

**NEW THEATRE
REPORT SECTION**

The Drama Review

Dance/Movement Issue



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Two Performance Pieces by Margaret Fisher



by Gail Bochenek

Margaret Fisher is a performance artist who lives near San Francisco and works primarily in the San Francisco Bay area. Descriptions of two of her latest pieces follow. Both were first presented at the San Francisco International Theatre Festival in 1980.

Il Miglior Fabbro (The Better Maker)

In the performance area are two wooden-frame tents side by side. They are 8 feet square, 6 feet at their apex, and covered with white muslin. The "insect" tent is at the right, tent flaps open, a duplicate miniature tent suspended within the opening. Two fluorescent industrial lighting fixtures form a bright "V" upstage on the tent floor. From the opening a clear plastic tube coils its way over to the "scientist" tent at the left. This tent is closed, except for a triangular window centered on its front wall. It is illuminated by a blue light from within. In front of it, on the floor, is its cut-out—a piece of triangular

Title photo: *Il Miglior Fabbro*

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The True and False Occult

The set is an asymmetrical white triangular wall with a corresponding triangular floor, both of which are constructed of heavy posterboard folded every two inches to give a pleated or corrugated effect, as in a fan. It is 16 feet at its widest dimension and eight feet at its tallest dimension. Together the wall and floor form a creased rectangular shape. At its lower acute angle a small version of the wall closes off the shape with its miniature vertical plane and serves to reflect the image back onto itself.

Scene 1

The Corps De Ballet

The performance area is dark. Projected onto a white horizontal slat at the left front of the performance floor is the single word: "while." It is a white image whose reflection illuminates part of the surrounding pleated floor. Silently the words slides upward to the slat above, and the first slat now reads: "Henry draws twelve on ten." After a pause the words slide upward and a third phrase appears: "So that his days can be in meter also." (They refer to the composer Henry Brant, who revealed to Fisher in 1979 his plans for a metric calendar.) Pause. Slide. "The conclusion being *meno uno anno*" (minus one year). Pause. Slide. "*ogni venti anni*" (every twenty years). Pause. Slide. This first small rectangle of phrases is one slide projection that moves upstage along an evenly pleated white paper floor to a white paper wall of vertical pleats. Pause. It slowly travels from right to left across the wall, the pleats creating an undulation among the words. This is the "*corps de ballet*." Reaching the backs of two performers sitting in the dark in front of the pleated floor, the phrases move down their bodies, taking on the reds, greens, and oranges of their t-shirts, sweatpants, and legwarmers. The words roll off onto the dark area in front of the pleated floor and disappear. The performance area is perceived alternately as two-dimensional and three-dimensional depending upon the appearance and location of the "*corps de ballet*."

Appearing at the original horizontal slat is the second "*corps de ballet*": "When ya' gonna leave me Henry?" A gong sounds. The gong repeats, and the white wall and floor are illuminated and delineated by the projection of white Chinese-Japanese brushstroke characters, the borders of the projection exactly fitting the contours of the constructed set. The second rectangle of words follows exactly in the path of the first, and each of the phrases of this second verse to Fisher's poem now moves in sympathetic rhythm to the Kabuki music (Nagare [*Water Images*] by the Azuma Kabuki Musicians) following the introductory gongs. Once upon the wall, the words cross right to left to the two seated performers, down their clothes and disappear. Pause. The third corps de ballet begins with the phrase: "It appears more than once," and it repeats the same path as its predecessors.

