



TALKING CURE PART II
THE QUESTION OF TASTE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

SUMMER 2010

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FRONT COVER: CENSORED "PORTRAIT OF GEORGE" BY ROBERT ARNESON, 1981 ©MARION GRAY
BACK COVER: KIPPER KIDS AT THE BERKELEY ART MUSEUM, 1979 © MARION GRAY

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THE POLITICS OF TASTE

After a certain point opinions on art are dismissed as mere "matters of taste", supposedly because these responses are so personal that there could be no real gain from pressing the issue. In the present, when the "Contemporary" has replaced the "Modern," it increasingly appears that those who are publicly writing and speaking about art often aren't arguing about what Contemporary Art is and why it is important - but instead focus on situating it within a theoretical construct (explaining how it *functions*) which validates the work-as-art. It is as if the present generation, reeling in the wake of so called post-Modernity, are paralyzed from making value judgements, and with that has gone the arcane and quaint matters of aesthetic judgement, and Culture and Value. I suspect that this intellectual abdication of the realm of taste paved the way for the market driven excesses of the art world of the 1980s and 90s, an ever-corporatizing leviathan which we have yet to fully come to terms with culturally.

The philosopher and political historian Hannah Arendt has classified the problem of taste and its implications with such provocative clarity in her essay "The Crisis in Culture" from *Between Past and Future* (penguin 2006), that I believe it is worth quoting at length:

...Judging is one, if not the most, important activities in which this sharing-the-world-with-others comes to pass.

*What, however, is quite new and even startlingly new in Kant's propositions in the Critique of Judgement is that he discovered this phenomenon of taste and hence the only kind of judgements which, since they concern merely aesthetic matters, have always been supposed to lie outside of the political realm as well as the domain of reason. Kant was disturbed by the alleged arbitrariness and subjectivity of *de gustibus non disputandum est* (which, no doubt, is entirely true for for private idiosyncracies), for this arbitrariness offended his political and not his aesthetic sense. Kant, who certainly was not oversensitive to beautiful things, was highly conscious of the public quality of beauty; and it was because of their public relevance that he insisted, in opposition to the commonplace adage, that taste judgements are open to discussion because "we hope that the same pleasure is shared by others," that taste can be subject to dispute, because it "expects agreement from everyone else." Therefore taste, insofar as it, like any other judgement, appeals to common sense, is the very opposite of "private feelings." In aesthetic no less than political judgements, a decision is made, and although this decision is always determined by a certain subjectivity, by the simple fact that each person occupies a place of his own from which he looks upon and judges the world, it also derives from the fact that the world itself is an objective datum, something common to all its inhabitants. The activity of taste decides how this world, independent of its utility and our vital interests in it, is to look and sound, what men will see and what they will hear in it. Taste judges the world in its appearance and in its worldliness; its interest in the world is purely "disinterested," and that means that neither the life interests of the individual nor the moral interests of the self are involved here. For judgements of taste, the world is the primary thing, not man, neither man's life nor his self.*

*Taste judgements, furthermore, are currently held to be arbitrary because they do not compel in the sense in which demonstrable facts of truth proved by argument compel agreement. They share with political opinions that they are persuasive; the judging person - as Kant says quite beautifully - can only "woo the consent of everyone else" in the hope of coming to an agreement with him eventually. This "wooing" or persuading corresponds closely to what the Greeks called *πείθειν*, the convincing and persuading speech which they regarded as the typically political form of people talking with one another. Persuasion ruled the intercourse of*

the citizens of the polis because it excluded physical violence; but the philosophers knew that it was also distinguished from another non-violent form of coercion, the coercion by truth. Persuasion appears in Aristotle as the opposite to *διαλέγεσθαι*, the philosophical form of speaking, precisely because this type of dialogue was concerned with knowledge and the finding of truth and therefore demanded a process of compelling proof. Culture and politics, then, belong together because it is not knowledge or truth which is at stake, but rather judgement and decision, the judicious exchange of opinion about the sphere of public life and the common world, and the decision what manner of action is to be taken in it, as well as to how it is to look henceforth, what kind of things are to appear in it.

To classify taste, the chief cultural activity, among man's political abilities sounds so strange that I may add another much more familiar theoretically little-regarded fact to these considerations. We all know very well how quickly people recognize each other, and how unequivocally they can feel that they belong to each other, when they discover a kinship in questions of what pleases and displeases. From the viewpoint of this common experience, it is as though taste decided not only how the world is to look, but also who belongs together in it. If we think of this sense of belonging in political terms, we are tempted to regard taste as an essentially aristocratic principle of organization. But its political significance is perhaps more far-reaching and at the same time more profound. Whenever people judge the things in the world that are common to them, there is more implied in their judgements than these things. By his manner of judging, the person discloses to an extent also himself, what kind of person he is, and this disclosure, which is involuntary, gains in validity to the degree that it has liberated itself from merely individual idiosyncrasies. Now, it is precisely the realm of acting and speaking, that is, the political domain in terms of activities, in which this personal quality comes to the fore in public, in which the "who one is" becomes manifest rather than the qualities and individual talents he may possess.

