CHAPTER 1 *performance politics real life*

It is against a background of a political and intellectual battle for cultural change in major cities across Europe, Japan, and the United States that performance must be viewed. Rich in metaphor and symbolism, these early performances were a reaction to a decade in which the traces of post-war trauma were slowly erased by expanding consumerism on both sides of the Atlantic. They were also an extension of Dada and Futurist gestures, which deliberately blasted traditional art academies and forced art into the domain of public confrontation. "We must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life," American artist Allan Kaprow wrote in his homage to Jackson Pollock in 1958. "It is important to declare as art the *total* event, comprising noise/object/movement/color, and psychology," proclaimed German-born Wolf Vostell in 1968, describing '60s art events as continuing in the spirit of Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades. His own work, he said, was "a merging of elements so that life can be art." Indeed, for those artists wishing to be directly engaged in the seismic social shifts of the times, and to interact with the public, live art also offered a particularly seductive role for the artist—as activist, shaman and provocateur.

Since the mid-'50s, artists' actions had taken place sporadically in cultural centers around the globe, but by the end of the decade, the sheer number of such events was evidence of an important and growing tendency. In May 1957, the Gutai group in Japan had organized a "Stage Art Exhibition" in Tokyo and Osaka, with huge inflated balloons filling the stage, and a performer wearing a dress made of lights. In spring 1958 Yves Klein invited guests to witness his *Anthropometries of the Blue Period* at Robert Godet's Paris apartment. In Cologne the following summer Wolf Vostell's *Fernseh-dé-coll-age für millionen*, initially planned as a TV program during which viewers would be instructed to carry out certain actions, was in fact presented live. A month later, in Provincetown, Rhode Island, Red Grooms in *The Walking Man* made a painting in front of an audience in the manner of French painter Georges Mathieu. In October, Allan Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* at the Reuben Gallery in New York included several artist friends who were all active event-makers themselves—Red Grooms, Dick Higgins and Robert Rauschenberg among them. From that evening, and for several years to come, the media would use the term "Happening" to describe a broad range of artists' events and gatherings.

YAYOI KUSAMA
***"Anti War" Naked Happening and Flag Burning at Brooklyn Bridge*, 1968**

Kusama targeted key New York City locations—Brooklyn Bridge, Central Park, Wall Street—for her events. She said they were "anti-war, anti-establishment... about economics, politics, Japan, and scandal." The performers wore little but Kusama's signature polka dots.

Kaprow's events were emphatically participatory, while Claes Oldenburg's were more concerned with engaging the viewer visually—his *Ray Gun Spex* events were, he said, "paintings in the shape of theater," fragments of which the viewer could purchase from his Storefront studio. Robert Rauschenberg, whose performance collaborations began in 1952 with Merce Cunningham and John Cage at Black Mountain College, maintained a clear separation between performer and viewer in all but the intensity of the perception-altering surprises that he created. "I don't call my theater pieces Happenings," he said in a 1965 interview, "because of my involvement with theater through dance." The collaboration between artists—especially dancers—and the way they altered each other's notions of the body in space, was the key component that kept him absorbed by performance throughout his prolific career.

By 1960 there were regular festivals of performance in most European cities. Usually collections of independent actions, they displayed little of the collaborative exchange between artists of different disciplines that was so inspirational for many American artists. In Nice in 1961, for example, Arman destroyed a chair and table in *Anger*, and Niki de Saint Phalle in *Surprise Shoots* used a rifle to shoot at a panel containing glass objects and plastic bags filled with paint and smoke bombs. But 1961 saw the introduction of Fluxus, named by George Maciunas, an artist and poet born in Lithuania and working in New York. Fluxus was a loosely constituted group, more concerned with music and language than with painting and environments; it attracted artists from a broader spectrum, and had a more intellectual and socio-political edge. There was a direct link to John Cage through George Brecht, who had studied with him, and many of the group were classically trained composers—Nam June Paik, Yoko Ono, David Tudor, Charlotte Moorman. Fluxus concerts were often presented in traditional concert halls, like Carnegie Hall in New York, and stages were frequently littered with musical instruments which were "prepared," mistreated, or destroyed in the process of creating "noise music," and challenging, symbolically at least, the rigidity of the music academy and the barriers between "high art" and the music of everyday life. In Paik's second concert, *The Exposition of Music Electronic Television* in a Wuppertal gallery, 1963, he assaulted three prepared pianos (one covered with a brassière, padlock, barbed wire, and other objects), and thirteen television sets. He was joined at one point by Joseph Beuys, a visitor to the exhibition, who helped hack apart one of the pianos with an ax.

For Paik, Fluxus was an "international passport," much like Dada had been some fifty years earlier. As its name made clear, it had no fixed center, ideologically or geographically. From Prague to Amsterdam, Cologne, Tokyo, Stockholm, or Sydney, it gave rise to the spontaneous art event. Everyone could do it, artist and non-artist alike. Its fluid agenda attracted many women—Yayoi Kusama, Yoko Ono, Shigeko Kubota, Ay-O, Alison Knowles. At the same

time its vaguely anarchic ways suited the various political tenets behind the protests of the '60s. Its very failure to become an "ism" was its success, according to Beuys, and he responded to its inclusionary spirit by joining Fluxus concerts, and creating highly ritualized events of his own. Beuys, who saw art as a tool for awakening both spiritual and political awareness, put a strong emphasis on music: "The acoustic element and the sculptural quality of sounds have always been essential to me in art," he explained in a 1979 interview. His first Fluxus concert, after a meeting with Maciunas at a neo-Dada concert in Düsseldorf in 1962, took place at the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal: Beuys played a piano with pairs of old shoes until it fell apart. The following year he and others organized the Festum Fluxorum Fluxus Festival in Düsseldorf; twenty artists participated in an evening of *Music and Anti-music: Instrumental Theater*. By 1965, however, Beuys's passion for dramatic ritual and its ability to touch the audience led him to separate from Fluxus. At the Düsseldorf Galerie Schmela that year, Beuys's *How To Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* was a startling three-hour event which he described as "a complex tableau about the problem of language, and about the problems of thought, of human consciousness, and of the consciousness of animals."

Through the '70s, the work of radical artists of the '60s—Hermann Nitsch, Günter Brus, and Arnulf Reiner in Vienna, Gustav Metzger, John Latham, and Stuart Brisley in London—continued to exert great influence on the next generation of performers, who were just as intent on the connections between art and everyday life, between art and psychology, and between politics and the aesthetics of action. The range of work produced at this time was enormous—from the elegant and eloquent work of Arte Povera in Italy, to the unyielding political symbolism of British and Irish artists in the '80s. Performance as metaphor—a means of articulating broader cultural spasms from shifts in political or economic strata rather than focusing on personal concerns—was a particularly male preference, and the artists who emerged from eastern Europe at the end of the '80s added many examples. Disturbing and curiously suspended in time, like visitors from another place, their performances alerted viewers to the continuing fragility of human life in the frame of world politics, all but forgotten by those who lived through the affluent '80s when performance, as monologue and media parody, came as close as it ever has to standard entertainment.

