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Balancing act between instinct and reason

or how to organize volumes on a flat surface in shooting photographs, films, and videos of performance

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Performance documentation and how to shoot it is what this paper is about. The methodology described here produced photographs that now are considered “historical photographs” and it is “after the act” that those photographs can be read as “organizing volumes on a flat surface”. In the heat of the moment I certainly didn't feel like reason had anything to do with shooting photographs. I just captured everything as fast as I could. The examination of a practice “after the act”, gives the false impression that above all, shooting photographs is about control. For me it was, and still is, exactly the contrary. Photographing is about relinquishing control. You submit yourself to whims, random thoughts, and haphazardness. Essentially the photographer should be in a reactive mode, far from reasoning. Intuition, whatever way you define it, is a must. Retroactively I am conscious of a slippage between the meaning associated with a body of photographs and the practice that preceded the accumulation of that corpus and the “balancing act between instinct and reason” applies to that slippage.

I came to performance photography because of the need to keep trace of what I was seeing and to record my amazement as a spectator. There was an urgency I felt when, for the first time, I saw Richard Foreman's play *Total Recall* in December 1970. What I saw was extraordinary but only four other people were there to see it. Therefore recording it was an absolute necessity. Somebody had to preserve for posterity some traces of the extraordinary originality of the third production of Richard Foreman's *Ontological-Hysterical Theatre*.

I

Richard Foreman's work with his performers was rehearsed and stable over time but most of the other events I saw involved a great deal of improvisation, creating different effects from one day to the next. The transitory nature of those events that seem destined to oblivion was another compelling reason to record them.

The concepts I used at first for shooting photographs were modeled on my training as a filmmaker: the concept of coverage, gathering shots, collecting moments. None came from any preconceived ideas of what a good photograph should be about. Neither was I interested in capturing the singular photo that could be used to publicize the work. The photographs I accumulated, first of Richard Foreman's theater and later of dance and performance art, were devoted to the concept of total coverage by shooting any new visual composition that occurred and discounting any possible interpretation of content. I was helped by the richness of this new tradition in Visual Theater that was the hallmark of Richard

Foreman's and Robert Wilson's plays. Editorializing the multiple photographs would come later, I thought, and there might be no need for it. Furthermore, somebody else could do it.

Clearly in my mind, photography was not about passing judgement, on the contrary, it was about absolute objectivity. The justification for shooting the photographs was solely that they should exist. How the photographs could be used was left vague because they were made for others who would make sense of them, if not now then sometime in the future. Making that work visible for my contemporaries was not my primary impulse. On the contrary, I felt that the originality of the work would be understood only at a future date and perhaps my photographs would help in that discovery.

The photographs should not represent me, or my taste, but should be just about what I was looking at. I felt that selflessness was of great importance in recording photographs that later could stand as documents. I had an enormous respect for the value of archives.[1] Because of my film culture, I already was versed in the various ambiguities attached to the so-called objectivity of a photograph. The whole decade of the 1960s in film, especially in Paris, involved an examination of the fallacies of direct cinema and Cinéma vérité and writings, like that of Jean Rouch, which were familiar to me.[2] I knew how the presence of the photographer could distort what was looked at. In the case of theater and dance, in New York, in 1970 and 1971, what I saw was structured by the author-director, the choreographer, or the performance artist, so my presence as the photographer didn't modify what I was looking at. It was not as if I was a filmmaker, as Chris Marker in *Le Joli Mai* (1963) or Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin in *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960), filming real people going on with their lives. Objectivity, it seemed, was still a possible goal and it was important to justify the action of "documentation" rather than "interpretation". The act of documentation was desirable because what I was seeing did not apply to an already known tradition but reflected structures that deployed new compositional rules. The comprehension of these new rules required objectivity.

I started to document spectacles that in those days were called "avant-garde". I had a concept of avant-garde movements from the 1920s and of their historical importance in defining some of the present. But in France, my knowledge of the performing arts had been totally traditional. This is perhaps why I was so struck by the newness of what I discovered in New York on my first visit in October 1970. Using references to what we now call the "first avant-garde" from the 1920s was not so strange in New York in 1970. I therefore adapted to my needs the idea of using automatism like the surrealists had done forty years previously to relieve some of my hesitation about shooting photographs. It was only later that I learned that John Cage had brought to art making his concept of chance.[3] Chance decisions were made visible everywhere in the improvisation techniques of many theater and dance events since Fluxus and chance were still in the air when I arrived in New York in 1970. In my own practice I merged the two organizational concepts of automatism and chance.