It is through this lens I would like to invite interaction with the diverse content of this issue - in which these artists and writers have offered their thoughts and judgements, revealing themselves and building our common world. "The Question of Taste", which has been conspicuously absent from our contemporary art dialog, is essentially about thinking and feeling deeply and sharing this with each other as peers inhabiting shared reality - a matter at the very heart of art and politics, and an issue which will deeply enrich contemporary art discourse when it returns to the fore.

-JE



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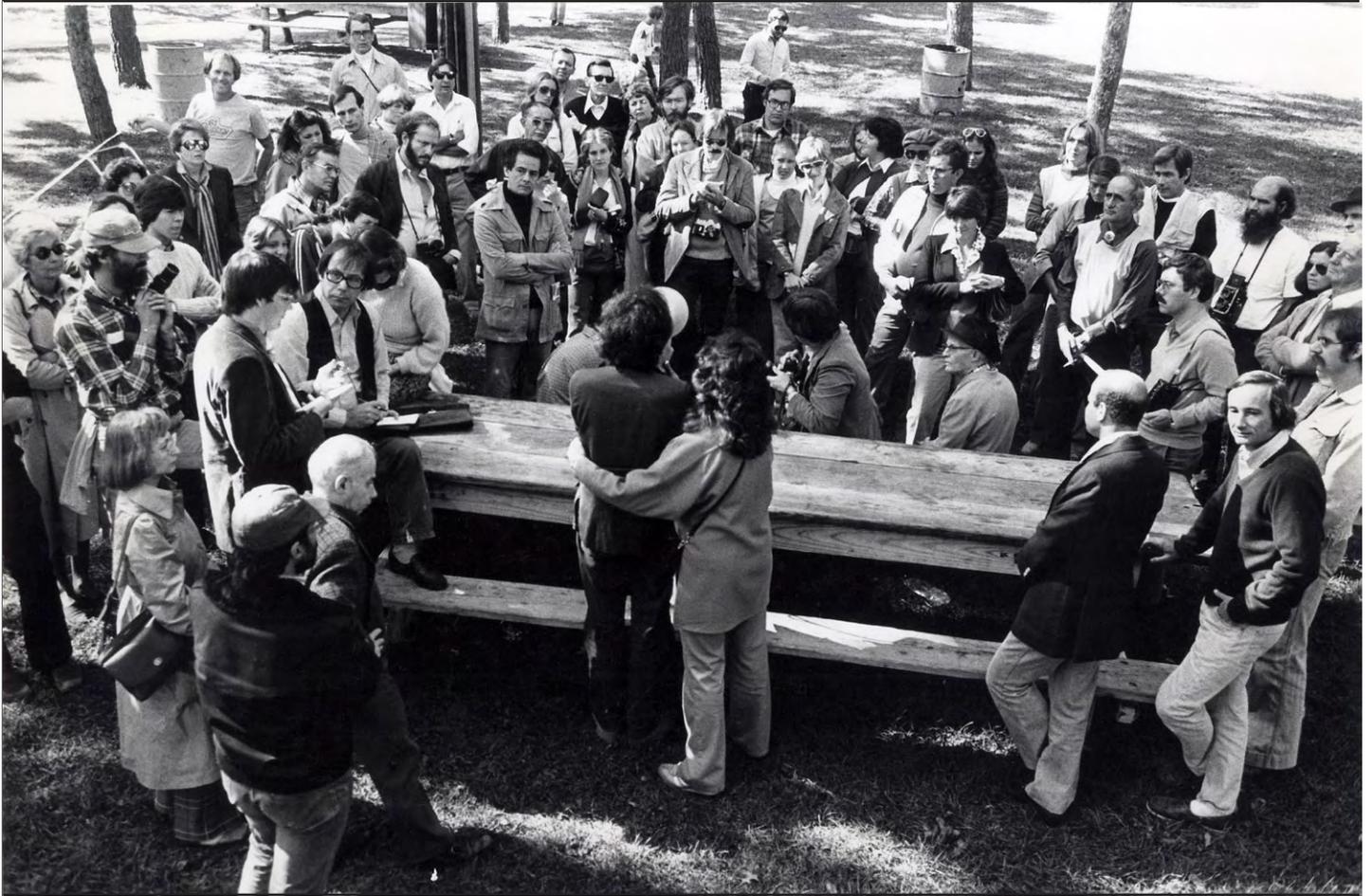
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ARTIST AS ARCHIVE

PORTFOLIO: MARION GRAY

JARRETT EARNEST: I want to talk about what moved you to start documenting Performance art, and what's kept you doing it?

MARION GRAY: *I had just returned to Berkeley where I was working in art history and sculpture with Peter Selz, Joan Brown, Peter Voulkos, and Jim Melchert. I was introduced to a whole new way of operating and engaging with the world - ideas and materials. It was a real coming together of creative forces from all sides, whether it was someone drumming on a bronze sculpture, a performance gathering up in the hills with many participants or a showing of the experimental video, like Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Mouth to Mouth (1975). Being around those people changed my way of thinking about work and how to approach it.*

It was at this time I decided I wasn't really an art historian. I'm still so glad I was at Berkeley then because of the energy. I really sat down and asked myself "what is it I like?" "Well, I like to be at times by myself, but not on a daily work basis, so that eliminated being a writer." I wanted to be out interacting with people and decided that the best solution was to commit to the photography I had been doing. So I bought two cameras, they were the first Olympus' that I could carry - one for black and white, and one for color, and I would use both of them at the same time, with filters to shift between indoor and outdoor lighting. It just became an activity and a way of working in the environment that challenged me intellectually, and gave me the opportunity of preserving something that I thought other people should see. Performances were not being documented at the time, like they are now, of course there was not the technology or the sensibility. This was about the time the Running Fence project was starting.

