

LESSON FIVE: Performance into Art



IMAGE NINETEEN: Yves Klein. French, 1928–1962. *Anthropometry: Princess Helena*. 1960. Oil on paper on wood, 6' 6" x 50 ½" (198 x 128.2 cm). Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Wiesenerger. © 2007 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

IMAGE TWENTY: Joseph Beuys. German, 1921–1986. *Eurasia Siberian Symphony* 1963. 1966. Panel with chalk drawing, felt, fat, hare, and painted poles, 6' x 7' 6 ¾" x 20" (183 x 230 x 50 cm). Gift of Frederic Clay Bartlett (by exchange). © 2007 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn



INTRODUCTION

Performance art, which emerged in the 1960s, encompasses a diverse range of forms, including theater, dance, and music. While some performances are now known only through photo, video, or film documentation, others resulted in works of art. In this lesson, students will explore two works of art that were created by performances.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will be introduced to performance art and will consider its relationship to more traditional forms of visual art, such as painting and sculpture.
- Students will consider the different ways in which performance art is documented.
- Students will explore artists' construction of identities in performance and their adoption of signature materials and props.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

Ask your students to discuss their experiences with performing arts, such as music, theater, and dance. What kinds of performances have they attended or participated in? What are the roles of sets, costumes, instruments, and props? What is the role of the audience? What materials, if any, are typically created by live performances? How does seeing photographs, video, or film of a performance differ from seeing the live performance?

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- **Divide your class into pairs. Have one student from each pair face the screen where you project images while the other student faces away. Show the image of *Anthropometry: Princess Helena*, by Yves Klein (Image Nineteen). The students facing the screen should describe this work to their partners, paying attention to color, materials, and **composition**. Their partners should draw what is being described, seeking clarification if necessary. When they have finished, have the partners facing away from the screen turn around to see if the work resembles what they drew.**
- **Ask your students to write down five words they associate with the color blue in this work. Have them share their words with the class.**
- **Inform your students that in 1960, with the help of chemists, Klein invented and patented this color, which he called International Klein Blue, or IKB. International Klein Blue is made from pure pigment held together by a clear binder that leaves its intensity intact.**

Klein claimed that International Klein Blue reminded him of the color of the sea and sky of his hometown on the Mediterranean coast of France. Using this color, he made many **monochrome** paintings, which he believed symbolized limitless space. He said, "Through color, I feel a total identification with space; I am truly free!"³⁴

Klein wanted to remove the direct touch of the artist's hand, traditionally valued in painting, and so he employed female models to act as "living paintbrushes," or machines for making art. He directed the women, who covered themselves in International Klein Blue paint, to make imprints of their bodies on large sheets of paper or canvas. In his large *Anthropometry* series (anthropometry is the study of human body measurements), Klein made only three paintings using the imprint of his own body.

- **Ask your students what they think about Klein's characterization and employment of models as "living paintbrushes."**

34. Yves Klein, "My Position in the Battle between Line and Colour," in *Force Fields: Phases of the Kinetic*, by Guy Brett (London: Hayward Gallery, 2000), 242.

To emphasize the importance of process over the finished works of art, Klein staged the making of his *Anthropometry* paintings as elaborate performances for large audiences, complete with blue cocktails and a performance of his *Monotone Symphony* (1960), a single note played for twenty minutes, followed by twenty minutes of silence.

- **Describe Klein’s process to your class using the artist’s own words:**

In this way I stayed clean. I no longer dirtied myself with color, not even the tips of my fingers. The work finished itself there in front of me, under my direction, in absolute collaboration with the model. And I could salute its birth into the tangible world in a dignified manner, dressed in a tuxedo. . . . By this demonstration, or rather technique, I especially wanted to tear down the temple veil of the studio. I wanted to keep nothing of my process hidden.³⁵

An audio excerpt of Klein’s *Monotone Symphony* can be heard on UbuWeb, at http://ubu.wfmu.org/sound/klein_yves/Klein-Yves_Monotone-Symphony_Excerpt.mp3. A film of the making of Klein’s *Anthropometry* paintings can be viewed on UbuWeb, at www.ubu.com/film/klein.html. **Please note: this film features nudity and may not be appropriate for all students.**

- **Ask your students to discuss Klein’s role as an artist. Is it similar to that of a painter, conductor, choreographer, or director? How does his role as artist compare to Sol LeWitt’s (see Lesson Two)?**

Before immersing himself in art, Klein had become an expert in the Japanese martial art judo, or “gentle way.” According to Klein, judo locates the human body at “the center of physical, sensorial, and spiritual energy.”³⁶ He earned the most advanced judo diploma possible, produced films and a book on the subject, and even founded a judo club in France.

- **Ask your students to consider how Klein’s interest in judo might relate to his *Anthropometry* series. What role does the body play in each of these arts?**

Klein said that the body prints in his *Anthropometry* series reminded him of imprints left on the judo mat after a participant had fallen.

- ***Anthropometry: Princess Helena* registers a physical trace of the model rather than a detailed likeness. Ask your students if they would consider this painting to be a portrait. Does the work’s title influence their interpretation? It may be useful to discuss this work in relation to handprints, footprints, and, particularly, thumbprints, which have long been linked to identity.**

Klein’s *Anthropometry* paintings register a direct trace of the body. Even though they do not typically include imprints of the head or face, Klein believed they were superior to representational paintings as portraits, as he considered the torso to be the body’s “essential mass.”³⁷

As a point of comparison, students will now look at another artist whose work is the product of a performance.

