

Chasing Time: Blythe Bohnen's Performative Photographs

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Blythe Bohnen arrived in New York City in 1967 at the age of twenty-seven, full of curiosity and pluck. Knowing no one in the city, and with two art degrees to her name—a BA in art from Smith College and a BFA from the Boston University School of Fine and Applied Art—she immersed herself in the art world and all its intoxicating possibilities. Working in the education department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and visiting galleries, theaters, concerts, and other museums during her free time, Bohnen fully embraced New York. She reveled in performances by Merce Cunningham and John Cage, vividly remembers seeing Tricia Brown's dancers suspended from the ceiling and "walking" on the walls of the Whitney Museum of American Art, and visited exhibitions by Lynda Benglis and Richard Tuttle that radically shifted her thinking about art. One notable highlight was sharing her drawings with the artist Dorothea Rockburne, who made process-oriented, nonrepresentational drawings that strove to be about nothing other than drawing.¹ "It was an exhilarating time. Everything seemed possible," Bohnen recalls.²

Indeed, the late 1960s and early '70s was a heady time for the arts. In the wake of the predominance of the Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism movements of the 1950s and '60s (as well as the early-twentieth-century movements that preceded them), ideas about art making and presentation were fundamentally transforming. Impatient with traditional and established forms of art, artists began to make works that defied disciplinary boundaries and prevailing notions of taste. In many ways also responding to the political climate of the day—a war raging in Vietnam, widespread

student protests, and a rising wave of feminism, to name just a few hallmarks—artists pushed back on conventionalism and the commodification of art by creating works that were conceptual and multidisciplinary. As Bohnen once described, "Interdisciplinary thinking was the avant-garde."³

In this stimulating atmosphere, many artists began to focus on ideas of impermanence and physical movement as ways to break away from the static nature of most visual art. Based very much on the legacies of Dadaism, the Bauhaus, Allan Kaprow's "Happenings," and the groundbreaking experiments of John Cage and Merce Cunningham at Black Mountain College, the lines between life, art, artist, and audience became increasingly blurred as artists created works that came to be known as "performance art." Often characterized by improvisation, spontaneity, ritual, and endurance, performances during this era adopted a wide variety of styles and drew inspiration from a large number of disciplines, including music, dance, painting, video, and film. Many artists spoke of "intervening" in real life and providing a "real" and egalitarian exchange between artist and viewer.

By and large, performance artists valued direct experience above all else. For many of them, photography was merely a means to record the event and provide proof of the action. Influenced by conceptual artists like Ed Ruscha who sought to purge art of its stylistic concerns, many performance artists such as Marina Abramović, Chris Burden, and Carolee Schneemann favored simple black-and-white photographs or video and restrained textual descriptions to document their actions. These objects were not meant to be

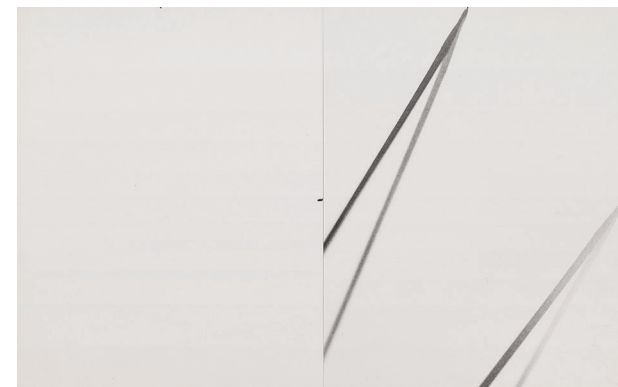


Fig. 1: Blythe Bohnen, *Two Marks Center Top and Center Right of a Sheet of Paper with Constant Light Recorded by Graphite Stick and Camera Open at Each End of Motion*, 1968. Gelatin silver print and graphite on paper.

precious, as artists considered them to be completely ancillary to the live event.

