

23

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Performing Histories: Why the Point Is Not to Make a Point...

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Babette Mangolte, photograph for Trisha Brown, "Roof Piece", dance performance, 1973.
© Babette Mangolte, 1973

Only a few people were present to watch Trisha Brown's dance performance *Roof Piece*, high above the streets of downtown Manhattan in 1973. With fourteen dancers spread out between water towers and chimneys dotting the roofs in a line stretching from 420 West Broadway into an area just above Wall Street and back again, at best you would see a fragment of the action. The contact sheet of photographs taken by the French-American film-maker and photographer Babette Mangolte in July 1973 uniquely depicts the punctual concentration and simultaneous dispersion of the performers and spectators present at the scene. For one of the few chroniclers of the spectacle, Don McDonough, then-editor of *Ballet Review*, it was a unique experience: 'You were up in a completely different world, totally removed ... and nobody even knew this event was taking place except for the few other people who happened to be on rooftops that day.'¹ Similar to the children's game of Chinese whispers, *Roof Piece* consisted of a sequence of studied gestures, a kind of performative Morse code that travelled from one performer to the next. Independent of the spectator's spread-out position across various rooftops, Brown's choreography and its particular vocabulary of contradictory movement and repeated gestures subsequently faded away in the overlap of distance and duration.

Only one of Mangolte's photographs chosen from the contact sheet of *Roof Piece* was printed by *The New York Times*. It quickly became the poster image of the downtown New York art scene in the 1970s, despite the fact that hardly anyone saw the performance.² The image captured the atmosphere of the event in a unique way due to the grainy black-and-white look, which created a visually tangible tension between the immediate presence of the performers in the highly contrasted depth of the image, and their gradual disappearance in the hazy light of that summer day. And indeed, in an article fittingly titled 'Exporting SoHo' published at the end of 1979, critic and dancer Wendy Perron sites the disappearance of a specific urban spirit that Mangolte's photograph stands for: 'It is an image that reveals a unique conception of the relationship of person to environment. Rooftops are like basements, or closets: they aren't meant to be seen. When they are deliberately shown to

you, you get the feeling you are seeing the inner workings of something.³ The ungraspable cityscape of the rooftops became the perfect metaphor for the desire for the invisible and the discovery of new fields of action felt keenly by the avant-garde at the time. In the early 1970s, urban public space was both an unoccupied and not yet consumable space of projection for a wide array of visual strategies and actions - many of which addressed social and political issues and questioned representational strategies of the individual as a subject.

Until recently Mangolte was mostly known for her work as a camera person in the 1970s for avant-garde film-makers such as Chantal Akerman, Marcel Hanoun, Yvonne Rainer and Michael Snow, as well as for her own film *The Camera: Je or La Caméra: I* (1977) and *Water Motor*, a film based on Trisha Brown's choreography of the same name from 1978. Mangolte arrived from Paris in New York in December 1970 with the intention of immersing herself in the experimental film scene. Her self-taught knowledge regarding the history of film and photography, which she acquired alongside her studies in the cinematography class at L'École Nationale de la Photographie et de la Cinématographie in Paris in the mid-1960s (where she was the first woman to study), helped her to make inroads into the art and film scene and adapt to her new environment.

Once in New York, her photography allowed her to survive financially, as well as to see what was happening in the theatres, museums, galleries and lofts of New York, and on the silver screens of its independent cinemas - most notably, that of Anthology Film Archives. Mangolte was eager to focus her documentary practice as a photographer not on one particular subject, but on all fields of performance in dance, theatre and art. Within a few years she was being commissioned on a regular basis to document choreographies by Rainer, Brown, Lucinda Childs, Steve Paxton and other former members of the Judson Dance Theater; art performances by Joan Jonas and Robert Whitman; and theatre productions by Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson.⁴ Mangolte was more than a witness with a camera. The ideas and aesthetics of Minimalism, Conceptual art, postmodern dance and theatre, as well as Structuralist and feminist experimental film became vital for her different practices. Throughout her work as cinematographer, photographer and film-maker she engaged with key aspects of the time: the rejection of ontological self-reflexivity, the use of operational time, literalism and the effect of space on seeing.⁵ By doing so, she joined a new avant-garde that was as historically conscious as she was, invested in the continuation of a 1960s legacy that recognised the potential of performance art beyond the spectacle.