JE: One of the other things that I hoped we could talk about is Christo and Jeanne Claude.

MG: *Running Fence was the first project I ever photographed seriously. I had just left Berkeley and in my back yard was what I believed to be the most exciting "art world" event happening at the time. I have gone on to work with Christo and Jeanne Claude many times since, but this will always be very special for me.*

JE: How do you like the films about their projects - how do you feel the experience relate to its filmic representation?

MG: *The Running Fence film brings me back to the very moment of working on the fence every time I see it. In the beginning of the film, you are seeing groups of workers headed out in the early morning light to their appointed locations, it was like an army of artists crossing Marin and Sonoma counties. The fence was 18 feet high, and as it was going up it started to feel like we were part of a crusade. The poles that held the fabric had wires with grommets and when the wind blew they hit and made a sound reminiscent of a boat in full sail, the fabric billowing out. The sounds for me add another dimension to the film. Anyone who saw Running Fence can never look at the landscape again without recalling what Christo and Jeanne Claude created. It made everyone look at California and the hills so differently. The films to me are honest, exactly right.*

JE: In some ways this is like a portrait of an artistic family, a community. How do you feel about that?

MG: *I have been in the Bay Area for a long time now - the people I have worked with, or the projects I have photographed, are an extension of what a family would be.*

For instance, the way Tom Marioni's social action is a formal recognition of an interaction between people coming together. Before I started going to New York or Europe, many artists would come to the Bay Area. In a way its like when you are traveling, moving around in different countries over and over again, you see people in Italy and have dinner with them, then you end up in Germany and there they are, and you make friends. For those who are moving around and working, these connections are the richness of being in the art world.

JE: That is at the heart of one of the things that blows me away about what you do. Because the idea of documentary photography has a sense of assumed "clinical" purpose, it is supposed to be showing you something that is "true", it is kind of distanced to "show you what really happened," which is just a fantasy anyway. But with your photographs, you get this very subjective perspective, its like you can tell that you are really excited and you love whats going on and you want to share what you love about it with other people and that motivates the photographs. So they're not "documents" as much as very personal sharings, and you get these wonderful things. They are kind of bizarre, if you thinking about them "showing what happened" in the future, but then they show it in another, perhaps truer way.

MG: *Thats very nice to hear because that is exactly how I feel about it. I like to enjoy my life. I feel you have to make everyday the best it can be, so I have a lot of fun.*

JE: I know you have seen so many, but what are some of the performances you've seen and thought "this is just the best thing, most important thing, I've seen"?

MG: *Sometimes the most important performances were not things that need to be documented. The one piece that stands out in my mind was John Cage and Merce Cunningham's final collaboration Ocean, performed in 1996 in the Harmon Gymnasium on the UC Berkeley campus which was circular so that the orchestra encircled the audience who encircled the dancers. It was all there - the music, moving figure, and orchestration of space.*

