

**Y**ves Klein's nude models rolling on blank canvases; Chris Burden staging his own shooting; Gilbert and George covered in silver paint singing *Underneath the Arches*; all these artworks come under the heading of "performance art", and all have achieved a degree of fame out of all proportion to the small number of people who actually saw them.

A hybrid artform combining elements of theatre, dance, literature, painting, sculpture, music and film, performance art began in the early years of the 20th century with the Futurists, Dada-ists and Surrealists. With the collaborations between Merce Cunningham, John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg in the Sixties, performance art entered the bloodstream of art history.

Nowadays, performance has become so engrained in the practice of contemporary artists that we sometimes don't realise that a work of art is a performance. When Cornelia Parker asked the actress Tilda Swinton to sleep at the Serpentine Gallery, or when Michael Landy destroyed his possessions in front of onlookers in Oxford Street, they were using their own bodies or those of collaborators to express ideas or feelings more directly than would be possible through drawing, painting or sculpture.

The trouble with artists' performances is that they normally take place only once or twice. That means relatively few people see the work live, as opposed to performances captured in photos and on film.

Last week, in one of the most imaginative acts of curating I've encountered in a long time, Andrea Tarsia and Tamsin Dillon at the Whitechapel Art Gallery mounted the first in what is to become a series of re-enactments of historical performance pieces from the Sixties and Seventies. Although the week of performances finished on Sunday, the new sense of energy and experiment at the Whitechapel

means that we will be seeing more events like it.

The week began with Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* from 1964, a work that embodied all the exuberance, decadence and silliness of that extraordinary decade. To the joyful sound of the Shirelles, the Ronettes and Elvis, eight (mostly) young men and women shed most (but not all) of their clothes, and ended up on the floor in a sort of choreographed group grope, while the now middle-aged artist moved among them, pelting them with raw chicken, fish and sausages, which duly became incorporated into their not-particularly erotic couplings. As the piece neared its end, Schneemann poured paint over the writhing performers, turning the scene into a psychedelic free-for-all.

What must have looked shocking in the Sixties today looks like the innocent celebration of the joys of flesh, the pleasures of youth. The polymorphous perversity of *Meat Joy* perfectly matched the sheer happiness of rock and roll music, and its Dionysian expressionism now looks like an extension of what Jackson Pollock had done with paint.

But not all performance emerges out of visual art. In Samuel Beckett's 1950 play *Breath*, the curtain rises on an empty stage. We hear the long inhalation and exhalation of breath; then the curtain falls. For obvious reasons, Beckett's bitter comment on the meaninglessness of our lives has had no influence on the theatre. Its impact on the visual arts, however, has been enormous.

When, on the second night of the Whitechapel series, the British artist Stuart Brisley crawled on his belly through a mound of flour and pools of viscous black and white oil paint, it was like watching primordial life emerging out of the swamp. Entitled *Beneath Dignity*, the piece was inspired by seeing coal miners inching through 18in-high seams. Had I watched Brisley's agonisingly slow progress on film, I'm not



Polymorphous perversity: artist Carolee Schneemann (right) in her 1964 performance of *Meat Joy*, which now seems like an innocent celebration of youth

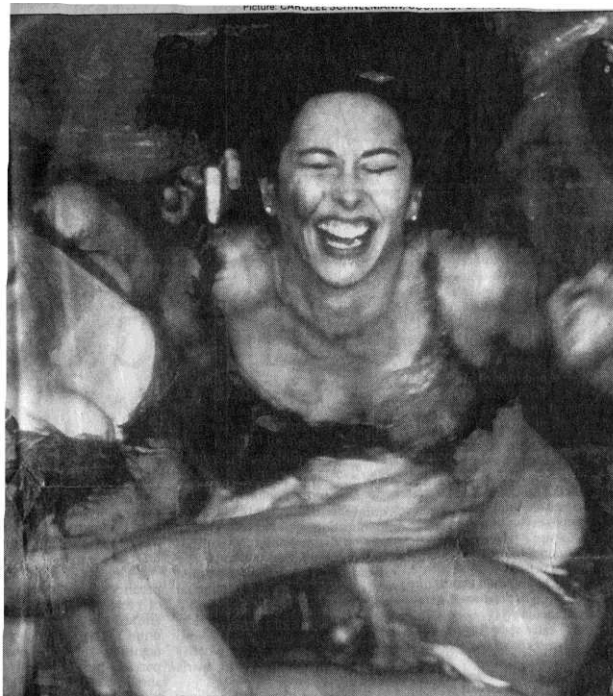
sure I'd have been affected by it. But seen live in an art gallery, the experience was unforgettable. We live in a culture of video, film and TV. It's not the new that shocks us any more, it's the live.

On Thursday, a group of Seventies performance artists called the Bernsteins recreated a work in which the five men and one woman sat around a circular coffee table and, for 50 minutes, laughed – and not just laughed, but howled, shook, rocked, whimpered, gasped and quaked.

Leaving aside the stamina

such a feat of endurance required, the longer the piece went on, the more mesmerising it became. Laughter is, of course, infectious: as the performers heaved and sobbed with mirth, so did the audience. Laughter became a kind of surrealistic language, one that could be aggressive or gentle, a means of interacting with the audience or excluding us from the shared joke.

Even more remarkable were two artists called the Kipper Kids, whose gleefully obscene double act belongs to the theatre of the absurd. The two



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men came into the gallery wearing jockstraps and PUNCHINELLO masks; when they left 15 minutes later, they were covered in paint, glitter, whipped cream and a cherry. In between, they battered and poked one another, making crude jokes about farting, diarrhoea and urinating.

I hate slapstick and loathe mime but, as I watched this performance, I realised that what I was seeing was probably as close as I'll ever come to the origins of comedy. This is what the Romans and the Greeks thought funny. It existed long

repression of our violent impulses and sexual desires is the source of all human misery. By ritualistically acting out these desires, he prompts us to acknowledge these buried aspects of our humanity. That, anyway is the theory.

Gallons of pig's blood spilled on to the gallery floor; the bodies of sacrificial victims were smeared with fruit, vegetables and offal; in a climactic orgy, white-clad assistants used their bare hands to pulverise raw meat, blood and wine. But the whole thing was so staged and so phoney that as the men in white coats were scooping out the intestines of an ox to pour over the blindfolded victims, I found myself thinking of last week's episode of *ER*.

**W**hat's more, I find the activities of Herr Nitsch profoundly offensive, an excuse to dignify voyeurism and sadism in the name of art. Maybe he loses something in translation, but he left me cold.

The week ended with the Greek-born artist Jannis Kounellis bringing 11 live horses into the Whitechapel, instantly transforming the main gallery into an elegant stable heady with the smell of horseflesh, straw and dung.

This was a recreation of a famous event that took place in a Roman gallery in 1969, and I was surprised by how beautiful and powerful it was. I couldn't, however, understand why it was included in a series about performance art, since it is simply an installation – until one of the horses decided to perform spontaneously, spectacularly, all over the polished floor of the venerable Whitechapel. We all applauded.

For more reviews by Richard Dormant, visit his website at [www.artisticlondon.com](http://www.artisticlondon.com)

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