Teacher Guide

Stage Environment: You Didn’t Have to Be There
September 8–October 21, 2018

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EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

• The year 2018 marks the 70th anniversary of the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH), the third-oldest contemporary arts institution in the United States.

• CAMH’s physical address has shifted since its 1948 founding, but it has remained committed to presenting cutting edge art if its time.

• CAMH has always celebrated works beyond the scope of traditional visual arts – showcasing theater, music, dance, and literary traditions.

• Stage Environment revisits the long-standing performance focus by showcasing documentation and related ephemera from some of the museum’s most poignant and palpable performative pieces.

• The title of the exhibition comes from a quote from former CAMH Director Sebastian J. “Lefty” Adler regarding CAMH’s soon-to-be-built 1972 building designed by architect Gunnar Birkets: “It is not an acropolis we want here. It is not Culture on a corner. I think of the new museum as a stage environment to house the multimedia in which artists of today are working.”

• The exhibition explores the relationship between performance and its documentation and contends that performance documentation and ephemera can have generative and productive functions, not merely serving as a consolation prize for not having been there.

• CAMH does not have a permanent collection, it does have a rich archive. CAMH’s archives which were donated to Rice University’s Woodson Research Center in 2017, are now accessible to the public.

• The exhibition complicates the division between archive and collection, documentation and performance, performing art and performance art.
Key Questions

• Why is some ephemera labeled artwork, while other performance documents are instead archival objects?

• What goes in an archive? Who decides what goes in an archive?

• How does an archive form the history of an institution?

• What contemporary programs, events, or happenings do you imagine should be included in a future archive?

• Do you agree with the sub-title of the exhibition: You Didn’t Have to Be There? Can you learn everything you would need about a performance, work of art, exhibition, etc. through an archive? Or is it different to have the experience at the time of the original event?

• What is the difference between performance art and performance documentation? Which category would you place a music video?

Curriculum Connections

History | This exhibition showcases documentation and ephemera from 70 years of CAMH’s history. Choose an institution and think about how that place aligns with historical events. Think carefully about how the choices you make impact the story.

What would your personal or family archive look like? What objects have been saved that can tell your story? How does that relate to how we understand historical events?

Dance and Movement | How do you document a performance and share that experience for people who are not able to attend in person? Can you fully appreciate a dance performance if you aren’t able to be there? How did the historical performances included in the exhibition influence current ideas around dance and movement?