

Chapter Title: ROSELEE GOLDBERG

Chapter Author(s): ALPESH KANTILAL PATEL and ROSELEE GOLDBERG

Book Title: Storytellers of Art Histories

Book Editor(s): Alpesh Kantilal Patel, Yasmeen Siddiqui

Published by: Intellect. (2022)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv36xvjlw3.17>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Intellect is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Storytellers of Art Histories*

ROSELEE GOLDBERG

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED ON January 17, 2020, via phone.

ALPESH KANTILAL PATEL (AKP): You were born and raised in South Africa and eventually received degrees there as well. Can you share a few anecdotes from that period of your life? Specifically, in hindsight, are there any moments you think probably helped shape the kind of art historian you've become today?

South Africa

ROSELEE GOLDBERG (RG): I would say that growing up in South Africa is absolutely fundamental to who I am and, yes, also to my understanding of art history. From a very young age, I was aware of the politics of the country, of the inhumanity and inequities of Apartheid, of police brutality, of special branch police imprisoning people who objected to this horrific racism and holding them illegally. Not a moment of a day went by without awareness of that system. That sense of politics underlying everything, shaping every aspect of our lives, whether art, architecture, education, personal relationships, is always with me.

I grew up in subtropical Durban, on the Indian Ocean. Up the coast, waving hills of sugarcane fields, and further north, Zululand. I grew up listening to Zulu songs on the radio, hearing various African languages spoken on the street as groups of

people walked down the hill where we lived, playing the guitar and harmonizing as they went; observing women wearing traditional dress with its patterns of intricate Zulu beading and large marital headdresses. Being woken by the sound of hadeda birds. In Durban, there was also a large population of Indians who were brought to South Africa in the 1860s from India as indentured workers on the railways and in the sugar fields. There was a strong sense of their culture, with Indian temples and festivals and a large Indian market in the center of town. And, of course, Gandhi lived in Durban for 21 years from 1893. So, it was a society of many different ethnicities, languages, cultures, despite the government's vigilance at keeping everyone separated.

I was also a dancer from a young age. I started with tap around 5 years old, then classical ballet, classical Spanish, also Bharatanatyam, which was taught by a young Indian dancer at the back of her uncle's photo studio in an area of town reserved for Indians. It was not exactly illegal for me to be there, I don't think, but it was somewhat hidden from view. My mother would take me and wait for the lesson to end to take me home.

Art history

I began studying art history at 13 years old, in my first year of high school. I had an amazing teacher who made art history riveting. I tried to never miss a day of her classes, which alternated between art history and painting and drawing classes. I clearly remember the very first lesson: we began with imagining how to build a Zulu hut, the beehive-shaped thatched structures that dotted the hills around Durban the moment one left the city on drives into the countryside. Clay pots, Zulu beadwork, cave paintings of the San people in the Drakensberg Mountains, the oldest dating to around 73,000 years ago. She built our understanding of art and culture through the ages, one layer at a time: the painted sculptures of ancient Greece, the rhythms of classic columns and their distinct capitals from Athens to Rome to Florence. Art history was the lens through which I viewed the world early on.

I left Durban for Johannesburg to attend the University of the Witwatersrand, where there was an exciting art history department made up of several very strong, politically aware professors. Interestingly, the art history department, fine art studios, and the

Architecture School shared the same modern building on campus, Bauhaus style, with students from the different disciplines attending some of the same foundation classes and lectures. My majors were fine art and art history, as well as political science, which only confirmed my belief in the importance of understanding the politics of a period as underpinning the history of art. My political science and art history papers were almost interchangeable, each illuminating the other. I was always cross-referencing the two and then taking the ideas being discussed back to the studio. I was also running a dance studio at the university. I was all about mixing these different understandings of practice and politics and history and research.

AKP: You describe such a rich background in the arts and politics, being very aware of politics when you're doing art. And then when you went to England, you went to the Courtauld Institute. I'm curious what kind of experience that was like. This must have been a huge shift.

London

RG: The Courtauld was an extraordinary place to be a university student in London in the late 1960s. In those days, it was located on Portman Square, in a breathtakingly beautiful mansion designed by Robert Adam in 1777, with its famous helix stairway. I initially intended to research Medieval and early Spanish Romanesque architecture and had plans to explore connections between late Romanesque and architectural styles in North Africa, but after a semester, I switched to "modern," eager to study with art historian John Golding, an amazing writer and lecturer whose book on Cubism I had read in South Africa, and which is probably still the main touchstone on Cubism. It was very evident from his book that he must have been a painter, and for me as a fine arts student, his parsing of space and the relationship of flat planes and how surfaces are broken up was a fascinating guide. I was still attending dance classes regularly in London, trying to decide my focus, dance or visual art, when I discovered the work of Oskar Schlemmer at the Bauhaus, which became the subject of my dissertation at the Courtauld. It would be the beginning of my writing and research on the history of performance.

