The Twenty-First Century Performance Reader

The Twenty-First Century Performance Reader combines extracts from over 70 international practitioners, companies, collectives and makers from the fields of Dance, Theatre, Music, Live and Performance Art, and Activism to form an essential sourcebook for students, researchers and practitioners.

This is the follow-on text from The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader, which has been the key introductory text to all kinds of performance for over 20 years since it was first published in 1996. Contributions from new and emerging practitioners are placed alongside those of long-established individual artists and companies, representing the work of this century's leading practitioners through the voices of over 140 individuals. The contributors in this volume reflect the diverse and eclectic culture of practices that now make up the expanded field of performance, and their stories, reflections and working processes collectively offer a snapshot of contemporary artistic concerns. Many of the pieces have been specially commissioned for this edition and comprise a range of written forms – scholarly, academic, creative, interviews, diary entries, autobiographical, polemical and visual.

Ideal for university students and instructors, this volume’s structure and global span invites readers to compare and cross-reference significant approaches outside of the constraints and simplifications of genre, encouraging cross-disciplinary understandings. For those who engage with new, live and innovative approaches to performance and the interplay of radical ideas, The Twenty-First Century Performance Reader is invaluable.

Teresa Brayshaw is Principal Lecturer in Performing Arts at Leeds Beckett University and works freelance as a Feldenkrais teacher, theatre practitioner and personal development coach in a range of international contexts. She co-edited the third edition of The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader.

Anna Fenemore is Associate Professor in Contemporary Theatre and Performance in the School of Performance and Cultural Industries at the University of Leeds. She is also Artistic Director of Manchester-based Pigeon Theatre.

Noel Witts is Emeritus Professor of Performing Arts at Leeds Beckett University, and a Professorial Fellow at Liverpool Hope University. He is the author of Tadeusz Kantor in the Routledge Performance Practitioners series, and co-editor of all three editions of The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader.
This book is dedicated to all readers worldwide and especially our students – past, present and future – who continue to inspire and challenge us. Without them and the institutions that enable them to develop their knowledge, deepen their interest and extend their potential, there would be little point in pursuing a project of this nature. We hope they will find value, stimulation and encouragement in the ideas, texts, images and reflections contained and variously expressed in this book.

A number of the artists included in this current volume have themselves previously been students of performance and related disciplines and some have reported how the practitioners they first encountered in *The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader* have influenced their own development and artistic practice and thinking. It is our hope that those current students reading the material in this volume will themselves make contributions to later editions and we look forward to connecting with them over time.
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WE WOULD LIKE TO THANK all those colleagues, artists, programmers and collaborators who have supported us in various ways to bring this volume to completion. A project of this size has required us over an extended period of time to have conversations with many people all across the globe, engage in protracted email correspondence, see lots of live and mediated artworks. We are indebted to those individuals, companies and organisations who have helped us make this volume possible. The following is a list of people without whom we would not be able to share and disseminate the contents of this edition.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS


Shenton, P. (2014) “How we set out to make a piece about controversial works of art and ended up getting naked and talking about how we feel about our bodies”, in Brine, D. Adjunct, Cambridge Junction. Reprinted by permission of the author, company and Daniel Brine/Adjunct.


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Arana, I. S., Pessi, M. S. and Metcalfe, S. (2014) “Lost in the funhouse, or all you need to make a show is a girl and a microphone” from Daniels, R. (ed.) DIY, The University of Chichester. Reprinted by permission of company and editor.
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AS A WAY OF READING this collection of writings we suggest that, initially, the following connections and equivalences could prove of interest: process, politics, audiences, cultural specificity, bodies, collectives/collaborations and (spanning all of these) ethics. We will unpack these further in our introduction, but with these in mind there are many composite essays that might be written by all our contributors, many different dialogues or conversations between performance makers in the twenty-first century, this is just one possibility:

On process …

We’ve spent more than 4000 days in a collaborative process, tens of thousands of hours together in the rehearsal room, hundreds of car journeys, plane journeys, bus journeys, get-ins and get-outs. Slowly, over a very long time, we have made an extraordinary commitment to each other; to put all our creative attention into something shared. (Action Hero)

What we do is sit around and talk about things. Do things. Set things in motion. Get the ball rolling. Try stuff out. Improvise. Put some music on and dance about. Suggest stuff for the other person to try out. Jump in when it’s getting exciting and have a go at pushing it forward. We find our way into it. We are experimental. We accept, in fact embrace, the chaos and out of that we push for form, for structure, for logic. We have to have it in front of us to know what it is and to know why we’re bothering. It has to be made of really good bits that we like and like doing and then the
battle is joined, the questions come; What does all this add up to? What does it mean? Why did we do this? What does it say? What did we want it to say? Did we/do we want it to say anything? How do we want people to feel when they are watching this or when they come in or when they leave? (New Art Club)

Starting with an idea pushing it away from the source, but we always come back to the beginning again. Working on this process has been strange because all that information is stored in a place in my head and it has come alive again. This bit when the pieces are crafted and put together is the most enjoyable of the making of a performance. (Reckless Sleepers)

I think with us it’s part of that thing of finding the edge of something, you know, because if you’re not anywhere near the edge you’re just doing basically puerile, sort of safe stuff, so you’ve got to find the edge and the inspiration to get to the edge is because you, you want to, you’re not satisfied with something. You want to move the edge forward, it’s like a kind of encroachment on people’s capability and, you know, I think we’re quite good at that, at keeping ourselves angry and not making stuff if we’re not, if we’re not angry about it. (Ridiculusmus)

One evening I leave my notebook in the bag, and sit on the floor in the spare room, I close my eyes and I imagine my journey. I don’t try to describe it, I just try to see it. I travel, and I return. I’m aware how this sounds. I’m not saying I had an out of body experience. But I did sit quietly and see something very clearly in my imagination. Falling away from the earth and seeing everywhere I had ever been mapped out below me in a line of light. Falling back to Earth and seeing all of the people who are close to me, scattered across Europe. The next day I sit on the stage with Gillian and I describe what I saw. “That’s it,” she says. (Third Angel)

