

ARTS

More Than a Photographic Memory

Performance-art photographers are assuming a central role in the avant-garde

VISUAL ARTS

Action/Performance and the Photograph

Transient Moments: Vancouver and the Performance Photograph

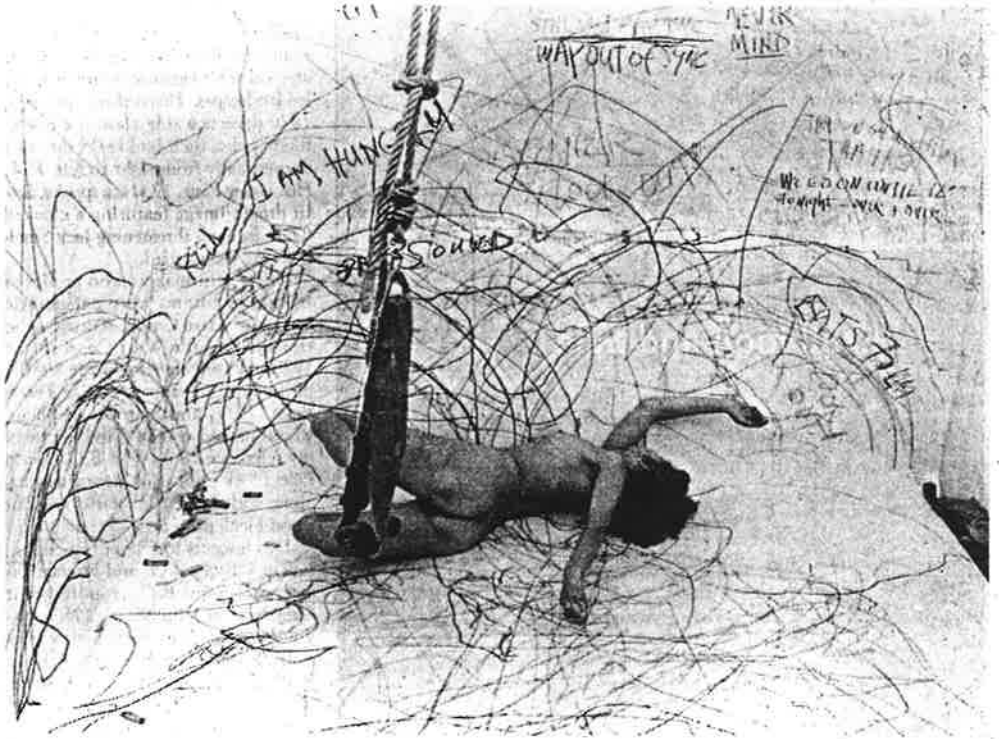
At Presentation House Gallery until October 27

• BY ROBIN LAURENCE

"The photograph is not performance," writes freelance curator Ann Pollock, but it "has had a particular symbiotic relationship to performance art for many years". Just what that relationship, that symbiosis, might be is revealed in two exhibitions now on at Presentation House Gallery. Action/Performance and the Photograph, organized from Los Angeles by Craig Krull, scans the camera's intersection with live-art forms in the United States and Europe. Transient Moments: Vancouver and the Performance Photograph, curated by Pollock, does the same for this city. As a kind of side effect, both shows construct a history of performance art as it has evolved through Dada-inspired Happenings and Actions, Fluxus events, body art, and certain aspects of feminist and conceptual art. The primary intention here, though, is to address the photograph's evolving role in that history, from being a deadpan document of transient events and fleeting experiences to being an active agent in a more lasting form of socio-visual encounter.

Although some of the artists represented here initially resisted making photographic records of their live works, some eventually staged works explicitly for the camera. That is, the photograph and not the event became the art form's *raison d'être*—its object, *ahem*. Yves Klein's *Leap into the Void* was contrived not for a live audience, but for a photo to be published in a single-edition "newspaper" produced for the Festival d'art d'avant-garde in Paris in November 1960. Vito Acconci's *Fall* (1969), Dan Graham's *Pier 18 Project* (1971), and Kim Abeles's *Self-Portrait as Other* (1979) are not simply about the conceptual activities of falling down with a camera in hand (Acconci), holding a camera against different parts of the body (Graham), or striking the camera's shutter-release button with a variety of unwieldy objects (Abeles), but about the photographic images that result from those imposed conditions. And Eleanor Antin's 1972 project *Carving a Traditional Sculpture*, in which she took a series of pseudoscientific shots of her naked self over a six-week period, is both a record of a diet and a feminist critique of patriarchal systems of art-making, image-making, and sexual ideals. Without her 28 photographs, mounted in the familiar conceptualist grid, Antin's body-art project would not have been realized.

