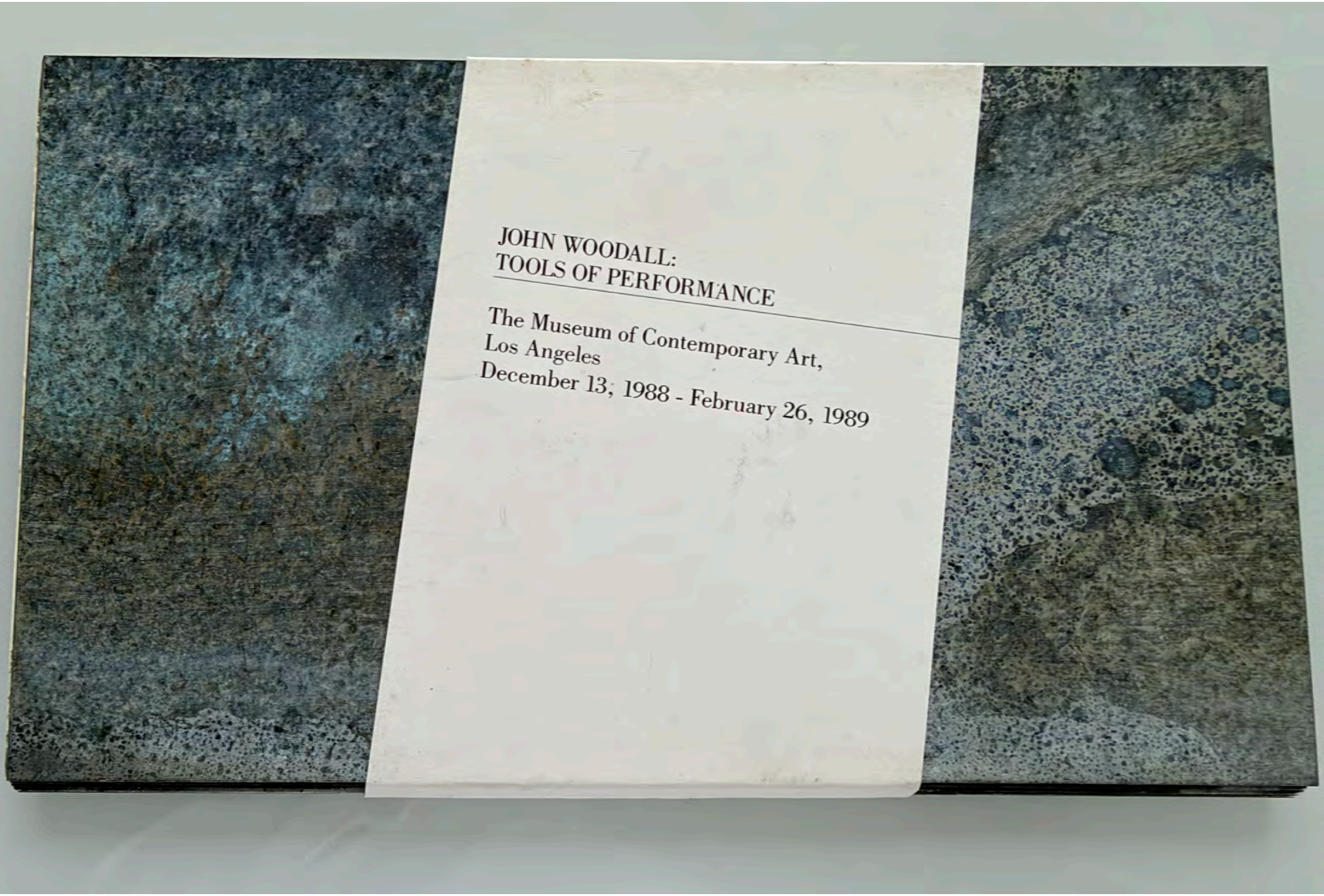
JOHN WOODALL:
TOOLS OF PERFORMANCE
The Museum of Contemporary Art,
Los Angeles
December 13, 1988 - February 26, 1989

JOHN WOODALL: TOOLS OF PERFORMANCE

One of the pioneers of Bay Area performance art of the 1970s, San Francisco artist John Woodall has continued through the 1980s to integrate elements of the visual arts with theatre and performance art. While known in the Bay Area, this is his first major exhibition in Southern California.

