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Self-representation as Performance Art in Women’s Art Practice

Maya Deren’s At Land: A Singular Performance of Self

“A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of The Australian National University”

DISSERTATION

PRESENTED IN FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE
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Abstract

The presentation of the thesis comprises the Studio Practice component (66%), the culmination of which takes the form of an exhibition of 8 large-scale photographic portraits, 20 small photographs of selected performances and an LCD screen showing a compilation video. I will conduct a live performance on the opening day of 22 June 2011 at the School of Art Gallery, Australian National University. The exhibition extends to 3 July 2011. The presentation also comprises the Dissertation component (33%). The Report documents the influence of artists, including Marina Abramovic, Bas Jan Ader, John Cage, Zhang Huan, Joan Jonas and William Pope L., and their correlation to my work. It also considers the overarching influence of Julia Kristeva's theories of the abject. The Studio Practice component while based in the Photography and New Media Arts workshop has examined the abjection of self in performance art through performing live, in gallery spaces and in the public domain using the photograph and video, to document the works. The Dissertation undertakes an analysis of the life and work of American avant-garde filmmaker Maya Deren that establishes her actions in her film At Land as performance art.

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I, [Signature] hereby declare that the thesis here presented is the outcome of the research project I have undertaken during my candidacy, that I am the sole author unless otherwise indicated, and that I have fully documented the source of ideas, references, quotations or paraphrases attributable to other authors.
I wish to acknowledge the help and support of all those around me.

In particular, I would like to thank my Supervisor Martyn Jolly for giving me the courage to embark on a new direction and for his ongoing support. I would also like to extend a special thanks to my Supervisor, Helen Ennis for her tireless effort in assisting me. Thank you Denise Ferris for all your encouragement. Thanks to Peter Fitzpatrick for your help and encouragement. My deepest gratitude goes to Sage Leslie-McCarthy for her unswerving guidance. I am also deeply indebted to Penny Hanley. Thank you to Sue in Tasmania for changing the course of my life. A special thanks also to Cathy Laudenbach, David Wills, Brendan McGeachie, Ivo Luvric and Robert Guth.

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I dedicate this to you.
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Maya Deren's *At Land*: A Singular Performance of Self.

Introduction

Throughout art history women's art practice in Western cultures has been marginalised in the context of mainstream art genres such as painting and sculpture. This is due primarily to the male-centric structure of the art world that determines the content and critiques itself. As a consequence many women artists have been omitted from its history.

The subject of this dissertation, filmmaker Maya Deren, received some acknowledgement for her first film *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1942) but not without her husband being apportioned the major part of the credit.¹ However, with her singular performance of self in her second film *At Land* (1944), Deren secured a place in film history by writing, directing and performing in it. Her placement in film history is expanded by my new interpretation of her actions in *At Land* as performance art which I base on her use of self representation and her intention to influence others that runs parallel with her standing as a filmmaker.

Taking Deren's use of self-representation and her intention to inspire other women to follow suit, I establish that her actions in *At Land* are instances of performance art as distinct from an actor playing the part of a character as in the case of theatre.

Adopting her mother’s influence as a first wave feminist of the mid nineteenth Century, Deren forged a career for herself. First wave feminism freed many women from the constrictions of dress and domestic duties. Freedom of movement broadened work opportunities and education allowed women to congregate and further their aspirations.

With a rise in numbers of women attending universities in the 1960s came a growing awareness of gender inequities in staff ratios and the absence of gender-related studies. This was part of a growing women’s rights movement and led to the introduction of women’s studies into University curricula, San Diego State University being the first.\(^2\) A search ensued for the work of women who had previously been rendered invisible by the lack of critical discourse by the predominantly male theoreticians of the time.\(^3\)

Sparking this search and much debate on the absence of women in art history, was Linda Nochlin’s 1971 essay ‘Why are there no great women artists?’\(^4\) The question itself was intentionally problematic since the implied answer, of course, is that ‘there are no great women artists

\(^2\) San Diego State University, "Women’s Studies Timeline," (San Diego: San Diego State University, current).
because women are incapable of greatness'.\textsuperscript{5} Hence there was the subsequent search by some feminist art historians and writers for great women artists who had been overlooked by history (since history was written by males) and the search by others to establish that women artists have a different kind of greatness to that of males. Women like Deren, for instance, faced the reality of the male-centric structure of educational institutions and art industries, including galleries, which excluded participation by women. As a result, these women established their own niche, and in Deren's case, her own screenings and promotion.

Since the turn of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century there has been a concerted effort to shift the emphasis of women's art practice away from being categorised as feminist. For example, at an international photography conference in 2008\textsuperscript{6} one of the keynote speakers, Shelly Rice, when asked about the inclusion of Catherine Opie's work as feminist, stated that this would be dangerous, but did not elaborate. In a later encounter with Rice, I queried her about this purported danger, to which she replied that to discuss women's art as feminist 'ghettoises' it. I was shocked and asked whether a re-definition of feminism might be preferable and she conceded that yes it would, and was on her way to debate this very issue with the woman who posed the original question.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{6} ANU, "Photographies, New Histories New Practices," (paper presented at the Vivid, National Photography Festival, Finkel Lecture Theatre, Curtin School of Medicine, ANU., 2008).
\end{flushright}
Surprising as it was to hear a prominent art historian speak dismissively of feminism, I am heartened by the knowledge that there is an increasing interest and debate on the topic. For instance, Cornelia Butler, speaking on the occasion of the 2010 exhibition *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, said that the related *Feminist Futures Symposium* of 2007 had attracted the largest audience in the institution’s history, indicating that there is a enormous interest in women’s art. She went on to say that the more frequently women’s art is shown the more it changes the way we view art history.\(^7\)

My line of questioning had been guided by my search for a way of looking at women’s contribution to art history other than one in opposition to the male hegemonic norm or imitative of it. It has also been informed by Amelia Jones’ theory of Para-feminism, a term she uses to ascribe a more inclusive meaning to women’s work that covers all types of feminism such as the black, gay and ethnic experience.\(^8\)

The study of women’s art practice prior to the 1960s reveals that women consistently used self-representation in all genres of art, but, by not conforming to the male hegemonic dictates of the day, attracted little critical attention and were therefore excluded from its history. The same is true of performance art. Despite its formal history having been

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\(^8\) Amelia Jones, *Self Image: Technology Representation and the Contemporary Subject* (London: Routledge, 2006). 213
written by a woman and the definition of performance art being broad-based, many women were omitted.\(^9\)

Austrian performance artist and filmmaker Valie Export described the situation for women artists in the 1970s by saying that the time had come

for us women to employ art as an expressive means of influencing the consciousness of everyone, in order to allow ideas to permeate the social construction of reality and create a human reality. Until now art has largely been created by men, it has usually been men who have treated the subject of life in general, and the problems of emotional life, men who have provided their views, their answers, their solutions, now we must articulate our views! We must destroy all those notions of love, fidelity, family, motherhood, spouse, notions, which have not been determined by ourselves, and create new ones, which correspond to our sensibility and our wishes.

... to change the art imposed on us by man is to destroy the facets of woman constructed by man. The new values we bring to art will assign new values to us as women.\(^10\)

With this, Export articulated what Maya Deren had put into practice in her films thirty years prior, in her bid to offer an alternative to Hollywood's construction of woman and to forge new ways of viewing woman. Like Export, Yoko Ono also called for action, only another thirty years later in 2000, and in the form of a song of the same name, *It's Time for Action! (There's no option) Every Day--any way.\(^11\) Without

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9 RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, 2001 ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001). This comprehensive history of performance art, despite including a broad spectrum of artists and genres, does not include Deren.


specifically stating her intent to address women's issues, Ono 'lives out her notion of feminine identity with every breath of her body.'\textsuperscript{12}

Not finding it necessary to articulate her feminist stance, Deren instead lived it and in a more subversive way portrayed it through her actions in \textit{At Land}. My placement of Deren into the history of performance art, focuses on this contribution to the history of women's art and leads the way for the restructuring of a new history of performance art.

With the momentum built around Deren's daring actions and the influence they carried, came a wave of women from dance (Anna Halprin and Trisha Brown amongst them) who broke free from its formal constraints to engage in a broader expression of self through bodily action that became known as performance art.\textsuperscript{13} Pioneering this movement was Anna Halprin who, like Deren, had been born into a Russian Jewish family with a psychiatrist father. The implications of this were that she, like Deren, also had a liberal education, and she was different, of which she said,

Knowing that I was different was sometimes very painful to me because I was discriminated against because of that difference….Everyone else in my school had blond hair and blue eyes, and the girls could swish their hair around. I would try and swish my head, and my hair would stand up and never come back down. So I knew that I looked different as well.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid. 167
\textsuperscript{13} Judy Malloy, \textit{Women Art and Technology} (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).\textsuperscript{13}
\textsuperscript{14} Janice Ross, \textit{Anna Halprin: Experience as Dance} (University of California Press, 2007).
Overcoming her pain by performing her experience, she performed the broader cultural context of her life.

An examination of the biographical information pertaining to Maya Deren establishes that she was intellectually astute and actively forthright and that in recognising the inability of the system to accommodate women’s art practice, she determined to change both the system and the representation of women in art. Through the use of self-representation in her film *At Land* (1944) Deren introduced a significantly new way of viewing woman. Having written directed and performed in this film she presents a woman’s perspective of woman that had not been presented in film before. An examination of her actions against the detail of her biography reveals her intent to effect social change, an essential component of performance art.

I redress the lack of recognition of Deren’s contribution to performance art history by shifting the focus away from *At Land* as an experimental film, onto her actions in it as performance art. The significance of this is that performance art, synonymous with political protest, aligns her actions with her convictions. With a new focus on the use of self-representation in women’s art practice I have introduced the notion that performance art was founded in women’s art practice.
Veve A. Clarke, author of *The Legend of Maya Deren*, has compiled an extensive account of Deren’s life and work.15 Of her films two, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) and *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946), have received equal attention, most specifically for their surrealist imagery. *At Land*, however, has been overlooked and under-acknowledged because of its more subtle references as a film made by a woman of a woman’s experience. Critics of the day, namely P. Adams Sitney and Howard Moss, were not attuned to her process or her feminist content and the meaning of the work eluded them. Sitney preferred to critique it as what he called a ‘trance film’ and Moss called it quasi-dramatic with no character development, thus missing the point of the film.

Throughout the dissertation I argue for *At Land* to be considered as performance art. Beginning with her biographical detail in Chapter One, I examine the significant events and characters that contributed to the construction of Deren’s persona and that fuelled her ambitions. The single event that sustained the most lasting effect, and which Deren alludes to throughout her life, and in her work, was her displacement from her homeland.

This remains a constant in her work, with references to her arrival by sea in *At Land*, and the transformative powers of the sea in *Ritual in

Transfigured Time. Despite the fact that Deren was only three years old when she left Russia, the family retained the dress and mannerisms that she maintains contributed to her sense of alienation and which became the driving force behind her push for freedom and social justice for all. Her exceptionally high IQ also set her apart from her peers, as did her father’s profession as a psychiatrist and her mother’s investment in feminism, both of which broadened her social awareness and alerted her to her status as different.

In Chapter Two I examine theories of self-representation by women that support the idea that through this form of expression, women wrest control of their depiction, and to a certain degree their destiny, from the hands of the male hegemonic status quo that proffers a view of woman as the object of their desire.

I discuss Laura Mulvey’s theory of the ‘male gaze’, despite the fact that any discussion of Deren’s practice in the 1940s in terms of Mulvey’s theory of the 70s renders it mute before its time, since Deren had pre-empted it. Her actions are more akin to Amelia Jones’ approach to women’s issues in the 21st century, which she calls para-feminism. Mulvey incited women to rally against the status quo rather than to assert alternatives. Deren thwarted the ‘male gaze’ with her use of self as both subject and object of her film, which demonstrates the contemporaneous nature of Deren’s actions, in keeping with current
debate on the need for a newly defined feminism. Amelia Jones uses her term Para-feminism to bridge a variety of feminisms, which I discuss in Chapter Four. This discussion gives greater credence to the significance of Deren’s contribution to both feminism and performance art and further substantiates my argument for her inclusion in a significantly new history of the genre.

An analysis of the film At Land establishes that it is comprised of a series of tableaux, each independent of the other, and that each is an instance of performance art. Revealed through her actions (the film is silent) and with the benefit of her biography the tableaux relate aspects of her life experience and her relationship within the universe, establishing them as the first instance of performance art.

Chapter Three is a comparative study of the lives and work of Deren and French writer and photographer Claude Cahun (1894-1954). It draws parallels between their ambitions and achievements and examines the possible reasons for their non-commensurate status. For Cahun, it also demonstrates that it is through being written into history that an artist’s reputation is established.

Chapter Four provides an historical context for performance art beginning with RoseLee Goldberg and her history of Performance Art.16 In it she maintains that performance art is difficult to define and that

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being broad-based, it transcends boundaries. It is generally accepted that performance art is a bodily action, performed before an audience of one or more people, often with the intent to effect change.

It is here that I consider Deren’s actions in her groundbreaking film *At Land* and examine her legacy. I conclude by placing her into a new expanded history of performance art alongside other contemporary women influenced by her. If, as Valie Export has said, ‘[T]he future of woman will be the history of woman,’\(^{17}\) it is important that the history be full and accurate.

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Chapter 1

A Sense of Identity

This chapter examines the biographical detail of Maya Deren to reveal the key elements in her life that contributed to her use of self as both subject and object in her film *At Land* (1944). Critically, it focuses on the aspects of her life experience which, when viewed in context with her actions in this film, form a correlation that identifies them as a significantly new art form that became known in the 1970s as performance art. It also places Deren’s work at the forefront of its history.

Using data gathered from a variety of sources, I have constructed an outline of the circumstances and individuals that had an impact on her life. These sources include the two-volume biography compiled by VeVe Clark, Millicent Hodson and Catrina Neiman titled, *The Legend of Maya Deren: a Documentary Biography and Collected Works* (1984),\(^{18}\)

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Volume I, *Signatures* covers an outline of the people, events and circumstances in her life that elucidate my argument that her use of self-representation in *At Land* is performance art. It spans the period of Deren’s life prior to filmmaking, from 1917-42. Volume 1 Part Two, *Chambers* concentrates on her filmmaking years from 1942 until her death in 1961. Both comprise biographical detail compiled by Clark, Hodson and Neiman, using information gathered from interviews with Deren’s family, friends and acquaintances and from Deren’s diaries letters and other written works by Deren held at Boston University’s Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center. The footage is held at Anthology Film Archive New York.
Bill Nichols’s book, *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde* (2001), Deren’s own writings in *Essential Deren: Collected Writings on Film* edited by Bruce McPherson (2005) and the documentary films, *Invocations* (1987) and *In the Mirror of Maya Deren* (2002). They provide a critical insight into the factors that contributed to the construction of her persona and the formation of her ambition, the most compelling being her sense of alienation, which stemmed from her ethnicity, her intellectual capacity and her gender.