Developing automatism in shooting photographs is not difficult. Essentially it relies on being very fast in setting up exposure, on focus and framing, and to dare to fail if you go too fast. You will get better at it over time, so speed is of the essence. My motto was: Shoot first and think later.[4] At first my strategies were all about trying to get a decent exposure in spite of the low light, and as many shots as possible in spite of the undistinguished background and unpredictable events that unfolded in front of me. There was hardly time to measure the lights for a good exposure, one often had to guess. But

guessing right or wrong was not my primary concern as long as I got the shot. Getting it was better than missing it even if technically it wasn't "a good photograph".

The techniques of film emulsion and of film processing that I had learned, helped my ambition to become a cinematographer. The use of photography for scouting film locations was common practice at the time. And the search for an image that would not appear flat once projected on the movie theater screen was another preoccupation of the period. Both film director and cinematographer try to capture volume rather than flatness to bring a three dimensionality to the projected film image. Intuitively I felt that revealing volume was as important in photography as in film, so I privileged the use of normal lens over wide angle but kept my frame with a lot of context around the action.[5] The context, present in all my photographs, validates an objective look at what is there. More than just implying objectivity, the context guarantees it.

At the time I conceptualized photography as being solely literal and not metaphorical. I certainly believed that a photographer shouldn't impose a specific "style" to what he or she was photographing. Without formal training as a photographer, I felt that a series of photographs was more telling than just one photo and valued photo in bulk rather than in single unit. The contact sheet was extremely important with its multiplicity of shots and its compactness in telling the story behind the event. To make a photo documentation that was as exhaustive as possible by showing all the successive phases of the event was more desirable to me than to shoot one great photo.[6] As we now know, those iconic photos can be misleading.[7]

Although committed to my own method, I knew that artistic practice has to be open ended and couldn't be about applying rules that would fit all. On the contrary, art making is about inventing new forms. There was no feeling of constraint in regard to the rules I devised for myself. My own rules were somehow optional, as there was no need to justify any of my decisions. Although striving for objectivity in my documentation, I also valued my instinctive reactions in confronting the performance work. It is one of the most fundamental differences between my work as a photographer and my work as a filmmaker. While method and intuition are needed for shooting a film, for photography all you need is intuition. Furthermore, I believe that in shooting photographs, not only is an analytical response not needed, it is even a disadvantage.

II

Photographing dance made me utterly aware how important it was to avoid taking a misleading photograph. What you were recording had to reflect the specificity of the choreographer you were documenting. It was crucial not to make the choreography of Trisha Brown look like ballet or even like the choreography of one of her close friends and fellow choreographer Yvonne Rainer. Consider the pedestrian movement used by Yvonne Rainer in *Walk, She Said* or the incremental examination of the organic gesture tailored on ones' body in Trisha Brown's *Accumulation* (both from 1972). What you saw were two completely different movements, although they were both linked by their ordinariness. They had very different motivations: *Walk, She Said* was narrative and *Accumulation* was structuralist.[8] Both choreographies called for photographs that showed some of the commonality of the movement but also the variance in the organizational concept. I didn't want my photographs to reduce the performance to a cliché or unduly simplify the work.

III

The contradiction between objectivity and specificity was a balancing act between two opposite pulls. Avoid judgment in the way you photograph, so refrain from critical commentary in your decisions to record this decisive gesture. It was important to achieve a specificity that requires some critical sense of what you are looking at. What kind of criteria could justify the decision of what was specific and what wasn't? In the case of dance, it was the kind of movement explored in the choreographic work that enabled me to define what differentiated Trisha Brown from Yvonne Rainer. In the case of theater it was the use of deep space and the staging of the entrance and the exit that enabled me to distinguish between Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson. I thrived in the theater proscenium setting, because photographing an event that positioned the audience without any uncertainty was easier. I prepared by looking at rehearsals without shooting, coming the next day to shoot what I was seeing but also what I remembered having seen the day before. I felt I could discover what was specific by just remembering what I had found memorable on a first viewing of the work. While respecting the structure of the performance, I felt free to do some interpretations by merely using my own reactions, based on the specificity I saw in one work that was absent in another.