AKP: Very soon after the Courtauld, you became a director of a gallery at the Royal College of Art. What did the contemporary art scene look like in England at this time? Was your work at the gallery how you ended up getting very interested in curating?

The Royal College of Art Gallery

RG: After completing my degree in London, I lived in Paris for almost a year, from where I applied for a position that had been advertised at the Royal College of Art (RCA) for director of exhibitions. To my surprise, I got the job, even though I had absolutely no experience as a curator nor any knowledge of contemporary art. At the interview, I extemporaneously came up with the idea of finding ways to work with all departments at the RCA, not knowing that inter-departmentalization was a major concern there at the time, and described the gallery as a meeting place for them all, a hub for discourse, performances, events, and exhibitions, that would connect the departments: graphic designers would design catalogues and flyers, interior design students would help install exhibitions, general studies students would be engaged in research and writing. I am sure I was inspired by my close attention to the Bauhaus with its integrated curriculum connecting so many disciplines.

I accepted the position, and suddenly, I had to ask myself, “Oh, now what?” The first thing I did was head to the Venice Biennial, and on the first morning there, I met people whom I would stay close to over the next decades—Vito Acconci, Joseph Kosuth, Joan Jonas, Germano Celant, Giancarlo Politi, Ileana Sonnabend—sitting in the café in St. Mark’s Square. The art world was quite small in those days, everyone pretty much fitting into one café on the square, moving in the evening to the other side, whichever was the shadier. I remember a boat ride to Torcello with Roberto Matta (Gordon Matta-Clark’s father), meeting French artist Daniel Buren, even César with his gravelly voice. I will always remember Gerhard Richter’s black-and-white portraits, installed just below the dome in the German pavilion in 1972. Next was Documenta, where I would meet Kounellis, Dorothea Rockburne, Mel Bochner, and Marcel Broodthaers. I also went to Los Angeles and New York City. I visited the Watts Towers on my first day in Los Angeles, taken by a very good

friend, an African American sociologist and activist whom I had met in London, who had been involved with the Studio Watts Workshop. He also took me to the Women's Building and introduced me to many artists.

So that was the beginning of my curatorial education! From the start, I was looking across media, across disciplines. My first exhibition at the RCA was by Giulio Paolini, another was "Record as Artwork" curated by Germano Celant, and later "A Space: A Thousand Words" of fifteen artists and fifteen architects, curated with the architect Bernard Tschumi. The gallery had a very tight budget, but I wrote to artists whom I had met in New York and elsewhere: "If you're in London, please come and join us for a talk and presentation." Many came! So, the program of exhibitions and events was incredibly exciting for the students but also for the London art scene of the time. Visitors included Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Carl Andre, Willoughby Sharp, Anthony McCall, Christian Boltanski, and Marina Abramović.

AKP: What compelled you to move to New York City, which is where you went to next? From South Africa to England to New York City. What got you to New York City? This was also when you become a curator at the Kitchen in New York City. It seems like such a pivotal moment in terms of performance for you. Can you tell us more about that?

New York

RG: During my first trip to New York, I was struck by the high energy of the city and the high energy of Americans in general, and felt the irresistible pull to stay. After three years at the RCA, where the program received terrific critical recognition but where the established painters and sculptors within the school wished the gallery to focus more on work created internally and less on the newest international developments in contemporary art, it was time to move on. New York was beckoning. My final exhibition at the gallery, "A Space: A Thousand Words," would travel to the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in New York and the USC gallery in LA. I continued writing on performance for *Studio International*, on the downtown scene and women artists for *Spare Rib* in London, and wrote my

first article for *Artforum*, on Schlemmer and the Bauhaus, in 1977. I became close friends with artists Robert Longo and Cindy Sherman, and many others including Laurie Simmons, David Salle, and Eric Fischl, who had all recently moved to New York around this time. Longo was then the video curator at the Kitchen and suggested that I take over his position, since he didn't wish to be curating anymore but wanted to focus on his own work. I became curator of video at the Kitchen, soon adding performance to the title and building a gallery and video-viewing room. The program used the same interdisciplinary framework that I had instigated at the RCA.