Performance was an open field to explore, offering the artistic means for a site-specific, socially aware and process-based art that found its expression not just in live action, but also in text, video, photography and film. One of Mangolte's first experiences of photographing performance was Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theater: "There was an urgency I felt when, for the first time, I saw Richard Foreman's play "Total Recall" in December 1970.⁶ I thought that what I was seeing was extraordinary, but only four other people were there to see it. Therefore recording it was an absolute necessity."⁷ The challenge was to capture the physical and conceptual distraction of the audience's attention, which impeded them from empathising with the characters on stage, within a single photographic image to be chosen for publicity by Foreman 'after the fact'. The spectator, according to Mangolte, was 'physically called into engagement with his own mind rather than solicited to project himself and identify with the actor's character, as in a spectacle'.⁸ Mangolte's pursuit of the staged confrontation between the imaginary and the action on stage within the two-dimensional frame reflected both her instinctive and analytical methodologies. Her effort to 'fiercely resist a single allegorical key' was vital for the distinction between the event and its structure, which was to remain visible in the images she took.⁹ The attempt to capture Foreman's specific engagement with the audience in the real and not in a space of illusion, which he accomplished through overtly theatrical stage lighting and direct address, is mirrored in Mangolte's documentation. Her photographs focus on the physical nature of the foreground as well as the background of the stage. The performing actors are clearly portrayed as part of a context, and not as the centre of attention. Assigned by Foreman on an ongoing basis to chronicle his work, Mangolte saw each play numerous times - a credo of diligence she retains to this day - on each occasion taking photographs. Photography was a tool of comprehension for her, teaching her to see and understand what was happening on stage as well as in the audience. The aim was to grasp the atmosphere between the performer and the audience, capturing the mental image that an audience would likely remember later, regardless of whether they were present at the time or not.

The majority of performance artists working in the 1970s were well aware of the necessity to preserve their work beyond the fleeting moment of its performative appearance. Such a desire was based on the social and economic need to make the performance available to a large audience on the one hand, and, on the other, to ensure that the work would become part of the cultural canon and thus to secure its art historical reception. The archival plenty that consequently derives from this period gives rise to the nexus of problems in which to understand the documentation of performances, specifically Mangolte's work in this arena. Today, performance art has simultaneously maintained its indexical and historical claim to the authenticity of the live event as well as its existence as an ephemeral art form. When we speak about a past performance event we are speaking about the event itself as well as its translation into a variety of media, transformed by temporal and spatial settings into two-dimensionality. This transcription manifests itself at the interface of correlating terms such as singularity, authenticity, appropriation and reproduction, and sets the cultural function of these 'still' and 'moving' images in a state of evolution and re-reading. Whether documented or staged for the camera, performance becomes the material of its own documentation, the product that brings the event of the performance, independent of its witnesses, into circulation. As the revival and appropriative rediscovery of recent years has proven, the documentation of performance art is an essential part of the existence and understanding for this process-based art form that continuously changes within its reception. The documentation of performance art expresses the singularity of the event as part of an economy of reproduction. Its four-decade journey, from the street to the walls of the museum, ensures the symbolic status of the genre as an ephemeral art form within the cultural canon. Neither performance art nor its documentation are separated from another; instead, they are to be understood as equal elements in a genre that is nurtured by contingent reciprocity between event, mediatisation and reception.

Mangolte describes her practice as being rooted between intuition and technique: 'Although striving for objectivity in my documentation, I also valued my instinctive reactions in confronting the performance work.'¹⁰ Aware of her presence behind the camera, she tried to avoid falling into the trap of a particular style that would compete with the motifs she documented. 'The point was not to make a point,'¹¹ as she once put it, but rather to express the particular style of the performer in the documentation. At the same time, Mangolte's documentary photography and camera work equally took part and produced a genuinely modern and urban perception of ephemerality that, like her image of *Roof Piece*, has become emblematic for the Conceptual and postmodernist aesthetics of the 1970s.

Mangolte's training as a cinematographer, her reduced interference with the action and her intuitive approach toward her subjects proved especially relevant for the camera work in Joan Jonas's seminal video-performance *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* (1972) and *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll* (1973), as well as for the majority of Jonas's performances that Mangolte filmed until 1978. Mangolte, with her Sony Port-a-Pak video camera positioned on her shoulder and/or on a tripod, followed Jonas's movements precisely, creating a steady stream of close-up images of the dynamic and dazzling character Organic Honey's interactions with various props, costumes, mirrors, monitors and other recording devices. Mangolte supplied a consistent visual frame for Jonas's monotonous repetition of singular gestural movements - such as her rhythmic knocking of a mirror with a spoon - her impromptu live-drawing sequences or her constant costume changes. Jonas's presence and actions, and the simultaneous playback on various screens and monitors dispersed in an 'all over'-like treatment of the performance space, created a scenario that Douglas Crimp described as an effect of de-synchronisation.¹² The body had lost its position at the centre; it was dispersed and caught between the different apparatuses merging the acts of recording, reproducing and perceiving.