As Krull has written, there has been a "correlative shift in intent from reportage to the integration of photography into the context and premise of [the] action itself". As Krull hasn't written (but other critics have), that shift has included the sharing of authorship of a conceptual or performance work with a photographer, and the production of a marketable commodity out of an unmarketable occurrence. Some of the photographers here are quite separate individuals who have put the stamp of their own photographic careers on the clay of others' performances. Harry Skunk has made distinctive black-and-white photos of the performances of David Askevold, Joseph Beuys, Dan Graham, Yves



Photographs—such as Henrik Gaard's image of Carolee Schneeman's *Up To and Including Her Limits*, from an ongoing Presentation House retrospective—can give some permanence to the ephemeral activities of performance artists.

Klein, and Gordon Matta-Clark; Annie Leibowitz has taken a provocative, pinup-style photo of a nearly naked Linda Benglis; and Dennis Hopper has taken a dark and murky photo of a Robert Rauschenberg/Merce Cunningham performance.

The viewer of these exhibitions is often tossed between a longing to have witnessed the original—especially when some photos are such unsatisfactory afterimages of extraordinary events—and an appreciation of the occasional brilliant photo that has survived, and ultimately usurped, the performance. Andy Goldsworthy's gelatin silver prints of himself tossing hazel sticks into the air, in dark clothes on a dark hillside against a stormy sky; Mary Beth Edelson's photos of herself, shrouded in cloth and balancing above a stony beach or rolling off a sandy cliff; and Robert Keziere's photos of Paul Wong's 1978 performance *in ten sity* at the Vancouver Art Gallery, with their flashes of silvery light and desperate action—these works represent not just the record of performance moments but their aesthetic, material, and temporal transformation. We are asked here to meditate on time, truth, and transience, on what is captured and held and what disappears forever into the void. It's the nature of the photograph that's being examined here, much more than the nature of performance art.

Allan Kaprow, the big Dada of American Happenings, who is here shown engaged in a variety of playfully displaced group activities—such as unrolling a mile of tar paper along the shoulder of a road—is quoted as saying that originally he was "really opposed" to photos being made of his works. "The Happenings had not to do with presenting an image of someone else to an audience as in theatre, but experiencing something for oneself." The presence of a photographer or filmmaker, he argued, "would shift the attention of the participants to becoming actors for the sake of the image being recorded". Later, he choreographed events specifically for the camera. Concerning his 1968-69 "calendar" titled *Days Off*, Kaprow said: "The Happenings were throw-aways. Once only. Nothing left—except maybe thoughts. Photos and programs of such events are leftover thoughts in the form of gossip. And gossip is also play." Photographic "play" has made a strategic incursion

into Happening "play".

Chris Burden, whose sensorially masochistic performances in the 1970s included having himself shot in the arm, kicked down two flights of concrete stairs, and crucified to the roof of a Volkswagen, is quoted as saying, "Although I previously maintained that the photographs of my performance work were merely a documentation and not the work, in actuality, I now see that the photographs were an integral part of the work." For a period of time in the 1970s, sadomasochism was a significant element in performance art—and thus of the photographs arising from that art. When I was at the gallery, visitors visibly (and audibly) shuddered at Dennis Oppenheim's large-format, close-up colour photo of a sliver being forced into his finger. Somehow, the familiar pain evoked by that image was much more gruesome than the alien pain represented by the black-and-white photo of Burden's little bullet holes with their thin trickles of blood. I shuddered, too.

In the history of performance art—and performance-art photography—somasochism has often intersected with sexual fetishism. Viennese *Aktionist* Hermann Nitsch is pictured, in a number of pseudo-Dionysian rituals, pouring blood over the mouths and genitals of naked, bound, or blindfolded young men and orchestrating crucifixions of men and slaughtered animals. Paul McCarthy is depicted, in large-format Cibachrome, with a half-dozen ketchup-dripping hot dogs stuffed into his mouth and with a ketchup-covered G.I. Joe stuffed into his crotch. And Mike Kelly is shown, naked and smeared with feces, trying to push a stuffed animal—a child's toy—up his ass.

Through more than three decades, performance artists have been examining and defying sexual mores and social behaviours. What the photos of these performances do, however, is set up a permanent condition of voyeurism through the agency of the photograph. This voyeuristic condition—more than the performance artists' provocative or puerile activities—can induce feelings of considerable discomfort. Indeed, this is the first time I remember seeing a "viewer discretion advised" sign posted at Presentation House Gallery.

In contrast to the Americans and Europeans, Vancouver performance

artists appear wholesome and whimsical, their nudities chaste and childlike—as if our West Coast environment evoked a condition of Edenic uncorruption. Of course, as Transient Moments reveals, our paradisiacal condition has not prevented people like Nitsch from performing at the Western Front and pouring more blood on more bodies. This show calls up not only the early Happenings and performances staged in Vancouver by local artists such as Anna Banana, Hank Bull, Kate Craig, Gathie Falk, Tom Graff, Glenn Lewis, Eric Metcalfe, Al Neil, Evelyn Roth, and Vincent Trasov, but also the international personalities and movements that helped shape the live art being done here. And the photos being taken here, too. ■

When every picture tells only part of the story

ACTION/PERFORMANCE AND THE PHOTOGRAPH and TRANSIENT MOMENTS: VANCOUVER AND THE PERFORMANCE PHOTOGRAPH

A double retrospective
Presentation House Gallery, North Vancouver, until Oct. 27.

