

**DUMB TYPE: EXPLORING  
FUTURE VISIONS OF  
COMMUNICATION  
THROUGH  
CONSIDERATIONS OF  
THE SELF AND OTHER**  
(2000)

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DUMB TYPE IS AN artist group formed in 1984, largely by students of Kyoto City University of Arts, with the main objective of creating performance works.<sup>1</sup> The group's name was chosen in the hope of creating a new form of communication using various methods of expression (transmission or media) without relying on language or formalized narratives, hence the English term “dumb” meaning “unable to speak.” While members gathered from a wide range of fields including film and new media, sculpture, painting, architecture, design, and computer programming, it was performance<sup>2</sup> that was chosen as the discipline for combining these expressions.

The 1980s was a time of innovation in which new communication technologies were developed one after another. Announcements about the development of the computer, video appliances, the Walkman, CDs, and other devices that have become ubiquitous in our lives today happened in quick succession; it was the dawn of the high-tech age. Contrary to the development of these communication tools, the 1980s was also a time in which the impossibility of mutual understanding between people started to become apparent all over the world. Some were unable to talk to each other, some were lonely or didn't feel they could express themselves; there was a strong sense of a loss of the self, with various incidents and social problems emerging one after another. The relationship between the rapid development (or change?) of technology and social systems on one hand, and the human mind on the other, was out of balance. In response to these situations, various new forms of artistic expression were born and among them emerged multimedia performance,<sup>3</sup> a multifaceted artform that made comprehensive use of various means of expression (image and video, sound, dance, etc.). Dumb Type also began its activities in syntony with such movements.

Generally speaking, groups or organizations made by human beings often adopt pyramidal structures where leaders have assistants and other subordinates below them. Most companies are a case in point. Many organizations in the field of performing arts<sup>4</sup> also follow a pyramidal structure with a director, actors, stage managers, and lighting and costume staff. The same applies to the works themselves, consisting of script, direction, stage set, lighting direction, costume design, and props. Although these forms of organization are stable and

1 [The word used here is *butai hyōgen* 舞台表現.]

2 [Here, too, the word *butai hyōgen* 舞台表現 is used, but it is supplemented with the katakana transliteration of “performing arts” in brackets. The expression was, however, not adopted in the English translation so that it could be used for *butai geijutsu* 舞台芸術, which more directly translates to “performing arts.”]

3 The American artist Laurie Anderson (1947) is well known for this form of art. Making use of various technologies, she combines music, dance, and contemporary art. Notable works include *United States* (1982) and *Mister Heartbreak* (1984).

4 [The word used here is *butai geijutsu* 舞台芸術.]

functional, they tend to create hierarchy and power dynamics.

From the outset, Dumb Type happened to be a group of people who disliked such hierarchical structures, which led them to actively seek a way of organizing the group that did not generate hierarchy. As a result of much trial and error, the current style of Dumb Type gradually took shape: having no specific leader, working in a project-based manner instead of falling into an exclusive relationship among fixed members, not being tied to scripts or narratives and treating all elements of expression (the body, language, music, light, image and video, space, graphics, etc.) as equal in value, practicing consensual decision making as much as possible, and actively sharing information and skills.

What emerged from the experience of personal and collective trial and error was a question that concerns identity: what is the self? It is a question that cannot be avoided when thinking about relationships with others as well as with systems such as society and the state, and it inevitably became a core motivation for Dumb Type's production of works from the early days to the present.

In this article I will describe Dumb Type's activities by introducing the group's major works.

## ***AN ASTEROID ADDITION*** ***[Hito de no tashizan]*** ①

This work was created in 1984 just before the group was named Dumb Type. It is an outdoor performance that took place from evening to night in the courtyard of Kyoto City University of Arts. Based on the concept of dismantling language and narrative, various "life formation games"<sup>5</sup> were performed on a playing court drawn with white lines.

