

Art

What Is Performance Art?

A timeline of the most pivotal moments in the medium's history.

By Julia Halperin April 17, 2026

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"The term 'performance art' is a little overused," admits the curator Klaus Biesenbach, 59. "It's a bit like how everyone uses the word 'curator.'" Ever since the Serbian artist [Marina Abramović](#) took up residence in the atrium of the Museum of Modern Art in New York every day for two and a half months in 2010 (in a show he organized) — and visitors recorded the action from every angle on their iPhones — performance art has captured the public's imagination. Yet an accurate definition of the term isn't always clear. The curator RoseLee Goldberg has described performance art as "live art by artists." The performance artist Martha Wilson, 78, calls it an intervention that happens "in real time," often placing the artist's body at the center of the action. But it may be easier to define performance art by what it isn't. It's not a concert, or theater or an event. It lacks a clear narrative. "It has more of a sculptural quality," Biesenbach says. "You walk around it. If the artist creates a moment that makes you aware of the here and now, of your own human condition, then I think you can use that term."

Key Moments in Performance-Art History

1916 A nightclub in Zurich called Cabaret Voltaire hosts performances by artists associated with the anarchic Dada movement. They chant, read nonsense poetry and dance erratically. Their desire to use live art to shake society out of its complacency will inspire artists for generations.



Dadaists, including Tristan Tzara (seated, second from left), Francis Picabia (standing, second from right) and Georges Auric (standing, right), at dinner in France around 1920. Photo12/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

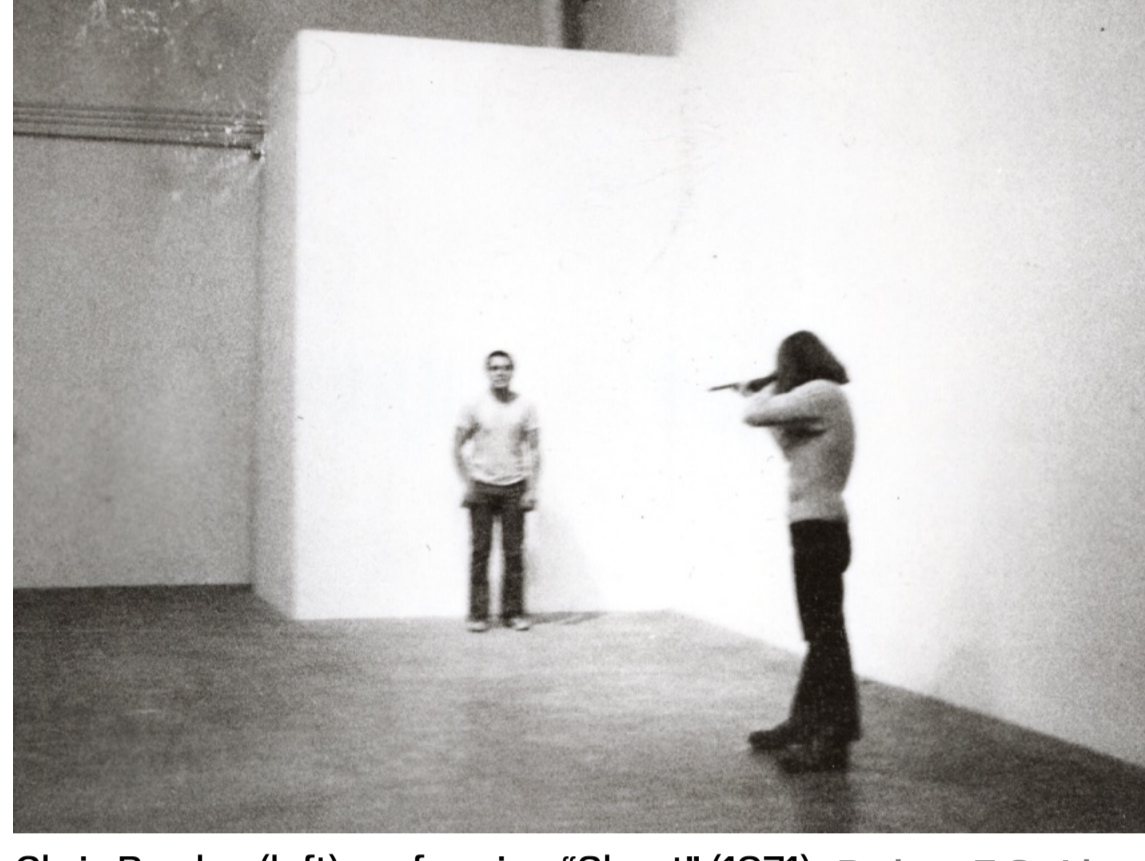
1959 In New York, Allan Kaprow presents "18 Happenings in 6 Parts." Unlike theater, it has no plot; unlike an exhibition, it invites audience members to immerse themselves in the action. The mix of speech, music and ordinary movement comes to define a strand of performance art known as Happenings.