- **Before showing your students the next work of art, write the following list of materials on the board for reference: blackboard, chalk, hare, poles, fat, felt.**

35. Yves Klein, quoted in Jean-Paul Cloutier, *The Anthropometric Mystery*, www.uwo.ca/visarts/projects/kleinmystery/galleries/jp.htm (viewed August 2007).

36. Amelia Jones, “Untitled *Anthropometry*,” in *The Artist’s Body*, Tracey Warr, ed. (New York: Phaidon, 2000), 54.

37. Yves Klein, “Truth Becomes Reality,” trans. Howard Beckman, in *Yves Klein 1928–1962: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (Houston: Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1982), 230.

- **Ask your students to draw a picture or write a story incorporating these materials. Have your students share their pictures and stories with the class. What associations have they made with the different materials? Are there any commonalities among their pictures and stories?**
- **Now show your students the image of *Eurasia Siberian Symphony 1963*, by Joseph Beuys (Image Twenty), and ask them to describe what they see.**

This work is composed of the materials previously listed, used by Beuys in a 1966 performance—what he called an “action”—at a Berlin art gallery. Each of these materials held symbolic power for Beuys. While the hare, with its quick jumps, suggests the ability to span long distances, fat suggests insulation, which was essential to Beuys’s “warmth theory”—his obsession with the role of calories in sustaining life. To him, felt embodied protection and warmth as well as detachment and isolation.

- **Ask your students if they recognize any of the words and symbols written on the board in Beuys’s work.**

The board notes the degrees of the angles of fat and felt affixed to the sticks and the temperature (42° Celsius) of a high human fever. Note that both angles and temperature are measured in degrees.

This performance was documented through a series of black-and-white photographs, and very few of its details have been recorded. It was one of many performances in which Beuys used a taxidermied hare. In the empty gallery space, he knelt to tie the hare’s legs to long wooden poles, elevating it to his own height. He then hoisted the hare onto his shoulder and, holding it close to his cheek, whispered to it. Beuys took his own temperature and the hare’s and recorded these and the angles between the sticks on the board.

In his performances, Beuys often used animals, which he believed “comprehend more than many human beings with their stubborn rationalism.”³⁸ In addition to the dead hare, which recurs in several performances, Beuys lived with a wild coyote for five days for his 1974 performance *I Like America and America Likes Me*.

- **Ask your students to consider the title of this work, *Eurasia Siberian Symphony 1963*. What do they know about the two geographic regions in the title?**

Eurasia is the continental block that links Europe and Asia, evoking the fusion of Eastern and Western cultures—resonant for Beuys, who lived in divided Cold War Germany. Siberia, which Beuys saw as a place of spiritual journey and metamorphosis, is a vast, icy region of Russia and northern Asia. Beuys claimed that when he was injured in a plane crash during World War II, he was rescued by the nomadic Tartars of this region, who rubbed him with fat and wrapped him in felt to warm his body. Although Beuys’s performance, unlike Klein’s, lacked symphonic accompaniment, the photodocuments indicate that, in it, he played two long wooden poles as if one were a bow and the other a violin.

- **Ask your students to compare and contrast *Anthropometry: Princess Helena* and *Eurasia Siberian Symphony 1963* as documents or remnants of performances. Ask them to compare the roles of the two artists in their performances and in the making of these works.**

38. Joseph Beuys, quoted in Ursula Meyer, “How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare,” *Artnews* 68, no. 9 (January, 1970): 57.

During their performances, both Klein and Beuys assumed stage personas, akin to actors performing in character, and used signature props, materials, and costumes. Klein wore a tuxedo as he oversaw elaborate performances, while Beuys was known for wearing jeans, a felt hat, and a fishing vest both onstage and off.

- **Ask your students to consider why artists might create stage personas and use signature materials.**

ACTIVITIES

Fluxus Happenings

Joseph Beuys was considered part of Fluxus, an interdisciplinary, international **utopian** artists' group formed in the early 1960s that sought to break down the barriers between art and life and challenge the commodity status of the art object. Fluxus was known for impromptu performances, or **Happenings**, and for the distribution of low-cost **multiples**.

Both Beuys and Yayoi Kusama participated in Happenings, which were originated by Alan Kaprow. Have your students conduct research on Happenings by Fluxus artists, including Kaprow, Nam June Paik, Kusama, and Beuys. What prompted them? Where did they occur? What was the response to them?

Contemporary Performance Art

Have your students conduct research on contemporary performance artists and artists who use performance to produce works of visual art—such as Marina Abramovic, Vito Acconci, Janine Antoni, Matthew Barney, Martin Creed, Coco Fusco, Gilbert & George, Richard Long, Yasumasa Morimura, Adrian Piper, Miranda July, Bruce Nauman, Carolee Schneemann, Cindy Sherman, and Mierle Laderman Ukeles. What strategies and materials do they employ? What is the role of the artist's body in their performances? What subjects do the performances explore? How are they documented?