

Gathie Falk / A SHORT HISTORY OF  
PERFORMANCE ART AS IT INFLUENCED  
OR FAILED TO INFLUENCE MY WORK



When I was introduced to performance art in 1968 I had just settled into a career of making sculptures. I was making sculptures of men's coats folded like shirts and standing up like portraits. I put 69 ceramic grapefruit all over a gallery floor, and I placed a ceramic roasting chicken into a pink-flocked birdcage.

My introduction to performance art was made by Deborah Hay, a New York artist whose roots were with Merce Cunningham's contemporary dance, and who in 1968 was doing performances with artists like Rauschenberg. To my gratified surprise she gave my work as an incipient performance artist a great big stamp of approval. Since this discipline was a new one to me I needed this approval. I also got a big wad of satisfaction from the fact that this new work was closely related to my sculpture and that, paradoxically, I had learned an entirely new language without much bother.

From my perspective, to make a performance piece is to put together, or choreograph, or compose a work of art that has a beginning, an end, and a middle, with preferably, but not necessarily, a climax or several climaxes. Sometimes a piece works in a linear way with one event following another (*A Bird is Known by His Feathers Alone*, 1972); sometimes the choreography is worked out like a fuque in music with one event beginning close upon the heels of another, and a third event intertwining with the first two. The anthology of music is apt. One of my works, *Red Angel*, 1972, is like a rondo, with theme A followed by theme B, followed by theme A.

The events, or themes, I like to use are, guess what, activities of ordinary everyday living: eating an egg, reading a book, washing clothes, putting on makeup, cutting hair, together with slightly exotic events such as shining someone's shoes while he is walking backwards singing an operatic aria, sewing cabbage leaves together, smashing eggs with a ruler as in playing croquet, making a painting out of lipsticks, powder, and perfume, measuring and graphing my cat's tail as it is projected on different gallery walls, moving a hundred oranges across a floor with a prone body while a hundred cocktail glasses are moved in the opposite direction by another prone body, sawing popsicles in half and using them as weapons of assault and defence, along with plastic flowers in the back pocket.

To some spectators it seemed that all this effort was made with a view to toppling the usual order of things, or that the aim was outrageous. Not so. The activities I used belonged together in that mysterious way that all things in every strong work belong together, with neither too much nor too little of anything. I was not fighting the battles of the Dada artists, in fact, I wasn't fighting any battles: just doing, creating, with different materials, the things I also made with more traditional materials.

The new material was people, used not in the conscious way of dance nor in the narrative way of theatre, but in a way only a visual artist would find natural.

Making a performance piece, for me, also meant trying not to bore people to death. A lot of tolerance, concentration, "a new way of looking," as Steve Paxton called it, is required from the audience of performance art. The least the artist can do is not intentionally bore the hard-working audience.

People who undoubtedly influenced my work in the sixties were visiting artists from New York, Deborah Hay, Steve Paxton, Yvonne Rainer. The

work of each of these people was definitely related to a new careful examination and perception of the natural movements that people reiterate in their daily activities. Each deferred also to slightly idiosyncratic interpretations of those movements, for instance, Deborah Hay's filling a corner with people, relates to filling an elevator.

While these artists had something in common they were also very different from each other. Yvonne Rainer leaned towards dance, while Hay's and Paxton's works encompassed a wider range of analogy, much of that material being verbal. Hay gave you a punch in the stomach quite often, while Paxton's work flowed more gently to a conclusion without a climax.

There was other work piped in: the piano-axer, chicken-killer, pig's blood-thrower. My work was not much affected by this artist since I'm the kind of person who feels that a good stripper can be more effective in the way he/she removes a glove than how he/she takes off everything.

Another person who affected my work was my friend, Tom Graff, who does exotic, baroque, complicated performance works. To the uninitiated they sometimes look like musical reviews with a lot of explainable visual stuff. These people don't know that Graff is using entertainment itself as a subject for his work, bashing it around till it comes out a different shape but with some pieces still recognizably there.

Graff's work made me think about using songs and dances in my work. In *Red Angel* I used *Row, Row, Row Your Boat*; I used *Drink to me Only With Thine Eyes* in a piece called *Drink to Me Only* (1972); *Low Clouds* (1972) had a dance-like movement of clouds. I also began making sculptures intended chiefly to be used as props. And I wrote some music to the lyrics, *Name, Age, Sex, Racial Origin* for a piece called *Chorus* (1972). This work took me well into the seventies.

Simultaneous with my first strong sculptural and performance experiences, influential critics were telling us that art no longer hung on walls, that Concept art was the only way to go, and that if we wanted to look at something it must be documentation of said Concept art, or, a few years later there was the new thing called performance art or video art. Both the new performance art and video art were closely related to Conceptual art. Instead of inviting people of divergent talent to participate it dictated a narrow dogma of restraint and minimalism.

The result of this cultural revolution was that the painters kept on painting, sculptors kept on doing what they do, and some of us flamboyant Performance artists went our naughty ways.

Now that Performance art has gained a firm place of respectability in the art world I hope that there will be room for all kinds of individuality, for if it keeps on being bound by rules and formulas, we will soon see it on the shelf of London Drugs packaged in a squeezable tube.

As for me, why did I stop doing Performance art about four years ago? Well, when you get older you get tired of lugging around heavy boxes, looking in vain for a round dishpan in a major Canadian city and teaching a new crew to crow.<sup>2</sup>