

ARTISTS SPACE

Note: The booklet of work descriptions that accompanies the exhibition is designed to reference the seminal 1980 volume *Performance Anthology: Source Book of California Performance Art*, edited by Carl E. Loeffler and Darlene Tong. The book, which documents the performance rhetoric and scholarship of the '70s, comprises brief excerpts from the publications that were attempting to chronicle performance at the time, each properly cited so that a reader could track down the originals in magazines such as *Avalanche* and *La Mamelle*. Our booklet is made as a research guide in the same spirit of scholarship and generosity.

Terry Fox: the simplest kind of nothing
Danielle A. Jackson

That word [performance] means something different from what it used to. There must be a better word, we could say “situation.” I make a situation. The actual situation is what’s going on in the space we’re in. And the situation involves everybody there, and there is a blend when everybody starts participating. For instance, in Montana, where I played the instrument in a boat in a tunnel for twenty-four hours, people came all twenty-four hours and sang into the tunnel, played instruments, dropped their dogs in the water, listened with their ears against the ground.

—Terry Fox¹

In June 1979, Crown Point Press—a Bay Area etching and publishing company founded by Kathan Brown—dedicated an entire issue of its publication *View* to the artist Terry Fox. In it, Fox and interviewer Robin White speak candidly about his sense that performance was becoming an endangered species, with very few people making performances as he did. For Fox, performance was a kind of life theater—at once public and private—that bounces energy back and forth like human contact in a spontaneous street encounter.² In the interview, he famously proclaims, “Performance has to do with the day in which it originated. . . . It is an attempt at synthesizing communication.³ It’s an attempt at a new communication.” In his view, the only people this art form exists for are those who are present, and beyond that the work disappears, flouting notions of art that exists for all time.

Fox’s earliest performative works, often described by the artist as “situations,” thematically addressed everyday phenomena and life in the public sphere. In the 1960s and '70s, he was part of an American-European avant-garde that actively sought new forms of expression. He performed these early works primarily in New York and San Francisco before relocating to Europe in the 1980s.⁴ Employing an actionist and process-oriented approach, Fox created extreme physical and psychological experiences that used his own body to explore the intangible aspects of human existence and endurance. Oftentimes, his work embraced exhaustion, with Fox engaging in actions until he was physically unable to continue—using his body as a unit of measure or an instrument, gauging what it could or could not do. Extending far beyond a single medium, Fox moved effortlessly between the accidental and ephemeral while focusing on a heightened awareness of perception and the subtextual aspects of social life.

My introduction to the work of Terry Fox began in the Bay Area in a class at California College of the Arts organized by the poet and curator Renny Pritikin, who was once the president of 80 Langton Street, later New Langton Arts, an artist-run space in San Francisco active from 1975 to 2009. In the course, we visited with many Bay Area Conceptualists, including Paul Kos, Jim Melchert, Jock Reynolds, and Tom Marioni. We learned about Lynn Hershman Leeson’s

Dante Hotel (1973), Bonnie Sherk’s *The Farm* (1974-80), and the important group exhibition *All Night Sculptures* at the Museum of Conceptual Art (MOCA), founded by Marioni and located at the time at 75 Third Street, above Breen’s Bar. The exhibition took place from sunset to sunrise, April 20-21, 1973. Fox’s contribution, *Cell*, used a space on the third floor, eight feet long by six feet wide by twelve feet high, that had both a skylight and a small, sealed window looking out to the roof. Fox constructed a suspended platform, transforming the space into a loft. Viewers entered the room one by one through a hole in the floor via a man-hole ladder that emerged underneath a wooden bed, which was covered with sheeting and bolster pillows. The walls were covered with faux brick made from green tin, and the flooring consisted of used canvas. The scent of vinegar filled the room, emanating from a bowl filled with the liquid and a sponge soaked with it that sat in one corner.⁵

