

# You Had to Be There

More and more  
artworks exist not  
as objects but as  
ephemeral  
events—a  
conversation,  
a thunderclap, a  
slow-motion kiss—  
that insist viewers  
take part

BY LINDA YABLONSKY

"It's not an artwork," curator Laura Hoptman told visitors on opening night. "It's a conversation starter. That's all." It did get visitors talking, and not just to one another. Two "experts" at a time with experience in Iraq—among them, ex-soldiers, refugees, journalists, curators, and translators all chosen by Deller and the museum staff—made themselves available during prescribed hours to answer visitors' questions one-on-one. "How often do we get to hear the firsthand experience of those who have been to Iraq?" asks Deller, who admits to having an obsessive interest in the war and the misinformation surrounding it. Deller did not film or record any of the show's conversations. "If you walk in and don't talk," he says, "you're missing out on the experience."

On the day I visited, a 29-year-old Iraqi surgeon who had volunteered for Deller's show (only months after having been granted political asylum) took the floor in a carpeted lounge area that Deller had outfitted with comfortable chairs surrounding a coffee table. Describing his experience growing up in Saddam Hussein's Iraq as one of terror and enslavement, the doctor was fiercely supportive of the American role in Saddam's demise. When asked if the war was worth all the spilled blood and chaos, the doctor gave the gathering crowd an impassioned speech on the price of freedom. ("A CIA plant, obviously," groaned one spectator.)

When photographer Susan Meiselas took

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SAY YOU ARE wandering through a museum and the guards suddenly start hopping around you and singing, "This is so contemporary, contemporary, contemporary!" You may laugh—and then, a moment later, realize that the encounter is actually a living artwork choreographed by the Berlin-based British artist Tino Sehgal.

Or what if a museum stages an exhibition of unscripted meetings between visitors and total strangers?

There is only one way to identify such experiences as art: be there when they happen. Of course, that applies to any live performance—or work of art, for that matter. If you didn't see it in person, you didn't really get it.

But today, just being there is not enough. In a spate of recent exhibitions, an increasing number of artworks have been taking shape more as singular events than as unique objects, and almost all lead the viewer into assuming an active role in the proceedings. One must take part, or the situation cannot fulfill the transformative function of art.

In February, Jeremy Deller, who won the Turner Prize in 2004, collaborated with the New York public-art agency Creative Time to bring *It Is What It Is: Conversations About Iraq* to the New Museum. On the floor within the exhibition space was the twisted, rusted-steel hulk of a car salvaged from a suicide bombing on a street of booksellers in Baghdad. In the context of a museum, the wreck looked very much like a sculpture. It was both horrifying and beautiful.

Allora & Calzadilla's performance *Stop, Repair, Prepare* at Gladstone Gallery, New York.



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the doctor's place, the conversation turned first to the experiences of the Kurds and then to the personal lives of the audience members, who said their families came from Honduras, Cuba, England, and elsewhere. The dialogue then veered toward revolution, insurrection, and cultural attitudes dividing generations. Altogether, it was one of the most fascinating afternoons I've ever spent in a museum.

Not long afterward, *New York Times* critic Ken Johnson panned Deller's show, calling it "therapy for our national post-traumatic stress" masquerading as art. "I'm all for using the public space of a museum as a platform," Johnson said in an interview, "but grassroots political activity is not art." (Following the New Museum show, Deller and two of his experts, an Iraqi artist and a former army specialist in psychological warfare, took the bombed car on the road across the country, conducting conversations in both outdoor places and art centers.)

"Jeremy Deller provided a window on how war affects real people who aren't just fleeting shadows in burkas on the six o'clock news," countered *New York Magazine* art critic Jerry Saltz in response to my e-mail asking what he would have said had he reviewed the show. "Deller's work is alive, it creates psychic friction and emotional tension. It crackles with art."

