

Large Print Guide

Action Gesture

Performance:

Feminism, the Body and Abstraction

17 Jan 2023 – 7 May 2023

Gallery 7



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These artwork captions start with the interpretation panel and labels inside Gallery 7, and then continue on the left as you enter the gallery and follow in a clockwise direction.

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Introduction

This exhibition focuses on pioneering dance and performance practices by women artists who have used their bodies to explore freedom of expression, subjectivity and politics. It accompanies *Action, Gesture, Paint: Women Artists and Global Abstraction 1940-70*.

Pioneering American choreographer **Martha Graham** developed a new language of movement, which influenced Abstract Expressionist artist Judith Godwin whose stark, bold gesture in paint find an echo in Graham's choreography. Similarly, **Pearl Primus** created a new approach to movement based on African-American, Caribbean and African dance.

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In New York, **Carolee Schneemann's** early paintings in the 1950s were influenced by Abstract Expressionism before she began to explore the act of painting using her body as both tool and ground. **Rosemarie Castoro** also considered the implications of the body in abstract painting with a dancer's awareness of space. In performances, photographs and films, **Ana Mendieta** explored violence against women and the physical and spiritual connections between her body and the Earth. In Europe, feminist performances by **Renate Bertleman** and **Annegret Soltau** staged the female body to examine male oppression and sexual violence **Niki de Saint-Phalle** took aim at Abstract Expressionist painting by shooting at her canvases in a documented explosion combining destruction and creation.

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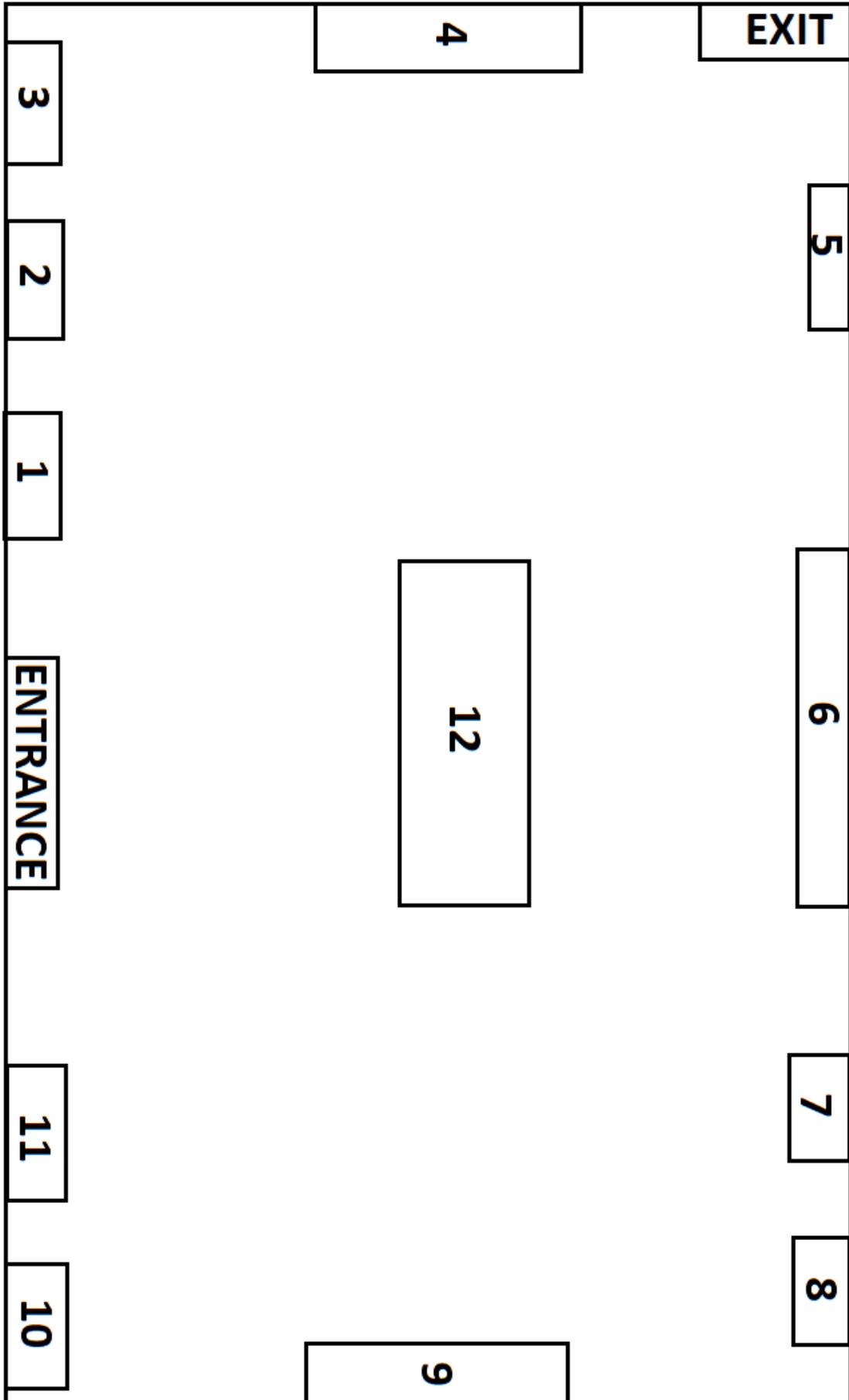
The first 'happening' in Korea took place in 1968 with **Jung Kangja** inviting participants to burst balloons attached to her body. **Shigeko Kubota** and **Atsuko Tanaka** were key figures in the Japanese avant-garde exploring new approaches to gesturalism through performance and video art. Brazilian artist **Lygia Clark** expanded abstract painting and sculpture into collaborative actions which blurred the distinction between art and life.