This attitude, of course, presupposes a hierarchy of experience, namely that one experience—in this case a "live" one—can be more authentic or intrinsically valuable than another. Knowledgeable about conceptual art and land art, Bohnen was immediately aware of the role photographs played in these action-based works. In the mid-1970s she observed that although performance artists and land artists wanted to dematerialize artwork, the photographs they created to document their actions quickly became artworks in their own right.⁴ Bohnen explained, "I was asking, which was more important, the art or the documentation—or, was the art and its record really one thing?"⁵

The last part of that question—*was the art and its record really one thing?*—was a primary conceptual underpinning of Bohnen's work for decades. Intrigued by the relationship between

an action and the photographic record of that action, Bohnen had begun using a 4 x 5 Polaroid camera in the mid-1960s as a way to explore the connections among movement, mark making, and perception. A series of works soon emerged that paired simple line drawings with photographs of the making of those drawings. Called Photodrawings, works like *Two Marks at Center Top and Center Right of a Sheet of Paper, with Constant Light Recorded by Graphite Stick and Camera Open at End of Each Motion*, 1968 (fig. 1) and *Three Adjacent Diagonal Motions in Constant Light Recorded by Graphite Stick and Camera Open at the End of Each Motion*, 1968 (fig. 2), demonstrate Bohnen's quest to record all aspects of a drawing, including the human movement, the instrument (a graphite stick), the marks made through the employment of the instrument, the shadow cast by the instrument, and the light source that makes these elements visible. Using



Fig. 2: Blythe Bohnen, *Three Adjacent Diagonal Motions in Constant Light Recorded by Graphite Stick and Camera Open at the End of Each Motion*, 1968. Gelatin silver prints and graphite stick on paper.



Fig. 3: Blythe Bohnen, *Drawing and Photo, Recording Motion of Artist's Hand Creating Drawing*, 1968. Gelatin silver print and graphite on paper.



Fig. 4: Vito Acconci, *12 Pictures*, 1969. Gelatin silver print. © Vito Acconci / Artists Rights Society, New York, courtesy Maria Acconci

black-and-white film and mimicking the palette and tonality of the drawings in her prints, Bohnen's photographs look and feel like her drawings. By placing them next to the drawings themselves, she creates image combinations that embrace illusion as a way to eliminate any perceptual hierarchy between the two.

To be sure, if viewed from a distance, the exact form of these works would be difficult to discern. The titles aid in this enterprise, however, by straightforwardly stating what one sees. In *Drawing and Photo, Recording Motion of Artist's Hand Creating Drawing*, 1968 (fig. 3), for example, both panels depict soft-edged, shadowy gray forms surrounding a narrow curvilinear gap in the center of the image. In the right panel, a photograph capturing the blurred effect of the movement of Bohnen's arm drawing is printed to resemble the tonality of the shading of a graphite stick. Meanwhile, the drawing on the left panel, which was being made while the photograph on the right was exposed, has a lighter gradient of grays. It is as if the drawing is a more minimal version of the photograph—or one in which some of the information may be missing or erased. In this way, Bohnen complicates chronology. She describes having the drawing imitate the form of the photograph of itself as turning "progression into a non-linear cycle."⁶ She further explains: "One has an artwork which is both act and record simultaneously. The outcome has influenced the initial action. A kind of circular causation."⁷

This "circular causation," as Bohnen calls it, and the instability of perception that comes from fusing the document of an action with its result,

recalls other artists working at the time who put the camera at the center of performative gestures. In his work *12 Pictures*, 1969 (fig. 4), for example, Vito Acconci created a photo-action artwork by walking across a darkened stage in a theater and taking twelve flash photographs of the audience as they watched him perform. After the action, he developed the film, printed the photographs, and arranged them sequentially in a line. By combining two traditionally distinct art forms—performance art and photography—in a way that ensured their perpetual coexistence, Acconci created a durational artwork that is incompatible with the compartmentalized medium-based history of art. Like *12 Pictures*, Bohnen's Photodrawings are equally difficult to classify and have a split identity as both the record of an action and its ephemera.

Both Acconci's and Bohnen's works also have movement at their core and incite the imagination in a synesthetic manner. By inviting the viewer to imagine an action, these artists make clear that, at least in part, the concept and potency of their artwork reside in the viewer's encounter with it. Bohnen has long been fascinated with this type of mental gymnastics. She jokes that after seeing Hans Namuth's 1950 short film about Jackson Pollock she could never unsee Pollock at work, and therefore the paintings are not abstract, but rather realist, artworks. "To me, the painting and the movie had become joined in an amalgamated mixed-media artwork," she explains.⁸

This fascination with art residing in the mind is a long-term interest of Bohnen's, and in the Photodrawings she made for documenta 6 in 1978, she describes wanting to make art that was