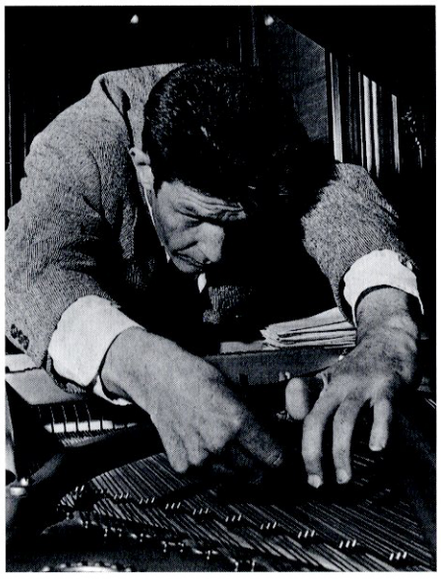
Artists of the '90s use performance as a critical evocation of everyday life, now an extraordinary mix of visual languages and value systems. Threaded through with technology as much as with the traces of spirituality of their own invention, contemporary performance artists force us to confront our own particular moment in time, and to attempt to name it.

► **ALLAN KAPROW**
***Household*, 1964**

Every artist's approach to live actions was quite different, depending as much on background as on temperament. The ebullient Kaprow designed his events for maximum audience participation, as in this Happening at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

JOHN CAGE
John Cage preparing a piano, before 1950
***Reunion*, 1968**

Cage's "prepared pianos" were evidence of his iconoclastic approach to the traditions of classical music and of his interest in making performances from found materials. For *Reunion* he invited composers (and friends) David Tudor, Gordon Mumma, David Behrman, and Lowell Cross to perform their live electronic music simultaneously, while Cage, Marcel Duchamp, and Teeny Duchamp played a game of chess on a wired board.



◄ **ROBERT WHITMAN**
***American Moon*, 1960, 1976**

► **JIM DINE AND JUDY TERSCH**
***Car Crash*, 1960**

American Moon was first performed in 1960, and was reconstructed in 1976. Whitman, originally a sculptor, created highly effective spatial illusions with paper, cloth, and lighting. His Happenings were known for their careful preparation and visual lushness. Jim Dine's brief events, on the other hand, were far more sketchy; he considered them to be an acting-out of his personal obsessions.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG
***Elgin Tie*, 1964**

Painter and assemblage-maker Robert Rauschenberg, who came to Happenings via dance, maintained a clear separation between performer and viewer. *Elgin Tie* (right) was part of *Five New York Evenings* at Stockholm's Moderna Museet.

NIKI DE SAINT PHALLE
***Shooting Painting*, 1962**

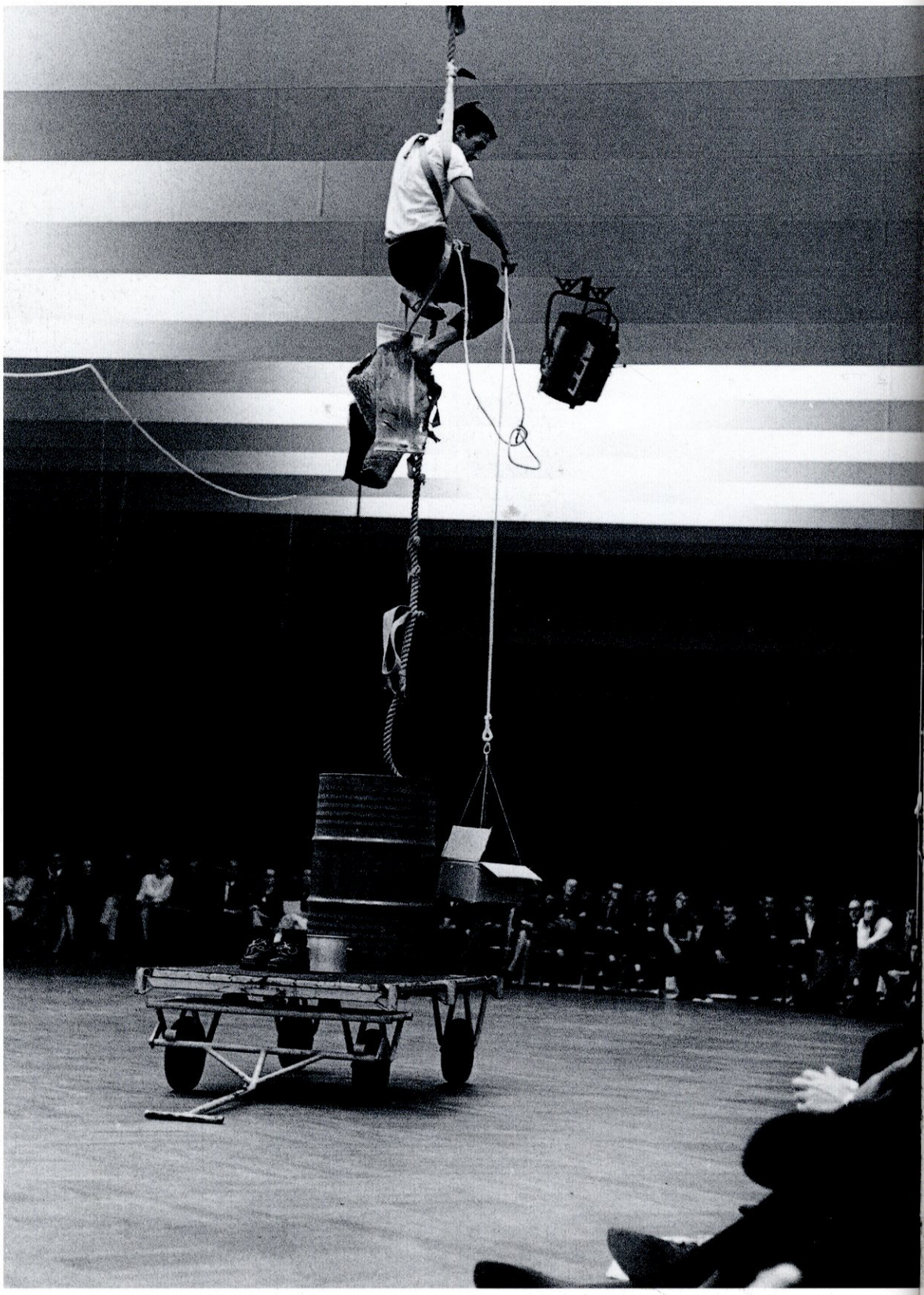
For her violent action paintings, De Saint Phalle shot at large assemblages covered in balloons filled with paint (opposite, top). Each bullet splashed a different color across the canvas.

