

IMPERI

NEMENT

ARKINGS

JEAN-PIERRE HÉBERT

ANA MENDIETA

OSCAR MUÑOZ

THE OPENENDED GROUP:

MARC DOWNIE

SHELLEY ESHKAR

PAUL KAISER

C.E.B. REAS

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN

CAMILLE UTTERBACK

Pratt
EXHIBITIONS

Contemporary Art

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"Impermanent Markings"

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IMPERMANENT MARKINGS

Linda Lauro-Lazin, guest curator

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Pratt Manhattan Gallery

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EXHIBITIONS

IMPERMANENT MARKINGS

Linda Lauro-Lazin

IMPERMANENCE MEANS THAT EVERYTHING CHANGES AND NOTHING REMAINS THE SAME IN ANY CONSECUTIVE MOMENT. AND ALTHOUGH THINGS CHANGE EVERY MOMENT, THEY STILL CANNOT BE ACCURATELY DESCRIBED AS THE SAME OR DIFFERENT FROM WHAT THEY WERE A MOMENT AGO.¹

—Thich Nhat Hanh

"Impermanent Markings" is an exhibition that examines the role of the artist's "mark" in diverse contemporary work—from simply documented actions performed by a single artist to complex, cutting-edge, digital media in which the artist is also a programmer of code. Ultimately, the show poses the question: How can time-based media, in which all the marks and gestures are ephemeral, point, in fact, to a greater sense of the universality of the creative act?

I chose the artists in "Impermanent Markings" for the way in which their works exhibit a similarity of process that has long fascinated me: namely, that, in one way or another, all of them create marks that somehow disappear or change as their work unfolds. It is an approach towards the artist's "hand" that is both poetic and daring, and exploring it in this show has allowed a number of observations to surface about spirituality, about a sense of "self" within the act of both looking and making art, and even about the fleeting nature of life itself. Even when the artist chooses his or her own visage within this "impermanent" matrix (as in the case of Oscar Muñoz's self portrait within the video *Narciso*), when that "self" disappears, a momentary and greater awareness is allowed to surface.

That said, despite their similarities, these artists work in ways that are strikingly diverse, employing sand, fire, earth, water, motion capture, performance, video, installation, and software code. The materials the artists use are often impermanent and ephemeral themselves and, as such, become conceptually integrated into the works. But more on this later. In any case, what

¹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *No Fear, No Death: Comforting Wisdom for Life*, Penguin Putnam Inc., 2002

we, the viewer, see and experience is constantly shifting, and the works themselves are sometimes hard to pin down. The lines in Camille Utterback's projected electronic paintings move in response to the viewer's movements: They are never the same twice—and then, gradually, they disappear. C.E.B. Reas makes delicate colorful lines created by software code—code that is actually creating the lines in real time.

I had been working on the idea of this exhibition for almost five years, culling my final artist wish list from artists I had worked with in the SIGGRAPH 2005 art gallery; from studio visits; from inspirational visits to galleries and international festivals like the Venice Biennale; and also from work I had long known and loved. I particularly felt it relevant, if a bit personal, to acknowledge Carolee Schneemann and Ana Mendieta, who had inspired my own creative work as a practitioner over the years. The latter provide a very important historical and structural underpinning to the work that has come after them—digital works, in particular, much like the ones you see here—and I'm grateful for Schneemann's generous participation, and the participation of the Ana Mendieta Foundation.

Performative works are, by definition, impermanent. Yet Schneemann has had to grapple over the decades with far more visceral and physical issues surrounding the female body and the way in which she has dared to employ her own in the making of her performance-based art. "How can I have authority as both an image and an image-maker?"² she wondered in a journal entry of the early '60s. Schneemann's *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1973–76), which is represented in "Impermanent Markings," is a seminal performative piece in which hand-drawn lines express the artist's meditative state—even as her suspended body is pushed to its physical limits. The creative energy is primal and sexual, even if it is embodied only temporarily. From whence springs this energy? Or, conversely, to what point can this energy be, if it all, reduced? Is it in the mark, or in the knowledge of how the mark came about, or both? When all is reasoned out, however, what we're left with is a clear sense of how the seemingly automatic drawings that arise from Schneemann's highly "corporeal" performances somehow transcend the freedom and fetters of both labels.