Spanning nearly twenty years of production from 1970 to the present, the exhibition examines the process and development of the 48-year-old artist's visual and performance related work, including approximately 80 drawings, story boards, sculptural objects, and a film installation. The centerpiece of the exhibition is a large-scale, multi-leveled wooden installation that will also function as the set for "Gim-Crack," a performance work that addresses the circumstances of male friendship. It will become a "living sculpture" when the performance has its Los Angeles premiere with Woodall and his collaborators on stage March 9-12 and March 16-19, 1989. MOCA has also commissioned Woodall to create a wall drawing on the galleries of the Temporary Contemporary and the artist's book that accompanies the exhibition.

FROM OBJECTS TO ACTION

Woodall has said that for him, "Performance art is an attempt to apply a time line to sculpture." His disdain for sculpture that "just sits there," was expressed in 1969 when he tossed his sculptures off the roof of the San Francisco Art Institute, where he received both his BFA and MFA degrees. Woodall's rejection of art as artifact was confirmed when, as a preparator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, he saw the basement full of "all these things that had once been viewed as precious and now they were sort of discarded. That made a big impression."

Trained in the visual arts but responsive to the radical movements of the late 1960s, Woodall joined others who broke away from traditional art-making, embraced anti-commercialism, and sought out innovative ways to conceive of and show work. Like many artists at this time, he abandoned object-based sculpture and began to explore

more active, performance-oriented art just as San Francisco was becoming a vital center for new forms of conceptual art. While at the Art Institute, Woodall studied with conceptual/performance artist Bruce Nauman and sculptor Tony De Lap. His colleagues included Terry Fox, Howard Fried, Tom Marioni and Bonnie Sherk, artists who pioneered performance art in the Bay Area.

San Francisco performance art of the 1970s, strongly tied to conceptual art, derived from the personal experience and everyday life of the artist. Woodall and his colleagues extended their materials to include sound, light, space, environments, and even their own bodies. As they interacted with these materials, their art also took on new forms –site-specific installations or performances presented live or documented in text, photographs, film or video. With its emphasis on personal idiom and autobiographical sources, work by Woodall and other Bay Area artists shares an affinity to work by German artist Joseph Beuys or New York artist Vito Acconci.

"NOUMENAL STATIC STATES," 1970-1975

In 1970 Woodall and his wife, costume designer Sandra Woodall, moved into their Mission Street studio. It was here that he began working on nine performances for "Noumenal Static States," his five-year exploration of the processes that constitute the act of invention. Woodall's notes, drawings and performance works for this series question where images come from and how they are manifested and apprehended by the mind–noumenon–and/or the senses–phenomenon. Each new performance in the series superseded the former and incorporated objects used previously. Notebooks, photographs and film are the media he uses in the series. In his "Noumenal Static States" notebooks Woodall writes about his concern with distracting street noises, ultimately using these distractions to create "desirable attractions"–actions or performances made in his studio.

The installation *Three Unsolicited Actions* incorporates three films from 1971-73 are of Woodall's studio performances. The first two films, "Dark Window" and "Slow Roll," deal with inner and outer distractions. An aluminum spring-loaded elbow joint, an object fabricated by Woodall in Fletcher Benton's studio, appears in both. Like the kind of handicap golfers use to improve their

game, the apparatus became the artist's handicap. Woodall used the elbow joint for three or four years, discarding it only when it lost its sense of purpose and became "a decorative thing."

In "Slow Roll" Woodall clutches a radio, which, according to the artist, "broadcasts exterior transmissions as electrical vibrations." And, continues Woodall, unseen sources of sound from his skull cap "radiate interior communications." The work raises questions about the artist's action as receiver/transmitter.

The third film, "Meeting With Leroy," is an example of Woodall's ability to take characters and events from real life and make memorable images out of them. While walking on Market Street, he had repeatedly watched a blind man named Leroy rhythmically reading from a braille Bible and decided to include him in his film. Leroy's presence eventually fades out as Woodall uses the braille reader's energy to propel himself through a barrier wall with camera obscura projections of outside distractions. The final scene in the film shows Woodall methodically slicing a sheep's tongue. Leroy disappeared off the streets of San Francisco shortly after his appearance in Woodall's film.

