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A Rebel Form Gains Favor. Fights Ensur.



Marina Abramovic and Sean Kelly Gallery/ARS

Marina Abramovic and Ulay in "Relation in Time." [More Photos >](#)

By CAROL KINO
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ONE snowy night last month, as New Yorkers rushed home in advance of a coming blizzard, more than a hundred artists, scholars and curators crowded into the boardroom of the Museum of Modern Art to talk about performance art and how it can be preserved and exhibited. The event — the eighth in a series of private Performance Workshops that the museum has mounted in the last two years — would have been even more packed if it weren't for the weather, said Klaus Biesenbach, one of its hosts and the newly appointed director of the [P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center](#). After seeing the R.S.V.P. list, he had "freaked out," he said, and worried all day about overflow crowds.

As it was, he and his co-host, Jenny Schlenzka, the assistant curator of performance art at the museum, were surrounded at the conference table by a Who's Who of performance-art history, including Marina Abramovic, the 1970s performance goddess from Belgrade whose retrospective, "The Artist Is Present," opens Sunday at [MoMA](#); the much younger Tino Sehgal, whose latest show of "constructed situations," as he terms them, just closed at the [Guggenheim Museum](#); Joan Jonas, a conceptual and video art pioneer of the late 1960s who usually creates installations that mix performance with video, drawing and objects; and Alison Knowles, a founding member of the

Fluxus movement who is known for infinitely repeatable events involving communal meals and foodstuffs.



Marina Abramovic and Sean Kelly Gallery/ARS

Marina Abramovic in "Holding Milk" (2009) from "The Kitchen Series."

seen as a place where important discussions about the history and future of their genre is happening — has doubled the original invitation list.

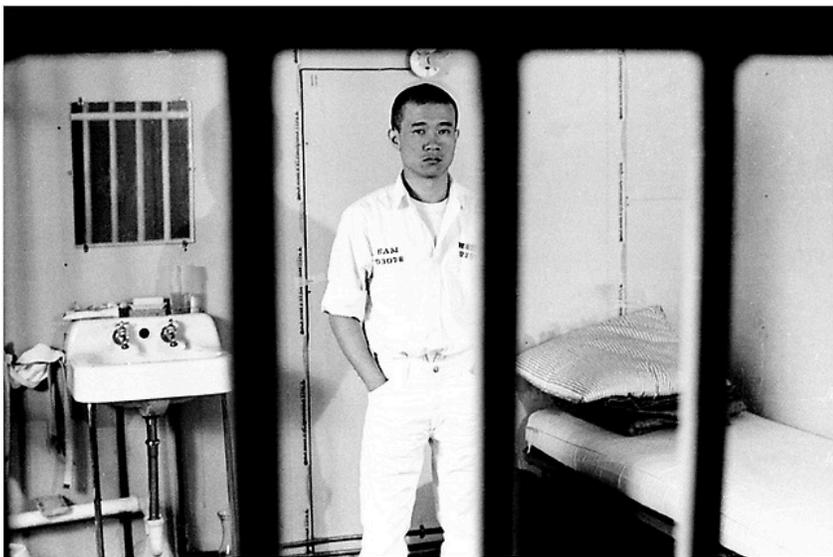
It was a scene that would have been hard to imagine just a few years ago, when major American museums, even those with an avowed interest in performance art, did not consider it central to their missions. But as work made in the 1960s and '70s — the era when modern-day performance art really took off — has increasingly come to seem the stuff of art history, and as more young contemporary artists have gotten involved in performance, that attitude has been changing. And nowhere has the shift been more dramatic than at MoMA, the country's most powerful arbiter of 20th- and 21st-century art, which has made up for being late to the table by digging in enthusiastically.