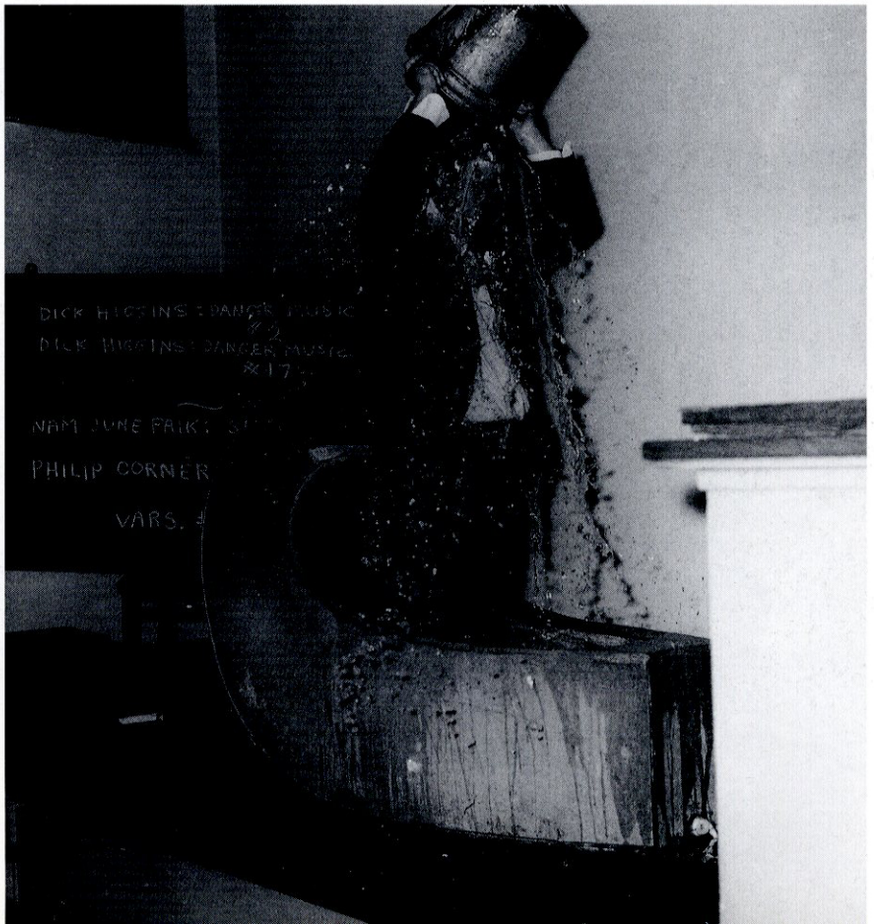
NAM JUNE PAIK
***Simple*, 1962**

Paik's performances were witty and clever, often verging on intellectual slapstick, and erotically charged. An energetic participant at Fluxus festivals, he ridiculed the pretensions of the art world with deliberately absurd actions. Wearing a business suit, he poured a bucket of water over his head, as part of the Fluxus International Festival of New Music in Wiesbaden (opposite, below left).

CHARLOTTE MOORMAN/NAM JUNE PAIK
***TV Bra for Living Sculpture*, 1970**

Moorman, a cellist, and Paik first performed this work in 1969 as part of an historical exhibition "TV as a Creative Medium" in New York. The next year they were "exhibited" in "Happenings and Fluxus" in Cologne (opposite, below right).




DICK HIGGINS
DANCE MUSIC
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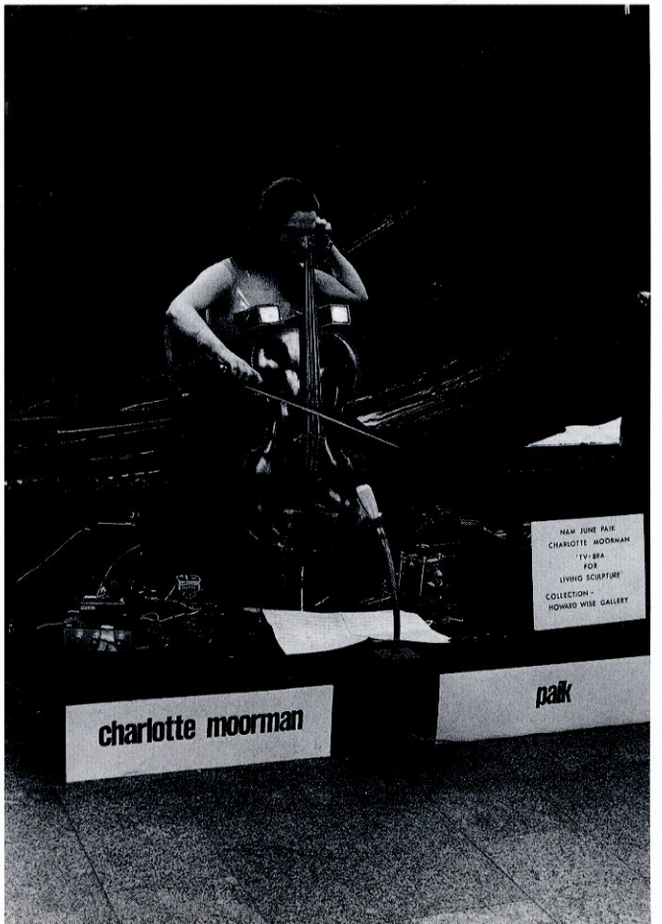
PHILIP CORNER


NAM JUNE PAIK
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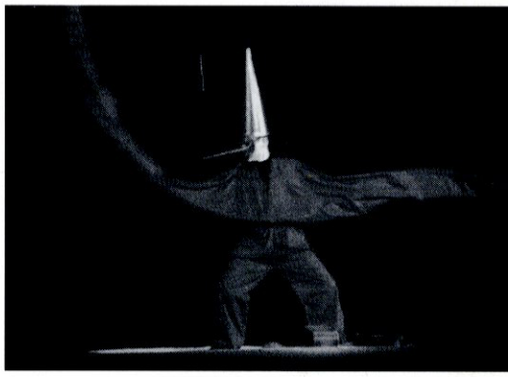
CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN
***Meat Joy,* 1964**

Schneemann's major opus was a seventy-minute Dionysian spree in which male and female performers painted each other's semi-naked bodies (they wore fur-enhanced bikini underwear), rolled in tight embraces along the floor, crawled through mountains of paper, and threw red meat, fish, and dead chickens into the mix of hair, paint, bodies, and mattresses. A backing soundtrack included "My Guy," "Baby Love," "Noh Ho L'Eta," as well as taped Parisian street sounds. Seen at Jean-Jacques Lebel's First Festival of Free Expression at the American Center in Paris, 25–30 May 1964, it was performed again at the Judson Church in New York in November of that year.