The Ouija Board

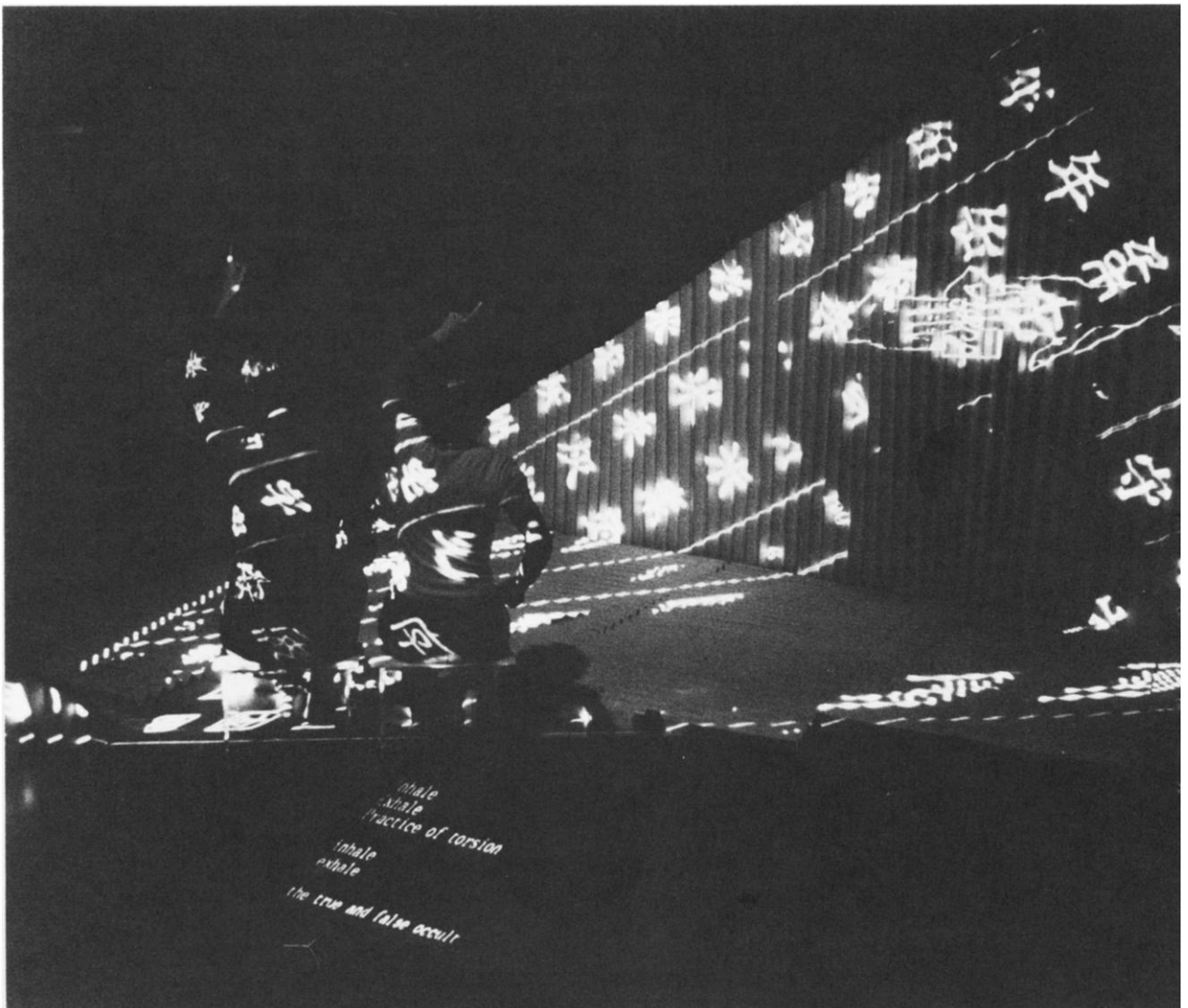
Just under the apex of the wall is projected now a white picture or line drawing depicting two outstretched hands holding between them a small block identified with the word "ouija." It is met by a third group of phrases and as the poem verse continues

on its path right to left, the "ouija" block bounces from one Japanese character to the next with an uneven determination as if the characters themselves were exerting a certain pull from the block.

Cartoon Characters

The performers, sprayed with the light of the Japanese characters, are two women side by side seated on clear plastic benches, their backs to the audience. With a percussive gesture accenting the musical beat of the Kabuki music, their outside arms rapidly point to the oriental brushstroke characters, index fingers extended, elbows folded between each outward gesture. The hands of the inside arm brush side to side across the top of the thigh. The overall effect is a highly stylized percussive lyricism. The low benches coupled with the dim light creates a distortion of the bodily proportions, giving the performers a cartoonlike appearance with elongated torsos and shortened legs. (Fisher attributes the origin of this gesture to the Pentagon generals, who are now able, as explained at the Arts/Sciences gathering in 1979 in Telluride,

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Colorado, to crossreference their projected information systems from the comfort of their armchairs. As they point in space with one hand to indicate the detail which interests them, they brush the other hand across a touch-sensitive device located in the arm of their chair, thus effecting a “turning of pages” in the computerized projection-memory system and calling up any information they desire. The entire Harvard library could not fill the storage capacity of this system.)