The kind of theatre I make offers an alternative way of experiencing theatre as a form that I would like to call a contemporary hybrid and is structurally often fragmented in nature. I don’t like to see it as an attempt to decolonise Indian theatre as I firmly believe that the Indian culture is a palimpsest of many cultures hence rather I intend to call it a theatre of ‘contemporary hybrid’. When I call my work ‘contemporary hybrid’ what I really mean is that at one level it attempts to push the strict boundaries of theatre as a language engaging with various other art forms and technology and at the same time it also often reflects upon or is inspired by the ritual theatre, folklore and various cultures that have been practiced in contemporary India. (Deepan Sivaraman)

And that is what we’re doing I think: making in a semi-chaotic/semi-structured way, accepting that creativity is wild, leaving room for the unknown, asking questions, proposing possibilities, trying things and eventually finding our way to something that makes sense. (New Art Club)
We improvised and created material. The inner landscapes became shared experiences. All of us have different ways of improvising and of conducting ‘do what you saw’. As the main material gathering and devising method we have developed ‘do what you saw’. At the end of the day we improvise with the material that has been gathered. This goes on for a substantial amount of time mixed with various tasks, exercises and improvisations, until we start structuring the performance. We don’t work with scripts or directors. The designers (light, sound, costume) followed the work. As artistic director, I jumped in and out. If I don’t see I cannot think. Sometimes seeing does not even help. (Oblivia)

My process is about being alive to my world and sensitive to the world of others; it is also about giving time and nourishment to this delicate stage of creation. I see the making of theatre as a collaborative voyage and nurturing relationships throughout is key to the strength and resilience of the company and the work we make. The quality of the work relies fundamentally on the quality of the process. If you’re planning on growing a beautiful healthy plant, you’re going to choose the best soil and the best seed and the conditions must be as perfect as possible. (Gecko)

The emerging new work is never about a thematic but begins as a list of ideas, a list that encompasses theatrical form, content, images, questions about materials, the audience, the actors’ professional development goals, personal experience, individual and collective imagination, observation, mistakes and my own ego-related bullet points. It’s vast and eclectic and is as much about a journey into fear as it is about bold ambition. (Back to Back Theatre)

Also, for me, a huge factor in my work relates to dreams. What I love about dreams is that you’re often in a sequence of seemingly unrelated events and you don’t always notice the schism between them. You just tumble from one to the other and there’s a strange sort of continuity, they completely embrace you. If they’re profound enough they might leave you the next morning with images that might be unconnected, but they really have a strange impact on you, they’re imprinted on your mind. (Brett Bailey)

In my work, I would like to try to produce on stage a “pure presentness” of the performer! I would personally reduce the theatricality of the work in order to produce as few signs as I can. (Jérôme Bel)

It was one of those very humbling moments in our rehearsal process, which I confess occur with alarming frequency. The director states something so obvious it requires no argument; her statement has rendered her observation undeniable. Only the question remains as to why the observation had gone thus far unobserved, was not already obvious before her statement made it so. (Every house has a door)

Today I have been in a room with Chris, my friend ... We are talking about death. Talking about how we don’t talk about it enough. Not just me and him but All of Us. Most specifically, All Of Us Who Are Lucky Enough To Live In This Safe, First World Nation
where we are, for the most part, insulated from any direct contact with death. Because if we did (talk about it more openly and with less fear) then maybe we’d have a healthier relationship with ‘it’ and, more importantly, with each other? (Unlimited)

Making a new theatre work feels like a death wish, a tempting of fate. I think it is a quest about how close one can come to death through provocation, complexity, simplicity, exposure, transparency and admission. We are testing what one can get away with, what one can do and say and still be loved. In invoking spirits to our stage, we are attempting to make something primal, something that bores into our evolutionary cerebral cortex; something that connects us with not just all that live but all that have lived; something that finds the personal within the cosmic, that proposes a work for the near future. (Back to Back Theatre)

I am not interested in provocation purely for the sake of provocation; I hope to incite thought. If I work too cautiously my work will lose its sharpness, but if I go full steam ahead, I will achieve just as little. The disruption would become ungainly. It is a constant balancing act. You sometimes fall from the rope, you sometimes burn your fingers. Sometimes the artwork has succeeded and the artist has died. (Dries Verhoeven)

Yes, and I think with us it’s part of that thing of finding the edge of something, you know, because if you’re not anywhere near the edge you’re just doing basically puerile, sort of safe stuff, so you’ve got to find the edge and the inspiration to get to the edge is because you, you want to, you’re not satisfied with something. You want to move the edge forward, it’s like a kind of encroachment on people’s capability and, you know, I think we’re quite good at that, at keeping ourselves angry and not making stuff if we’re not angry about it. “For fuck’s sake, be an individual! Be something bigger than yourself! Aspire! Fail! Recover! Repeat!” (Reckless Sleepers)

Since the earthquake hit Japan, I’ve strongly felt the need to write fictional stories. I have started to consider “fiction” as not an “unreal fabrication” but rather an “alternative” to reality. I think the current society in Japan should change to this alternative reality. That is why I have started to think that “fictional stories are needed.” I will make my next new work with this idea in mind. (Toshiki Okada)

We want to give something back to the people who place their trust in us, a feeling of ‘empowerment’, of ‘I can do that’. We don’t just want to take we also want to give back. That is an attitude that has developed and grown within the group over the years. (Gob Squad)

My aim was to work on issues that could be those of the audience. I wanted to create a greater identification of the spectators to the performers by de-skilling them. Skills are only exciting for the (stupid) performers themselves and the specialized audience (the elite? I am not sure!). But in a way, if you are an artistically ambitious artist, you need to please both the elite and express your political stand on equality. This is a difficult
equation, but this is the one you have to resolve. Skills concern craft, which bores me; I find this decadent. I try not to use the skills of the performers and that is why I started to work with amateurs. (Jérôme Bel)

On politics …

As a feminist artist I identify ‘movement’ in both senses of the word: kinaesthetically (through the act of moving, making movement and facilitating movement in others) and politically (a group of people working together to stimulate dialogue and affect change). What is written on the body and felt in the heart is at the centre of what I create and what I curate. What threads through all my work is the desire to make the personal political, to make the individual experience readable and therefore universal and to place the female experience centre stage. (Vincent Dance Theatre)

We have institutionalised disruption. In Northern Europe if you want to go to the barricades, first you have to go to city hall, fill in a form and then you are allowed to stand somewhere on an industrial site, in the Netherlands on the Malieveld. (Dries Verhoeven)

