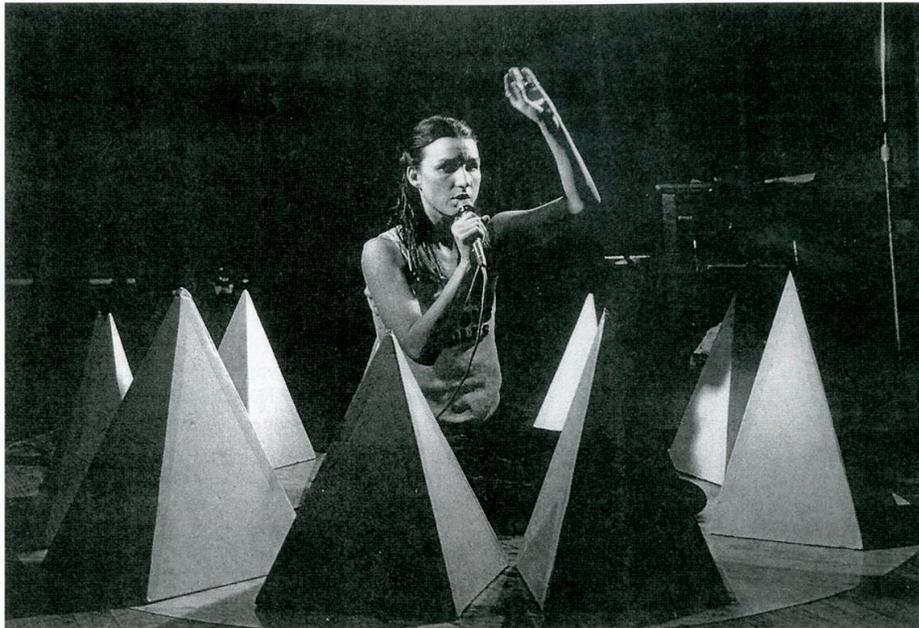


GLADSTONE GALLERY

Catherine Damman, "Rituals of Rented Island," *Art In America*, March 2014, p. 151-152.



“RITUALS OF RENTED ISLAND”

New York—Whitney Museum of American Art

The 1970s was a notoriously unruly decade for art in New York. As the city fell into economic decline, derelict SoHo lofts came alive with diffuse artistic practices that defied categorization, melding dance, theater, performance and music into a riotous mix. Laboring without much expectation of financial reward (while paying rents that would appear mythically low to most denizens of Bushwick today), the artists of the nascent downtown scene eked out the freedom to create unconventional, often ephemeral artworks that expressed radical politics, queer sexuality and militant feminism.

Until now, however, the '70s New York performance scene has been largely neglected by art historians and museums alike, and no wonder. How would one start to institutionalize artistic practices that took the form of improvised, one-night-stand events for a dozen people in an illegal squat? "Rituals of Rented Island: Object Theater, Loft Performance, and the New Psychodrama—Manhattan, 1970-1980," therefore, took on a difficult task: facilitating an overdue assessment of downtown art and performance without letting the movement's anarchic vitality wither in the sterilized uptown air.

A rebuttal to those who insist on presenting "live art" only in the flesh, the exhibition presented a profusion of props, photographs, ephemera, film and video. Curator Jay Sanders's intelligent *mise-en-scène* avoided fossilizing or dampening these relics. Jet-black walls sliced up the galleries into a labyrinthine structure. Sounds overlapped as if in disobedient conversation, and a kind of bankrupt maximalism reigned supreme. The ghosts of a decade of experiments in making art and living cheaply were not muzzled in the gleaming modernist space: they were unleashed.

Among the more than 20 featured artists and groups were both art-world A-listers and the previously invisible. Vito Acconci certainly belongs to the former group. His *Following Piece* (1969), one of the earliest works in the exhibition, documents in grainy, black-and-white photographs the artist's habit of simply following strangers around the city until they entered a private building. Despite the work's relative familiarity, it still feels harsh, dangerous and exciting.

A major revelation was Jill Kroesen's series of "systems portraits," narrative, rambling performances originally staged at venues like the Kitchen and represented here in videos. In *The*

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Original Lou and Walter Story (1978), Kroesen breaks the fourth wall of the stage, speaking directly to the audience in tones that are by turns affable and combative. It feels refreshingly feminist to see a woman performer giving herself license to be every bit as imperious and weird as her male contemporaries.

The exhibition thrived in its insistence on the interdisciplinary promiscuity of the period. Intense fraternization between art and theater was represented by the inclusion of props and videos documenting work by such half-thespian troupe, half-installation artist collectives as Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theater and Robert Wilson's Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds. Avant-garde music entered the mix via John Zorn's Theatre of Musical Optics, the title of which denotes the group's interest in the overlap between retinal and auditory experience. One only wished for more work by the inestimable experimental filmmaker Ken Jacobs (*Apparition Theater of New York*): his "*Slow is Beauty*"—*Rodin* (1974), a shadow play requiring 3-D glasses, blurs the line between cinema and performance in a visceral meditation on perception.

Jacobs was an early collaborator with and great influence on Jack Smith, undoubtedly a star of the show. An Islamic dome topped the entrance to the galleries holding Smith's work, a reimagining of his presentation at the 1977 Cologne Art Fair. An unruly display of brassieres Smith designed for men recalled Claes Oldenburg's soft sculpture, though here the vocabulary is of B-movie Orientalism rather than household commodity. Smith's project still seems radical, erotic and delightfully perverse.

Squat Theatre—a collective of Hungarian-born artists—used the large windows of their West 23rd Street storefront as a backdrop for loose, eroticized re-presentations of contemporary events. Their storefront theater setup was reproduced at the Whitney, with video projected on a scrim atop a false window. It is indeed difficult not to yearn for a New York before its current Bloombergian anaesthetization, but "Rituals of Rented Island" was, at its best, less a nostalgic pining than a call to action: both for curators tasked with presenting performance from the archive and to a generation of artists who have inherited this potent (and, in some cases, ever-evolving) canon.

—Catherine Damman