The performance artist Robert Rauschenberg plays a game at Allan Kaprow's "18 Happenings in 6 Parts" at the Ruben Gallery in New York in 1959. Fred W. McDarrall/The New York Historical via Getty Images

1962 Practitioners of another strain of performance art, Fluxus, host events across Europe. In lieu of immersive spectacles, their art comprises simple instructions written in the form of what they called event scores. Alison Knowles debuts what will become her most famous Fluxus work, making and serving a large salad to a London audience.

1971 [Chris Burden](#) arranges for a friend to shoot him in the arm at a California art gallery. The notorious performance, documented on video and in photographs, is known as "Shoot."



Chris Burden (left) performing "Shoot" (1971). Barbara T. Smith, via the Chris Burden Estate. © 2026 Chris Burden/Licensed by the Chris Burden Estate and Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

1980 Some artists embrace performance as a way to critique the art world. In New York, [Lorraine O'Grady](#) invents a beauty queen persona known as Mille Bourgeoise Noire, who begins, in the words of the artist, "invading art openings to give people a piece of her mind."



Lorraine O'Grady in 1981 performing her "Untitled (Mille Bourgeoise Noire)" (1980-83/2009). Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, N.Y.

2006 The Cuban artist [Tania Bruguera](#), one of a number of artists to use the medium as a form of political protest, begins her series "Tatlin's Whisper." In a piece from 2009, she invites audiences to speak into a microphone for "one minute free of censorship." They're ushered offstage by performers dressed as soldiers.



Tania Bruguera's "Tatlin's Whisper #5" (2008) performed at the Tate Modern in London in 2008. In the piece, two horse-mounted police officers used crowd control techniques on museum visitors. © 2026 Tania Bruguera/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: © Shella Burnett/Tate Images

2010 [Abramović](#) sits silently in the atrium of the Museum of Modern Art across from one visitor at a time, for a total of more than 730 hours, during her solo exhibition "The Artist Is Present."



Marina Abramović performing "The Artist Is Present" (2010) at the Museum of Modern Art in 2010. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, N.Y.