A lot of my approach in the last ten years has been about finding ways to use the theatre as a place to think about how we are doing in these circumstances, and perhaps towards social and political change and acts of resistance. I want to try to create a liberated space in which those gathered in the theatre can reflect on and ask some questions of the world in which we live. In doing so I hope we might be allowed to consider our individual and collective capacity to shape it. (Andy Smith)

I have never wanted to be labelled a political artist. I simply try not to be fooled by clichés and propaganda. I try to look at the world around me through a different lens, to pay attention to issues that others might not notice. I worry about those who might otherwise go unseen. Like a rescue dog, I have to follow my nose, react to the scent of life. Before calling myself a political artist, I have to honour my obligation as a human. (Mohammad Aghebati)

Yes, but I think we have to recognize that in art we move at a different pace. Real change is actually transformation. Quick change never lasts; it always creates a backlash whereas real change is actually moving deeply through people’s attitudes across a generation. What we do in theatre—the word “culture”—is about cultivation. You’re planting a seed as deeply as you can plant it, so that it will have long-term consequences. (Peter Sellars)

A critical stance toward the world at large is the primary condition for theatre making. Integral to this philosophy is a commitment to operate as a collective with no single voice of authority. (Dood Paard)
This is a position. This is a position of an image. This is position of an image of ‘I’, ‘I’ is in this position and this position is true like in a real movie. This position here is an image, a true image like in a real movie. This image here creates a category of truth and deeply believes in it. This image is good looking. This image here stands, sits, lies down with a wild open mouth. This image touches life and death. This image will stand in one frame for a very long time. This image is fully aware of what it does with its emotional capitalism. This image suffers for all white heterosexual women. (Agata Siniarska)

To actually change, the non-western world must begin to articulate clearly its own discourse and create networks outside the Euro-centric one. Only then can we start to construct an environment beyond morbid curiosity and opportunism. An environment without resentment. It is time to replace the multi-nationals of art and instead look for what globalization could actually mean. (Padmini Chettur)

On audiences …

Strangely enough, the most important experiences I have had as a theatre spectator were the ones that revealed the truth—the truth against the fakeness on which theater is built. In those instances, I experienced the revelation of something more real in the theater than in life, where reality is hidden by social and cultural conventions and habits. (Jérôme Bel)

Finding other ways, different ways, to make friends while you’re up there – giving people laughter – raucous laughter – giving people good stuff to see and hear, feeding people very well. But never giving a moment, a position, a reading, a stance, a meaning away for free and unshaken. Making yourselves and the audience, making everybody work (sweat) to try to find relief, to try to find where things settle. (GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN)

I think if you can let an audience know why it is happening, and how it is happening, you get over all the mystery and then they can think, ‘Do I like it then?, ‘Do I think this is worth doing?’ (Lone Twin)

Is this art? I didn’t get it. I got it. I love it. I’m afraid. I’m with you. We go straight on Wall Street towards the East River and we come back zigzagging, crisscrossing the perpendicular streets towards Trinity Church on Broadway. Can I stay with you? Are you all a group? How come, it makes no sense and it makes total sense. Are you Brazilians? Some of us are. How do you know? I don’t know. What is going on here? Performance art. Stuff from the seventies? Do you want to try? (Eleanora Fabião)

The audience is the proving agent of all theatre. The presence of an audience is central to the definition of theatre. If there isn’t an audience, it isn’t theatre. The theatre happens
inside an audience. The object of theatre happens on the stage, but the subject of theatre takes place inside an audience. Anyone can walk across an empty space, but it is the fact of someone watching it happen that produces the act of theatre. (Andy Smith)

I want spectators to understand that I see them somehow, that they’re not alone, but with me. Sometimes I’m inciting them saying ‘Yes, great job, excellent!’ looking not into the camera, but suggesting that I’m addressing other students. When I direct my gaze into the camera, it’s meant to exercise more authority. On the viewers’ part, their reaction always depends on different variables, like their position in the space, whether they’re sitting or standing etc. (Farah Saleh)

In light of the rise in bespoke performances and art works over the last decade we wanted to make a work which springs from your acquiescence with the work itself (or your rejection of it). In each of these new works in which the public are addressed as individuals and/or are invited to navigate the work to some degree, power relationships are inscribed. If you are ready to accept that you would kill in certain circumstances (especially when you or those you love are threatened) then it merely remains to identify the sufficient level of threat necessary to trigger our violence. (Blast Theory)

We play a lot with sightlines, what you can and can’t see. Each person will witness a different performance because of where they chose or where directed to sit. In The Last Supper this is a random process with strong consequences, as people choose their seats via a lottery and are generally separated from their friends, lovers and family. Most come in pairs and because they are broken up they are unable to maintain that strong unit that can stand apart from the social gathering. What takes place is that strangers sit next to, and talk to, one another. (Reckless Sleepers)

To close the gap between performer and audience, create new experiences, we need to begin developing new spaces for performance. We are now employing SRT-derived movement principles to invent embodied computer interfaces and orchestrate experiences designed to elicit sensory awareness – offering forms of interaction beyond the visual. For example, we are exploring vibration, pitch, amplitude and harmonics, ideas of buoyancy, and the sense of smell. (Gibson/Martelli)

We believe that the most important tool that we have brought to the 21st century is that our fans and we ourselves have come up with the concept of Furan theatre; that is, a very physical type of theatre in which the audience is invited to go on stage and interact with the stage elements. This interaction means that the passive spectator becomes active and that gradually their pulse can coincide with the stage rhythm of the work. (La Fura dels Baus)

The intense liveness of the exchange between BodyWeather performers and their audiences offers a vividly open-ended, ethical opportunity. Conventional psychology and narrative fall away; the focus on an energetic exchange between bodies dissolves the
logics of inside and outside, self and environment, yields cascading acts of discovery and realisations, opening to new apprehensions of human being. Audiences are entreated to unfurl imaginatively into new orderings of space, time and being. (Tess de Quincey)

Many more theatre artists and producers in Tehran are young. Almost 75% of the audience is made up of young people, often university students. Therefore, you have passionate artists and audiences who are not so much concerned with the commercial value of the work, but rather crave an art form that can catalyze new ways of thinking, that can offer an alternative to the government-approved media. (Mohammad Aghebati)