**Ethnicity**

The major contributor to her sense of alienation was her Russian heritage. Deren attests to this in her most revealing literary work, *Self Portrait* (1935), an essay written as a journalism assignment while attending New York University. In it she identifies her birth in Russia as a pivotal point in her life, stating that it ‘holds in it the “why” of who I am.’

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21 Jo Ann Kaplan, *Invocations: Maya Deren,* (Great Britain: Arbor Films, 1987). This film features interviews with Hella Hammid, Sasha Hammid, Amos Vogel, Marcia Vogel, Stan Brakhage, Jonas Mekas and Joseph Campbell, in which they tell of their experience of Maya Deren and her work.
22 Martina Kudlacek, *In the Mirror of Maya Deren* (Austria: Zeitgeist Films, 2002); ibid. This film made by Austrian, Martina Kudlacek, features Miriam Arsham, Stan Brakhage, Chao-Li Chi, Rita Christiani, Jean-Léon Destiné, Katherine Dunham, Graeme Ferguson, Alexander Hammid, Judith Malina, Jonas Mekas, Martha Mondesir, André Pierre, Amos Vogel and Marcia Vogel.
Born Eleanora Derenkowsky in Kiev in 1917 to two highly educated Jewish parents, she was defined by her ethnicity, and amidst growing anti-Semitic sentiment in Russia the family immigrated to the United States in 1922. Settling in Syracuse, New York, they were further identified as different from the norm by their customs and appearance. The effects of their forced partition from their homeland and Deren’s self-conscious reaction to their ostracism in Syracuse, played a significant role in forming her social conscience which informed her ambition to effect social change.

The young Deren’s distinguishing physical characteristics, speech, dress and surname, created what she described in a letter to a former teacher, Eda Lou Walton, as a ‘terrible sense of not belonging.’ In the same letter, she wrote that she had always viewed her parents as foreigners; they had accents, her father had a beard and they did not participate in the Christmas and Easter celebrations that her friends did, adding to her sense of alienation from the rest of the community and resulting in her rejection of her heritage.

In 1925, as a means of ameliorating their status as foreigners in parochial Syracuse, Deren’s father, Solomon Derenkowsky, changed the

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family surname to Deren. This secularisation made it easier for Deren to evade religious identification and she ceased to practice Judaic customs.

Remaining strongly affiliated with Europe, and wanting to provide their daughter with an education commensurate with her ability, Deren’s parents enrolled her in the International School in Geneva, Switzerland in 1930, when she was thirteen. Here, with the encouragement of the school, she immersed herself in the study of Russian history, language and the arts, inverting the effects of alienation and affording her a newfound sense of pride in her heritage and her achievements. Her graduating paper, *The History and Present Conditions of the Russian Peasant* (1932) while reflecting an interest in the welfare of the everyday citizen, held broader political implications for Deren in establishing a social conscience.26

On her return to the United States three years later, she entered Syracuse University and aligned herself with the Young People’s Socialist League, where she met and soon after, in 1935, married its leader, the young political activist Gregory Bardacke.27 A Russian by birth, he was being tutored by Deren’s father who, besides teaching him the language, was able to offer him a much broader perspective on the Russian

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27 Ibid. 255.
situation because of his lived experience. Bardacke and Solomon Deren formed a strong bond.

Bardacke’s Russian origin, his closeness to her father, and his political commitment validated Deren’s own newly-formed identification with her Russian homeland, her need for her father’s acceptance and the sense of social justice that drove her ambition. As stated in *Self Portrait*, her aim was to change things for the better through her role as a radical.  

This informed her writing and became the driving force in her performance of self.

A demand for Bardacke’s political leadership took the couple to New York. Once there, Deren assumed a radical political stance, leading rallies. A photograph of her at a rally on the streets of New York depicts her lone female figure marching stridently in the lead. In a much bolder action, at the age of 19, Deren addressed a National all male Convention of the Young People’s Socialist League in Chicago. Presenting an analysis of the USSR, she referred to it as a model of ‘Feudal Industrialism’ rather than the ‘Worker’s State,’ thereby creating mayhem. She was personally ridiculed and her work was dismissed. One member of the audience, the young anthropologist Herbert Passin, befriended her. He was to become a key figure in shaping her career. After long periods of

29 Photograph of Deren leading the street rally. 266.
separation, Deren and Bardacke divorced in 1939 and, in the same year, she graduated from Smith College.

Passin remained a lifetime friend, introducing Deren to anthropology, and through it ritual and the occult, which governed a substantial portion of her life from then onwards and helped to define her ambitions. Passin made a substantial contribution to the construction of Deren’s biography through the copious letters from her he had retained. They described the significant people and events in her life and detailed her physical and emotional relationships and reactions to them.31 Passin provided a valuable insight into Deren’s character and exposed details of her ambitions with his personal recollections captured on audio and video tape in interviews with her biographers, VeVe Clark, Millicent Hodson and Catrina Neiman, as well as in interviews with documentary filmmakers Jo Ann Kaplan and Martina Kudlacek.32

Anthropologist Katherine Dunham was a colleague of Passin’s. They had studied together at the University of Chicago. Dunham was a black woman living in a predominantly white society but despite this had gained status as an anthropologist and had formed her own dance company. Deren asked her friend Passin about ritual and the occult, and

32 Passin’s friendship spanned Deren’s adult lifetime and because she confided her innermost thoughts to him he was able to provide the most comprehensive account of her biographical detail. See Clark, Hodson and Neiman’s two volume biography The Legend of Maya Deren, Kaplan’s VHS recording, Invocations, and Kudlacek’s DVD In the Mirror of Maya Deren.
he referred her to Dunham. She originally approached Dunham for employment as a secretary but also suggested that she assist Dunham with her research on Haitian ritual dance. Deren later published an article on ritual voudoun dance, causing a rift between the two but not before Deren had absorbed Dunham’s strategies for exoticising her points of difference and using them to her advantage. In a clever marketing ploy, Dunham borrowed from her African and Haitian dance tradition to make *Tropics and the Jazz Hot* (1940) in collaboration with dance’s foremost contemporary choreographer George Balanchine. Furthermore, Dunham tantalised American audiences by premiering the performance in Paris where it created a sensation. By the time it reached New York, audiences were brimming with expectation. As evidence of Dunham’s influence, Deren had become much more flamboyant and turning to her own origins for inspiration, adopted the Russian dirndl skirt and peasant blouse as her signature mode of dress, exoticising her own difference.

At a party held by Dunham, in 1942, Deren became attracted to a man called Alexander Hackenschmied. She believed that he shared her ethnic origin, a point of great significance at the time, since she had embarked on a quest to establish her persona built on her ethnic difference. Disappointed that he wasn’t Russian, his status as a filmmaker more than compensated for it, since she had developed an interest in film through seeing Margaret Mead’s footage of Balinese
traditional dancing. At this party they discussed film and Deren was anxious to learn more.

After a brief relationship the couple married, marking a critical turning point in Deren's life. Hackenschmeid's influence on Deren was profound. As a devoted husband he provided the emotional security she needed. As a much sought after filmmaker he provided financial support and, most importantly, he taught her to make film, giving her an entrée into the industry and access to its audience. In her astute manner she was perfectly poised to take full advantage of this extraordinary opportunity.

Intellectual Aptitude

As the only child of two highly educated parents, Deren had an inherent aptitude for learning, further enriched by her home environment where she was surrounded by some of the most elite minds who included her in discussion and debate on the latest developments in science and the arts of the time. With her natural intellectual aptitude and her privileged access to mature debate, her knowledge of human behaviour and her own self-awareness grew disproportionately to that of her peers, defining her as different and marking a further point of alienation.

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33 Alexander Hackenschmied, his name at the time of their meeting, later changed his name to Sasha Hammid.
The prolific writing in her diaries, letters and poems reveal the true extent of her precocious abilities. For instance, her poem *Spring*, was published in the Syracuse primary school paper, the Syra-Dela, in 1927, a paper she helped establish.\(^{34}\) In an interview with Catrina Neiman and Millicent Hodson, her mother Marie Deren confirmed her capabilities and an IQ that was so high it resulted in her skipping a grade at school.

Deren's enrolment in the International School in Geneva served two purposes. It provided Deren with an education more in keeping with her abilities and a grounding in her Russian heritage and gave her mother, Marie, the excuse to live independently in Europe (she enrolled in the Sorbonne in Paris where she studied French). Meanwhile, Deren became immersed in the study of Russian history, politics, the arts and language.\(^{35}\) Deren continued to write prolifically. Her mother archived the diaries, letters, essays and poems that contain her innermost thoughts and desires that now inform us of the base upon which her future manifestations of self were built.

Her poem of 1931, *The Rise and Fall*, describes 'ambition' and 'hope' as entities destroyed by conceit. Written with maturity beyond her years, it describes her understanding of her situation in society and hints at an early sense of social responsibility when she says that


\(^{35}\) Op cit. 298.
‘ambition’ aimed ‘To uplift mankind from the muddy depths of ignorance.’

Returning to Syracuse in 1933, Deren received acknowledgment for her youthful achievements in Europe and gained early entry into Syracuse University. Continuing to write, her articles were published in the university paper *The Daily Orange*. Her letters to friends continued to reveal her strong ambition to achieve and the steps needed to do so. Regarding her determination to ‘make good’ at *The Daily Orange*, one of the best papers in the country, she said she needed to become a ‘personality...I had to have all the editors know me by sight.’ This predicates her later approach to film and its distribution in the 1940s and demonstrates her awareness of the power of manipulation to attain goals.

A firm knowledge of human behaviour and her strong self-awareness made her resilient. Her ability to adapt led to her swift grasp of photography and filmmaking, and editing and marketing before that. But these skills were hardly compensation for the difficulties she was to encounter as a female in the almost exclusively male domain of film.

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37 Ibid. 128-29.
Gender

Gender had been an issue for Deren from birth. Her father had an obsessive desire for a male child. Marie Deren, fearing the imminent birth of a daughter, delayed delivery until her husband had left the hospital.\(^{38}\) This action, clearly based on gender bias, set the tone for Deren’s development as a female ‘other’ than the preferred and implied ‘superior’ male. This first encounter with the male hegemonic social structure ultimately formed the unwritten basis of a feminist ideal of ‘difference as strength,’ which she demonstrated by her actions in *At Land*, presenting a woman’s experience from a woman’s point of view, in bold contrast to the norm for film at the time.

Just as Deren’s real-life birth as a female defined her as different, so too did her birth from the sea in the opening scene in *At Land*. Deren designed her film as she did her persona, indicating a supernatural birth from the sea, her chosen name Maya reflecting these meanings. Significantly, this resonates with Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion that ‘One is not born, but becomes a woman.’\(^{39}\) Published in French, in 1953 de Beauvoir exposed the way masculine ideology used sexual difference to maintain systems of inequality. She also exposed the way that notions of sexual equality did away with the idea of sexual difference and established the preferential order of the masculine. Just as *The Second

\(^{38}\) Ibid. 28.

Sex exposed patriarchal definitions of woman, Deren demonstrated through her actions that the lived experience of a woman differed significantly from them. Perhaps the most revealing is her display of physical prowess that tempers the assumption of woman as the weaker sex. As did de Beauvoir, Deren challenges the criteria used to form assumptions about women and invites other women to do likewise.

With the benefit of this biographical detail, it is clear that Deren’s actions articulate her life experience and portray her notion of self as different. *At Land*, a series of tableaux portray aspects of difference and social commentary, clearly aiming to effect change, a topic that I elaborate on in the following chapter on self-representation.

My argument that Deren’s performance in *At Land* is a significant landmark in the development of performance art is emphasised when viewed against her introduction of an alternative expression for the situation of women in society. Through her performance, Deren empowered subsequent women to follow suit and in so doing affected society’s perception of women in stark contrast to that presented by Hollywood.

**Conclusion**

Having isolated the significant aspects of Deren’s life and the events and characters in that contributed to the construction of her
persona, it becomes clear that, rather than a corollary role, her performance in *At Land* is autobiographical. Chapter two establishes the role of self-representation for women in art. I give a brief account of women in the 19th and 20th centuries using self-representation, and demonstrate the significance of this form of art. This provides a context within which I place Deren’s performance of self in *At Land* as performance art.
Chapter 2

Performing the self: Maya Deren and Self-representation in her film *At Land*

The examination of Maya Deren’s biographical detail in Chapter One identifies the three key factors that contributed to the development of her social conscience: her Russian heritage, her exceptional intellectual aptitude and her gender. It also establishes a vital link between these and her life choices that facilitated her pro-active confrontation of issues arising from her awareness of social injustice and her perceived need to counter it.

The initial part of this chapter examines Deren’s use of self as both subject and object in her film *At Land*. Then it discusses the film’s significance as performance art: how it changed the perception of women from a male-centric view to one that reflects the 1940s experience of being woman from a woman’s point of view. The film consists of a series of tableaux, each based on a key aspect of Deren’s life experience. She has transposed this experience into sequences that represent new ways of viewing woman.

Performed before the camera, her actions demonstrate her awareness of being ‘different’ in a variety of ways: ethnically, through her foreign birth, intellectually, through her knowledge of psychology, and through her boldness and daring in adopting contemporary theories.
in the arts and social sciences. She also demonstrated her difference in terms of gender by establishing her independence and forging a career in the male dominated industry of filmmaking, albeit on its margins. Furthermore, she interceded by presenting a new view of woman that was antithetical to the one put forth by the predominant producer of film, Hollywood.

Broadly speaking, performance art consists of an action or actions before an audience of one or more with the intent to effect change (I define performance art in more detail in Chapter 4). Of importance to the placement of Deren’s actions in At Land at the forefront of performance art history, is the recognition of her pioneering effort in representing woman as independent and free, in tune with nature and in control of her destiny.