This transformation of space represents a sculptural approach that stretches to Fox’s moving image works, for example in pieces like *Three Minutes* (1970), a black-and-white Super 8 film, which foregrounds the architecture of a space that might be 80 Langton Street or Fox’s loft on 16 Rose Street in San Francisco. Fox zooms in and out of focus, with the camera stopping periodically on columns, blemished brick walls, ceiling beams, shadows on the wooden floor cast by a window sash, and on Bonnie Sherk. *Hardwater* (1970), another film from that time, focuses on a metal bucket filled with water that hangs from a string apparently attached to a window in an unidentified apartment. Midway through the short, the view shifts to an exterior shot, with the bucket propped against a step on an exterior stairway or fire escape. The bucket now holds a piece of glass jutting downward from it, giving at first glance the illusion that the water has been frozen midair. The camera zooms in and concentrates on the sharp, curved edge of the mirrored surface lingering beyond the pail’s lip, a marker of Fox’s interest in elemental gestures but also of his interest in spatial relationships. In another sequence, the camera zooms all the way in to hit the glass pane, creating abstract shapes from its edge and the serrated steel steps. The palpable silence of the film is notable, given Fox’s use of glass as a sound instrument in works such as *The Resonators* (1989), where he rubs wine glasses against broken windowpanes to create atmospheric vibrations.

All these different things are sculpture, the exhibition of Fox’s work at Artists Space, looks critically at the artist’s videotapes, the most famous of which are *Children’s Tapes* (1974), a series of dramas posited as an alternative to children’s programs involving household objects like spoons, matches, and candles.⁶ Because of the equipment restrictions of the medium at the time, specifically its time constraints, Fox moved away from videotapes in the 1980s. His last work in the medium was *Flour Dumplings* (1980), a video shot with two cameras and his only tape in color. In it, the artist uses a shaker to sprinkle flour atop meat, potatoes, and other food products that rest on a newspaper on a table

while a nearby television rotates through popular commercials. Its audio mixes with distorted radio news broadcasts to form a dense sonic collage, and a slow continuous scroll of phrases snatched from the broadcasts crawls up the image in a textual overlay. In 1980, [Flour Dumplings](#) was shown as part of Fox's important solo exhibition [Room Temperature](#), curated by Barbara London at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA), alongside an effigy made of newspapers from that time period wearing the artist's clothing. This video played continuously in the show with [Shirt Passes](#) (1980), a black-and-white videotape showing a twisted shirt running across a wood floor. In other contexts, [Flour Dumplings](#) is often displayed alongside a lesser-known video titled [Holes and Entrances](#) (1979), a black-and-white tape that comprises a collection of ten-second zooms. For example, a camera plunges into various openings such as deteriorated and sub-basement entrances on New York's Houston Street, holes that are strewn with rubble and litter to reveal a gritty image of the Bowery that, while storied, is little seen. As the images zoom into and out of one entrance after the next, the soundtrack overlays audio from radio and television programs, likely the Armed Forces Network radio and BBC news programs among other sources, while also including sounds like water dripping from a faucet.

One notable piece involving Fox was not a work by him per se. [Send/Receive: Satellite Network](#) was a project spearheaded by artists Liza Béar and Keith Sonnier, who connected groups of artists in San Francisco and New York in what is presumed to be the first interactive transmission organized by artists. [Send/Receive](#) used a low-flying NASA satellite system to broadcast two days of live interactive two-way video. As one of the participating artists on the West Coast, Fox worked with Alan Scarritt and Margaret Fisher to perform a cacophony of drone and scratch sounds on homemade instruments—Fox playing a singing bowl and hitting strings on a long wooden table at various intervals, Scarritt rubbing his hands against a glass bottle filled with water in a circular motion, and Fisher tapping an engraved piece of wood repeatedly with a drumstick, all together entering into a kind of cipher of murmuring vibrations for twenty minutes. Within [All these different things are sculpture](#) at Artists Space, [Send/Receive](#) occupies a central place as a metaphor for the important relationships Fox had with both San Francisco and New York and as a nod to the foundations of this curatorial project, which takes a critical look at Fox's projects primarily between those two cities.

