



**University of Dundee**

## **Retrospective Remarks on Rose English, Mona Hatoum and Ana Mendieta**

Guy, Georgina; Linsley, Johanna

*Published in:*  
Reconstructing Performance Art

*DOI:*  
[10.4324/9781003275909-16](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003275909-16)

*Publication date:*  
2023

*Licence:*  
CC BY-NC-ND

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

### *Citation for published version (APA):*

Guy, G., & Linsley, J. (2023). Retrospective Remarks on Rose English, Mona Hatoum and Ana Mendieta: Where Is Performance? In T. Gusman (Ed.), *Reconstructing Performance Art: Practices of Historicisation, Documentation and Representation* (1 ed., pp. 209-228). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003275909-16>

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in Discovery Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

"This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge/CRC Press in *Reconstructing Performance Art: Practices of Historicisation, Documentation and Representation* on 26th May 2023, available online: <http://www.routledge.com/9781003275909>."

# **Retrospective Remarks on Rose English, Mona Hatoum and Ana Mendieta**

Where Is Performance?

*Georgina Guy and Johanna Linsley*

Tate's website entry for the term "performance art" cites a definition from art historian Jonah Westerman that states, "performance is not (and never was) a medium, not something that an artwork can be but rather a set of questions and concerns about how art relates to people and the wider social world."<sup>1</sup> Such expansive understandings, foregrounded by art museums that now incorporate live events in their programs and collections, situate performance as a mode of arts practice particularly oriented towards context. Statements such as Westerman's, which often accompany performance's accommodation in the gallery, signify less concern for what performance is ontologically as how it functions sociopolitically and what it offers to art institutions seeking to generate experiential encounters from object-based collections and epistemologies. The framing of performance by contemporary art museums not as a formal but rather a conceptual tool for approaching ideas of encounter and relation raises questions, for us, as well as other performance-minded visitors, about how and where to locate the particular materialities and theoretical concerns of performance as it is produced by artists.

If Peggy Phelan's foundational ontological inquiry in *Unmarked* (1993) might be phrased as "what is performance?" then our reflections ask instead, "where is performance?" In what

follows, we attend closely to a selection of retrospective exhibitions by performance artists that hinge on the display of objects. Our intention in seeking to locate performance in these curated events is not to reinforce medium specificities but to reassert performance as a way that artists (make) work. There are formal particularities to processes of contextualization. By examining strategies of display and location, performance reemerges as method and infrastructure. Within each event, the work of the artist is itself identified, via our analysis, as engaged with complex practices of contextualization, which we might call form. Our focus on the retrospective as a certain type of solo exhibition thus allows for a complementary but differently elaborated engagement with performance as context. It unpacks ontology as the result of a negotiation that takes place over time and involves multiple agents (artist, curator) so that different ways of “situating” performance come to produce its alternative ontologies.

Given the emphasis, in this chapter, on context, it seems relevant to gesture to the circumstances in which it is written. In her contribution to a forum discussing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on performance and performance studies, Amelia Jones reevaluates if not her position on the ontology of performance, then the value of gathering in person. Jones holds that neither live nor screen-mediated encounters are “morally or politically or aesthetically superior” but admits that, within months of isolation, the “lack of actual bodies in spaces (performing and witnessing) starts to wear thin.”<sup>2</sup> The radical shift in social practice and its impact on experiences of physical proximity since the first pandemic lockdowns alters the coordinates of our discipline.<sup>3</sup> Familiar terms like “liveness” and “document” take on new dimensions. As Heike Roms argues, the skills and frameworks developed by performance practitioners to “bring people together in shared spaces’ have actually proven remarkably adept at supporting encounters at a distance.<sup>4</sup> Roms points to how performance “has at its heart an

examination of transfers and connections across remoteness.”<sup>5</sup> Writing this chapter together as an exchange “across remoteness” elucidates further how performance travels.

This collaborative chapter constitutes a set of remarks in response to three recent retrospective exhibitions of work by pioneering performance artists in London institutions: Ana Mendieta at Hayward Gallery (2013), Rose English at Camden Arts Centre (2015) and Mona Hatoum at Tate Modern (2016). The selection is in part expedient. London is where we have lived and worked, and the pandemic radically curtailed opportunities to attend gallery-based practices. More substantially, these events attest to increased regard for performance by art institutions of varying sizes both within the UK capital and beyond. Such presentations—to which we might add Carolee Schneeman at MoMA PS1 in New York City (2017–2018) and the Barbican in London (2022–2023) or Simone Forti at Museum der Moderne in Salzburg (2014)—constitute an international remarking of the significance of certain performance artists, often women, on wider art historical conversations. What interests us here is how these artists, prominent since the 1970s, meet a more contemporary moment through the format of retrospective exhibition, and how reviewing this work post-pandemic opens new views on the display of performance.

Led by visual work, the exhibitions we consider in this chapter share a strategy of display that relies on artifacts, which may document a performance or may be understood to “perform” themselves. This technique diverges from another prominent approach (of which the previously mentioned Forti exhibition is indicative) wherein live performers reenact, reconstruct, or reimagine earlier performance works within a gallery or museum context.<sup>6</sup> The context of display, as Guy has observed, is a “strong basis for reflecting on performance in terms of duration and in relation to the object.”<sup>7</sup> The particular objects used by Hatoum, Mendieta and

English offer rich possibilities for such reflection. We find in these exhibitions a partiality towards materials like earth, sand and glass—granular substances reducible to particle form that gain their shape and force in the world through accumulation. We notice concavities and convexities—the impression of a body in a landscape, a glass vessel literally produced through the capture of breath, a line in the sand continuously wiping itself out.