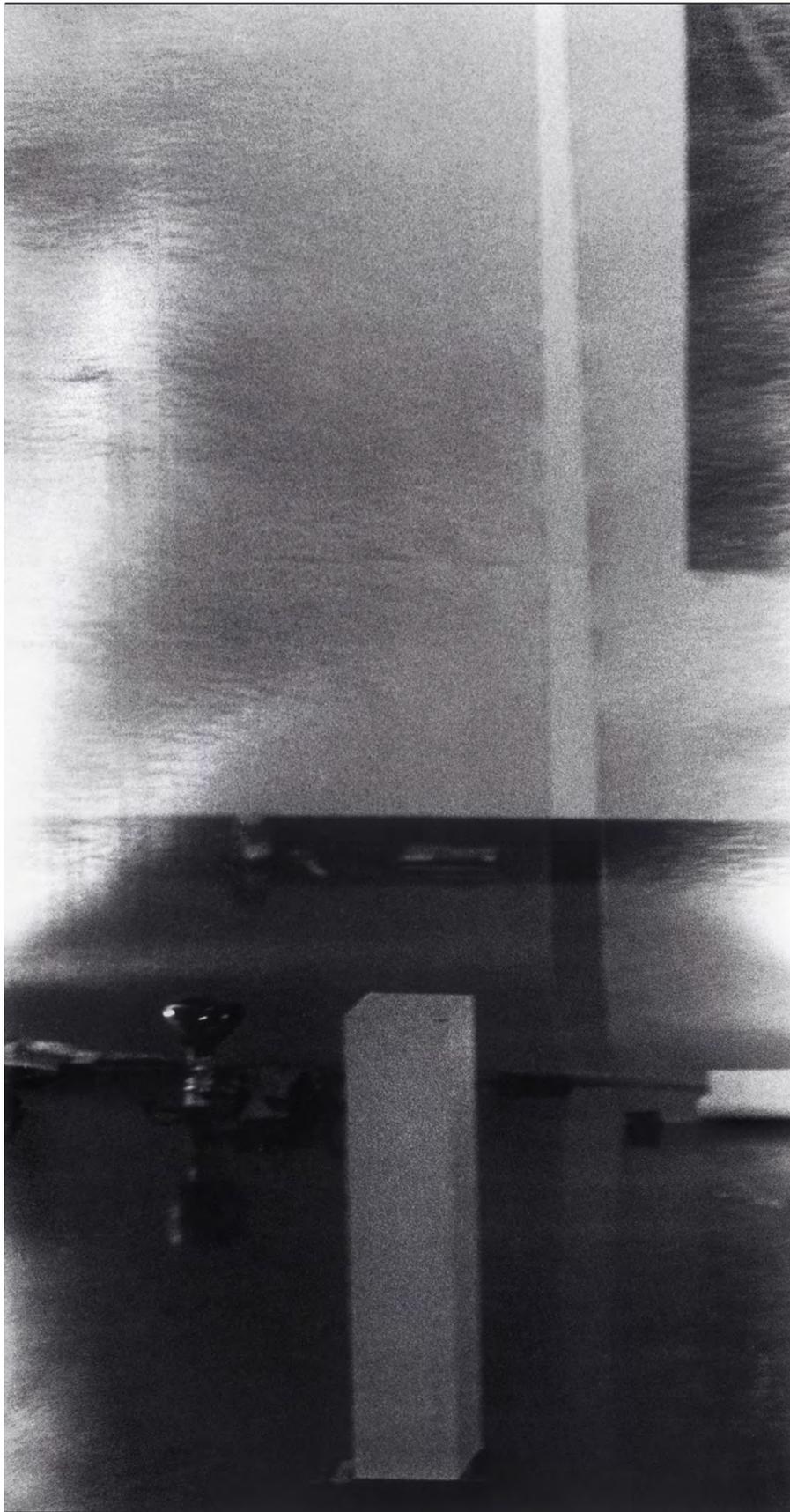
JE: So did you photograph that performance?

MG: *Of course not, it was something to sit back and enjoy. I probably took a few photos, but with no real intention, just something for me.*

JE: It makes sense that we both love Richard Tuttle - its all about space. I have never worked with another photographer on installing a show that really worked to put up the images architecturally within the space in a way that makes meaning outside of the photograph. Usually its like: I made this photograph or painting, and its done, and I stick it on the wall. You brought such an awareness to how it would be encountered spatially.

MG: *Thanks for saying that - that is key. That is a consideration that goes into every step of the process- composition, printing, etc.*

I can't imagine doing anything else. Its almost like an addiction. I feel very fortunate as an individual to have found what really to me is never ending and exciting.



PAGE TEN: JEANNE-CLAUDE AND CRISTO, PRESS CONFERENCE FOR THE *WRAPPED WALKWAYS* IN JACOB LOOSE MEMORIAL PARK, KANSAS CITY, MI 1978