The Lunar Calendar

The fourth “*corps de ballet*” is in the image of a lunar calendar with a large “X” through it. It is larger than any of the previous “*corps de ballets*” and when it is projected onto the set it accents the vertical and horizontal planes by resting partially on the wall and largely on the floor, seeming to reach outward in space. It follows the same path again as its predecessors, joining the activity of the “ouija” block and the beating arms of the performers in rhythm to the Kabuki music. Reaching the performers, it settles with its lower horizontal edge at their ankles. In time to the music, it repeatedly marches up and down from their heels to their calves. The cumulative effect of the beating arms, the disproportioned torsos and legs, and the jumping calendar at their ankles gives the illusion of jumping cartoon legs on the performers, much like the period cartoons of the 1940s. The performers are transformed into live animations.

Taking its cue from the music, the calendar slips down and fades away. The performer on the right stands and walks behind the wall, stage left, and disappears. The “ouija” block with its two hands disappears. Projected on the dark floor at the right front is the final verse of the poem: “Inhale exhale practice of torsion, inhale exhale, the true and false occult.”

The whole poem, “The True and False Occult,” that has been presented reads:

while

*Henry draws twelve on ten
so that his days can be in meter also
the conclusion being Meno Uno Anno
ogni venti anni
to change the economics (I suggest) et la
forza d'impulso (in pounds and meters).*

“When ya’ gonna leave me Henry?”

*or... the gravity of the situation
with implications*

*zero uno zero
according to the bench in the Seaweek trick
una “gi” zero “gi”*

It appears more than once.

*hair tuft above waterline
and torqued and practiced
U’s translates (in double tongue)*

C’e una “erre”

C’e una “bi”

C’e una “cappa”

*worrisome rough skinned bather characters;
i.e., w. to literature.*

inhale

exhale

practice of torsion

inhale

exhale

the true and false occult

The music slows to a quiet pause. The woman (Fisher) who until now has been operating the projectors occupies the empty bench. She and her companion on her left face each other, their profiles to the audience. They raise their outside arms, index fingers pointing, and begin a new beating pattern that builds with the resumption and eventual climax of the Kabuki music.

The Venetian Blinds Open

The five separate pieces composing the floor are now individually and violently pulled back against the wall. (This is accomplished by pulling the pleated posterboard with a string laced through the slats in the style of venetian blinds.)

Fans and Benches

The two performers on the benches continue to beat their arms and now they add a back-and-forth lean to their unison movement. Their movement and the music end together abruptly. They stand doubled over, shuffling their feet in quick percussive, Japanese-like footsteps. The scene ends with them distributing black paper fans and torquoise miniature benches across the newly-bared floor. End of Scene 1.

Scene 2

Fisher remains alone at the upstage left corner of the performance area. She stands against a black curtain and is dressed in yellow blousy shorts (sweatpants hiked up to her thighs) and a light-colored, tightfitting long-sleeved t-shirt that flares out from the waist. The light on her is yellow.

The ensuing five-minute solo dance alternates her pose from a profile to a frontal to a profile position. Frequently her face is turned to the audience while her body is in profile to them. Another common spinal position has the upper torso turned in a way that places the upper body in a frontal position to the audience, and the lower body, pelvis and legs, in a profile to them.

As she begins, her face is to the audience, the torso in a severe twist with the left arm contradicting the turn by slinging across the body in the direction of the hips. The left index finger points outward to the right wall, just a few feet from where she is standing. The left arm, while creating a third pull on the spine, continues the sloping line formed by her neck and upper back—a slouched posture that her naturally long proportions transform to the “character” study of the “Bather” series by the living American painter R.B. Kitaj.

The right hand clutches her forehead and will remain in this gesture well into the solo. The sharp angle of the right elbow supporting this gesture—the elbow is held out at a right angle to the body—is meant to act as a sort of counterpoint to the three-part swirl in the body and left arm.

The Stance

The right leg is forward, and the left leg is back carrying most of the weight. This stance will change only twice in the solo—to a frontal position with legs parallel, and to the final profile, in which the legs are parallel and together. In this pose, she isolates her movement in the left hand and right foot. Alternately she extends the thumb, then index finger. The thumb, when extended, is vertical; the index finger, horizontal. Simultaneously she points the toes of her right foot downward—a dancer’s point except that the right heel stays on the floor, lending a clawlike character to the gesture. The toes then beat upward, the heel still rooted to the floor, with the metatarsal arch responsible for the flex of the foot. The finger and toe isolations match the percussive rhythms of the music for the first phrases.

