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# Fashion and Performance

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# A Note: Performance Art Lives

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## **Ever Wonder What Happened to Performance Art?**

After its heyday in the 1970s, when visual artists from Adrian Piper to Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman and Eleanor Antin were making sculptures of their bodies or trying on different identities in their gallery performances, performance art, many critics think, devolved into autobiographical rants that soon became indistinguishable from stand-up comedy or therapy monologues. Well, it's back: in galleries, on the streets, in museums, on videos, in cyberspace, looking in some cases the way it did in the 70s, and in others very fresh and new.

Recently, some young artists staged a guerrilla performance to get their artworks "hung" in the Museum of Modern Art by hiding them in their

**Figure 1**

An image documenting the performance *Starting Over*, by Nayland Blake, held at Matthew Marks Gallery, New York, 2000. Photo courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.

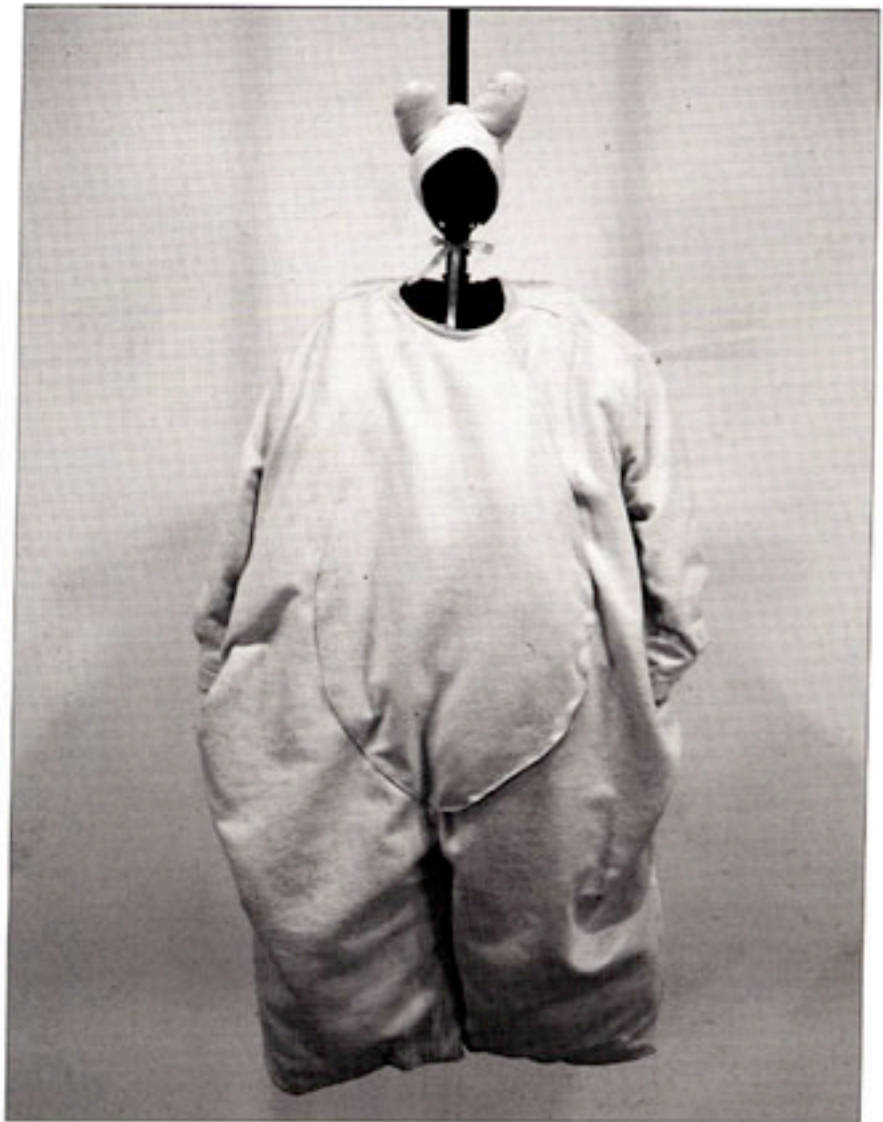


coats, which they checked at the entrance; the artist Nayland Blake performed on video in an overstuffed rabbit outfit in his show at Matthew Marks Gallery; and, as part of the Whitney Biennial, the online collective Fakeshop ([www.fakeshop.com](http://www.fakeshop.com)) staged an elaborate interactive performance event with surveillance cameras at a makeshift space in Chelsea. New York's Sculpture Center, the technologically hip Postmasters Gallery in Chelsea and the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, Connecticut, to name but a few venues, have all presented performance art in the last two years, suggesting a genuine re-emergence of interest in the field.