Fundamentally, and in conclusion, my area of practice and primary interest in theatre revolves around the premise of moving a gathering of sentient spectators. Spectators, since they are at the epicentre of the theatre; sentient because I see them as vital co-creators of theatrical experiences. There is no theatre without an audience. (Sankar Venkateswaran)

We start with the people in the room. Our work is made as a product of these relationships that we build with people. We’ve learned that embracing and offering up a kind of vulnerability is a key to finding ways to enter into people’s lives – and them into ours. We cultivate a willingness to let failure occur, to let it be seen and heard. This seems to set up a public space, between us and those we meet, where interesting conversations can take place. In this somehow open space, change can occur, for us and maybe for the people we meet. There’s something hopeful in that. That’s why we do our work like this. (Quarantine)

• As an audience member I don’t want to be that involved. I want to be more of a voyeur. I hate audience participation, I hate it with a loathing, I really do.
• We can hardly resist giving the audience some kind of role. We are always concerned that the audience has an active part to play. We are strangely united as a group about this. There is not much discussion about whether we should do it but rather how we should do it.
• You have to take responsibility as a viewer, you define your role as a viewer by how close you come, how involved you get, when you come in, when you exit.
• We are working with an audience that is open to us. Sometimes we call them ‘found performers’, like ‘found objects’.
• We are interested in you, and we will try to get something out of you. Sometimes it can be a little embarrassing, but we are embarrassing. (Gob Squad)

Disappointment is part of the game. My work has been often characterized as deceptive. This deception is part of my strategy. In order to gain something, you have to lose something else. So, the dramaturgy is often to disappoint first the expectation of the audience, to start from zero again, and then you can, maybe, build something new with the audience. You have to destroy the dream of the audience, its desire, which is most of the time the recognition of what they like, in order to prepare them for a new experience. (Jérôme Bel)
There is a need for new languages and enquiries. Our cultural productivity reflects the complexity of our histories that are interconnected, and the genuine ‘reader’ of this work cannot ignore this history. I am yet to meet this European ‘reader’, be it writer or curator who meets me halfway. (Padmini Chettur)

Audiences are entreated to unfurl imaginatively into new orderings of space, time and being. The exchange is at once individual, and deeply collective, testing what it is to be fully alive in, through, and with our bodies. Implicit in this exchange is a fundamental ethical challenge that questions how we are together and how we organise ourselves. (Tess de Quincey)

What I am trying to do in Korea is to find out how we see the current state of the relationship between Korea and Japan and how we can use theatre to give expression to it. Depicting today’s society is a difficult thing for Japanese artists to do alone, so I believe that there is value in using international projects as an opportunity to bring our respective perspectives to the process of looking at our shared issues and finding ways to express them in artistically skilful and meaningful ways. (Junnosuke Tada)

It may be clear by now; the philosophy of my practice is influenced by the Natya Shastra but my work is not so much to do with the dramatic literature of Sanskrit theatre or the dramaturgy of Natya Shastra. My training at the Intercultural Theatre Institute has shaped my sensibilities and my methods of theatre and performance. I also do theatre with tribal communities in Kerala where many of my understandings are continually challenged and I am constantly negotiating. (Sankar Venkateswaran)

Theater provides a chance for dialogue between cultures. A dramatic heritage belongs to everyone. It allows us to transcend time, place, and language. The practice of adaptation is common here because it helps Iranian artists get around censorship, as you can claim that the story you’re telling is someone else’s story, not a story about Iran, and therefore not a story that needs to be scrutinized, not a story that would be of any concern to the government. (Mohammad Aghebatı)

After two decades of working in the dance world, I can safely say that dance eludes me more and more. I am perpetually oscillating between positive feelings of hope and conviction, negative ones of hopelessness and despair. The irony being that dance is not the actual problem. The ‘problem’ is my finding myself more deeply embroiled than ever in the post-colonial/neo-imperialist politics of our supposed ‘free’ and globalized world. What is my relationship to the past? A past of tradition, re-invented tradition and even imagined tradition. What is this ‘Indianness’ that I represent? (Padmini Chettur)
I founded my theatre ... out of the need to identify that kind of personal necessity, to find my equivalent gesture of throwing a handful of sand over the historical, cultural and political memories of death and darkness in my country. In 1991 when Dah was initially formed with Hadrenka Andjelic and Maja Mitic (and later with Sanja Krstanovic Tasic), my country was undergoing a period of darkness, a time of destruction and violence. To found a theatre group that consisted of a handful of people in fact was the action that I had been searching for to oppose this darkness. (Dah Theatre)

I think the future of Indian performance is based on its ability to cross the strict borders of theatre and explore the possibilities of engaging with other art disciplines. It should show the courage and candidness to move on from its conventional existing idea of word based representational drama and should explore the possibilities of theatre as a physical material form that take place in a particular moment of time and space. (Deepan Sivaraman)

And certainly not in the Netherlands. If you explain that something is art, the disruption is placed in the artistic domain ... What's more, it is different in Germany; art is authoritative there. As soon as the disruption is labelled as art, the resistance is more likely to increase than decrease. (Dries Verhoeven)

On bodies ...

While the act of performance may be mediated by any number of filters, it starts with a living body; a body that is, here and now. The deep energy of our bodies is embedded in space, shaped by time, the environment, the specifics of place. My work takes on the inhabited, inhabiting body, a transformative body able to assume radical difference and otherness; an ambiguous body that can be occupied by images that invite us – lure us, entice us – into multiple narratives and environments. These bodies arise from the practice of Body Weather. (Tess de Quincey)

Considering my body as an archive, I feel I can create an access door for viewers by deconstructing movements. From this perspective, I can teach, demonstrate, and construct new gestures with viewers. This process represents the exposure of my archive, namely my body, to them. I get feedback when I see them accomplishing the gestures, or at least feeling or remembering them. Even when they don’t try them physically, their bodies remember, since it’s not only a matter of muscles but also of mental memory. (Farah Saleh)

It is not dance, but there is something magical about it, and it is closely related to religion. We are going to invent a new faith on the stage. What do these people believe? What are their values and how can we learn from their humanity? (Ultima Vez)