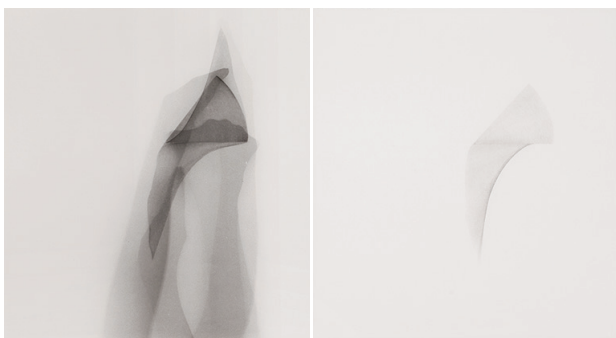


Fig. 5: Blythe Bohnen, *One Pivotal Motion Each Up and Down from Center Point Recorded by Graphite Stick and Camera*, 1977. Graphite stick on paper and photograph.



Fig. 6: Blythe Bohnen, *Factum I: One Vertical Motion Recorded by Charcoal-Stick and Camera Open at End of Motion*, 1968. Gelatin silver print and graphite on paper.



Fig. 7: Blythe Bohnen, *Factum II: One Vertical Motion Recorded by Charcoal-Stick and Camera Open at End of Motion*, 1968. Gelatin silver print and graphite on paper.

"as close to a mental image as possible."⁹ Many of these works, such as *One Pivotal Motion Each Up and Down from Center Point Recorded by Graphite Stick and Camera*, 1977 (fig. 5), are more ethereal than her earlier Photodrawings, yet similarly provide photographic evidence of movement and are intended to reveal something behind the surface of the work. Like Robert Morris's *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*, 1961, where a wooden box emits the sounds of sawing, sanding, and hammering recorded during its construction, Bohnen's Photodrawings bring process to the forefront. And in so doing, Bohnen, like Morris, injects her works with a sense of duration by insisting that the time allotted to the object's making be considered in its reception.

Bohnen's deep interest in time takes precedence in her *Factum I* and *II*, 1968 (figs. 6 and 7), Photodrawings, an homage to twin combines of the same name made by Robert Rauschenberg in 1957. In Rauschenberg's work, two canvases mimic one another in composition and materials, with collage elements that include photographs, strokes of paint, painted letters, and a calendar. Although very similar, the combines are not identical—their differences are revealed in markers of the passage of time, like dripping paint and the gestures that can be detected in the brushstrokes of paint and solvent used in the photo transfers. Similarly, Bohnen's *Factum I* and *II* each contain nearly identical drawings of a single black line bleeding off the bottom edge of a white paper. The photographs of their making that accompany them are two very different images. In *Factum I*, registers of the drawing instrument and its shadow form lines of varying thickness and density to the right of the central line. In *Factum II*, these linear forms appear to the left of the line. The lines in the photographs also vary in number and tonality, reflecting the different paces and rhythms of movement of Bohnen's arm while she drew, as

subtle pauses would allow more exposure time for the writing instrument and shadows to register on the film and consequently create darker forms on the print. Formally, these works directly reference the geometric and linear forms of Minimalist artists like Sol LeWitt, Agnes Martin, and Frank Stella, who famously described his work as "what you see is what you see."¹⁰ Unique in the field of photography, Bohnen's works, like Minimalist paintings, are graphic and void of emotion or representation. Bohnen, however, was interested in uncovering much more than what is visible on the surface; she wanted to expose hidden facets of movement and time.

In addition to revealing the time before and after the drawn marks were made on the paper, the differences in the photographs of the *Factum* works allow Bohnen to expose the endless possibilities of gestural motion behind any drawing. Like contemporary German photographer Barbara Probst, who shoots the same subject at exactly the same moment with multiple cameras to demonstrate the infinite number of moods and moments that can be captured by a camera of one subject, Bohnen demonstrates that there is an infinite number of ways and circumstances under which a simple mark can be made. Human movement, speed, instrument angle, light source, and pressure can all combine in endless variations, each one



Fig. 8: Aaron Siskind, *Martha's Vineyard Seaweed 12, 1953* from *Untitled*, 1953. Gelatin silver print. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. Gift of the Aaron Siskind Foundation, 2019.1040 © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts



Fig. 9: Blythe Bohnen, *Self-Portrait: Pivotal and Diagonal Motion from Chin*, Large, 1973. Gelatin silver print.

unique. And each one is essentially unreadable in a drawing without the revelatory capacity of photography.