ABOVE: JOAN JONAS PERFORMING *THE JUNIPER TREE*, SFAI 1979

PAGE 14: HEMANN NITSCH ... PARTITUR DER 56. AKTION ... REQUIEM FÜR MEINE FRAU BEATE, BOLOGNE ITALY 1977

PAGE 15: TERRY FOX, BERKELEY ART MUSEUM 1978

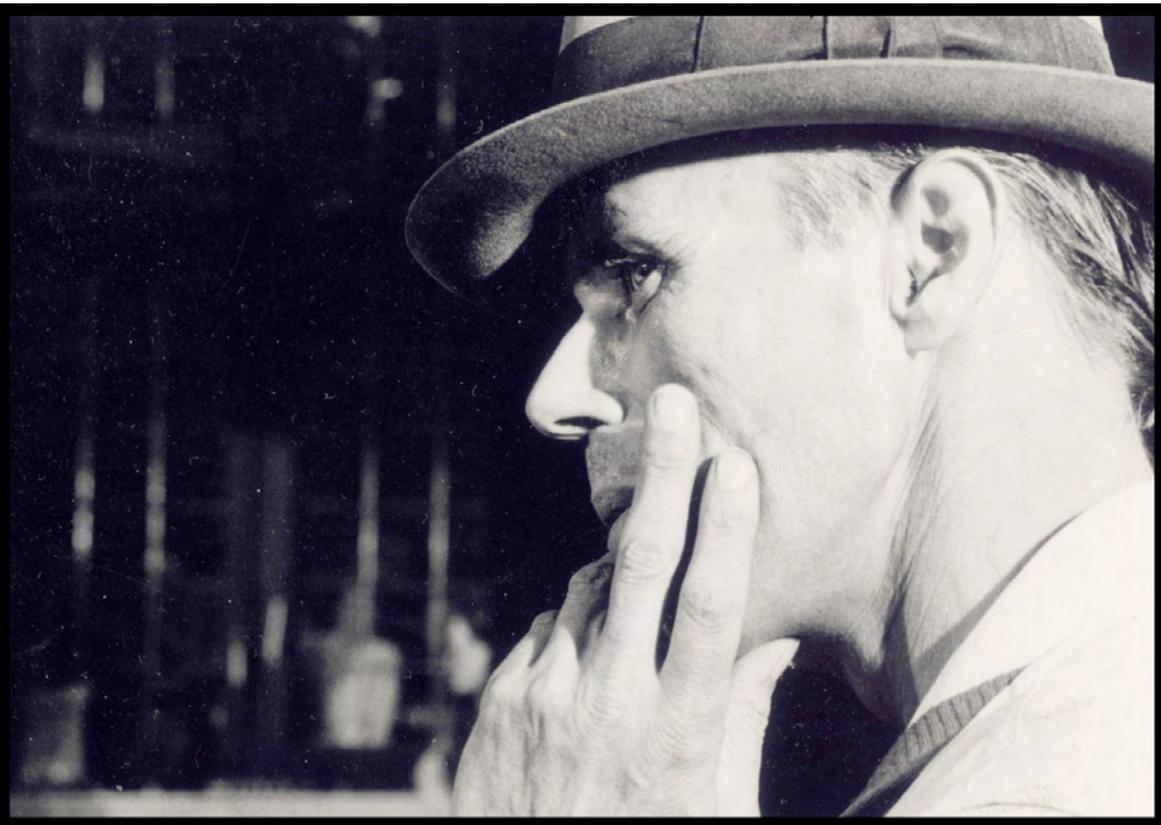
ALL PHOTOS: © MARION GRAY











BARNEY/BEUYS, SFMOMA 2006/DOCUMENTA 1977 © MARION GRAY

PHYSIOLOGY





PAGE 18: EIKO AND KOMO, UC BERKELEY CAMPUS 1979

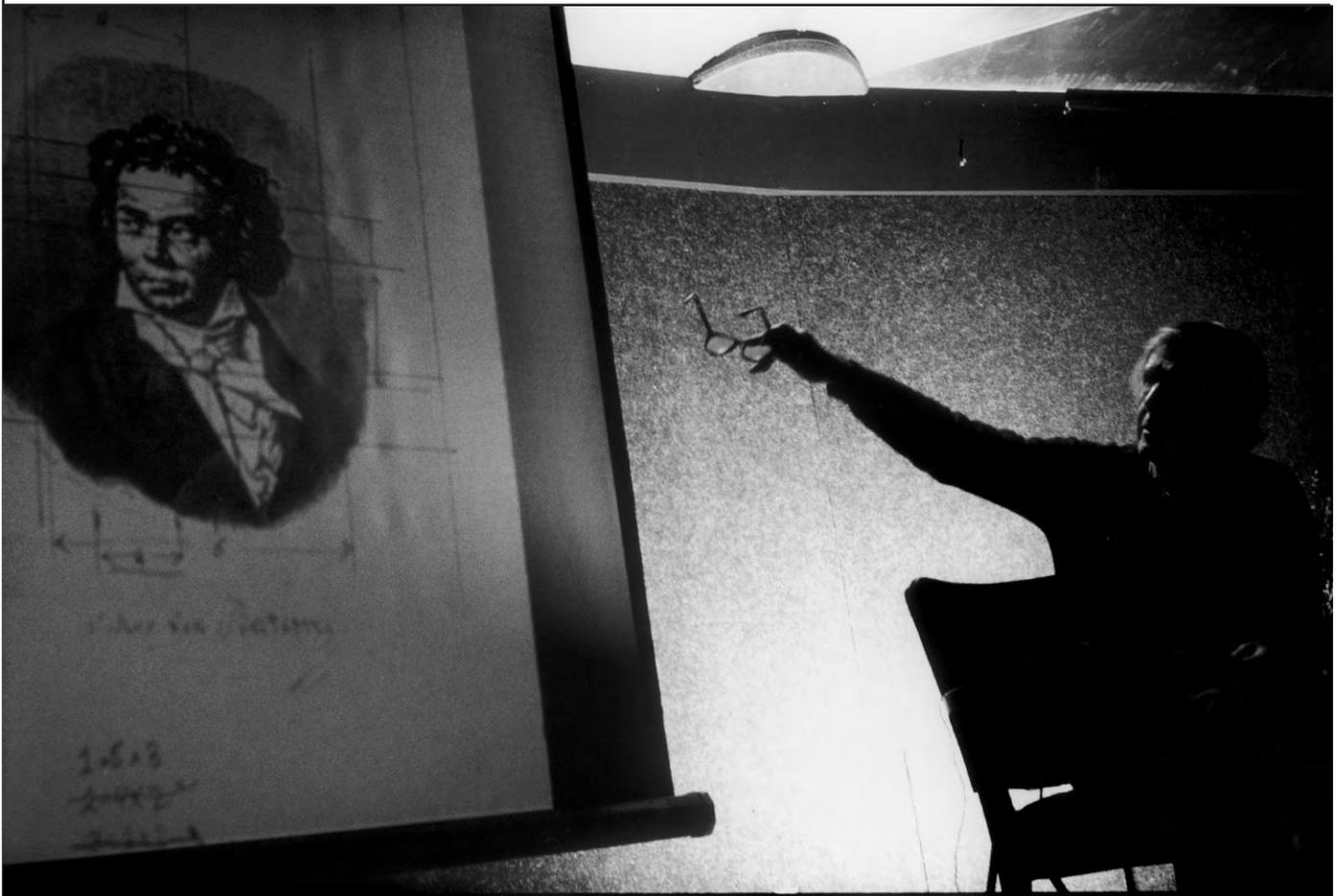
PAGE 19: PAULINE OLIVEROS, MILLS COLLEGE OAKLAND 2000

BELOW: JOHN CAGE/BEETHOVEN 1987

OPPOSITE: HARRIET, CHRISTO AND JEANNE-CLAUDE EXHIBIT