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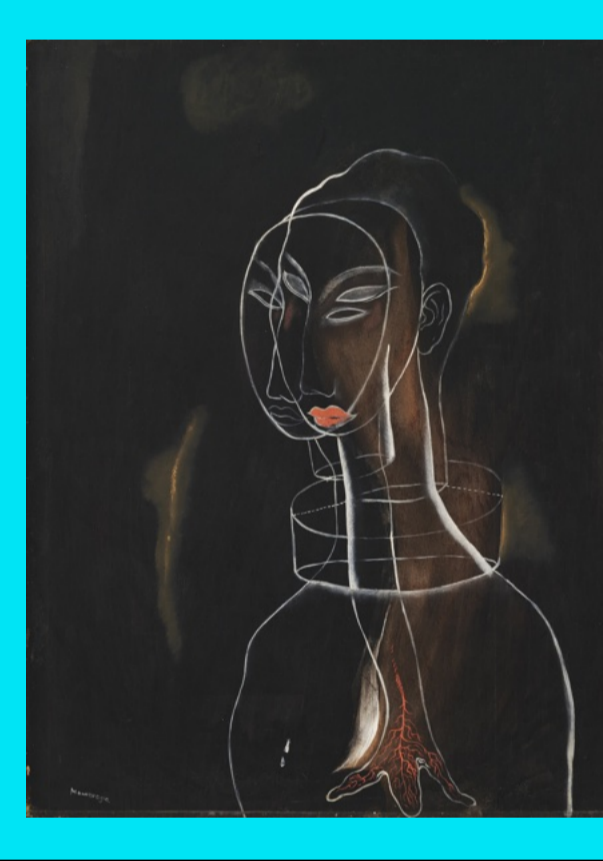
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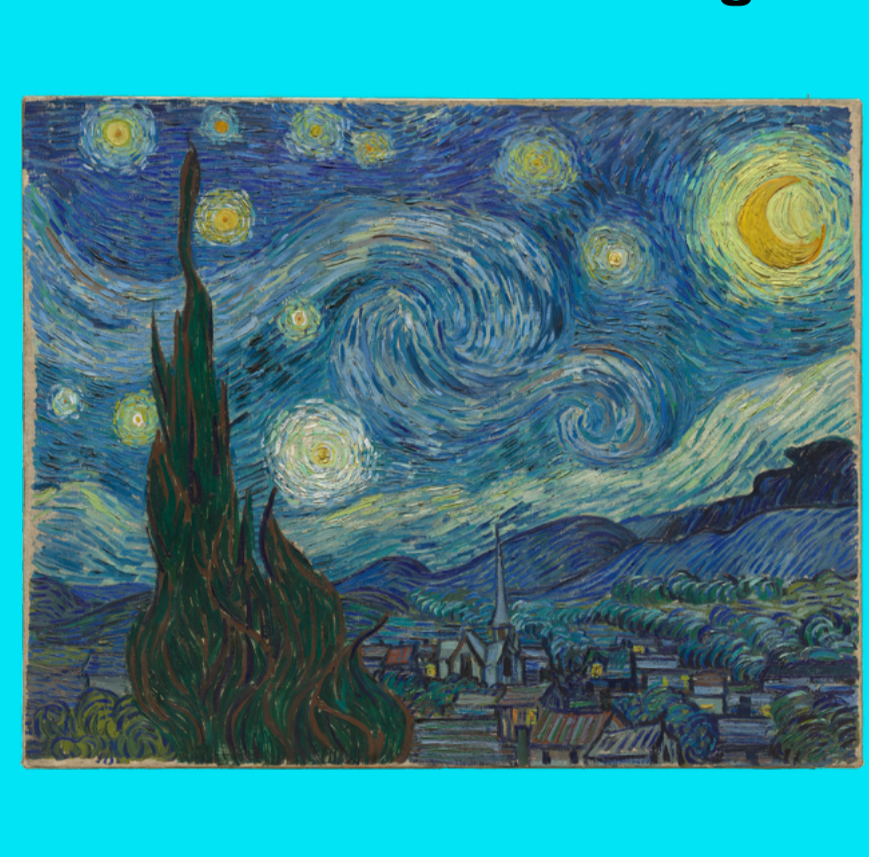
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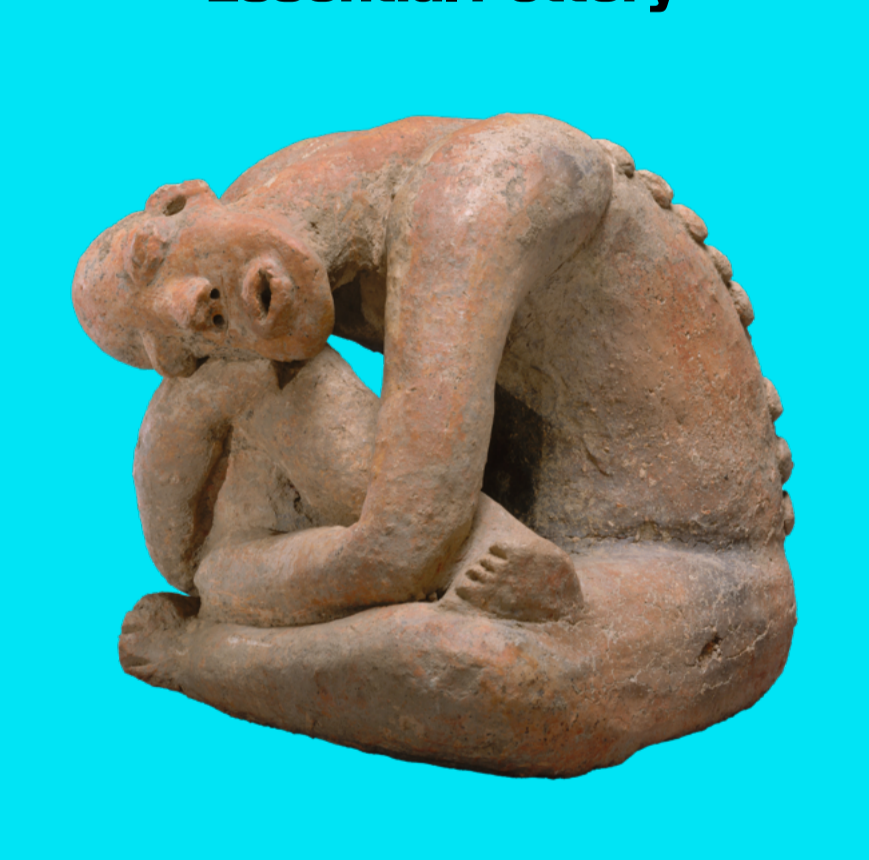