No Body. I learned very early on in dance training that how I feel is not necessarily how I look, and the journey through movement and performance practices has been a process of aligning my own internal perception with external commentaries. A journey...
IN DIALOGUE

of adjustments made in the attempt to eradicate discrepancy. And when I do move, it is possible to occupy different places simultaneously – the place where internal sensations and private ideas dominate. Ideas like: What if I move from everywhere and nowhere? What if I could get inside time and push it out? What if I imagined the air was a supportive structure? What if movement were a kind of marked dance of memory? What if I moved like a bad dancer? (Wendy Houstoun)

I have been lifted, caught and dropped, I have dived into water, fallen from a ladder, pierced someone’s shoulders with acupuncture feathers, been suspended from my feet upside down from a rope, rolled over stones, broken through a sheet of sugar glass, fallen backwards from a high tower, walked on wine glasses, been thrown out a car driving at high speed into my own performance, lurched around underpasses, tottered on high heels with my legs tied together carrying a large man, shouted through a megaphone under the spray of water, screamed into a microphone while losing my voice, run across a field for hours, danced in unison, collided with the group, moved alone and now and then, just stood still. (Wendy Houstoun)

Our recent research explores the use of haptic interfaces and physical recreations of computer-generated environments to question how senses of dislocation and immersion enhance viewer experience. We all have a sense of our body in the real world – we are all experts in movement – we all have a kinetic sense. But what of this sense of our body in computer-simulated reality? How can we cultivate and integrate kinesthetic intelligence into immersive environments? This leads us to ask two fundamental questions through our practice: How can we close the gap between performance/artwork and audience? How can we create new experiences for audiences? (Gibson/Martelli)

And I’m going to sing you a song
A song about standing on stage in front of an audience
A song that does not begin in the way it usually does
A song that is not sung in the voice it usually is
A song without an ending
A song that won’t stop playing
A song that says anything we want it to say
So we can stop saying anything
A song that takes us somewhere
Without us going anywhere (Michael Pinchbeck)

On collectives and collaboration ...

With more than 35 years’ experience, [we have] never been organised on the basis of a hierarchical structure with one leader. It is a prolific, polyccephalic group, made up of six heads, driven by the vitality of rock, the provocation of neo-circus and the visual strength of object and physical theatre. (La Fura dels Baus)
Learning is the result of sharing knowledge; but, above all, it is the fruit of a shared experience. We are also the result of working with diverse creators, professionals from different disciplines and techniques. From the very beginning we worked together as a collective. Out of an incidental gathering as a group of friends in the beginning, we soon understood our structure as an approach to deal with existing power structures. The loss of control, which arises when there is no boss around, was a productive and challenging experience that we shared. (Monster Truck)

[Our] ten founder members together fulfil the role of the company’s “artistic director”, with the shows (likewise this text) collectively “designed, devised, and directed by [the company]”, although individuals typically take on particular responsibilities in the process: Most ... members also do their own creative work outside of the company’s projects, information about which can be found on their websites. Theatre is above all collaborative work. (Shunt)

Since my plays are silent and non-verbal, people ask me if I do physical theatre. I say, I do theatre of the mind, and I mean so. There are a number of minds operating in a theatrical experience. Moments of theatricality erupt when the minds of the spectators, the actors, the characters and the author harmonise. At such moments, the poet’s experience becomes the spectator’s experience. The borders between the author, actor, character and the spectators are blurred, creating a live and mutually nourishing viewer-response loop. Eventually when the distinction between the self and the other is blurred, but without confusions between the self and the other; an experience of oneness is felt by the spectator. (Sankar Venkateswaran)

Craft and aesthetic affect can always be refined or adapted, but too often artists operate under mythologies of muse, inspiration and other subjective mysticism: metaphoric obfuscation of the linkage between idea, transmission and reception of culture. I was henceforth disposed, or rather primed, to resist dialecticism, particularly the mismatched binary of style versus technique. All music must address both, but the ideal practice eschews the dominance of one over the other. (David Chisholm)

How do we use the many art forms when we create a performance? By giving each one space enough within the performance. It is like a symphony with many instruments and musicians playing. The stage director is the conductor who leads them all. It is a matter of selecting and dosing in the right amounts. It is a matter of rhythm, pauses and breaks. And last but not least, listen to your intuition, go with your gut. (Hotel Pro Forma)

[Our company’s] unyielding grip on its autonomy, its repeated defence of it, is unique. There are few other groups in the Netherlands who have worked for so long without either a director or set designer. No external authority determines the worldview being expressed, the acting style or the stage design; each and every decision on these and other matters emerges from discussions between equals – the actors and the technicians. (Dood Paard)
The power of the theatre lies in its power to cast light on dark truths and allow a process of mourning to occur in society. Theatre can create indeed a necessary space for collective mourning, for collective witnessing, for remembrance and action. It is important to ask the question: how to create space where we can meet and be together, a place to mourn, and not be in opposition with one another? (Dah Theatre)

We believe in dialogic processes, that the best ideas come from collaboration, and that that is hard, and not always straightforward, but that it is more human. The act of collaboration can feel very radical in an individualistic culture. (Action Hero)

On ethics …

When Bernice Johnson Reagon lifts her voice, what is happening to democratic space as it’s being created in the streets of Albany, Georgia? The question of the power of that music and those people singing in the vans on the way to prison, and what it means to sing in the presence of those dogs and water cannons—this is ethical performance at the highest level imaginable. (Peter Sellars)

Our practice contains an imprint of the way in which we wish to live our lives and the way we wish to be in the world. In contrast to a defined moral code, this ethics is social, ever-evolving and dialogic. We ask ourselves and our audiences a series of questions about the world. The work we make is a response to particular civil/social ethics of being, doing, working and acting in the world. (Action Hero)

Thinking is an ethical must for an artist, even more in current times. Philosophical constructions on which the predatory model is based have failed, patriarchy is falling down and for the new world we need a new thinking, a new involving art. For this, it is compulsory to philosophize and poeticise the world. We’re still full with the old order. My system involves believing we throw into disarray an order and at the same time, we make a play. (Patricia Ariza)

Looking backwards to my work as a performance artist, I realise my role as faculty of the School of Theatre clearly corresponds to the ethics and politics of my own performance practice. One of the constant features in my performance work is that, most of the time, most of my desire is invested in the process instead of the final art piece. (María José Contreras)

The intense liveness of the exchange between Body Weather performers and their audiences offers a vividly open-ended, ethical opportunity. Conventional psychology and narrative fall away; the focus on an energetic exchange between bodies dissolves the logics of inside and outside, self and environment, yields cascading acts of discovery and realisations, opening to new apprehensions of human being. (Tess de Quincey)
Perhaps the most satisfying outcome of this experimental, uncertain exercise in meaning making was the opportunity to intervene into an environment which otherwise exists for a somewhat rigid, necessarily predictable purpose: to maximise the exchange between currency and goods. (Aaron Williamson)

And finally ...