Overwhelmingly, the distinctive gestures we observe in these examples are characterized by movement and transformation. It is for this reason that we find it valuable to bring a formal lens to our inquiry into performance and exhibition, not to enforce category boundaries but to discover how these artists mobilize materials, ideas and contextual relations, and how these performance strategies are reproduced or represented within the retrospective space. Our method is to approach each of the three examples in our study through attention to questions of form that are necessarily, we argue, also questions about institutional structures, methods of display and modes of perception. Despite being an established curatorial form, prominent in contemporary international art museums, the solo exhibition itself has been, João Ribas suggests, “insufficiently historicised.”<sup>8</sup> This is incongruous with the ubiquity of this mode, as well as with its function as a display format that has a distinctive relationship to practices of historical contextualization. The retrospective is a specific kind of solo exhibition that works by decontextualizing artworks from the conditions of their making, and previous situations of public presentation, to then recontextualize these objects within the framework of the artist’s oeuvre. Retrospective shows thus recollect objects in an order that constructs an account of an artistic practice as a whole and makes a case for that practice as culturally necessary.

One function of the retrospective, then, is to expand who is included in historical narratives (women artists, artists of color, artists who are explicitly political, artists who use materials that

are challenging, artists who challenge formal disciplinary boundaries). As a “corrective” to exclusive canonical formations, the retrospective can be said to function, Ribas argues, as the “archive of contemporary art history.”<sup>9</sup> The connection of retrospective and archive is especially relevant for performance and its exhibition. If performance is defined by globally prominent institutions (Tate) that seek to curate it precisely *as* context, what moves do artists and curators have to make in order to translate performance into the distinctive type of contextually weighted space of the retrospective, which functions both by detachment (from past circumstances of production and display) and amalgamation (within an oeuvre)? Acts of curation are often defined in terms of contextualization. As dance specialist Funmi Adewole expresses, curating can help to “stimulate an intellectual context and critical discourse for the artists’ work, which is often undocumented or overlooked.”<sup>10</sup> It can be the responsibility of the performance curator to sustain cultural specificity. In a related way, the task of reenactment is also to contextualize, in this case by pointing to tensions between the live and the documented.

In the retrospective, the idea of contextualization functions somewhat differently, not least because, as João Ribas details, the “solo exhibition is seen as more directly representing the artist’s voice, and so supposedly comes with curatorial self-effacement.”<sup>11</sup> The idea of the retrospective is deeply entangled with the notion of the artist; it is an accounting for and of an artistic life. This emphasis on the artist within the retrospective form, and the convention of “curatorial self-effacement” noted above, mean that particular curatorial gestures can be difficult to unpick from the artistic mechanisms they work to highlight. In our analysis, we pay attention to the ways in which artistic and curatorial moves operative in each exhibition are wrapped up with questions of performance, and how the curation of performance-related works itself demands a wrangling with performance materialities and methods. The role of the curator

is very different across the three shows we examine, inflected by institutional priorities, the relationship with the artist, and the overall discursive aims of the exhibition.

In the case of the Mendieta exhibition, the approach of Stephanie Rosenthal, then-Chief Curator of the Hayward Gallery, is necessarily conditioned by the fact that the artist is not present, and in our analysis of the exhibition, we touch on the complex modes of advocacy that emerge through this context.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, for Jenni Lomax, curator of the English exhibition and then-Director of Camden Arts Centre, the curatorial task is to work directly with the artist on an exhibition that might be understood as a work of art in its own right. This is in line with what Lomax has articulated as a wider priority for the organization: “having artists present and part of the process of thinking and shaping the programme.”<sup>13</sup> Finally, the curatorial team behind the Mona Hatoum show—which includes Clarrie Wallis (Curator of Modern and Contemporary British Art, Tate) and Christine Van Assche (Honorary Curator, Centre Pompidou, Paris) with Katy Wan (Assistant Curator, Tate Modern)—stage a large-scale and “comprehensive exploration” of the practice of an artist still living and working.<sup>14</sup>

Our focus on the exhibitions addressed in this chapter is on the distinctive ways each artist provides a technique for bringing performance into the gallery, which structures the curatorial response and is not to do with a specifically conceived live event or reenactment but rather an approach mapped across an oeuvre or lifetime of work. Such practices of artistic accumulation require curators, rather than providing a schema, to be attentive to the mechanism of the artist. In our thinking about the Mona Hatoum retrospective, we focus on practices of rescaling, displacement and detachment that conjure particular circumstances and forces, working, paradoxically, through decontextualization. We take the title of the exhibition *Traces: Ana Mendieta* as a prompt to imagine connections and divergences from acts of forensic



depersonalization. In addressing the catalog of work by Rose English, we look at the retrospective flipped back to front, asking how ideas of “premonition” lay bare a process of display conditioned by a theatrical apparatus of spectating. In each case, we look at specific artworks to find strategies of performance within object-based exhibitions and consider how modes of display across the exhibitions draw on these approaches to position the artists’ contribution in a wider field. In this way, we argue that performance is not only referenced in these exhibitions but is fundamental to the way they function *as* retrospectives.

### ***Mona Hatoum at Tate Modern, London (2016)***

A metallic arm simultaneously rakes and smooths concentric semicircular furrows in a round container of sand. The rod, which equals the length of the diameter of the circle, is saw-edged on one side and plane on the other. It rotates with regularity so that one half of the sediment in this large-scale canister is consistently rippled while the other side is invariably level. The polished bar marks the point of transition between these two states.<sup>15</sup> In this mechanized act of smoothing and unsmoothing, marking and unmarking, the exhibit manifests a representation of the ontology of performance as ephemeral. This literal image might be epistemologically uncomfortable. It might prompt a rehearsal of certain statements about the historicization and documentation of performance, and about the relative status of its objects, that have been variously said and unsaid by theorists and makers interested in its archival and curatorial prospects. This is not our experience. In the context of a retrospective titled *Mona Hatoum* and staged at Tate Modern, London, from 4 May to 21 August 2016, this artwork, + *and* – (1994–2004), is beautiful precisely in how it presents something akin to performance.

