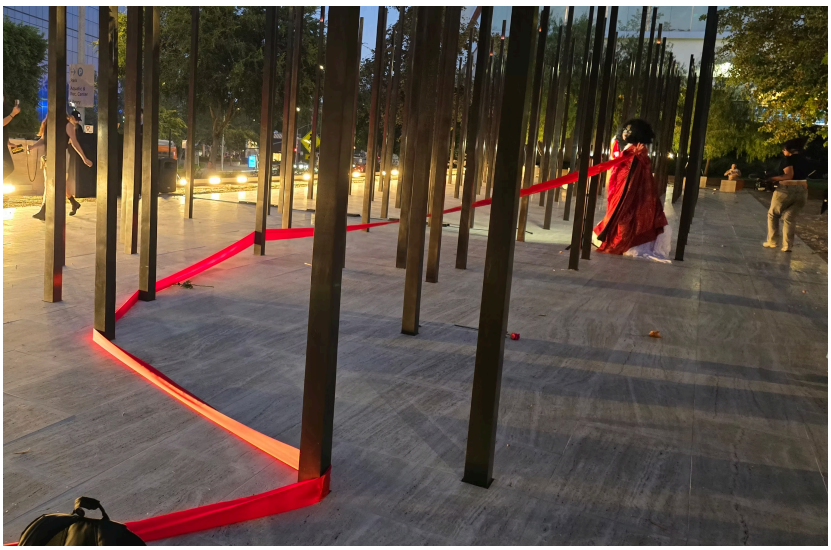
Kristine Schomaker · 3 days ago · 6 min read

Action=Life: Performance Art, Queer History, and Why the Body Is Always Political

By Kristine Schomaker

Friday night I stood at the AIDS Monument in West Hollywood and watched artists perform five-minute pieces in the open air as the sun went down. ACTION = LIFE, presented by LACE and the Performance Art Museum as part of Circa: Queer Histories Festival. A marathon of performances. So many friends. So much history in one place.

I drove home still feeling it. Thinking about the first performance I ever saw that made me understand what my own work was actually about. Thinking about how long people have been doing this and why
it keeps mattering.



