preface

Food is good material for my art.

MILDRED MONTANO,
PAINTER AND MOTHER OF
LINDA MONTANO

This project began when the anthropologist Diane Rothenberg invited me to her “Anthropology of Food” class at the University of Southern California in 1979. It was then that I started to gather slides of food performances, which led to a series of ten interviews with performance artists who use food in their work. Those interviews were printed in *High Performance* in the early 1980s as part of the magazine’s food issue. After food, I explored other themes: sex, money and fame, ritual and death—all things I wanted to know more about. I realized that performance artists were addressing these topics, so I talked to them, sometimes intermittently, sometimes intensely, for the next ten years.

After each artist chose one of the four topics (sex, food, money and fame, ritual and death), I asked him or her essentially the same question: How did you feel about (food, sex, money, fame, ritual, or death) as a child? It has always been my personal belief that the themes artists employ are born in childhood and that an artist’s work explores, transforms, perpetuates, or makes the information from that time understandable and manageable via symbolic acts—art. Some artists I talked with are not interested in that connection and expressed this in our conversations. Some discovered it again or for the

first time. Others responded conceptually—for example, when asked about sex, Tony Labat said: “Interpret my silence.”

My own childhood habit was not to speak but to silently intuit everything. By placing myself in an atmosphere of talking with artists about subjects I once thought too delicate or taboo to discuss, I have slowly untied my own tongue.

Also, I now have even more permission to unearth my personal recurrent art theme—hunger. Had I been interviewed for this book, I would have chosen to talk about food. I would have mentioned my allergic reactions to cow’s milk as an infant, my childhood vomiting incidents and hospitalization; I would have mentioned the way my grandmother cooked roadkill and humorously called all of the different animals she cooked “chicken”; I would have mentioned my two years in the convent and anorexically going from 135 to 82 pounds; I would have mentioned my live chicken installations and later performances as Chicken Woman. Finally, I would have mentioned that for thirty years I have translated and transformed physical hunger into ecstatic, meta-physical longing disguised as art. Performance births Meditation!

Can Performance Artists Continue to Practice?

As I reread these interviews, some from twenty years ago, I am moved by two recurrent themes: courage and mortality. In his book *Writing as Sculpture*, the Indian philosopher Harish Johari told members of a workshop in Holland that artists are saints. I have always believed this, and had it been appropriate, I would have titled the book *Performance Art Saints Talking*, because we are not shy, but visible warrior-saints, who continue to work with outrageous content in great ephemerality, often without documentation or notice. We must be strong, because some of us have been jailed for our art (Hermann Nitsch), performances or videos have been stopped or banned (Karen Finley, Annie Sprinkle, Carolee Schneemann, Paul McCarthy), the National Endowment for the Arts has denied funding (Finley, Tim Miller), and college

and university administrators have censored our work. For example, Alex Grey remarks, “The administration and I never saw eye to eye, so I left school and painted billboards.” Mierle Laderman Ukeles recalls, “This work [a painting] got me in a lot of trouble because the dean . . . said that I was obviously oversexed and that the art was pornographic.” And, discussing her experience at Bard, Carolee Schneemann remembers, “There was great upset about his genitals appearing in the portrait [that I painted].” That was then! Yet even now, almost twenty years later, performance art often suffers from the same alienation, administrative censorship, marginalization, and cultural bias. Is it because high-level politicians and fundamentalist/conservative Internet users are hanging out—in privacy—in cyberporn chat rooms or on 900 phone sex lines and come out of hiding—with shame and guilt over their repressed frolics, persona changes, and technologically induced ecstasies—to implicate, in Helmsian complicity, performance artists willing to address real-life issues, in real time, using real flesh? Maybe, maybe not.