This object rendering of performance’s ontology is specifically not a performance document. Nor is it, or at least not only, a kinetic sculpture of the sort that can, in the satisfying workings

of their motion, deter further thought or interrogation. The politics of Hatoum's practice are essential to this thickening. Throughout the exhibition, and the sense of an oeuvre presented therein, Hatoum's work powerfully references destructive apparatuses and regimes by taking objects out of context. Earlier in the layout of the retrospective (+ *and* – comes later), *Grater Divide* (2002) and *Daybed* (2008) refigure household objects beyond their domestic dimensions so as to underscore their proximity to “hostile environments.”<sup>16</sup> By making enormous kitchen utensils designed to shave and peel, Hatoum reframes these everyday tools for review as agents of violence. It is precisely by transplanting and rescaling such objects beyond their usual frames of reference that a specific political circumstance—of conflict and displacement, Israeli settlement, Palestinian culture, Lebanese civil war, British imperialism and the gender politics attending all these—is made apparent. All the works presented under the title *Mona Hatoum* refer to particular circumstances and conditions by, paradoxically, taking things out of context. This provides an approach to Hatoum's performance referents.

While the paradigm of performance evoked by + *and* – is literal, the effect is not. Or rather, it has something also to do with abstraction and the specific tension between the material and the conceptual staged in Hatoum's objects. Acts and sites of exhibition involve processes of decontextualization, and curatorial interventions often look to explicate or bridge inevitable disconnections of place and encounter. This is evident in displays of archival documents intended to situate and recontextualize historic events of performance. Hatoum's practice preempts this task of reintegration by performing activities of removal and disconnection in advance. Such dissociative moves form a central part of Hatoum's creative approach and the means by which her artworks function legibly within gallery environments. These acts of displaced reimagining make particular demands on those seeking to exhibit Hatoum's objects.

They require curatorial modes attuned to these processes of detachment that at once uncouple Hatoum's referents from their expected contexts and invoke specific situations unequivocally.

Viewed retrospectively, Hatoum's practice offers a distinctive approach to the curation of live art practices within a growing field of exhibitions composed of performance-related artworks, archives, and installations. The perspective demanded by documents of performance art when displayed in the gallery—the prerequisite understanding that these things refer to removed acts and circumstances while simultaneously performing here amongst other configurations of objects, audiences and settings—is already embedded in Hatoum's wider work. Looking at an enlarged domestic tool, visitors appreciate the apparatus alluded to precisely by its being taken out of context. Thus, performance is apprehended in Hatoum's acts of disconnection rather than in standard curatorial interventions of historicization. Hatoum's methodology works in relation to performance because it is already doing—and demanding—all those things visitors do when we encounter archival documents with objects that are neither documentary nor performance-derived. Modeling a relation between specifically delineated experiences outside the museum and the effects of dissociation that inevitably accompany display, Hatoum identifies an insightful means for exhibiting performance ontologically.

Within the framework established by the exhibition at Tate Modern, the monochrome photograph *Performance Still* (1985–1995) can be displayed eight rooms away from the edited video of the event it aesthetically represents because visitors will either be familiar with this point of reference in advance or anticipate the contextual specificity of the image via its decontextualization. *Performance Still* is evoked by curators as metonymic of Hatoum's broader practice, since it represents a coincident shift “from live and durational works to object-based work” and “from narration to an open-ended proposition.”<sup>17</sup> Referring to an act of

performance wherein Hatoum walked barefoot through Brixton, London, with boots tied to her ankles, the image is cropped by the artist so that the “context of Brixton in the 1980s is no longer clearly legible” and instead, via the positioning of the image at floor-level, the specificity of the pavement is displaced by the less distinct gallery floor.<sup>18</sup> Here again the decontextualizing force of exhibition is deployed by Hatoum in advance. Hatoum’s process of art making thereby sets out a spectatorial approach to performance documents.

Sand, of course, speaks of time. *Mona Hatoum* collects together an assembly of objects variously identified by curators as documentary, sculptural and installational created, as the idea of a retrospective implies, over an artistic lifetime. In compilation, these artworks reveal an approach shared across Hatoum’s various modes of production: in the aesthetic reframing of archival documents that relate to specifically staged events, in sculptural and installational works that, taken out of context, invoke very particular political conflicts and circumstances, and in those pieces, like *+ and –*, that take further this nuanced mode of abstraction so that the expressed point of reference becomes not a discrete instance but rather a phenomenon or form—in this case, performance. Instead of developing from identifiable and recognizable historical actions, such artworks take up Hatoum’s distinctive mode of decontextualization to “make visible some sense of performance more broadly.”<sup>19</sup> The literalness of Hatoum’s ontological presentations is nuanced and drawn across a distinctive association of multiform and multidecadal works that variously have nothing and everything to do with performance.

### ***Traces: Ana Mendieta at Hayward Gallery, London (2013)***

The photograph shows the outline of a body cut into damp soil with arm-like appendages carved to frame the figure’s head. A schematic and provisional femininity is suggested by a curve at the hips, but “legs” are fused into a single column. There is a placid sheen of red liquid

covering the inner dimensions of the cavity, recalling blood of course, though without the direct reference to injury that some of Ana Mendieta's other works contain. This is the body abstracted, less in the sense of a concept distilled or distinct from concrete experience, and more in the way that time, weather, erosion, political decisions and the proliferation of other forms of life might wear away the edges of a crater while still leaving evidence of a collision.