² Quoted by Dan Cameron, "Carolee Schneemann: *Up to and Including Her Limits*" exhibition brochure, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1996.

In her films, Ana Mendieta graciously allows the physical remains of fire or gunpowder or drifting flowers to function as "drawings"—drawings that specifically trace the artist's presence and connection to the earth. Here, even more than with Schneemann's work, the artist's moving, evolving marks are a direct pointing to the artist's own body. In *Untitled (Gunpowder Work #1) Amana, Iowa* (1980), Mendieta filled her "Silhueta" figure with a gunpowder mixture that she ignited. Small explosions and fire mark the body's interior space. When the smoke and fire dissipate, the heart area alone remains within the charred "Silhueta." In *Untitled (Flower Person #1, #2)* (1975), she uses peonies floating on a river to mark the silhouette of her body. Indeed, the Super-8 film quality itself is delicate in its recording of Ana Mendieta's intimate performances. As Chrissie Isles, longtime scholar of Mendieta, has remarked: "In her tactile, visceral films, we are brought close to the combustive material form of each 'Silhueta' as mud, water, flowers, gunpowder, cracked earth, tiny volcanoes, blood, candles, fire, smoke, and charred remains erupt and burn on the screen, creating the most metaphysical artists' films of the 1970s."³

Performance systems, like the ones many of the digital artists employ here, are a kind of algorithmic choreography; or, put another way, they are carefully controlled, specific systems that allow unexpected things to happen. For instance, Camille Utterback, who also writes software and programs in code, has, with *Untitled 5* (2004), arrived at a painterly space in which viewers are active and essential parts, co-creators of the work. The overall effect is that of a painting that seems to respond intuitively to the viewer's actions. Utterback does not reveal the rules of her system, but rather believes that "the internal structure and composition of the piece can be discovered through a process of kinesthetic exploration."⁴ The lines we make mark our absence and our fleeting presence as much as they testify to our essential coexistence within Utterback's plan.

Ephemerality is a recurring theme in the works of Oscar Muñoz. In the video and performance piece *Narciso* (2001) lines of graphite shavings and their undulating shadows outline a self portrait limned in the drain of a sink that the water dematerializes and drains away. Here Muñoz refers to the myth of Narcissus who falls in love with his own reflection in a pool of water: As

³ Chrissie Isles in "Subtle Bodies," essay in *Ana Mendieta Earth Body Sculpture and Performance, 1972–1985* by Olga M. Viso, 2004, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution and Hatje Cantz Verlag books

⁴ Camille Utterback, "Artist Statement," SIGGRAPH 2005 Electronic Art and Animation catalog, Association for Computing Machinery: New York, 2005

he reaches to touch his face, it disappears with the water's movement. Even more poignant is *Aliento* (1995), a series of eight mirrors silkscreened using special heat-sensitive ink. The images depicted therein are actually official death notice portraits of "disappeared" people of Colombia—and they are only visible when we come up close enough to breathe upon the mirrors' surfaces.⁵ The heat from our breath suddenly activates their likeness, and they stare back at us within our own reflections only for as long as it takes the fog of our breath to dissolve. If we didn't take the time to bring our own "existence," if you will, close enough to touch their faces, proof of their ever having existed might remain forever dormant. Muñoz seems to prove with incredibly simple and poetic means how closely creativity and impermanence are inextricably linked.