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PAGE 22-23: *CAR DANCE*, JULES BECKMAN WITH KEITH HENNESSEY
AND JESS CURTIS, SAN FRANCISCO 1997

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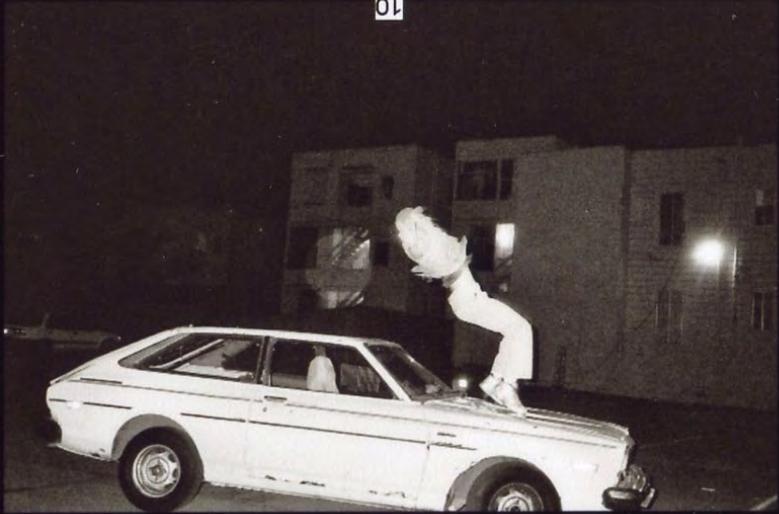
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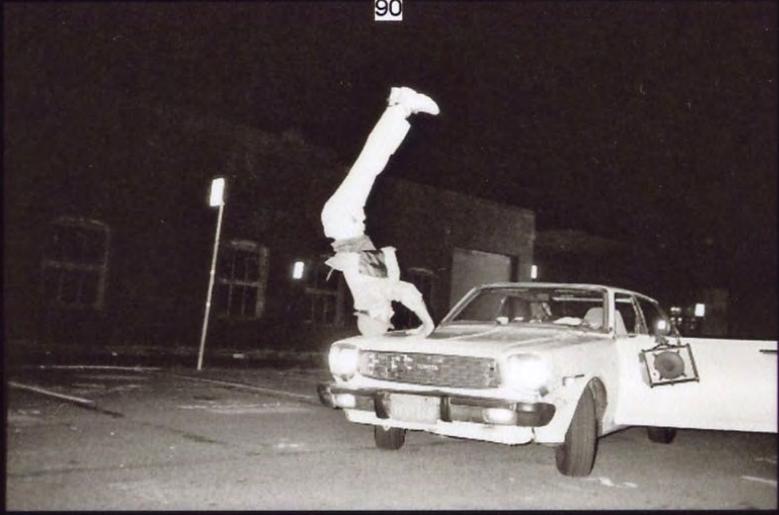
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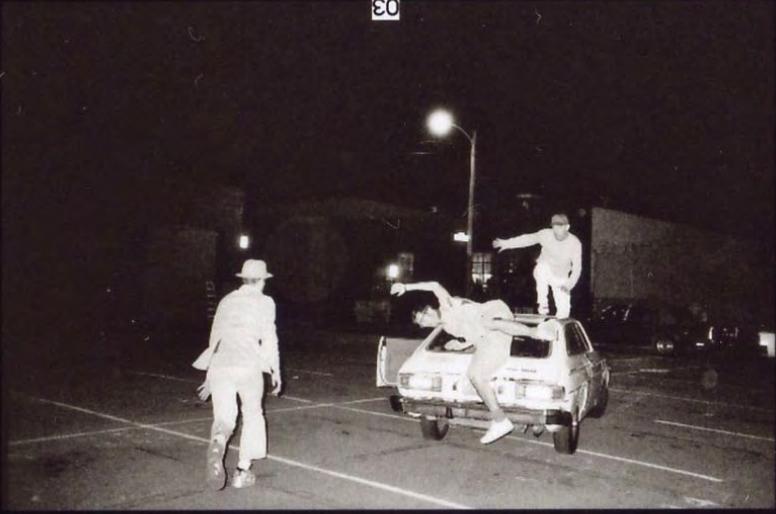
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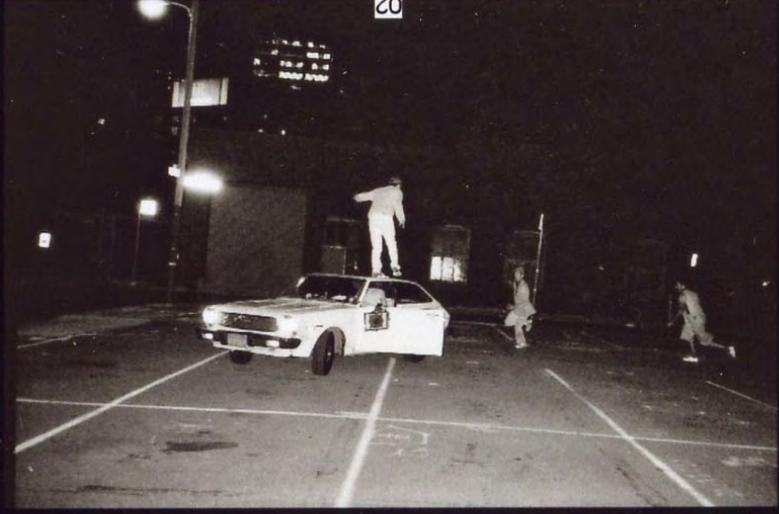
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CONTRIBUTORS