We zoom out to take in the other related images of leaf-strewn ground with an indistinct depression in the middle, which transforms through the sequence of eight photographs into the crimson body-like figure. These images are part of Mendieta's well-known *Siluetas* series, featured prominently in *Traces: Ana Mendieta*, a major retrospective of the artist's work at the Hayward Gallery, London, in 2013. For this series, Mendieta uses her own physique as an index for the creation of profiles dug into the earth in locations as varied as Mexico, Cuba and Iowa, USA—the last is the location for the images we are viewing. These outlines are specifically not self-portraits, however, but neither are they transcendent representations of an idealized body. Indeed, as Julia Bryan-Wilson notes, in later iterations of this work, Mendieta would remove the arms to avoid associations with “goddess” imagery prominent in predominantly white US-based feminist arts.<sup>20</sup> Bryan-Wilson, contextualizing Mendieta's participation in, reception by, and critique of feminist movements, argues that Mendieta “goes against ‘the body’ to reassert the existence of, and interdependency between, many bodies.”<sup>21</sup> Multiplicity is absolutely central to Mendieta's work. At the same time, looking at *Untitled (Siluetas Series)* (1975), we are struck by the singularity of the figure in the center of the image, even in its repetition. It is neither autobiographical, pointing necessarily to Mendieta herself, nor is it the universalized every-body. It is *a* body, both impersonal and specific, leaving its mark amongst many others. It is a body that is necessarily in relation, in the sense, perhaps, that Judith Butler means when they argue that “who we are, bodily, is already a way of being

‘for’ the other, appearing in ways that we can neither see nor hear.”<sup>22</sup> It is the figure’s context that makes it singular. Everything that surrounds it—from the landscape of which it is part to the sequence of eight photographs in which it appears to the wider multi-year series to which it contributes—constructs this body in its particularity.

The notion of the trace from the title of the exhibition is useful in conceptualizing a complex play between singularity and context. Traces are remnants of an event or action that might be left in a place where something has happened. To trace something might mean to render an object in outline or it might signify an approach that works backwards, seeking connections towards an origin or cause. A trace amount of something is just enough to be detectable. There is a sense of the forensic in the term, a sense not just of the documentary but the evidentiary. Mendieta’s practice is precisely concerned with the imprints and impressions a body leaves through immersion in a landscape or (often violent) encounter with other bodies. As viewers, we are also enjoined to perform acts of tracing, drawing connections between this assemblage of images, objects, inciting events and possible futures. The retrospective in this instance makes its account of the distinct and singular artist via a process of accumulation more akin to seemingly impersonal modes of scientific research or legal investigation.

There is a rough chronology to the exhibition, so that we encounter Mendieta’s earlier work at the beginning. Here, she uses her own body to produce traces, or her body is itself the site on which traces appear. The work of tracing has a direct, even literal dimension, though different to the literalness we found in Hatoum’s *+ and –*. In this work, social and political comment is explicit, as in Mendieta’s 1973 *Rape and Rape Scene*, made in response to the sexual assault and murder of a woman at the University of Iowa where Mendieta was a student. As *Traces* curator Stephanie Rosenthal notes, these images or “tableaux” were “created in public under the gaze of her fellow students,” so that the resulting photographs have at least in part the status

of performance documentation.<sup>23</sup> Within the image, we find an artist's interpretation of a specific horrific act of violence and a confrontation between that artist and an absent but implied audience, alongside other resonances, like the crime scene photo, that open the individual act to a wider context of systemic misogyny and legal injustice. The image is not reducible to any one of these but is rather a site from which all may be discovered.

However, as the exhibition progresses, the appearance of Mendieta's body shifts. *Body Tracks* (1974) is a photograph showing a large rectangle painted in red on a wall, recalling perhaps the monochrome abstraction of an artist like Kazimir Malevich. Mendieta is pictured kneeling in front of the rectangle with her arms pressed against its shape. The red is smeared in two vertical tracks indicating that the paint is wet and that Mendieta has dragged her arms through it. The photograph thus captures the aftermath of a performance intervention that punctures the abstraction of the geometric shape. Her 1982 *Rastros Corporales*, translated in the catalog also as "Body Tracks," is a triptych of blood and tempera on paper. These comprise impressions of Mendieta's arms in red on white paper, almost like negative outlines of the earlier photographic work. In this reiteration of the earlier act, the body is now gone and only the tracks remain. It is possible to imagine the very substance Mendieta presses and slides herself against in 1974 being transferred to paper nearly 10 years later in a kind of time warp where the act of tracing exceeds temporal and spatial boundaries. It might be imagined that here, too, is where the work departs from performance to become more sculptural or painterly. On the other hand, we might see performance here as depersonalizing the body represented in the work while tethering it still to its contingent and located specificities. Abstraction has returned to the work, but transformed.

While the term "traces" could indicate fragmentation, the overwhelming feeling is of an exhibition straining towards the comprehensive. Everything, everything, is here. It is an

exhibition devoted to completion, even as the work consistently points to absent bodies. The space where visitors both begin and end is an extensive research area, comprising four rows of tables and hundreds of photographic slides. If we try to think ourselves back into the exhibition space, we are sitting at one of those tables, engrossed in these slides, perhaps for the rest of our lives. This gesture of completion is, in a sense, theatrical. The invitation to research, while technically sincere, is limited in scope. The sheer numbers of slides present in the research area exceeded the capacity of any one viewer. In-depth academic or enthusiastic amateur research is not truly accommodated within an exhibition space, but is also not really the point. This is a demonstration of research, a provocation to research, rather than an occasion for research. Where does this need to demonstrate come from?

Across the exhibition, but especially among the long tables, there is a sense of evidence being presented and a case put forward. The exhibition advocates: for the importance of Mendieta as an artist and for the place of Mendieta within an art historical canon. It may also be understood as a call for the recognition more widely of women artists, artists of color, artists from the Global South, and an end to the systems of oppression that marginalize certain subjects to begin with. It is clearly important when both curating and writing about Mendieta's work to avoid a crass notion that her art recapitulates, prophetically, her death—a point made across the essays in the catalog. Nevertheless, the need for the exhibition to show and present everything, to include material in excess of what could physically be seen, is a kind of judicial act. Mendieta's oeuvre is haunted by the idea of lost potential, of what she might have made had her life not ended so early and with such violence. The abundance of material in her retrospective exorcises this specter of absence, through a process of evidencing not just of the arresting and perspective-shifting images and objects Mendieta produced but also the generative and proliferating mechanism at the heart of her practice.