Capture a moment of performance art on film, and what do you have? Is the photograph part of the performance, or merely a document of what took place? Is it a new piece of art in itself? These questions, which animate two concurrent exhibitions at North Vancouver's Presentation House Gallery, are the art world version of the old paradox about a tree falling in the woods, and the

sound it makes.

For as long as artists have performed their work in front of an audience, the audience has, paradoxically, demanded souvenirs of the moment. And yet, for some artists, that slice of time



Michael
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preserved in a photograph is inimical to the whole idea of performing live in the first place.

Allan Kaprow, one of America's performance art pioneers, refused to have his early work photographed, explains Craig Krull, the Los Angeles-based curator of *Action/Performance and the Photograph*, an international survey of the field.

"The whole point of performance for Kaprow was that it was experiential. It was not to be recorded. Either you were there or you were not there." Even later, when Kaprow was persuaded to document some of his work for museum exhibition, he directed that pages from the publication be tacked to a gallery wall so that the slight breeze of visitors walking past would cause the pages to shift and rustle — extending the performance aspect of the work into the present moment.

Krull's exhibition, originally mounted in 1993, traces the historical partnership between performance and photography, from the wide-eyed innocence of Happenings in the 1950s and early '60s, to the self-conscious shock art of Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley today.

Some of the more recent work in the exhibition is so brusque, in fact, that



Presentation House curators have posted warning signs advising viewer discretion.

Some of the classics in the field include Yves Klein's famous *Leap into the Void* (pictured here) from 1960. In the years before computers allowed us to distort and recreate photographs at will, the image of Klein's euphoric and death-defying leap on to hard pavement created a sensation. The image was actually created from two photographs sandwiched together: a process that hides the truth. Klein leapt, not into the void, but into a net. (Look closely at the greenery beneath Klein's outstretched leg, and you can see the joint where photographer Harry Shunk connected the two images.)

Another is the photograph of artist Chris Burden in 1971, moments after he had arranged to be shot. "At 7:45 p.m. I was shot in the left arm by a friend," his caption reads. "The bullet was a copper jacket 22 long rifle. My friend was standing about 15 feet from me."

Even 25 years later, the notion of arranging to be shot as a way of making art is disturbing. The sight of the tiny entry and exit wounds in Burden's arm, the blood beginning to trickle down his forearm and the dazed expression on the young man's face contribute to an eerie sense of vertigo.

Krull's point is that photography has moved from a recording function to a more central role in performance art. Some artists, like William Wegman (best known now for his goofy portraits of trained Weimaraners) and Dennis Oppenheim, performed exclusively for the camera, without other

A CLASSIC: the detail at left is from performance artist Yves Klein's *Leap into the Void*, a deceptive image made from two photos sandwiched together

spectators present. The resulting photographs — of Wegman playing with the parts of a push broom, and Oppenheim hanging by fingers and toes between two cinder block walls — are the performance, reduced to a single, emblematic image.

In terms of shock value, nothing in the exhibition beats Paul McCarthy's *Grand Pop* and *Hot Dog*. Large color prints, the images mock the notion of pop art and celebrity artists. *Grand Pop* shows an elderly man on a table, his trousers pulled down, smearing ketchup around himself and a dismembered Barbie doll; *Hot Dog* shows a young man regurgitating a mouthful of half-eaten food.

Originally 170 images strong, this recreation of *Action/Performance* is unfortunately plagued by holes. The owners of works by artists such as Anselm Kiefer, Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik and others refused permission for their pieces to leave Los Angeles.

□

While Yves Klein and John Cage were planning performances in other parts of the world, Vancouver was revealing in its own performance art scene. Local curator Ann Pollock has drawn together a survey of those activities in *Transient Moments: Vancouver and the Performance Photograph*.

"There was a great deal of activity in Vancouver," Pollock explains. "And a strong sense of collaboration between artists here and elsewhere."

John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg, Steve Paxton and Laurie Anderson all passed through town.

Images in this exhibition include the Mr. Peanut campaign for mayor in 1974, Evelyn Roth's crocheted car covers, Eric Metcalfe's and Hank Bull's MacBooty Brothers in the 1980s, Laurie Anderson at the Western Front, and Martin Bartlett's visionary grasp of electronics.

Although Pollock defends the photographs as artworks in themselves, the strength of many remains in helping us to imagine what the performing moment itself might have been like.

The exhibition continues with a panel discussion today at 2 p.m. at Presentation House, featuring Mexican performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña; an evening of performance-related films at Pacific Cinematheque, Sept. 26; and a talk by Vancouver artist Hank Bull at Presentation House, Oct. 2. Call 986-1351 for more information.