## ***PLAN FOR SLEEP #5*** ***[Suimin no keikaku #5]*** ②

This is one of the first series of works created after the formation of Dumb Type and the first work to be presented at an international festival. From 1984 to 1985 five performances and one exhibition were produced as part of the Plan for Sleep series. Centered around the journey (or movement) of four men and women, the work attempts to traverse space, time, history, and discourse. In an attempt to express

<sup>5</sup> [This was the expression used by the group to describe a performance based on mechanical movements gradually forming shapes and patterns.]

the concept from different angles throughout the series, the stage set and direction changed considerably with each performance. Notably, #5 was the first performance with a large-scale stage set and the first work invited to an international festival, marking a major turning point for Dumb Type. It was due to this work that the group established its own office and workshop space outside the university and its style of activity to one that continues to this day.

### 036 – PLEASURE LIFE ③④

This work was created in 1987 and was Dumb Type's first introduction of moving images into a performance. The audience looks down on and observes (like a TV show with audience participation) an artificial space reminiscent of a photo studio, composed of aluminum walls, artificial grass, a white floor divided into a lattice pattern (grid) of thirty-six squares, lighting for shooting, and TV cameras. In this space, two pairs of men and women play out a "life formation game" which viewers can watch simultaneously in two different ways: live on stage or live on the four TV monitors embedded at the front of the stage. With various images (news, movies, information about daily life, aerobics etc.) interspersing the live video on the monitors, and a slide projector throwing various situations onto the floor, the lives of the people on stage are shown to be affected by such information. The work was composed to have a high entertainment value, with the audience receiving a textbook called *Reference Book for Interpreting the Life Formation Game* providing guidance on various ways to read each scene, and the music and lighting styled as if the whole work were a TV show.

This work was created at a time when computer games were becoming increasingly popular and role-playing games were undergoing various developments. It depicts, with cynical humor, a society that has started to lose grip on the reality of daily life, one in which unlimited streams of information are sent through TVs and magazines, forcing people to unconsciously participate in a game of consumption. The work was produced around the time the Japanese economy was beginning its ascent towards a bubble, and the motivation for the work was anxiety over the signs of an unstable society in which, due to what could be characterized as information

addiction, people could only affirm their own existence through the exchange of information.

This work convinced the group's members of the possibilities of multimedia performance as of a form of expression unique to Dumb Type that made use of various media.

### ***PLEASURE LIFE* ⑤–⑦**

This work is a revised version of the previous work *036 – PLEASURE LIFE* (1987). Due to space related constraints caused by touring overseas, the studio setting of the previous work was removed and the concept of the grid emphasized. Thirty-six metal stands called platforms, equipped with TV monitors, speakers, microphones, and other information terminals were arranged in a grid and the “life formation game” played by four men and women unfolded between them. The concept is almost identical to the previous work. This was the first work that was performed abroad, and at every city in the tour (United States, Germany, United Kingdom and Denmark), members met many artists of the same generation who were also dealing with the relationship between information society and identity, and realized that the social phenomena presented in the work touched upon issues common to the whole world. This work was also produced in the form of an art exhibition (installation) under the title *PLAYBACK* ⑧ (1989).

### ***pH* ⑨–⑭**

This work stems from the discomfort that Dumb Type's members experienced at passport control every time they toured overseas: one-sided private questions; the certification provided by a one-page document and the impossibility of persuading someone in person without it; the power of an individual when backed by the power of a state; this mysterious thing called nationality; prejudice; a system where passports are the only locus of identity; political boundaries represented by a nation's borders; division (or borders) based on race, nationality, gender, and sexual orientation.

There are various borders between the individual and society. This performance was created by expanding this image of borders. The space consists of two rows of audience seats, long and thin and about

two meters high, that look down onto an elongated space sandwiched between them that acts as the stage. In this space is a device with two metal trusses that automatically move back and forth, reminiscent of a giant photocopier. The lower truss moves 40 centimeters above the floor and the performers have no choice but to avoid it by lying down or jumping over it. A slide projector is installed on the upper truss and various images are projected onto the floor. The images fall from overhead regardless of the performers' movements. The movement of the equipment and the projection of the images, lighting and music are all controlled and synchronized by a computer. The movements of the performers are inevitably affected and governed by these motions, thus becoming mechanical, but due to differences in bodies and accidents, discrepancies occur and a sense of incongruity with the system emerges.