▲ **KAZUO SHIRAGA**
***Sambaso Ultra-Modern*, 1957**

◄ **THE NEO-DADA ORGANIZERS**
Untitled, 1960

Formed in December 1954 by Jiro Yoshihara, in Osaka, the Gutai Group's manifesto called on its members to "create what has never existed before." Art for them was both a theatrical event and a gesture of individual freedom, as well as a political response to a post-Hiroshima mood of desolation. Kazuo Shiraga, dressed in red, appeared in the 1957 exhibition "Gutai Art on the Stage" in a two-part program of twelve Actions, including sound and media projections, reviewed in the New York *Times* of 8 September that year. The Neo-Dada Organizers, formed in 1960, was a short-lived group which operated out of Masunobu Yoshimura's studio, and which took a far more aggressive approach. In fact, several of their street actions ended in skirmishes with the police, and their first exhibition was cancelled even before it opened. There were three Neo-Dada exhibitions in Tokyo in 1960, and Masunobu (right) and Kinpei Masuzawa (left) are pictured parading through the streets during the third.

GUSTAV METZGER
Destruction in Art Symposium, London, 1966

HI RED CENTER
***Be Clean!*, New York, 1966**

JEAN-JACQUES LEBEL
***Pour Conjurer L'Esprit de Catastrophe*, Boulogne, 1962**

The political atmosphere of the 1960s infused art actions with political rhetoric and an anarchic energy that was intensely anti-establishment. Art institutions were considered irrelevant, together with critics, curators, and collectors. Instead, artists performed in the streets, and confronted authority and public with their ideas for a radical new culture. Metzger and others organized the two-day Destruction in Art Symposium (above), which included Wolf Vostell, John Latham, Hermann Nitsch, and Yoko Ono. Extreme left-wing critics of the inequities of Japanese postwar culture, Hi Red Center (above right) performed their street-washing piece in New York (assisted by Fluxus artist Maciunas) and Tokyo. In Boulogne, Paris, and Milan, Lebel's Festivals of Free Expression (right) were major events; to his delight, their anarchistic slogans and the nudity scandalized the international press.

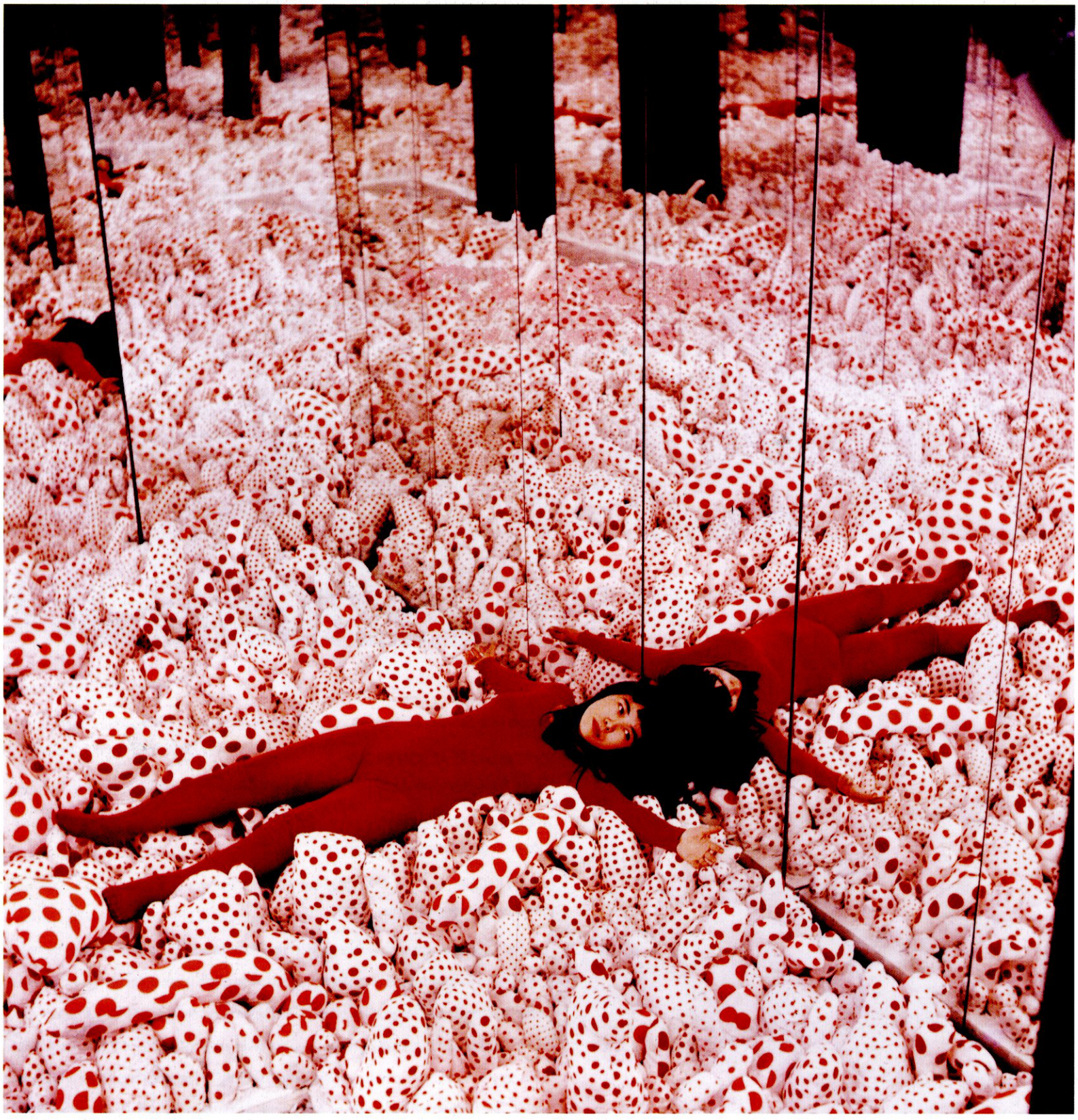
JOHN LATHAM
***Skoob with Powder,* Destruction in Art Symposium, London, 1966**

GUERRILLA ART ACTION GROUP
***Blood Bath,* New York,1969**

WOLF VOSTELL
Happening: Erdbeeren, Berlin, 1974

MILAN KNIZAK
Street performance, Prague, 1964

Latham's book-burnings (top left) suggested that "the cultural base had been burnt out." GAAG's art strikes and street protests included *Blood Bath* (top), a call for the resignation of the Rockefellers as Museum of Modern Art Trustees. From the late '50s to the late '70s, Vostell (above) was an incessant action-maker, telling spectators, for instance, to "go into a laundry and ask in which year we are living." Knížák (left), co-founder of AKTUAL whose actions were often stopped by the police, "wanted to make revolution in everyday life."