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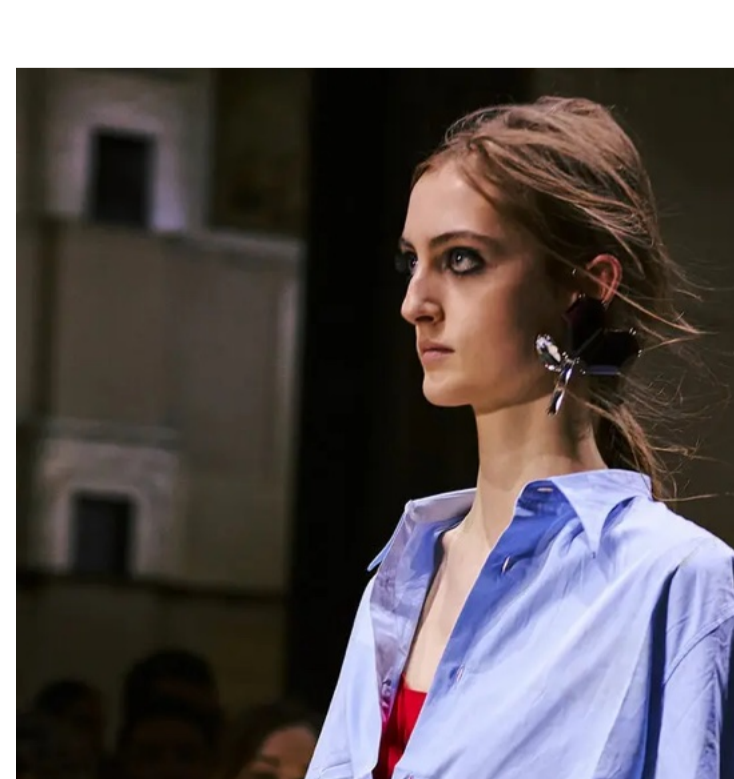
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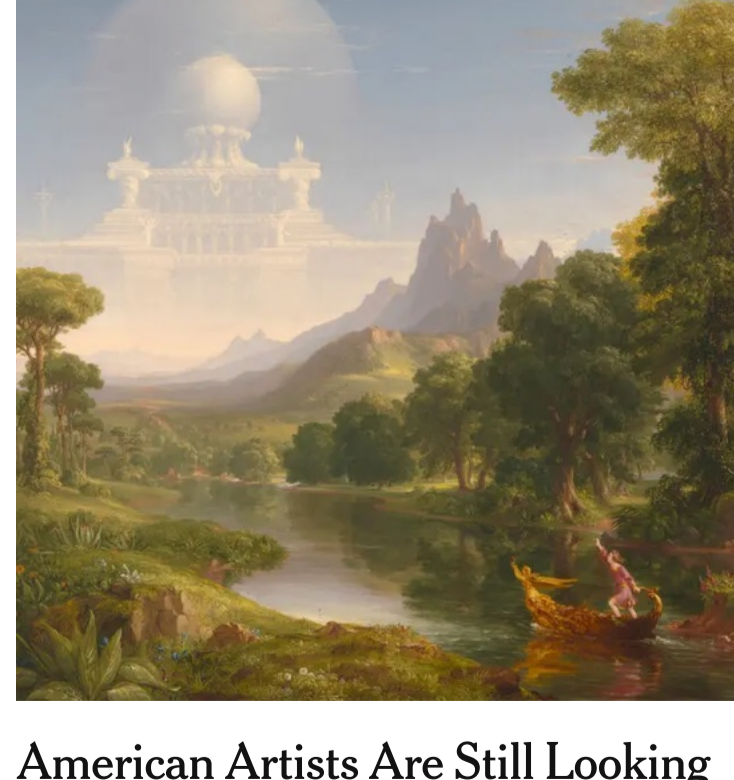
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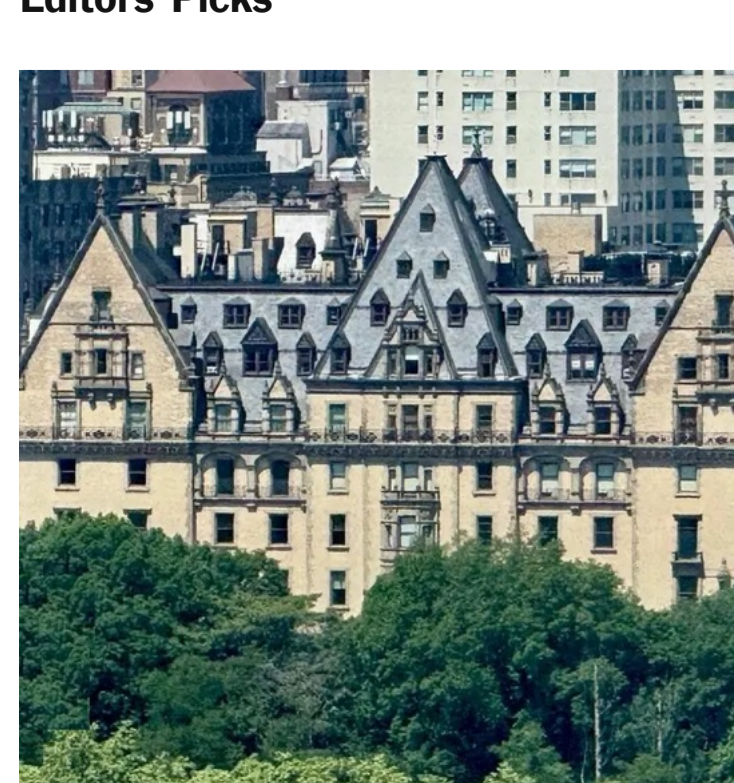