Why this sudden renewal of interest in an art form that seemed relegated to the history books, like Neo Geo or Arte Povera? "It's a new spirit of openness in the galleries," says Nayland Blake, who has been performing since the mid-80s, first in San Francisco and then in New York. The critic and performance-art historian, RoseLee Goldberg, agrees. "The galleries are realizing that their spaces are ideal for performances, and there's a whole new generation of artists eager to work in them," she said. Of course, performance art never actually disappeared from art; but in the feeding frenzy of the 80s for high-priced objects like paintings and sculpture, the time-based art of performance, as well as video, was less in favor because of its lack of marketability.

Part of what changed is that some visual artists have come to see performance as a natural extension of their overall artistic practice, which may also embrace painting, video and installations. Nayland Blake is a good example. In a recent show he exhibited large charcoal drawings, multimedia sculptures and a full-wall video projection of a performance. Echoing the endurance performances of Chris Burden and others in the 1970s, Blake filled a bunny costume with 146 pounds of navy beans

**Figure 2**  
Nayland Blake. Costume used  
in the performance *Starting  
Over* held at Matthew Marks  
Gallery, 2000. Photo courtesy  
of Matthew Marks Gallery, New  
York.



(equal to the weight of his lover), which, added to his own 270 pounds, made movement, especially dance, almost impossible. But move he did, rendering a hilarious and complicated meditation on relationships, the body and doomed attempts to please another person.

Extreme performance art is also in evidence in the three artists who occupied (two of them literally) the Sculpture Center in a recent performance. William Pope.L, a performer and the curator of the series, did exactly what his title said, "Eating the *Wall Street Journal*." Seated on a toilet atop a 10-foot tower, Pope.L, naked except for a thick dusting of flour over his back skin, a jockstrap, a silk tie and a gold watch, munched on a stack of *Wall Street Journals*, aided by milk and ketchup. He then regurgitated the contents, to dispel the heavy metals and bleaches in the paper.

"Our consumer society promises power and wealth simply by owning certain objects," Pope.L said, "which harks back to primitive magic and voodoo. I figured if I also eat it, just imagine how much power I can drain from this fetishized object!" He is not the first to create unusual meals in a performance. The Los Angeles artist Paul McCarthy, who received a midcareer retrospective this year, organized by the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, gained notoriety in the 70s by ingesting large amounts of hotdogs and other edibles and non-edibles, which he too regurgitated.

Pope.L, who studied with the Fluxus performance artist Geoffrey Hendricks at Rutgers in the late 70s, invited his teacher to participate at the Sculpture Center performance as well. Hendricks re-enacted a piece from 1971, "Dream Event," during which he slept in the space, recorded his dreams and performed a new work, "Eating and Breathing," with the dancer and yoga instructor Christina Read. Hendricks, who participated in performances with George Maciunas, Claes Oldenburg, Yoko Ono and John Lennon, Allison Knowles, Dick Higgins, and others, became known for his 1971 performance, "Body Hair," during which he shaved his entire body in an act of Buddhist-inspired self-abnegation. A video of this performance was also shown at the Sculpture Center.

While Hendrick's work may be spiritual in its intentions, Patty Chang's is anything but, though one of her first performances, "Shaving," did suggest some unwitting connection between the two artists. In this piece from 1998, Chang, 27, strutted into the performing area wearing a red crinoline dress and carrying a bowl of soapy water. She sat on a stool, lifted her hefty skirt and proceeded to shave her groin vigorously as well as defiantly, suggesting a robust sexuality hidden under that proper dress.



**Figure 3**  
Images from *The Bounty*, a performance by Patty Chang held at Jack Tilton Gallery in 1999. Courtesy of Tilton/Kustera Gallery, New York.

**Figure 4**

An untitled performance by Hunter Reynolds from the *Act of Art* series at The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000. Courtesy of The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art.



Chang is not one for subtlety. Her other performances to date have included cutting open her breast (actually a cantaloupe concealed in her bra), and standing still in a gray suit with the sleeves sewn into the jacket, forbidding arm movement, as her mouth was held open by a dental clamp attached to a wall by a string. “I think of them as sculptures,” she said “not necessarily as political acts.” She essentially lived in the Sculpture Center using a waterbed and live-feed video to create her performance.

For their “Acts of Art” series, the Aldrich Museum curators Jessica Hough and Aran Winterbottom assembled a mix of artists—from the

well-known dance duo Eiko and Koma, who performed one of their minimalist dances inside a custom-designed trailer they travel in for these occasions, to the musician and sound artist Stephen Vitiello, whose installations were seen and heard in 2000 at PS1 and Postmasters Gallery. Vitiello projected on a wall a three-minute scene from the movie "Twister" slowed to 45 minutes, while performing live with a sampler and electric guitar.