The work toured domestically and internationally for over two years and, during this time, global society underwent some major changes including Japan's bubble economy, the Gulf War, and the development of communication systems as exemplified by the internet. The title of the work, *pH*, was taken from the symbol used to measure the degree of alkalinity and acidity, and the work unexpectedly ended up functioning as something that assessed the various borders of a changing world. In 1990, a video installation ⑮ was also produced as part of this work.

## S/N ⑮-⑳

This project began in 1992, when one of the members announced to his close friends that he was infected with HIV. At that time, there was still no knowledge or awareness of AIDS in Japan and various prejudices and inadequacies in the medical system were major problems. The infection of the member caused a huge stir in the surrounding community. For over a year, members had discussions regarding one another's prejudices, sexuality, gender, and the problems with conventional concepts, attitudes, and systems. These discussions extended beyond the production of work, also involving many people outside the group's members. During this time, various forms of activism happened in parallel to the production of work. Inevitably, this work came to carry a strong message and raised various issues to the

world. While the previous work *pH* (1990) was about borders and the relationship between the individual and society, *S/N* (1994) was about the borders between the self and the other. It was also a project that showed a new relationship between art and activism. Although the work was a multimedia performance that made extensive use of video and high-tech equipment, there was also heavy use of monologues and interviews as a result of seeking out a form of expression that felt authentic. Performances continued, and even after the member that was infected passed away in 1995, many activities centered around him still continue to this day.<sup>6</sup>

## OR 21-24

The starting point for this project was the notes left by the deceased member of the group about his thoughts on the border between life and death. In the middle of a blizzard nothing can be seen. You can't even see yourself; you don't know where you're standing, you don't even know whether you're dead or alive. Lost boundaries. A complete whiteout. Standing stock still in the midst of this, what can one do to take a step forward? Like the previous two works, this work also dealt with borders. However, this time, the group sought to create new borders for living amidst lost boundaries. The stage is simply a pure white semicircular screen on a pure white floor. With video projections, a blinking strobe light and heavy bass sounds, it is a work that challenges the limits of human sensory perception. This was the first time the group produced a work while staying abroad and by renting out an entire theatre.<sup>7</sup> Practicing with the equipment set up as though it would be in the actual performance allowed for very subtle synchronization and meant the inter-relationship between image, sound, lighting, and performance became more meticulous. A video installation 25 was also produced as part of the work.

Currently, Dumb Type is already in the process of producing a new work which is scheduled to premiere in France in October 1999. Taking considerations that surround human memory and one's perception of the world as a starting point, it will be a work that questions the possibilities of change in the world and in human beings as we enter a new century.

As outlined above, Dumb Type has continued to consider the

<sup>6</sup> In 1992, Dumb Type member Furuhashi Teiji told his friends he was infected with HIV. He died of septicemia in October 1995. In 1993, a non-profit community center called Artscape started and in the same year the AIDS Poster Project (APP) began at Artscape. In 1994, Furuhashi participated in the 10th International AIDS Conference (Yokohama) with a project called *Love Positive* centered around APP. As of 1999, the activities of Artscape, APP, Bazaar Café, QFF and Women's Diary are still ongoing. See APP's website for more details: <http://ha2.seikyou.ne.jp/home/art-scape/app.index.html> [now defunct].