Point A → B (2007) by The OpenEnded Group (Marc Downie, Shelley Eshkar, and Paul Kaiser) employs parkour-athletes, or "traceurs," outfitted with motion capture suits.⁶ Blue (a.k.a. Paul Joseph) of Urban Freeflow and N.Y. parkour traceur, Exo (a.k.a. Exousia Pierce), are the performers. The technology employed is motion capture, a process that digitizes movement without capturing the physical likeness of the subject. Thirty-two optical motion-capture cameras and two high-definition video cameras were used to capture the movement of the performers. The paths of the performances are captured, transformed, and drawn into a synthetic space. The figures are rendered as three-dimensional gesture drawings. The traced paths, rendered figures, and environment are interwoven. They fuse and expand. The lines dissipate and resolve over time and the resulting film is shown on two juxtaposed screens enveloping the audience in a vertiginous world. The delicate "hand drawn" appearance of the film is developed using The OpenEnded Group's own non-photorealistic renderer—part of "Field," an open source experimental development environment.⁷ The OpenEnded Group's powerful collaboration is bearing fruit in a unique vision—and perhaps even a new discipline. One could say that they successfully employ artificial intelligence as a drawing method. "Drawing is the most mental representation of something," remarked Eshkar and Kaiser during a panel presentation at Pratt Institute in April 2008. Perhaps code-driven artwork could be considered even more conceptual.

⁵ According to the Benetech Human Rights Program's Human Rights Data Analysis Group (HRDAG), there were approximately 2,553 missing persons in the Department of Casanare in Colombia between 1986 and 2007. (Daniel Guzman, Tamy Guberek, Amelia Hoover, and Patrick Ball, authors, HRDAG Report "Missing People in Casanare," November 28, 2007)

⁶ According to Webster's dictionary, Parkour is a recreational pursuit in which participants called traceurs traverse urban structures by running, jumping, vaulting, rolling, etc. (Webster's *New Millennium Dictionary of English*, parkour. Dictionary.com. Retrieved on 2008-02-07)

⁷ Marc Downie—WIKI of FIELD March 2008

Jean-Pierre Hébert is considered a pioneer of algorithmic art. He has been creating drawings based on original code and computer-driven devices since 1979. He writes his own software using paradigms found in nature for inspiration. Hébert has been focused on developing drawing as dematerialized pure concept. "I have been working under the hypothesis that to gain power and beauty, drawing should become a pure mental activity. I have endeavored to make it so by banning the physical side of drawing, using devices to actually produce the physical proof of concept. My process is thus akin to composing, or choreographing, or—thinking."⁸

With his algorithmic sand paintings, as we see here in *Telemachos* (2001–02), Hébert goes one step further: Not only has the physical hand been removed from the process but the sand painting itself is fleeting. "Watching a sand trace throughout the day is thus and again an experience in impermanence," says the artist.⁹

C.E.B. Reas's *T1* (2004) is at once software, performance, and physical art installation. Individual lines created by computer code are projected onto multiple circles on the floor where they appear to float. The spectators are invited to meander through the installation as if moving through a path in a landscape, discovering the luminous, growing drawings. Each moment yields something different from the next. Although he has carefully programmed *T1*, Reas has built chance into the system so that every generation (performance) of the software is unique and fresh.

The installation of the artwork in the physical space of the Pratt Manhattan Gallery has allowed the concepts underpinning "Impermanent Markings" to come full circle—beginning with Schneemann's suspended rope and tree surgeon's harness and a visual feed of the artist in the harness making a series of automatic drawings in real time—culminating with C.E.B. Reas's installation of his software generating a "live" aggregate of digital "drawings." It's interesting how, even when you cannot put your finger on a single mark that will last (as in the case of Reas's *T1*), there is a sense of something perpetual about the creative moment itself. And, even when you can (as in the case of Schneemann's drawings), there is a quality that is incredibly universal and almost ineffable—a quality of presence in absence that radiates beyond the mark.

⁸ Jean-Pierre Hébert artist's statement

⁹ Jean-Pierre Hébert published in
The Tricycle, Winter 2000

ABOUT THE CURATOR

LINDA LAURO-LAZIN is an artist, curator, lecturer, and educator, who has been exhibiting her artwork for more than 30 years in the U.S. and Europe. Although her foundation is in painting and photography, Lauro-Lazin has always been inspired by a wide range of creative disciplines. She began using digital media in her practice in 1986. Her work has been included in *Art of the Digital Age* (Thames & Hudson, 2006), an authoritative book on digital artwork edited by Bruce Wands.