The diffusion and transcription of the self on stage and the deconstruction of the gaze and its mechanisms of identification were not only the subject for Mangolte's camera work and documentation for others, but also determining factors for Mangolte's own film work. These concerns were related to the desire to produce films with and for women that would question art as an ideological form of expression and representation of power. In 1972, through a recommendation by Annette Michelson, Mangolte was commissioned as the photographer and cinematographer for Rainer's first feature film *Lives of Performers*, and a year later, for *A Film About a Woman Who*. It was around the same time that Mangolte started to work with Akerman, who, only 21 years old, had just visited New York for the first time. In 1972

Akerman and Mangolte shot two films, *La Chambre* and *Hotel Monterey*. Both shared an affinity to Structuralist film - specifically Michael Snow's *Wavelength* from 1967 and *La Région centrale* from 1972. In the years to follow Mangolte would become the cinematographer for Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) and *News From Home* (1976). Despite the formal differences between Akerman, Jonas, Rainer and Mangolte's own films, as well as each of the projects in which Mangolte was involved, they tried to develop a new visual language within the syntax of space-time-movement, countering the gender-specific visual construction of mainstream cinema and art. Through her work with Rainer and Akerman, Mangolte developed two key signature camera styles: her hypnotically consistent tracking shots of urban façades and cityscapes, and the staging of the subjective camera.

Mangolte started directing her own films in the mid-1970s, and this subjective camera featured as the protagonist in her first three feature-length films: *What Maisie Knew* (1975), *The Camera: Je or La Caméra: I* and *The Cold Eye (My Darling, Be Careful)* (1980). She describes *The Camera: Je or La Caméra: I* as an exploration of film-making from the perspective of a photographer and film-maker: 'The film is literally the camera.'¹³ It is a portrait of Mangolte's artistic production, as well as a film about the relationship between the body and its photographic and filmic staging, and her life between two languages and cultures. Uncommonly for both commercial and Structuralist film, *The Camera: Je or La Caméra: I*, according to Mangolte, attempted to 'express something that is under-represented in mainstream culture or in experimental work [...] such as making a film about making photographs from the perspective of the photographer'.¹⁴

The first part of the film, set in a photo studio, lets us witness the intimacy and communication that occurs between the photographer and a series of models, colleagues and friends who pose before Mangolte's (film) camera. Their efforts to follow Mangolte's instructions - in voiceover in French - as well as their confidence and simultaneous shyness in trying to make the right pose are constantly interrupted by the clicking sound of a camera shutter. In the second part of the film, we are taken on a walk through Mangolte's neighbourhood of TriBeCa. With her handheld 16mm camera, Mangolte explores her immediate urban environment; on the street she becomes the one who is forced to react to the gaze of others. The dynamic of movement between the recording apparatus and its subject is reversed - the woman behind the camera does not direct but rather only chronicles her environment.

A short scene in the middle of *The Camera: Je or La Caméra: I* bridges the two segments of the film. For several minutes the street and the photographic studio meld together in an empty loft building, when the city appears as a façade behind the grid of the windows, a backdrop of sound and image. A staged interplay begins between the camera's point of view and two men in casual clothes who walk through the room in opposite directions. They follow a choreography of movement and stillness, framed by the angle of the camera and the iron grid of the loft windows. At first, we see a still shot of a man in mid-step. He suddenly steps out of the frozen frame and resumes walking through the space. We hear the sound of an imaginary camera's shutter. Neither the rolling footage nor the shutter of the camera is in synch with the rhythm of the actors' movements. For Mangolte, the scene's dynamics derives from this waiting for the image to freeze: 'When in the middle of a flow you suddenly interrupt the constant motion, and when with striking swiftness you shift to stillness, the opposition between stillness and movement creates dramatic tension, a jolt.'¹⁵ It is this captured 'jolt' - the moment that is to represent the whole in the future, that speaks of the correlating influences and dependency between fictional and documentary modes of representation - which is so significant in the photographic documentation of performance art and its historical reception. Mangolte offers the audience the chance to distinguish between the illusionist and self-reflective potential that she continuously investigates in her films. Her aim was for the audience 'to reassess the way they look at film', and to investigate the audience's potential for recursive self-referentiality.¹⁶ The spectator becomes a participant, behind the camera, at the same time that he or she sees him- or herself in the blackness of the shutter (the screen literally blacks out for instant), a reversal of and a parallel to being photographed him or herself. Mangolte breaks through the surface of cinematographic construction by deconstructing and altering the relationship between camera, performer and spectator.

Today, Mangolte can be recognised as a catalyst for the performing arts of her time, having delivered documentary photographs, videos and films that fed into the cultural memory of an entire decade. The success and recognition of her work can be traced back to the diverse economies of her conditions of production and her friendships with those she worked with. The reception of her work centred for many years on her documentary photography and her cinematography for others, which represents the often sought, unauthorised 'third hand' ideal for collaborative practices. Her technical perfectionism and her self-described 'selfless' methodology is grounded in the diversity of roles she plays within these collaborations, fluctuating between collaborator, expert, author and hired gun.