Acts of law are encounters between an impersonal system and an individual instance—both abstraction and circumstance constitute this encounter. Unlike state-sponsored legal action, however, the acts underpinning Mendieta’s work are not aimed at a set end point, a prosecution, but a continuous unfolding of a process of evidencing. Adrian Heathfield refers to the objects of Mendieta’s work as “visual artefacts” that do not finalize the acts from which they emerge but “gesture to future dissolutions *or* re-formations—an end is never seen.”<sup>24</sup> It is because of this open-endedness and multiplicity that Heathfield argues, “[o]ne cannot locate Mendieta’s works, or think of them as autonomous objects.”<sup>25</sup> And yet, location is everywhere in this work. To return to the 1975 iteration of the *Siluetas* addressed above, both the rural Iowa landscape into which the central figure is inscribed and the London gallery space in which we encounter the image, as well as all the other contexts in which it has been or will be displayed, are implied by and help produce this figure as singular as its existence unfolds in time.

### **Rose English, *A Premonition of the Act* at Camden Arts Centre, London (2015–2016)**

At first glance, a premonition might seem to be the opposite of a retrospective. While a retrospective implies a historical and typologizing survey constructed with the benefit of hindsight, a premonition is future-oriented. According to the introductory wall text in the gallery, the event titled *A Premonition of the Act* displays objects, images, sounds and texts that represent the “vital components of a major yet-to-be realised performance that is heralded by this exhibition.” As a mode of artistic practice, this preemptive act of display raises a number of questions and propositions for performance and its curation. First, it connects to a history of performance-oriented visual arts practices that prioritize the presentation of process as performative. We might think, for example, of the action painters who “move the emphasis in visual art away from the quality of the completed art object toward the complex drama of the act of composition” revealed through the intersection of painting and photographic and filmic

documents, as Peggy Phelan has articulated.<sup>26</sup> With titles like *Storyboard* and *Prototypes of Practice* (2011), the multiform works presented in Camden Arts Centre stage a dramaturgical practice towards an act yet or never to be realized.

Performance has long been distinguished from traditional sculptural works and figurative paintings in terms of staging a live unfolding of practice rather than presenting a previously made product. Instead of tracing an act of performative making, as the canvases of Jackson Pollock and others might be said to do, *A Premonition of the Act* stages a process towards the conception of an event of performance. Whether the proposed act to which this exhibition is directed represents a fictional framing device or a genuine artistic intention is perhaps not important. What is significant, rather, is the unique way in which this accumulation of research materials (annotated photocopies of catalogs and manuals, drafts of scores, videos of glassblowing), and the form in which it is staged within the gallery, makes an insightful and experimental statement about how document-based displays of performance function. Amongst this collection of memoranda, a penciled note, presumably written by English, observes that “[the premonition of the act] and the afterlife of the act [are one!]” What is displayed as the archival remains of an event are the very same documents that prefigure it. This multidirectional chronology is akin to what we found in the Ana Mendieta retrospective, where tracing can be understood as a mode of working backwards while traces also accumulate new shape and form over time.

In her nuanced account of performance remains, Rebecca Schneider reminds us that Hamlet commissions a performance to “function as record”—in this case, of his father’s murder.<sup>27</sup> By drawing attention to this canonical order of proceedings wherein performance is employed as evidence, Schneider deftly illustrates how the “live act does not necessarily, or does not only, precede that which has been set down,” and it certainly does not do so in scripted theatrical

productions wherein the “live is a troubling trace of a precedent text.”<sup>28</sup> In Schneider’s examples, as in *A Premonition of the Act*, documents foretell the event of performance. In the case of curated exhibitions of archival collections, the materials put on display are the same regardless of whether they are shown before or after the event to which they refer. This is what *A Premonition of the Act* demonstrates. Whether the performance has taken place or not (and whether it ever will) is immaterial. What English constructs is a retrospective in reverse wherein what is displayed has to do with foresight rather than review. The effect of this is the presentation of an unfolding of process—in this case, the artist’s work of preparatory research.

*A Premonition of the Act* certainly appears as an exhibition wherein an artist accommodates, as performance scholar Bertie Ferdman states, the “curatorial process as part of their artistic practice.”<sup>29</sup> It reads as an installation of materials ordered by English rather than a collection of artworks organized according to a curatorial design. This impression might be inaccurate and reflect what João Ribas defines as “mediation,” a key element of the solo exhibition wherein, as previously discussed, this form appears to directly represent the “artist’s voice” via a process of “curatorial self-effacement.”<sup>30</sup> Whether through artistic gesture or curatorial mediation (or an interplay thereof), as visitors, we experience a sense of immersion, a light interactivity or invitation to think with the exhibition as we encounter its many parts. One large gallery is devoted to a multichannel sound installation, a recording of operatic work for many voices titled *Lost in Music* with libretto by English and score by Luke Stoneham. The gallery is dark, apart from tightly focused lights illuminating a series of documents pinned to the walls in a level row. The documents seem curious at first: photocopies from reference books placed alongside what appear to be process notes from the composition of the libretto.

The digital copies and typed scores are annotated throughout with these incremental penciled additions, lyrical observations that open the material to further analysis and render drafted text

provisional. The shifts are instrumental. One page of typed script reads “playing an object,” but a later inscription adds the preposition “to” so that the object is no longer the thing represented but the audience of the performance, which is now “playing to an object.” The documents are often exhibited in pairs, as if facing pages opened on the gallery walls. This section of working text for *Lost in Music* accompanies a cataloged image of an ornate display of china in Cabinet des verres, Copenhagen, Castello di Rosemborg, circa 1708. This picture characterizes the sort of elaborate glasswork investigated, as well as the imbrication of the research process with skilled attention to the curatorial. There are also images of effects, of electric synapses and “laboratory lightning,” of glassblowing with a penciled note about “taking air.” Ideas of the “highly” or “overwrought” combine with notions of luminescence and fluorescence. Reading while listening, moments of synchronicity occur, with enigmatic phrases like “flagrant wisdom” and “ornamental happiness” doubled across page and voice.