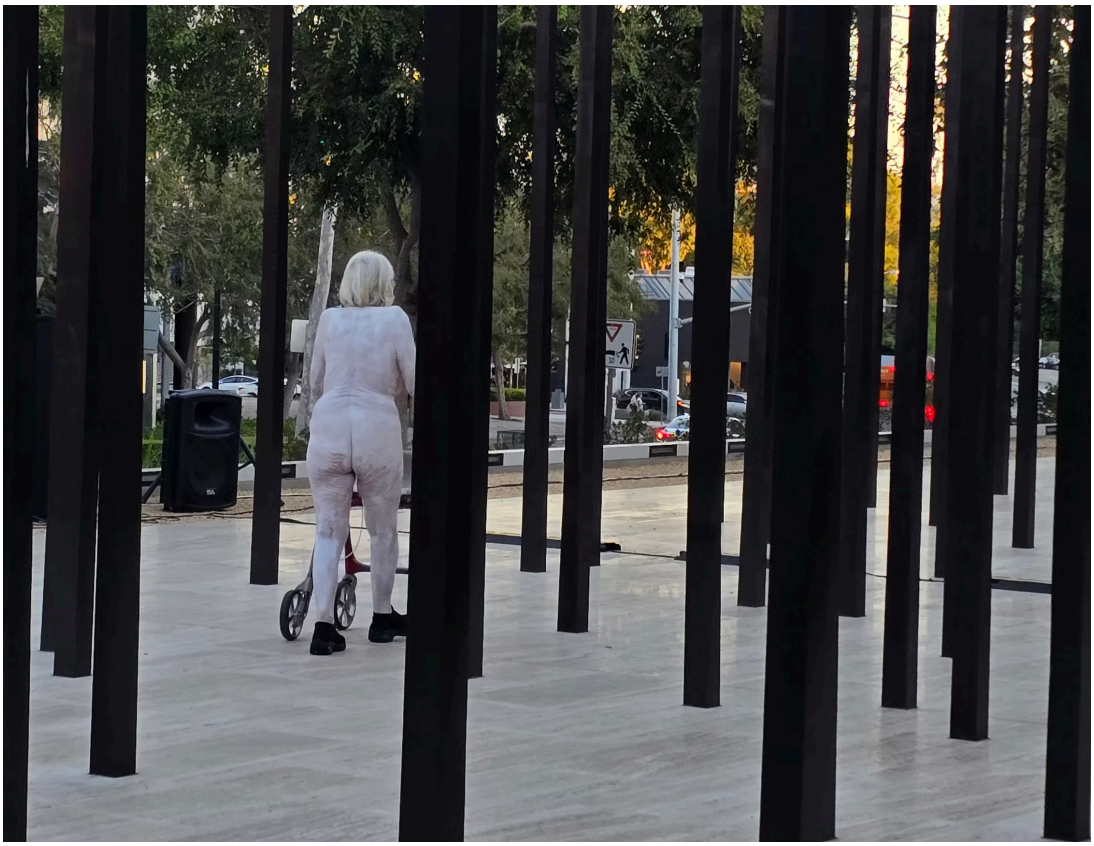
Dacity

What Performance Art Actually Is

Performance art is the most direct art form there is. No object between the artist and the audience. No mediation. No filter. Just a body in a space and the willingness to be seen doing something that matters.
It emerged as a distinct practice in the early twentieth century through Dada and Futurism, artists who wanted to blow up the boundary between art and life. Allan Kaprow named it Happenings in the late 1950s. Fluxus took it further in the 1960s. Alison Knowles making a salad in a gallery. George Maciunas declaring that anyone could make art from anything. The everyday elevated into something worth paying attention to.

In Los Angeles the feminist art movement of the 1970s transformed performance art into a political weapon and a healing practice simultaneously. Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro at CalArts. *Womanhouse* in 1972, an entire house transformed room by room into feminist art. Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz making large-scale public performances about violence against women, about grief, about visibility and political action in the streets rather than in studios and galleries.

Barbara T. Smith creating *Feed Me* in 1973, going into a room and asking to be fed, refusing to be an object and insisting on being recognized as a person with specific needs worth knowing and meeting.
All of that history was in the air on Friday night. In every five-minute performance at the AIDS Monument.



Sheree Rose

The AIDS Monument and Why Site Matters

The AIDS Monument in West Hollywood is not a neutral backdrop. It is a site of grief and survival and community and political rage made physical. The AIDS crisis killed tens of thousands of people, devastated entire creative communities, and was met for years by government indifference and public silence. The queer community organized, mobilized, made art, made noise, and refused to let those deaths be invisible.

ACT UP. Gran Fury. Felix Gonzalez-Torres making candy piles to the weight of his dead lover because the government would not act. Performance art as activism, as mourning, as insistence on being seen.
Standing at the AIDS Monument on Friday night, watching artists perform in that space, felt like a continuation of that history. Not nostalgia for it. Continuation of it. The work is not finished.





Gabrielle Civil

ACTION = LIFE and the Performers

The lineup was extraordinary.

Jerri Allyn, an activist artist and educator who has been making socially engaged work for decades, exploring social justice, gender norms, and queer rights through performance and installation. Gabrielle Civil, a Black feminist performance artist and poet who has premiered over fifty original performances worldwide, whose work aims in her own words to open up space. Marcus Kuiland-Nazario, a founding artist of 18th Street Arts Center and Highways Performance Space, whose long-term research-based works explore extreme states of emotion like grief, anger, and loss. Sheree Rose, who has been thrilling and shocking and exciting audiences since 1981, beginning with her groundbreaking collaborations with Bob Flanagan. Ben Cuevas, whose knit skeletal fragments are currently on view at the Brand Library as part of *Artifacts from an Unborn Empire*, and who brings his queer, non-binary, HIV-positive lived experience into everything he makes.

Each performer had five minutes. Five minutes to say something true in a space that holds enormous history. The constraint itself felt meaningful. Not everything has to be long. Sometimes five minutes is exactly enough.

I know so many of these artists personally. Seeing them perform in that space, at that monument, on that night felt like being held by my community. That, too, is its own kind of political act right now.