The Kitchen

I had just submitted the manuscript of my book *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present* to my editor at Thames & Hudson in London, which would come out the following year in 1979. (The title would change to *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* with the second edition, when it became part of the World of Art series in 1988). I was intrigued by the possibilities of curating this material that had always been so untamable, artist driven without curatorial overview, but I decided that it was possible to work within an institution yet retain a radical position. Indeed, it became my mantra as a curator and as an art historian: I still believe that it is essential to unravel given histories, to approach both roles from a radical place, always rethinking both the meaning and the presentation of both historic and contemporary developments. I was the first art historian-curator at the Kitchen. Up until then, programs had been run by artists: actor and performer Eric Bogosian was in charge of the dance program, musician Rhys Chatham was the music director, and Longo curated video. I introduced analytic group exhibitions and performance series with a particular overview, such as "Made for TV?" which included artists working on the edge of TV, video art, and early cable TV; or "The New West," with Eleanor Antin, Bob & Bob, and other West Coast artists; or "Imports," which included artists with whom I had worked in the United Kingdom, such as Brian Eno, the Kipper Kids, Anne Bean, and Bruce McLean. I also organized the first solo shows of Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo, Sherrie Levine, Thomas Lawson, and Jack Goldstein in the gallery. It

was an extraordinary couple of years (from 1978 to 1980). For my book launch in May 1979, it was especially meaningful to present it at the Kitchen, with live performances, and with so many members of the art community in attendance. We also held book launch events at Fiorucci with Klaus Nomi and at the Mudd Club! The book became very much a reference to the lives we were living.

AKP: Ah, okay. Are there any pivotal moments for you in the 1980s? Is this also when you began teaching in New York University's Department of Art and Art Administration?

Teaching

RG: I've always been teaching, ever since I graduated: in London at the Architectural Association, through the gallery at Royal College, and in New York at the School of Visual Arts. I have taught at Steinhardt NYU since 1987. I feel an obligation to teach, to download my firsthand experience of watching history unfold since the 1970s, and to provoke a different kind of thinking about what art history is capable of, to rethink art history as an investigative tool, as a way to inform, inspire, and entice. There's no better way to understand art history than to be deeply immersed in contemporary art. As I explain to my students, the more deeply you understand the present, the better you will understand the past. To really feel art history, it helps to recognize how all parts of the art world work, right now, today. This knowledge and awareness will give you a good idea of how it possibly might've been in the 1500s. There were power players then as there are now.

It is extraordinary how many different fields you can enter through art history, whether it's philosophy, sociology, political science, or gender studies. There's a radicalism to art history that is always in motion. I think to be an art historian is to have a huge imagination and to make sure that your imagination is at work at all times. To be a good historian is to sit at the feet of the people about whom you're writing: imagine that moment in time, recognize that art history is the story of ongoing invention, breakthroughs, political, cultural, social shifts. For me, *Performa* is a way to animate art history in the most exciting

ways, to “refresh” the ever-changing ways that we understand the overlapping threads that make up the cultures of the world.

AKP: Any other anecdotes about the 1980s?

RG: For me, the 1980s was an intense, accelerated decade. It seemed to be a real swing of the proverbial pendulum from the 1970s: the obsession with money, Wall Street, Reagan, Thatcher. Some part of me was somewhat in shock; belief systems of the 1980s art world seemed to be entirely at odds with the noncommercial, highly conceptual work that we cared about so much in the 1970s. At the same time, the artists to whom I was closest—whom I call the first media generation, since they came of age with rock ‘n’ roll, 24-hour television, *The Twilight Zone*, punk music, and B movies, and who were critically looking at the ubiquity of media, the “mediatization” of experiences—provided entirely new ways of examining and articulating American culture through their art, which was completely absorbing. I continued teaching and writing.

I also had two children in the 1980s, which seemed an incredibly radical thing to do then in the downtown art world. Sarah Charlesworth, Laurie Simmons, Louise Lawler, Jane Kaplowitz, Elizabeth Murray, among my friends, also had children in the 1980s. And, yes, I was working as an independent curator. In the 1990s, I organized several performance series at the Museum of Modern Art and one at the Guggenheim.

AKP: This seems like an interesting moment where you got a major mainstream institution to acknowledge performance.

RG: Mainstream institutions largely ignored the history of performance. Even though they presented performance from time to time, performance was considered outside of curatorial thinking. I wanted to see it integrated into art history. I was close friends with Kirk Varnedoe, an extraordinary art historian and curator at MoMA, and when he told me about the exhibition he was preparing on the role of non-Western art in shaping early Modernism, I reminded him about the fact that Steve Reich’s *Drumming* was based on Reich’s exploration of African drumming in Ghana and that it would be an exciting addition to his exhibition, which it was. That was followed a few years later by a performance series that I organized to accompany Kirk’s

exhibition, “High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture,” in 1990. Once again, I curated a complementary series to the work in the exhibition, including Laurie Anderson, Eric Bogosian, David Cale, Brian Eno, Spalding Gray, and Ann Magnuson, all of whose work existed on that edge between “high” and “low.” At the Guggenheim, I would organize a performance by Daniel Buren to accompany his retrospective.