This becomes clear through an examination of the content of each tableau in the film in the context of its time and in relation to her intent to expose social inequities. The exposure of inequities and Deren’s aim to effect social change sit well with RoseLee Goldberg’s statement that performance art ‘traditionally emerge(s) at times of political, social and economic uncertainty and ... [is] seized upon by artists to illuminate the issues and initiate change.’

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The film industry traditionally represented woman as bearer of the message, not the maker, and for the pleasure of the subject whom it assumed was male. Deren used the film medium, the most illustrious at the time, to promote her message, which met with resistance. The phenomenally popular 1940s Hollywood films such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) and Otto Preminger's *Laura* (1944) portrayed women as either passive and compliant or independent and dangerous, therefore needing to be controlled. Female characters had clearly defined roles, 'the hard-boiled dame' and 'the soft-boiled sweetheart.' According to Mollie Haskell the woman character in 1940s films 'hadn't a soul she could own. She was, in fact, a male fantasy.' Particularly in film noirs of the period, such as Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*, female characters were 'seen by the male in highly subjective narratives, often recounted in the first persona and using interior monologues, by which she was deprived of a point of view.' In contrast, rather than being a male fantasy, Deren subverted this concept and invented a way to express her ideas and talent. Deren's innovative actions in her film, her stage presence at the screenings and her accompanying lectures, constitute performance art.

41 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975). Mulvey discusses the position of woman as object in film for the pleasure of the subject, which it is taken for granted is male, hence her theory of the 'male gaze.'
43 Op cit 190.
Falling outside the officially declared time frame for performance art of the 1960s and second wave feminism of the 1970s, *At Land* was critiqued as experimental film. Consequently, its significance as a pioneer of either performance art or feminism has been ignored by feminists and art historians alike.\(^{45}\) By focussing on Deren's actions and analysing them within the context of social developments of the 1940s I forge a vital link that identifies them as performance art. Furthermore, as the first instance of a woman’s self-representation in her own film, it introduces audiences, both male and female, to a significantly new way of viewing ‘woman’ in film at the time.

Having established a pattern of events and influences that contributed to the construction of Deren’s persona, I now analyse the tableaux in her film *At Land* to clarify its content. I also examine the effect of her ethnicity, her intellectual aptitude and her gender in determining her life’s experience.

**Ethnicity**

Beginning with Deren’s birth from the sea in the opening tableau of *At Land*, an analogy is drawn between this, her displacement from her Russian homeland, and her arrival by sea on land in the United States of America. In the film, after being delivered at land, from her birthplace of


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the sea, Deren draws strength from her acknowledgement of ‘difference’ and her conferred status as Goddess. She is invested with the boldness and daring that enables her to take risks and invent new ways of working. Parallels can be drawn between Deren’s adoption of the name Maya, meaning ‘born of the sea’ and ‘illusion,’ and the construction of her persona revolving around her Russian birth and her arrival on the shores of America by sea. Despite creating a sense of alienation, this gave her the impetus to strive for freedom from constraint and social justice.

Following her birth from the sea, Deren awakens at the water’s edge and enters another reality. Her eyes open and, glancing skywards, they trace the ascent of birds flying overhead. Deren invests this scene with the essentialist theory of woman bound by nature with a positive inflection of being born from the sea as a supernatural being. The power of this scene is reinforced by the upward movement of the birds, a metaphor for freedom used by Mary Cassatt in her large-scale mural *Modern Woman* (1892–93). Norma Broude interprets Cassatt’s imagery from the perspective of a feminist positivist. She claims Cassatt’s representation of woman as a signifier of strength, using birds as symbols of freedom with their soaring motion suggesting a positive ascent into the heavens. A traditional male interpretation of *Modern

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*Woman* would have been one comprising passive female figures that are situated at home in nature, with the birds, symbols of peace, being seen as 'feminine' adjuncts.

In this short sequence, Deren refers to her foreign birth, a migratory journey and a personal and physical struggle. Her awakening symbolises her birth in a foreign place and her entry into a new land, the birds, her hope for the future. As the scene unfolds, she struggles to raise herself up through jagged driftwood, signalling her struggle to overcome adversity. In her own life this equated with her experience of overcoming a sense of alienation.

Capitalising on the origin of her alienation, her ethnic background, Deren wore the Russian rural costume made up of dirndl skirt and off-the-shoulder peasant blouse, which not only identified her as Russian but accentuated her voluptuous figure, a symbol of freedom from physical restraint and an expression of female sexuality. In this way Deren heralded the hippy movement of the 1960s whose followers adopted this mode of dress and espoused love, peace and freedom of body and spirit. She moved gracefully and sensuously across the landscape, her thick curly hair flowing wild and free.

Immediately following the opening scene, Deren’s eyes are drawn towards what appears to be a stack of driftwood, but which Deren refers to as a tree stump, the significance of which, she says, lies in its
intricate configuration of inverted growth, much like the root system of a tree. She draws an analogy between the growing tree and art, likening the energy spent making a film to the efforts of the tree to regrow after being cut down close to the root. But I see a closer relationship between her efforts to recover from adversities, such as her struggle to re-form after metaphorically being cut down by ridicule from her critics.47

Experience taught her to convert adversity into strength, evident in her adaptation of foreign costume into a new fashion. Equally, with her quick wit, her self-awareness and her knowledge of psychology, she demonstrated her intellectual capacity to manipulate people and circumstances in realising her ambitions.

**Intellectual aptitude**

Little stood in Deren's way in realising her intellectual vision. She was quick to grasp new ideas and adapt them for her own advantage and for the benefit of others. Astute in realising her personal ambitions, her wider vision was to effect positive change for society in general and women in particular. She viewed her life as a journey.

By referring to *At Land* as an odyssey, Deren draws a parallel between her journey within the film and her voyage through life.48

48 Ibid. 193.
Shelley Rice, extending this reference, bestows epic proportions onto both by emphasising the link to Homer’s *Odyssey*.\(^9\) Deren presented this journey as a series of tableaux, non-linear and non-chronological. The purpose of this format was, she said, to encourage viewer participation by allowing them to choose which tableau to view, when, and in what order. This inclusionary tactic was later employed by radical contemporary artists of their day, such as John Cage, who extended his notion of audience participation to the hearing of ambient sound in his ‘non-intentional music’.\(^50\) With this, Cage asserts that the audience determines the piece. This resonates with Deren’s poetic process and her written work, *An Anagram of Writings on Film and Art*, in which she mapped an open structure of contents allowing the reader to randomly select chapters rather than reading sequentially. She referred to it as a ‘chapbook,’\(^51\) to be read like an open journey.

In keeping with the theme of odyssey and resuming her journey, Deren’s personal struggle was embodied in her actions in the film. Beginning on the sand and reaching out towards the jagged tower of driftwood, Deren draws her body up through the irregular and somewhat precarious growth, alluding to her own irregular and somewhat

precarious life and the exhaustive strength required to endure it. Raising her right foot from the wood on the beach and simultaneously grasping the edge of a boardroom table with her left hand, Deren emerges from the exterior environment into the opulent interior ballroom setting, a reference to the extraordinary transition between the two worlds, the real and the created.

Once inside, the extraordinary unfolds as her dress and her actions stand in stark contrast to the alien environment inhabited by lavishly attired and wildly gesticulating members of the social elite. Wearing a short, self-styled, figure-hugging dress, Deren slithers bare-footed along the length of the banquet table. The luxuriousness of the setting is firmly established by an oversized chandelier, barely visible through rising plumes of smoke, as it looms large above the banquet table. This exaggeratedly lavish setting, and Deren’s plain appearance in it, is indicative of the dichotomous relationship that exists between the natural and the contrived worlds in which she lives. Further accentuating this division Deren crawls through two scenes, alternating between a banquet table and a jungle-like setting, signifying a division between interior and exterior realities.

Making reference to Homer’s *Odyssey* once more, Deren journeys down into the centre of the earth. Guided by a supernatural force she is compelled to pursue a chess piece that had propelled itself off the
chessboard down into a stream carried along on a fluid journey down into the bottomless depths of the earth.

Intellectualising her life’s struggles through these tableaux, Deren refers to prevailing myths and theories. For example, her continuous efforts to gather and contain rocks in her bare arms, clearly refers to Albert Camus’ interpretation of the myth of Sisyphus. Persistently and repeatedly picking up stones off the beach with one hand and cradling them in her arms, as she reaches down to pick up more her grip loosens and the stones fall to the ground. Awkwardly, she attempts to retrieve the fallen stones, only to have them spill back out once more.

Undaunted, she gathers them back up again and again until, with her attention diverted towards two distance figures, her arms relax, the stones fall and she strides towards two women playing chess on the beach. This tableau, with its absurdly repetitive action, refers not only to the myth of Sisyphus but also to the role of women. In addition, it alludes to what Deren calls the ‘time quality of a woman,’ which, in an audio recording she explained was specifically pertinent to her.

What I do in my films is very, oh I think very distinctively, I think they are the films of a woman. And I think that their characteristic time quality is the time quality of a woman. I think that the strength of men is their great sense of immediacy. They are a now creature. And a woman has strength to wait because she has had to wait. She has had to wait nine months for the concept of a child. Time is built into her body in the sense of becomingness.

53 Martina Kudlacek, In the Mirror of Maya Deren. DVD Zeitgeist Films Audio recording.
And she sees everything in terms of it being in the stages of becoming.

She raises a child knowing not what it is at any moment but seeing always the person that it will become. Her whole life from the very beginning is built into her, is the sense of becoming.

Now in any time form, this is a very important sense. I think that my films, putting as much stress as they do upon the constant metamorphosis, one image is always becoming another. That it is what is happening, is what is important in my films, not what is at any moment. This is a woman's time sense and I think it happens in my films more than in anyone else's.

Again referencing Simone de Beauvoir, Deren had done what de Beauvoir advocated all women do, which was to establish strengths of their own accord since they have no history of being women in their own right but rather exist only as 'other' to men. De Beauvoir gives examples of the ways that history reinforces women's status as 'other' to men, referring to Plato whom she said, thanked the Gods for creating him free on the one hand and on the other for making him not woman.54 De Beauvoir quotes Aristotle as saying ‘The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities,' and that ‘we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness.’55 St Thomas, she said ‘pronounced woman to be an “imperfect man”, an “incidental” being’. And in Genesis she says ‘Eve is depicted as made from what Bossuet called ‘a supernumerary bone’ of Adam.56 Thus she says ‘humanity is male and man defines woman not as herself but as relative to him, he is

54 de Beauvoir, The Second Sex. 23.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
the subject, he is the absolute — she is the other.'

As she demonstrated this situation had existed throughout history and the reason it continued she said was because women had not brought about change. ‘They have gained only what men have been willing to grant, they have taken nothing, they have only received.

Deren was an exception to this theory and continued to break new ground in life and through her actions in film. Continuing to establish a ‘woman’s sense of time’ in a later sequence in the film, Deren again alters the viewer’s perception of time. As she strides up one side of a hill she then stands on top. Immediately she disappears over the edge, then seamlessly appears atop a more distant hill, and, disappearing again, reappears atop a still further hill. By repeating this several times over, Deren concertinas time and space.

Through clever editing, she renders the impossible spatio-temporal scenario visibly coherent. Using time to imply space, Deren shifts perceptions of time and space. Describing her process, she also explains how she created the illusion of a much larger banquet table than actually exists. By cutting her shots from table to jungle to table and back again, she said she made ‘a long table out of it. You see, this is a case of time

57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
implying space.'\textsuperscript{59} Continuing, she states: 'matter is a cross section at a
given moment of developments through time. A work of art is a cross
section through the intelligence — the totality of an artist — at a point
in his vertical structure.'\textsuperscript{60} Deren also mentions that, 'Being both a time
and space art, film is especially capable, as an art instrument, of creating
a form in which the integrity of the individual identity is counter-pointed
to the volatile character of a relativistic universe.' Also in relation to \textit{At
Land}, she stated: 'This dynamic relationship, with all its emotional and
ideological implications, is the central concern of this film.'\textsuperscript{61} She stated
that her paper written at Smith College gave her a start in
‘understanding the relationship between time and space, science and
art.'\textsuperscript{62} \textit{At Land} was a demonstration of the cinema’s capacity to portray
ideological as well as personal statements.' \textsuperscript{63}

Metaphor plays an important role. The game of chess, a metaphor
for intellectual pursuit, occurs in the film on two separate occasions. The
first game, played by a lone figure seated at the head of the banquet
table, excludes her from playing by the rules whereas the second, played
by two women seated at the water’s edge, appears to have no rules.

\textsuperscript{59} Clark, Hodson, and Neiman, \textit{The Legend of Maya Deren: A Documentary Biography and
Collected Works, Volume 1, Part Two, Chambers (1942-47).} 192.

\textsuperscript{60} Op cit. 193.

\textsuperscript{61} Clark, Hodson, and Neiman, \textit{The Legend of Maya Deren: A Documentary Biography and
Collected Works, Volume 1, Part Two, Chambers (1942-47).} 193.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid
The implication of both games is that women are not capable of playing the rules. Both games are instead, appropriated as metaphors for the intellectual pursuit of the ‘game of life.’ Bearing in mind the difficulty Deren experienced fitting into the bourgeois banquet scene, when the lone player abandons the game on her approach, this could be read as her exclusion from ‘the game of life.’

Undeterred, Deren continues her journey towards the abandoned board and looks on as the chess pieces retract from her and a pawn propels off the board. With a show of tenacity, she pursues as it falls into a crevice and gets carried along by a stream of water down towards the symbolic centre of the earth.

Another tableau unfolds as Deren approaches two women playing chess on the beach. The women, one blonde and the other black-haired, appear to be playing chess but not by the rules. Given that chess is a strongly coded game of intellectual significance, the fact that these women disregard all protocol reinforces the notion that women are not capable of intellectual engagement, and that they are better aligned with nature.

Taking a controlling stance, Deren strokes their hair, lulls them into passivity and steals both queens. Running triumphantly down the beach, as she retreats from the scene, she experiences flash-backs of each previous tableau, first from the viewpoint of the women and then
from her own perspective. This provides a reinforcement of the journey just made which in its reappearance, threatens to replay into eternity. The film ends with Deren still present in the last frame, the inference being that the film will continue to replay. It is possible that this is a reference to Freud’s theory of the rehearsal for the death of the mother in his grandson’s action of throwing and retrieving the string as he recites forte/da, here/gone. Freud theorised that the child, through this repetitive act of throwing and retrieving was exercising control over his fear of the loss of his mother through her disappearance/death. His fear is conquered through repetition.64 Another intention could be the fulfilment of her wish that her images be retained in the memory of the viewer. The constant state of replay would guarantee the embedding of her images in the mind of the viewer. These tableaux parodied the situation for woman in society with inferences of gendered compliance, resistance and exclusion.

