
Introduction: Performance – action – extremity

A deluge of blood seeps to the street beneath her whitewashed door. Incidental viewers stop to look at, ostentatiously avoid or miss it altogether. Flowing outwards, the blood's viscous wetness soaks the worn taupe of her welcome mat in a coagulating puddle, leaching in six or more mounting rivulets of gore to encroach upon the blankness of the pavement and the day. It is a slender slice of awfulness, this scene: compulsive and unexplained, as in a world of dream. The main gush of blood looks livid red, the rest a russet brown.

The performance at hand is *Moffitt Building Piece* (1973) by the Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta. It was undertaken in front of the battered entrance to her home in Iowa City and filmed on a single Super-8 reel and captured on slides by the artist secreted in a car parked across from the spectacle (**Figure 0.1**). Mendieta's action was one in a series in which she explored the culture of sexual violence against women, prompted by the rape and murder of a fellow student earlier the same year. Mendieta sourced animal blood and mingled it with scraps of meat so as to stage a deceptively simple but devastating piece in which an unsuspecting series of viewers would fall upon a scene of apparent misadventure or crisis (it would be unclear to viewers if the fluid was blood – and if it was human blood) prompting their own micro-performances of astonishment, bewilderment or obliviousness.

The active source of the torrent remains obscured and inexorable, enabling the scene's spectacular strangeness and a political aspect of its experience. As Julia Bryan-Wilson writes of the action, Mendieta 'created a situation that unfolded unpredictably over time, in which the bodies [of passers by] were visibly marked by gender, age, race and class' on account of the way we might read a relation between their appearances, their identities and their performed reactions – even if the unmarked body that represents the source of the bloody irrigation remains 'unknown and unknowable' to the



0.1 Ana Mendieta, *Moffitt Building Piece* (1973), 35 mm colour slide, document of performance © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC, courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York

witnesses (Bryan-Wilson 2014: 27). The action is a minor epic of interpersonal disaster for which there is no clear victim or perpetrator. Freightened neither by a performer nor an audience according to conventional expectations of each term, the performance is built around a visual sign that makes meaning in unexplained (but explicable) ways. In the context of Mendieta's other works, *Moffitt Building Piece* asks how the singularity of blood (a woman's blood, Latinx blood) burdens the field of vision. Across her performances, she imagines a fuller range of incidental abandonments, from normal filth to fantastical excrescences: say, of garbage, dust, fire, blood, bones or a corpse (of human or of bird); the street, a home or a field becomes a crime scene, a grave, a site of spontaneous combustion or a makeshift altar for a humble mess of flowers.

In *Moffitt Building Piece*, Mendieta uses a modest tactic – a prank or stunt of sorts (but one that is no lark) – to pose a series of nuanced ethical questions: Who may notice the blood, even investigate its source? With how reduced a palette and with how distilled an action might a performance create a visceral relation or a lasting impact? With what effects might the incidental viewer, suddenly a witness, ignore (or indeed seek to intervene in) whatever crimes might appear to be occurring behind closed doors? The poet Claudia Rankine writes tellingly of the experience of public invisibility, witnessing the way this clashes with intimate scenes of racialised and sexualised insult or affray: 'Each moment is like this – before it can be known, categorized as similar to another thing and dismissed, it has to be experienced, it has to be seen' (Rankine 2015: 9). The spectacle at hand demands itself to be seen, experienced and properly known – even, paradoxically, when some refuse to look.

Many do not see the bloodshed at their feet. Some pause hard to look at this slender pageantry of another's distress – and then walk on. Others keep strolling but look back. Few stop. Some peer up at the window above, perhaps to check for the sound or sight of commotion that one might report or else to manifest the home more evidently as a house of horror. One woman pokes the clotting viscera with her umbrella. Another, carrying books, walks haphazardly through the mounting carnage at Mendieta's doorstep, bloodying her shoes but oblivious to the scene.

In the 1970s, performance artists devised actions, whether simple or convoluted, which privileged or prioritised the contingent materiality of the body of the performer – and, inevitably perhaps, the bodies of her, his or their audiences. Artists did so, as Mendieta's action suggests, through performed images that brought suffering, survival, agency, pleasure or desire to the fore of our awareness, staging activities that foreground how we think and feel about or engage with history, with others and with our surroundings. Performance art did not originate in the 1970s: an authoritative genealogy by RoseLee Goldberg reads it as emerging circuitously from the European avant-garde experiments of Futurism, Bauhaus, Surrealism and Dada in the early twentieth century (Goldberg 1979: 9–78). Yet the 1970s are significant for the trenchant ways artists revived performance art's forms to animate the ways we interact with (to confirm, challenge, pleasure or injure) the bodies of others and inhabit and transform the spaces of our world. In doing so, performance artists depended on a multiple articulation to histories of fine art and experimental theatre, as well as to other genealogies: rethinking, refining or rejecting the tendencies or values they identified in sculpture, painting, plays, Happenings, dance, poetry, music

or sound. The relation of performance art to theatre, in particular – as continuation or repudiation – is hotly contested: perhaps a kind of unresolvable and reluctant relation of indebtedness. The artist and critic Scott Burton notes as much in a short essay of 1970, where the link between performance art and theatre depends upon their distinctive inhabitations of the audience's time and attention. Works of performance art are:

categorizable as 'theatre' [to the extent that] they can only be experienced in extension, as processes or sequences in time, and they control the audience's length and rate of exposure (the opposite is true of reading a book or looking at a painting). But these works . . . are unlike traditional dramatic art because they exist explicitly in the same, actual time as that of the viewer instead of offering fictive times and places. They are not illusionistic but literalist theatre pieces. (Burton 2012: 222–3)

In occupying and exposing time and attention in this way and by opposing historical conventions of theatrical time and place, performance artists subjected their bodies to duration, repetition, pain, injury, sociality or duress; to actions undertaken frequently without regard for the traditional demonstration of skill, technique or training (in contrast to the virtuosic use of performance in, say, theatre, music or dance); and to activities that appropriated modes of being and doing that seem to belong to 'non-art' domains of practice, like work, play, love, sport, vaudeville or crime.

In their apparent exceptionality, many signature performance actions of the 1970s might to contemporary eyes look gratuitous, odd, illegible or unwarranted. This novelty or difficulty inherent to performance art was (and still is) partly the point: the anomalous body practices that artists pursued would enable them to depart from the orthodoxies that clung (and cling) to institutional and other traditions of art-making, criticism and reception; and such practices also exposed or exploded the social checks placed on bodily comportment and daily performances of identity and selfhood. Existing at a limit – of art or the social, of bodily integrity and comfort – extremity is written into existing accounts of what performance art is and does. For example, Edward Scheer writes that 'performance art provokes [a] crisis of representation as part of its core aesthetic', as 'by presenting the body (usually of the artist) as the central motif of the artwork, the representational frame of the work is disturbed, its referentiality is disordered by the forceful engagement of the work with the presence of the artist' (Scheer 2010: 219).

Karen Gonzalez Rice addresses this function in her study of the 'prophetic' power of endurance art. 'In the face of physical and psychic extremity', she writes, the performance artist 'simultaneously embodies ethos and pathos, death and survival, vulnerability and discipline, victimhood and heroic agency' (Gonzalez Rice 2016: 4). For Gonzalez Rice, performance actions are legible as 'both pathology *and* art' and both 'respond to trauma *and* constitute ethical relations' (*ibid.*, emphasis in original), suggesting that a performance, in its extremity, may vacillate on a series of highly volatile distinctions: between the acceptable and the unacceptable, truth and fiction, stigmatisation and apologia, reckless activity and anomalous strategy – or, finally, between the stuff of art and the praxis of an irredeemably precarious life.

This apparent excess or eccentricity – this art's *extremity* – has been significant despite or because of the aesthetic revolutions that emerged or intensified in vigour in the 1960s; indeed, performance art both drew from and heightened the aesthetic challenges posed by conceptual art, do-it-yourself art, Happenings and experimental film – all forms for which performance was in fact typical, fundamental or exemplary. An imperative of performance art – to identify and overcome the limits of form – complemented and extended the historical priority of much advanced art after modernism *tout court*. As John Roberts writes, modernism accepted or realised 'art as a historical category that logically cannot be submitted to limits or norms, outside, that is, of the *negation* of the negation of negation'; after modernism and in a more intensified manner in the 'post-conceptual' terrain of art after the 1960s, 'to make art is at the same time to *define* art, to subject it to a process of self-scrutiny on the basis of art's historically and socially constructed norms' (Roberts 2015: 11, emphasis in original). Yet performance art in the 1970s is not simply camouflaged against a general back-drop of mutual and sustained excess. It stands out as a repertoire of its own particular extremity, despite the superlative nature of its moment.

The central problem of *Unlimited Action* is to attribute a kind of troubled legibility to performance's extremity, while opening up a scope for less well-known works whose historical marginality is also crucially at play. If extremity assumes a limit, what might we make of the borders, gaps or ruptures between art and its purported out-sides? How are the distinctions between the aesthetic and the extra- or anti-aesthetic staged, upheld or transgressed in works of art and in our critical encounters? How do we historicise and theorise the works and practices that subsist as and beyond a limit of the aesthetic? What is at stake in celebrating works of art for their extremity (which is always relative), their difference (which is surmountable) or their novelty (which can be neutralised by repetition or acceptance)? How does one attend to the event's apparent luxation from time in its excessiveness, its dislocation from the past as a singularity, without pretending it assumes the same inverse grandeur as real atrocity, whose limits must exceed those of the paradigmatically consensual space of art, however unsurpassable, strange or destitute the latter might sometimes appear? Performances such as the ones foregrounded throughout this book, beginning with Mendieta's *Moffitt Building Piece*, stage their own social extremity, as painful, isolated, dangerous or anomalous actions and as facts of life. They tend to lack, reject or annihilate the formal properties that often seem to signal an activity or object's proper status as art. As such, the performances will often seem to relegate themselves to the purported outside of art. Yet the discourse of art may overcome, contain or at least make nonsensical the contention of art's specificity or the apparently insurmountable difference or distance between itself and something else. When a work of art appears to be exceptional or inassimilable, has a limit been crossed – or was it less a boundary than a yet-unseen path to be taken?