BILL BERKSON is a poet and art critic born in New York in 1939 and became active in the literary and art worlds in his early twenties. He is the author of 14 books and pamphlets of poetry, including *Saturday Night: Poems 1960-61*, *Shining Leaves*, *Recent Visitors*, *Enigma Variations* (with drawings by Philip Guston), *Blue Is the Hero*, *Lush Life* and most recently, *Serenade and Fugue State*. His work has been included in many literary journals and anthologies. He is also a Corresponding Editor for *Art in America* and a regular contributor to *Artforum*, *Modern Painters*, *Art on Paper*, *American Craft* and other magazines. From 1971-78, he was editor-publisher of Big Sky magazine and books. He has received awards and grants for poetry from the Poets Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, Yaddo, the Briarcombe Foundation, and Marin Arts Council, and in 1990 was given an Artspace Award for Art Criticism. In recent years he has also curated exhibitions of individual artists such as George Herriman and Ronald Bladen and of contemporary painting, and served as an adjunct curator for *Facing Eden: 100 Years of California Landscape Art* at the Fine Arts Museum, San Francisco. He has taught and directed the public lectures program at the San Francisco Art Institute since 1984. He lives in San Francisco

LAURA BOWLES FAW AND CATHY FAIRBANKS are art artists who's investigations consist of sculptural installations, curatorial projects, and collaborative ventures such as The Pistils and The Ap-art-ment. They have exhibited nationally and internationally.

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CHRISTIAN L. FROCK is an independent curator and writer. Invisible Venue, the alternative enterprise that she founded and has directed since 2005, collaborates with artists to present art in unexpected settings. Frock's creative practice interrogates the intersection of art, daily life and popular culture through the presentation of and examination of public art and interventions, site-specific installations, happenings and events, avant-garde publications, artist multiples, and alternative spaces. Frock holds a Master's degree in curatorial practice from Goldsmiths College, University of London.

LINDA GEARY is a painter who lives and works in Oakland. She is the Assistant Chair of Painting at California College of the Arts. She has upcoming solo shows in June at Rose Burlingham Fine Art in New York, and in October at Rena Bransten Gallery in San Francisco. <http://www.roseburlingham.com/> <http://www.renabranstengallery.com/Geary.html>

MARION GRAY is an Artist/Photographer that has been active in the vital Bay Area art scene since the 70's. In 1975, she completed her studies at the University of California at Berkeley in the Art History Department with Peter Selz and in the Art Practice Department with Jim Melchert, Peter Voulkos and Joan Brown. Upon graduation, she began her "camerawork"- using still and moving cameras - collaborating with artists, developing imagery for multi-media performances, publications, portfolios, exhibits, and documentation. Marion's work has taken her from the West Coast to New York and Europe, and covers a wide spectrum of artists, including Meredith Monk & Ann Hamilton collaborations, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Tom Marioni, Fluxus Artists, Alison Knowles, Paul Dresher Ensemble, Rinde Eckert, Douglas Davis, Nam June Paik, Charlotte Moorman, and Josph Beuys. www.mariongray.com

ELLYSE MALLOUK is an artist and writer based in San Francisco, where she is currently a candidate for an MA in Visual and Critical Studies at California College of the Arts. Her thesis work concerns the social activity already always present in viewing. She holds an MFA from CCA, and has shown her work locally and internationally.

MARY MCCARTHY (1912 - 1989) was novelist, critic, and biting satiric intellectual-at-large who was a major figure in the American Intellectual life of the 20th century. Her novels include *The Company She Keeps* (1942); *The Group* (1963), her most popular work; *Birds of America* (1971); and *Cannibals and Missionaries* (1979). She also wrote two autobiographies, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1957) and *How I Grew* (1987).