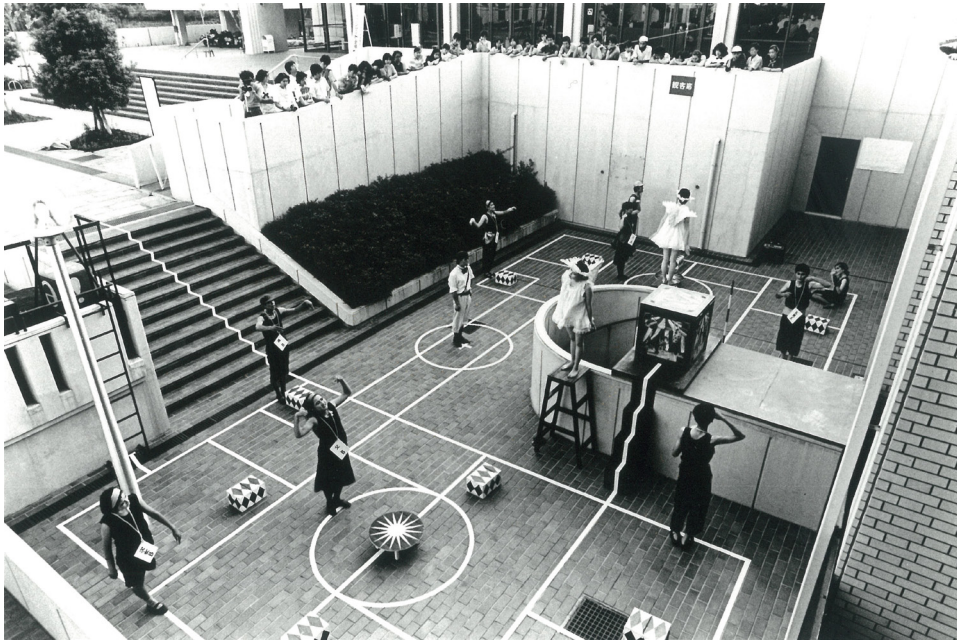
<sup>7</sup> Created while staying in Maubeuge, a town in northern France, for over a month from February 1997. For more information about the Maubeuge Festival visit: <http://www.lemanege.com>

self and other for many years. However, every time we collaborate, I become keenly aware of the difficulty of building relationships. In the process of producing the works, various attempts have been made to find a way of organizing a group without hierarchy. What form should the contractual (economical) relationship of the group take in a way that does not restrain it? What are the conditions to be a member? What is a system of consensual decision making?<sup>8</sup> How open is the office to outsiders? How should equipment be shared and organized? What is the method of communication? There has been a lot of experimentation with specific environments and systems. For example, new members are determined not through a system such as an audition that creates a hierarchical relationship between those that choose and those that are chosen, but it is left to something as vague as chance. “Let’s see what happens after becoming friends . . .” The word “friend” can often lead to misunderstandings, but within this ambiguity lies hope for the possibility of future relationships. Building relationships with others is a never-ending endeavor.

What kind of communication will we have achieved in the future?

8 [The word used here is *gōgi-sei* 合議制.]

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①

*AN ASTEROID ADDITION* [Hito de no tashizan] (1984), Performance. Photo by Nakabayashi Masaki.