A series of precise arm and leg gestures follows: The left arm swings backward to her side and beats up and down. The right heel leaves the floor, the right knee jiggles. The left elbow bends the forearm downward. The left hand circles from the waist. She straightens both knees rigidly. The left arm sweeps across the body in its initial position. The torso inclines forward. The torso settles into a backward slouch of the spine. At this point, the first few phrases of the music are repeated, and Fisher likewise repeats the earlier finger and toe isolations.

A new block of gestures follows: the left arm circles clockwise to the ceiling. It is retracted sharply in to the ribs. The forearm beats a small rapid pulse. The arm extends toward the floor with index finger pointing. The shoulder pushes forward. In this position it pumps the arm up and down. The tongue wags side to side from her open mouth. The arm pumps, the tongue wags in alternation. The elbow retracts in to the pelvis. Fisher opens her mouth into a wide scream and moves her tongue in and out eight times. Her left arm flings backward to her left side, her mouth still poised in the scream.

The legs at this point shift their stance to a frontal parallel position. Balanced on her right leg, Fisher dangles and nervously beats and flops the left foot against the right ankle. The left hand signs the alphabet for the deaf in rapid succession and in random order. She inserts her own percussive gestures and an occasional unexpected relaxed gesture. The total effect of the signing develops into a blur with the *accelerando* of the music, and this blurred action is pulled in close to her chest.

The musical phrase ends. The original few phrases are heard again and Fisher assumes the original stance with right leg forward and repeats the initial finger-toe isolations. A gong sounds; her left arm swings back once more to her left side. Her right heel leaves the floor, the right hand for the first time releases its grip on the forehead and pulses in and out two inches in front of the forehead. Simultaneously, the left hand is brought to the left temple and pulses while the right knee bobs up and down with the heel off the floor. A dissonant chord is struck and both hands clamp onto the forehead, the elbows at a right angle from the head. She freezes; the weight is on the balls of the feet. Projected over her head are, in sequence, an "a", a "b", an "r". They shift to and fro into a blurred effect. A new letter is added, the first disappears, and so on. She has shifted her fingers to her cheeks and is poking at her face with small percussive movements of tensely arched fingers. Her right arm extends to her right side in a pedestrian-paced movement and returns. Her elbows vibrate, tremble toward each other as if pulled together by a magnet.

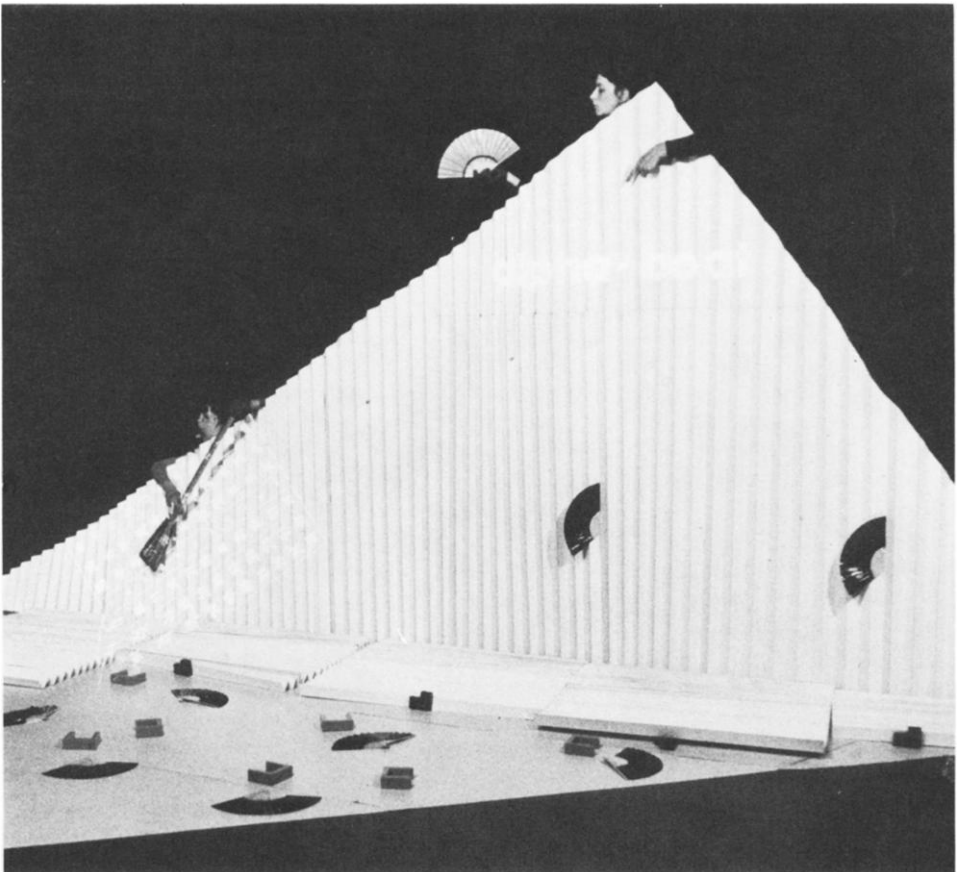
She turns her body profile to the audience, the legs together so that they are seen as only one leg, and she slowly bounces up and down from the knees, in and out from the hips. Rising up onto the balls of her feet, she leans forward. Her left fist strokes at her left upper buttock. Her right hand hangs at the wrist and flaps to a blurred smear. It is carried to the back of the head, the chest. It moves vertically, horizontally, palm up, palm down. The heels jerk the entire body up and down. Suddenly she is stooping, knees bent, torso forward, vibrating hands clasping out from the chest. As the light fades on her, the yellow letters overhead slow to a pace at which one can discern the word "ABRACADABRA."