I ended up with the criteria of the "new", which was very much a key quality in art circles all through the 1970s. Around 1976, I settled on a practice that shifted back and forth within the bracket of two modes, an automat mode that I called "shooting without thinking" and an urgent mode that I referred to as "shooting the specificity of the work".[9] I also kept the practice of taking as many chances as possible, experimenting with darkroom skills to produce better negatives that had less contrast. This implied spending more time looking and examining the contact sheets before going back to shoot the same work a second or third time. So I could modify some choices I had previously made and could assess what I had missed and therefore could capture at the next photo session. I reached the point when planning trumped intuition, which could undercut my pleasure. The desire to look is necessary when shooting photographs. To a certain degree, I feel you can only shoot photographs if you take on a totally innocent and naïve position in front of the work. If your planning turns into an obsession, you lose. You should never feel that you have exhausted the material. If you do, you have to stop shooting this particular kind of work.

I continued shooting theater, dance, and performance all through the 1970s and became increasingly aware of the significant differences between the three.[10] Theater was more predictable because often it was repeatable and you could go to rehearsal before shooting the dress rehearsal. The challenge was to avoid being trapped in "shooting for the lines". I never listened to the spoken text, as I was solely focused on visual matter.

Dance was more challenging if you dealt with a group piece. Solo work was simpler, because you only had to decipher one dancer's movements. The position of the soloist in relation with the background was not that important and could be neutralized by composition and focus. But in the choreography for a group piece, the dancers' relation to the space was the main problem for the photographer as you had to capture at least two things: the movement of each dancer and the interactions and spatial composition between the dancers. Since the background was important in establishing those variable interactions in a group piece, you often composed the shot with the background rather than without.

For performances in the strict sense of “performance art”, often associated with just one performer (Vito Acconci, Joan Jonas, Jack Smith, Stuart Sherman, and later Michael Smith and others), rehearsals were rare. You had little prior knowledge of what you were going to shoot. The photographs were mostly shot during the actual performance in the presence of an audience that could be anywhere. Often the performance space was unpredictable as well. Interactions with objects used as props were often what the performance was about and you dealt with the issue of scale between the performer’s body and small props, which you had no control over. Most artists didn’t always carry their preoccupations in staging, audience mode of address, and vocabulary, from one piece to the next. There was a lack of consistency in the work and what had been done in the last performance didn’t apply to the next one. What the performance artist implied in the multiple activities shown in the piece was a specific relation between audience and performer. The audience’s position in relation to the performance was key to the comprehension of the work.[11] The photographer’s challenge was to make visible the interactions between performer(s) and audience in the space. My main guideline was to identify with the position of the spectator in the middle of the audience.[12] I was trying to capture the mental images that would become what an audience would likely remember of the piece. Those often became the “iconic” images for the piece. So my first impulse was to decide where I should physically position myself to photograph. In some art performances this decision was more difficult than in theater or dance. After the camera position, the most important for me was to decide what lens I should use to find the proper scale between the performers’ bodies, the actions that are performed, and the space itself.[13]

Although you could be motivated by sound effects to shoot some photographs, the sound as in all other forms of performance, wasn’t represented in the photo. It was also impossible to represent how actions could be stretched out or slowed down. Time manipulation was a familiar trope in Robert Wilson’s work as he systematically used very slow movement. For instance, one performer would take twenty minutes to cross the stage diagonally while others would move faster or stop altogether. The attention needed to witness a slow movement is tantalizing because the spectator’s concentration varies in the course of the movement’s duration.[14] Photography deals with composing in relation to a frame that can be precisely defined by the photographer by means of the scenic design or intentionally obliterated via soft focus or close up. But how long it takes to do something that can’t really be photographed. You need motion picture or video to render the duration of a performance and the audience’s reactions during the unfolding of the performance itself.

The practice of recording dance rehearsal started almost immediately after the Sony Portapak became common. Video appeared at first as a tool for securing improvised movements that could be recaptured later. I think, Twyla Tharp was the first who used video as an annotation tool in dance rehearsal starting around 1972.[15] The quality of the video was not good enough to show fully what had gone on to an audience that hadn’t been there. So the videotape was just useful for the people that had participated in the improvisation, but it wasn’t very readable for an outsider.