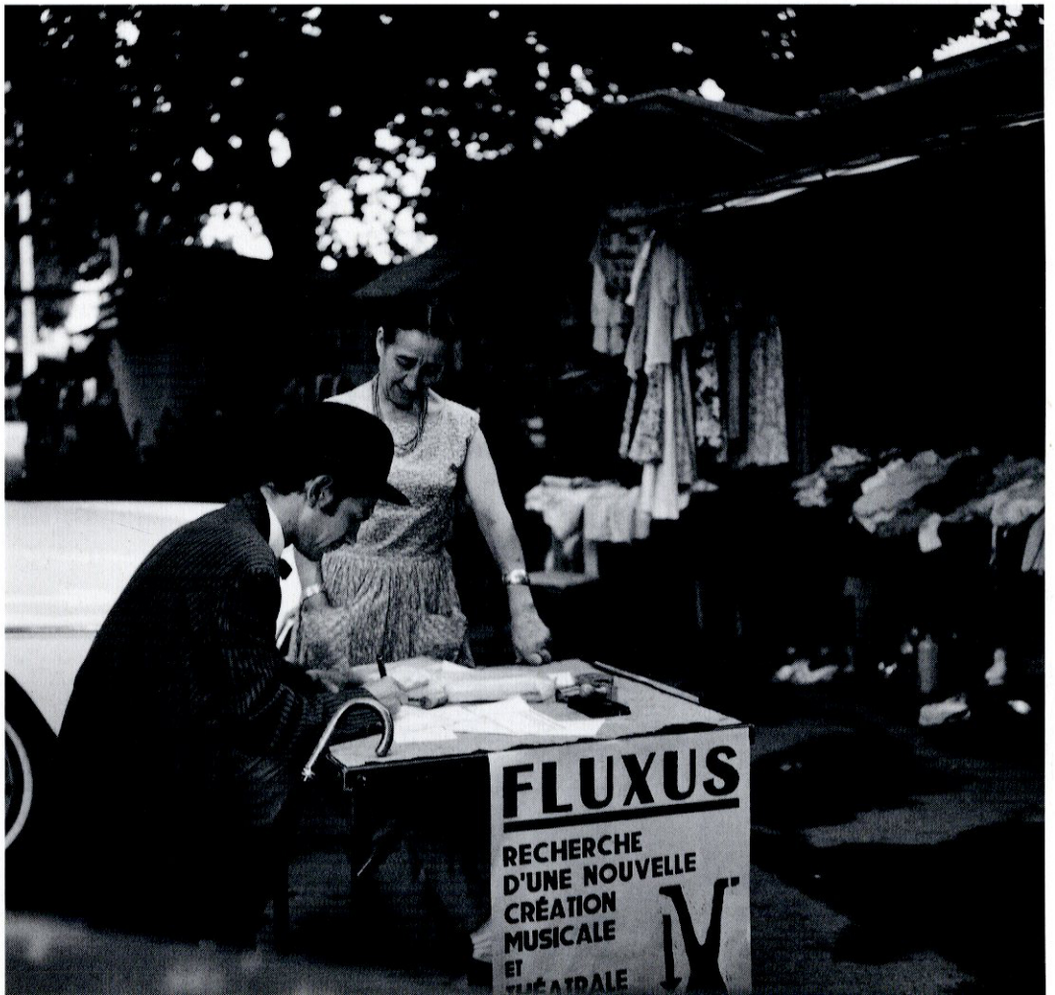


◄ **YAYOI KUSAMA**
***Infinity Mirror Room,* 1965**

Kusama used the term Obsessional Art to describe paintings and environments that emerged as much from her own episodes of acute depression as from observations of the repetitiveness of daily life—what she called "the consciousness of living in continuation." "Think of breathing," she said. "You have to breathe so many times." Her mirrored rooms gave architectural form to her intense sensations. This piece was part of her solo exhibition "Floor Show" at the Castellnar Gallery, New York.

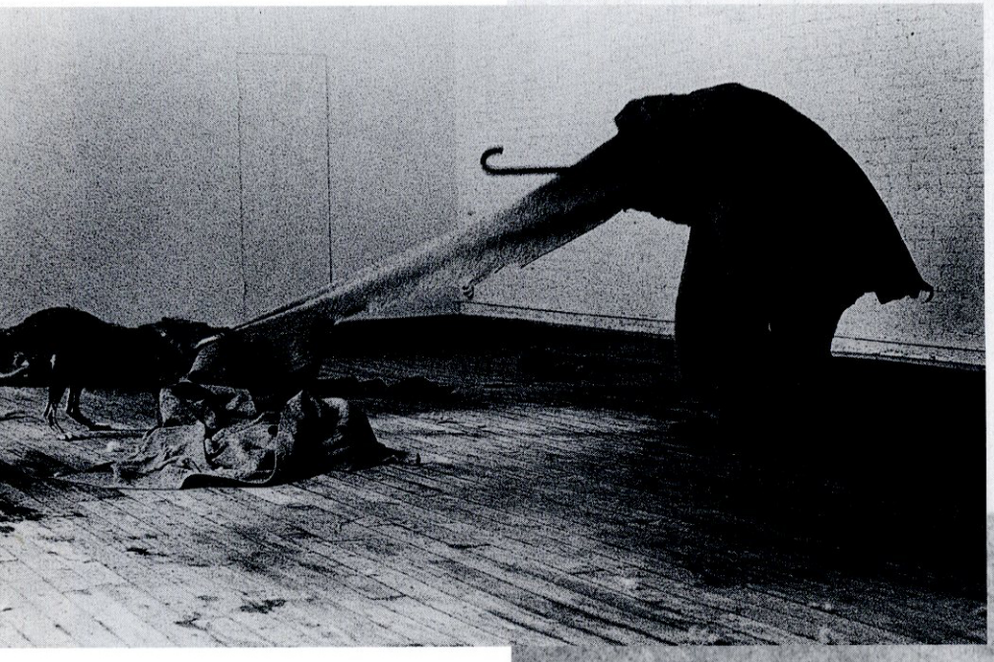
► **FLUXUS**
Graffiti announcing street events, New York, 1964
Fluxus Festival of Total Art and Comportment, Nice, 1963

Fluxus was a term introduced in 1961 by George Maciunas, to connect a broad collection of artists, musicians, writers, and poets, who were already hugely active in creating events in cities around the world. His intention was to open Fluxus activities to non-artists as well; "the goal was social (not aesthetic)," he said. Maciunas wrote manifestos, organized festivals, and tirelessly documented these activities. Fluxus members felt compelled to state their distinct approaches. "Each of us had his own ideas about what Fluxus was," wrote George Brecht, "and so much the better." Dick Higgins, Lette Eisenhauer, Daniel Spoerri, Alison Knowles, and Ay-O are pictured above, and Ben Vautier (signing certificates in Nice) below.