Scene 3

The triangular wall is illuminated, as is its floor. The floor is now of a coral color, spread with a random pattern of black fans and turquoise benches. At the apex of the wall is a woman's head (Beth Fein). At the lower end of the wall, a second woman's head (Janet Jaffe) slowly emerges. This is the DANCE OF THE FLOATING HEADS done to

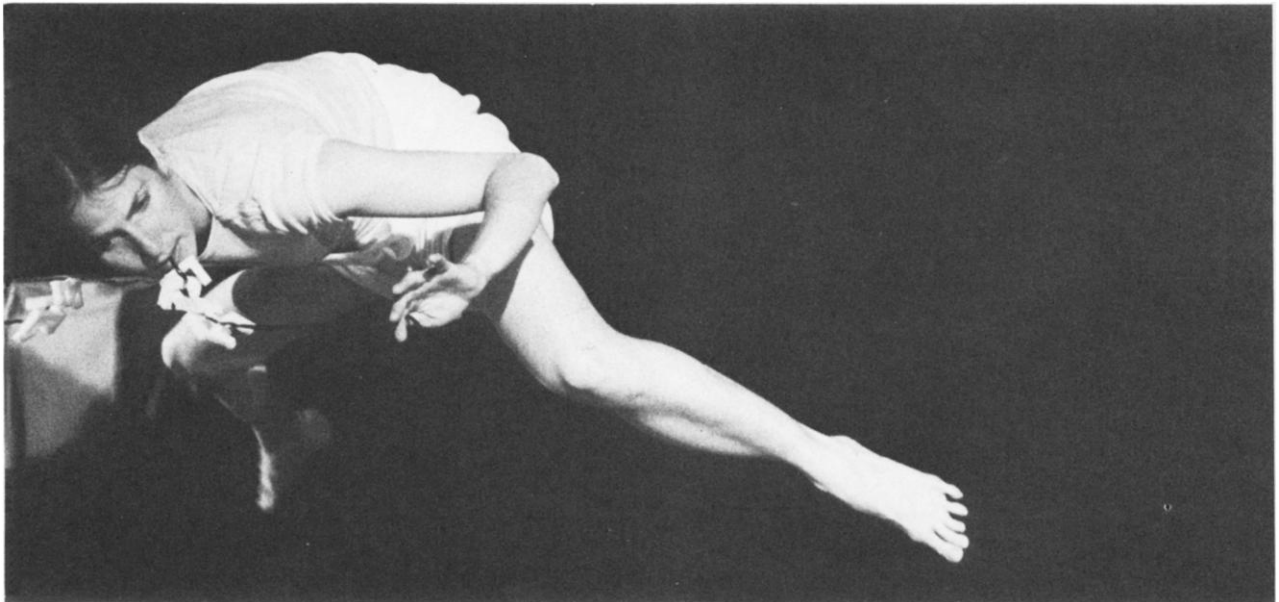
traditional Japanese Gagaku music (*Etenraku*). In slow motion the heads move along the wall toward each other. The corrugation of the wall enhances the floating effect by lending an allusory bobbing motion to their movement. At the center, face-to-face, they pause. The first woman turns 180 degrees and glides back to her original position.

