

# STEPCHILDREN

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## Performance III Museum of Modern Art (Feb. 22)

In the recent past a succession of little theater organizations — among them the Artists' Theater run by John Bernard Myers and Herbert Machiz in the '50s and the American Theater for Poets run by Diane di Prima and Alan Marlowe in the '60s — produced proscenium works, usually of literary origin, with the collaboration of visual artists as set and costume designers. By the late '60s several new, definitely theater-oriented groups had appeared, appealing to an art-world audience. Mabou Mines, Richard Foreman's Ontological Hysteric Theater and Bob Wilson's Byrd Hoffman Foundation all have incorporated adventurous texts and sounds as well as visual matter into fairly elaborate productions.

But it's commonly accepted that the most direct antecedents of current performance art are the happenings and Fluxus-like activities that began in the late '50s in the United States, Europe and Japan. Happenings themselves were an outgrowth of, and sometimes a reaction against, the painting and sculpture of the time, particularly abstract expressionism. Fluxus, which among other things popularized the format of performance as concert, had its roots in both the visual arts and music.

Considering its radical history, it's amazing to see how much certain performance art has come to resemble conventional theater. Such was the case on Friday, February 22, as the Museum of Modern Art, in the latest of a string of

performance evenings that have been sponsored by the Museum's Junior Council over the past few years. The evening was called "Performance III" in reference to the three pieces, each by a different artist, on the program.

The setting was not optimal. Instead of the auditorium, which is equipped to handle stage works with comfort, there was a makeshift theater in the sixth-floor Founders' Room — low platform at one end, wooden folding chairs in unraked rows. Massimo Mostacchi's piece, *In Other Words*, was essentially a monolog, the artist alone at a cafe table with a bottle of wine and an invisible companion. His live "conversation" alternated with his own voice on tape, the latter acting as intellectualized critical observer. Unfortunately, the links between the two elements were not clear, and the piece came off as a theatrical vignette of the type that might be presented as an exercise by a student in drama school.

*The Interrogation* by Federica Maragoni was more in the nature of what is thought of as performance art. Its major failing was that it went on too long — not as a demonstration of a theory of boredom (as is in some works by Nam June Paik), but as self-conscious lethargy. Holding a wax life-mask in front of her face, the artist triggered a mechanism that released fake blood from the eye sockets, smoke from the head. With a torch she melted a wax "canvas," on which had been projected a Carpaccio painting, revealing a tablet inscribed "ART." A heavy-handed statement in her program notes referred to this action as the "enduring message of the artist, thereby perpetuating the necessary search for THE NEW REALITY OF

ART" (caps hers). Her visual imagery was most effective in a film of melting wax body segments; this was brief, to the point and self-explanatory.

Guy de Cointet's *Tell Me* was unabashedly called "a play" in the program notes. De Cointet never appears in his pieces; he hires "actors," apparently with genuine theatrical training, to play "parts." The three fashionable women on stage spoke lines that almost sounded coherent, that the characters obviously understood, but which in reality often had no logical meaning at all. All the props and actions were deceiving: a series of letters on a board was really a long-lost treasure map, a green "T" was really a green telephone, a hard geometric painting (referred to in the dialog as "soft" and "romantic") was also a board game, a singing "musical" sequence was silently performed in sign language, orange blocks were a book, the book was practically alive (one of its "characters" had an odor so strong that the "readers" were repelled), and on and on. Some of it was forced, and it may have been more suitable Off Broadway, but it was the most original piece of the three.

More important than the circumstances and details of this particular evening is the Museum's attitude toward performance art itself. It should be emphasized that, although there have now been four or five such events on its premises, this implies *no official acceptance on the Museum's part whatsoever*. All of these evenings have been sponsored by the Junior Council, a fund-raising adjunct of youthful potential trustees, with no support at all from any of the curatorial departments. "Performance III," and a similar showing presented in 1978, were organized outside of his regular working hours by Cee Brown, a junior staff member in the Education Department. In

1977, also working strictly on his own time, Brown established an on-premises performance archive which by now has grown to include 2000 artists' work in eight legal-size drawers and an oversize cabinet. Despite his dedication, the files were once virtually inaccessible for research unless the potential user could match Brown's own odd hours on the project. It was only last year, when the Museum's forward-looking librarian, Clive Phillpot, obtained permission to incorporate this archive into the library, that the material became available for public use during normal hours.

MOMA has become increasingly conservative in recognizing new trends. It is hard to believe that this is the same institution that invited John Cage to perform as early as 1943 and allowed Jean Tinguely's *Homage to New York* to destroy itself in the garden in 1960. The void left by MOMA's timidity is far more irreversible in the case of performance art than it would be in the case of painting or sculpture, where an artist leaves tangible results of his or her evolution along the way. The institution that fails to buy an artist's painting early on will probably be able to get the same or similar work years later, although at a premium price. But live presentation disappears; despite all the hoopla about documentation, no video, film or still photography can fully recreate the best performances done by major artists in their prime.

It is inevitable that art movements change, particularly as they become part of the establishment. Despite this one institution's lack of support, performance art is well out of the underground, and "Performance III" is only one indication that it has already lost a great deal of raw vitality. It is not enough to nag MOMA awake, tell it to grab its suitcases full of money and try to climb aboard. It has already missed the boat.