Unlimited Action undertakes a counterhistory, depicting a series of encounters between acts of performance and the limits against which they brace. I account for actions whose makers often struggled – or patently refused – to acknowledge the status of their works straightforwardly as works of art; and others still whose performances were denied such a status by others or were barred or deterred from being

made at all. Moreover, I discuss actions that have generally slipped below or beyond the purview of the critical and scholarly establishments of art in the 1970s. How, then, might a broader history be constituted for performance art and proximate media, bigger than or beyond the ones given in previous accounts, from the late 1960s onwards? The project of what I call *the performance of extremity* – and of the thinking and writing it might give rise to – enables or requires an excessive route of imaginative action, then feels out the borders and boundaries of the possible and the impossible. By learning what is more than enough, in part to suggest what may be known (in itself, and as *enough*), the performance of extremity endeavours to engage, anatomise and finally overcome one's limits as a maker, viewer or critic.

The horizon of performance art in the 1970s includes actions presented for live audiences (often small, intimate or invited ones), as well as 'stealth' interventions with incidental audiences. It also includes private or intimate performances to camera, whose audiences only ever accessed the event by still or moving images. Its histories also includes works that exist only in hearsay or otherwise as heavily obscured, embellished anecdotes, either because the conditions under which they were made preclude documentation or authentication or because their mythic quality is written into the very idea of the performance. Throughout, difficulty, singularity or anomaly produces or sustains a work's own critical legend. For example, the suggestive power of a work such as Chris Burden's *747* (1973) capitalises on this self-mythologising aspect of performance art. A photograph by Terry McConnell seems to confirm the facticity of the performance – in tandem with the artist's written statement, the photograph authenticates the narrative that Burden shot bullets at an overhead aircraft with a pistol – but the image only evidences that Burden held a handgun aloft and aimed it at the Boeing as it passed through the frame. Either way, the idea of the performance works its provocative magic, staging the profound risks that accompany art's seemingly final (but serial) breaks with form. In *747*, the threat of criminal damage, mass death and personal ignominy ground the formal challenge that confirms the action as a performance, despite the lack of a live audience, a stable object or the facticity of his claims. Uncertainty, notoriety and doubt form part of such a work's existential charm.

Burden is perhaps the best-known performance artist to have worked with endurance, ordeal or self-directed hardship in the 1970s. A kind of notoriety was conferred upon or claimed by the artist when he was shot in the arm with a rifle (*Shoot*, 1971); threatened his own death by electrocution (*Doorway to Heaven*, 1973); invited an audience to force thumbtacks into his skin (*Back to You*, 1974); crucified on a car bonnet (*Trans-Fixed*, 1974); or kicked to fall down a concrete stairwell (*Kunst Kick*, 1974), among other actions. (The brevity with which I describe these performances can only compound their excessiveness, their internal sense of desperation or apparent gratuitousness.) As Donald Kuspit writes, Burden's 'early self-torturing performances were unusually foolhardy – more extreme than the typical avant-garde risk-taking' associated with avant-gardism and artistic experimentation (Kuspit 1988: 37).

Over a short but intensive period of activity between 1971 and 1975 (though he continued to perform until 1984), Burden presented now-classic performance actions that typically put him in situations of physical risk, heralded the threat of

injury or death, activated the audience as participants by implicating them inside difficult events and prompted other conditions of indeterminacy, laying a ground for the performance of extremity. If Burden's actions – like those of many other artists in the period – lend themselves to disapprobation, misapprehension, hyperbole or caricature, they pushed art to a certain limit, particularly by exposing the agency of his audience, curators or passers-by and their implicit complicity in his own physical (sometimes potentially mortal) endangerment.

Burden's exemplarity was reluctant, at least retrospectively: by the 1980s, he would begin to distance himself from the causative power of his earlier landmark works as an apologist of sorts for the broader excesses of the performance of extremity. Yet Burden's actions were among the most visible – and remain the best remembered and most efficiently contained – in a vast repertoire of instances of performance art that redefined the limits of art in the 1970s. The extreme aspect of such work is overwhelmed in its writing by the alien or unnamed situations one is cast into – *cast* as in *thrown*, but also in its theatrical sense of being induced to play a role, dressed in fraught styles of witnessing, doing and showing. The performance of extremity, then, involves acts of physical, emotional or conceptual excess – extremes of too much or not enough – to an extent that harasses the artist, us and the category of art; yet, crucially, in its resistant or elusive character, the performance of extremity also invites the means to dislodge the narrative already established of performance art in a given context.

Extremity is a promiscuous or tendentious word. It vacillates in its attribution to performance or art and pulls into its orbit a whole host of other significations. Extremity might broadly suggest violence, pornography, criminality, misanthropy, danger, recklessness, eccentricity or obscurantism and a host of other variously taboo, undesirable or repulsive spheres of activity or feeling. Outside of art it recalls the apparently wanton risks associated with extreme sports, like free-fall parachuting, parkour, bare knuckle fist-fighting or white water rafting, where a feat's gratuitousness, sublimity and pleasure are self-legitimising for the practitioner; the newly forged legal concept of extreme pornography, which in Britain criminalises – and thus expels from the aesthetic realm – the representation of violent and non-consensual actions, but also demonises marginal sexual practices that are non-violent (like female ejaculation, watersports or fisting); or extreme body modification, in which physical pressure, strenuous training and time (or do-it-yourself surgery) fashion new holes or alien contours in human flesh or move bones and cartilage into unexpected silhouettes; or else extremity recalls extravagances of feeling, association, irrational belief or action, including religious or political extremism, militancy or fanaticism, typified in the narcissistic bravado of radical ascetics, suicide-bombing, self-immolation or Yukio Mishima's *Seppuku*. Extremity reminds me, too, of the extremities of the body, of fingers, toes or genitals – the pieces of oneself that interpenetrate with other bodies and objects in the sensible world, often sensually or painfully, when they slip inside or get succoured, snagged, sliced or severed by autonomous things outside ourselves, are licked or fondled, caught in machinery or trapped in doors. The performance of extremity engages and eclipses the sensationalism of these preceding associations, but tightens the promise of performance art by posing the question of how post-war

art – typified, historically, by postmodernism and its aftermaths – provoked the expansion or hopeful dissolution of the category of art itself.

Action

For Frazer Ward, canonical works of performance art in the 1970s – Burden's *Shoot* in which he was shot, Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972) where he concealed himself masturbating beneath a ramp, and Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 0* (1974) in which she offered herself as a sacrificial object to the ultimately violent whims of her audience – may represent 'the result of a logic of escalating extremity at work within avant-garde circles' in contemporary art and thus became (he writes with some caveats) 'icons of the 1970s heyday of experimental and frequently confrontational performance art' (Ward 2012: 2). The precedence of injurious, risky or indecent activities in these and other iconic works is not gratuitous but signals, for Ward, 'the physical and/or psychological extremity and intensity' that typified experimentation in art in the 1970s (2012: 2). He explains that the new possibilities, however surprising or distasteful to some, were prompted or enabled by earlier transformations in the social milieu of the 1960s. These included artistic or aesthetic possibilities, notably for him the way minimalism commanded the viewer as an active component in the completion or activation of the work, such that the sobriety of minimalist sculpture enabled or invited a more potently embodied inhabitation of the newly activated milieu of art. The new uses of escalating extremity in art were also prompted, Ward suggests, by far-reaching social transformations, including new relations between public/private, inside/outside, as information moves more freely in and out of homes and institutions in unprecedented ways; the experience of art was remade as 'both public and embodied' in a context of new technologies of commerce and communications and of progressive but sometimes frightening reorganisations of the politics of the intimate and the personal sphere, including the politics of identity (2012: 6–8).

The subsequent transformations in art and performance were necessarily frightening to the old guard, prompting charges that the emperor wasn't wearing any clothes, the clowns were now running the circus and the barbarians were at the gates. The art historian and philologist Thomas McEvilley notes that after the late 1950s, the category of art became 'virtually unrecognizable to those who had thought it was theirs', namely, to academic artists, gallerists and critics. He continues, 'art activity flowed into the darkness beyond its traditional boundaries and explored areas that were previously as unmapped and mysterious as the other side of the moon' (McEvilley 2005: 233). Artists embraced the 'dark side' in both senses, as the hidden (or occulted) aspects of the semantic category of art, as well as the nihilistic, creepy or Dionysian underside of life. Specifically, McEvilley argues, performance art dragged the expanded or exploded category of art into a face-to-face encounter with physical, psychological and interpersonal extremity, often by reminding us of 'the awkward

embarrassments of living in a body’ (2005: 217). These provocations are germane to the emotional, physiological or sentimental – even, at times, seemingly metaphysical – limits encountered in *Unlimited Action*.