It’s complicated. The avant-garde doesn’t demand or expect acceptance, only a tolerant understanding and respect for its ability to aesthetically transform secrets, fears, addictions, impulses, and the shadow. In the meantime, we continue to be public and courageous—but also mortal and aging, and some of us in this book have died: Jim Pomeroy, John Cage, Ana Mendieta, Christine Tambllyn, Dick Higgins, and Hannah Wilke, as of this publication. Our bodies are our matter, our raw material, and I look forward to the incredibly profound, creative, and innovative ways that we will intelligently handle issues of time, cloning, robotics, environmental pollution, extraterrestrial life, cyborgs, weightlessness, androgyny, age reversal, gene therapy, and telepathy.

Relevance

It took over ten years to gather all the interviews for this book and another ten years to find a publisher. Much has changed in that time—

AIDS came, Soviet Communism went, the New Age tired, money as currency disappeared (replaced by credit cards and electronic payments), and sex became a dangerous activity, although Tantric sex was reborn. A book almost seems to be an antique, a pre-Internet phenomenon, an archaeological find, a relic from a time when we talked with each other, a time when we weren't held captive by fax machines, video conferences, cellular phones, caller ID, or e-mail. What was said back then was for then, and as those words came closer to being published, even though I thought the interviews were important, I worried about their current relevance until I read a quote from Margaret Mead, which said that young people needed "a good sense of the past" and urged them to read, in order to see how time has changed. If people have a sense of change, she indicated, they can project into the future, but if they think the world has always been the same, "with a TV set in the year one," they will lack imagination. I hope that *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties* will function as an invitation to imagination and reflection, helping readers to evolve the form of performance art using their own unique perspectives. It is also meant as an archival portrait of artists working in the ephemerality of performance, allowing readers to experience these artists' humanness, the depth of their knowledge, and the way that they wrestle with life's mysteries.

Gratitude

On every level this book is a collaboration and a team effort (the interviews need the introductions, the book needs the critical writings, and all of it needs a venue in order to reach the reader).

My deepest thanks to all the artists who allowed me to talk with them; you graciously gave information, wisdom, and good suggestions for making life more artlike and art more lifelike. Little did we know that performance art would resurge and be hot again, as well as commodified and academized!

Although there are apologies to be made to the many artists who have not been included in this book for various reasons, I feel that if I added interviews now, it would disturb the book's authenticity and flavor. (Actually, for editorial reasons, about a third of the 150 interviews submitted for consideration in the original manuscript were not included in this book.) Perhaps another author will be moved to follow where I left off or react to my inclusivity or exclusivity, thereby creating a new work on this genre. If you are included in the book and we have edited, subtracted, or changed things so drastically that you can't recognize yourself, please be lenient. Accuracy was our goal, but it was difficult to maintain.

Thanks to my typist and preparer, Margaret Henkeles, and her assistant, Anita Wetzel, for transcribing every interview from my handwriting to the computer—a labor of love and mastery.

The art historian Richard Shiff introduced me to Kristine Stiles, an art historian at Duke University. Kristine then became the angel-agent who, after reading the interview manuscripts, suggested that Stephanie Fay, an editor at the University of California Press, might be interested in the book. Stephanie sent it to two anonymous readers who made helpful suggestions for revisions, which I studied carefully and implemented as closely as possible. Jane McFadden, with help from Patrick Lakey, worked again on bringing all parts of the puzzle together as the book came closer to being published, a Herculean effort and fruitful collaboration. My thanks to them and to Stephanie Fay, Ellie Hicker-son, Sue Heinemann, Susan Ecklund, and Yuki Takagaki of the University of California Press for guiding the manuscript through the editing process and helping to make the work visible to the wide world.

Your Participation

From 1991 to 1998 I formally performed as a university teacher and found it to be one of my favorite personas. Therefore, the teacher in me feels free to offer my readers the following assignment:

Browse through or read the book. If there is any unfinished business in your own life on any topic—food, estate planning, enlightenment, umbrella policies, sex, money, medical care, teaching performance art at a university, irradiated meat, nursing homes for artists, antioxidants, real estate, tenure, cellulite, fame, censorship, your life's purpose, equality, the stock market, aging parents, and so on—interview someone who knows about that issue. After transcribing the interview, read it or listen to it until you feel satisfied and know what you need to know. Then teach someone else what you have found.

Linda M. Montano