As much as Bohnen relies on photography's evidentiary capacity, she also has relied on its aptitude for deceit. In the same way that Aaron Siskind's photographs of seaweed (fig. 8) or road tar look and feel like drawings at first glance, Bohnen undermines photography's perceived connection to reality by embracing abstraction. And in juxtaposing the "reality" of a drawing with the "illusion" of a photograph, she discloses her strong interest in the perceptual process. Reminiscent of Victor Burgin's *Photopath*, 1967–69,

where he took pictures of a museum floor and installed them above the wood at their original site, Bohnen's *Photodrawings* similarly use the act of doubling to destabilize the difference between reality and representation.

Bohnen's preoccupation with what the camera can both reveal and create reaches its apex in the series *Self-Portraits: Studies in Motion*, which she began in 1973. Mini performances created for her camera, these works record the path of Bohnen's head moving side to side and up and down during exposures of one to four seconds. The resulting images are recognizable as a human head, but one that is a blurry mass with indistinctly captured facial features that often appear doubled or elongated due to the extended exposure time. In making these images, Bohnen wanted to probe the extent to which even slight movement could alter the way she appeared and would be perceived, and she was intrigued by photography's ability to confuse her identity and transmute her into "a series of different human characters...I can be a man or a woman, an innocent person or a mysterious person. Nobody finds the subject (myself), when he/she sees thirty self-portraits," she explains.¹¹

Greatly impressed by German Renaissance painter and theorist Albrecht Dürer's books on mathematics-based human proportions, Bohnen was fascinated by the question of how radically altering someone's facial proportions might cause others to react and judge them negatively.¹² Accordingly, in the earliest rounds of this work, as seen in *Self-Portrait* (fig. 9), Bohnen transforms her visage beyond the realm of typical human proportions into something more extreme. Although she was interested in exploring why the distortion of the human face is upsetting—in particular, why a painting of a distorted face isn't as disturbing as a photographed one—in this set of images where

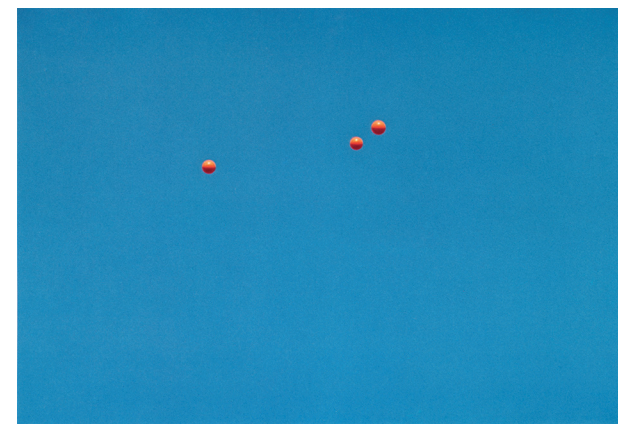


Fig. 10: John Baldessari, *Throwing Three Balls in the Air in an Attempt to Get a Straight Line (Best of Thirty-Six Attempts)*, 1973 (detail). Offset lithograph.
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Courtesy Sprüth Magers

she appeared to be greatly deformed, she felt that she had gone too far. She decided to pair the photographs with diagrams in which a graphite line represents the vertical axis of her body and a sepia-toned watercolor mirrors her head's movement. The addition of the diagram underscored the performative nature of the work and promoted a more scientific analysis of it, effectively tempering its reading as grotesque.

Bohnen's approach of setting firm parameters around a work's production and then performing a prescribed action in front of her camera recalls artists who used photography in their flirtations with abstraction as they mixed conceptual rules with chance. One famous example is Douglas Huebler's *Duration Piece 34, New York City, February, 1969*, where he took close-up photographs at predetermined intervals of time of whatever New York building façade he happened to be standing in front of and presented them alongside a textual explanation of his process. In an act resembling the practices of Bohnen and Huebler, John Baldessari created *Throwing Three Balls in the Air in an Attempt to Get a Straight*