In performance art of the 1970s, I privilege a specific – though perhaps nebulous – model of performance, namely the *action*. ‘Action’ became a keyword for art after the publication of Harold Rosenberg’s influential essay ‘Mobile, Theatrical, Active’ in *Art in America* in 1964. In the same moment that Ward identifies as a crucible of sorts for subsequent practices in performance, Rosenberg observed the emergence of new modes of painting and sculpture that were ‘striving to become something different than pictures on the wall or forms quietly standing in the corner of a room’, suggesting, rather, new kinds of images and objects with ‘an unmistakable impulse to erupt into the life around them’ (Rosenberg 1966: 259). The mobile, theatrical, active art Rosenberg witnessed in its emergence in the 1960s innovated by way of an ‘active art’ and an ‘artist-actor’, two surprising and simultaneous novelties that require that art ‘is not merely shown’, but ‘puts on a show and solicits audience participation’ (1966: 260). To complete itself as a temporal, spatial and deictic form, artists subsequently placed the performing body – living, breathing, shitting, pissing, suffering, loving, dying – at the core of art making, displacing painting and sculpture as ends to point far outside the conventional limits of art’s substantive objecthood, in acts of desublimation that often entailed (as McEvilley identified) seemingly negative, nihilistic or destructive effects.

The new ‘art as action’ drew upon contingent experiments in a new sensorium of art, including Happenings, street theatre, expanded cinema, protest performances and new dance, adding grist to the mill of the conservative antipathy towards art’s newly vaunted theatricality, ephemerality and aesthetic strangeness. In painting’s move towards showing itself as labour (especially in action painting) and the wholesale renovation of activity that it licensed, art undertook a formative turn to action, with ‘*doing* replacing *making*’ (Rosenberg 1966: 272, emphasis in original) in a critical move that would arguably find its feet in the 1970s, with the emergence of endurance art, ordeal art and hardship art – or, in a word, the vital realisation of performance as singular *action*. In the catalogue for his landmark exhibition *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979*, Paul Schimmel defines action-based performance art in terms of ‘an overriding preoccupation with the temporality of the act’, giving rise to variously explosive, joyous, dangerous or destructive permutations of ‘the execution of performative actions whose primary goal was the process of creation rather than the production of objects’ (Schimmel 1998: 17). While remaining in dialogue with the traditions of fine art and of theatre, then, calling a work an ‘action’ signals a performance that subscribes to all or some of the following characteristics: singularity or unrepeatability; non-virtuosity; unrehearsed or unrehearsable activity; the activation of audiences in visceral or affective terms; an emphasis on the brute materiality of the body; extended or anticlimactic durations; social engagement in terms of the rejection of meanings in favour of the production of an effect; an emphasis on process over product; and a refusal of the commodity form in the creation of a work. An action could be actively solicitous, antagonistic or aggressive, novel or strange, funny or frightening, dangerous, thrilling, reckless,

provocative, exceptional or obscure; such affects are provoked in an action's undertaking as in its myth's retellings.

The performance of extremity

Not least as audiences, we are often intimately aware of our own contingent and evolving limits – be they physiological, emotional, ethical or moral. We may feel squeamish before the creation of a wound in performance or cringe at the sight or smell of blood; we may be struck shy by sexual acts or intimate overtures or become overextended emotionally amid bloodless but exhaustingly sustained performances of endurance. In any such instance, how does one deal with having been urged towards or even past a certain limit? We might close our eyes or turn our face away, feel angry or offended or bored, fall asleep, fall fainting on the floor, intervene in the performance or simply leave. No such response is categorically separate from the function of the work – even if our affective involvement sometimes feels like a distraction from, an insult to, or an overdetermining factor in our reading. Anomalously, the perception of a performed image is translated into a physiological response: our sweaty palms, flushes and blushes, increased heartbeat, fainting, vomiting, fight or flight. What meanings are foreclosed or produced in such reactions? By imposing or upholding a certain limit, we say something in unconscious or pre-verbal terms: *this is too much, you've gone too far; that is unacceptable, I've had enough*.

Along with works by, say, Ana Mendieta and Chris Burden, introduced thus far, the history of performance art discloses many performances that may strike one as extreme in the terms so far suggested. Some of these performances have already breached the horizon of historical legibility – of legitimacy, even. A history of the performance of extremity in the 1970s might include Carolee Schneemann, naked and daubed in paint, reading a poem about oppression from a strip of paper she unravels from her vagina, in *Interior Scroll* (1975); or William Pope.L preparing seemingly to set himself ablaze at the doorway to a commercial gallery, using cheap fortified wine as fuel in *Thunderbird Immolation* (1978); or Ulay and Marina Abramović's *Relation Works* (1976–79), in which they variously ran naked towards and into each other (*Relation in Space*, 1976), ran into walls (*Interruption in Space*, 1977), screamed into the other's open mouth until their voices were lost (AAA-AAA, 1978), slapped one another rhythmically (*Light/Dark*, 1977) or drove in interminable circles in a van (*Relation in Movement*, 1977), each over durations that rendered a simple action excruciating for the artists – and, perhaps, for some spectators, unfathomable. The central problem of this book is to attribute a kind of troubled legibility to performance's extremity, specifically by opening up a scope for less well-known works whose historical marginality is crucially at play and to think through the particular challenges such works pose. This attempt does not negate or overcome the established histories and theories of difficult or challenging performance art, but works in concert with them.

Where performance art was violent, upsetting, erotic or otherwise overwhelming, its extremity was typically received in the service of a political, formal and/or social function. For Amelia Jones and Kathy O'Dell, in their definitive accounts, performance artists in the 1960s and 1970s achieved such ends by revealing or exploiting our assumptions about how we engage with art, with the world or with others, challenging the ethical and cultural assumptions we make about the conventional, proper or inevitable shapes such engagement must take (Jones 1998; O'Dell, 1998). Yet regardless of its putative utility, the cumulative effect of all this formal, conceptual or emotional difficulty – sometimes, even, brutality – can make performance art of the 1970s seem uniformly transgressive or affronting to the viewer. In a benevolent exaggeration, written as a foil to her account of apparently more measured and effective practices in the present, Catherine Wood writes that 'performance art [in the 1970s] was angry . . . and its signature traits were naked bodies, self-harm [*sic*] and extreme duration' (Wood 2016: 54); performance artists, she concludes, sought 'to express their interior angst' (2016: 57). Inevitably, this was never uniformly the case. Such a reading pathologises artists or draws too clear a line between intention or biography and the effects of a particular work; it also suggests uniformities across individual works and different artists' practices that are open to critique.

Anxious refusals of the farthest reaches of performance art in the 1970s forget that extremity works in both directions, in terms of the upper and lower limits of concepts and practices – here, specifically, of art and aesthetics. In my definition, extremity stages or dramatises the challenge to push art to its limits, in actions that smack of being *too much*, as well as *not enough*. For example, in their extremity, performance artists in the 1970s sometimes appropriated or invented a single action, as a kind of experiment in form, either in a short, discrete exercise or as a life-altering commitment. Where the effects of taking an extreme stand could be painful, it could also be playful; either strategy could be bluntly formal or frightening, muscular or fleeting. In *Drawing a Line as Far as I can Reach* (1972), Tom Marioni followed the terms of his title, scraping a graphite mark on the floor to the wall and up as high as possible, creating a simple, perpendicular gradient. The extremity of such an action relies on pushing the acceptability of what may count as art – or as a critical question about art – to a kind of breaking point, not by urging the body towards disaster or suffering, but by depleting the substance of art to towards a lower limit, risking negligibility, inconsequentiality or insignificance in the process as a thrilling kind of negative potentiality.

Performance art history is studded with such acts of negative potentiality. For example, in *Catalysis I* (1971), Adrian Piper (in her own account) 'saturated a set of clothing in a mixture of vinegar, eggs, milk and cod liver oil for a week, then wore them on the D train during evening rush hour, then while browsing in [a] bookstore on Saturday night' (Lippard 1972: 76). So doing, she may incite more dramatic overtures of racist and misogynistic disdain than her body would otherwise trigger in more muted fashions. Of the *Catalysis* series, Piper states, 'One thing I don't do, is say: "I'm doing a piece," because somehow that puts me back into the situation I am trying to avoid . . . There is very little that separates what I'm doing from quirky personal

activity' (Lippard 1972: 78). We might ask how the artist's practice and speculative discourse refuses to illustrate or be tied down by prohibitive definitions of art's work or by demands for its proper intellectual labour.

In a formally similar feat of formidable, negated slightness, Bas Jan Ader fell out of a tree into a canal (*Broken Fall (Organic)*, 1971); and, in a related piece, he fell off a vaulted roof, landing in a bush and losing a shoe in the process (*Fall 1*, 1970). If Marioni, Piper, Ader and others distilled performance to an essential, formal and seemingly banal activity and rendered such banality spectacular – what Alexander Dumbadze describes (specifically of Ader) as 'ordinary occurrences that abruptly become highly unusual experiences' (2013: 23) – contemporary performance artists also pushed the task-based project of performance to its polar extreme. In *One Year Performance (Cage Piece)* (1978–79), the first in a series of five breathtakingly excessive one-year performances, the Taiwanese-American artist Tehching Hsieh imprisoned himself in an 11 × 9 ft steel cage, for a full, uninterrupted year. At the commencement of the action on 30 September 1978, he certified, 'I shall NOT converse, read, write, listen to the radio or watch television, until I unseal myself on September 29, 1979' (Hsieh in Heathfield 2009: 66, emphasis in original). Whereas Marioni, Piper or Ader did substantially little over a slice of time, Hsieh does nothing for a duration so monstrously long that his action's sustained lack of activity makes his endurance devastating. In their discontinuous exemplarity, such artists or their works seemed to demonstrate too much or not enough commitment, pungency or feeling; they were pointedly too threatening or vastly too frivolous, too profound or too negated in their investments in what art might do, tell or mean.