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These artwork captions for Gallery 7 follow the labels as marked in these floorplans.

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GALLERY 7 FLOOR PLAN



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1. Jung Kangja

(1942, Korea – 2017, South Korea)

Transparent Balloon and Nude, 1968

Vinyl sticker of photo documentation

A pioneering artist, Jung was involved with The Fourth Group and New Exhibition Coterie in the 1960s and 70s to challenge traditional ideas about the female body and politics through performances. In what was commonly regarded as the first feminist happening in Korea, performers asked audience members to attach and then burst transparent balloons filled with sticky paste onto the body of a semi-naked Jung Kangja. Once the balloons had popped, Jung left the stage.

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2. Carolee Schneemann

(1939, USA – 2019, USA)

Up to and Including Her Limits, 1974–6

11 performance photographs

Schneemann started as an abstract expressionist painter and later became renowned for her performance art that boldly addressed gender, sexuality and political issues. In the iterations of this performance and installation, Schneemann suspended herself in a tree surgeon's harness and used the body's full range of motions to explore the limits of painting.

It was a feminist response to Jackson Pollock's painting process where he often flung, dripped and poured paint using his full body.

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3. Carolee Schneemann

(1939, USA – 2019, USA)

Up to and Including Her Limits

1974–6

29.00 mins

4. Ana Mendieta

(1948, Cuba – 1985, USA)

Butterfly, 1975

Super-8mm film transferred to high-definition

digital media, colour, silent, 3.19 mins

A Cuban-American artist with a brief yet prolific career, Mendieta worked across performance, sculpture, painting and video to investigate themes including displacement, the relationship between the female body and the Earth and violence against women bodies. In *Butterfly*, Mendieta uses polarised visual effects to create a spectral figure sprouting wings, re-establishing the bonds that unite her to the universe.

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5. Renate Bertlmann

(b. 1943, Austria; lives and works in Austria)

Deflorazione in 14 Stazioni [Defloration in 14 Stations], 1977

15 black and white photographs, vintage, one with scalpel

Bertlmann has been active in the feminist art movement in Vienna since the 1970s using her own body as a medium to explore gender, sexuality and eroticism. Wearing a breast shirt and latex pacifiers on her fingertips, she performed a sequence of meditative actions in which 'the language of the hands expresses a development of pain, joy, fear, and aggression' resulting in the violent tearing of the ribbon.