Gender

At Land was made at a time when the viewing subject was assumed to be male, and the female the object of his gaze. As bearer of meaning not maker, Deren inverted this assumption, something Laura

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Mulvey advocated many years later in *Visual Pleasures.*\(^6^5\) *At Land* transcends genre and gender through the introduction of a female perspective.

Deren’s interaction with nature depicts her performing on her own terms in order to intensify the image, often to the point of absurdity, to assert the female perspective.

In a very pointed tableau Deren depicts gender inequity within her marriage. Positioned on opposite sides of a path Deren and a male companion are seen talking and walking in tandem. As the camera pans, alternating between the two, at each return, the companion is replaced with another. Engaging in conversation and maintaining a steady pace, they walk forward until the last figure becomes that of her husband, Sasha Hammid. At this point the pace quickens. Struggling to keep up Deren becomes increasingly out of step and is forced to run. Unable to keep pace, she stands and watches as Hammid approaches a cottage, reaches forward, opens a door and enters. However, on Deren’s approach to the same cottage, her entry plays out quite differently. The entry point is beneath the cottage, and, obliged to crouch down, she crawls, creature-like under the cottage making her entrance from beneath the floorboards.

This tableau, interpreted as Deren’s journey along the path of life, reflects a disparity between her relationship with Hammid as opposed to the other men, made up of her friends, John Cage and Stan Brakhage. It assigns a degree of equality to the relationship between Deren and her fellow artists but not with her husband. Outpaced by him, she observes his seemingly natural transition through the traditional doorway into the next phase of his journey. Meanwhile, Deren, assumes a less than human pose in order to crawl under the floorboards in search of an entrance.

This, and other of Deren’s depictions of a woman’s experience, brings into focus issues of woman as ‘other,’ the assumption of male privilege and suppression of activities deemed inappropriate for women. When Deren speaks of a ‘woman’s time’ she establishes a forum for a discourse on a sensibility, peculiar to woman, previously unrecognised. Although published in 1949, Simone De Beauvoir’s theory of woman as ‘other,’ which she discusses in her book *The Second Sex*, would have been the subject of debate prior to this date. In Deren’s era of the 1940s, it seems that some women were beginning to assert their right to say and do as they please. No longer isolated, they were gaining a common voice and with it strength and power to change. Film was a liberating force, like performance, and Deren had combined the two. She also alludes to her competitive nature and to the ‘less than human’ status she had to endure.
P. Adams Sitney accredited the relative success of Deren's first film, *Meshes of the Afternoon* to her collaboration with Sasha Hammid, disproportionately accrediting it to him, on the premise that Hammid was an established filmmaker. In this way Deren was being regarded as the inessential other. In order to address this Deren set about establishing absolute authorship of her second film, *At Land*. She scripted, directed and performed in it, with the sole assistance of photographer Hella Heyman. Heyman attested to this development, stating that Deren meticulously specified every movement, angle, pan and length of each shot. Heyman said: 'I wasn’t really her camerawoman. I was the one who pushed the button, because Maya essentially did everything. She knew what shots she wanted and she set it up just the way it should be.' Deren herself detailed the minutiae in her shooting script and storyboard.

Of significance is Deren's representation of self as an independent individual asserting her experience, and inverting the theory that the subject is always male, a theory that Luce Irigaray argues is contingent on the belief that woman is the object 'of representation, of discourse of desire.'

She writes:

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68 Ibid. *At Land* shooting script by Maya Deren. 177.
Once imagine that woman imagines and the object loses its fixed, obsession character... If there is no more “earth” to press down/repress, to work, to represent, but also and always to desire (for one’s own), no opaque matter which in theory does not know herself, then what pedestal remains for the existence of the “subject”? 69

Viewed as a backdrop for At Land, this passage elucidates the prophetic nature of Deren’s performance of self, albeit mute, that has remained unrecognised until today. The very fact that this film is silent is significant. Having turned from the written word, Deren asserted that the expressiveness of the body and the immediacy of the message it conveys were her prime considerations in this film.

Comparisons can also be made with Irigaray’s Speculum of the Other Woman. 70 It is as if Irigaray is articulating Deren’s visualisation of how things were for women forty-one years before (At Land was made in 1944), and how she circumvented patriarchal dominance in film convention. It also makes clear the prophetic nature of the film. It is self-revelatory and shows her willingness to take risks, to work against the status quo. It shows her to be perceptive, assertive and adventurous while exhibiting her vision for the future.

As alluded to earlier in this chapter, Deren’s journey along the banquet table can be seen as a social commentary on her displacement within society. She is clearly at odds with the individuals in the room and

out of place in their surrounds. She crawls bare-footed, thrusting forward along the table on her forearms amidst a bevy of guests seated either side, too preoccupied with themselves to recognise her aberrant behaviour. Their obliviousness to her presence denotes her uneasy entry into mainstream society and her struggle to be recognised. The representation of Deren, crawling along the table and in a jungle-like environment refers to her sense of diplopia: her simultaneous occupation of two worlds. She does this, she says, to create a perception of expanded space and extended time, which she refers to as a portrayal of women’s time. Her use of extended time accentuates her travel through nature and society, emphasises the social divide, and comments on the failure of the bourgeoisie to recognise the human and female struggle at hand.

Deren’s comment on the bourgeoisie’s unwavering celebration of opulence in the face of human suffering resonates with a scene in Jean Cocteau’s Blood of a Poet, in which a man and woman in the company of a jester place a card-table over the body of a dying boy and proceed to play a game called The Elegant City. It is a parody of the game of life. The woman utters: ‘If you don’t have the ace of hearts, my dear, you’re a lost man.’ As she proceeds to powder her face the man, in

desperation, reaches down and pulls the ace of hearts from the dead boy’s chest without so much as a downward glance. Meanwhile, a grand audience has congregated on their balconies, revelling in expectation of a performance. They are at once outdoors with snow covering the banisters, and at the same time, inside a theatre, applauding at the conclusion of the game and oblivious to the reality of the situation.

These two scenarios, from two separate films, convey a feeling of despondency at humankind’s inability to prevent a repetition of war despite the trauma experienced and the atrocities suffered by respective societies. *Blood of a Poet* (1927) refers to the First World War and during the making of *At Land* (1944) the Second World War was in process.

Perhaps because of the war, Hollywood films were gaining in popularity, as were their stars. Deren’s presence at the screenings of her films and her introductory lectures were as integral to the films as was her role in them. Maria Pramaggiore discusses this presence as the development of a ‘star’ status commensurate with that of Hollywood.73 She quotes Patricia Mellencamp as saying that even though the ‘star’ system was antithetical to the notion of the avant-garde, the American avant-garde has always had a ‘star’ system of its own and that it was

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‘embodied in famous names, landmark films and fuelled by gossip.’

With the making and promoting of *At Land*, Deren established herself as unique in her self subjectification. This was not always recognised or appreciated and she was, at times, ridiculed.

For example, in 1959 Jean Cocteau and Hans Richter parodied this tableau in their film *8X8 A Chess Sonata in 8 Movements.*

It begins with the narration:

The rules of the game are fixed,
The pieces arranged by file and by rank.
8 lines, 8 times 8 squares solidly framed on a board and set on a table.
The way each piece may be moved is approved by traditions already obscure in the East before the game began to be played
For a thousand years in the West.
And yet, if everything, even what’s fixed, must sometime or other start moving,
Then why should the humble be patient forever?
Never shake up his position
Shake off his occupation.
Shake off his followers.
Shake the pieces.
Shape them for a new game.
To bring into play your own imaginations
To transform into human beings, the wooden knights and queens.

During this recitation and on the cue of ‘the way each piece moves...’
the pieces on the board begin to move independently. At the utterance of the words ‘and yet even what’s fixed must sometime or other start moving...’ the chess board itself begins to move and a male figure rises from beneath it revealing that the board is attached to his back. This

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74 Ibid. 17.
75 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ml4WA16Eo28
figure walks up a hill, with the other players close in pursuit grasping at the pieces as they fall from the board. They bend, retrieving pieces repetitively and incessantly, mimicking Deren’s stone gathering incident from *At Land*.

This mockery is the nervous response of Cocteau and Richter to the perceived threat that Deren posed by her audacious bid to disturb the status of the ancient and intellectual (read male) pursuit of the game of chess. She had propelled the queen from the game to journey down into the depths of the earth. The threat she in fact posed was to blatantly assert her independence by removing herself from the game, exacerbated by her descent into the crevice of the earth.

The two men transposed the mockery of *Improvisations* into absurdity by continually dropping and picking up the pieces. The irony is that Deren had literally detached herself from the ‘game’ in pursuit of a natural state of affairs. She established her own rules which was seen as a very real threat to the status of man. The gathering of stones, I believe, displays Deren’s perception of the absurdity of continuing an assigned task that has no apparent purpose. Deren’s self-reflection is inferred by the sight of her running down the beach, and then, journeying back through her previous actions in replay, until her flight is suspended, not ended, with the anticipation of an eternal return.
Spatial representations and juxtapositions are manifestations of Deren’s internal relationship with the external world that she projects onto her audience, to suggest other possibilities of being. *At Land* is a series of actions rather than observations. It is true that Deren observes as she traverses the tableau, but equally, she engages in actions as she journeys through the various landscapes.

Through this analysis of *At Land*, it becomes evident that Deren desired to make an impact on society and on women in general. Perhaps most telling is her desire to influence others as a form of self-perpetuation, as this quote illustrates.

I AM NOT GREEDY
I DO NOT SEEK TO POSSESS
THE MAJOR PORTION OF YOUR DAYS,
I AM CONTENT IF, ON THOSE RARE OCCASIONS
WHOSE TRUTH CAN BE STATED ONLY BY POETRY,
YOU WILL PERHAPS,
RECALL AN IMAGE-
EVEN ONLY THE AURA
OF MY FILMS
AND WHAT MORE
CAN I POSSIBLY ASK
AS AN ARTIST,
THAN THAT YOUR MOST PRECIOUS VISIONS,
HOWEVER RARE,
ASSUME SOMETIMES,
THE FORMS OF MY IMAGES.\(^{76}\)

\(^{76}\) Deren, Maya. Text scrolled at the opening of Martina Kudlacek’s documentary film *In the Mirror of Maya Deren.*
This passage provides an insight into Deren’s aim to influence her audience in such a way that they recall her images, or her ‘aura,’ into the future. In this way her work lives on, destined to replay as memory and/or on screen. She structured the film so that while her figure diminishes, it remains in the last frame, poised to repeat the sequences, inferring that they will indeed replay ad infinitum. Deren utilises the strategies that ensure her work lives on, through her enlistment of film as a medium for its ability to be replayed into the future and her denial of finality in this last scene where her figure, diminishing in size, remains in the frame implying the possibility that she may return: her refusal to end.

Conclusion

As revealed in the previous chapter, Deren celebrated ‘difference.’ She portrayed the situation for women, for the first time in film, and proffered alternatives to the traditional perception of woman.

*At Land* is Deren’s quintessential expression of the cultural climate of the 1940s from a woman’s point of view. An important instance of the portrayal of a woman by a woman in a film written and directed by her, it set an example for other women to follow suit. Her self-awareness and her social conscience informed her vision of how things were. This she conveyed to others through performance as a way of provoking
change. *At Land* demonstrates Deren's intrinsic strength and will to succeed. From the outset, it is clear that this film is self-referential and utilises her sense of self as 'other'.

As an intelligent, socially aware and ambitious woman moving in intellectual circles, Deren took advantage of opportunities as they presented themselves. Film, with its rapidly expanding popularity, offered a platform for critiquing the society that fostered it.
Chapter 3.

A comparative study of the use of self-representation in the work of Maya Deren (1917–1961) and Claude Cahun (1894–1954)

My examination of Maya Deren’s biographical detail in chapter one focuses on the people and events in her life that contributed to the formation of her persona. It also identifies the three core elements around which her social conscience was formed, ethnicity, intelligence and gender, and the strategies she employed to address social inequities. Chapter two highlights her independence from the patriarchal status quo in her use of self as both subject and object in her film At Land through which she inverts what Laura Mulvey termed the ‘male gaze.’

A comparative study of the life and work of French photographer Claude Cahun and Maya Deren in this chapter examines the issues and strategies that these women have in common. It focuses on the complexity of the situation for women living and working in a male hegemonic society, Deren in the 1940s and 50s and Cahun in the 1930s and 40s. Their ethnic origins and gender shaped their social conscience and, combined with their intellectual engagement, drove their political

77 Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."
ambitions which, when applied to their artistic expression, translate as performance art as a means of effecting social change.

The two women represented themselves in ways that portrayed their personal situations as women of ethnic origin, advanced intellectual aptitude and distinguished by gender in a male hegemonic society. Deren was a political activist, writer and filmmaker, and Cahun a literary figure, photographer and political activist. Both parodied women’s traditional gendered roles, but most potently, they presented alternative ways of being women through their art practice. What this demonstrates is that rather than being passive and compliant, traits traditionally attributed to women, Cahun and Deren broke with tradition and, rather than conforming, assumed their own positions as artists within the male hegemonic art milieu, encouraging other women to follow suit.

Ethnicity: Forging a Political Stance

An examination of Cahun’s life reveals that, in common with Deren, she experienced a sense of alienation that stemmed from her Jewish birthright and that, as the root of her social conscience, motivated her commitment to work for social change.

Rice et al., Inverted odysseys: Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman.
Born into a family of intellectuals in 1894, Cahun was originally named Lucy Schwob.\textsuperscript{79} In 1913, after establishing independence from her family, she changed her name, first to Claude Courlis and then in 1917 to Claude Cahun, choosing the gender-ambiguous first name Claude to re-orient the perception of her sexuality,\textsuperscript{80} and the secularised surname Cahun, to avoid anti-Semitic discrimination. Deren’s father had chosen a different surname for the same reason. These changes were indicative of the pervasiveness of discrimination on religious grounds and, in Deren’s case, the additional stigma attached to being foreign.

Both women shared a deep sense of social justice, which surfaced in their writing, political activism and eventually in their art. Deren, influenced by her parents’ experience of the Russian revolution, anti-Semitism and her own sense of alienation, resolved to change the complacency of the American public towards political upheaval in Europe and adopted a politically active role in the Young People’s Socialist League from 1933 until her divorce in 1939.