In works by Marioni, Ader, Piper and Hsieh, with wildly differing intensities, we see the performance artist enact what performance theorist Adrian Heathfield calls a 'lifework' or 'existence art' (2009: 11) – an 'absolute conception of art and life as simultaneous processes' that seeks both to strip art of its transcendence and to bulk up the day-to-day remarkability of life, with effects that are banal, funny, profound or terrifying (2009: 55). Blurring art and life, Hsieh in particular submits so violently to the logic of his performance (as well as to subsequent one-year performances) that he exempts himself from a full life: the discipline of art as a rule for living makes a year of his life sound barely survivable. Ader, too, aimed at a long-term performance with relevant effects: on 9 July 1975, he set sail across the Atlantic in a pocket cruiser, in a durational work set to last up to 90 days, *In Search of the Miraculous*; in contrast to the frivolity of his candid falls, he was lost at sea and died during the course of the action. Too little slips and slides to the mortal superlativity of too much. Extremity works its violations of the norms of behaviour in multiple and unpredictable directions. Such non-compliance with expectations of what art might do, the question of how far one might go and the stakes of such limit-acts together enable the backbone of this book.

The performance of extremity – as too much or not enough – thus asks us to reconsider the style and substance of living, of bodies, identity or relationality and the tasks and habits that make these concepts readable or recognisable as art or its others. The problem, that is, goes beyond us asking if the activity is, conclusively, an artefact belonging properly to art or to life. As Anne Wagner notes, the attempt to interrogate

and perhaps violate the limits of the discursive category of art prompts a series of questions concerning the function and interdependency of knowledge, distinction, difference, power and communication. By instigating situations of ‘communicative breakdown’, Wagner writes, art in the 1960s and 1970s could ask:

How, if at all, can art remake the ruling order? Can that order be forced to appear? What sorts of freedom do humans possess? Do we mean what we say? Can art trump speech? Can it change or erase what people perceive? How else might it reshape, even interrupt the given patterns of life? (Wagner 2016: 20)

The perennial question of how and with what effects one might blur the boundary between art and life – here, becoming exemplary, unsurpassed, a historical or formal cynosure – exceeds the issue of whether or not the constitutive action belongs to or operates discretely in and upon one or the other domain. Wagner reminds us to take seriously the charges behind superficially strange or desperate actions: the dream of deconditioning the self; of devising new shapes for social or communal relations; of extending the political and affective ranges of the body; and of remaking the horizon of sensory perception.

Performance artists in the 1970s oftentimes exemplified this questioning practice through the use of a singular action, repeated or sustained. For example, Vito Acconci bit himself repeatedly and made prints from his indented skin (*Trademarks*, 1974), manifesting his body as the raw materials of art, as both canvas and technological rudiment, to the exclusion of investments in the body’s pain, struggle or angst. In a more pungently abject imagining, Stuart Brisley lay in a bath of black water for two hours per day for two weeks, in a room filled with rotting meat and offal, ‘like a victim of some disgusting, unexplained murder’, as one critic put it (Cork 2003: 181), as a disturbing deliberation on struggle, dehumanisation and death (*And For Today . . . Nothing*, 1972). Tightening the political acuity of performance art even further, Alastair MacLennan walked through war-torn Belfast, wearing a large target and a plastic sheet – focusing the crosshairs of sectarian violence upon his own anonymous person – and repeated the action daily for a whole month (*Target*, 1977). In *Three Day Blindfold/How to Become a Guru* (1974), Linda Montano used a profoundly delimited range of materials and actions to ‘interrupt the given patterns of life’ (to borrow Wagner’s phrase); she blindfolded herself and relied on assistance from her silent companion, Pauline Oliveros, for three uninterrupted days, staging one’s capacity to choose incapacity as an imposition on another’s will to care or love. Each action asks questions about consciousness, embodiment, process, form and political or personal transformation, specifically through actions that appear *extreme*: that is to say, through actions that seem injurious, dangerous, vulnerable or unnecessary; whose duration seems unendurable or transformative – or too much like an undoing; and whose identity as art seems to beg the question of its own viability or verisimilitude (its lack of resemblance to prior landmarks or lauded practices of art making).

Feelings, desires, expectations and fantasy clearly influence or condition our critical encounter with art – and particularly so with the performance of extremity.

As Jennifer Doyle has argued, works of performance that seem to invoke excessive responses from audiences may be difficult or demanding, but the turn to emotion or affect functions not as a means of narcissistic escape or (mere) self-indulgence, but as an instrument of counterintuitive social engagement: such work appears ‘stubbornly unfindable, uncollectable, and impossible to curate for fear of offending politicians and donors’ (Doyle 2013: 15); it ‘feels emotionally sincere or real’ and ‘produces a dense field of affect around it even as it seems to dismantle the mechanisms through which emotion is produced and consumed’ (2013: xi). Nevertheless, Doyle notes, to the extent that such works seem to require a sympathetic, complex or ardent labour of critical response, a performance that pushes a viewer to her or his limits may just as likely produce violent or stigmatising responses. For example, work that is ‘shaped by a comingling of narrative, feelings, and politics . . . can appear to some critics as naïve and propagandistic’, prompting active attacks or passive refusals; for Doyle, each response ‘reflects a critical limit, and not a limit to the work itself’ (2013: 21). Doyle is not calling for a criticism without limits but, rather, she invites the writer to admit the limits – of taste, comfort, vocation and so on – against which one’s writing strains, so to revel in the pleasures and pains of such recognition. Doyle suggests the conscientious transgression through writing of a limit in oneself, now desublimated by the spectacle of another’s performance.

The approach towards a perceived limit may make one’s extension into the corporeal and conceptual world around us feel less safe, but performance teaches us that such experiences of extremity also enliven us or give us *permission to become more than what one is or feels one is allowed to be*. Such an approach involves, perhaps, the recognition of our social, political, subjective and interpersonal precariousness, prompting an attempt at the repudiation of the limits that give us pause (or worse, that threaten to oppress, arrest, traumatise, demoralise or destroy us). Griselda Pollock argues that the way difficult or upsetting art does its work depends upon the formal situation of trauma itself as ‘irrepresentable’, ‘transmissible’ and ‘belated’: that is, trauma undergirds both pedestrian and singular experience, not as personal pathology or hermeneutic origin but as that which cannot be known or shown; and despite its ineffability, such experience returns to us in ‘after-images’ and ‘after-affects’ whose difficult materiality might provoke, for the politically acute and patient viewer, a formative, ‘culturally transitive’, *transformative* experience (Pollock 2013: 4–11). This accompanies the works of art Pollock studies, namely, works that directly confront the historical realities of suffering. Her feminist approach also allows us to think more carefully about the possibilities for engagement that are opened up in any work that greets us like ‘a surprise attack’, foiling the vigilance of our psychic defences or that otherwise shocks or knocks our stability off course (2013: 47). Art, for Pollock, remains agonistic, passionate and confrontational: culture is not so volatile and we are not so vulnerable that neither it, nor I nor you can take the psychic pressure it subjects us to. If this orientation seems, by turns, destructive, masochistic, antagonistic, wishful or naïve, it may as likely involve a playful act of creativity, a perverse fantasy or a reversal of fortunes. The difficulty entailed in the performance of extremity models a leap of faith over the constraining boundaries one encounters, in the world, in oneself or in art.

Unlimited action?

The performance of extremity, both singularly and cumulatively, attempts to dissolve or buckle the strictures of the category of art, hybridising it with the limits of life itself. Such attempts are never final or triumphal – even if a whiff of heroism, catharsis, romanticism or the *rite de passage* may accompany the rhetoric of the limit. The categories of art or life are never fully and finally broken open, dissolved or intermingled, but demand serial unpicking, thresholding, ritual affronts, re-wilding and increasingly innovative interventions, in order first to broach and then to ballast the destabilisation of the limits of the particular semantic category under attack. ‘This is a mode of willing’, McEvelley writes, ‘which is absolutely creative in the sense that it assumes that it is reasonable to do anything at all with life; all options are open and none is more meaningful or meaningless than any other’ (2005: 249). McEvelley’s point refuses or complicates the pervasive criticism that performances of physical, psychic or ontological difficulty tend regressively to recuperate agonistic or expressionistic conceptions of art and meaning, including modernist assumptions about the transcendent capacity of painful, difficult or sincere thought and action.

I do not believe that the performance of extremity can demolish the category of art or obliterate with any finality the borders between art and life. Neither do I wish to recuperate the triumphalism or transcendence of scenes of seeming mastery. I argue that the spectral power of the limit will work according to its promise: labouring in *the spirit of the limit*, artists have been succoured by the ambition or will to violate the sanctity of forms, to bid valediction to orthodox values or to invent oneself anew by forcing a hairline fracture in the way of things.

The ‘unlimited action’ invoked in this book’s title, then, is a challenge and a myth: a totemic ideal rather than an objective thing to be delineated, claimed and studied. For the excremental philosopher Georges Bataille, a limit is imposed specifically to be surpassed or violated: ‘There exists no prohibition that cannot be transgressed. Often the transgression is permitted, often it is even prescribed’ (Bataille 1986: 63). Translated to aesthetics, Bataille’s philosophical contention would mean that the discursive construction of the phenomenon of art installs within itself a series of limits – conventions about what art is or does and taboos against foreign modes of being or doing – but that the practice of art ‘prescribes’ or necessitates transgression as a means of enabling its own future. Bataille’s conception of the limit-experience and its social and cultural force are given their best elucidation in his late treatise *Erotism* (first published in 1957), which explores the way extreme experiences – of ecstasy, cruelty, violence, violation, sacrifice, taboo and mysticism – are *erotic*, in the specific sense that eroticism consists of ‘assenting to life up to the point of death’ (1986: 11). Bataille’s is a world of scandalous limits, a frightening plateau of taboos and transgressions, punctuated by totems that have been erected to ward the subject from intolerable desires: for murder, ritual orgy, cannibalism, degradation, profanation, voodoo. These limits become all the more seductive, he suggests, according to the force of their proscriptive function.