"All Night Sculpture (Marking the Dilemma)," the seventh performance in the "Noumenal Static States" series was performed by Woodall at Tom Marioni's Museum of Conceptual Art in 1973. The artist stood in the center of a circle he drew with a radius equal to his height. He constructed a pair of glasses that inverted his vision, elevated one of his shoes and nailed the other to the floor to create constraints as he performed actions within his circumscribed "territory." Concerned with ideas of human scale, body proportion and its relationship to the immediate environment in terms of what Woodall refers to as a "territorial imperative," this work was both performance and living sculpture.

PERFORMANCES, 1975-1980

Woodall continued his performance work using a variety of actions, objects, sounds and environments. In 1975 he did a performance with Sandra Woodall at the University Art Museum, Berkeley, "All That . . . .To Be Said/Done." As she meticulously removed the silvering from the back of a mirror amplified with microphones, he sat at a table about twelve feet in front with his back to her and

manipulated objects to create a complementary sound. As she gradually removed the silvering, she could see him; he wore periscope glasses so he could see her. Together they created an audible/visual communication link that functioned as a large sound instrument.

Woodall's Oakland Museum exhibition in 1976 included a performance, "Dialogue with Survival," where the manipulation of sound was again an integral part of the piece. Woodall stretched the skin of a deer's head over a wire armature and inserted radio speakers into its eyes. He then inserted a third speaker in his own mouth and "thought" a monologue that was "broadcast" as a manipulation of these two radios. In this work Woodall was concerned with psychological rather than physical survival and the concept that ideas are placed in one's head rather than formed there.

At the University Art Museum, Berkeley, Woodall used the physiological functions of his body as the basis of "Waiting," a sound-oriented performance. Woodall was elevated on a 15-foot scaffold while stethoscope microphones broadcasted the sounds of his heart, lungs and stomach throughout the museum. Before seeing the artist, visitors could hear these sounds echoing in the museum cavernous space.

A TRANSITION PERIOD, 1980-85

Beginning in 1980, Woodall's performances showed a gradual transition from conceptual actions to more complex, theatrical elements. "Terminal Exchanges Towards A Middle," performed in 1980 at 80 Langton Street, an alternative arts space in San Francisco, examined the magic of the male/female relationship. Sandra Woodall sat in a chair on a four-foot square platform swinging and suspended above the ground while a magician performed tricks for her. Below the chair, a device created from an altered Victrola created a fog-horn sound. Woodall tried to use audible and visual forces to distract them.

From 1981-1984 Woodall created five performances in his "Old Man" series. Working from characters that have been part of his life, Woodall invented specific situations for them: "To me life is an invention anyway. You invent this world. You put people in that world and then you create these actions for people to carry out. Then you bring that world into the world of everyone else, to see

what it does . . . We invent what we want to get from life." The first of five "Old Man" pieces performed at Centerspace in 1975 was a monologue, "The Passing of Lizard's Man," that grew out of Woodall's relationship with an elderly Filipino artist who lived in the studio above him. When a catastrophic fire all but destroyed their studios, Woodall immediately created a performance that merged his art with the near-disaster in his real life. In the other four performances of this series Woodall investigated other personal and psychological issues such as defense mechanisms, buffoonery of human relations, the power of decision-making, choosing one's way in life, and letting go of one thing to gain another.

GIM-CRACK AND ITS PRECURSORS

In 1985 Woodall began work on three sketches that eventually culminated in his performance, "Gim-Crack." Characters, props and costumes from the three sketches are precursors to those used later. In "Porc'Pine Accident" (1985) Woodall collaborated with painter Tron Bykle, who becomes his counterpart in "Gim-Crack." "Sketch for Blos Bird," (1986) used the Cat's Cradle string puzzle that would also be an integral element in Woodall's future work. "Another Chocolate Factory Translator" focuses on the relationship between Bykle and Woodall, and provided the basic ideas for the target costumes and installation used in "Gim-Crack."

"Gim-Crack" is a culmination of Woodall's 20 years of artistic production. "Like a contemporary poem," says writer Renny Pritikin, "'Gim-Crack'" is a collection of dreams, stories, songs, jokes, gossip, quotations, and foreign phrases combined with movement, sculptural props and music into 'visual verse.'" This non-narrative work originates in the unconscious imagination and is intuited from unknowable, private and anonymous sources.

The exhibition reveals how Woodall's more recent work is a refined outgrowth of earlier, more spontaneous explorations. Woodall notes how his hand-made sculptural props are, "objects that have become tools, as part of a larger activity." These "tools of performance" also show how his work has evolved from sculpture and performance art to theatre, but is still firmly rooted in visual art.

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