I’m thrilled by the fact that that utterly inauthentic, sometimes downright dishonest thing can be riddled with truth. (Quarantine)

Magic is fast. We could think of the quick tempo of magic as being analogue to that of the entertainment industries, of bite size attention spans, and the hurried production and consumption of images in what theorist Jonathan Crary has called terminal capitalism. How to find another pace, another rhythm? When a sequence or film is slowed down, it becomes possible to see not only more, but differently. What was previously invisible becomes visible; in the right conditions, we realise it is not just the images that have been slowed down, but ourselves. (Augusto Corrieri)

In silence I come to know possibility.

Out of silence I come into awareness of myself as interruption.

My self-presentation does violence to quiet and to possibility, and I know my life as the ticking of a clock of my own making. Soon we came to the battlefields. It was not terrifying it was strange. It was a landscape. And it belonged to no country. I remember hearing a French nurse say and the only thing she did say was, c’est un paysage passionnant, an absorbing landscape. And that was what it was as we saw it.

It was strange. (Every house has a door)

Looking backwards to my work as a performance artist, I realise my role as faculty of the School of Theatre clearly corresponds to the ethics and politics of my own performance practice. One of the constant features in my performance work is that, most of the time, most of my desire is invested in the process instead of the final art piece. I love to work through ideas and concepts, to experiment with materials and procedures, and to practise different alternatives in order to discover what I want to do and how to do it. (María José Contreras)

In my language, Serbian, the word for theatre is POZORISTE. The root of the word, POZOR, means attention. Theatre is a place, therefore, of attention, where attention is paid. To do theatre is to be awakened, is to be alert; to be attentive. (Dah Theatre)

It is the role of the artist to be the standard bearer of truth, to challenge the status quo and to tell the authentic stories of life and of living. This has always been the role of the artist but never has there been such a war on truth, never has there been such
manipulation and systematically-created confusion – this is the time when we need artists, more than ever. (Gecko)

We’ve always loved making the endings. The ending is always the best bit. A good ending is both a farewell and also a kind of latching on, the show crawling into the heads of the audience like a shiver of longing, like a tickle of doubt, like a parasite. A good ending is a kind of epiphany, like in the dying moments you can suddenly catch sight of the whole thing, of what it really was, the show, and in that glimpsing it all twists back in on itself, like an impossible, un-mappable funhouse, dizzying, serpentine, exitless. It never ends. It always ends. It ends all too suddenly. It ends like (Sleepwalk Collective)
ethical position in the twenty-first century, rather (like Blast Theory’s ‘Trolley dilemmas’) a series of ethical dilemmas. As Gemma Paintin and James Stenhouse of Action Hero write:

it’s not theme or form or even medium that links our projects or defines our practice. It could better be described as an ethics. Our practice contains an imprint of the way in which we wish to live our lives and the way we wish to be in the world. In contrast to a defined moral code, this ethics is social, ever-evolving and dialogic. We ask ourselves and our audiences a series of questions about the world. The work we make is a response to particular civil/social ethics of being, doing, working and acting in the world.

Looking ahead

Some years ago Neil Mackenzie, curator of Flare International Festival of New Theatre, shared a list of international contemporary theatre makers with us as editors. Some of the artists from this list are represented here in this Reader. Recently Mackenzie shared an updated list of both emerging and more established innovative performance companies working internationally. The list served as a reminder to us of the ever evolving ‘field’ of contemporary performance practice, and that this book will only ever be a snapshot (or series of snapshots) of a single moment of the twenty-first century. And so we end this introduction with a nod to the future, to potential future editions of this Reader, to potential futures of performance. We would like to extend an invitation to our readers to get in touch with recommendations for performance makers/companies that might be included in future editions of this Reader. Please email us at contact@21stcenturyperformancereader.co.uk.

References


WHAT’S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Source
Commissioned by the editors.

Action Hero (founded 2005)
Gemma Paintin and James Stenhouse share an interdisciplinary performance practice together under the name Action Hero. Since 2005, they have created performances spanning theatre, live art, installation, multimedia and site-specific practice, which have toured to more than 25 countries across 5 continents. Although they work primarily with live performance, their work is always experimenting with form, and as a result expands across multiple creative practices.

Action Hero make work that seeks to use audiences as collaborators and co-conspirators. Their ongoing interests lie in the iconography of popular culture and its use; both as a weapon and as a shared cultural memory. Scrutinising the epic and the banal, they create performance that is intimate, distinctive and invigorating. They live and work in Bristol, UK.

Key works

Wrecking Ball (2016)
Slap Talk (2014)
Hoke’s Bluff (2013)
Frontman (2010)
Watch Me Fall (2009)
A Western (2007)

Further reading


www.actionhero.org.uk
Theatre Group. In 2003, Aghebati received a medal from President Khatami as Iran’s successful Young Theatre Artist for his direction of the play, *Kiss You and Tears* based on Vaclav Havel’s life.

Since 2008, Aghebati has worked with Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA). He has taught several workshops and classes to educators, teaching them how to integrate theatre and games into classrooms. He has also led theatre for young audience workshops at multiple International festivals. Aghebati’s plays for adults and TYA include: *Skellig and Children of Fly, Attar’s Simorg, Arash* and *Only God has the Right to Wake Me Up*, which premiered at the opening night of Freiburg Theatre Festival in Germany in 2005, and won best directing prize from Isfahan International theatre festival.

Aghebati is currently a Special Research Fellow at the Yale School of Drama, studying Theatre and he is also a member of several international TYA networks such as Assitej and Next Generation Artist. His award winning recent play *Hamlet, Prince of Grief*, was presented as part of the Under The Radar Festival in the Public Theatre in New York. The play has been touring across the States and was recently presented in NYC at the Asia Society as a part of the Iran Modern series. Aghebati moved to New York in 2013.