Bataille writes that within a given discourse 'licence' is always given for certain permissible transgressions, generally under tight and contingent circumstances. During the course of such licensed transgression, however, 'unlimited urges towards violence may break forth': the freedom to exceed a convention produces wild possibilities of disturbance that cannot be contained. Such acts of 'unlimited transgression' Bataille terms 'sacrilege' (1986: 65–6). To apply Bataille's theory to the performance of extremity, opportunities for excess are given or authorised by the discourse of art, perhaps to enable its own risk-oriented evolution; but at these and other limits, artists may go above and beyond the implicit terms of art's fearful yet permissible transgressions, with riotous, reckless, fearsome or baffling effects that the discourse of art might fail to integrate into its vulnerable or overextended whole. Is there such a phenomenon, then, as a work without limits? What would such an act of aesthetic sacrilege look like? Where would one find such a space to create, in which one's agency is not enabled and/or curtailed by a palimpsest of limits: material or financial impositions, including poverty; by networks of power, including the law, censorship in tacit or explicit forms and the imposition of institutional regulations and policies; the limits of one's ability, access or freedom; or the self-imposed limitations of catering to imagined audiences, including the frequently (or supposedly) squeamish, unadventurous, expectant and preoccupied constituencies of museum- and gallery-goers?

Certain transgressions may be activated – and regulatory impositions may be avoided – by moving one's work into the streets or other public spaces or by presenting unauthorised or stealth performances, summoning (or eluding or overcoming) the strong arm of the law as an eventuality of one's performance of social maverickhood or cultural invulnerability. Yet, does such a strategy free an artist from the bounds of a particular discourse, history or form? The art historian Pamela Lee queries the validity of any terrain of cognition that might be deemed immune to, or cauterised from, art – and the 'art world' – by way of the problem of globalisation and aesthetics. Lee questions the contention that 'one could lay claim to a space beyond [art's] imperial reach by wandering just far enough afield' and critiques the 'naïve' argument that 'outside' the traditional domain of artistic practice and reception, there may be 'the fabled Archimedean point from which to survey the workings of the art world as they take place down below' (Lee 2012: 2). For Lee, art is a domain without formal or categorical limits, just as culture extends itself to encroach upon everything that global capitalism can touch, remake and claim. Yet other limits remain to appertain, as disclosed in the persistent shocks instigated by the perpetually renewed 'contemporary'. As Bataille notes, '[t]ransgression outside well defined limits is rare' (1986: 71). Even the imagination, as a space of apparent freedom, is subject to limits originating inside or outside it, despite its own regenerative and subversive potentials: its purported purity is alloyed with cheaper metals, which is to say the fantasy of a free imagination may be truncated by power, conscience, superego, self-preservation or self-sabotage. After Bataille, limits may be loosened or periodically camouflaged, but their restrictive effect is never fully or finally overwhelmed and neutralised.

Perhaps there may be no performance without limits – no unlimited action, as such. To the charge, in an interview, 'You went over the limits' – specifically, of human capacity or endurance – the performance artist Ulay replies: 'No. If I had gone over

my limits, I'd be dead. The question is: who creates these limits' (Jelinek and Kalan 2016: 15). The strategic, antagonistic, irreverent, licentious performance will always find a limit (the final limit, for Ulay, the iconoclast, being one's finitude). Where there is a limit, one might identify the vested interest: to paraphrase Ulay, who – or what – creates and sustains a limit? What mortal or metaphysical threat is kindled in the attempt to surpass it?

The allure of lawlessness and of the limits to the fantasy of our own triumphant subjectivity has a credible philosophical history. A formidable precedent is Friedrich Nietzsche's dictum: 'Nothing is true, everything is permitted', written in 1887 (Nietzsche 2008: 126). It was borrowed from an apocryphal text by the Persian mystic Hassan-i-Sabbáh, the 'Old Man of the Mountain' and subsequently taken up by the experimental writers (and iconoclasts) William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, whose countercultural influence reached a fever pitch in the 1960s and 1970s. For Nietzsche – and for Burroughs and Gysin – such a statement proclaims the contingency of moral, ethical, political and social mores and modes of conduct. Truth itself, as an operating principle that might guide our ways of thinking and being – in life or in the specialised domain of art – is shown to be an invented category of knowledge. Anticipating Bataille's theorisation of the proscriptions and prescriptions that constitute human capacities for desiring action, Nietzsche imagines the very concept of truth and, with its converse, fiction (or, in a similarly denuded dyad, reality and unreality) as a limit forced on human thought and individual potential, produced and instrumentalised by a vested interest.

In the twentieth century, in Bataille's wake, the logic of the limit was valorised by thinkers associated with post-structuralism, including Michel Foucault, whose writings were often concerned with the limits to discourse; and Jacques Derrida, who studied the limits to language and to philosophy itself. For Foucault, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, published in French in 1969, to rethink the nature of discursive formations by uncovering their formative rules may reconstitute the practice of history and the nature of knowledge itself: the historian is 'forced to advance beyond familiar territory, far from the certainties to which one is accustomed, towards an as yet uncharted land and unforeseeable conclusion[s]', suggesting the obliterations of prior limits to what can be studied or known, leaving 'a blank, indifferent space, lacking in both interiority and promise' – for Foucault a useful potentiality, even if it sounds like a daunting one (Foucault 2003: 42–3).

First published in French in 1972, Derrida's *Margins of Philosophy* opens with a consideration of limits by asking how 'a discourse that has called itself philosophy . . . has always, including its own, meant to say [or stage] its limit' (Derrida 1982: x, emphasis in original). Having included its limits within its own conceptual scope and attempted to render these limits intelligible to itself, philosophy has 'recognized, conceived, posited, declined the limit according to all possible modes; and therefore by the same token, in order better to dispose of the limit, has transgressed it' (1982: x). Derrida seeks to reassert the ineffable, constitutive unfamiliarity of a limit and its beyond, to estrange properly the outside of discourse and stage the means by which 'the limit, obliquely, by surprise, always reserve[s] one more blow for philosophical knowledge' (1982: xi). For Derrida, a discourse lays claim to its content and interiorises

its limits according to two key operations of ‘appropriating mastery’: first, it establishes and maintains a *hierarchy* of objects and forms of knowledge, to subordinate its materials to its own discursive jurisdiction; and second, it practices *envelopment*, as a synecdochic variation on containment: ‘the whole is implied, in the speculative mode of reflection and expression, in each part’, such that no part is authorised to speak or be spoken of *properly* outside the domain of the whole of the discourse (1982: xix–xx). In a discourse, no thing remains categorically impertinent or incorrigible, as the newly discovered object or idea at the margin may be appropriated, classified, subjected to a hierarchy or enveloped within its own recalibrated epistemic spread.

My own use of signature performances as examples or as illustrations threatens to do the work of recuperating or extending the ‘epistemic spread’ that I claim they otherwise seek to undermine. Such is the price – at least, the risk – of a scholarly practice of historical recovery. To abandon the work to historical forgetting and to lay claim to an apologetic silence would serve to honour the incidental resistance of the action in its time and place of performance. Yet such an orientation would ignore the function of the document and revoke the work’s future-oriented capacity to vacillate on the margin and call into question the identity and function of a given discourse: here, of art or, more specialised still, of performance art. In its vacillation and the paradoxes of its retelling, a performance asks us to see which ‘texts’ – history and politics broadly conceived and the immanent tasks of activism, vigilance and sociality – lay beyond the territorialisations of a professional or disciplinary field; it calls on us to pose a narration that might scupper the dominance of our inherited knowledges. As Derrida asks, ‘How to conceive what is outside a text? That which is more or less than a text’s *own*, *proper* margin?’ (1982: 25, emphasis in original). Property or propriety are contestable and remind us of the need to lay claim to one’s contingent subject position as a writer or witness, not least in the task of deciding what is a limit and which action can be claimed to invoke or vacillate upon it. John Tagg engages in detail with a similar question, namely the extent to which a scholar might be required to ‘know their place’: in art history, Tagg argues, despite a series of urgent political reformulations of the discipline in the 1970s and 1980s ‘there never was . . . a place, outside the continual production, exclusion and elision of positions for speaking, within a discursive and institutional regime whose conditions of existence, limits and effects have to be gauged and regauged from perspectives which cannot claim privileged exterior vantage points’ (Tagg 1987: 100). By putting into question the relation between art and its purported outsides and by highlighting the extreme position the historian may find oneself occupying, Tagg suggests an urgent call to risk abjection in one’s vocation, precisely by means of losing one’s place in the face of the artists, objects or actions one attends to.

Does it hurt?

A key imperative of *Unlimited Action* is to pose a counterhistory to the narrative givens concerning performance art in the 1970s. In particular, works involving physical

self-injury – in direct service of or as a side-effect in performance art in the 1970s – have been variously celebrated, canonised and stigmatised. For example, in VALIE EXPORT's film-performance, *Remote . . . Remote . . .* (1973), she meticulously carved away the cuticles from her fingers using a carpet knife. Separating the flesh from her fingernails, pushing the knife gruesomely into the nail bed to draw blood, EXPORT intermittently bathed her tattered meat in a bowl of milk held between her knees, where we see the blood dissipate from her fingers into the milk's corrupting whiteness. Accompanied by an ominous, clanking percussive sound, the effect of watching the video document of EXPORT's performance is harrowing and strangely compelling. Sitting with the film, in a screening and later on my laptop, I am moved by the experience of watching: I wince, narrow my eyes with concentration and concern and feel vaguely nauseous. In a public showing of the film at *(Re)Presenting Performance*, Guggenheim Museum, New York in 2005, EXPORT sits elegant, unfazed and perhaps confronting in her demeanour on the stage in front of the screen, while collectively we sweat and groan and shift in our seats. The colossal close-ups of the blade and her bloodied hands loom large and images of her fingers in the milk or nibbled in her mouth dwarf the interruption posed by our discomfited noises or by others' intermittent walkouts. We don't quite *read* the document – much less enjoy it – as much as we experience it, subsequently perhaps to process or reorder our embodied responses, to come to terms (in the moment or in studied or traumatic reflection) with her boldness or brutality, and our not-quite-consensual subjection to it in the scene.