Lauro-Lazin was awarded the Fulbright Lecturing and Research Award for 1998–1999 in Macedonia. [It is the only Fulbright award in computer graphics in the world.] The research was her artistic practice in the form of an interactive, online artist's book in which she examined and responded to the Balkans during war time. She also helped to develop a computer graphics curriculum and lectured at the Fakultet za Likovni Umetnosti.

Among the exhibitions she has curated and organized are "Digital Visions" (1995) at the Muroff Kottler Art Gallery at SUNY Ulster County Community College, Stone Ridge, N.Y.; "Threading Time" (2005); and "Computer Animation Festival Concept Artwork" at SIGGRAPH 2005 in Los Angeles. She also co-curated a series of international, multi-site live performances on the Access Grid (2005) and has served on many international art juries.

Lauro-Lazin has a great passion for sharing her ideas about digital art and art in general. For many years she has both given lectures and organized or moderated numerous guest lectures and panel discussions. During one such event in 2006, Lauro-Lazin was invited to the Tokyo Museum of Contemporary Photography to lecture about electronic art with Jasia Reichardt.

Lauro-Lazin is currently an adjunct professor in the Department of Digital Arts at Pratt Institute. She lives in the Hudson Valley with her husband and two sons.

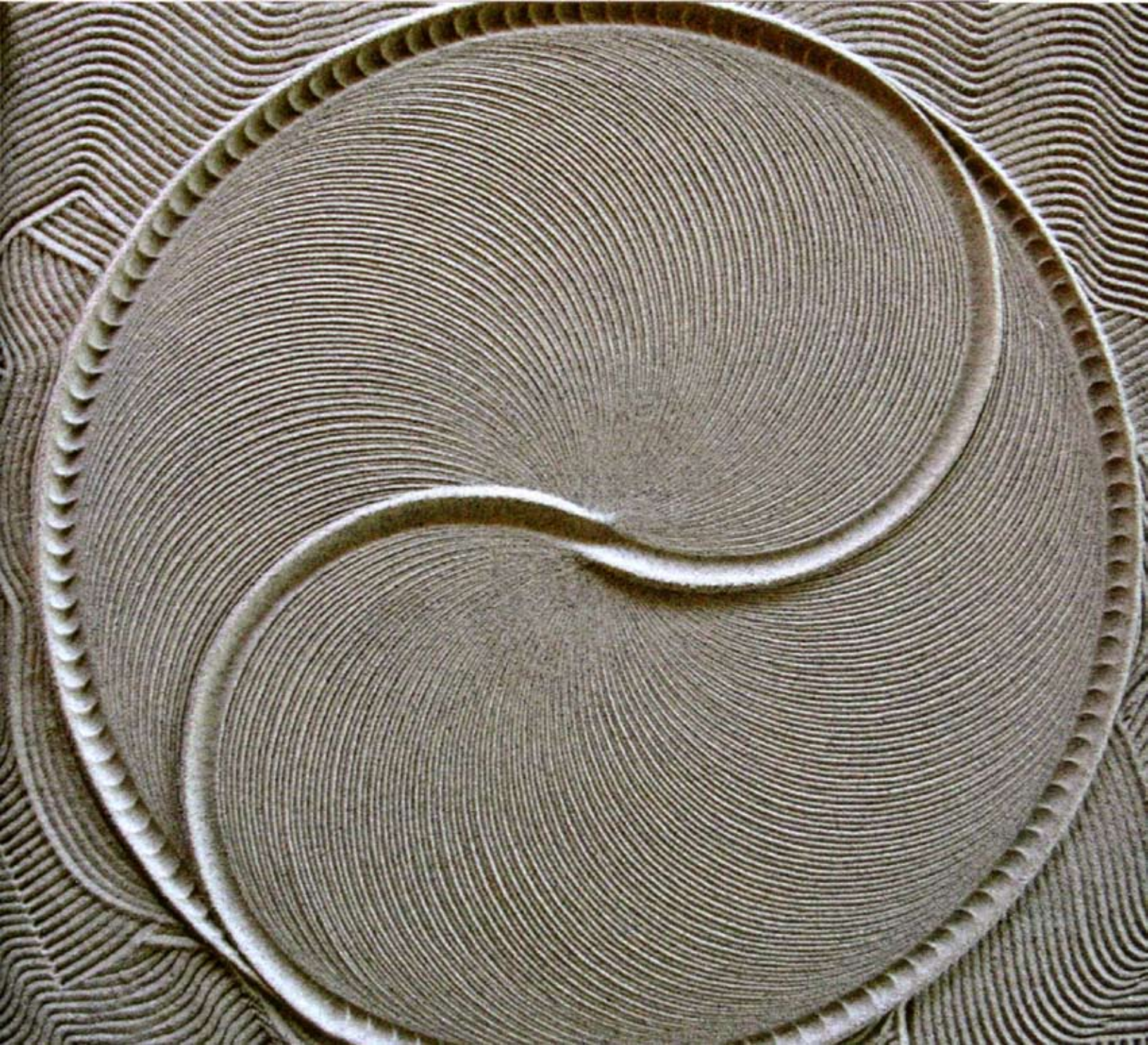


**JEAN-PIERRE HÉBERT
(COLLABORATORS VICTOR DI NOVI
AND DAVID BOTHMAN)**

Telemachos, 2001–2002

Mahogany, sand, electronics, computer, software; 12" x 54" x 54"

Courtesy of the artist





ANA MENDIETA

ABOVE (TOP) *Untitled (Flower Person #1, #2)*, 1975

Super-8 color film transferred to DVD; 6 minutes, 7 seconds

ABOVE (BOTTOM) *Untitled (Gunpowder Work #1)*, Amana, Iowa, 1980

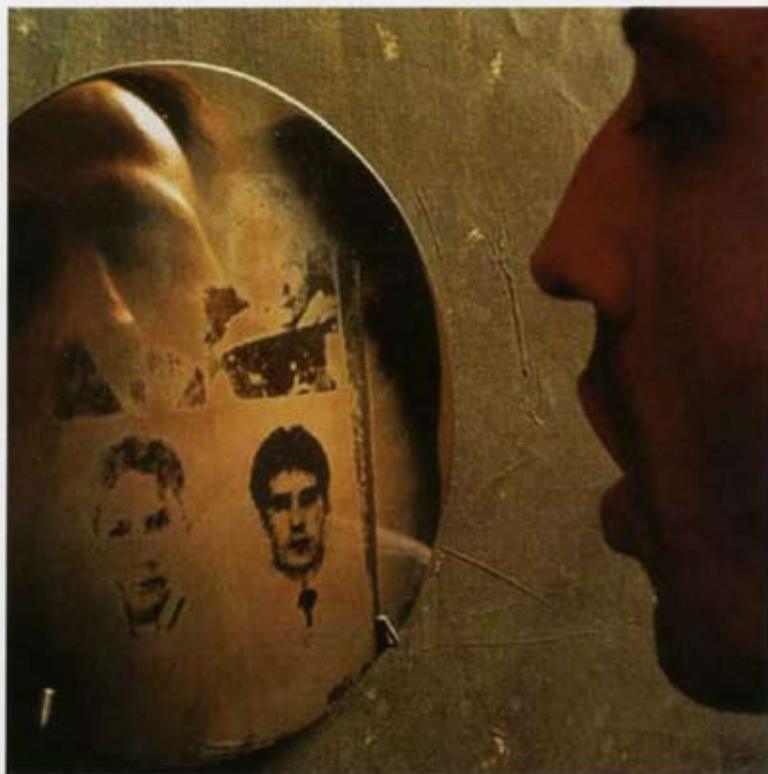
Super-8 color film transferred to DVD; 6 minutes, 15 seconds

RIGHT *Untitled (Blood Sign #2/Body Tracks)*, 1974

Super-8 color film transferred to DVD; 1 minute, 20 seconds

All courtesy of the Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection and Galerie Lelong, New York