Cahun fought for numerous social causes including the right for women to earn a living and for equal rights. Her political activism first manifested itself in her literary work before surfacing in her art, most notably in her sculpture \textit{Poupee I} (1936), a three-dimensional figure

\textsuperscript{79} Louise Downie, \textit{Don't Kiss Me: The Art of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore} (London/Jersey: TATE, 2006).
made from sections of the French Communist Party newspaper, parts of which were clearly readable.\textsuperscript{81} Placing \textit{Poupee I} within the oeuvre of montage, Gen Doy emphasises its combined literary and political content when she says that, ‘it uses text in a political way to encourage the viewer to (literally) read between the lines.’\textsuperscript{82}

Cahun, having been discriminated against on religious grounds, was also ostracised because of her sexual orientation.\textsuperscript{83} These were key motivating factors in her bid to advocate for change in social attitudes that began with her writing about her complex sexual relationship with her half-sister Suzanne Malherbe and later manifested as political gestures against Nazism in her photomontages and sculpture. After moving to Jersey in 1937 she and Malherbe joined the Resistance, compiled and distributed pamphlets and posters until the German occupation in 1944, when the two were arrested, gaoled and sentenced to death. The death sentence was retracted but they remained in gaol until their release at the end of the war. Despite ill health resulting from her imprisonment, Cahun continued to write until her death in 1954.

\textsuperscript{81} Doy Gen. A full account of the political situation in France during this period and a description of the sculpture and its texts explains Cahun’s political commitment. In \textit{Politics and Its Objects}. 115-118.


\textsuperscript{83} Downie Louise, \textit{Don’t Kiss Me: The Art of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore}, London 2006
Intellectual Engagement

Numbering amongst the intelligentsia of their day Deren and Cahun engaged with theories and practices of their respective times, such as the avant-garde and surrealism and the arts of dance, film, photography and literature. Keeping abreast of developments in art and theory, Cahun and Deren mixed with leaders in their respective fields, among them André Breton, Jacques Lacan, Anais Nin and Margaret Meade. Frequent attendance at literary events and seminars on topics from psychology, sociology to art, helped establish a place for them outside the traditional one defined for women that situated them in nature. Intellectual pursuits were viewed as unnatural for women since intelligence had been deemed to be a male domain and emotions female. At the opening of his speech on Femininity, Sigmund Freud addressed the audience by saying, 'Nor will you have escaped worrying over this problem - those of you who are men; those of you who are women this will not apply - you are yourselves the problem.'84 By continuing their involvement in intellectual activities in their respective environments and times Cahun and Deren participated in a cult of resistance against such theories.

Another form of resistance came with the intellectual fortitude built on the absence of mother figures in the lives of both Cahun and

84 Freud. Sigmund, Femininity 1933. 113.
Deren. When Cahun (Lucy Schwobs) was four years old her mother suffered a mental illness that precluded further contact with her daughter. Likewise, Deren’s mother was mentally ill and was periodically absent from her daughter’s life from when Deren was three years old. Marie Deren’s absences, however, were at times self-prescribed and a means of asserting her independence from the domestic sphere.

At this time many women who transcended male-hegemonic dictates were labelled as ‘hysterics’ and diagnosed as mentally ill. Hysteria, defined as a condition brought about by trauma, possibly refers to the trauma these women suffered from childbirth, a condition that is today known as post-natal depression.85 The young age of both children at the time of their mothers’ illnesses suggests that this could have been so. In Cahun’s case, it resulted in alternative mothering by other women, and for Deren, overprotective fathering.

Eventually both women experienced the replacement of their mothers. Deren gained a stepmother, a woman her own age, and Cahun gained a mother and a sister. Deren’s stepmother became her friend and Cahun’s stepsister her lover. I suggest that these complicated interpersonal relationships within their families were indicative of the shifting mores, which forged the moral code that informed their personal and professional conduct.

85 Depression suffered by some women after childbirth due to hormonal imbalance.
As children, Deren and Cahun were left to their own resources, giving them a sense of freedom on the one hand, but alienation on the other. This possibly determined the veracity of their independence as women and precluded their acquiescence to the dictates of the male hegemonic status quo. They transformed their own lack and loss of mother figures into a freedom born as an indomitable act of self-preservation, lest they suffer the plight of their mothers. Both women built and maintained the strength and determination that sustained them throughout their personal and artistic journeys, evident in the introspection and creativity that allowed them to break free of societal constraints.

Literature, with little or no gender constraints, was the initial choice of artistic expression for Cahun and Deren who both wrote prolifically from early ages. Coming from a family of publishers and having a close relationship with her uncle Marcel Schwob a prominent poet, for Cahun writing was a natural occupational choice. She published *Heroines* in 1920, which featured fairytale characters referencing contemporary images of women. In 1930, *Aveux non Avenus*, a self-revelatory book of essays and dreams was published and in 2008 was re-published in English.

Deren wrote poetry from the age of eight and continued until she began filmmaking. The two womens’ writing is as self-revelatory as their
photographic and film work. Cahun established a reputation as a writer whereas Deren was known for her films and her writing became an aside by way of explanation of her filmic technique.

As authors, Cahun and Deren persisted in advancing alternative ways of being in the world. Cahun, in a bid to align herself with other lesbian writers, aimed to enlighten audiences about lesbianism, but her work was rejected by those lesbians for being too explicit, the perception among them being that her exacting descriptions posed a threat to those lesbians who preferred to remain anonymous for fear of repercussions and who consequently distanced themselves from her.86

On another, more subtle intellectual level Cahun enlisted her previous experience of theatre and theatrics to confuse any singular reading of her photographic portraits by wearing her old costumes and assuming theatrical roles associated with them. A point made by Miranda Welby-Everard suggests that theatricality enabled Cahun to shift seamlessly between characters, genders and selves.87

According to Welby-Everard, Cahun’s theatrical role-playing was both deceptive and emancipating.88 Deren’s appearance as puppet, soldier, athlete and others with whom she identified allowed her to

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86 Louise Downie, Don’t Kiss Me: The Art of Claude Cahun and Marel Moore (London/Tate. 2006) 67
88 Ibid.
present alternative aspects of life. Performing before the camera, she presented them as various facets of self.

One of the most abstract of these facets in the performance of self was when Cahun contorted her body to spell out her initials and was photographed from above by Malherbe. Tirza Latimer refers to these movements as a form of ‘semaphore code’ devised by expressive dance movement leader Rudolf von Leban; he melded the visual, verbal and body arts as a way of ‘solving [the] common task of cultural reconstruction after the Great War.’

His use of the alphabet became Internationally known as ‘Mayerova’s Alphabet’ through a photograph of one of his students and the alphabet – the building block of language, was acknowledged by the artistic community of Europe as a logical starting point for the reconstruction of a culture devastated by the Great War. Cahun curved her arms and legs to represent an inverted C and a regular C signalling Claude and Cahun. She also performed the letters S and an M for Suzanne Malherbe who photographed the moves. The couple’s adoption of this latest art form is another indication of the veracity of their devotion to each other, spelling out their initials in the most innovative method possible as young lovers do.

Refusing love, Cahun’s inscription on her chest and the title of the photograph *I'M IN TRAINING DON'T KISS ME* (1927), prompts two

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questions, In training for what? and Why no kisses? Dressed in boxer shorts and wearing T-shirt and tights, much as a male boxer does, Cahun appropriates one of the most privileged male occupations in order to confuse gendered attitudes. With her legs crossed, a conventional female posture, she places her hand on top of a dumbbell. The positioning of the hand in this way would normally symbolise power but Cahun’s limpid weightless hand, with its perfectly manicured nails, inverts this assumption. The dumbbell could also imply ‘dumb belle,’ and certainly her over-articulation of the feminine would suggest further complicating an already complex image and blurring the distinctions between the visual and literal, as well as the mixing of language.

Other visual signifiers, such as wrist guards/sweatbands and scarf, serve as dichotomous inversions since there is no apparent sign of strain or exertion in the slight figure to which the viewer can attach significance. The blatantly false nipples she wears seem to indicate either the ‘lack’ of femaleness or perhaps the ‘in training for’ or the ‘becoming’ female as Latimer suggests, which belies the assignation of female to her body position. Her pose and strategic use of props infer sexual ambiguity and elide a gendered reading, leaving the purpose of her training indeterminate. The why question can be answered in a further confusion of gender for if she was a boxer she would need to refrain
from sex when in training and, if in the case of inferred female and in training, the kisses would ruin her theatrical application of lipstick.

Theatricality for Cahun was used as a key to freedom, opening the way to creative expression that thwarted categorisation. Her prose was no less liberating, and it seems at times that it was scripted for her photographs that manifest as reality performed for the camera, behind which, it is assumed, her lover, Suzanne Malherbe, stood as witness. Cahun deliberately uses theatrical tropes such as dress, hairstyle, masks and marionettes to assume alternative roles of Buddha, athlete, femme fatale and even her father, leaving no doubt as to the performativity of her photographs and her attempts to obfuscate categorisation.

Miranda Welby-Everard, in order to reclaim the theatrical in Cahun’s work, establishes that her early photographs were in fact, previously performed theatrical roles, restaged by Cahun, complete with costumes, and photographed as self-portraits. She argues that: ‘it is the picturing of the act rather than the mechanics of the picture that is significant, particularly as it was her partner [Suzanne Malherbe] who is most likely to have operated the camera.’ This privileging of the action over the photograph is further substantiated by the fact that she chose not to develop the majority of the photographs. The rediscovery of the

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91 Astrid. Peterle., "Visible-Invisible-Hypervisible":

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photographic collection by French philosopher and author François Leperlier in the 1980s sparked an interest that continues today. This leads to my assertion that Cahun’s actions undertaken in front of the camera were incidents of performance art.

Significantly different from Cahun’s, Deren’s theatricality seemed inherent. With an early emergence of self-awareness she developed an aptitude for leadership and public performance. With her understanding of human behaviour, no doubt gained from her psychiatrist father, Deren honed an acute awareness of affect which, when combined with her strong will and fiercely competitive nature, rendered her effective in advocating change. Most obvious in her political activities, she led protests, established a young people’s socialist training school and addressed large political rallies.

Time spent with the Katherine Dunham dance troupe helped formalise Deren’s intellectual and theatrical skills. Dunham’s influence extended to her exoticising of difference. Recognising Continental Europe’s keen interest in the ‘primitive’, she capitalised on her own exotic status as a black anthropologist and dancer with an all black dance troupe. She engaged George Balanchine, the most celebrated

Sketching the Reception of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore," in Indecent Exposures, ed. V. Walker (IWM Junior Visiting Fellows’ Conferences, Vienna); Vol. 22.

contemporary choreographer in Europe, and together they made *Tropics and the Jazz Hot* which premiered in Paris in 1940. Mesmerising the European audience with this production Dunham created an air of expectancy in audiences back home in New York.

Exoticism was a clever marketing ploy on Dunham’s part and its significance was not wasted on Deren who, when launching her films to the public for the first time, capitalised on her own exotic characteristics, dressing in Russian peasant costume which exploited her voluptuous looks.

Deren’s engagement with the literary world through promotional materials, written introductions to her films, and her essay *An Anagram of Ideas on Art Form and Film*, secured an audience, though not necessarily one that was sympathetic to her work. At a symposium on poetry and the film in 1953, Deren’s presentation of her conceptualisation of her creative process, delivered to an audience of mostly male authors met with ridicule. Dylan Thomas insisted on sexualising her reference to the horizontal and vertical structure of poetic film to which the audience responded with laughter. Further denigrating her, he referred to Deren as ‘the lady’ and inferred that her

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94 This anagram can be found in Bill Nichols’, *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde* also published in Bruce Macpherson’s *Essential Deren*, 35-110.
95 An account of Deren’s extensive promotional material for her films can be found in Clark’s *Legend of Maya Deren*, Volume 1 Part 2, Chambers (1942-61).
theory was unintelligible. There was a tone of resentment in his voice, a sense that she was an intruder.

Deren made no apology for her intellectual engagement with issues as they presented themselves. Regardless of her gender, Cahun was more elusive in her handling of gender issues changing faces (masks) to confuse categorisation. In the next section comparisons are made between Deren and Cahun’s expression of self relating specifically to gender and their relationship with theories of the day.

Gender

Gender inequity was at the forefront of women’s concerns during this interwar period and for Cahun and Deren, it was central to their art. Women’s resistance to traditional gendered roles in life met with derision but many women, including Deren and Cahun, invented ways of circumventing boundaries to introduce new ways of performing the self as other to itself and as unstable. In keeping with Freud’s belief that the unified self does not exist, they also mixed traditionally gendered behaviour and dress to appear ambiguous and at times androgynous.

Influenced by Lacan’s theory of self-recognition through the ‘mirror phase,’ Cahun produced a series of photographs, Self Portrait with Mirror (1928) being one. In this image Cahun averts her gaze away

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96 Willard Maas, Poetry and the Film: a Symposium, Film Culture No. 29 1963 55-63.
from the mirror so that both images are representations, one being the reflection in the mirror and the other, her image photographed. Cahun’s coat, hair and demeanour are masculine and her attitude sombre, not likely, according to Gen Doy, to appeal to a masculine viewer. 97

In a photographic portrait from the series titled Experimental Portraiture c.1942-43, Deren sits at a dressing-room table looking into a mirror that is flanked by two winged mirrors. Seated at Deren’s side is a life-like mannequin. This scenario is deduced from the information available in the mirrors, since the mannequin alone is visible in the foreground of the photograph, with a tuft of hair above it, which can be assumed to be Deren’s, since it is her image that is reflected in the central mirror. The mirrors however show Deren in the central mirror and the mannequin doubled in the two side mirrors. Deren conlates the real and illusion in keeping with the Surrealists’ use of mirrors and mannequins to draw attention to what Catrina Neiman states is ‘photography’s inability to discriminate between living reality and plastic illusion.’ 98 She also refers to Deren’s interest in Tibetan rites and the yogin’s use of the mirror ‘to meditate on the relationship between objects in the world and the deceptive reality of their reflected

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images.\textsuperscript{99} Surrounded by makeup and flanked by mannequins, the significance of this piece lies in Joan Rivière’s famous essay ‘Womanliness as Masquerade’ in which

the victim exaggerates the very modes of passivity and object-ness projected onto her via the male gaze: here she might be able to open up the closed circuits of desire this eye has attempted to establish via its penetrative thrust through a kind of restaging of exactly what is expected of her.\textsuperscript{100}

Mindful of gender inequities in film, Deren subverted the assumption that the viewing subject is always male by performing for the woman behind the camera. Both Deren and Cahun presented as free and natural creatures refusing to be civilised, both adopting and adapting the gendered binary of female/nature to obfuscate readings of gender and identity.