Trained as an art historian, with a specialty in the Baroque, Deller is known for his exploration of cultural legacies. His Turner Prize-winning documentary film, *Memory Bucket*, conflated the 1993 Branch Davidian siege in Waco, Texas, with George Bush's impact on Crawford. "If art can confound you

and show you something you weren't expecting, that's good," Deller says. "What interests me is a person becoming the artwork and the art becoming the person."

Around the time Deller's show opened, another participatory performance was taking place, at Gladstone Gallery in New York. For their first solo exhibition in the city, collaborators Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla installed the 2008 piece *Stop, Repair, Prepare: Variations on Ode to Joy for a Prepared Piano*. Visitors who arrived at the top of every business hour did not merely see and hear one of six rotating musicians play the final section of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony on a vintage Bechstein piano. They became a physical part of the show.

The artists deliberately chose "Ode to Joy" for its many and conflicting historical references. The Nazis had adopted it as a kind of theme song. In the film *A Clockwork Orange*, it is the sound of evil, the trigger for the principal character's outbursts of violence. Leonard Bernstein chose to conduct it as part of the celebration of the fall of the Berlin Wall. And now it is the anthem of the European Union.

When *Stop, Repair, Prepare* was first performed, at the Haus der Kunst in Munich, "it sounded so different, very Nazi," says Klaus Biesenbach, chief curator of media and performance art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the first institution to dedicate a staff to collecting and archiving such challenges to traditional object-art. "It had a political message," Biesenbach says. "In New York it was purely an ode to joy."

The only object for sale was the piano, which the artists had

BENOIT PAILEY

altered by drilling an 18-inch hole in the soundboard, cutting the strings to the middle two octaves of the keyboard. (Made in an edition of three, it had a six-figure asking price.) One at a time, the young musicians—three men and three women recruited for the show—essentially costumed themselves in the instrument, climbing inside the piano and playing the keys at either end, upside down and backward. And that was only half the job.

While improvising their performances, plucking strings and using the dead keys as percussive accents, they had to roll the piano slowly through each of four exhibition spaces in the gallery. Astonished audience members followed, surrounding the piano and taking pictures with camera phones, unwittingly collaborating in the performance itself.

**AUDIENCE** participation in art is not new, of course. Robert Rauschenberg's Experiments in Art and Technology involved spectators in a series of dance, music, and theater pieces in 1966, around the same time that Fluxus artists like George Brecht and Yoko Ono were making a practice of it. Brecht printed up instructions, or "scores," of simple tasks for audiences to perform; in her 1965 *Cut Piece*, Ono invited spectators at Carnegie Hall to pick up a pair of scissors and cut away her clothes. Nine years later in *Rhythm 0* at Studio Morra in Naples, Marina Abramovic lay on a table with more than 70 objects, including scissors, perfume bottles, and a gun, and remained completely still for six hours to see if visitors would use them on her or not, and if so, in

what way. Observers reported that audience members pierced her skin, cut her clothes, drank her blood, and would have shot her if they hadn't been restrained.

"Brecht said it was impossible to look at objects and not think of them as events," explains Peter Eleey, curator of visual arts at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Eleey has included several of Brecht's event scores in "The Quick and the Dead" (on view through September 27), a historical show of decidedly ephemeral, conceptual artworks that seem to be made of, or do, nothing. The exhibition checklist includes a human skeleton by Belgian artist Kris Martin, but it is buried somewhere out of sight on the museum grounds and represented by a certificate stating its GPS coordinates. Robert Barry's electromagnetic transmission operates invisibly. Hannah Rickards is responsible for an extended, and shattering, thunderclap. "I wanted to do a show that is more than meets the eye," says Eleey. "But there is a lot to see."

Sehgal's works, which the artist calls "situations," are at the forefront of the new wave of immaterialization. Performed by "interpreters" who act according to his oral instructions, the pieces employ dance movements, scenes from historical artworks, and quotations from books and newspapers. Sehgal, who has been trained in both choreography and economics, is a kind of 21st-century visionary. He has invented not only a renewable form of performance art but also a new way to market it, without any written or visual record to promote or sustain it. His works may save paper, but they are expensive to make and, according to New York's Marian

#### EXERCISE

- Determine the limits of an object or event.
- Determine the limits more precisely.
- Repeat, until further precision is impossible.