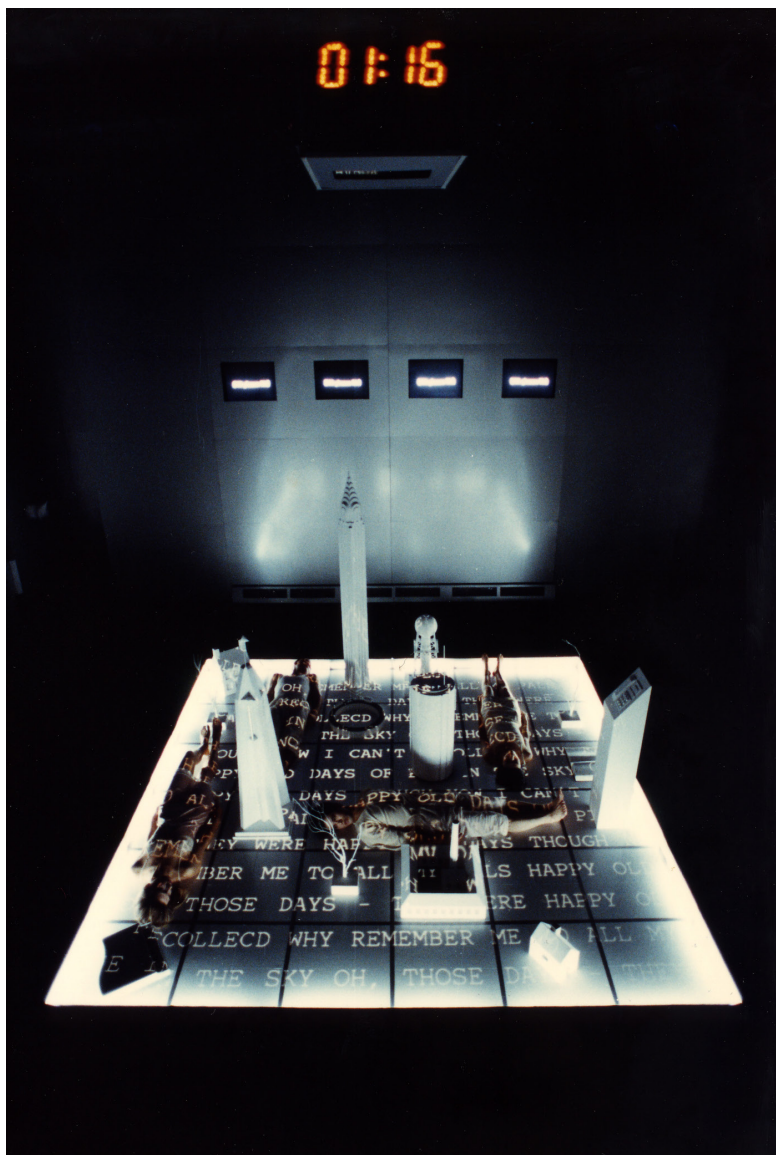
②

*PLAN FOR SLEEP #5* [Suimin no keikaku #5] (1986), Performance. Photo by Fukunaga Kazuo.



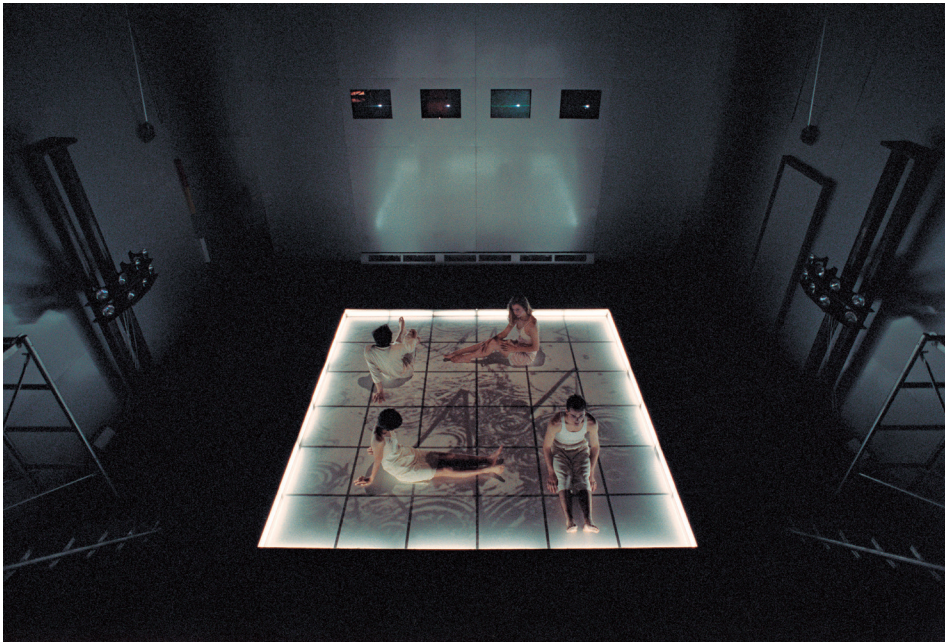
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*PLAN FOR SLEEP #5* [Suimin no keikaku #5]  
(1986), Performance. Photo by Fukunaga Kazuo.



③

*036 - PLEASURE LIFE* (1987),  
Performance. Photo by Fukunaga Kazuo.



④

036 – PLEASURE LIFE (1987), Performance.