Not that the growing relationship between museums and performance art is entirely smooth. In the '60s and '70s, after all, the genre was fed by a desire among artists to turn away from the market — and the museum — with work that was ephemeral, unsalable and uncategorizable. There was a whiff of rebellion in the air at the MoMA workshop, for example, when Mr. Sehgal

Also in the room were interdisciplinary art stars like Terence Koh, Tony Oursler and Jack Pierson, the endurance performer Tehching Hsieh, as well as curators from other institutions, including Chrissie Iles of the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#); Nancy Spector, chief curator of the Guggenheim; [Jeffrey Deitch](#), the incoming director of the [Museum of Contemporary Art](#) in Los Angeles; and RoseLee Goldberg, the founder of the Performa Biennial in New York. There were many less familiar faces too, from artists in their 30's to more obscure older members of the performance-art world, whose interest in the workshop — which is

gestured at the glossy rosewood conference table before him. “This is a new touch,” he said, his voice tinged with acid. “I’m not sure whether there’s ever been such a salon around such a corporate table before.”

And as the talk turned to money, the acid splashed back toward Mr. Sehgal, who in his brief career — he is just 34 — has started an approach to selling performance art that is both providing museums with a new way to take ownership of it and enriching himself. In the past, performance artists have often sold photographic or video documentation of performances, say, or props and other artifacts left over after the events. But Mr. Sehgal is believed to be the first to have sold the rights to the performance itself; MoMA, for one, recently spent a reported \$70,000 for an edition of “Kiss” (2004), a living sculpture that was on loan to the Guggenheim for the recent show and that requires its performers to stay locked for hours in a continuous, balletic embrace.



Tehching Hsieh during his year in a cage in 1978 and '79.

“Can you tell me how you did this?” Ms. Abramovic asked in her heavily accented English, seeming genuinely interested. “Is really something I want to know.” Others, however, made it clear that they were less thrilled by his entrepreneurialism: “When I began in the late '60s, I didn’t think about selling my work,” one artist yelled. “It just wasn’t something that you thought about.”

Even the notion that certain works of performance art can or should be restaged after a piece’s original incarnation, central to Mr. Sehgal’s notion of selling rights and to shows like the Abramovic retrospective — and more generally to the increasing involvement of museums in performance art — is not without controversy. While some artists like Ms. Knowles create work meant to be repeated, with the presumption that it will be different each time, others feel that attempting to restage a work regardless of its original context — the social and political climate, the kind of art it was reacting to — is a perversion of its essence.

Ms. Abramovic, who once opposed the idea of recreating her past work, is now the leading avatar of reperformance, as it is sometimes called. In her MoMA show younger performers are re-enacting five of her old pieces, like “Luminosity,” an event in which Ms. Abramovic hung naked on

a wall in a gallery, as if floating or crucified, for two hours at a time in 1997, and “Imponderabilia,” a 1977 piece in which she and her former partner and lover, Ulay, stood naked in the main entrance of the Galleria Comunale d’Arte Moderna in Bologna, forcing visitors to squeeze past them.

“Reperformance is the new concept, the new idea!” Ms. Abramovic proclaimed at the workshop. “Otherwise it will be dead as an art form.”

Ms. Jonas grabbed a mike. “Well, maybe for you,” she said heatedly. “But not for me.” In a later telephone interview she acknowledged that she has always revisited her pieces but added that she usually translates them at some point into another medium or form, like video or installation. “There’s never a way that you could repeat the original thing; it just can’t be done,” she said, “so you have to think, ‘How am I going to deal with it if I’m going to show something of that moment?’ ”

Clearly such issues can make performance art a lot more complicated for museums to work with than many other forms. And some curators suggest other concerns. “To my mind you can’t recreate performances that rely on the power of the presence of that artist,” said Ms. Iles, the Whitney curator, “any more than you can recreate a performance of ‘Swan Lake’ by [Rudolf Nureyev](#).” She cited Ms. Abramovic’s early 12-year collaboration with Ulay as an example: In the black-and-white photographs and footage of those performances, Ms. Iles said, “you see the power of their particular physical bodies, which are so similar to each other in looks and stamina, you see their psychological relationship to each other.”

Works that are built around fairly straightforward instructions are another matter, Ms. Iles said, as in the case of Ms. Knowles’s 1962 Fluxus work “Make a Salad,” in which the performer does just that, or [Yoko Ono](#)’s “Cut Piece” from 1964, in which she invited the audience to cut her clothes with a pair of scissors.

“It’s not about Yoko’s body,” Ms. Iles said. “Anybody could do it.”

