

ArtForum, September 2002:
A Short History of Performance: Part One
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Tradition decrees that Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* (1964) should properly be "remembered" the wrong way up. The work's best-known documentary photo shows Schneemann and a co-performer zooming, as if airborne, towards the viewer, their befeathered bosoms defying gravity- a dynamic effect achieved by printing the photo true to the camera's view: upside-down. Various cropped or stretched, this image dominated the press's representations of the Whitechapel's *A Short History of Performance: Part One*. Viewed "right" way up the image is less exuberant. Similarly, *Meat Joy 2002*, restaged by the artist and a group of evidently sincere, but mostly shy, physically unconfident volunteers, proved altogether less (in Schneemann's words) "energetic, evanescent [and] physicalised" than many viewers were anticipating: the performance's soporific mood contrasted lugubriously with its Motown soundtrack. Helpings of raw meat and mackerel eventually energised proceedings, but not as planned: the event climaxed with a display of aggressive and defensive gestures, rather than the "tender exchanges" of the artist's conception.

Over six days, *A Short History* re-presented live works by Schneemann, Stuart Brisley, Bernsteins, the Kipper Kids, Hermann Nitsch, Bruce McLean and Jannis Kounellis, and staged post-performance interviews with most of these artists. In fact, many of *A Short History's* pieces have been enacted more than once. *Meat Joy* was staged in Paris, London and New York, under very different conditions in each location. Kounellis's *Senza Titolo*, 1969- twelve live horses stabled in a gallery- was recreated at the 1976 Venice Biennale. Even in the '80s, the Kipper Kids' work was being discussed in terms of revival (in 1988, Artforum reviewer John Howell considered its relocation from a context of mid-70s "transgression" to the "freewheeling" 1980s). And in the Joan Crawford manner ("Joan's made her film again"), Herman Nitsch has staged variations on his *Orgies Mysterieuses* Theatre many times, and seems set to continue. (Good news, at least, for factory farmers of eggs and tripe).

Nevertheless, the project drew criticism on the basis that it betrayed the performances' "liveness" and their "original" character, in pursuit of nostalgic, commercial and promotional ends. In 1993, Peggy Phelan wrote "To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology"- an observation the project's critics might have recruited to their argument. However, Phelan continues, "Performance's being... becomes itself through disappearance". Thus, surely, to valorise a "first" or "sole" performance as a reified entity- the notional "real thing"- is to miss the radical point of her proposition. Performance's afterlife must itself be produced performatively, via a sharing and contestation of memory, testimony and material artefacts- plus the scrutiny of differing interests informing the work of recollection. Even as *A Short History* "repackaged" certain key performances, it mapped the crucial intersection between performance and memory, an undeniably fascinating process.

If performance is partly defined by its ability to articulate and manipulate the triangular relationship between performer, viewer and audience, then the series' most memorable works were those that explored this dimension most purposefully and sophisticatedly. Schneemann's tableau, despite the attendant hoopla, was not one of these. Stuart Brisley's *Beneath Dignity* (1977) organised its audience, traverse theatre-style, into two facing rows. Between them, prostrate, the artist struggled through a taxing sequence of manoeuvres (originally based on mining). His "self-abasement" became a gesture of "running the gauntlet", implicating spectators collectively in a complex moral scenario. Kounellis's installation, and Bernsteins' *Death to Grumpy Granddads*, (1973), went further still in eroding the distinction between the subject and object of the work; at the end of Bernsteins' hour-long laughing marathon, many viewers' jaws were aching- a refreshing change from the conventional "durational" formula, based on watching someone else having a really bad time.

-Rachel Withers