Deren’s placement of herself amidst the dense jungle-like vegetation in the banquet scene in \textit{At Land} is a deliberate strategy employed to exaggerate her affiliation with the notion of female in nature. She alternates between this and the image of herself as creature (identifiable as serpent) crawling along a banquet table within a bourgeois setting. She parodies this affiliation, accentuating its absurdity by locating it within a social setting, members of which are oblivious to her presence.

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{100} Joan Riviere, \textit{Womanliness as a Masquerade}. International Journal of Psychoanalysis Vol.19 1929
A much fuller interpretation of Deren’s tableaux is possible when viewed in context with Cahun’s photographs, *Self Portrait with Flowers* and *Autoportrait (Self Portrait)*. In *Self Portrait with Flowers*, Cahun lies situated amongst a bed of irises. Her prone position signifies passivity, but with her eyes closed she denies the viewer access and implies the possibility of death and absence, actively manipulating the viewer’s reactions. This portrait is seductive in its heady display of full-bodied irises barely suspended above Cahun’s slightly parted lips. The suggestion is of self-love for if, as Gen Doy states, Cahun is using mimicry and camouflage, Cahun’s openly sensuous body can be viewed as a flower. The shadow, that of Suzanne Malherbe, an inverted form of the one cast by the irises, is integral to the notion of self-love since as Cahun so often attests, she and Malherbe are as one.

Through her use of the leopard’s skin in *Autoportrait* Cahun invests her reclining body with the capacity to leap and the photograph with the potential to perform. Deliberately conflating the opposites of compliance and non-compliance; presence and absence; woman and nature and gender specificity, these photographs elide any stable reading. Both Cahun and Deren assert their strengths as women and as sexual beings independent of the male hegemony, by inverting

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assumptions of female weakness and male hegemony. Taking control of every aspect of image making, they staged their self-performance.

In the art world until well into the 1970s (and, it could be argued, well beyond them), women experienced marginalisation by gender. In their art practice, gender inequity became the political motivation for Deren and Cahun. An examination of Cahun’s biography reveals that she received a small amount of recognition for her work in her lifetime but, like Deren, the predominantly male authors of art history generally overlooked her.

With the advent of the feminist art movement in the 1960s, and the emergence of female theorists and critics, came the establishment of gender study curriculums in universities. This legitimised the work of women of the 60s which was successfully written into history but until relatively recently, histories of the work of earlier women artists have mostly remained unwritten. An exception to this is individual biography, which has become a popular model for the exposure of individual artists.

Deren and Cahun asserted their situation in society through their art, deliberately addressing gender. Marginalised by their subject matter – self, and contrary to the prevailing male hegemonic view of woman as

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103 www.sdsu.com The first Department of Women’s Studies began in the fall semester of 1970 followed by the San Diego State University. The same year Cornell University established its Department of Women’s Studies.
subject of the gaze and object of desire, they presented themselves as both subject and object in their art. Cahun obscured the traditional view of female sexuality by rendering it ambiguous. Deren did so by parodying the portrayal of woman using Hollywood films as a model. In both cases they thwarted what Laura Mulvey termed the ‘male gaze’.104

Traditionally, women working in the arts before the rise of the feminist movement of the 1960s stood at the periphery of established genres. Both Cahun and Deren serve as examples of women who, working outside the male hegemonic dictates, set precedents in their use of self-representation in their respective fields of film and photography, introducing a significantly new way of viewing woman. Deren not only broke with the tradition of women’s representation with her use of self-representation but she ruptured filmic tradition. Using a non-narrative, non-linear format she introduced a new tradition of avant-garde filmmaking into North America.

Feminism and Contemporary Art Practice

Other women working in the arts before the 60s experienced similar situations to Deren and Cahun, one of the most notable being exclusion. Rather than conforming to the male milieu, they broke with tradition and established their own unique ways of presenting their

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104 Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."
experience to the world. Their contribution and influence has been attracting sustained scholarly attention in the last decade, most notably through the exhibition *Women Artists: Elles at the Centre Pompidou*, 2009 and most recently *Modern Women: Women artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, 2011. *Women Artists* is an exhibition of works by women artists from the Pompidou collection. It contains a total of 500 works by over 200 artists from the beginning of the 20th century up to the present day. *Modern Women* features the work of women who, despite being marginalised, made significant contributions to art in early modern, mid century and contemporary periods and even though sometimes recognised in their time, have since become obscure. There has been a concerted effort to re-evaluate the contribution of these women and to trace their influence on contemporary art today.

In terms of the ongoing significance of the work of Deren and Cahun there are three main factors: the role of literature, questions about what it is to be human, and questions about identity. With the focus on the origin and development of women’s practice, what must be recognised is the place of literature in the development of the visual arts. An acceptable form of expression for women in the first half of the 20th century, like dance, literature provided an outlet for the creative impulse of women who lacked access to traditional art forms and who eventually realised their visual expression in performance art.
Writing on the work of Cahun, Kate Conley states, ‘Cahun puts into play the question of what is human and how a human being knows who and what she is.’

Conley discusses Cahun’s photographic self-portrait *Human Frontier* from this perspective. Applying this same postmodern context to Deren’s film *At Land*, a reading can be made that aligns it with *Human Frontier*, with its representation of a woman’s less than human experience, journeying through thick jungle terrain, out of place and out of time. An exaggeration of the conservative alignment of woman with nature serves the purpose of Rivière’s ‘Womanliness as Masquerade’.

Manipulating the technology of their mediums, Deren and Cahun bring into question the reality of the image and the stability of identity. By manipulating time and space, and the positioning of herself within it, Deren identifies it as being what she calls a ‘woman’s sense of time,’ a distended time that is part of a woman’s experience.

Cahun and Deren use self-representation to expose realities other than those presented by the status quo. Picturing themselves as products of their respective social constructs they render the notion of any single identity as unstable. They defy categorisation by transcending difference and transgressing traditional gender roles.

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106 Martina Kudlacek, *In the Mirror of Maya Deren*. DVD audio recording played in the documentary.
As a friend of Lacan, Cahun would have been familiar with his theory of the ‘mirror stage’ that refers to the relationship between the ego and the body, ego being a result of identifying with one’s spectral image. By using the mask and mirror in her work Cahun symbolically reveals and conceals the boundaries between the real and illusionary in the self-portrait. In doing this, Cahun disturbs the idea of identity as tangible, keeping it fluid and rendering any one reading impossible.\textsuperscript{107} Substantiating this is her much quoted text from her book \textit{Aveux non Avenus}, which declares: ‘Under this mask another mask. I will never be done taking off/lifting up all these faces’.\textsuperscript{108} Using the mask and its meaning, masquerade, she laughed, scoffed and ridiculed. Playing the joker she eluded categorisation, shifting between identities and delivering political comment through her art.\textsuperscript{109}

A more obscure link between these two women is Cahun’s close relationship with her uncle, symbolist poet Marcel Schwob, and the possibility that Deren may have known his poetry through her research: the topic of her Masters thesis was ‘The Influence of the French Symbolist School on Anglo-American Poetry.’ Although there is no mention of Deren having known his poetry, there is a likelihood that she did, which opens up the possibility that she knew of Cahun’s work.

\textsuperscript{107} Doy, Claude Cahun: A Sensual Politics of Photography.  
\textsuperscript{108} Cahun. Claude \textit{Aveux non Avenus} English translation of the original French version. 2008  
\textsuperscript{109} Doy, Claude Cahun: A Sensual Politics of Photography. 118
Nonetheless, Deren's involvement with the study of French symbolist poetry and her focus on the 'new idealism', which, she argued in her thesis, resulted from its emphasis on inner realities and the 'unknowable' subconscious mind, places her in the same sociological environment as Cahun.

Conclusion

Having discussed the similarities between the lives and work of Claude Cahun and Maya Deren it is obvious that despite living on different continents, in different timeframes and under different economic circumstances, these women shared a strong sense of social justice, which initially manifested in political activism. On a more personal level and through the politics of gender these women performed the self to reveal the situation common to women in their time and demonstrated alternative ways of being.

The process of comparison I have undertaken has established that there are many more examples of women artists who have been influential in their time but who have receded from notice by not being written into histories primarily written by men. By elevating women into performance art history rather than having them exist as isolated biographies, which has been the case in recent years, a more comprehensive picture emerges of the participation of women in art.
generally and in performance art in particular. Furthermore, this makes it possible to advance the idea of women effecting social change through artistic action.

The following chapter establishes such an historical context for performance art within which I place Maya Deren, using examples of contemporary instances of her influence.
Chapter Four

An art historical context for *At Land*

Having established a relationship between Deren’s life experience detailed in Chapter One, and her use of self-representation in *At Land* as an expression of that experience in Chapter Two, a comparative study of the life and work of Claude Cahun and Maya Deren in Chapter Three examined the issues they faced, and the strategies they used to address them, namely their performance of self as ‘other.’ This demonstrates that despite their diverse origins, sexual orientations and methods of working, these women shared a resourceful approach to their exclusion from the male-hegemonic art milieu.

This chapter provides an historical context for performance art. It examines RoseLee Goldberg’s history of performance art, which establishes its origins in the Futurist movement of 1910-13, through Dada from 1918 and Happenings of the 1950s until 1979 when Goldberg officially wrote performance art into history with her now classic text *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present* (1979). This examination of Goldberg’s history reveals that the primary goals of performance art are to wrest the arts from tradition and to free artists

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110 Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*. First published as *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present* in 1979
to invent new approaches to the making of art. It also exposes a
significant omission of women from this history.

I reconcile this omission in part by inserting Maya Deren into this
history. In order to do this I establish that her use of self, her actions,
her use of time, her introduction of a new method of working with film
and her intention, constitute performance art. I then place her within a
new expanded version of performance art. This placement focuses on
her groundbreaking use of self in At Land and the implications of this for
feminism. It will prompt an investigation into the work of other women
excluded from the present history including Baroness Elsa von Freytag-
Loringhoven, whose performances on the streets of New York in the
early 1920s caused a great sensation. Although acknowledged as a
Dadaist, a discussion on von Freytag-Loringhoven’s work in terms of
performance art is fruitful allowing any or all of its aspects, including her
written work, to be considered. Her inclusion in the history of
performance art, as with Deren, places a focus on her body and her
precursory role as a body artist.

Demonstrating the need for history to be told, Walter Benjamin
wrote,

...every image of the past that is not recognised by the present as one of its own
concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.111

111 Walter Benjamin, Theses on the Philosophy of History
As Benjamin suggests, in order to advance into the future, it is necessary to comprehend the past. The question therefore needs to be asked: how can we possibly proceed with impunity to write an art history that fails to recognise the contribution of women, as artists, dealing with situations and concerns that affect women working and living in a traditionally male hegemonic society and in a similarly dominated art milieu? In order to advance this history these omissions need to be redressed.

Positioning Maya Deren within this new context of performance art shifts the focus of her work onto her body and her actions, highlighting her prescient contribution to feminism with her introduction of self as subject in At Land. It also releases the body from the medium of film, allowing it to be examined in other contexts such as body art of the 1960s. Thus a new interpretation of her body on the beach could become more akin to Dennis Oppenheim’s Parallel Stress of 1970 in which he lies face down in the V between two mounds so that his body parallels the shape.

Defining Performance art

There is no one definition of performance art. At its simplest, RoseLee Goldberg says, performance art is 'live art by artists.'\(^{112}\) She also states that ‘performance art consists of a bodily action or actions undertaken by one or more persons before an audience of at least one, including the camera, with the intent to effect change.'\(^{113}\) Further, she describes performance art as being 'composed of (often confrontational) ideas. It takes place in ‘real’ time and the body is its irreducible medium, the locus where text and image intersect.'\(^{114}\)

In his article *Some Relations between Conceptual and Performance Art*, Frazer Ward, states that performance art is 'relatively easy to define.' He continues by quoting art historian, Anne Marsh, saying that performance art is

> a form of art that happens at a particular time in a particular place where the artist engages in some sort of activity, usually before an audience. The main difference between performance art and other modes of visual art practice, such as painting, photography, and sculpture is that it is a temporal event or action.\(^{115}\)

Ward’s discourse on the relations between Conceptual and Performance art points to the ‘oppositions and overlaps’ between the two categories. Similarly, Maya Deren’s film, *At Land*, has oppositions and overlaps

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\(^{112}\) Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*. 9

\(^{113}\) Op cit 9

\(^{114}\) Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*. 9

between film and performance art but I argue that ultimately her actions are instances of performance art.

Gregory Battock places the body at the core of performance art with his statement:

Before man was aware of art he was aware of himself. Awareness of the person is, then, the first art. In performance art the figure of the artist is the tool for the art. It is the art.\textsuperscript{116}

Written for the catalogue \textit{The Art of Performance}, Battock’s statement accompanied an exhibition of performances in Venice in 1979. This exhibition and other festivals and events in the United States and Europe in the 70s, gave preference to performance art over traditional genres, formally acknowledging it as an art form that privileges the artist over the object.\textsuperscript{117}

Lucy Lippard emphasises the immediacy of performance art with her statement that ideally, ‘performance means getting down to the bare bones of aesthetic communication-artist/self confronting audience/society.’ \textsuperscript{118}

A close examination of these varied definitions of performance art reveals that there are basic principles underpinning the genre. The most prominent is the aim to effect change, socially politically and artistically. Goldberg states that, ‘Live gestures have constantly been used as a

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{118} Lippard, Lucy, "The Angry Month of March," \textit{The Village Voice} 1981. 91
weapon against the conventions of established art’ and that ‘its radical stance acts as a catalyst for change. One of the aims of performance art is to effect change. She continues that:

... when certain genres appear to reach a stalemate, performance art steps in, breaks down codes and introduces a new direction.¹

These brief accounts of performance art also make clear that the basic components of performance art utilise the body, time, action and effect.