Living with Hodgkin's lymphoma (a form of cancer affecting the lymphatic system) led Fox to make the physical and emotional cycles of illness and wellness key subjects of his work. A crucial work in this respect is [Levitation](#) (1970), in which the artist fasted for three days and then lay in a locked room at the Richmond Art Center, just north of San Francisco, for six hours atop a square of dirt on his back surrounded by elemental fluids—four clear polyurethane tubes filled with blood, urine, milk, and water. His goal was to become capable of rising into the air, a

metaphor for transfiguration. After the six hours passed, viewers were allowed into the space, where only the imprint of Fox's body in the earth remained. One week after the show opened, its curator, Tom Marioni, was forced to close it by the city, which considered the work "obnoxious" and a fire hazard. Fox called [Levitation](#) his "strongest piece of sculpture because the whole room was energized"⁷—making it a key example of his attempts to expand the limits of gesture and the body and the possibilities of sculpture.

Like [Levitation](#), [Pisces](#) (1971) was another seminal performative work by Fox. To make the piece, the artist bought two live fish from a Chinatown market. He placed them on the floor of the Museum of Conceptual Art, tied strings to their tails, and tied the other ends of the string to his tongue and penis. As they struggled to breathe, the animals' flipping and tugging sent vibrations twinging up the string into Fox's body as he conjured graphic images of death in his mind. The fish were then wrapped in white cloth, tied in more string, and transported to University of Santa Clara, sixty miles from San Francisco, to be used as elements in the group exhibition [Fish, Fox, Kos](#). Once he arrived, in a gallery roped off from the public, Fox lay on a white cloth, a 1000-watt light bulb shining harshly down from above. Several feet away were two flashlights that had been switched on and wrapped with black tape so that they couldn't be turned off, their beams pointed toward each other. They lay in close proximity to the two fish, which now were attached to Fox's hair and teeth. The flashlights grew dim and extinguished over time, and Fox slept several hours in attempt to dream about the dying of these two fish—the whole project a way of thinking through the cleansing of the body.⁸

Together, [Levitation](#) and [Pisces](#) were the crux of my motivation for this curatorial project. They were the first performance works that I fell in love with, for their simplicity of materials and for Fox's use of gesture and breath as materials for making art. How can gesture be ritual? How can performance expel? How can it alter space? How can it harness energy? All these questions are ones that I continue to grapple with in my curatorial work today, specifically around sound, movement, and performance. And, as someone with their own long-term ailments, I admire the way Fox approached navigating experiences or situations that were lived, felt within and through the body.

In 1972, after undergoing major surgery, Fox began making art inspired by the Chartres labyrinth in France, an intricate pattern on the pavement of a cathedral floor that represents life's journey as a winding path of 552 steps. Among the more well-known of the resulting works was [Yield](#) (1973), a set of continuous trancelike actions that took place over three days in an elaborate built environment at the University Art Museum in Berkeley. While viewers watched from a balcony, Fox ritualistically performed such activities as creating skeletal outlines on the floor in flour, blowing smoke, and baking bread. These activities were documented by Fox's twin brother, Larry Fox, and are presented not as standard documentation

but in abstract, almost ghostly images: closeups of Fox's hands, hazy images that signal smoke, lines of spit hitting flour, and so on.

Thinking through the labyrinth form also led Fox to attempt to use sound in ways that were more sculptural than musical. He embarked on creating sonic works that could change the architecture of space or the mood much like the energy exchanges in his performances like [Pisces](#) or [Levitation](#). In [552 Steps Through 11 Pairs of String](#) (1976), a four-and-a-half-hour piece at Fox's loft on 16 Rose Street, he stretched eleven pairs of piano wires of eleven different thickness across the floor and attached them to turnbuckles hooked to eye screws. Each pair passed over a wooden bridge at both ends, creating a large harp that the artist played with a mallet. The audience listened from the darkened loft on the floor below Fox's. The "score" for the project was a thirty-four-foot string tied with 552 knots, each representing a step in the Chartres maze.

