

"HIGH PERFORMANCE: THE FIRST FIVE YEARS"

February 1 - March 30, 2003 at [Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions](#), Hollywood

by Judith Hoffberg



Front cover of "High Performance," 1978, volume 1, number 1.



The first nine front covers of "High Performance," 1978-1980.



"High Performance: The First Five Years, 1978-1982," installation shot at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, February, 2003.



Carolee Schneemann, "Interior Scroll: Preparation," 1975, gelatin silver print printed in 1985. Photograph: Anthony McCall. Appeared in "High Performance" #6, June 1979.

Most people say that Los Angeles does not have a history, destroying buildings before their time, discovering new heroes before the old ones have disappeared, and remembering that everyone has his or her fifteen minutes, and then it's gone. But there are a few institutions and keepers of documents (or those who have organized them) that make for a delicious discovery in the roots of a society, a culture, or a movement. And so *High Performance: The First Five Years* makes historical a magazine that not only made a difference in Los Angeles and perhaps the wider art world beginning in 1978, but also the exhibition's host institution, which also began 25 years ago and is still making a difference.

Begun as a quarterly, *High Performance* 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 artists. The panoply of performance artists that appeared in the magazine, which ended its run in 1997, is part of the art history of the 20th century, now archived and recognized by this show, curated by Jenni Sorkin, who first presented this exhibition as an M.A. thesis at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College in New York State, and now lives in Los Angeles.

Publisher, founder and editor Linda Frye Burnham began the magazine by asking for material directly from the artists on the premise that for too long art was mediated by a curator or an art critic. High Performance had no point of view except reportage of news "and the rebirth of wonder." Burnham was democratic, operating on an open submission policy, publishing any artist who could provide that documentation in black and white, dates, and a description of the performance printed in a single- or double-page spread. What more could an artist who was doing performance ask? A place to show the time-based live art that was simply missing from most other art publications. Unmediated expressions by the artists themselves, in their own voice, described and documented both their work and their intentions.

This occurred at the inception of performance art as a movement, featuring 15 to 80 artists per issue, and providing a breadth and depth of materials previously unseen. It was a tremendous lift for Los Angeles performance artists, who proved eager for information regarding their medium in other cities and other countries. So much of the work had not as yet been documented by video, which was less easily distributed and disseminated than it is today.

The second most important part of the magazine was its covers, front and back, which featured documentation of individual artists' performances beginning with Suzanne Lacy's inaugural cover, namely the photo documentation of a traveling fairy tale piece, *Cinderella in a Dragster* (1977). Other covers featured the likes of Linda Montano, Carolee Schneemann, Rachel Rosenthal, Maura Sheehan and Laurel Klick. The Lesbian Art Project also were featured as a feminist collective. The men during this same period included Paul McCarthy, Hermann Nitsch, Chris Burden, Richard Newton, Stephen Seemayer, Wolfgang Stoerchle, and Alex Grey. Many of the images were provocative, deemed today obscene, offensive, or even unprintable.

As one enters the gallery, one sees an array of various media in the first vitrine that *High Performance* supported and documented: artist books (Astro Artz was another arm of the magazine, featuring less well-known but extremely talented artists who created bookworks that documented and amplified their work) and mail art (featuring the late Lon Spiegelman's envelopes decorated with drawings and rubberstamps, as well a sheet of his artistamps which were in the envelope). Then one sees Linda Montano's leather jacket, which made her feel "great" while she performed, adorned with puffy paint on the back spelling Art = Life. That certainly conveys that performance is a live medium, oftentimes autobiographical and extremely moving when it comes from the heart and soul of the performer. Other artifacts from Montano performances here are puppets of her and her husband who died (Mitchell Payn from the *Mitchell's Death* performance); acupuncture needles that she continually reused throughout the 1970s and '80s; as well as letters of her 60-year-old self to her younger artist self (called Artist Linda) ruminating on the passage of time and attitude toward her younger, more naive self.

Nancy Buchanan's *If Only I Could Tell You How Much I Really Loved You* (1980) incorporated refabricated paper dolls, original fortune cookies, black and white photographs and performance documentation, performed by a cast of 11. This was a political commentary disguised as a comic farce, being a meditation on the CIA and its overthrow of the Allende government in Chile in 1973, as well as commenting on the increasingly conservative atmosphere under then newly elected President Reagan.

Rachel Rosenthal's *Soldier of Fortune* (1981) appears in its elegant book format, which records her dressed in combat gear at fancy restaurants accompanied by her pet rat, Tatti Wattles. Barbara T. Smith's early Xeroxes and documentation of the *Perpetual Napkin* (1980), complete with red napkins, recalls another era of quiet performances in non-art venues. The aprons of The Waitresses are also here, as well as their costume for The Great Goddess Diana, which was an ongoing performance through the years 1978-1981 at the Women's Building and other venues.

Documentation hardly ends with the magazine's working photos, marked up for publication, but includes correspondence between editor Burnham and the artists, showing how they veered from formalities to friendships, chatty letters which show a wonderful friendship and appreciation between Burnham and the myriad of artists, including one from Jurgen Klauke of Germany signed "love and peace and happiness."

Ongoing videos, a reading table with facsimiles of the five years of magazines, and a light-filled exhibition of artifacts and documents from those first crucial years celebrate the birth of an important journal as well as the legacy of LACE, founded to champion the presentation of new art and art forms. A series of performances this month appropriately round out this celebration.