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6. Annegret Soltau

(b.1946, Germany; lives and works in Germany)

Ich Schlafend [I am sleeping], 1977/78

Set of 6 gelatin silver prints

Since the mid-1970s, Soltau has been exploring experimental representations of the female body and self-image. Often using her own body in performance, photomontage, video and collage her work distorts how women's bodies are seen in society. In this sequence of photographs, the female body is gradually obliterated by gestural brushstrokes burying the figure beneath the act of painting. Courtesy of Richard Saltoun Gallery London and Rome.

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7. Atsuko Tanaka

(1932, Japan – 2005, Japan)

Round on Sand, 1968

16mm coloured film transferred to DVD,

10.30 mins

Tanaka was a Japanese avantgarde artist who experimented with abstract painting, performance, film, installation and sculpture over her five-decade career. She joined the Gutai Art Association in 1955 in their radical experimentation and physical engagement with materials. In Round on Sand, Tanaka draws large concentric circles in the sand while waves wash in. The improvised abstract drawing highlights the connections between Tanaka's body and the universe.

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8. Niki de Saint Phalle

(1930, France – 2002, USA)

Another Way of Painting – With Shotgun,

1961

Black and white video, silent

32 seconds

French-American artist de Saint Phalle

explored and celebrated the female form and

experience across painting, film and sculpture.

She began the 'Shooting Paintings' series in

1961 when as the only female member of the

French New Realism group she attached

pigment-filled balloons to the surface of her

paintings.

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The balloons exploded in a violent eruption of paint, plaster and objects like toys and tools when shot at in a radical repositioning of painting and assemblage as action.

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9. Shigeko Kubota

(1937, Japan – 2015, USA)

Analogue Magnetism

(for Takehisa Kosugi), 1974

SD video, colour, sound

12.43 mins

A key member of the New York Fluxus group in the 1960s, Kubota is known for her extensive body of single-channel videos, video sculptures and installations, pushing the boundaries of video art with her husband Nam June Paik. This significant work reveals how Kubota fuses the personal and the technological, merging vibrant electronic processing techniques with images of the body.

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10. Martha Graham

(1894, USA – 1991, USA)

Heretic, 1929

Archival film, 6.27 mins

Steps in the Street from the Suite Chronicle,
1936

Archival film, 5.50 mins

Graham founded the Martha Graham Dance company in 1926, which trained and inspired generations of dancers across the world in a language of movement that would 'increase the emotional activity of the dancer's body'.

Heretic introduced a pared-down fragmentary choreography which explored non-conformity.

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Steps in the Street was made as a stark response to the isolation and aftermath of war in Europe. Performed by members of the Martha Graham Dance Company.

Courtesy of Martha Graham Resources

11. Pearl Primus

(1919, Trinidad – 1994, USA)

Pearl Primus dancing, likely at Cafe Society

Downtown, 1945 C-print of photo

documentation

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Primus was a dancer, teacher and a pioneer of African and Caribbean dance in the US. She trained with Martha Graham after receiving a scholarship to join the New Dance Group where she was the first African-American student.

Primus later founded her own dance company in 1946, often basing her work in movement on writing by black writers such as Langston Hughes and Lewis Allan recreating Allan's poem 'Strange Fruit' in choreography.

Photo by Myron Ehrenberg © Jerome Robbins
Dance Division, The New York Public Library
for the Performing Arts.

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12. Rosemarie Castoro

(1939, USA – 2015, USA)

Rosemarie Castoro performing in her Soho studio, New York, 1970s C-prints of photo documentation

Castoro was a key figure in the New York art scene in the 1960s although she was long overshadowed by her male peers. Her multifaceted practice was associated with Conceptual Art and Minimalism and included abstract paintings and large-scale sculptural forms. These photographs are taken from her journals of the time which reveal her early training as a dancer and performative approach to painting in acrobatic poses suspended in space by harnesses.

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