Fox's affinity for piano wire continued over the years in works like [Erossore](#) (1979), where the artist strung the material from one end of an abandoned building on Houston Street in New York to the other.⁹ In [Suono Interno](#) (1979), Fox obtained permission to use the deconsecrated church of Santa Lucia in Bologna for a three-day performance. No audience was allowed inside—a condition of Fox's being able to use the space—but the public could watch through an eye-size hole labeled in chalk with the words *suono interno*, or "internal sound." He played for six consecutive hours on three consecutive days, his "instrument" two parallel wires strung about one hundred meters from the door to the cover of a crypt. One peering through the hole saw the wires as two lines converging to a point as Fox performed by stroking and gently pulling them.¹⁰

Fox's arsenal of materials was a rich panoply of the unconventional: fermented flour, yeast, and water, the ingredients used to make bread; living fish; the traditional four elements of nature, earth, air, water, and fire; his own breath. With them, he highlighted the transitory nature of existence and extended the boundaries of body art. He carried over this searching approach to his sound art, understanding sonic and physical space as inherently sculptural. For Fox, all kinds of things could happen with sound and performance; it's deep. His approach took sound as dimensional, and he used what he called "the simplest kind of nothing," pieces of wire hangers, wood string, and paper as primitive tools to change the landscape or energy of a space. Today, we are left with documents—photographs of actions, letters, or objects from signature pieces. Striking images exist of Fox lying atop a mound of dirt ([Levitation](#)), blowing smoke from his mouth and nose into the air ([Virtual Volumes \[Smoke Exhalation\]](#), 1970), throwing a mock Molotov cocktail at a brick wall ([Liquid Smoke](#), 1970), but these photos aren't the work; they are a kind of relic, frozen in time. For Fox, the work of performance, a situation or action, existed in the present, only in the moment in which it happened. The moment to witness is long gone.

Notes

1. Terry Fox, interview by Robin White, View 2, no. 3, Crown Point Press, Oakland, California, June 1979. The work Fox discusses is [Culvert](#) (1977). During a two-week residency at the University of Montana in Missoula, Fox walked the outskirts of its campus searching for various acoustic possibilities. Eventually he found a one-hundred-foot-long, twelve-foot-wide cylindrical metal tunnel through which the Clark Fork River ran. The performance took place in two parts that spanned twenty-four hours. It began with two student volunteers joining Fox in a boat, where they rowed to the middle of the tunnel and improvised on instruments for three hours. Afterwards, Fox continuously "played" a metal cheese dome by stirring it around a wooden stick. For people to witness the piece, they had to hang upside down on either end of the tunnel to peer inside. Often they began to participate by adding their own sounds—shouting, singing, or whistling. For more information see the entry on [Culvert](#) by Fox in [Terry Fox: Works with Sound](#), ed. Bernd Schulz (Heidelberg, Germany: Kehrer Verlag, 1999), 68-69.
2. Fox called his first works in 1969 "public theater," or "street situations." Perhaps, the most well-known of these is [What Do Blind Men Dream](#), in which Fox asked a beautiful blind woman and her partner who sang at the same San Francisco street corner daily to instead sing on the corner of Buchanan and Union near an open construction pit, from sunset until dark. He did one "street situation" each month in 1969, most of which took place on street corners, with one extending into Anne Halpin's famous loft. Fox would send announcements and put posters up south of Market and all down Third Street. He considered his first art performance [Defoliation Piece](#) (1970), which he did for the [Eighties](#) exhibition at Berkeley Art Museum. In it, he burned jasmine plants; the performance was a response to Vietnam and left only a scorched square in the garden where the plants had been.
3. Fox, interview with White, 9.
4. During this period, Fox also performed in various other cities around the world, from Missoula, Montana, to Kassel, Germany. Works such as [Suono Interno](#) and [L'unità](#) (1972) were produced in Italy, specifically in Naples and Bologna.
5. See Brenda Richardson's statement on [Cell](#) in her [Terry Fox](#) (Berkeley, California: University Art Museum, 1973), 54.
6. Fox made thirty-four works in the [Children's Tapes](#) series, a translation of the thirty-four turns in the Chartres Cathedral labyrinth. Each video involved five items: a spoon, a fork, a candle, a bowl, and water.
7. "Terry Fox: I Wanted to Have My Mood Affect Their Looks," [Avalanche](#), Winter 1971, 70-71.
8. Tom Marioni, "Terry Fox: Himself," [Art and Artists](#), January 1973, 40.
9. Fox also did a performance called [Triplex](#) in the same building as [Erossore](#), also in 1979.
10. Terry Fox, "Suono Interno (1979)," in [Terry Fox: Works with Sound](#), ed. Bernd Schulz (Heidelberg, Germany: Kehrer Verlag, 1999), 75.