At the top of the wall, the first woman raises her right hand in an aqua glove. A projection of an airplane appears on the upper wall just under her head. The second woman, who is at the middle of the wall, turns 180 degrees and glides down the wall. Before reaching the bottom, she pauses. The first woman raises a bent right arm above the wall. The airplane "flies" across the wall to disappear. A black and white crayon follows in its path and stops under first woman's head. (This effect is achieved by an old-fashioned slide projector with a two-slide tray that pulls the slide into place.) The second woman's head continues to the bottom of the wall and disappears. The first woman's right arm points to her missing companion. The crayon travels across the wall, right to left, toward where the second woman has disappeared. A slide projection of the English alphabet (a rectangular-shaped picture of press-type) appears on the lower wall, matching its long upper edge to the sloping line of the wall. The second woman's head reappears. The first woman lowers her right arm. The crayon fades out. The second woman raises her foot and wiggles the toes. The first extends her right arm once more above the wall, this time holding an aqua colored paper fan. She then wraps her left arm around the apex of the wall to point to the upper wall. The word "alpha-bed"



appears projected on this spot. She retracts her left arm. The second woman lowers her foot. She travels along the edge of the press-type alphabet/alpha-bed to its upper edge. The first woman wraps her left arm around the wall again and points. The word “alpha-wave” slides into position.

The women manipulate the entire wall so that it throbs and undulates as a wave. This lasts about 15 seconds. The first woman fans herself. The projected word “alpha-wave” disappears. She fans twice more. The second woman brings out an oar over the top of the wall and positions it in front of the alphabet/alpha-bed projection under her. The first woman again points with her left arm wrapped around the wall. Another word appears: “alpha-boat.” She retracts her left arm, lowers her fan, turns her head sharply 180 degrees and moves it up and over the zenith of the wall and disappears. The alphabet/alpha-bed under the second woman is replaced by a similarly-size rectangle full of Japanese-Chinese brushstroke characters. It is the same slide seen in Scene 1. It is the “alpha-boat.” Now the word “alpha-boat” at the upper wall disappears. The second woman begins to row. A pleated paper sail is hoisted behind her head. An aquagloved hand appears to her right side. She gives the oar to the aqua hand and then bobs her head about as if in stormy seas. The first woman’s head emerges behind the second’s and also bobs. Both heads stop abruptly. They lean over the edge of the “alpha-boat,” open their mouths into a wide scream and protrude their tongues in and out three times. They shield their eyes with their hands, the first woman looking out to the audience, the second looking up to the apex of the wall. Both heads, the sail, and the alpha-boat beneath them glide together up the wall to the top. They lower the sail. They smoke cigarettes. The final verse of the poem reappears on the wall: “inhale exhale practice of torsion, inhale exhale the true and false occult.” The music and lights fade. End of Scene 3.



The True and False Occult: Scene 3 (left), Scene 4 (above)

Scene 4

The same Gagaku music (*Etenraku*) is played at a very slow speed on the tape recorder. To the right of the wall and floor Fisher stands straddling a mirror, her torso resting horizontally along its top edge. Her left elbow juts out from her shoulder, and the fingers are tensely poised at her mouth. She plays the fingers up and down while pulling them away from her face. It is an action almost violent in its deliberateness, and it is repeated five times. With her left arm initiating the breast-stroke and her left leg rising to complete the stroke, she achieves the illusion of swimming in water. She has performed seven of these strokes when a woman (Beth Fein) appears and walks to the right edge of the coral floor. The woman hunches over the top of her own bench, kneeling with her chest resting forward on her thighs. Dangling from her mouth on a string is a cluster of small cut-out figures. Her right hand stretches the elastic string to its maximum length. It is a quick gesture, martial-arts in character, that reveals a line of five white benches. She releases them to their cluster pattern and re-stretches them a total of five times. With her hands perched off the front edge of her bench and her feet off the other, she paddles hands and feet back and forth in unison. It is a cartoonish-image, both in the quality of the movement isolation and also in the proportion of the large folded body in contrast to the small gesture underneath.

The third performer (Janet Jaffe) appears, walks to the left edge of the coral floor not far from its forward acute angle, and settles onto her own bench in a manner similar to that of the other woman. She also has a cluster hanging from her mouth, and she extends her elastic cord of five small benches five times. She then paddles 10 times, feet and hands in unison in the same gesture the other initiated.

Fisher places her left foot on the floor. She violently pulls her hand from her mouth 10 times. Black out. It is the end. The performance has lasted about 30 minutes.