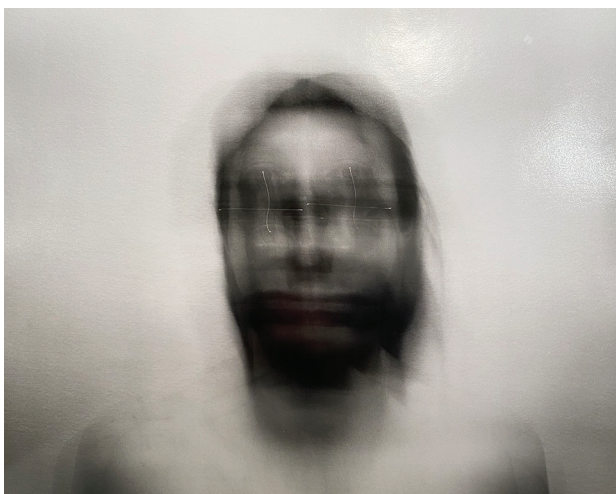


Fig. 11: Blythe Bohnen, *Self-Portrait: Vertical, Horizontal Motion*, Medium, 1974. Gelatin silver print.

Line (Best of Thirty-Six Attempts), 1973 (fig. 10), in which he threw three orange balls into the air for his camera to record, resulting in images that depict the bright spheres floating against the blue background of the sky in varying configurations, none of them exactly straight. Similarly, Bohnen's self-portraits combine rigid constraints on what will appear within the camera's frame with an element of chance, ensuring a consistency of form while also relinquishing some control to the confluence of materials and time.

In the early round of *Self-Portraits: Studies in Motion*, however, Bohnen felt that chance had not worked in her favor, as the seemingly grotesque figures it conjured invited an unsettling narrative that detracted from her desire to emphasize process and movement. To rectify this, she made another round of these works where she started moving her head before the exposure, and kept it moving until after the shutter was closed, as seen in *Self-Portrait: Vertical, Horizontal Motion*, Medium, 1974 (fig. 11). This constant movement

prohibited the camera from clearly registering any of her facial features, eliminating the perceived disproportionality of the earlier works. In addition, within the ghostlike images something remarkable appears—the light reflecting off her eyes forms a white line, creating a sort of drawing within the gray haze. To achieve this effect, she had to methodically remember and reenact her body movements and also to focus on having the direction of her eyes stay as straight ahead as possible in order to reflect the light in a linear manner. In many ways, Bohnen's *Self-Portraits* mark the culmination of her quest to use her body as a drawing mechanism, as she could now move away from the diptych format, finally able to collapse drawing and the record of the creation of the drawing into one image.

Bohnen considers her later *Self-Portraits: Studies in Motion* series to be among her most seminal work. Although blurry forms depicting motion in a certain direction are commonplace in photography, Bohnen's self-portraits are radical in their capacity to communicate duration and movement in a nondirectional manner. As viewers, we are invited to map her movement, but it is impossible. The mental puzzle offered by Bohnen reflects her belief that within the flow of time, certain memories and concepts provide a feeling of stability, giving us the sensation of time stopping momentarily. And with her *Self-Portraits*, Bohnen simultaneously unearths both the somatic and the static nature of the photograph, achieving her hope that her work will "dissolve into the original motion perpetually."¹³

The circularity of form presented by Bohnen in so many of her performative photographic works illustrates her belief that time is not progressive but rather a nonlinear cycle. These works possess an unresolvable tension and lure us to imagine

her original performative movements, ultimately challenging us to reconcile the work's duration with its static manifestation. In this process, the work comes alive and vibrates with possibility, as it proves Bohnen's belief that time is coincident with shifting awareness.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Dorothea Rockbourne posed this question in 1973: "How could drawing be of itself and not about something else?" Jill Newhouse Gallery, press release for *Dorothea Rockburne: Indication of Installation Series*, September 2013, <http://www.jillnewhouse.com/exhibitions/dorothea-rockburne-indication-drawings-from-the-drawings-that-make-themselves-series-1974>.
- 2 Blythe Bohnen, letter to Elizabeth Sussman.
- 3 Blythe Bohnen, "Excerpts from Interview by Gail Livingston," unpublished self-interview, 6.
- 4 Bohnen, letter to Sussman.
- 5 Bohnen, "Interview by Gail Livingston," 10.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Bohnen, letter to Sussman.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Frank Stella, radio interview, 1964.
- 11 Blythe Bohnen, "Study of Forms," trans. Misako Onose (2002).
- 12 David Hall, email to author, October 30, 2020.
- 13 Bohnen, "Interview by Gail Livingston," 1.