Jerri Allyn

The Performance That Changed Everything for Me

In 2010 I saw Micha Cárdenas and Elle Mehrmand perform *Technesexual* live at GLAMFA. I was already deep in the Gracie Kendal Project, spending significant time in Second Life with my avatar, asking questions about identity and the virtual body and what it means to inhabit a self you built from scratch.
Technesexual blew the walls off what I thought was possible.

The performance involved both artists engaging in playful erotic acts in physical and virtual space simultaneously, using handmade electronic stethoscopes to play the sounds of their heartbeats in both spaces. The lines between the physical and the digital were not just blurred. They were collapsed. Two bodies in a room and two bodies in a virtual world, the heartbeats moving between them, the intimacy simultaneously real and mediated and real again.

I had been doing something adjacent with Gracie — living in a virtual world, asking what that world revealed about my physical one — but I had not yet understood it as a lineage. Seeing *Technesexual* made me understand that I was working in a conversation that already existed. That there were other artists asking the same questions from different angles. That what I was doing was serious and worth taking seriously.

That is what community does. It gives you permission to be who you already are.

Cárdenas's earlier piece *Becoming Dragon* (2008) went even further. Living for 365 hours immersed in Second Life with a head-mounted display, only seeing the physical world through a video feed, while mapping her movements into Second Life. The piece questioned the one-year Real Life Experience requirement for transgender people seeking gender confirmation surgery, asking whether one year of Second Life experience could substitute for it. That is not metaphor. That is the question made completely concrete. What is real experience. What does a body have to do to count.

Those questions run directly through the Gracie Kendal Project. Gracie was tall, thin, blonde, confident, everything I thought I was not. I built her to help me build myself. What I learned over years of inhabiting her was that the confidence people were responding to was always mine. The virtual body was a laboratory for the physical one. The performance was always real even when it happened inside a screen.





Kevin Emilio Contreras

Why Performance Art Matters Right Now

We are living in a moment when bodies are political again in the most urgent way. Bodily autonomy. Gender identity. Who gets to exist in public space. Who gets to define what a body is for and what it deserves.

Performance art has always lived in that territory. It has always insisted that the body is not a problem to be solved or a surface to be decorated but a site of knowledge, of history, of resistance, of joy. The performance artists who came before us, from the Fluxus artists to the feminist performance artists of the 1970s to the queer artists who made work through the AIDS crisis to the artists performing at the AIDS Monument on Friday night, all of them understood that.

The body in public space, doing something true, refusing to be invisible. That is the whole practice.
I make performance work because I need to be in the room with the fear. Because putting my body in a space and saying this is who I am and this matters is the most honest thing I know how to do.
Friday night reminded me why. And gave me courage to keep going.



Circa: Queer Histories Festival and ACTION = LIFE

ACTION = LIFE was co-presented by Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) and the Performance Art Museum (PAM) as part of Circa: Queer Histories Festival, presented by One Institute, the oldest active LGBTQ+ organization in the country. Circa is the first and only queer histories festival in the United States, held each October during LGBTQ+ History Month.

One of my favorite performances of the night was by Dacity, who activated the whole space through costume and dance, breaking out of the constraints of a past life to be free. Dacity is an LA-based drag performer, writer, and LGBTQIA+ advocate whose work blends performance, storytelling, and queer world-building. Since debuting in 2023, Dacity has received two California College Media Awards, released original music, launched the queer podcast *Dyzz Bytch*, and founded TRANS•FORM. With a background in journalism and political education, their work centers uplifting unheard queer voices and exploring identity through performance and media.



Sophia Le Fraga

The Performance Art Museum advances the visibility, legacy, and scholarship of artists working in performance. LACE champions artists, curators, and cultural workers who explore and defy boundaries through socially engaged projects.

This is the infrastructure that makes nights like Friday possible. Organizations and institutions that understand that performance art is not a niche concern but a central part of how communities process history, build solidarity, and insist on their own existence.



Marcus Kuiland-Nazario


FUCK GILEAD
NO LOADS
REFSED ON
THE STEPS
OF THE F.D.A
"GO WITHOUT HATE,
BUT NOT WITHOUT RAGE,
HEAL THE WORLD."



Ben Cuevas