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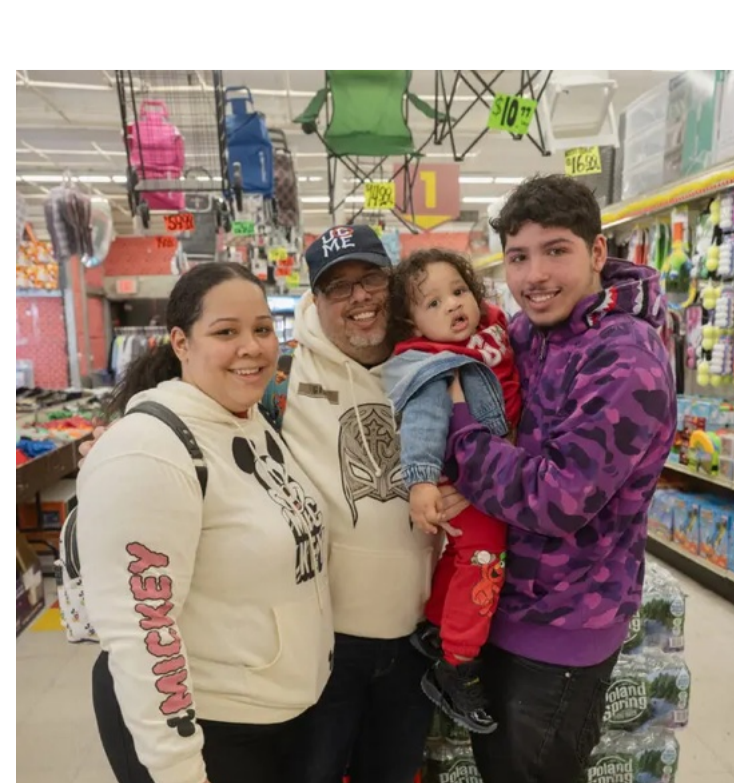


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