The means by which injurious performance may prompt (or overwhelm) our critical encounter with it has been a frequent question for performance studies. Marina Abramović's physically arduous performances are exemplars of the use of self-injury in the 1970s and a frequent conduit for scholarly discussions of agency, active witness and consent (see Goldberg 1979; Iles 1988; O'Dell 1998; McEvilley 2010). In one such work, *Lips of Thomas* (aka *Thomas Lips*) (1975), Abramović ate large quantities of honey, lashed herself bloody and carved a large Star of David into her abdomen with a razor blade, prompting her audience to storm the performance space and bring an abrupt end to the performance. For Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Lips of Thomas* posed conceptual problems for its live audience, not by the strength of its symbols or allusions, but by its 'transformative potential' to overhaul or wreak havoc to received ways of reading, understanding and valuing performance – as demonstrated by the audience's mass refusal of the full promise of its completion. By transforming her audience into actors, or active co-authors, Abramović prompts an ethical crisis, for the viewer must choose either to consent to, or to revoke, the shape of the encounter, which otherwise subjects the audience to the perverse authority of the artist (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 12–13). Fischer-Lichte notes that there are indeed signs and symbols in Abramović's performance (honey, the cross, the star, flagellation and so on), but these are 'incommensurable with the event of the performance' because one's ability to read these literary functions of the production of meaning is overwhelmed by the visceral experience of the event (2008: 16). As with the experience of EXPORT's *Remote . . . Remote . . .* there is no distanced, passive orientation to take up, no space from which to give a detached response. In the extremity of each artist's action – variously cutting, flogging, freezing or otherwise overwhelming

her body – and the exceptional demands placed upon the audience, Fischer-Lichte argues that ‘the materiality of her actions dominate[s] their semiotic attributes’ (2008: 16–18), precisely because pain, injury and consent cannot be assimilated into the conventions that otherwise govern spectatorship in theatre, art or performance art.

A common claim made by artists is that performance under duress allows her or him to master pain or to access a state of being beyond pain, paradoxically by way of the spectacle of self-directed injury. A core example is Stelarc, who rationalised his performances – beginning in 1976 with a series of suspensions from hooks inserted into his skin (attached to wooden structures, cranes or the interiors of buildings) – as a means of breaking loose from the bounds of embodiment, towards a posthuman condition in which he claims ‘the body is obsolete’ (Farnell 1999: 140). In tandem with such rationales, in performance art of the 1970s wounding is often deployed persuasively as a corporeal practice of mark making and as a technique for representing or manifesting the body as raw material – as when, in *Sentimental Action* (1973), Gina Pane inserts a row of thorns into her forearm and slashes the palm of her hand with a razor blade to create a bloody flower atop a punctured stalk of flesh. Such practices may never be fully formal, as the wound is too loaded to float free from its social and cultural significations. Moreover, the critical effort to separate the wounding or duress from feeling as an audience member or reader – to treat the body of another as pure matter, object or meat – is riven with anxieties about a chain of politically disastrous histories of embodiment, including of torture, assault, abuse, slavery or war.

Cognisant of the semiotic trouble promised by injury, duress or endurance in art, by the end of the 1970s and beyond, critics and scholars sought to narrate and theorise a history of physical extremity in performance. A new rhetoric for doing so was provided by the term ‘hardship art’, as coined by the critic Jill Johnston in *Art in America*. Published in 1984, Johnston’s essay ‘Hardship Art’ analysed *Art/Life: One Year Performance* (1983–84), a performance by Tehching Hsieh and Linda Montano in which the artists were bound at the waist by an 8-ft rope, for a whole calendar year. While Johnston does not elaborate directly upon her usage (and probable coinage) of the term, ‘hardship art’ described the production of a conflicted situation of social togetherness and isolation in the performance, as a trigger for psychological insights with political ramifications (Johnston 1984: 176–9). As a *rite de passage* of sorts for Hsieh and Montano, the difficulty of the so-called ‘Rope Piece’ was compounded by the formal absence of an object of study (how might a historian study the whole?) and by Johnston’s necessary abjuring of the critical detachment supposedly required of critics of art.

Subsequently, scholars have continued to explore new and existing terminologies to address the frequently confounding effects of the use of injury, pain or duress in performance. In *Unmarked*, for example, Peggy Phelan notes that ‘a genre of performance art called “hardship art” or “ordeal art” attempts to invoke a distinction between presence and representation by using the singular body as a metonymy for the apparently non-reciprocal experience of pain’ (Phelan 1993: 152). For Phelan, anticipating aspects of Fischer-Lichte’s argument, pain’s intrinsic refusal of communication provokes theoretical questions about documentation, mediation and immediacy, presentation, representation and reproduction: ‘ordeal’ points to a

particularity – or, more precisely, a limit – of her argument that performance art distinctively ‘uses the performer’s body to pose a question about the inability [of language or writing] to secure the relation between subjectivity and the body *per se*’ in the anomalous acts that make up its history and which leave traces in archives (1993: 150–1). Rather than simply contributing another coinage to a repertoire of unwanted designations, I propose the term ‘the performance of extremity’ to gather and analyse extraordinary actions that strain against the common knowledge of art’s limits, specifically through performance, while refusing or avoiding the interpellation of such works as governed by emotional, psychological or other modalities of pain and suffering that are unavoidable when the author privileges the definitive operations of hardship and ordeal. Extremity must remain wild: it cannot be codified as a genre, genus or style; it must not be schematised as a new orthodoxy in a series of past subversive gestures that have been reiterated, contained and overcome.

The scenes historicised in *Unlimited Action* sometimes involve physical hardship or ordeal – in, for example, Kerry Trengove’s act of durational manual labour; Ulay’s appropriation of tattooing and surgery; incidental works by COUM Transmissions and Anne Bean involving bloodletting or similar bodily practices; or the Kipper Kids’ madcap adventures in self-boxing. Yet, in their selection and mapping I also seek to expand the concept of extremity to include acts that endanger artists, institutions or audiences in more varied terms, though still in altercations with the law or social decorum, thus posing the limits to form, sensibility, sense or art itself. This move away from physical hardship is not a moralistic strategy – a polite turning from the perceived prevalence of wounding in performance art of the 1970s – but, rather, performs a critical attempt to situate such tactics within a broader range of formally, conceptually and politically suggestive means by which artists strove towards extremity to stretch the bounds of aesthetic possibility. These begin with the lower limits of extremity (in the performances of Marioni, Piper and Ader) and include a further range of novel interruptions to the category of art in the 1970s. The critical shift away from the valorised (though stigmatised) shapes of extremity – as established by the work of, say, Abramović, EXPORT, Stelarc or Pane–, takes on its starkest expression in the final two chapters. Here, the work of Anne Bean and the Kipper Kids does not allow or enable a mere expansion or refinement of the accepted horizon of difficult performance art in the 1970s, but seems to sit particularly askew alongside better-known precedents (neither seems to elucidate the other). Extreme actions require anomalous models of witness, which may return a wilder array of practices to the scope of one’s critical awareness: to repurpose, perhaps, the extremity *of* extremity.

That which was

The performance of extremity stages the identification – and perhaps the overcoming – of the formal limits of bodies, material conditions, institutions, moral or political assumptions or the law, *in and as* the practice of art. If art’s limits, like the limits of

Georges Bataille's 'human spirit', run from the 'voluptuous' to the 'ascetic' (1986: 7) – from too much to not enough beauty, pleasure or sense – how might these and other limits be seen, tracked, known or figured, in art and subsequently by writing? By what procedures and assaults, in which time and place and with what consequences might such an undoing of performance and of art stage itself? A basic challenge here, then, is to specify precisely *how* and *with what effects* such disturbances, disorderings, over-extensions or reconstitutions of representation and form took place in and through performance art in the 1970s. My strategy here is to do so not through re-readings of arguably canonical works – the flashpoints registered thus far – but by way of a series of actions (and associated practices) that have been less visible in the existing histories of performance art.

The core case studies that ballast this book's writing – works by Kerry Trengove, Ulay, COUM Transmissions, Anne Bean, the Kipper Kids and Stephen Cripps – demonstrate the politics of form: the inevitability by which the formal choices an artist makes will always incite a series of political and affective eventualities, particularly when read through the frame of the conceptually fraught division between art and life. As a history, the book is not a survey but a series of connected scenes that I pose as exemplary. Each chapter focuses on a case study, namely, a single artist or group active in the 1970s. I focus predominantly on performances that took place in the United Kingdom and Europe, but also take in works that toured to the United States or were made there or elsewhere, to set the scene for a given analysis. This geographical scope is more accidental than deliberate: I have been guided by methodological commitments to explore practices for which archives of differing natures may be accessible, conducting interviews with living artists where possible and addressing practices that have been under-acknowledged by others (to date, arguably, American artists in the broader milieu of performance art's histories have received relatively more attention – that is, generally while still remaining marginalised). Being fluent only in the English language precludes me from archival research in many non-Anglophone nations.

I focus on single works in various cases, but not exclusively, for the shape of some artists' practices precludes this methodology. Where I do privilege a single work, I endeavour nevertheless to ground it in context with other performances, including some by the same artist, to acknowledge that individual practices of subterfuge do not exist in or emerge from a vacuum. Documentary traces for many of these case studies in the period are scattered. Reconstructing the works entails a historiographical exercise of patching together archival traces and inquiries into the ways historical veracity about an event is both enabled and foreclosed by the stories the archive is equipped to divulge, including those sought first-hand from surviving artists.