**OPPOSITE** An installation view at the New Museum of Jeremy Deller's ongoing project *It Is What It Is: Conversations About Iraq*.

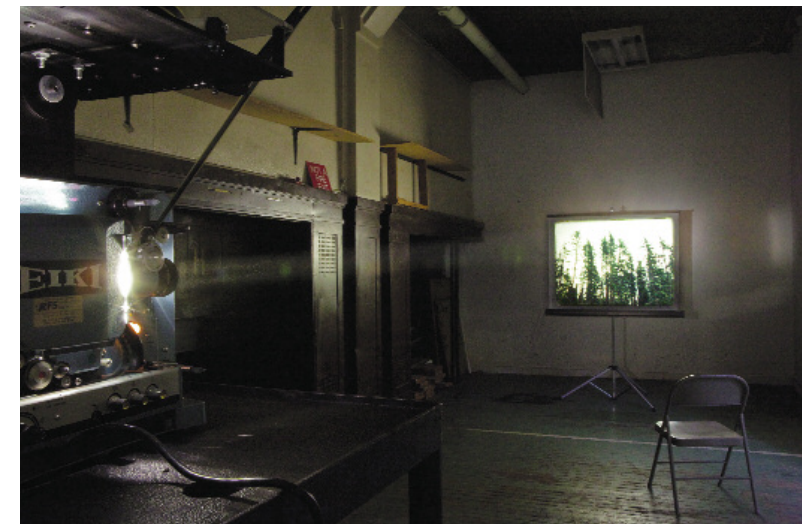
**ABOVE** George Brecht, *Exercise*, 1963.

**RIGHT** *Still Alive*, 2005, a silver-plated replica of Kris Martin's own skull, is on view in "The Quick and the Dead."



LEFT: GENE PITTMAN/WALKER ART CENTER, MINNEAPOLIS; WALKER SPECIAL PURCHASE FUND, 1988; RIGHT: ACHIM KUKULES/ COLLECTION ANDREA WELSHOF AND VOLKMAR KOLSCH, BIELEFELD, GERMANY/COURTESY SIES + HOKE, DUSSELDORF





**LEFT** Readers reading On Kawara's *One Million Years* at David Zwirner, New York. **ABOVE AND RIGHT** An installation view of Mungo Thomson's *Silent Film of a Tree Falling in the Forest*, at the 2008 Whitney Biennial.



Goodman Gallery, can cost up to five-figure sums to acquire.

To purchase *The Kiss* (2003), a stylized, slow-motion seduction in which a couple locked in an embrace re-creates kisses from popular artworks, MoMA had to agree to stipulations such as presenting the piece for six weeks every two years (to keep it from being forgotten), not allowing catalogues or photographs, and paying the performers a handsome fee. Nothing was put in writing, not even a bill of sale.

"Buying *Kiss* was a huge ordeal," Biesenbach reports. The negotiations involved a dozen different people, including lawyers, curators, dealers, conservators, and an "interpreter" for Sehgal. "It's oral history," Biesenbach says of such works. "It needs an institution to give it visibility and access to a large audience."

Late last year, Milan's Nicola Trussardi Foundation sponsored the exhibition of nine Sehgal works in the period rooms of the Galleria d'Arte Moderna's 18th-century Villa Reale. Its curator was the New Museum's Massimiliano Gioni, who included Sehgal's first artwork, *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things* (2000) in his 2008 group exhibition, "After Nature."

Executed by a single dancer rolling on the floor, with poses lifted from videos by Bruce Nauman and Dan Graham, it is a mesmerizing piece that is startling at first blush, when it isn't clear whether the dancer is performing or is the victim of a fall from a staircase. "It carries out the idea that you can preserve history through the movement of your body," says Gioni of Sehgal's work, rather than through notations

or objects. The same could be said of *Stop, Prepare, Repair*.