IV

Somehow the length of time of most performances, which could vary from a couple of minutes to half an hour to several hours (even 24 hours in the case of some of Robert Wilson’s theater pieces), was the first conceptual stumbling block that prevented the use of film for recording performance, not even

with the much cheaper Super 8 film. It was not only the cost but also the manipulation of film rolls packaged as three minutes long or ten minutes long and the necessity to edit between all the rolls. Photography was immediate and reactive. Film had to be pre-conceptualized before shooting. The task was even more complicated if what you wanted to film was improvised. How could you plan the filming, in order to make those improvised variations perceptible to the film spectator? To film improvised material you would have needed collaborative effort between the maker of the performance piece and the filmmaker, but the time to do so was not there. Most performance works were conceptualized quickly and performed only once or twice. If collaboration was necessary you needed to distinguish between the "performance", the part of inventing the event, and executing it as a "performer". Only the "inventor" could collaborate with a filmmaker, not the "performer". To film you need distance, to be a performer you don't. Distance can make the performer self-conscious. It is a lot easier to collaborate if you are detached from the event itself so filming something that is restaged after the act is a lot easier. As a filmmaker, I didn't feel tempted to film what I was seeing in performance.. The exception was the making of my first dance film, choreographed and performed by Trisha Brown *Water Motor* (1978). A series of photographs could provide a chronology of the iconography of the piece, some sense of the maker's intentions and aesthetics, and therefore be informative and worthwhile. Film was almost doomed to fail if you couldn't restage the action for the film camera, and that was needed to make an interesting film work. Therefore a choreographer like Yvonne Rainer, who turned to film making in 1972, called herself a filmmaker. What she was doing was a film, not a documentation of her performance work.[16]

You have to examine the similarity and differences between live performance versus the document of the performance to understand why filming it isn't obvious and also why I, as a filmmaker, didn't do it. The way we see a live event is not fixed or stable. In live performance the viewer watches with all the distractions of peripheral vision and has enormous choices of what to look at. He can turn his head away, he can look at the audience behind him instead of at the performing area and he can even close his eyes and not look at anything. This is the moment when you shift focus, relax your eyes and come back to the performance space with renewed interest and acuity. But when we look at a document like photography, film or video the first element we see is the frame of the document. We have no reason to drift elsewhere outside the frame. Actually not looking at the document would seem ludicrous. To maintain undivided attention on a video or film taken from a fixed camera position, even if that image is well shot, is not a given. In a live performance, the viewer's mind is active, analytical, and sensorial. The static document always appears to deliver less and doesn't encourage sensorial connections or emotional participation. Furthermore a static camera filming a live performance isn't using the two key characteristics of film, the power of ubiquity via montage, and the possibility of multiple points of views via variable camera positions. If I had to summarize the essential differences between film and photography in documenting performance, I would say that, for better or worse, the motion picture camera can mislead while the still camera can be mute.

When I try to understand the performance work of artists I have never seen or met, I intuitively feel that the multiplicity of sources, photographs, videos, films, and texts, like artist statements and critical commentary, are absolutely necessary. From the documentation I need to be able to reinvent what the performance artist was doing. Multiple sources permit me to reconstruct via my own sensibility and imagination the social and artistic context within which the work was invented. I recently discovered

that fact in the work of two artists, namely, Lygia Clark and Gina Pane, who were very active in Paris in the early 1970s, while I was in New York. I discovered their work solely through documentation. Although they had worked in the same city (Paris) for several years, they have nothing in common. They both came from an art background but Lygia Clark was all about sensorial experimentation and flexible forms, while Gina Pane was all about control of the self and of her self-image. Looking at the documents you notice that they interacted very differently with their photographers and comparing their archives shows clearly the limits of documentation. You have to fight the documentation in order to rethink the performance and imagine what they did and why.