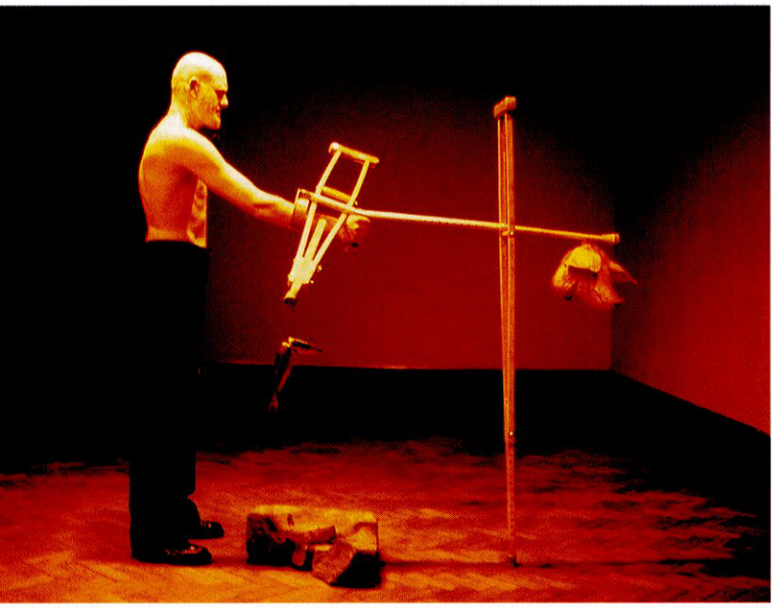
◄ **JOSEPH BEUYS**
***Save the Woods*, 1973**
***Coyote: I like America and America likes me*, 1974**

Committed to the idea that art has a capacity to transform people—socially, spiritually, and intellectually— Beuys created what he called "social sculptures." These might include lectures, collaborative protest activities (such as *Save the Woods*), or symposia on art and politics. For Beuys *Coyote* was a metaphor for the tragic decimation of the Native American peoples (who respected the coyote) by the early European settlers (who despised and shot it). Beuys spent a week "in captivity" with the wild animal in a New York Gallery.



► **JANNIS KOUNELLIS**
***Untitled (with Horse)*, 1972**

Born in Greece and educated in Rome, Kounellis was steeped in classical philosophy and imagery, which he used freely in a series of eloquent performances. For him everyday life in Italy *was* "high art," and the mix of the two was less of a contradiction than an acknowledgment of fact. Like his peers—Michelangelo Pistoletto, Luciano Fabro, Mario Merz, Marisa Merz, Giulio Paolini, or Giuseppe Penone—he was equally comfortable with history and contemporary life, and shared the Italian love of metaphors to link them. Kounellis described this performance in the Sonnabend Gallery in New York as a painting.

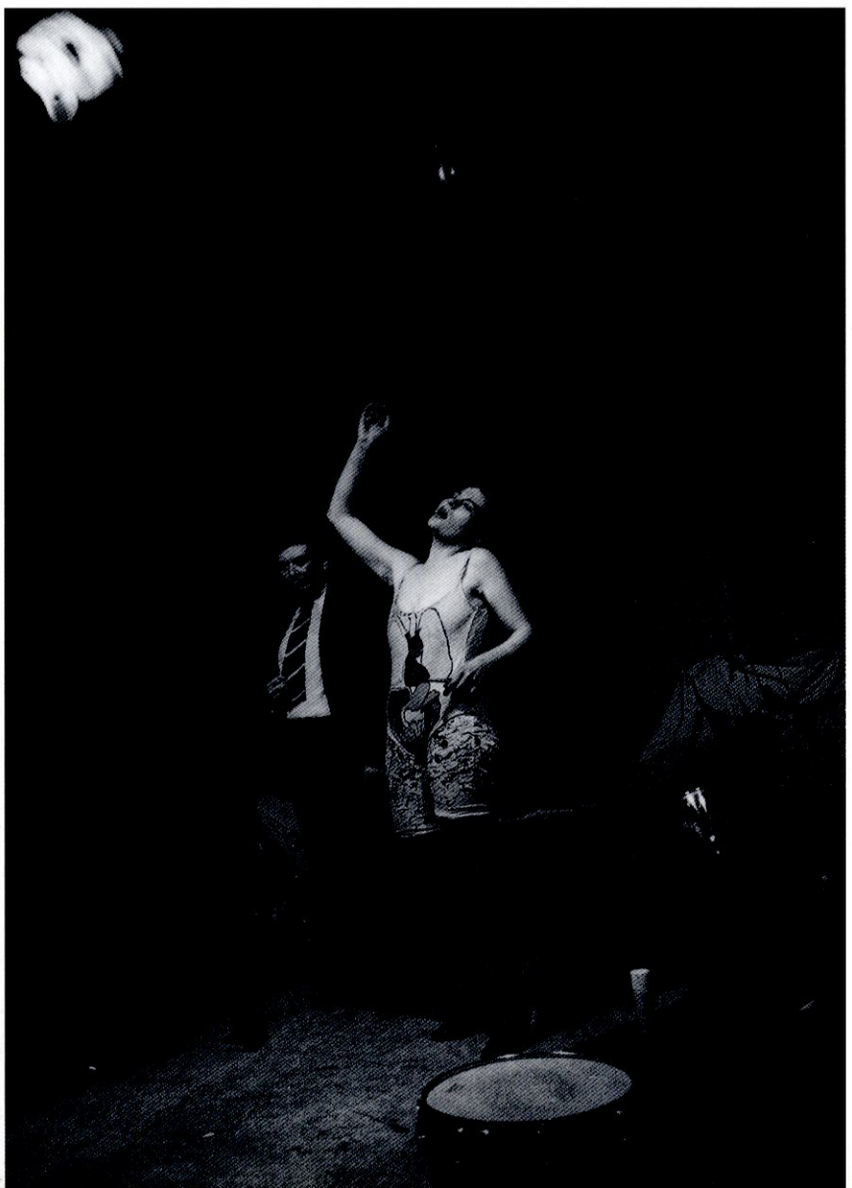


▲ **ALASTAIR MACLENNAN**
***Lie to Lay*, 1986**

Influenced by Zen Buddhism and a belief in "everyday experience as a key to enlightenment," MacLennan's harsh, sometimes sado-masochistic tableaux are for him cathartic events that heal "spiritual, psychological, political, social, and cultural wounds." *Lie to Lay* took place in an abandoned warehouse in Newcastle upon Tyne. He transformed it with rows of hospital beds, bales of hay, and stacks of old clothes into a dramatic backdrop for his 120-hour endurance work about healthcare in Britain.

