

Press Release

Exhibition

Stage Environment: You Didn't Have to Be There

September 7, 2018–October 21, 2018



Joan Jonas, *Double Lunar Dogs*, 1980/1981. Performance documentation from *Other Realities—Installations for Performance* Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 1981. Photo by David Crossley

#StageEnvironment
#atCAMH
@camhouston

Media Contact

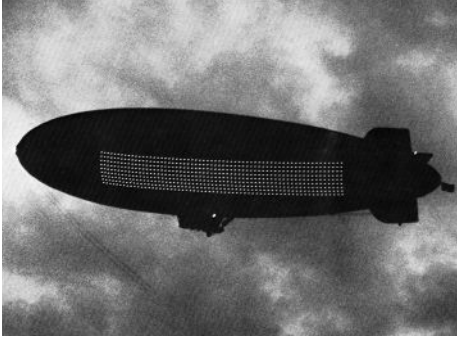
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HOUSTON, TX (August 31, 2018)—The Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH) is pleased to announce the upcoming exhibition *Stage Environment: You Didn't Have to Be There*, which showcases and celebrates the long-standing history of CAMH's innovative commitment to performance and performative art. This exhibition is organized by CAMH Exhibition Manager and Assistant Curator Patricia Restrepo. The museum will host a public opening reception on the evening of Friday, September 7, 2018 from 6:30–8PM. The exhibition will remain on view through October 21, 2018. As always, admission to CAMH is free.

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Press Release



Michael Snow's *Night Light Color Flight* (installation view), in 1972. Photo by Hickey & Robertson Photography, Houston, Texas

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH), the third-oldest contemporary arts institution in the United States. Although the museum's name and physical address have shifted since its 1948 founding, CAMH's commitment to presenting cutting edge art of its time has remained steadfast. The institution continuously has celebrated works beyond the traditional scope of visual arts—showcasing design, theater, music, dance, and literary traditions alongside the plastic arts. Notably, a demonstrable focus on live arts, performance art, and artwork with performative elements is embedded in CAMH's institutional DNA. Perhaps above all, CAMH should be celebrated for its expansion efforts—broadening what constitutes art, questioning what a museum should offer to the public, reconsidering the physical boundaries of a museum, and supporting a changing definition of arts. *Stage Environment: You Didn't Have to Be There* revisits and reinvigorates CAMH's longstanding performance focus by showcasing documentation and related ephemera from some of the museum's most poignant and palpable performative pieces.



Terry Adkins performing *The Last Trumpet* (1995) at Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, as part of *Radical Presence: black Performance in Contemporary Art*. Photo by Max Fields

Latvian architect Gunnar Birkerts explored the small yet prominent site for CAMH's current location at the intersection of Montrose Boulevard and Bissonnet Street in 1969. He was equipped with a modest budget and an unconventional directive for an arts museum. Unlike other museums that often wanted to resemble sophisticated department stores filled with permanent collections of riches, CAMH considered itself a place of energetic experimentation and desired a structure that could be flexible and amenable to expansive exploration. Sebastian J. "Lefty" Adler, the museum's Director at the time and the key consultant for the new structure, positioned CAMH as a brave type of cultural institution: **"It is not an acropolis we want there. It is not Culture on a corner. I think of the new museum building as a stage environment to house the multimedia in which artists of today are working."** Devoid of permanent interior walls, the resulting 1972 structure was one of the most technologically advanced and malleable arts museums in the country.

As soon as the Contemporary Arts Association (CAA, CAMH's founding name) was formed in 1948, it was determined to display a broad and generous definition of the arts, plural. The first exhibition CAA mounted was *This is Contemporary Art*, which presented nearly 175 objects as "contemporary art," including Russell Wright china and a Waring blender, in addition to furniture, advertising, graphic arts, fabric, silver, jewelry, a model of Frank Lloyd Wright's house, and more. Less than one year later, the institution laid the groundwork for seven decades of robust performance support with the exhibition, *Theatre and Ballet Art: Elements of Stage Design*, which was accompanied by an evening of dramatic performances by four local theater companies.

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Press Release



Maren Hassinger performing Senga Nengudi's *RSVP*, 1975-77 at Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, as a part of *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*. Photo by Max Fields



Douglas Davis, *Seven Thoughts*, 1976. Copyright Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Courtesy Center for Advanced Visual Studies Special Collection, MIT Program in Art, Culture and Technology.

In December 1954, following the sale of CAMH's original property on which an A-frame building was first sited, the museum staged an early "happening" by inviting the public to participate in the physical move of its structure. The museum was divided into two parts, loaded onto two flatbed trucks, and moved to the southwest corner of the Prudential lot at what is now known as Fannin Street. Nearly 200 supporters came out to witness the move, which began at 10PM and was completed at 2:30AM.