First commission

I was in Venice in 1999, and I saw Shirin Neshat’s installation *Turbulent* (1998) in the Arsenale of the Biennial. There were two films, the man on one side, the woman on the other, projected on two facing screens, and the most beautiful surround-sound from the singers in the films linking the two. I was stunned, almost in tears. I sat there thinking, “What if this were live?” The work had all the qualities I felt would make for an amazing live work: cinematic choreography, a rich story, visual storytelling. It was a time in the 1990s when quite a few artists were producing beautiful installations—large film projections in white spaces that were visually stunning and dense with meaning. Isaac Julien, Steve McQueen, Douglas Gordon, Gillian Wearing, Stan Douglas. There were probably other projection-based works that year in Venice, but all I can remember is Shirin’s.

I returned from Venice and met up with Shirin. “Would you ever think of creating a live performance?” I asked. “I feel your work has all the ingredients to make an extraordinary live production.” She said, “What a fantastic idea. Yes, I’d love to do it.” So the project was on! I had no idea what it would cost to commission this performance, whether the budget would be \$20,000 or \$200,000, or even what a production would entail. And neither did she. But we both ran with the idea, found some funds for an initial workshop at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA), and went forward from there.

We presented *Logic of the Birds*, based on a twelfth-century Persian poem, in its almost finished form at the Kitchen in October 2001, just three weeks after the tragedy of 9/11, which made it additionally heart-wrenching and profoundly relevant. Propelled by a series of films, recorded and live song, and live performance, it was thrilling. I had invited the head of the Lincoln Center Festival, Nigel Redden, to join us for our first

full run-through of the production, and at the end of the night, he said, "We'll take it." The following year, *Logic* was presented at Lincoln Center. It was everything I had dreamed of.

It took a while to think about what I wanted to do after that. Obviously, the model of commissioning and producing new live work by artists was very tempting. But as an art historian, I couldn't imagine presenting material separate from a larger cultural context; it was essential to me that such work expand to include an education program and publications, and that it engage a community of artists, curators, architects, musicians, dancers, curators, writers, and museum directors as part of the start-up vision. And so it took me a while before I decided, in 2004, to create the Performa Biennial.

Performa

At that time in 2004, the art world was very much about big institutions and about big institutions expanding and getting even bigger. Attention centered on the huge spaces in Chelsea that looked more like car showrooms than galleries. I felt there was no place for young artists. There was no place for totally different ways of operating. And so I decided to create a biennial. It began with a public series that I presented in the Einstein Auditorium at Steinhardt called "Not for Sale." In the first discussion with Marina Abramović, Chrissie Iles, and Rob Storr, we talked about the importance of going back to artists' ideas and not just talking about the marketplace, which seemed so prevalent at the time. The mood was definitely a reaction against the explosion of art fairs, too. Another reason for starting Performa was to finally give the history of performance a highly visible, public platform. My book on the history of performance art was first published in 1979; for me, it was a necessary revisionist history of the twentieth century that inserted performance into all those places where it was a critical turning point in the history of art ideas and where it had been left out. Performa was committed to exploring, live and through research and archives, the history of performance, whether performance of the Renaissance, Russian Constructivism, or 1920s Paris.

Also, I felt we needed a community again. The New York art world felt too grown up, too top heavy. I wanted to create an environment where we could capture new ways of thinking

and find new ways of producing artwork. Performa from the beginning was about working with artists, creating commissions from scratch. Many of the artists would make live performance for the first time. Shirin Neshat had never done performance before, yet all her work was performance driven, except audiences were on the set with her, behind the camera. Performa has always been about realizing an artist's wildest imagination; giving them full license to try something utterly new; and providing the necessary curatorial, technical, and financial support for them to do so.

Performa is about rethinking, remaking, and reimagining art history and bringing it to life in the present in the most public way. For every Performa Biennial, we spend two years in a very exciting research phase into a variety of historical periods or performance in select countries, such as in South Africa, Taiwan, or Sweden. We're always creating new outlets for putting this material into the world, for bringing the public into our research and conversations. To do this, we have established the *Performa Magazine*, Performa Institute, Performa Publications, and Performa TV and Radical Broadcast, both on our Performa website. We are a production house and a hands-on training ground for the next generation of curators and producers, who, not surprisingly, are in demand. So yes, we're much more than the biennial!

Art is a way to change people's hearts and minds and to make us better human beings. It's the only totally free space, a radical space. It cannot be contained. Art historians have a responsibility to be radical, too, as radical as the artists about whom they write.