**Key works**

*Richard II* (2016)
*Oedipus the King* (2015)
*Hamlet, Prince of Grief* (2012)
*Jocaste* (2007)
*Only God has the Right to Wake Me Up* (2005)
*Kiss You and Tears* (2003)

**Further reading**

Ariza focuses her interests on women artists and the social movement in Colombia, producing large works that bring together professional artists and victims – particularly women – of the long-existing armed conflicts in Colombia. The Corporation Colombian de Teatro (which she manages) creates performances and events with widows and children from the most violent regions of the country: abused women who have left their homes, young people living on the streets, and others displaced by war and social upheaval. These women tell their life stories and play an active role in each performance. The company also organizes the biannual Festival Alternativo de Teatro and the internationally acclaimed Festival de Mujeres en Escena (“Women on Stage Festival”).

In 2007 Ariza was awarded a Culture and Conflict Prince Claus Award from the Netherlands. In 2014 Ariza was awarded the Gilder/Coigney International Theatre Award by NYC’s League of Professional Theatre Women.

Key works

*Antigona* (2006)
*De caos y dec a caos* (2003)
*Los nadaistas* (2001)
*Camilo vivo* (2001)
*Mujeres desplazadas* (2000)

Further reading

Back to Back Theatre (founded 1987)

Back to Back Theatre creates new forms of contemporary performance imagined from the minds and experiences of a unique ensemble of actors with a disability, giving voice to social and political issues that speak to all people.

Based in Geelong, the company is one of Australia’s most globally recognised and respected contemporary theatre companies. Seeking to make a body of work that exists in repertoire across time, the company tours extensively locally, nationally and internationally. Over the last decade, Back to Back Theatre has presented 44 national and 71 international seasons of its work.

Since 1999, under the Artistic Directorship of Bruce Gladwin, the company has nurtured a unique artistic voice with an emphasis on the ensemble’s own commentaries on broad social and cultural dialogue. Created through a process of research, improvisation and scripting, new work is realised across time via collaboration between the ensemble, Artistic Director and guest artists.

In addition to its professional practice Back to Back collaborates intensively with communities around the world, with a focus on artistic excellence and elevated social inclusion for all people of difference.

Back to Back Theatre has received 16 national and international awards including in recent years a Performance Studies International ASA award (Artists/Scholars/Activists), a Helpmann Award for Best Australian Work, an Edinburgh International Festival Herald Angel Critics’ Award, a New York Bessie and the Myer Foundation Group Award for its longstanding contribution to the development of Australian theatre. In 2015, Bruce Gladwin received the Australia Council for the Arts’ Inaugural Award for Outstanding Achievement in Theatre, and in 2016 Back to Back Theatre was awarded the Performance Studies International’s Artist-Scholar-Activist Award.

Key works

*Lady Eats Apple* (2017)
*Super Discount* (2013)
*Ganesh Versus the Third Reich* (2011)
*Food Court* (2008)
*small metal objects* (2005)
*Soft* (2002)

Further reading

ON MAKING THEATRE


www.backtobacktheatre.com
Key works

Macbeth (2014)
Exhibit B (2012)
Orfeus (2006)
Big Dada: The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin (2001)
iMumbo Jumbo (1997)

Further reading

High-jinx from the South African Stage, Cape Town: Juta and Company Ltd.

www.thirdworldbunfight.co.za
Notes

1 The group adopted its name from the restored sabed (water fountain) where we performed our first piece. Sabeel's mission is to promote women's work and present new non-traditional work in alternative performance spaces. I revived the group upon my return to Cairo from New York in 2009.

2 One such example is the theatre group Halwasa’s *By the Light of the Revolution Moon*, written and acted by Hani Abdel Naser, Mohamed Abdel Muiz, and Ahmed Fuad, and directed by Hard Abdel Naser.


4 In summer 2009, I wrote *Solitaire*, a play about three Egyptian women from the same family. The play has since been revised to include a new section about the Egyptian Revolution, and I have been touring the new version as a one-woman show in Egypt and abroad since March 2011.

5 Friday, January 28, 2011, witnessed major clashes between demonstrators and security forces in many cities in Egypt. Because of the extreme violence of the police and the random killing of peaceful demonstrators, it came to be known as the “Friday of Wrath.”

6 While the media referred to the events of February 2, 2011, as the Battle of the Camels, many of the rebels called it *Mowqeat al-Gahsh* (Battle of the Little Donkey), belittling the attackers and adding humor to the situation. The rebels even exhibited war trophies from the battle, hanging a saddle, some shoes, and items of clothing they collected from the attacks on a lamp post with a sign that read, “Museum of the Battle of the Little Donkey.”

7 Cairo experienced a major tragedy in 2008 when more than 100 audience members died in a fire in the Egyptian National Theatre in Ataba Square. Since that incident, the theatre authorities refuse to allow any open flame on stage, even though most theatre workers smoke inside the building, onstage, and in the workshops.

8 The Military Council in charge of the transitional government in Egypt decided to hold a referendum on March 19, 2011, for people to vote on six constitutional amendments. These forbade the president from staying in office for more than two terms and prevented him from passing the country’s leadership on to his son. Though both are important matters, these amendments did not address many of the issues the rebels wanted to see changed. Nonetheless, it was the highest turnout for a vote in Egyptian history, with more than 18 million people going to the ballot boxes. But there were many tactics used to divide the society between liberals and conservatives, as well as between Muslims and Christians. The results of the referendum were disappointing to many activists who thought that after the successful revolution, things would change in their favor.

9 Hassan Abu Bakr’s testimony of February 11, 2011.

PERFORMANCE THROUGH THE EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION

Source


Dalia Basiouny (Sabeel for the Arts founded 1997)

Dalia Basiouny is an Egyptian writer, theatre director, activist, scholar and founder of Sabeel for the Arts, which is known for feminist and activist theatre. She has lived in New York, London and Cairo during some of the most dramatic events in recent history and has used her experiences in such moments as the basis for her one-woman show, Solitaire. Solitaire has been presented in Cairo, Iraq, Morocco, Zimbabwe, Abu Dhabi and Germany, as well as in several US cities. The play has received the theatre award from the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture 2010. Basiouny’s work illuminates the issues of women and the function of art in times of revolution. Named a finalist for the League of Professional Theatre Women’s Gilder/Coigney International Theatre Artist Award, she has directed internationally throughout the Middle East, Europe and the United States. Most notably, her work was showcased at Kennedy Centre’s Arabesque Festival in 2009.