If the past contains everything that has happened and is untold and uncontainable, history is an intellectual and discursive operation that takes place only in the present. This distinction between narrative orders is complemented or enabled by the archive, which, as historian Carolyn Steedman notes, is discussed frequently (but inaccurately) as a metaphor or analogy for history itself or for human memory or the unconscious (Steedman 2001: 68). However, for Steedman, the archive is a specific kind of repository, a passive (though symbolically loaded) storage system governed

in its accumulation of documents neither by logic nor comprehensiveness. Things end up in archives by compulsion as well as by accident: although they may later be subjected to logic (to systems of sorting and classification) and to critique (as supports for nationalistic and colonial imperatives), ‘as stuff’, Steedman explains, ‘it just sits there until it is read, and used, and narrativised. In the Archive, you cannot be shocked at its exclusions, its emptinesses, at what is *not* catalogued’ (*ibid.*, emphasis in original). While we can take issue with history, as a narrative that emerges from the application of established methods and personal agency to the things sitting in archives, such umbrage does not suit our orientation to the archive or its documents, whose ‘condition of being deflects outrage’, Steedman argues (*ibid.*). The genealogy I construct in the present – a series of links, lineages, prioritisations and exclusions – sifts through the traces of the past, as found in various archives (paper ones, predominantly), to provoke provisional and sometimes fantastical scenes of history, subject to each event or artist’s own inevitable exposure or recovery, like a revelation of an uncertain fate.

My efforts to seek out and narrate performances of extremity are also indebted to a methodological tradition of questioning the politics of scholarship and of extending its conventions and its limits. Specifically, the 1970s saw the emergence of a period of remarkable change in discursive understandings of the politics of art and of aesthetics, characterised by the full emergence of feminist, anti-racist and Marxist scholarship. As Janet Wolff has written, in the 1970s the sociological (or social) critique of art and aesthetics took hold in academic art history, the effects of which were to question the types of work that art history takes as its objects of study, revealing the traditions of selection and their criteria to be arbitrary, and destabilising the distinctions between art and proximate fields of cultural production (Wolff 1993: 14). By the end of the decade, art and the practices of reading had been revolutionised by questions of identity, exclusion, representation, the linguistic function of the sign and other issues emerging from critical theory and identity politics. *Unlimited Action* engages with the spirit of such advances – namely, to extend the reach of performance in art’s (and theatre’s) histories and to explore the effects of the extended or reconstituted scope of its relevance. That said, the relative lack of gender balance in this book’s major case studies and my failure to decolonise and internationalise the history of performance art in the 1970s give me pause.

Unlimited Action poses the long 1970s as the scene of the performance of extremity at its most vital. I do not propose a cultural history of the period, but notable aspects of the 1970s emerge via key political events, scenes of economic transformation and specific instances of censorship and the social climate of culture war, protest, esoteric sensibilities, counterculture, music and so on. The development across chapters is not chronologically scripted, but thematic, narrative, intuitive in its ordering of significant scenes and innovations. As a whole, I take the decade as a fairly loose scope, exploring works that belong, rather, to the ‘long 1970s’ (Bennett 2009: 516); that is, some key works take place as early as 1969, while others bleed into the early 1980s. The development of practices and styles, the curious plays of cause and effect and the construction or collapse of strategies of making and living do not fit well the neat and artificial boundaries of the turns of calendar decades.

The performance of extremity, as explored here, is interwoven into the backdrop of political, social and cultural events that constitute the discursive frame of 1970s. The novelist and firebrand cultural critic Gary Indiana recalled the polarising of affect around the 1970s in terms of its combination of dissolute thrills (borne on the back of the 1960s) and a tendency towards fiasco:

Can you even remember the urgency we felt in the '60s . . . to move human society in the direction of life against death? It was all on the verge of really happening, the so-called transvaluation of all values, apocalyptic changes in the social order, a polymorphically perverse, orgasmic version of the Rapture – [until in the 1970s] violence pulled it totally down the toilet. (Indiana 2014: 34–5)

For Indiana, by the end of the 1960s, American hopes for the good life of counter-cultural revolution and sexual and intellectual emancipation had been swept down the drain and into the sea. The culture of possibility signalled by the 1960s is notionally recorded as vanquished by the shame or horror of: the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr and Senator Bobby Kennedy in 1968; the massacres in California committed by Charles Manson's death cult in 1969 and their highly mediated trials in 1971; and the killing of a fan by Hells Angels at a Rolling Stones gig at Altamont Free Concert in 1969. Such flashpoint events are all North American occurrences; as horrible and spirit-rending as they were, their power to act as symbols for global paradigm shifts suggests America's cultural imperialism, whereby its occurrences are mythicised and naturalised for their power to create or destroy universal narratives of culture, epistemology or ontology. That said, the British Socialist politician Tony Benn continued or echoed Indiana's depiction of a downward trajectory across the 1960s into the 1970s, focusing specifically (and in more staid terms) on the situation in Great Britain and Northern Ireland. For Benn, the end of the 1970s 'marked the end of the consensus, based on full employment and the welfare state', which had been accepted as a matter of principle in British politics and social consciousness after the Second World War; the consensus around social justice, he suggested, had been bolstered by the post-war economic security that peaked in the late 1950s on the back of rearmament, pressure from the International Monetary Fund and the European Economic Community, oil price increases and the reconstruction of world trade, resulting in 'the birth of a new liberal capitalism that could promise plenty for all' (Benn 1979: 19).

By the late 1960s and into the 1970s, this economic stability was in tatters, resulting in major local skirmishes – strikes, walk-outs, work-ins – and national catastrophes, including the Three-Day Week of 1974, at the tail-end of Edward Heath's Conservative government and prompted by a recession on the back of the international oil crisis of 1973. The 1970s in Britain and Northern Ireland were a time of political and economic insecurity, with the election of three one-term governments over the course of the decade (Conservatives in 1970, Labour in 1974 and a Conservative return to power in 1979). Financial insecurity, mass unemployment, a fever pitch of social anxieties around immigration and broad manifestations of civil unrest colluded to make the 1970s the most turbulent decade of the twentieth century after the end of the Second World War. Liberal capitalism – or neoliberalism – was

consolidated forcefully after the defeat of Labour in 1979 by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government and her emphasis on monetarism, privatisation, authoritarianism and the dismantling of both consensus politics and the prior sanctity of the welfare state.

If the 1970s were politically and economically volatile in both the United States and UK, the decade also sustained and monumentalised the last gasps of liberal freedom in cultural phenomena from David Bowie to disco, punk to funk. The utopian possibilities they represented were enervated by neoliberal capitalism from around 1979 and dealt a seemingly final deathblow by the simultaneous emergence of the global AIDS pandemic early in the 1980s. The cultural theorist Mark Fisher observes that neoliberal capitalism participated in 'a transnational restructuring of the economy' in the 1970s: 'The shift into so-called Post-Fordism – with globalisation, ubiquitous computerisation and the casualization of labour – resulted in a complete transformation in the way that work and leisure were organised', he writes, with repercussions that are now pervasive, introjected and irreversible (Fisher 2014: 8–9). The end of the 1970s thus signified what he terms 'a threshold moment . . . when a whole world (social democratic, Fordist, industrial) became obsolete, and the contours of a new world (neoliberal, conformist, informatic) began to show themselves' (2014: 50). Elsewhere, Fisher names this emergent cultural logic in which we are entrenched as 'capitalist realism', denoting a new historical sensibility seemingly without past or future, in which values and practices commonly held separate from bureau-administrative, regulatory and commercial imperatives have been subjected to ironic distancing and a generalised structure of disavowal, namely, a 'massive desacralization': 'beliefs have collapsed at the level of ritual and symbolic elaboration, and all that is left is the consumer-spectator, trudging through the ruins and the relics' (Fisher 2009: 4–6).

Fisher's characterisation of the 1970s suggests why the decade demands renewed attention. The chapters in *Unlimited Action* historicise performance art in a series of fairly promiscuous historical and national contexts in the 1970s, including the British miners' strikes, national guilt in post-war Germany, apartheid in South Africa, countercultural mysticism and occult turns, radical pedagogy, and legal and moral rulings about pornography and indecency. Fisher's own solution to the banalisation of history is elusive but consoling and prompts a rationale for this book's ambitions; he writes, '[t]he most powerful forms of desire are precisely cravings for the strange, the unexpected, the weird. These can only be supplied by artists . . . who are prepared to give people something different from that which already satisfies them; [namely] by those . . . prepared to take a certain kind of risk' (2009: 76). My attention to archives of performance art in the 1970s – to a history of the performance of extremity – is sustained in spirit by Fisher's call, as evidenced in his own desiring investments in postpunk and related subcultural and 'popular modernist' attachments in the 1970s (2014: 23). The spirit of that call, in the necromantic countenance of this book, emboldened me to seek out a certain strangeness in the traces of the 1970s, a probable anomaly in how we know things have been done, as if before a fall. Such strangeness is not lost entirely but can be sustained imaginatively in the present, if we find the means with which to endure and sustain the ghosts of the past.