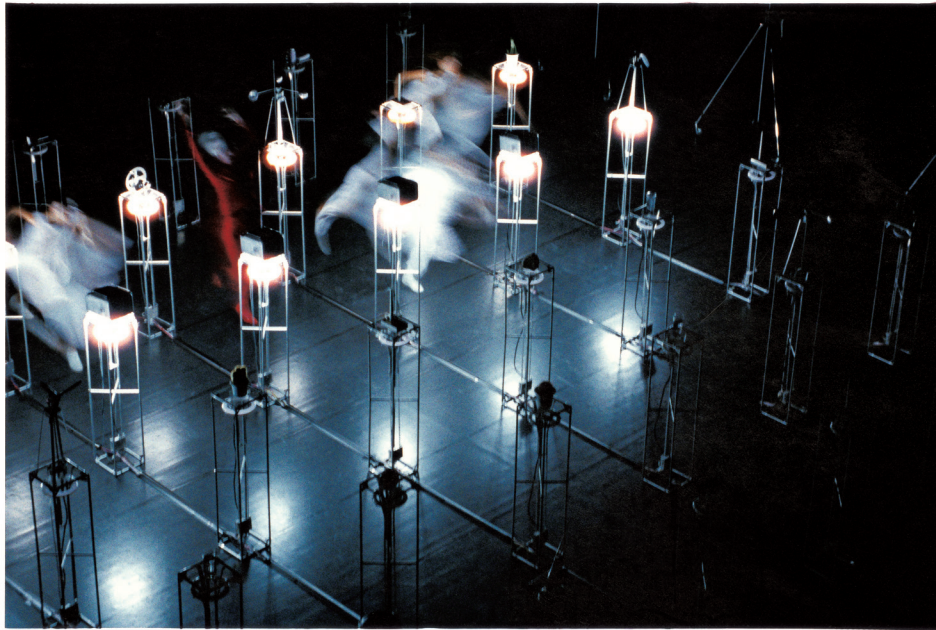
Photo by Fukunaga Kazuo.



⑤

PLEASURE LIFE (1988). Photo by Fukunaga

Kazuo.



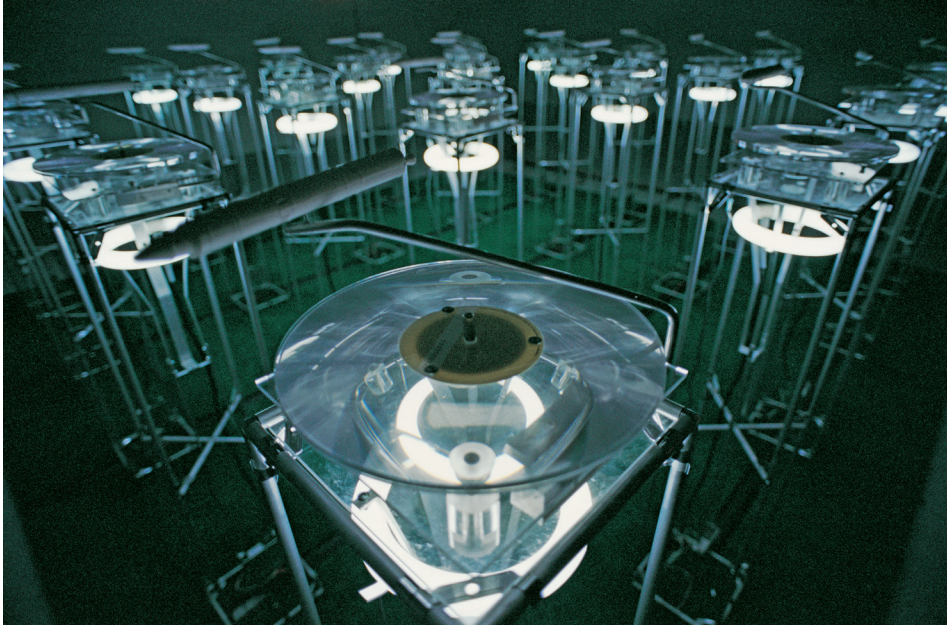
⑥

*PLEASURE LIFE* (1988). Photo by Fukunaga Kazuo.



⑦

*PLEASURE LIFE* (1988). Photo by Fukunaga Kazuo.



⑧

*PLAYBACK* (1991), Installation. Photo by Takatani Shiro.



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*pH* (1990), Performance, Spiral (Tokyo).

Photo by Fukunaga Kazuo.



10

*pH* (1991), Performance, Brooklyn Bridge Anchorage (New York). Photo by Takatani Shiro.