The recipient of many awards, including the Fulbright Arts Grant (USA), the British Council Chevening Scholarship (UK), and Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (Theatre Production Award for Solitaire, 2010), Basiouny received her PhD from City University of New York. Her thesis examines the political theatre of Arab American Women after 9/11. Basiouny teaches theatre at Helwan University and at the American University of Cairo.

Key works

The Magic of Borolus (2011)
Tahrir Stories (2011)
Solitaire (2010)
The Courage Just to Be I (2000)

Further reading

Professionals, unfortunately, have naturalized many ways of being on stage; being contemporary dancers, they are not aware of this anymore. I think it is disgusting because they are reproducing the same thing again and again without being conscious of it. For me, this is a nightmare – that’s how I discovered that contemporary dance was dead!

**CW:** Could I possibly press you to reflect on the Judson difference at all? Is Paxton’s importing of ordinary walking a similar strategy to your found club dance, tennis playing, or disabled theater? Or does he believe in transparency or purity of neutral movement, which is the opposite of these ready-made styles/forms?

**JB:** Well, I think the ’60s /’70s and the ’90s/’00s were different times, but the operation is the same. There is maybe a pre-cultural industry era, and la société du spectacle. My esthetic is a Warholian version of Paxton’s esthetic. But when I saw Satisfying Lover, I remember I thought that I should have done this piece! It was so perfect. But in fact, I did a piece incorporating pop songs, [such as] “Let’s Dance” or “I Like to Move It.”

**CW:** Regarding Judson versus now, I like your Paxton-after-Warhol characterization (even if Warhol had thought of all this at the same time: we just took five decades to understand him!) I am very interested in how art, historically speaking, often goes through a process of reiteration to be understood: how the ideas of the ’60s are immediately rejected by the next generation (late ’70s/’80s) but are reiterated/revitalized from the ’90s in ways that deepen our appreciation of the original work, and add to it. I think the seeds of Warholian knowingness were already there for Rainer/Paxton (consciousness of the image, of the fakeness of ordinariness as a style), but somehow that knowingness has been submerged in our historical understanding of them, so that we believe that they only believed in authenticity in a naive way. However, your work seems — to me — to draw out and exaggerate/go further with that implicit seed of ready-made-ness and make it of our time completely.

**Catherine Wood is Senior Curator, International Art (Performance) at Tate Modern.**

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**Source**

Jérôme Bel (b. 1964)

Jérôme Bel lives in Paris and works worldwide. Bel is an experimental choreographer; he provokes his audiences with witty, cerebral presentations that often break down the traditional barrier between performer and audience, and that pose questions about virtuosity and the nature of dance. Bel studied at the Centre National de Danse Contemporaine of Angers (France) in 1984–1985. From 1985 to 1991, he danced for many choreographers in France and in Italy. In 1992, he was assistant to the director and choreographer Philippe Decouflé for the ceremonies of the XVIth Winter Olympic Games of Albertville and Savoie (France).

Bel has been invited to contemporary art biennials and museums (Tate Modern, MoMA, Documenta 13, the Louvre), where he has put on performances and shown films. Two of them, Véronique Doisneau and Shirtology are in the collections of the Musée National d’Art Moderne-Centre Pompidou. Jérôme Bel is regularly invited to give lectures at universities. In 2013, together with the choreographer Boris Charmatz, he co-authored Emails 2009–2010, which was published by Les Presses du Réel.

Jérôme Bel received a Bessie Award for the performances of The Show Must Go On in New York in 2005. In 2008 Jérôme Bel and Pichet Klunchun received the Routes Princess Margriet Award for Cultural Diversity (European Cultural Foundation) for Pichet Klunchun and myself (2005). In 2013, Disabled Theater (2012) was selected for the Theatertreffen in Berlin and won the Swiss Dance Awards–Current Dance Works.

Key works

Tombe (2016)
Disabled Theater (2012)
Pichet Klunchun and Myself (2005)
Véronique Doisneau (2004)
The Show Must Go On (2001)
Shirtology (1997)

Further reading

IN CONVERSATION


www.jeromebel.fr
partners such as the Swedish Institute of Computer Science, Sony and Nokia, also the BBC, British Telecom and Microsoft Research. Blast Theory has been nominated for a BAFTA award four times and has won the Golden Nica for Interactive Art at Prix Ars Electronica, an International Mobile Games Award, three Lovie Awards and The Hospital’s Interactive Art Award among others. In 2016 they were awarded the Nam June Paik Art Center Prize in recognition of the group’s exploration of new boundaries in art. Internationally, Blast Theory’s work has been shown at the Tribeca Film Festival, Sundance Film Festival, Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis, the Venice Biennale, ICC in Tokyo, the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney Biennale, National Museum in Taiwan, Hebbel Theatre in Berlin, Basel Art Fair, Dutch Electronic Arts Festival, Sonar Festival in Barcelona and the Palestine International Video Festival.

Key works

*Short Periods of Structured Nothingness* (2018)
*Karen* (2015)
*The Thing I’ll be Doing for the Rest of my Life* (2013)
*Ulrike and Eamon Compliant* (2009)
*Uncle Roy all Around you* (2003)
*Can You See Me Now?* (2001)

Further reading


www.blasttheory.co.uk
Further reading


www.tammybrennan.com
Museum of Arte Útil evolved into the Asociación de Arte Útil (co-director Alistair Hudson).

Bruguera has participated in numerous international exhibitions, including Documenta 11 (2002), the Bienal Iberoamericana in Lima, Peru (2002), the Istanbul Biennial (2003), the Shanghai Biennale (2004), and the Gwangju Biennale, Korea (2008). Her work is also in the permanent collections of many institutions around the world, including the Museum of Modern Art and Bronx Museum of the Arts in New York and the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de La Habana.

**Key works**

*General Strike* (2010)

*Surplus Value* (2010)

*Migrant People Party (MPP)* (2006)


*Behavior Art School (Cátedra Arte de Conducta)* (1998)

*Tribute to Ana Mendieta* (1985)

**Further reading**


www.taniabruguera.com