As eyes adjust to light, a circle of wooden chairs becomes visible, arranged in the center of the space and facing outwards. At the end of the exhibition, there is a live performance of *Music for Lost in Music* in the gallery, the debut of the 72-minute chamber opera with chairs for contemplation replaced by singers and music stands. This culminating event does not, however, negate the idea of open chronology produced within the space of the exhibition. Indeed, the promotional materials for the live performance explicitly refer to it as the “musical element” of a “proposed future performance.”<sup>31</sup> Further, of course what was being “debuted” was a piece of music that had already been recorded and exhibited across multiple weeks in a gallery. It is a live debut preceded by a recorded document, rather than the perhaps more expected reverse. “Debut” joins “premonition” and “retrospective” to suggest multiple directions and orientations, which do not in any way deny the particularities of gathering in a room to encounter physical bodies and virtuosic voices. Rather, here, the live is incorporated into a

wider exposure of process where the before and after of preparation and aftermath creates not so much “liveness” as *liveliness*, not so much presence as propelling movement.

Elsewhere in the gallery, we find a trestle table displaying glass objects arranged on top of further reference materials about histories and styles of glassblowing. There is a glass diabolo—a prop for juggling that might, except for the performer’s skill, be easily dropped—and porcelain plates for spinning. There is a suggestion here of the capacity for error so characteristic of the live. This assemblage indicates with its title, *Prototypes of Practice*, again the in-progress, the tension between completion and starting out or starting again. This tension is heightened in a series of video works showing Chinese acrobats moving with the same or similar glass objects, balancing one on top of another while contorting their bodies. We gasp and hold our breath. Then the question of air and suspension is itself staged as we watch glassblowers at work alongside the acrobats, creating vessels for and with breath, the dangerous heat of the liquid glass making its manipulation possible. The titles of the video works (*Ornamental Happiness* and *Flagrant Wisdom*) cause jolts of recognition as we remember reading and hearing them voiced in the previous gallery. The virtuosic acts of acrobats and glassblowers, captivating as spectacle, nevertheless do not fully resolve into event but rather prompt further acts of recall and anticipation, folding and unfolding.

Spectacle is a key theme in the exhibition: acrobatic, operatic and theatrical. The currency of spectacle is attention, and one of the key infrastructures of attention in any exhibition is light. In an influential study from the early 1990s, New Historicist Stephen Greenblatt characterizes modern museum and gallery lighting as an “attempt to provoke or to heighten the experience of wonder,” which he defines, in turn, as “intense, indeed enchanted, looking.”<sup>32</sup> Greenblatt contrasts this category of attention with “resonance,” wherein attention is directed out from an object or artifact toward its historically contingent context. If light is a mechanism for the

production of wonder, the vitrine might be the tool museums often turn to for the presentation of resonant relations between objects and documents. In *A Premonition of the Act*, however, both of these approaches are subtly shifted. Instead of a vitrine, there is a trestle table, more associated with the workshop than the gallery. In the distinctive use of light accompanying the sound installation *Lost in Music*, the texts and images are tightly illuminated. As viewers, we are prompted to encounter these process-oriented and resonant documents with wondrous, “intense, indeed enchanted, looking.” Except that the lights are not tasteful pools of gallery illumination but more like theatrical spotlights. A spotlight is designed to focus attention not on a monumental object of entranced contemplation but on a moving spectacle. If wonder was produced, it may not have been Greenblatt’s absorbed marveling but closer to Sara Ahmed’s “critical wonder” that reveals the “surfaces of the world *as made*.”<sup>33</sup> In *A Premonition of the Act*, we are invited to see events and objects in the process of *being made*.

### **Concluding Contexts**

We opened this chapter with a definition of performance that foregrounds its capacity to put objects, practices and social dynamics into relation—that identifies performance with processes of contextualization and opening art practice out to the wider world. We noted Heike Roms’s astute observation that performance has a distinct lineage concerned with an “examination of transfers and connections across remoteness” that helps us emphasize the notion of process in thinking about performance as contextualization.<sup>34</sup> We have also been struck by Amelia Jones’s reassessment of the pleasures of physical proximity in the wake of COVID-19, which we take as a reminder of the fact that performance is practiced by specific bodies in particular spaces and that it occasions communities of people. Ultimately, then, by framing our inquiry through the question “where is performance?” and by bringing, in part, a formal lens to this investigation, we are interested in reconciling the idea of performance as

context with the strategies, skills and inventive acts that artists and curators bring to bear in the creation and display of performance works. This is not to reify performance as a category or insist on ideas of medium specificity but to argue for the importance of accounting for performance as a range of existing practices and possibilities.

It is for this reason that we have chosen to focus on the retrospective, a form that has developed in order to make accounts of artistic practices and artistic lives, and to consolidate the position of particular artists within wider conversations. We are aware of a prevailing tension here: on the one hand, the retrospective can be seen as part of a mechanism of hierarchical evaluation that is always inflected by social bias and ideological underpinnings. On the other hand, we have seen art institutions deploy the retrospective as a way of revising certain canonical boundaries, which helps us to understand art history itself as dynamic and contentious. Our focus on London institutions is in part a way of emphasizing this tension, even as the three institutions we address do represent different modes of exhibition practice. The Camden Arts Centre is significantly smaller than Tate Modern, for example, and so more limited in terms of resources, and perhaps more flexible in terms of display strategies. It is important to situate ourselves in relation to the tension just described—white academics working in UK higher education institutions with access to globally prominent art exhibitions. We are interested in probing the retrospective as a form and part of this is to articulate the challenges it poses.

Another part of our inquiry is to test the limits of the retrospective and consider how performance in particular helps us to do that. We have stretched the definition of “retrospective” in our study. The Rose English exhibition in particular does not fit the conventional structure of a retrospective, and it is worth noting that another significant London exhibition of English’s work at the Richard Saltoun Gallery in 2019 took a more historical

approach to the display of this work, focusing on early projects and documentation. This exhibition offers valuable insight into English's milieu and the length and breadth of her career. However, we felt that *A Premonition of the Act* offered a different perspective on what a retrospective might be. It transposed a particular performance strategy—the exposure of an unfolding of process—into an exhibition space, and in so doing, made an account not just of the contents of English's oeuvre but of the mechanisms that characterize this oeuvre. The exhibition gives the overarching contextual form of “towards” but also assembles signifiers of performance. The unfolding of process that we recognize here is thus importantly also a reconfiguration of the chronology of act and artifact, where document might anticipate event and vice versa. By proposing the premonition as retrospective, we suggest that performance strategies allow for the status of the object and the live action to remain in animated relation.