OSCAR MUÑOZ

ABOVE *Aliento*, 1995

Silkscreen on steel discs, 7½" diameter each

Courtesy of the artist and Sicardi Gallery, Houston, Texas

RIGHT *Narciso*, 2001

Video; 2 minutes, 30 seconds

Courtesy of the artist and Sicardi Gallery, Houston, Texas



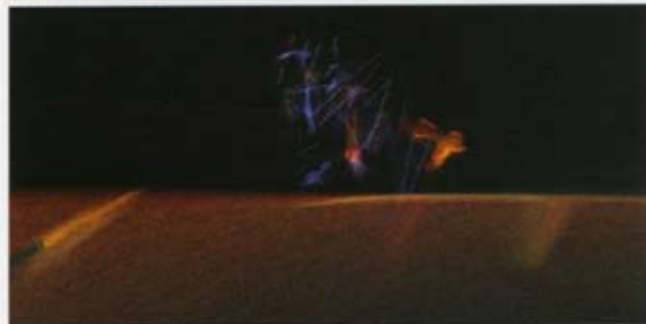
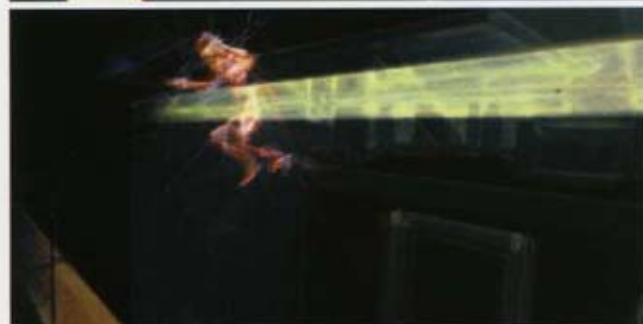