"It's no accident that Sehgal's reputation has risen with the derivatives market," says Elee, who presented the artist's first U.S. museum show at the Walker last year. "The work circulates as pure capital. Once you understand that it can't be documented or represented any other way, it changes the primary experience."

Like Deller, Sehgal believes that the act of performing should be delegated to other people. "That's different from past work by Marina Abramovic, Chris Burden, or Bruce Nauman, whose bodies feel the pain of the performance," Gioni says. "It's their sacrifice. Now the artist creates the situation and others carry out the action."

I became one of those others in February, when I was conscripted by David Zwirner, along with dozens of volunteers, to read aloud *One Million Years*, an epic work begun in 1969 by On Kawara, best known for his monochromatic "date" paintings. What viewers saw in the otherwise empty gallery was a soundproof white booth with two people, a man and a woman, seated before microphones at a white table and taking turns reciting the years from 998,031 B.C. to A.D. 1,001,995.

Speakers, mounted on the gallery walls, amplified the voices, while a sound engineer outside the booth recorded the readings for compact discs to be released in boxed, limited-edition sets at some future date. (According to the gallery, if 27 CDs are produced by one of several participating galleries each year, the project will still take 100 years to complete.)

After less than two minutes of reading the even years, starting with 59,600 B.C., from the pages of a thick black binder, I thought I would go mad. Meanwhile, spectators in the gallery walked around the booth, listening intently. They distracted me, and I kept making mistakes, inadvertently skipping years, repeating them, reading my partner's numbers, even going backward.

Once I found a rhythm, my mind began to wander through time, the subject at hand. I could not imagine what sort of civilization or planet there would be 60,000 years in the future; what had the thousands of years past already wrought? I felt sick. It was frightening to be propelled so fast and so far, from the beginning of time to the end of it. Thrilling, too. But if I hadn't taken part, I don't know how profoundly I would have been struck by the passing time, or by our tenuous grip on it.

**THE ABSENCE** of visible objects makes room for all sorts of heightened experience in art. Think of Yves Klein's much-hyped, now-mythic 1958 opening in Paris of an exhibition, featuring blank white walls and an empty cupboard, from which the public was temporarily locked out. Or Joseph Beuys's blackboard "lectures" on art and politics as paths to spiritual enlightenment. Or Michael Asher's 1974 show introducing the everyday transactions of his Santa Monica gallery's back office and storage area as the substance of art, while the exhibition space remained empty.

The breakneck, stream-of-consciousness monologues that the 27-year-old British artist Tris Vonna-Michell has brought to large group exhibitions, like the current "Younger Than Jesus" triennial at the New Museum, have a direct line to Beuys's lessons, as well as to more recent lectures by John Bock, who twists the language of economics, art, and psychology into absurdist verbal sculpture.

This winter, the Pompidou Center in Paris opened a historical show called "Voids." The title, inspired by Klein, was more than appropriate. The nine identical rooms—comprising recreations of exhibitions past—were distinguished from the other galleries elsewhere in the museum by the absence of any visible object. The only contents of Art & Language's *Air Conditioning Show* (1966) was, in fact, cool air. Roman Ondák's installation *More Silent Than Ever* (2006) was a hidden listening device in an otherwise empty gallery. Padding through the silent halls, visitors were, essentially, the show.

Does a tree fall in a forest if no one is around to see it? *Silent Film of a Tree Falling in the Forest* (2005–6), a seven-minute, 16-millimeter film by Los Angeles-based artist Mungo Thomson, was a hard-to-find entry in the 2008 Whitney Biennial. The point of the film isn't just that life goes on whether or not anyone is looking, but also that it takes an eyewitness, or an artist, to make sense of it. Yet no retelling can fully capture what transpires between art and its audience at any given time. You just have to be there.

After all, a viewer can walk away from a painting. It is much harder to detach from an experience that lives under the skin. ■