A Brief Outline of Performance Art

RoseLee Goldberg’s history of performance art reveals the ways these components are utilised and for what effect. She begins her history with the description of poet and cycling fanatic Alfred Jarry’s absurd slapstick performance Ubu Roi in Paris on December 11 1896.¹¹⁹ More precisely, it was the enduring effect of this performance on wealthy Italian poet Fillippo Thomasso Marinetti that was significant. Made up of farces and puppet shows recalled from childhood, his aim was to agitate his audience. He used satire he said, because it made a piece ‘modern’.¹²⁰

Raising the curtain on opening night, Jarry exposed a backdrop painted by Toulouse Lautrec and Pierre Bonnard. In front of it stood a crude table covered with a ‘sordid’ cloth. Setting the mood, he

¹¹⁹ Goldberg, Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present. 11
¹²⁰ Ibid. 13
introduced the audience to the event with the declaration: ‘the action takes place in Poland, that is to say, nowhere.’ This was followed by the main protagonist Ubu’s, proclamation, ‘Merde’. Pandemonium broke out and violence erupted. Again, ‘Merde’ he yelled and the crowd went mad, breaking into frenzied fisticuffs at the utterance of this taboo word and with this ‘Ubu Roi’ became infamous.

Having witnessed this and the excitement such rebelliousness generated throughout Paris, Marinetti returned to Italy where he was appalled at the conservative state of the arts. He vowed to change it. Taking advantage of political unrest at the time, he played on nationalist and colonial sentiments in his staged satire ‘Roi Bombance’, achieving similar results as Jarry’s ‘Ubu Roi’.

Painters and poets alike were agitated into action. Italian artist Boccioni stated that ‘painting was no longer an exterior scene, the setting of a theatrical spectacle.’ Fellow Futurist Scoffici insisted that ‘the spectator must live at the centre of the painting’. Violence became the order of the day and Futurist artists encouraged each other to literally fight the ‘artistic battle’, often resulting in periodic detention.122

121 Ibid. 14
122 Ibid. 14
As Goldberg stated, ‘Performance was the Futurists’ way of forcing the audience to take note of their ideas.’¹²³ So too was their release of thousands of flyers over St Mark’s Square declaring their Futurist Manifesto Against Passiest Venice in 1910.

Their declared intent was to destroy the cult of the past, to reject imitation, to reward innovation, accept the label of madness, disregard art critics, rebel against the use of the words ‘harmony’ and ‘good taste’, clear art of themes used in the past and rejoice in the day-to-day world.

The Futurists’ aim was to disrupt the complacency of the art world and to ‘drive intelligence to the brink of madness’ with their absurd theatrical behaviour and lack of structure.¹²⁴

In Zurich, the Dadaists founded the Cabaret Voltaire, facilitating performances by painters, sculptors, writers and musicians to reflect freedom and madness. These principles resonated in subsequent movements including Fluxus, Body Art and Happenings.

Central to these activities across all sectors of performance art was the body, an action and audience interaction. Audience interaction surfaces as a primary concern as a means of thwarting voyeurism.¹²⁵

¹²³ Ibid. 14
¹²⁴ Ibid. Dessy produced a piece called Madness ‘The Protagonist goes mad, the public becomes uneasy and other characters go mad’ The aim was to instil madness in the audience.
It is clear from this brief account of Futurist performance art that, 'live gestures', as Goldberg terms them, 'have constantly been used as a weapon against the conventions of established art,'126 functioning as a catalyst for change when an art movement reaches a stalemate. Moreover Goldberg singles out the use of performance by the avant-garde in forging new directions in art.

As the initiator of avant-garde film in America, Deren broke with tradition on several counts. Central to these was Deren's use of her own body. To paraphrase Battock, her body is her art. Her entry into the film industry, while not being unique, was unusual in that she had no formal training. She was fortunate in owning her own camera, which gave her the freedom to experiment, a luxury not many could afford. Deren's use of self as subject matter was unique at the time and the contextualising of her body within society and in nature was prescient. Her actions in 1942 predicted Body Art of the 1960s and inspired Performance Art as it became known in the 1970s. Her stated intent was to inspire others, particularly women, to engage in live action and film.

Gatherings as Happenings

The identification of At Land as performance art is substantiated by a later film, Ritual in Transfigured Time, 1946. This was a precursor of

125 Ibid. They were determined to draw the audience into action. 14
126 Ibid. 7
'Happenings,' a term coined by Alan Kaprow for his live group events of the 1950s which prefigured performance art of the 1960s.\textsuperscript{127} Deren often gathered together groups of artists and intellectuals for events at her Morton Street apartment. These gatherings included poets, painters, dancers, and musicians who would do as she bade, in exchange for the opportunity to participate in what they recognised was ‘cutting edge’ work. One such participant who recognised the significance of Deren’s gatherings was author Anais Nin, who stated that Deren ‘expected that, undirected, things would ‘happen’ but that the era of Happenings had not yet developed.’\textsuperscript{128}

Happenings were events established as art, involving performances within environments rather than on the stage. They shared in common with the Futurists, Dadaists and Fluxus the desire to break from convention; to use everyday objects, to blur the boundaries between art and life and to effect change.

Allan Kaprow coined the term Happenings on the occasion of his \textit{18 Happenings in 6 Parts} (1959).\textsuperscript{129} Attendance at this event was contingent on audience participation and invitations to subsequent happenings contained details of the expected involvement, precluding voyeurism. Further conditions set down for Happenings stated that

\textsuperscript{127} Harrison and Wood, \textit{Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas}. 717-722
\textsuperscript{128} Clark, Hodson, and Neiman, \textit{The Legend of Maya Deren: A Documentary Biography and Collected Works, Volume 1, Part Two}, Chambers (1942-47). 534
\textsuperscript{129} Goldberg, \textit{Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present}. 128
the line between art and life should be kept as fluid and perhaps as indistinct as possible ...the source of themes, materials actions and the relationships between them are to be derived from any place or period other then art ...The performance of a Happening should take place over several widely spaced, sometimes moving and changing locales. Time... should be variable and discontinuous. Happenings should be performed only once. Audiences should be eliminated entirely.130

‘To repeat a Happening’, Kaprow said, ‘is to accede to a far more serious matter: compromise of the whole concept of change.’ His Happenings of the 1950s set the same trajectory for performance art as the Futurists did in the early twentieth century. Likewise, Ritual in Transfigured Time sets the same trajectory from 1944 to 1950.

One highly orchestrated scene in Deren’s Ritual in Transfigured Time, identifies the social mix of her friends, simultaneously paroding the social behaviour of the bourgeoisie. Within a formal cocktail party setting, Deren instructed the guests to move around the room gesturing and laughing, tossing their heads exaggeratedly. As they moved around the room they extended hands as if to greet each other but instead passed by, heightening the apparent social tension. The diversity of characters enabled Deren to touch on a broad spectrum of issues ranging from class, race, gender and sexual orientation. The cumulative effect of this was to parody the bourgeoisie.

On a more personal level Deren’s performances at her private gatherings and their real engagement with social ritual were of myth-making proportions. Often dressed exotically, Deren would

spontaneously break into dance, swinging her hips and letting her hair fly, her enormous earrings jingling and swinging against her throat, seducing her audience to pay attention. On one notorious occasion Zenia Cage was attracting attention with her dancing when Deren positioned herself in such a way as to turn the focus away from Cage. These performances were often accompanied by exotic Voudoun music and can easily be placed in the art historical structure of performance art as Happenings.

Such gatherings/happenings were significant social and artistic events. Deren played a formidable role as a woman, an artist, filmmaker and promoter of avant-garde film. Men and women loved and feared, admired and despised her. Bearing testimony to this, Patricia Bosworth, in her book *Diane Arbus: a Biography*, describes Arbus's social environment in the late 1950s as comprising a group of 'spectacularly talented women,' amongst them Mary Frank, Anita Steckel and filmmaker Shirley Clarke and novelist Patti Hill. Bosworth continues:

In another category entirely was the chain-smoking Maya Deren – voluptuous hyper-energetic always broke – who is today recognised as a major figure in American avant-garde film. Even in the fifties she was regarded as someone special.\(^{132}\)


\(^{132}\) Ibid 172
In an interview with Lauren Rabinovitz, Joyce Wieland recalled hearing about another particularly legendary gathering of women in 1961. Deren had assembled the women on the occasion of a baby shower for electronic music composer Bebe Barron. Among those present were author Anais Nin and filmmakers Shirley Clarke and Marie Menken. According to Weiland, these women were known for their ‘renunciation of traditional sex roles and their celebrations of women’s sexuality.’ They were strong, assertive women who were gender ambiguous in their dress and their actions and outwardly opposed the dominant ideology of the time.

Deren’s influence was apparent on filmmaker Shirley Clarke who made the film Dance in the Sun. The sequences in the film performed by Daniel Nagrin resonate with Talley Beatty’s performance in Deren’s Choreography for Dance. Clarke continued with Deren’s legacy of freeing dance from the theatre. She also repeats Deren’s time and space shift from outside to inside by depicting the body as it lifts from one place and descends into another. Further instances of Deren’s influence in Clarke’s film are the framing of the body against the sky, and use of roaring ocean waves and soaring birds. That Deren’s work continues to

134 Ibid., 3
135 UBUWEB Film and Video: Shirley Clark http://www.ubu.com/film/clarke.html
influence artists today is a tribute to her innovative approach to art making.

**At Land as Performance Art**

A discussion of Deren's work as performance art necessitates an exploration of the divisiveness of categorisations that traditionally marginalised women. This serves to defuse the myths that kept them outside the traditional artistic milieu. By situating Deren within the genre of performance art I aim to create a catalyst through which other women can be re-examined within a new expanded framework.

Deren's choice of film as a medium and her actions in *At Land*, establish them as prototypical of performance art as exemplified in the 1960s. Her performance of self in *At Land* and her intentions establish *At Land* as a key instance of performance art.

Sharing aims in common with the Futurists and subsequent movements through to Kaprow's Happenings and performance art of the 1960s, Deren deviated from them only in her choice of film as medium. Also significant was the fact that she was a woman. Despite Goldberg's emphasis on the 'liveness' of performance art, which may have contributed to the exclusion of her films, other aspects of Deren's work - such as her aim to effect change and her desire to inspire others to perform - attest to her commitment to profile issues of culture and
identity. These constitute two of the most consistent aspects of performance art. As was the case with much early performance art, Kaprow’s Happenings were live and because he was a purist, in the sense that he believed in the immediacy of his happenings and their unrepeatability, they precluded documentation. In this sense, Deren’s actions as performance art, existing as film, are of little consequence.

Having arrived at film from poetry Deren described the immediacy of expression through film compared to putting her vision into words. She was able, she said, to put her reality and her vision directly onto film. In this way she is describing her preference for performance to achieve her goals. Herein lies the quandary that has faced At Land and continues to be problematic. Because of its categorisation as film it has not been critiqued as performance art. As avant-garde, experimental film it has had a limited audience. Deren made an important distinction between a performance and film of that performance, saying that it is not the mechanics of the film, but what is happening that is vital at any given time. And what was happening was her representation of woman in a woman’s time.

Deren’s aim was to bring about change and to inspire others to perform, a testimony of her commitment to focus on issues of culture and identity. Her gatherings as precursors of Happenings also comply
with criteria for performance art but it is her original approach to representation of self that requires deeper examination.

Deren introduced avant-garde film to American audiences but more importantly, she changed women’s perception of themselves. She empowered women to follow her example by representing themselves in a radically different way from that touted by conventional Hollywood films.

Deren’s legacy

Deren’s continued relevance to successive generations of artists makes it clear that many women were not easily placed within the male hegemonic categories of traditional art genres. They were, in fact, excluded from them and rendered invisible or marginalised because of their ‘feminine’ subject matter. By wresting control of her image from film and using knowledge of Deren’s experience and current theories of psychology and art it is possible to arrive at multiple readings of each work.

A possible barrier to Deren’s inclusion in performance art history stems from the fact that the live aspect exists in the future only through film. Although Peggy Phelan takes a purist stance on performance art with her theory of ‘denial of truth’ through
documentation of the live event,\textsuperscript{136} it is now more commonly accepted that performance art is understood through the written and photographic reference to it. As Amelia Jones states, 'we often do not have access to the live performance.' As an art historian, theorist and performance artist, whose youth precludes her personal experience of early performances, Jones says she is reliant on the photographic and written documentation of a performance as evidence of its existence. Such documentation she says, can in fact provide more information about a performance than is possible to glean from a single perspective of a single event.\textsuperscript{137} Attendance at a live performance does not guarantee the best vantage point or the best perspective, since one's attention can easily be distracted away from a significant action, and or a poignant moment missed altogether.\textsuperscript{138}

I have come to understand Maya Deren's performance in \textit{At Land} as performance art, and the film as the photographic documentation of the performance. My account of Deren's life exposes the temporal, sociological and political context within which \textit{At Land} was made. It also reveals a purpose beyond that which is visibly evident in the film. By performing her experience of the world, Deren presents a perspective of woman counter to that rendered by Hollywood at the time, for the


\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
consumption of the viewer who was assumed to be male. Her underlying
aim was to inspire others to follow her example. Her aim was for her
audience to retain a memory of her work. With her choice of film to
record her actions Deren calculated their ability to be recalled. She has
performed her actions and suspended their ending, thereby deferring
death. In Freudian terms she has used repetition to heal the trauma of
absence in this case, the absence of representation of ‘woman’ as real.

Deren recognised the potential for film as the ideal medium
through which to capture her personal expression, affect her audience
and disseminate her message. Deren had previously been exposed to the
powerful effect of film when, as a political activist at Syracuse
University, she experienced first-hand the effects of the inciteful

There can be little doubt that Deren’s experience of this film and
its effects influenced her later choice of film as a medium. It differed
from the traditional use of juxtapositions in its heavily emotive scenes
such as the one that placed the static figures of a mother and child in
the midst of an onslaught of Tsarist officers in pursuit of the sailors who
revolted against them. This highly politicised scene demonises the
officers for their disregard of the woman and child and transfers
audience empathy with the woman and child onto the revolutionaries,
making the film effective as propaganda and causing it to be banned in Britain and Europe for varying periods of time.

Using similar tactics to heighten emotional impact Deren employs obscure juxtapositions in *At Land*, placing her body in the landscape. She introduced a woman's perspective of her relationship to nature, a view different from that of her male counterparts. The significance of this lies not so much in Deren's opposition to the male gaze as a Mulvey-ian interpretation would ascribe to it, but simply as the introduction of a new way of presenting the world: from a woman's point of view.\(^\text{139}\) This former oppositional view was strongly held and adhered to by feminists in the 1970s and recorded by Laura Mulvey in *Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema*, published in 1975, in which Mulvey formulated her theory of the 'male gaze' based on the given that the viewing subject in cinema is male and that the female, as object, was positioned for the pleasure of that male.

