

"And Yet You *Can* Find *Self-immolation* in the Dictionary"

Performance Art's All-stars Define What Exactly It Is They Do

Most people with a grade-school education could explain dance or sculpture or, for that matter, *Ob, Kay!* But few of us have the facility with language to explain what performance art is. We do know that when we take a cab to the East Village, pay \$17 and walk down a musty staircase into a "performance space," we're about to see something

Performance-Art Expert: Angelika Festa, NYU doctoral student who explores "pain work"; once bound herself to a pole suspended above the floor in an art gallery and remained there, with silver tape over her eyes, for 24 hours
Definition: "I would never speak down to an eight-year-old. I wouldn't need to explain it, because they're doing it. Kids' games are all about the themes that performance art wants to address: 'Who am I? Why do I not have any power? Why is it so painful to be alive?'"

Performance-Art Expert: Martha Wilson, founder-director of the Franklin Furnace, a major New York museum and performance space
Definition: "It's like pornography.... I know it when I see it."

Performance-Art Expert: Brian Routh, aka Harry Kipper, former member of Kipper Kids, a performance-art troupe; was once married to Karen Finley; appears onstage dressed only in his underwear and a baby's bib and tells Bible stories using stuffed animals and a doll—he strangles the doll, then whips himself with a cat-o'-nine-tails
Definition: "People always point their finger at performance artists and say they're a bunch of sickos. But we're not the ones who are sick. I think it's just the opposite."

Performance-Art Expert: Linda Montano, who spent an entire year tied to fellow performance artist Techhing Hsieh by an eight-foot-long rope

that's not quite a concert, not quite a play and often not quite worth \$17. Stumped in our efforts to straightforwardly define this art form—we kept making too-liberal use of the terms *multimedia*, *monologist*, *cathartic* and *raw meat*—SPY put the task to actual experts in the field. We asked them, *How would you define performance art to an eight-year-old?*



Bogosian Sprinkle Anderson

Definition: "Recipe for making a performance: (1) Take what has been bothering you your whole life; (2) remember what you love to do more than anything else; (3) in private, act out with abandon and ecstasy until reaching the issue that is bothering you; (4) use sound, movement, movies, video, slides, puppets, food, masturbation, costumes, mirrors; (5) repeat this action until you have transformed what is bothering you into the beauty of truth; (6) if you are in need of witnesses, invite friends to your house and perform the action for them without expecting applause; (7) whenever an obstacle or knot appears in your life, take care of it, and appreciate its presence, for it will move to alchemy."

Performance-Art Expert: Ellen Steinberg, aka Annie Sprinkle, former porn actress who, in her current stage show, discusses her sexual history and invites the audience to view her cervix through a speculum
Definition: "When I started having sex, I wasn't a performer yet. But all that time, sex was my art. I realized it later when I met a couple of per-

formance artists. Some guy told me I was really a performance artist. I said, 'What's that?' He kinda told me, but I don't remember what he said. To me, it's experimenting with life in a fairly acceptable way."

Performance-Art Expert: Laurie Anderson, who has released five albums of enervating, *Sprechgesang* music; has mounted several multimedia stage shows, one of which became a concert film; has publicly played her violin while wearing ice skates, the blades of which were embedded in blocks of ice
Definition (provided on the condition that SPY not "twist and pervert this and make fun of" her): "I never had any idea what it was, which is why I enjoy doing it so much."

Performance-Art Expert: Eric Bogosian, who has written and performed several well-received one-man shows, among them *Sex, Drugs, Rock & Roll* and *Drinking in America*, and the play *Talk Radio*; calls himself a monologist (which, he says, is different from a performance artist)
Definition: "You know, making fun of performance artists is like David Letterman calling up old people and making fun of them because they're half deaf. There will be mistakes. Most artists are not good, and anything can be stupid. But sometimes something blooms out of it that's inspirational. Performance art is a naive form of theater made by visual artists—that's as close as I can get to it."
—Constance Adler