

Performing the City
Mariana Schroeder
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Suggested Intro:

Performance art grew out of the “Happenings of the late 1950s,” which in turn, have their roots in the work of the futurists, Dadists and surrealists who often staged provocative events to illustrate their ideas. It was in the 1960s, however, that the art form came into its own and became recognized world-wide as a new art medium. In Munich an exhibition and symposium now examines performance art in the world’s great urban centers. It may surprise many, but performance art in the sixties and seventies was not limited to New York, London and Paris, but was a global phenomenon. The exhibition leaves Munich at the end of November and goes on to Naples in December, to Sao Paulo in January of 2009 and then to Paris in April. Mariana Schroeder reports.

SOT: sound of installation tr. 1 blend under

The performance is called “*Ausfegen*” or “Sweeping Up” and the artist is Joseph Beuys. In 1972. Beuys attended the May first demonstration in Berlin, accompanied by two of his students from the Düsseldorf Art Academy. Armed with a red broom he sweeps the garbage left by the revelers and demonstrators on Karl Marx Square. A film documents the legendary Berlin performance. Curator Heinz Schütz brought together films and photographs documenting performance art in cities around the world.

SOT: Heinz Schütz tr. 3

Beuys used the demonstration on the first of May to make his own performance. In a certain way he was part of the demonstration, in another he was against the demonstration because he used his brush to clean the road and used the garbage to make an installation out of it. He was cleaning the road for several hours and then took the garbage to a gallery to make an installation out of it.

Performance art cannot be exhibited. It is the most ephemeral form of art. Once the performance has ended it disappears. Schütz is careful to point out the exhibition he curated shows only the documentation he gathered – photos or films of the actual events. He does not hang anything on the walls because performance artists turned against commercial forms of art that could be bought, sold and exhibited. One room contains podiums containing large bound books, which he Schütz calls “Atlases,” representing 11 different cities. Visitors step up to them, not unlike ascending a pulpit.

SOT: Heinz Schütz tr. 5

It’s a documentation of street performances, performances and demonstrations and daily performances. You have to decide what is art and what isn’t....I wanted to prevent that there are pictures on the wall but wanted to create a certain memory atmosphere. The focus is on the books and each person can watch it himself.

SOT: segue to atmosphere blend under

Speakers around the room fill the space with a sound installation by Alcuin Ai. It represents some of the cities featured in the Atlases: Mexico City, Tokyo, Naples, Seoul, Munich, Berlin and others. Schütz says this is the first comprehensive overview of performance art of the 60s and 70s to be seen in Europe. It examines the performative urbanism of the two decades and goes beyond national borders to look at global issues and trends. An important part of the project was the two day symposium in which international lecturers focused on performance art of their regions. Reiko Tomii came from New York to discuss performance in Tokyo.

SOT: Reiko Tomii Tr. 29

In the 50s and 60s avant-garde artists were very active, not only in Tokyo but all over the country. (31) One group is Hi Red Center active in 63 and 64 which came out of the tendency of anti art. They are quite deviant, getting out of the galleries and into the street. Their most famous performance was *Cleaning Event*. Tokyo was hosting the Olympics and Tokyo was cleaning up so they wanted to poke fun at it...They used the toothbrush and household brushes and wore white coats. It was quite funny.

Humor is not always an element of performance art. Often there are underlying political messages. Yoko Ono, one of Japan's best known performance artists, staged her first works in New York.

SOT: Reiko Tomii tr. 36

Yoko Ono started her artistic work in New York in 1961. She came back to Tokyo in 1962. Her performance was quite avant-garde. Her work is always collaborative. I think her most interesting thing is a work she did 1964, "Cut Piece." She sat on the stage and the audience was invited to cut off her clothes. It was violent in a way, there are feminist ideas here.

Although some artists like Yoko Ono performed their action in galleries or on the stage, most performance art of the 60s and 70s was in the streets taking inspiration from conceptual art and often exhibiting strong political connotations. Thomas Wulffen, from Berlin, says American artists like Allan Kaprow, Dick Higgins and John Cage introduced performance art to Berlin.

SOT: Wulffen, tr. 47

There was too much import from the outside. At the end of the 70s a group called Buro Berlin developed performance art in a different way which was connected to Berlin. (48) They worked in situations and called it *situationen*. They just got into a place and worked directly with it. In Kreuzberg they worked in empty rooms near the wall.

Performance art goes on. One of the more spectacular examples is Christo's wrapping of the Reichstag in Berlin

SOT: Wulffen. Tr. 44

That was the best art work around the unification. For me it was a perfect performance. How does this differ from the action of the 60s and the 70s?

There is a distance between the author to the viewers...viewer didn't know what to see. Now he knows that is a performance. In the 60s and the 70s this art form was developed and no one knew what to expect. And now they know and the viewer becomes more important than in former times.

Performance art will continue to evolve and embrace the issues of this generation but will probably never again regain the spontaneity and freshness of the works of the 60s and 70s, the golden age of performance art. The exhibition Performing the City brings many of these happenings back to life.

Mariana Schroeder, Deutsche Welle Radio, Munich.