by determining what was not performance art.

This is a crucial difference between *High Performance* and *Avalanche*, which enthusiastically profiled avant-garde dancers such as

**Barbara Dilley** and **Yvonne Rainer**. New York's strong tradition of avant-garde dance and theater created a space for impromptu interdisciplinary events, collaborations and festivals. In the early 1980s, performance acquired a nightlife tinged with a heavy dose of theater, where artist-turned-actors such as **Penny Arcade**, **Eric Bogosian**, **Spalding Gray**, and **Ann Magnuson** played the East Village club circuit, performing one-person, stand-up, and monologue shows.

Across the country, Los Angeles performance artists had the commercial music industry and Hollywood in close proximity. By the mid-1980s, performance had transformed itself from conceptual art into stage-based entertainment. Scornful of those who "sold out," or profited financially from their work, veteran performance artists were by and large displaced in the 1980s by a younger generation of artists who had emerged from drama academies rather than art schools. Under Burnham's leadership, *High Performance* remained a champion of avant-garde events in alternative spaces, performed without admission fees.

A significant document of a particular era in American cultural production, *High Performance* was central to the development, expansion, and legitimization of performance art as a medium distinct from theater, creating both an audience and a venue for the dissemination of live experimental and conceptual body-based work. More than just a historical archive of seminal artists, it is a testament to passionate practice and independent activity. From this distance, it is easy to forget what the 1970s and early 1980s looked like. Many younger artists still don't know. If you don't know, find out.

If you can't remember, go back. If you don't like it, change it.

An indispensable record, *High Performance* is worth re-reading.

**Jenni Sorkin**

*Artists Represented in the Exhibition* Eleanor Antin, Bob & Bob, Nancy Buchanan, Chris Burden, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Tee Corinne, Lowell Darling, Cheri Gaulke, Donna Henes, Kim Jones, Jürgen Klauke, Suzanne Lacy, The Lesbian Art Project, Paul McCarthy, Linda M. Montano, Gina Pane, Reindeer Werk, Rachel Rosenthal, Carolee Schneemann, Stephen Seemayer, Barbara T. Smith, Lon Spiegelman, and The Waitresses.

*Curator's Acknowledgements* I would like to thank all of the artists and writers who have shared their time, information, and materials during the course of my research: Jerri Allyn, Nancy Buchanan, Linda Burnham, Tee Corinne, Sue Dakin, Steve Durland, Anne Gauldin, Cheri Gaulke, Rose Lee Goldberg, Kim Jones, Jürgen Klauke, Linda M. Montano, Peter Plagens, Arlene Raven, Rachel Rosenthal, Moira Roth, Carolee Schneemann, Willoughby Sharp, Barbara T. Smith, Terry Wolverton, and Jan Williamson at the 18th Street Arts Complex; and all of the artists who are featured in this exhibition. Additionally, I would like to thank the many friends and colleagues who have been supportive of this project: Michael Brenson, Linda Burnham, Connie Butler, Jeff Cain, Katherine Chan, Lynne Cooke, Julie Deamer, Bridget DuLong, Anne Gauldin, Carolee Ann Klonarides, Katherine Litwin, Meryl Pollen, Arlene Raven, Annie See-on Shaw, Irene Tsatsos, and most of all, my partner, Sandra Firmin. — Jenni Sorkin

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This brochure accompanies the exhibition *High Performance: The First Five Years, 1978–1982*, organized by Jenni Sorkin for Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions from 1 February – 30 March, 2003. A variation of this exhibition was presented as an M.A. thesis at The Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, from 12 – 25 May, 2002.

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Front and back: a selection of front and back covers from *High Performance, 1978–1982*.