**THE OPENENDED GROUP:
MARC DOWNIE
SHELLEY ESHKAR
PAUL KAISER**

Point A → B, 2007

Digital animation; dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artists





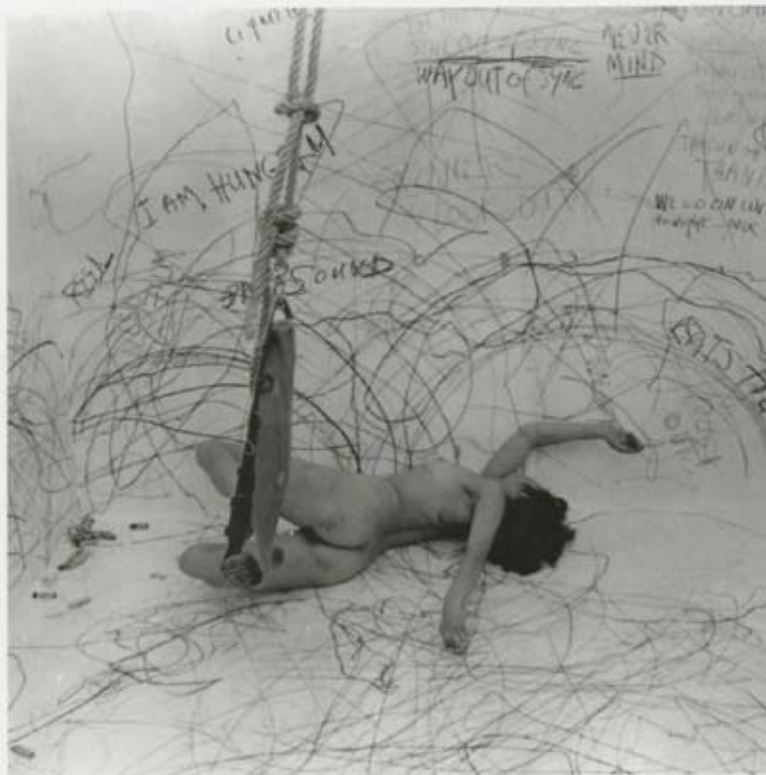
C.E.B. REAS

TI, 2004

Custom software, computer, projectors, wood; dimensions variable

Courtesy of bitforms gallery nyc





CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN

ABOVE *Performance, The Kitchen NYC, 1976*

Photo: Henrik Gaard

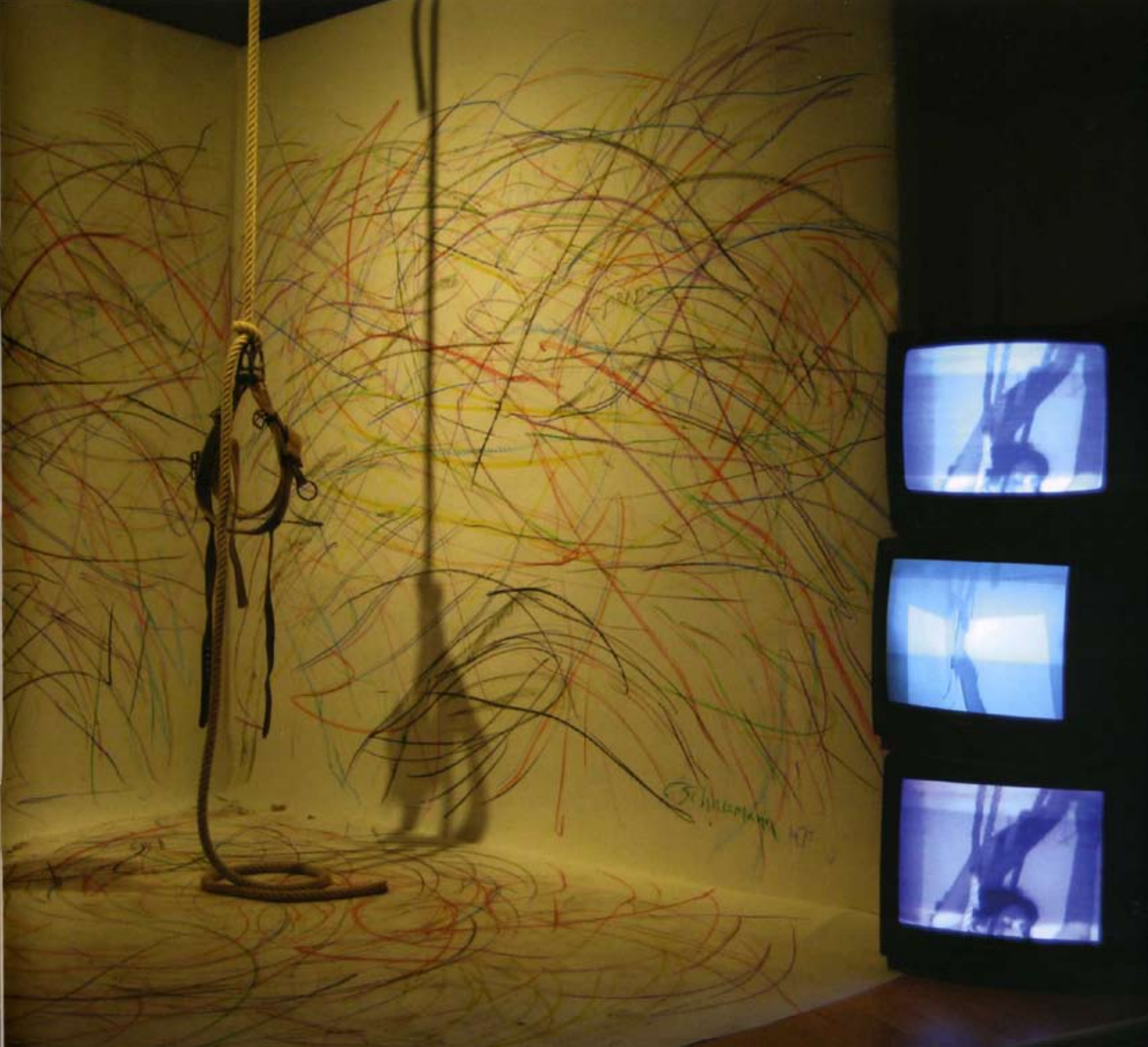
RIGHT *Up to and Including Her Limits, 1973–1976*

Drawing on paper with 2 channel video

and 16mm projector; 8' x 8' x 8'

Courtesy of the artist







CAMILLE UTTERBACK

Untitled 5, 2004

Interactive video installation; 8' x 6' (projection)

Courtesy of the artist