► **ANNE BEAN and PAUL BURWELL**
At The Kitchen, New York, 1978

A key figure in British performance art from the early '70s, Anne Bean, musician and artist, formed the art-parody band The Moodies, and later joined with Paul Burwell and Richard Wilson, to form the Bow Gamelan Ensemble, active in the '80s and early '90s. During their ritualistic events, Bean's powerful figure held central stage while Burwell's drumming, on home-made percussive instruments, including electric motors and fans, metal pipes, old washing machines, and sheets of glass, created an atmosphere of frantic and explosive drama. Their events often also included fireworks.



STUART BRISLEY
***Moments of Decision/Indecision*, 1975**

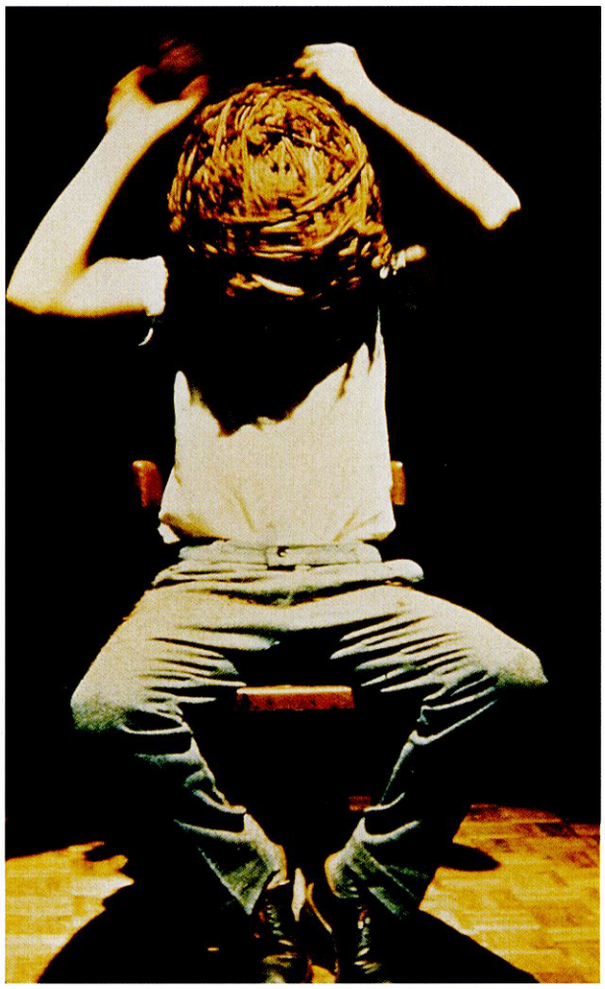
In Britain, Germany, and Austria in particular, an aspect of '60s performance was its penchant for violence—both as a tool for individual catharsis, and as a form of aggressive public protest against Cold War politics and the war in Vietnam. British artist Stuart Brisley drew together influences from the Viennese Actionists and the political events of the early '60s in the USA, as well as his reading of R.D. Laing's radical psychoanalytical texts, to create powerfully original performances of his own. *Moments of Decision/Indecision* took place in one large room, lasted six days, and dealt with sensory deprivation that increased throughout the day, as Brisley drenched himself in white and black paint to the point that he could barely move or see. It was unusual at that time for being performed behind the so-called Iron Curtain (it was presented at Galeria Teatra Studio in Warsaw), and Brisley's futile attempts to climb the walls of the room built up increasing feelings of frustration and helplessness in the watchers.

◄ **ANDRE STITT**
***Gridlock*, 1994**

Stitt's pieces reek of the agony of growing up beside the Belfast barricades. His manic, funny, and frightening street appearances, covered in flour, ketchup, and mayonnaise, contrast with his sombre indoor performances. *Gridlock*, part of Brighton's Violence of the Imagination Festival, was a four-hour work in which he hammered and cleansed an old enamel bathtub.

▼ **NIGEL ROLFE**
***Rope Piece: The rope that binds us makes us free*, 1985**

For this enigmatic work "made for Ireland," at New York's Franklin Furnace, Rolfe, like Catling, used language to give resonance to his performance. "From one of the cottages [in Leitrim]... I took a ball of twine.... To bind my head.... To capture, to contain, to smother—perhaps a symbol of Ireland."



▲ **BRIAN CATLING**
***Luna Prayer*, 1989**

Catling's performances, poetry, and written vignettes are intensely sculpted works made of words and actions. His writing precisely navigates a space—"in a square room with no windows a glass tube runs along the walls"—while his performances fill the spaces in between with his large body, silent gestures, and vivid poses. *Luna Prayer* was performed at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford.

MONA HATOUM

***Variations on Discord and Divisions,* 1984**

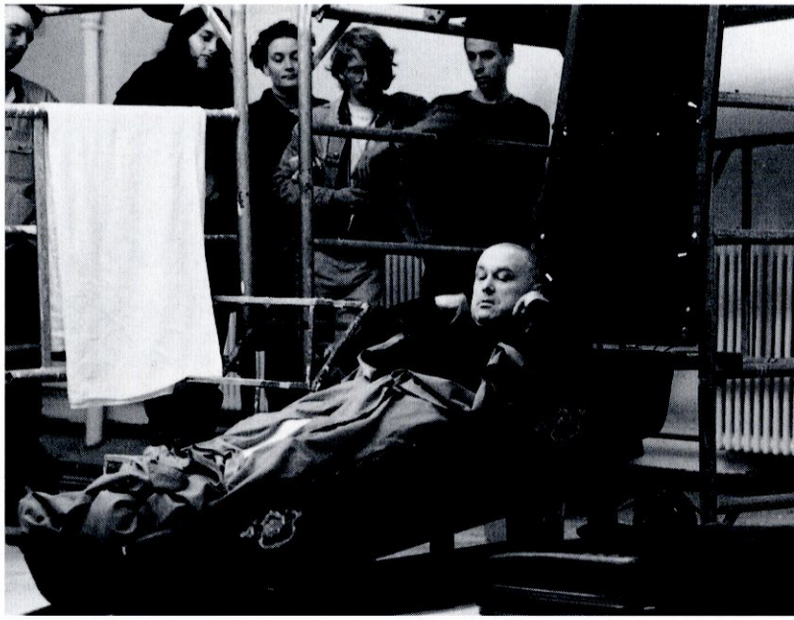
"My work often refers to hostile realities, war, destruction, but it is not localized, it refers to conflicts all over the world," says Hatoum of her unstructured performances that are usually a response to a specific site and a particular moment in time. "I want to remind the audience that there are different realities that people have to live through." *Variations,* about forty to fifty minutes long, was performed in Vancouver. The entire space was lined in newspapers; dressed in black with her face covered in an opaque stocking mask, Hatoum tried to scrub the floor, but smeared it instead with red-stained water.