In my task as an archivist I now value the written text as a more detailed and diversified source for the context and the concepts that explain the artist's intent as well as the performance impact on others. Writing had to be added to the photo or film documents from the periods that represent the work. But as a maker of those still image and film documents, I testify to their shortcomings. The two categories of visual documentation are the still image that can be iconic or just anecdotal, and the moving image that accounts or at least alludes to time and duration. Both are needed as one shows an immediate access to the iconography while the other shows process. But we are left with an important question. Can such visual documents mislead the archivist of the future? In a photograph, the background can impose itself on the performer's body and somehow make it disappear. But it can also strengthen the body's presence with the right framing and it can expose the body in an amplified context that is part of the work. But the more the performer controls his/her image, the more the background is made to disappear. The photos that Gina Pane staged of many of her works are a good example. These photographs neither convey any sense of the space where the event occurred, nor of the audience and its investment into looking at the event. Her staged photos show the end result of the process and evacuate the performance that was the process. In opposition, Gina Pane's video documentation shows some of the process but misleads as to the impact or even duration of the process since the video is made of disconnected fragments of the performance and doesn't represent the time of the performance.

V

Looking at the photographs of the happenings staged by Allan Kaprow and Robert Whitman in the late 1950s and early 1960s, we see an undistinguishable mix between participation and spectatorship. Participation was what the work was all about. In the late 1960s and in the 1970s, Lygia Clark developed a type of performance that refuses spectatorship and was only about sensorial participation. The only way to produce convincing documents to represent Lygia Clark's ideas behind her work is to combine photography and text.[17] Because her work was about being inside a sensation and not external to it, the image produced by the photo or film camera, which is always outside the body, misrepresents the work. It is about a sensorial change inside the body that literally defies representation, but can be written about.

Now in view of the importance of the image as a locus for the publicity of the work, the rapport background-context / foreground-performance is still as important as ever, but the aesthetics of the 1970s was about bridging art and life so the background was part of the work. Currently it the opposite is the case. For example, just look at the publicity photos of the Matthew Barney performance and film work used by the Guggenheim Museum New York for his retrospective in 2003. There is no

context. Matthew Barney's definition of his work is contained in an iconography that avoids all contexts.

Today you could say that performance photography is used for selling the work as an art logo and is unable to represent anything that helps understand the work. But in the 1960s and 1970s I think photography could at least represent the importance of the architectural design or displacement where the actions or events took place. It could also show the use of public space and the by-standing audience that was central to performance at the time. The photograph could represent how to look at the performance. A performance work like *War* by Yvonne Rainer was staged on two floors in 1971 in the NYU Loeb Student Center. Photographing *War* could make the complexity of the space and the multiple choices of the spectator totally obvious with only a couple of photographs, while filming it was enormously difficult. Why? Because the photograph doesn't necessarily imply spectatorship but it can represent the act of looking, while the moving image always presupposes a spectator. The spectator who watches the film is not necessarily in the same position as the spectator who was present and watched the actual performance.

For the filmmaker who wants to film performance, the big question is how to go about it? Documents versus staged reconstitution, direct address, and Brechtian distance versus immediacy. Is the "mise en scène" of the performance "a must" when producing a valid document? My own experience says yes: anything is better than a straight, so called objective camera position, to produce a film or a video that could pass as a valid substitute for being there if you yourself couldn't be there for the "real thing." "Mise en scène" means staging as well as setting and is used in film and critical studies to address the fact that both directing and aesthetics matter. But the term particularly applies to performance art, as performance is one of the few genres that is not based on stereotypes and preset codes of spectatorship and image making. That is why performance films made by filmmakers who do not understand the performance work per se are so often irrelevant. The filmmaker must bring the perspective needed to comprehend a performance work that is ground breaking in its principles. He/she should not apply the conventions of his/her own medium to filming the performance. Therefore he/she has to invent new rules for filming the performance work. Camera movements could mislead by highlighting the performer's own movement or by canceling it out. Other decisions like the use of long shot or close ups can produce very different version of the same moment in the piece and in certain cases totally subvert the work, bringing value from the commercial and advertisement world to a performance that is at odds with those values. You end up with slickness instead of authenticity.

In the 1970s, performance was anchored by a specific sense of time that now in 2005 we have lost, but studying works from that era can reconstitute that sense of time.[18] Every period has a set of assumptions that are somehow so familiar that they are unseen by the participants and the viewers because they are perceived as the norm. But norm changes and the filmmaker documenting or reconstructing performances several decades later has to make obvious those unseen set of assumptions that justify the work and somehow explain them to an audience from another era.