Also as part of the series at the Aldrich, the film-maker and visual artist Michelle Handelman, who has a background in martial arts and dance, and in her own words, likes to "activate people," organized a "picnic performance," during which visitors shot paint guns at canvases (reminiscent of the Japanese Gutai performance artists of the 1950s). And Hunter Reynolds transformed himself from a mummy-wrapped figure lying on the floor to a whirling dervish in a full-length gown, spinning for up to two hours.

Many performance artists incorporate costume into their work as yet another extension of media boundaries. For instance, Reynolds' performances often involve modeling 1950s dresses worn by his mother. In like manner, Puerto Rican artist Freddie Mercado performs in his own hand-made gowns, veils, capes and wigs in street performances that draw large crowds in San Juan. In both cases, costume provides a context for cross-dressing or masquerade.

The startling, contemporary-looking photographs of Claude Cahun, shot in the 1930s and only seen in New York in the late 1990s, remind us that performative art infiltrated photography years before "Performance Art" became a recognized art form. While gender-bending performances became *de rigueur* in the 1980s, New Yorkers were shocked to see the prescient photographs of Cahun, writer, photographer, Resister, and Nazi prisoner first at the Guggenheim Museum in 1997 and then at New York University's Grey Art Gallery in 1999. Her name appears in no major book of art history and none of the familiar surveys on Surrealism (though she was associated with Breton and the boys in Paris), nor even in the former MOMA curator John Szarkowski's estimable *Photography Until Now* (1989). Lesbian, Jew, lovers with her half-sister,

**Figure 5**  
Image from the performance  
*The Adventures of Lucky M:*  
*AIM* by Michelle Handelman.  
From the *Acts of Art* series at  
The Aldrich Museum of  
Contemporary Art, 2000.  
Photo by Laure Leber © 2000.



**Figure 6**

Image from the performance  
*The Adventures of Lucky M:*  
*AIM* by Michelle Handelman.  
From the Acts of Art series at  
The Aldrich Museum of  
Contemporary Art, 2000.  
Photo by Laure Leber © 2000.



the artist Suzanne Malherbe, self-portraitist, provocateur, Cahun made a career of photographing herself in costumes that allowed for multiple identities.

Many of Cahun's contemporaries in 1920s Paris dressed up (and down) for the camera, especially Man Ray's. Meret Oppenheim, the highly gilded trapeze artist Barbette, the flamboyant *marquise* Casati, Duchamp, to name but a few, frequently posed in various guises before Man Ray. But where one gets the sense of a certain playfulness in this crowd, Cahun



seems dead serious, not in choice of costume, but in intent. Hers was a calculated choice to bend the rules of gender. As an outspoken lesbian, she assumed an ambiguous name (Claude) and proceeded to assign herself roles from the most feminine (the character *Belle* from *Bluebeard*) to the decidedly butch (businessman in a suit). In one particularly affecting portrait, dressed like a little girl with a large bow in her hair, she lies asleep on a shelf in a huge armoire. One gets the sense that Cahun's real childhood was anything but that of the demure schoolgirl skipping and jumping rope with her friends.



**Figure 7**  
Claude Wampler. A detail from  
the installation *Painting. The  
Movie*, Postmasters Gallery,  
New York, 2000. Photo  
courtesy of Claude Wampler.

In 1937, Cahun moved from Paris to the Isle of Jersey with Malherbe to escape the encroaching Nazi threat. By 1940 German troops had occupied the British Channel Islands, but Cahun, fluent in German, used her prowess with disguises and languages to subvert the Nazi presence. She created fake conversations (playlets) about the disintegration of the German effort, based on information received from clandestine BBC news stories, and disseminated them among the German military. She and Malherbe were arrested in 1944 and kept in St. Helier prison until the liberation in 1945. This biographical information is important to understanding the self-portraits, because Cahun's intense political involvement (also evident in Paris, where she helped organize a Communist union of artists and workers) distinguishes her from present-day appropriationists like Mariko Mori and other costumed artists like Gilbert and George and Cindy Sherman.

Cahun was not obsessed with art history, but with personal and political history as it was unfolding in her historical moment. Hers was not a clever, art school display of talent and market savvy. Homosexuals in society, no matter how strong their egos, have a constant relationship to questions of identity. Cahun openly displayed the politics of identity in a forceful form of acting out.