These complications may explain why a museum like MoMA, that temple of high Modernism, took so long to embrace performance art. As early as 1963 the museum showed at least a mild interest in the genre when it organized the off-site event “Push and Pull,” an “Environment” by Allan Kaprow in which visitors could rearrange two rooms of furniture (a joking homage to his former teacher, Hans Hoffman, who continually used the words push and pull in relation to painting). But often, performance at MoMA itself has consisted of unsanctioned protest actions against the museum. In 1969, for instance, the Guerilla Art Action Group removed Malevich’s “White on White” (1918) from the wall and replaced it with a manifesto. Also that year four members of that group stormed the lobby, held a wrestling match and fled, leaving behind a pool of animal blood

and handbills demanding the resignation of all the Rockefellers from the museum board. (Documentation from these events is now owned by MoMA and can be seen in the show “1969” at P.S.1 through April 5.)

In 2006, two years after Mr. Biesenbach arrived at MoMA as a film and video curator, he was picked to head a newly formed media department. He was already pushing the museum to acquire more performance-art-related materials, and eventually actual performance rights to works by Mr. Sehgal, the Slovakian artist Roman Ondak and the duo Allora & Calzadilla.

In January 2009 MoMA expanded the media department to include the performance genre, Mr. Biesenbach became its first curator, and MoMA began a performance-art exhibition series. The first show focused on Mr. Hsieh’s seminal “Cage Piece” (1978-79), for which he locked himself into a cage in his SoHo studio for a year. On display were the cage and its furnishings, as well as the 365 self-portrait photographs that Mr. Hsieh made to document his days in captivity.

Ms. Abramovic’s retrospective is the biggest performance exhibition that MoMA has mounted. Along with documentation and the re-enactment of her past performances, it features a new piece, “The Artist Is Present,” which Ms. Abramovic will perform every moment the museum is open for the entire 11-week run of the show. She says it is the longest-duration piece that has ever been performed in a museum.

But the most significant step that MoMA has taken may be the Performance Workshop, which Mr. Biesenbach began in early 2008. “It’s an important responsibility for the museum to really talk to the artists,” he said in a recent interview, noting that the issue had recently become more pressing. “The artists from the ’60s and ’70s are still with us,” he said. “And they might not be with us if we decide in 30 years.”

MoMA is not the first museum to get serious about historical performance or to go beyond the collecting of documentation or videos. When it comes to acquiring actual performances, it is following the lead of European museums like the Ludwig Museum in Cologne and the Tate Modern in London, which began doing it earlier this decade. And other American museums have restaged long-gone events. In 2005, for example, Ms. Spector and Ms. Abramovic jump-started the current performance-art reperformance boom with “Seven Easy Pieces” at the Guggenheim, for which Ms. Abramovic re-enacted several legendary works, including [Vito Acconci’s](#) “Seedbed” (1972), Joseph Beuys’s “How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare” (1965) and her own 1975 “Lips of Thomas,” during which she uses a razor blade to incise a pentagram on her stomach.

Ms. Abramovic saw that show, she said in a recent interview, as a way “to take charge of the history of performance.” In the 1990s, as younger artists became interested in work of the ’60s and ’70s, she said she noticed that some were restaging historical works themselves, often without

consulting or even crediting the originator. “I realized this is happening because performance is nobody’s territory,” she said. “It’s never been mainstream art and there’s no rules.” Finding this unjust, she decided to set them herself, by recreating the works in consultation with the relevant artists and estates. Better she should do it now, she said, because “they will do it anyway when you’re dead behind your back.”

Ms. Iles also suggested that museums have been collecting performance for decades without fully recognizing it. Take “Grapefruit” (1964) an artists’ book by Yoko Ono that is full of event scores. (One, called “A Piece for Orchestra,” begins “Count all the stars of that night by heart.”)

Although the work resides in the Whitney’s special collections department, Ms. Iles said it might better be reclassified as performance. “They are instructions to be performed by us and everyone who ever owned the book,” she said. (She will discuss some of these ideas on March 24 at “It’s History Now: Performance Art and the Museum,” a panel discussion presented by Performa at [New York University](#).)

“Performance challenges categorization, which was originally its point,” Ms. Iles said. “But museums are about archiving, categorizing, and indexing.” It’s not always an easy fit, but “maybe what’s interesting is the way in which the past is reframed in the present.”