In 1960, CAMH began an ongoing series of radical television programming on *Channel 8* in order to reach audiences in their own homes. Much of the series was dedicated to live performance for the television, including poetry readings, theater stagings, and improvised music performances. CAMH had the innovative foresight to try and utilize television as a medium itself, documenting some of the first happenings on television. CAMH continues these traditions by documenting all of our public programs to stream on the Museum's YouTube channel.

CAMH sponsored a significant evening of performance by the Merce Cunningham Dance Company at Houston's Music Hall on April 14, 1965. The dance company performed five works, and John Cage also came to Houston under the Museum's sponsorship to lecture on his music the night before. Although the *Houston Post* called the evening "a three stage escalator to hell," this performance was the first time Houston audiences were introduced to the Company.

CAMH continued to push boundaries and explore new ideas in the 1972 *Exhibition 10* with the performative artwork by Michael Snow. Snow created a score for a light performance composed of 8,000 colored lights on a Goodyear blimp, which was flown over the Museum. When CAMH first flooded, only four years after the new building opened on Montrose, then CAMH Director Jim Harithas decided to use the city as his extended museum while renovations were underway. One notable performance took place on December 20, 1976 in the Astrodome. The art and interactive technology pioneer Douglas Davis, broadcast the first live global satellite performance in Houston. This was one of the first uses of satellite technology for artistic purposes. During the performance Davis read seven thoughts to a live international satellite audience and an empty Astrodome; he then put the seven sheets of paper that contained the seven thoughts in a sealed box that was never to be opened.

Although *Stage Environment* focuses on more historic performance work organized by the museum, one recent exhibition of note is *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art* (2012). This exhibition was the first comprehensive survey of performance art by black visual artists. It provided a critical framework to discuss the history of black performance traditions

Press Release

within the visual arts beginning with the “happenings” of the early 1960s, throughout the 1980s, and into the present practices of contemporary artists.

Stage Environment explores the dialectical relationships between CAMH’s performances and their documentation. Why are some ephemera labeled artwork, such as Michael Tracy’s altered documentation of photographs of his 1974 *Sugar Sacrifice*, while most performance documents are relegated to archival objects? Entering a decades-long academic debate about these relationships, this exhibition posits that performance documentation and ephemera can have generative and productive functions, not merely serving as consolation prizes for not having been there. While honoring the power of liveness, this exhibition seeks to demonstrate the often unsolidified and contradictory connections between performance, works of art, and documentation. By rethinking these relationships, documentation can be freed from simply serving as a historical archival index.

Public Programs

These events are free, open to the public, and take place at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. Seating is limited. Please check camh.org for a complete list of Museum programs relating to this exhibition.

Opening Reception | *Stage Environment: You Didn’t Have to Be There*

Friday, September 7, 2018 | 6:30–8PM

Celebrate the exhibition opening that revisits CAMH’s 70-year performative legacy of live arts by mining selected performance documentation and related ephemera from its rich archives.

Performance | *Cell Lust / a body*

Saturday, September 8, 2018 | 2–3PM

An ephemeral exploration of gender, sex, and relationships through word, light, and sound as told by the celestial bodies of the universe. Emily Æyer and Traci Lavois Thiebaud partner to present this performance within *Stage Environment* to continue CAMH’s tradition of presenting new works in the gallery space.

Open Studio | Collaborative Scrapbook

Saturday, October 6, 2018 | 2–4PM

Archive your experience and add to a collaborative scrapbook celebrating CAMH’s 70th birthday.

Art at Noon | Nancy Wozny

Friday, October 12, 2018 | 12–1PM

Join Nancy Wozny, current Editor-in-Chief at *Arts + Culture Texas*, as she lends her insight as a choreographer and dancer coming of age in the 1970s

Press Release

and 1980s to the exhibition *Stage Environment*. Light lunch provided.

Performance | *Body Archives: Bone Deep Memories* with Urban Souls Dance Company

Thursday, October 18, 2018 | 6:30–7:30PM

Join Urban Souls Dance Company in the exhibition *Stage Environment* as they explore the idea of archives and memory inside of the body. The brain remembers, the spirit recalls, and the body reacts. What do we do with the memories that we keep in our bones?

CAMH Mission

The Contemporary Arts Museum Houston presents extraordinary, thought-provoking arts programming and exhibitions to educate and inspire audiences nationally and internationally.

General Information

The Contemporary Arts Museum Houston is located at 5216 Montrose Boulevard, at the corner of Montrose and Bissonnet, in the heart of Houston's Museum District. Hours are Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday 10AM–7PM, Thursday 10AM–9PM, Saturday 10AM–6PM, and Sunday 12PM–6PM. Admission is always free. For more information, visit camh.org or call 713.284.8250.