Cahun's art involved the unmasking of identity through disguise. Cindy Sherman's does the same, but sometimes with less success, as in her macabre still-lives for designer Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons, which parade under another disguise, that of anti-establishment fashion advertising.

Another Claude, Philadelphia-based Claude Wampler, is a costumed performance artist of striking originality who references Minimalism and dance history in her work. Minimalism and performance have co-existed since the 1960s, when choreographers like Deborah Hay, Trisha Brown and Lucinda Childs mixed and matched movement and images with artists like Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Robert Morris and many others. By the time the monumental minimalist Robert Wilson staged *A Letter to Queen Victoria* and *Einstein on the Beach* in the mid-70s a new type of stage action had been irrevocably aligned with minimalist sculpture, in the form of slow, extremely precise gestures. Wampler, who has drawn from many forms of post-Dada performance in her short but significant career (since the mid-90s she has presented almost a dozen new works in venues from the Thomas Healy Gallery and PS 122 in New York to festivals in Brussels, Amsterdam, and Austria), strapped her dancer's body on to a movable throne for her latest performance at Postmasters. Even Wilson's minions have freer limbs than Wampler allowed herself here.

Inspired, she tells us in gallery notes, by Akira Kurosawa's 1957 film *Throne of Blood*, Wampler's performance installation was a dance of illusion and deception. Just when you thought you knew what was going on, a simple step in the wrong direction cut you off from what you thought

image of her face stares at viewers through a blue haze as a voice-over provides social commentary on television shows. In a recent performance, *Drag and Drop*, filmed on a tennis court, the artist faces an opponent who is a video projection that moves according to electric signals from sensors placed under the court.

Performance art, which some critics trace to the virulent gestures used by Jackson Pollock in making his paintings, has radically influenced all forms of contemporary art, from video art to conceptual art to multimedia installations. It has placed the person and the body of the artist center-stage, and allowed a sense of self-mocking and playfulness to infiltrate a field often bent on the rigors of form and function. If all the world's a stage, performance artists occupy a special and quirky corner of it.

you were looking at. In the main gallery were four pedestals containing transparent boxes that harbored mysterious objects that looked something like sculpted body parts; but as you got closer to them the boxes would suddenly become opaque, and the contents hidden. As you stepped away, the transparency would return (thanks to discreetly placed sensors) and you could look inside and indeed see things like a bloody stump of flesh or two bones or a lump of bloody hair. All told, they amounted to what could easily be detritus from a Kurosawa set.

In the middle of the gallery's far wall lay a sizeable rectangular shape that could have been an old mirror or a dim light box, possibly a painting, but probably not. Upon approaching the wall the viewer was treated to another illusion, this one in the form of Wampler herself, who, as if appearing from the ether, materialized beyond the wall, which, it turns out, was an LCD panel rigged to respond to viewers' movements. Dressed in an elaborate knock-off of a Japanese noblewoman's dress and with a sadistic-looking dental contraption holding her mouth open in a perpetual fake smile, Wampler traversed the space beyond the wall on a diagonal in very minute steps. Back and forth she went, as in a dream state, never moving an eyelid.

The effect was unsettling—something like watching one of Madame Tussaud's wax characters suddenly move in an eerie dance. Clearly Wampler is toying with "time," cinematic time, painting time, viewing time. She is after nothing less than a rejuvenation of the "art" portion of "performance art." In so doing she embodies Deleuze's notion of uniting "an actual image with recollection-images, dream-images, and world-images."

Performance art, usually time-based, becomes timeless in the realm of cyberspace. Martha Wilson, the doyenne of downtown performance and the founder of Franklin Furnace, moved in 1997 from a basement stage in TriBeCa to the Web ([www.franklinfurnace.org](http://www.franklinfurnace.org)), where she has presented dozens of new and archived performances. The current rage for viewer-involved activity is available in the performances at [www.movingimagegallery.com](http://www.movingimagegallery.com).

The Plaintext Players are a collective of artists and writers from around the world, including the James Joyce scholar Marlena Corcoran, who log on from their real locations (Munich, Los Angeles, New York) to a communal text space known as MOO (Multi-user Object-Oriented Space) and proceed to type in dialogue, action and scenery in a steady flow of improvised theatrics. Their work, which was included in the 1997 Venice Biennale and Documenta X, can be found at <http://yin.arts.uci.edu/~player>.

Kristin Lucas, a 1994 graduate of Cooper Union in New York, started out as a VJ (video jockey), mixing video material culled from friends or found in the garbage into visual collages at parties in much the way DJs mix music. She soon found herself in the 1997 Whitney Biennial with a "performative video," as she calls it "Cable Xcess," in which a fragmented