In 1987 Mulvey reassessed this theory and its origins in Freudian theory, stating:

My own work with film theory has been deeply influenced by binary modes of thought. There came to be a tension between this influence and a desire for change. The problems were epitomised by the disproportionate place that an article I had written in 1974 (published in 1975) had come to occupy in film theoretical orthodoxy, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*.\(^\text{140}\)

\(^{139}\) Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."

\(^{140}\) Ibid.
What this disproportionate placement did, she said, was to ‘hinder the possibility of change’ because her argument locked the spectator’s position into that of active, voyeuristic and male and the woman’s body into the erotic, spectacular, exhibitionist and ‘other.’ It polarised them as either/or, leaving little option for change other than to invert that position.

In 1944, with her use of self as both subject and object in At Land, Deren created a pivotal point in the history of art, film and feminism. She pre-empted Mulvey’s notion of the viewing subject as male and the object as female for the pleasure of that privileged ‘male gaze.’ She inverted the gaze to counter what she saw as the propaganda of ‘the male gaze’ in Hollywood film. By introducing a woman’s perspective of woman she paved the way for other women to represent their experience and to actively engage in effecting changes in the perception of women through their engagement with performance of self, which later became the radically new medium of performance art. She liberated ‘woman’ from the ‘male gaze’.

In addition, through her film Choreography for Film, Deren freed dance from the theatre and dancers from classical movement.\textsuperscript{141} She led them to experiment with a more personal expression of bodily self into

\textsuperscript{141} Maya Deren, \textit{Maya Deren and the American avant-garde}, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). For further discussion on this aspect of dance and Deren’s contribution to its liberation from classical conventions see Mark Franko’s essay on Aesthetic Agencies in Flux 1.
performance art. This essentially places Deren's work into a 21st century perspective of performance art. It firmly situates it within the realm that Amelia Jones calls 'Parafeminism,' a term she prefers over the older 'Feminism' and that is not bound by connotations and mindsets but rather infers parallels.

Deren, almost certainly, was aware of Lacan’s theory of the ‘gaze’ and the male assigned binary of female/nature. At Land was Deren's insistence on the situation of women as she saw it, in the world, rather than against the prevailing view, the subtle difference being that she was asserting her view, rather than opposing the other. I am advancing the idea that, in isolation, and outside the context of film, Deren’s actions were performance art and that film served to document her performance in perpetuity.

In a bid to re-activate interest in Deren's achievements and to introduce the new perspective of performance art, I am arguing for Deren’s inclusion in the history of performance art as a woman working in a predominantly male milieu presenting a female point of view of woman that differs from the historically established one, that considered woman as hysterical, deviant or as an aside to the given, which was male.

Every era of history has seen the emergence of women forging new ground; working independently of the norm, establishing for
themselves and subsequent generations, a place of their own in the annals of art. It is important to recognise their work and the underlying reasons for their method. They inform us of social conditions and point the way to change.

‘...in every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from conformism that is about to overpower it.’

When Walter Benjamin wrote this passage in 1936, he unwittingly iterated what performance art sets out to do, and indeed, what Maya Deren was to do in 1942. In fact it was almost a catchcry for performance art from its inception with the Futurists who determined to disrupt conservatism.

At Land stands apart from Deren’s other films in her singular use of self. It was a quest to reveal her experience of society at the time reflected in her portrayal of the bourgeoisie, and the urban and natural environments and the way she negotiates her way through life and the prevailing attitudes towards women. Her ultimate wish was for her audience to recognise the issues she addresses and be moved to emulate her experience and thereby redress them. In this way At Land performs women’s cultural history.

While _At Land_ dealt with social issues from a personal perspective Deren's film _Ritual in Transfigured Time_, made in 1946, dealt with broader social issues of class, race, gender.

Of critical importance to my positioning of Deren's work into art history as performance art is her influence on other women who pioneered the art form in the 1960's. In the late 1960s many women turned to performance art as a new means of expression. Having come from dance, they saw it as an extension of their claim for subjectivity for themselves. Amongst these women were Anna Halprin, Joan Jonas, Shirley Clarke and Carolee Schneemann, whose bodies were central to their practice. Using their lofts as venues, they performed before friends and fellow artists, much as Deren had in her Mort Street apartment before them. Being new, and unlike established genres, performance art was gender neutral and allowed these women the freedom to take control of the representation of their bodies. Both Jonas and Schneeman acknowledge Deren's influence. According to both, everyone knew Maya Deren. A Jonas acknowledges influence derived from Deren's involvement with Haitian voudoun ritual, evidence of which can be seen in her drawings that are integral to her performances, one of which I
personally witnessed at *Reading Dante*, in Sydney, Australia, June 2008.\(^{144}\)

Joan Jonas’s 1970 performance *Mirror Check*, was a milestone in performance art. She stood nude and examined her body parts using a hand mirror for her own deliberation, and by doing so frustrated the gaze of the audience, denying them access to the parts privy only to her gaze. Jonas was a pioneer of video art, introducing it into her performances in 1970 in a way that, when combined with her other disciplines, aligned her works with happenings and with Deren.

When Jonas says: ‘The happenings involved several things going on at the same time’ and that ‘there wasn’t a logical connection between the actions,’ her words resonate with Deren’s description of her own films as ‘non-narrative’ and ‘non-linear’ and with others descriptions of her work as Happenings. So too do Jonas’ words: ‘It’s a poetic narrative, which is not necessarily linear.’\(^{145}\) Deren describes the non-narrative logic of her films as a poetic logic, to which she applies the term ‘vertical investigations’ resulting in creative forms and ‘new realities’.\(^{146}\)

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\(^{144}\) Joan Jonas, *Reading Dante*. This is a performance based on Dante’s *Inferno* and *Paradiso*. It was performed at the National Art School’s Cell Block Theatre for the Biennale of Sydney in June 2008. In a conversation with the artist Joan Jonas, she related that Maya Deren had been an influence on her work, particularly Deren’s experience of Haitian voudoun.

\(^{145}\) Ayers, Robert. Artist Interview. ‘That’s what we do—we retell stories.’ *Listening to Joan Jonas*. Nov. 2004

\(^{146}\) Deren, *Essential Deren: Collected Writings on Film*. 212-13
The 'new realities' that Carolee Schneeman identifies as significant in her development are 'the creative pre-feminist thresholds' that Deren occupied, 'where [Schneeman] could anticipate the complexities, resistances to [her] own creative will.'

Martha Rosler, another pioneer of performance art, is best known for her performance *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1973) that used domestic objects. Like Deren she focussed on women's experience, but unlike Deren, used video. Of significance is that, just as film had been the greatest disseminator of information in Deren's time, video, specifically through television, had become a means of mass communication in the 70s, with its ability to infiltrate every household. It changed the face of communication. Rosler was able to address the public directly through television. *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, she said, was never meant to be a live performance, but rather, it was to be viewed as a television show. She specifically named the Julia Child cooking show; Child was, she said, 'our great inspiration.'

Rosler stated that she used video because it was cheap and that there were no set standards. To be viewed on a small television set, her gestures were performed within this spatial parameter, and sometimes they went outside of the box.

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149 Tate Modern interview with Iwona Blazwick. Tate.org.UK./Martha/Rosler/Online Events/Talking Art 2007.
With the renewed recognition of performance art's historical significance has come a global resurgence of performance art activity since the beginning of the 21st century, prompting a re-examination of the state of the arts and its relevance to society.

RoseLee Goldberg stands at the forefront of an effort to reignite the impetus to perform. In the Tate Modern’s Symposium on live performance held in 2003, Goldberg was a keynote speaker, along with other art historians and practitioners. The result was the publication of a book *Live: Art and Performance*, edited by Adrian Heathfield.\(^{150}\) A landmark for contemporary performance art, this 2003 symposium featured prominent performers, critics, theorists and art historians primarily from Britain and the United States, including Gillian Perry, Amelia Jones, Peggy Phelan, Marina Abramovic and Joan Jonas, all of whom contributed to the revitalising of performance art.

RoseLee Goldberg set in motion a subsequent focus on performance later that year with the planning of what she refers to as the ‘first biennial of visual art performance.’\(^{151}\) Titled Performa ’05 it was held in New York and comprised performances, screenings and symposiums throughout the city. In her article in the *New York Times* that introduced Performa ’05 to the public, Roberta Smith spoke of the breadth of performance art:

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\(^{151}\) 'Performa ’05 opens ‘just’ Splendidly.' Art Info, New York Nov, 9 2005
Admired for its purity and subversive spirit, it is ubiquitous in gallery and museum exhibitions, whether on its own or as an active ingredient in video, installation art, sound art and photography. And performance art – also known as performance – is often the ghost in the machine in even the most static of objects; there is hardly a work of art with a scratchable surface that can't be assigned so-called performative aspects.\textsuperscript{152}

It is with the writing into history that status is apportioned to an artist and to date Maya Deren's relatively low status has remained disproportionate to her achievements. I attribute this to the restricted focus on her work as film rather than the examination of her actions within it. The focus on this precludes critical discourse on her work as a feminist performance artist challenging traditional stereotypes. Her actions, despite being performed before the camera, constituted performance art driven by her aim to effect change. She had found the medium that best expressed her experience and her vision for the future.\textsuperscript{153}

In establishing this I have demonstrated that, like the Futurists and subsequent performance art movements, Deren shared the same principles in advocating a new approach to art and in her case film. She had been astute in recognising the phenomenal impact Hollywood film was having on society and adopted and adapted it to serve her purposes as an art medium and to effect change in public perceptions of both art

and women, situating herself as a catalyst for what was to become known as performance art.

In her analysis of film as an art form, Deren stated that, as a poet, she had 'tried to put into words what her mind’s eye saw,’ but that when she discovered the movie camera she found an immediate expression. She was able to ‘put her reality and her vision directly on to film.’

The Futurists’ instrument for art was activism. They performed live, co-opting the public arena to optimise their audience, and rendered the ordinary into the extraordinary. They employed political and reactionary methods to provoke their audiences and to alter their perceptions.

Deren’s political activism easily translated into performance art. She had rallied with the Young Socialist League in her youth, and there is little doubt that she would also have witnessed the effect of film on the impressionable minds of her compatriots, so that when faced with the opportunity to partake in filmmaking, and eventually breaking out on her own with At Land, Deren was truly in her element.

A useful parallel can be drawn between Deren’s use of film and Martha Rossler’s use of video as performance art. Rossler performed specifically for the video camera to be viewed on television. Her piece, Semiotics of the Kitchen, itself served to criticise television’s

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154 Martina Kudlacek, In the mirror of Maya Deren (New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2001), DVD.
objectification of women and Julia Child's maintenance of gender in the kitchen. Deren's film and Rosler's video work equally translate as performance art, making the object of film and video secondary.

Positioning *At Land* within a performance art context opens a new discourse on the potential for other women to be similarly situated. It invites a wider debate on issues involving women, self-representation and performance art.
Conclusion

An initial examination of Maya Deren's film *At Land* (1944) established that it differed considerably from other films. Made up of a series of tableaux, its experimental nature was apparent in its non-narrative, non-sequential format, but what has been established in this dissertation is that the differentiating factor in *At Land* was the protagonist Maya Deren's performance in it. Her actions were extraordinary. As a filmmaker, her use of self was unique, and most significantly her representation of woman from a woman's point of view was visionary.

Research has shown that, at the time, there was little recognition of *At Land* beyond what was perceived as the aimless wanderings of a woman. My examination of the film in the context of the time, 1944, has made it clear that Deren was addressing the situation of women in the male hegemonic society. It also clarifies that the mostly male critique of the film was subjective, contingent on a male perspective and prejudiced further discourse on the film.

While feminist film critique in the 1970s concentrated on Deren's inversion of the 'male gaze' through her positioning of self as both subject and object in *At Land*, little attention was paid to her actions and their meaning.
Throughout this dissertation I have examined Deren’s actions against details of her biography that determined a correlation with her lived experience. This paired with her intentions and examined within the context of performance art have firmly established that Deren’s actions in the film are instances of performance art.

An examination of Deren’s biographical detail, in Chapter One determined that the key factors in her life that contributed to the formation of her persona were her ethnic origin, her intellectual aptitude and her gender. Of these, I identified that her sense of not belonging, stemming from her displacement from her homeland had the most sustained effect, influencing everything from her choice of studies in Europe to her political activism while at University. Of significance to my argument is the recognition of that same political fervour in her groundbreaking representation of self as both subject and object to counter the prevailing depiction of women by Hollywood.

A closer examination of the individual tableau in Chapter Two corroborates my finding that Deren’s life experience and her actions in *At Land* are interchangeable. From the film’s inception when Deren was born up by the sea it was evident that this was a reference to her then newly adopted name Maya, meaning Goddess of the sea and illusion. Inferred by this action also was her alienating arrival in America by sea. Neither of these readings, nor subsequent ones would be possible
without the insight gained from the biographical detail. This explains, in part, why, to date, these parallels have not been drawn and the lack of recognition of them as performance art.

My inclusion of Claude Cahun in the comparative study with Deren in Chapter Three served to determine that Deren was not the only woman using self representation as a means of expressing the complexity of the situation for women living and working in a male hegemonic society. Rather Cahun was only one of many others whose work could be similarly compared and contrasted with Deren's while maintaining the same focus on self representation as a means of presenting alternative ways of being women. I have demonstrated that many women who resisted traditional gendered roles were held in contempt while others, including Deren and Cahun circumvented such criticism by mixing dress and behaviour in order to appear ambiguous and in Cahun's case, androgynous.

Having established in Chapter Four that, in its broadest sense, performance art consists of a body performing an action before one or more people with the intent to effect change, I have placed Deren's performance in *At Land* in this category. I have demonstrated that Deren engaged in activities that would come to be heralded as Performance Art. She introduced the notion of a woman portraying her own reality
through the use of her body, something no other female artists were
doing at the time.

By considering Deren's actions in *At Land* as performance art I
have opened the way for further interpretation of her actions and those
of other women whose works sit outside the borders of traditional
categories. These women need to be included in a broader discourse on
performance art that accentuates the formative role of women in this
art form many of whom are accessible only through biographies. While
biography is a popular vehicle for profiling individual artists today, there
is power in the collective. This dissertation demonstrates the need for a
new expanded history of performance art that includes these women. It
also establishes that the writing of this history creates a platform for
new investigations into the role of women in art history and places Deren
at its forefront.
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