That which is to come

The performances discussed so far push at the limits of our collective understanding of what art can or might do. Yet *Unlimited Action* is categorically *not* a history of the ‘most extreme’ examples of performance or of art.¹ The rhetoric of extremity risks camouflaging or celebrating how artists sometimes cement their own aesthetic and historical priority; this procedure is most notable, perhaps, in Marina Abramović’s *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005), which harnessed the authorising power of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York to reassert the extremity – and scaffold the iconicity – of the work of Vito Acconci, Joseph Beuys, Bruce Nauman, Gina Pane and Abramović herself. Her re-performances licensed a number of extreme performances as representatives of the period in which they were first performed. For art historian Mechtild Widrich, *Seven Easy Pieces* performs a ‘distillation of reception and memory’ by which ‘Abramović proposed a new, more self-consciously canonical status for the performances she staged’, thus ‘canonizing’ and ‘monumentalizing’ (and perhaps taming) provocative works of performance (Widrich 2014: 33). A historiographical project on Abramović’s part, *Seven Easy Pieces* affirms a received historical narrative, while confirming herself as a pioneer to stake a claim to her own extremity and virtuosity. The five reclaimed pieces plus her own *Lips of Thomas* are extreme: conceptually speaking in their notoriety and formal excessiveness; and more plainly in the physical difficulty of performing (and watching) them over extended durations. Yet each is rendered ‘easy’ (perhaps only facetiously) by Abramović’s seasoned mastery of the form of performance art.

The accounts to come, then, struggle to avoid conferring the triumphalism and mastery that arguably accompanied Abramović’s project of recovery. The scenes that populate this book’s milieu include artists who have variously appropriated grand larceny, a trial for indecency, sustained acts of manual labour, anomalous strategies including sabotage, pranks and stunts and other arguably ‘normal occurrences’ of life (normal, that is, even if vilified) by recasting and reframing such activities as the substance of performance. The performance of extremity characterised in my case studies appears necessarily to avoid institutional licence, approval or condescension.

Chapter 1 explores a gruelling performance by Kerry Trengove, in which the artist was walled into a gallery and subsequently dug his way out, by hand, over the course of eight days. I argue that Trengove’s performance of extremity undermines the institution of art and broaches new ways of thinking about the politics of endurance in performance. The brute force of *An Eight Day Passage* (1977) enables the extension of the performance into new formal imperatives for art, giving rise to dialogical, pedagogical and political opportunities for the performance of extremity. In Chapter 2, I turn to Ulay’s action in *There is a Criminal Touch to Art* (1976) and argue that by stealing one

1 Journalists regularly publish such lists, often as click-bait responses to newsworthy performances. For an example, in response to Pyotr Pavlensky’s activist performances, see Jonathan Jones (2013); his examples from the 1970s include works by Ader, Abramović, Burden, Acconci and Hermann Nitsch.

of Germany's national treasures – a priceless nineteenth-century painting – Ulay seeks to irritate his German-ness and provoke politically nuanced understandings of the limits of art and performance, of what counts as art or crime and of how these border-crossings might work upon national identity, selfhood and self-knowledge. In Chapter 3, I investigate the provocative performance actions of COUM Transmissions, focusing on the *Mail Action* (1976), a performance that appropriated a trial against Genesis P-Orridge (COUM's ringleader) for indecency; and the subsequent media scandal over COUM's exhibition *Prostitution* (1976) at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, prompted in great part by Cosey Fanni Tutti's documentation of stealth performances, among other provocations. Based on interviews and correspondence with P-Orridge and primary research in institutional archives, I ask how these two events harassed the distinctions between art, crime and pornography and refigured the attendant themes of censorship, punishment, indecency, decorum and culture war.

Chapter 4 looks beyond singular, central works by focusing on Anne Bean's practice of 'life art', exploring how and with what effects she constructs a continuum between works and between art and life, in the context of historically specific questions about counterculture, occultation, 'wakefulness' and eccentricity. Doing so prompts a kind of theoretical or conceptual excess, urging the historian to think in unfamiliar ways and to depend upon alien figures of thought, in a practice of attendance that brings art to bear upon occultation and the occult to bear upon the vibrant materialities staged by the object in performance. Whereas previous chapters enable me to seek out the limits of a particular action, Bean's work in its totality provokes a limit-experience in the methodological practices of research and writing, partly because her performances have existed at the limit of intelligibility and visibility.

In the final chapter, I study the performances of the Kipper Kids, a duo of performance artists with a shared persona named Harry Kipper. If Ulay's extremity aggravated his own sense of national identity, for the Kipper Kids subjectivity itself comes under attack, through the dismissal of individual identity and, more robustly, perhaps, through an anti-aesthetic pursuit: namely, of a strategy of self-sabotage – represented by the ultraviolence of self-boxing – where violence, confusion and antagonism are exploited to avoid the burdens of success, singular works or a career. The sensibility of senseless unravelling in the performances of the Kipper Kids pulls together the assaults on form elaborated in the preceding examples of the performance of extremity and tugs the reader back to the scene of self-injury otherwise so redolent in performance art of the 1970s, which this book seeks to contextualise. The conclusion introduces a final example – the pyrotechnic performances of Stephen Cripps – as a lens through which to highlight, in relative brief, two additional themes of the previous chapters, namely, the limit-experiences of recklessness and impossibility.

There is a tension throughout the case studies: in articulating the conceptual and political reach of each work, prompted by the historical and material conditions of production and reception, one may run the risk of disarming the action at hand, defanging the brute power, strategic invisibility or muscular unintelligibility of the performance (what feels like its peerless-ness, its immediacy or its radicality). I think this is no risk at all. There is no cost (beyond a loss of sensationalism). I am not so wedded to the shock or pain or madness of these actions, to your pain or to my joy.

Strange lives and incorrigible habits

In 'Extremes', a short chapter of his book *Violence and Splendor*, the philosopher Alphonso Lingis sketches – without commentary – the topic of extremity via examples drawn from his far-flung travels and the experiences of limits opened up concomitantly in his phenomenal horizon. He finds extremity manifested in scenes of ontological vastitude: the 'selflessness [and] voluptuous pleasure' experienced in dancing; the 'oceanic experience' of being at sea; the mirthless solitude of being sick; a paranormal healing experience where 'cosmic splendor vaporized your misery'; social ostracism where 'nobody talks to you, even greets you anymore'; the strange lives and incorrigible habits of animals; Patagonia (Lingis 2011: 5–6). In a later chapter, Lingis writes again of extraordinary, surprisingly tenable situations of extremity: of trusting in surgeons, sky falling, walking the vast dioramas of the Mongolian desert or infection with bubonic plague (2011: 13–14). All these instances signify extremity in their difference to, or exceeding of, the averages and means of daily life, in the inherent risk that such experiences harbour and manifest or the sublimity of their scale, each of whose degrees of excess can never imaginatively be surmounted or conceptually held, even if the experiences themselves may be undertaken or survived.

At the other end of the scale of extremity, Lingis considers the radically miniature, through his example of the visually inaccessible ecosystems that live in 'a wonderland of minute lichens and microplants' encountered in wild adventures, constituting '[w]hole tundras you were about to crush with your foot' (2011: 17). He continues,

The radius across which you move each day, whose vistas your eyes scan, is one stratum of fractal layouts and ecosystems just under and also just beyond what your naked eyes can see. In them there are no objectives you can want to reach and acquire, no things to detach and refashion with tools and stamp with the spirit, make yours and annex to your identity, will, and status. (2011: 17)

Lingis's carnal phenomenology reminds us of the pure wonder of looking awry at the world: the freedom and terror of seeking out that which is too big or too small for the ordinary scales and styles of being, existing at a limit of experience or perception. Notwithstanding the beauty of his writing, Lingis's powers of observation are profound: his understanding of what constitutes extremity stages that which in its sublimity obliterates our security and suspends our comfort; but he also venerates that agent whose diminutive ontological power or autonomy we ourselves annihilate when it finds itself underfoot. The miniature ecologies 'just under and also just beyond what your naked eyes can see' disclose the vulnerable entities, living systems, histories and flows that exist at a beleaguered and precarious level of extremity in the world of sensible phenomena, because they cannot be secure in their selfhood, longevity or sanctuary (2011: 17). They are too small, too unimportant in their seeming, but not too negligible to be known or cared for. Superlatives work in both directions, then, for the performance of extremity can seem too much to bear, but,

as significantly, may also look too little, be not enough or appear too far removed from visibility and cognition for us to feel we could adapt our perceptual styles and methods to greet them.

Looking inwards, as it were, for extreme signs – for motifs of one's own attraction to excess – I may think less of sublime panoramas and animal weirdness, than to the attempt to obliterate and recast the given image of oneself through, say, tattooing and body modification of cosmetic or monstrous proportion; or possession by urges sexual, sadomasochistic or too deep in romance; supernatural and corporeal modes of horror; the extreme disquiet of bad feelings, like shame, regret, paranoia, embarrassment or guilt (so vast they might swallow me whole); of bleeding on command; or suicidal ideation. These problems are, typically, not those of contemporary art or of traditional aesthetics. Such conceptual drifts dovetail with Lingis's turn to the microbial worlds of flora (and, closer to home, to unfamiliar and precarious styles of doing, making and living) because each extreme to which one is drawn might command a new methodological focus on what commonly exceeds or undercuts the intelligible horizon of the aesthetic (or, for him, the philosophical – in whose own ecology aesthetics lives as a species of thought).

That is, we do not see the world at our feet, including the scope of practices that might be admitted and celebrated as the extension and intensification of the history of art or performance art (rather than as the distinct or discrete terrain of the history of life). Our technologies of vision and comprehension are not appropriately precocious or capaciously attuned. The performance of extremity asks, precisely, for sensorial and intellectual recalibration, as anticipated by Lingis's perceptual drift to unmapped or uncomfortable spaces of the anthropocene. The scenes of performance in *Unlimited Action* tend to toe the line, either delicately or rambunctiously, between the heretical and the humble, between militancy and a more subdued endurance. In each of its directions and however varied and unique, the performance of extremity signals a determination to exist without comfort or resolution in one's own chosen place – to make a singular home for oneself – even if it means setting the house on fire.