Mangolte's practice is of interest because of the various engagements she had - and has - with the worlds of film, art and performance. She is unique in this sense, not only for her work chronicling the performance scene of the 1970s, but also because she has explored this practice *qua* practice, that is, as a documentarian of the genre and cinematographer for seminal feminist films. While photography brought Mangolte to performance art, the subject of photography in her films led her to make work about dancers and performers, such as *What Maisie Knew*, *Water Motor* with Brown and *Four Pieces for Morris* with Robert Morris in 1993. Mangolte stopped photographing performances in the mid-1980s. She instead focused on her own films dealing with the perception of time and space by investigating the vastness and suburban life of the American city- and landscapes of the West Coast as her subject matter - *There? Where?* (1979), *The Sky on Location* (1982) and *Visible Cities* (1991). In 2003 she completed an acclaimed documentary titled *Les Modèles de Pickpocket*, a film about the lives of the 'models' Robert Bresson engaged for his film *Pickpocket* in 1959. Performance art's revival in recent years has had both a retroactive and immediate effect on the recognition of Mangolte's 1970s work. She has been invited to participate in numerous exhibitions and festivals with installations considering her past practices as well as newer film installations, bringing a well-deserved attention to her current works and projects. At the core of this interest, even if rarely addressed, lies Mangolte's sustained focus on the means of her own past production as well as her ongoing relationship, as a fan and film-maker, with performance in art and dance. Part of the renewed interest in her practice is based on the complex connections between her own work and her contribution to the making of other artists' works. Perhaps more importantly, however, her practice illuminates certain problems and assumptions in the analysis of the genre of performance art, addressing the processes of its historicisation and ongoing revival.

Footnotes

1. Taken from the transcript of a lecture held by Don McDonough, in Henry M. Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avante-Garde since 1970*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998, p.140. ↑
2. Babette Mangolte's text about the making of *Roof Piece*, available on www.babettemangolte.com (last accessed on 4 November 2009). ↑
3. Wendy Perron, 'Exporting SoHo', *The SoHo Weekly News*, 30 December 1979, p.28. The image was incorrectly dated as 1971, though Mangolte's archival records and original contact sheets confirm it was made in 1973. ↑
4. A majority of the iconic photographs of performance art in the 1960s in New York were taken by Robert McElroy, who was later joined by Peter Moore. Moore continued to photograph performance art in the 1970s and together with Mangolte took many of the iconic images of the performance scene in New York from that decade. In the 1980s they were succeeded by Paula Court and Dona Ann McAdams. ↑
5. See Malcolm Turvey, 'A Neutral... Average Way of Looking at Things', *Framework: The Journal of Cinema & Media*, vol.45, no.1, Spring 2004, p.82. ↑
6. Mangolte's documentation of Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theater started in 1970 with 'Total Recall' and ended with 'Boulevard de Paris' in 1978. ↑
7. Babette Mangolte, 'Balancing act between instinct and reason or how to organize volumes on a flat surface in shooting photographs, films, and videos of performance', in Barbara Clausen (ed.), *After the Act: The (Re)Presentation of Performance Art*, Vienna and Nuremberg: Museum of Modern Art Vienna Stiftung Ludwig, Verlag Moderner Kunst, 2006, p.35. ↑
8. Babette Mangolte, 'My History (The Intractable)', *October*, vol.86, Fall 1998, Cambridge,

- MA and London: The MIT Press, p.88.↑
9. *Ibid.*, p.89.↑
 10. Babette Mangolte, 'Balancing act...', *op. cit.*, p.39.↑
 11. Unpublished interview with Connie Shortes from 1996, from the archive of Babette Mangolte, New York.↑
 12. See Douglas Crimp, 'De-Synchronization in Joan Jonas's Performances', in D. Crimp (ed.), *Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions, 1968-1982* (exh. cat.), Berkeley and Eindhoven: Berkeley University Art Museum and Van Abbemuseum, 1983, p.9.↑
 13. Artist's statement on *The Camera: Je or La Caméra: I*, 1977, available at <http://www.babettemangolte.com> (last accessed on 10 October 2009).↑
 14. Minda Martin, 'Babette Mangolte: An Interview', *Cinamad*, issue 7, July 2003.↑
 15. Unpublished interview with Connie Shortes from 1996, from the archive of Babette Mangolte, New York.↑
 16. Jacky Lansley, 'Babette Mangolte: Cinematographer and Filmmaker in Discussion with Jackie Lansley', *Dance Now*, no.21, March 1982, p.4. Translated by Margarethe Clausen.↑