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Notes

- 1 Both my parents were historians so the value of archives in writing history became familiar to me at an early age.
- 2 In 1960 and 1961, Jean Rouch, anthropologist and filmmaker, published several ground-breaking texts and manifestos in *Les Cahiers du Cinema*, about the interaction between camera and subject, and how the camera presence affects the subject that the camera documents.
- 3 John Cage who I met and worked for in 1974, making slides of one of his music pieces had a profound influence on me.
- 4 It is impossible to use the same logic in film practice. Film necessitates thinking first and shooting second and that is why straight film documentation is rarely very valid. Although it transmits information, this information is not mediated for the viewer and doesn't communicate the sense of being there. Film relies on organizing time and points of view, tasks you can do only after many trials and errors at the editorial phase. But photography editorial is a different matter. Editing photographs establishes just a selection, which doesn't add anything to the photograph. In film, editing is about deciding the order of shots. The meaning of a given shot changes in relation to the shots placed next to it, so order transforms meanings.
- 5 The "wide wide angle" lens creates a distorted perspective that can be misleading if your intent is above all to be objective. What is called the "normal" lens permits the rendering of a perspective that is similar to the human eye and is considered more "neutral".
- 6 I think the photos that I did of Joan Jonas's *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll* are a good illustration of this practice. Shoot everything even if the photo doesn't read well.
- 7 One famous example is Harry Shunk's photograph of Yves Klein's *Leap into the void*, from 1960.
- 8 I am using the term "structuralist" the way P. Adams Sitney used in his writings at the time, to describe the films of Michael Snow and Ernie Gehr.
- 9 1976 is the year when I became totally consumed by photography, in all my activities. My film *The Camera: Je, La Camera: I* (1977) analyzes my photo practice and tries to make this practice visible to the film spectator.
- 10 By 1976 the field was more crowded and at dance events I was bound to meet Nathaniel Tileston or Johan Albers, who shot opera, so I never saw him Downtown. The staff photographer from *The Village Voice*, Lois Greenfield, came unto the scene in 1976, and covered only dance. Photographers were specialized and stuck to what they thought was their expertise: either dance, theater, or performance. Peter Moore, who had covered everything in the 1960s, was now concentrating on performance art, and stopped coming to dance when the field became too crowded. I stuck with specific artists and never specialized in any one field.
- 11 It is particularly true of the work of Vito Acconci and Joan Jonas. Allan Kaprow discusses redefining, after Pollock, the position of the audience in art in his text "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock" (*Artnews*, 57 #6 1958), and his own artwork and "happenings" did just that in the late 1950s.
- 12 This is a clear difference to Peter Moore, the preminent photographer of the 1960s and 1970s, who positioned himself and his camera on the side and at an angle. I was almost always frontal to

the back wall of the performance space. I also used some architectural definitions of the space to anchor the frame of my photographs.

- 13 By the mid-1970s I had three Nikon bodies with three different lenses, 35mm, 50mm and 85mm. Zoom lenses couldn't be used in the low light conditions of most performance events.
- 14 John Cage discussed these phenomena of shifting attention and mental drift in his writings from the late 1950s, which I read many years later.
- 15 For Twyla Tharp, who was married to an experimental filmmaker, video was solely a recording medium. Her use of video at the time is not comparable to the video art pioneered by Nam June Paik in the 1960s and Joan Jonas in the 1970s.
- 16 It would be interesting to analyze how the impulse of just documenting versus recreating is present in Yvonne Rainer's first film *Lives of Performers* (1972), as the differences between Rainer's performance in *This is a Story About a Woman Who...* (1973) and the film that came from it, *Film About a Woman Who...* (1974), are very striking.
- 17 The well known image *Mask with Mirrors* by Lygia Clark (1967), an object made of lenses and mirrors to be worn by the participant as goggles, is an example of an image that doesn't represent what the mask does, which is to send back to the participant his own reflected image making it impossible for him to see the outside world. The mask sends you back to yourself. The photograph seems to imply the opposite, like access to a peripheral vision that would be behind you.
- 18 That is what I tried to do in *Four Pieces by Morris* 1993, a reconstruction of Robert Morris's seminal performances from the 1960s that I had never seen. The reconstruction was done in collaboration with Robert Morris.