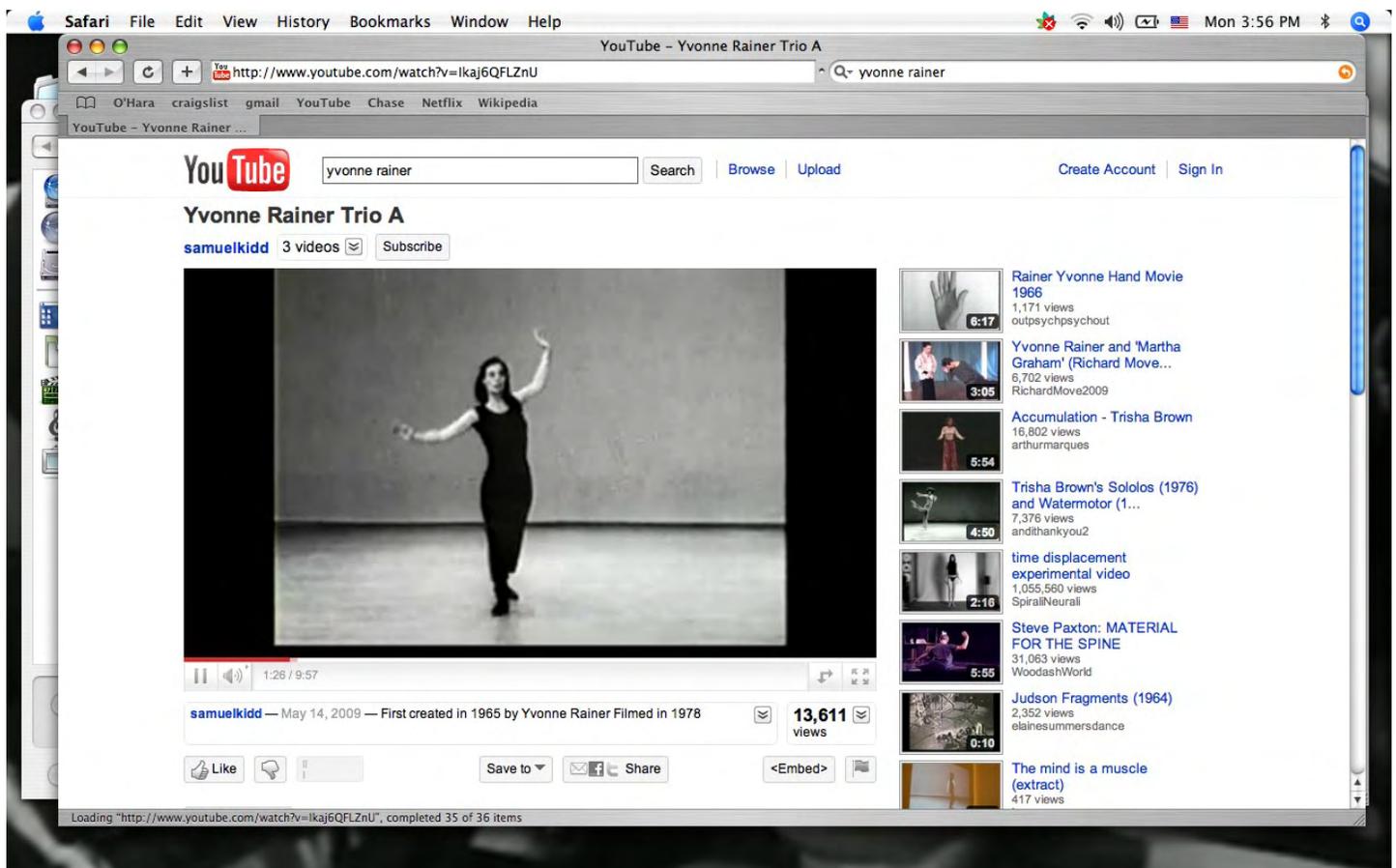
ROBERT SMITHSON (1938 - 1973) is one of the most influential artists and thinkers about art in the 20th century. His seminal *Spiral Jetty* is the key example of earthworks as they emerged in American art, and is a key illustration of his influential concept of the "non-site".

MIA KIRSI STAGEBERG is a Norwegian-American fiction writer who first published with the *New Directions* annuals of the 1960s and 70s. Based in San Francisco, she has worked as an art writer, editor, oral historian, researcher, nonprofit fundraiser and cloth sculptress.

THERESA WONG is a composer and performer whose work encompasses music, theater, and visual art. She is currently working on her first large scale opera, *O Sleep*, which will premiere at Southern Exposure in May 2010. She believes that Chinese and Italians are irrefutably related through the institutions of mafia, pasta, chaos, and family

CHRISTINE WONG YAP is a visual artist who explores optimism and pessimism. Her writing is inspired by thingness, complicity, phenomenology and how the work of art mediates a relationship between artist and viewer. Based in Oakland, she holds a BFA and an MFA from CCA. She blogs indiscriminately at blog.christinewongyap.com.

JOHN ZURIER received his MFA from UC Berkeley and is currently Eminent Adjunct Professor at the California College of the Arts. His work is represented by Gallery Paule Anglim in San Francisco and Peter Blum Gallery in New York. He currently has an exhibition at Galeria Javier López in Madrid, Spain, and an upcoming exhibition at Peter Blum Gallery in May 2010. <http://www.johnzurier.com/> <http://www.galeriajavierlopez.com/> <http://peterblumgallery.com/gallery>



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