TOMAS RULLER
***8.8.88*, 1988**

Pursued by the state police for his radical activities and his connections to artists abroad, Czech artist Ruller was forced to perform in secret, often documenting his events on video. A show of his drawings in a Prague gallery in the summer of 1988 was cancelled just before the opening; instead, Ruller invited visitors to join him in a two-hour walk around the neighborhood. "It was a day close to the anniversary of the Russian invasion of 1968," Ruller recalled. "I used fire, which was related to Jan Palach who burned himself in protest..."

BLACK MARKET INTERNATIONAL
Basle, 1995; St. Gallen, 1992; Berne, 1997; Helsinki, 1991
(clockwise from below left)

Established in 1985 as a "a meeting of at least two or more people," this group of all-male European artists perform as a loose collective, sometimes solo, sometimes collaboratively, at festivals throughout Europe. Often silent, their emblematic, improvised sequences, lasting anything from a few hours to twenty-four, and usually presented in large, non-theater spaces, frequently refer to recent east-west political conflicts, which is to be expected given the combination of Finns, Russians, Poles, Germans, Swiss, Czechs, and Irish. Guest artists are sometimes invited to participate in the performances, which are never repeated.



▲ **PEDRO GARHEL AND ROSA GALINDO**
***Vertigo Virtual*, 1989**

Garhel and Galindo's exaggerated costumes are full of references to the past, such as Martha Graham's body-tubes of the 1930s, and Oskar Schlemmer's padded Bauhaus dancers of the 1920s. They select unusual architectural spaces, like the cloisters of León Cathedral, for quasi-ritualistic performances that often incorporate images of pain, ecstasy, and death.

► **LUCY ORTA**
***Refuge Wear: Collective Survival Sac*, 1997**

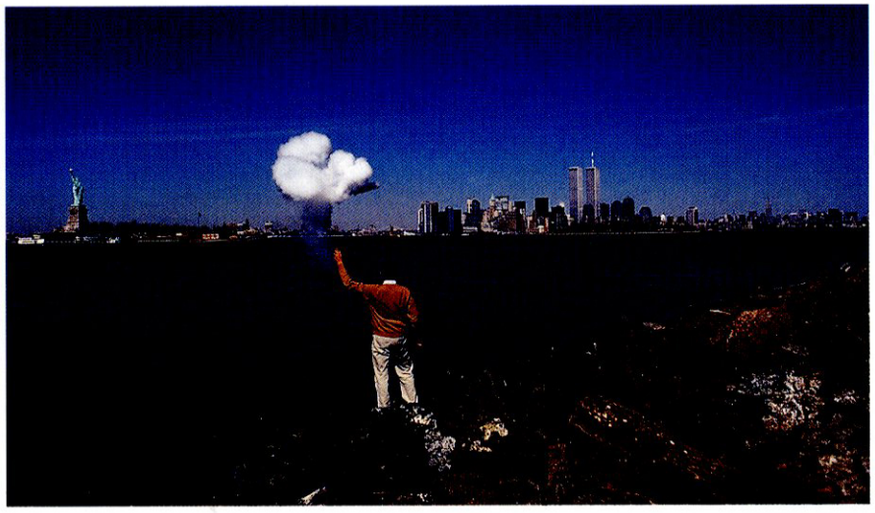
Orta's Body Architecture provides an ironic twist to clothing. Refuge Wear can be transformed from suit to temporary shelter. Each design is related to a collaborative social project, such as a Salvation Army center for homeless families (Paris, 1995) or a "communication workshop" with groups of prisoners (Metz, 1996).

TAMAR RABAN
***Dinner Dress, Tales about Dora,* 1997**

First performed in an apartment in Vienna, Raban's festive five-course dinner for twenty, accompanied by sound and slides, took place around a large table in an arts center in a disused Tel Aviv bomb shelter. A tablecloth—the skirt of the artist's dress—reached the floor, and transparent plates placed over cut-outs in the cloth, provided peep-holes to video monitors installed below. A culinary tableau, *Dinner Dress* was a play on private and public ritual, and ways of connecting the two in the most intimate and visceral ways. "The dress as the extension of my body, they are eating my body, they are consuming me," Raban wrote.

RIRKRIT TIRAVINIJA
***Untitled,* 1994**

Tiravinija is always concerned with directly engaging his audience, and has involved spectators in activities such as the installation of an actual rehearsal studio in a gallery or the consumption of a Thai meal cooked and served by him. His interest lies in the process around art—the backroom of a gallery in Lucerne as in this work, or a theater—and he usually lists "lots of people" as an ingredient in his work.



CAI GUO QIANG
***Gunpowder Performance*, 1993**
***Encountering the Others*, 1992**
***Cultural Melting Bath*, 1997**

Born in Fujian Province China, Cai Guo Qiang brings to the West a deeply spiritual sensibility that is as mysterious as it is curiously recognizable. Explosions of gunpowder in landscapes (near the Great Wall of China and near New York City) are reminders of cinematic techniques in faking battles and also of the more sinister atomic experiments of the 1950s. Yet they are intended as ceremonies wherein "the moment of explosion creates chaos in time and space," conveying a "Chinese view of human beings as a microcosm of the universe." *Cultural Meeting Bath*, made of thirty tons of *Taihusu*, a limestone from the bottom of Lake Tai near Cai's native city of Suzhou, incorporated *feng-shui* (ancient Chinese geomancy) and herbal medicine. Cai invited various individuals to bathe together in the healing waters.

ROMAN SIGNER
***Aktion*, 1987**
***Kleine Ereignise (Small Event)*, 1996**

Transformation of ordinary objects like kitchen tables, bicycles, or balloons into "action sculpture" is at the heart of Signer's work. Using pyrotechnics, water pressure, or the wind, his events and installations continue the line of exploration begun in the early '70s by artists more concerned with underlying perceptual processes than with making objects. Blasting gunpowder adds both subversiveness and the humor of surprise to his work. Whether working in the Alpine landscape or in his Lucerne studio, before an audience or a video camera, Signer prepares each project with the care of an architectural draftsman (for which he trained) and the concentration of an acrobat.