The Ana Mendieta retrospective too makes use of strategies of working backwards and forwards, as the exhibition assembles traces and prompts acts of tracing that have something in common with forensic investigation. We have argued, however, that the inquiry at the heart of the exhibition is not aimed at a final outcome but rather evidences Mendieta's concern with open-endedness and multiplicity. Through the mechanism of iteration at play here, we find emerging a notion of singularity, and more precisely, a singular body—both a physical body and a body of work. This body is in a sense depersonalized but nevertheless absolutely conditioned through its position both in the landscape of its creation and its place of reception. It is a body that is distinctive in its contextual relation, and it is in this situatedness that we find performance emerge.

Questions of context in the Mona Hatoum exhibition are also staged as a kind of reversal. We have considered how Hatoum's practice of decontextualizing objects acts to generate other



kinds of contexts, both political and performing. This strategy is reflected again in the curatorial logic of the exhibition, where practices of detachment—of object from its typical use, archival document from its iteration in another medium, or artifact from its historical referent—inform the modes of display in ways that seem aimed less at explicating Hatoum’s artistic context and more at demonstrating how Hatoum puts context to work. We have argued, too, that we find in this exhibition literal expositions of performance ontologies, with experience made and unmade before us. This literalness is itself a complex negotiation of abstraction and material conditions, underlining how performance practices enable shifts in perception and relation. In contrast to chronologies that situate performance as a medium used by Hatoum in her “early” practice, performance emerges through this retrospective—as we account for it in these reflections—as central to Hatoum’s artistic practice more broadly.<sup>35</sup>

Everywhere in these exhibitions, things move, are on the verge of movement or have just come to rest. The steel bar rotates continuously in + *and* -. Acrobats and glassblowers variously execute virtuosic motions in *Ornamental Happiness* and *Flagrant Wisdom*. More abstractly, Mendieta’s *Siluetas* unfolds across geographical locations, Hatoum’s *Grater Divide* and *Daybed* see household objects move outside their domestic setting, and English’s texts are transformed from written notes to printed titles to vocalized lyrics. In identifying strategies for answering the question “where is performance?,” we have had to account for movement or the possibility of movement. Over their oeuvre, as it is curated in these retrospective exhibitions, each artist develops a distinctive way of rendering performance that is played out and formed across distinguishing acts of and approaches to contextualization. Performance thus allows us to trace contexts and it also helps us understand how context shifts and changes, how it is coproduced, and how it leaves openings for new emergence. The aim of the retrospective may

be to take a definitive stance, but we have found more useful the notion that it is one configuration through which performance may be found.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “Art Term: Performance Art,” *Tate*, accessed 8 July 2022, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/performance-art>.

<sup>2</sup> *TDR* Editors, “Forum: After COVID-19, What?” *TDR* 64, no. 3 (2020): 194.

<sup>3</sup> For further engagement with how performance, and its relationship to the visual arts, is reconceptualized in the situation of pandemic, see Georgina Guy, “Staged Installation, Reported Speech, and Syndemic Images in *Blindness* and *Caretaker* (2020),” *Critical Stages/Scènes critiques*, no. 24, special issue on Aural/Oral Dramaturgies (2021); and “Theatre as Installation in the Syndemic Architectures of Rimini Protokoll and Battersea Arts Center,” *Theatre Journal*, special issue on Installation, forthcoming 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Heike Roms, “Training for Performance Art and Live Art,” *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 11, no. 2 (2020): 117.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>6</sup> Other examples include Yvonne Rainer at Ravens Row in London (2014), the multiple blockbuster exhibitions of Marina Abramović, as well as performance work by younger artists like Trajal Harrell (Barbican, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Georgina Guy, *Theatre, Exhibition, and Curation: Displayed & Performed* (London: Routledge, 2016), 3.

<sup>8</sup> João Ribas, “Notes Towards a History of the Solo Exhibition,” *Afterall*, no. 38 (2015), <https://www.afterall.org/article/notes-towards-a-history-of-the-solo-exhibition>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

- 10 Funmi Adewole with Jareh Das, “Curating Performance from Africa on International Stages: Thoughts on Artistic Categories and Critical Discourse,” in *Curating Live Arts: Critical Perspectives, Essays, and Conversations on Theory and Practice*, ed. Dena Davida et al. (New York: Berghahn Books: 2018), 46.
- 11 Ribas, “Solo Exhibition.”
- 12 Mendieta died in 1985. The violence of her death after falling from a window in her high-rise apartment in New York, and suspicions that she was pushed by her husband, the artist Carl Andre, has long galvanized feminist protest. For example, for details about a protest in London in 2016, see Isabella Smith, “Protestors Demand ‘Where Is Ana Mendieta?’ in Tate Expansion,” *Hyperallergic*, 14 June 2016, <https://hyperallergic.com/305163/protesters-demand-where-is-ana-mendieta-in-tate-modern-expansion/>.
- 13 “A Q&A with . . . Jenni Lomax, outgoing director of Camden Arts Centre,” *a-n News*, 16 January 2017, <https://www.a-n.co.uk/news/a-qa-with-jenni-lomax-outgoing-director-of-camden-arts-centre/>.
- 14 “Mona Hatoum,” *Tate*, accessed 8 July 2022, <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/mona-hatoum>.
- 15 The Room Guide for the exhibition at Tate interprets this action as the “interplay between two opposite forces, making and unmaking, building and destroying in a continuous cycle.” “Mona Hatoum: Room Guide,” *Tate*, accessed 8 July 2022, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/mona-hatoum-2365/exhibition-guide>.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Capucine Perrot, “Mona Hatoum Born 1952: *Performance Still* 1985–95,” *Tate*, accessed 8 July 2022, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/performance-at-tate/perspectives/mona-hatoum>.

18 Ibid.

19 Georgina Guy, *Theatre, Exhibition, and Curation: Displayed & Performed* (London: Routledge, 2016), 179.

20 Ana Mendieta, quoted in Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Against the Body: Interpreting Ana Mendieta,” in *Traces: Ana Mendieta*, ed. Stephanie Rosenthal (London: Hayward Publishing, 2013), 32.

21 Ibid., 36.

22 Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 76.

23 Stephanie Rosenthal, “Ana Mendieta: Traces,” in *Traces: Ana Mendieta* (London: Hayward Publishing, 2013), 13.

24 Adrian Heathfield, “Embers,” in *Traces: Ana Mendieta* (London: Hayward Publishing, 2013), 24.

25 Ibid.

26 Peggy Phelan, “Shards of a History of Performance Art: Pollock and Namuth Through a Glass, Darkly,” in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005), 500.

27 Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 89.

28 Ibid.

29 Bertie Ferdman, “From Content to Context: The Emergence of the Performance Curator,” *Theater* 44, no. 2 (2014): 14.

30 Ribas, “Solo Exhibition.”

- 31 “Postscript: Rose English and Luke Stoneham: Music for Lost in Music (1),” *Camden Arts Centre*, accessed 8 July 2022, <https://archive.camdenartscentre.org/archive/d/postscrip3>.
- 32 Stephen Greenblatt, “Resonance and Wonder,” *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 43, no. 4 (1990): 28.
- 33 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 180. For another examination of Ahmed’s ideas about wonder in relation to performance, see Johanna Linsley, “Stupid, Paranoid, Wonderful: Staging Non-knowledges in the Pedagogical Encounter,” *Performance Research* 17, no. 1 (2012): 59–67.
- 34 Roms, “Training,” 119.
- 35 See, for example, the brief description of the *Mona Hatoum* exhibition, which presents a chronology wherein Hatoum progresses “from her early performance and video works to her sculpture and large-scale installation.” “Mona Hatoum,” *Tate*, accessed 8 July 2022, <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/mona-hatoum>.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- a-n News*. “A Q&A with . . . Jenni Lomax, outgoing director of Camden Arts Centre.” 16 January 2017. <https://www.a-n.co.uk/news/a-qa-with-jenni-lomax-outgoing-director-of-camden-arts-centre/>.
- Adewole, Funmi with Jareh Das. “Curating Performance from Africa on International Stages: Thoughts on Artistic Categories and Critical Discourse.” In *Curating Live Arts: Critical Perspectives, Essays, and Conversations on Theory and Practice*, edited by Dena Davida, Marc Pronovost, Véronique Hudon, Jane Gabriels, 46–56. New York: Berghahn Books: 2018.
- Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.
- Bryan-Wilson, Julia. “Against the Body: Interpreting Ana Mendieta.” In *Traces: Ana Mendieta*, edited by Stephanie Rosenthal, 26–37. London: Hayward Publishing, 2013.
- Butler, Judith. *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015.
- Camden Arts Centre*. “Postscript: Rose English and Luke Stoneham: Music for Lost in Music (1).” Accessed 8 July 2022. <https://archive.camdenartscentre.org/archive/d/postscrip3>.
- Ferdman, Bertie. “From Content to Context: The Emergence of the Performance Curator.” *Theater* 44, no. 2 (2014): 5–19.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. “Resonance and Wonder.” *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 43, no. 4 (1990): 11–34.
- Guy, Georgina. “Staged Installation, Reported Speech, and Syndemic Images in *Blindness* and *Caretaker* (2020).” *Critical Stages/Scènes critiques*, no. 24, special issue on Aural/Oral Dramaturgies (2021).

- Guy, Georgina. "Theatre as Installation in the Syndemic Architectures of Rimini Protokoll and Battersea Arts Center." *Theatre Journal*, special issue on Installation, forthcoming 2022.
- Guy, Georgina. *Theatre, Exhibition, and Curation: Displayed & Performed*. London: Routledge, 2016.
- Heathfield, Adrian. "Embers." In *Traces: Ana Mendieta*, 20–24. London: Hayward Publishing, 2013.
- Linsley, Johanna. "Stupid, Paranoid, Wonderful: Staging Non-knowledges in the Pedagogical Encounter." *Performance Research* 17, no. 1 (2012): 59–67.
- Perrot, Capucine. "Mona Hatoum Born 1952: *Performance Still* 1985–95." Tate, accessed 8 July 2022. <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/performance-at-tate/perspectives/mona-hatoum>.
- Phelan, Peggy. "Shards of a History of Performance Art: Pollock and Namuth Through a Glass, Darkly." In *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, edited by James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, 499–514. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005.
- Ribas, João. "Notes Towards a History of the Solo Exhibition." *Afterall*, no. 38 (2015). <https://www.afterall.org/article/notes-towards-a-history-of-the-solo-exhibition>.
- Roms, Heike. "Training for Performance Art and Live Art." *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* 11, no. 2 (2020): 117–25.
- Rosenthal, Stephanie. "Ana Mendieta: Traces." In *Traces: Ana Mendieta*, edited by Stephanie Rosenthal, 8–19. London: Hayward Publishing, 2013.
- Schneider, Rebecca. *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*. New York: Routledge, 2011.

Smith, Isabella. "Protestors Demand 'Where Is Ana Mendieta?' in Tate Expansion." *Hyperallergic*, 14 June 2016. <https://hyperallergic.com/305163/protesters-demand-where-is-ana-mendieta-in-tate-modern-expansion/>.

*Tate*. "Art Term: Performance Art." Accessed 8 July 2022. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/performance-art>.

*Tate*. "Mona Hatoum." Accessed 8 July 2022. <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/mona-hatoum>.

*Tate*. "Mona Hatoum: Room Guide." Accessed 8 July 2022. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/mona-hatoum-2365/exhibition-guide>.

*TDR* Editors. "Forum: After COVID-19, What?" *TDR* 64, no. 3 (2020): 191–224.