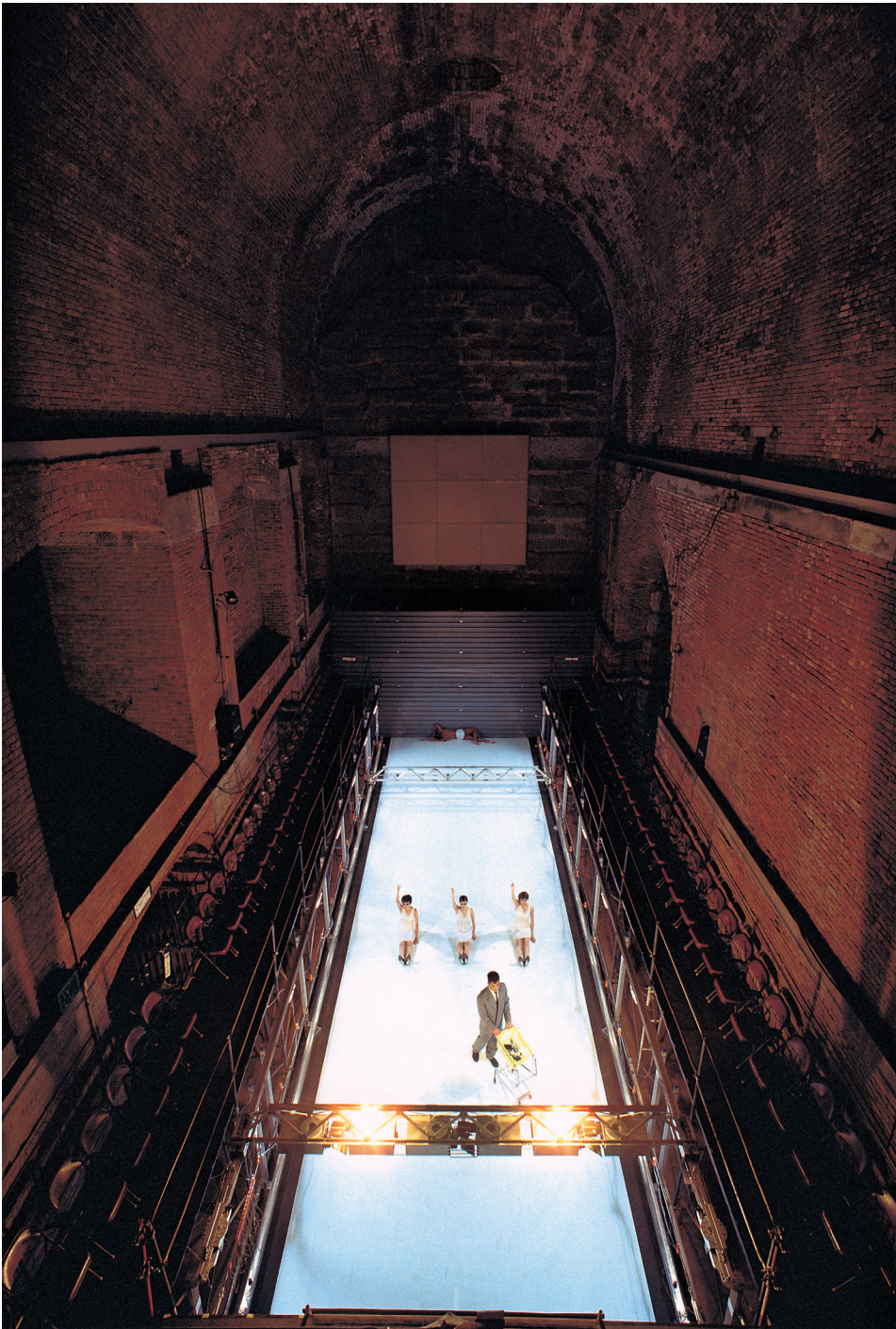


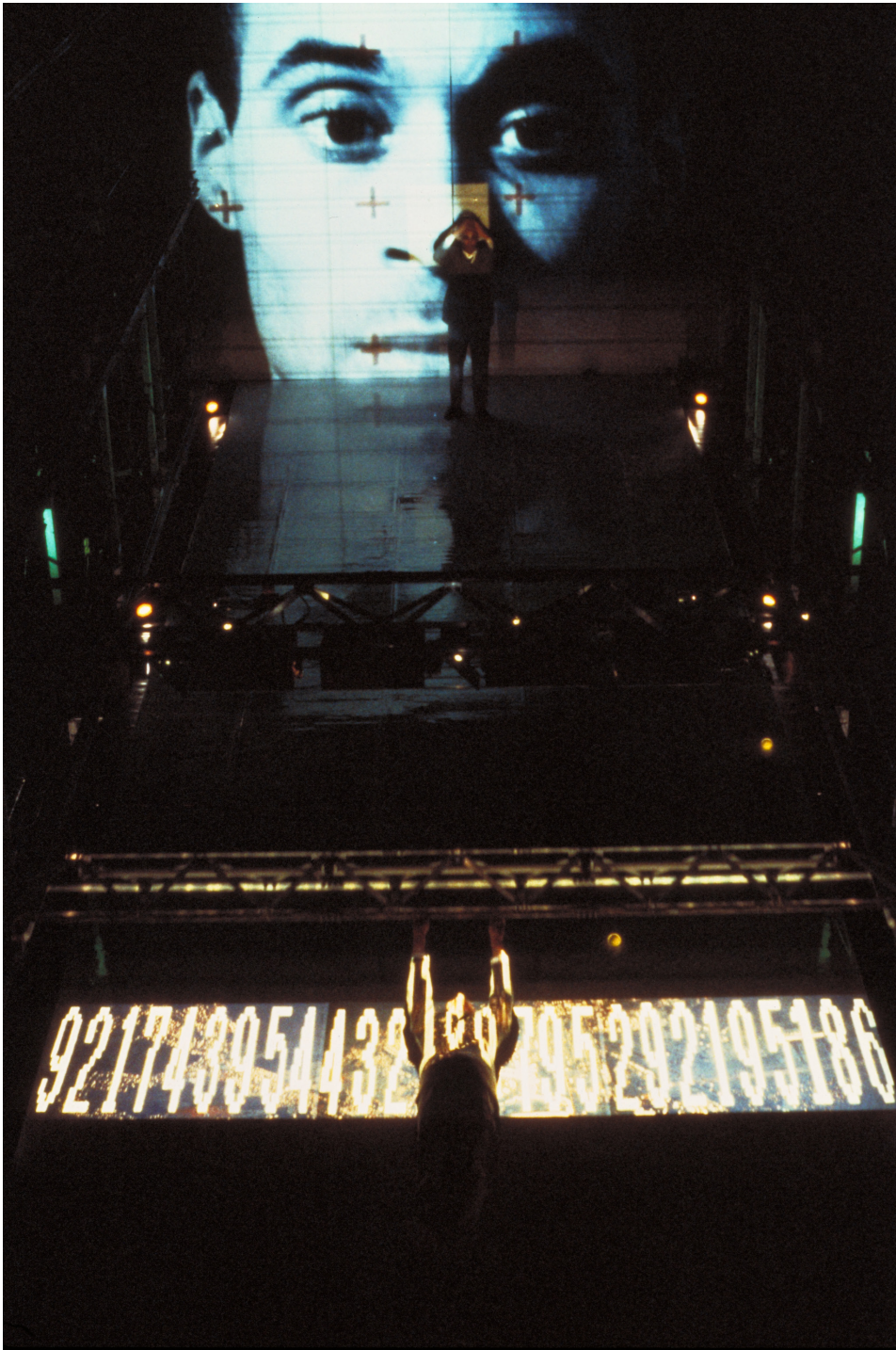
①

*pH* (1991), Performance, Brooklyn Bridge Anchorage (New York). Photo by Takatani Shiro.

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*pH* (1991), Performance, Brooklyn Bridge Anchorage (New York). Photo by Takatani Shiro.





13

*pH* (1993), Performance, Spiral Hall (Tokyo). Photo by Takatani Shiro.

Please note image 14 from the original article could not be obtained for reprinting.



15

*pH* (1990), Video Installation, Spiral Garden (Tokyo). Photo by Fukunaga Kazuo.



16

*S/N* (1995), Performance, Spiral (Tokyo).  
Photo by Fukunaga Kazuo.



17

S/N (1995), Performance, Spiral (Tokyo).

Photo by Fukunaga Kazuo.



18

S/N (1995), Performance, Spiral (Tokyo).

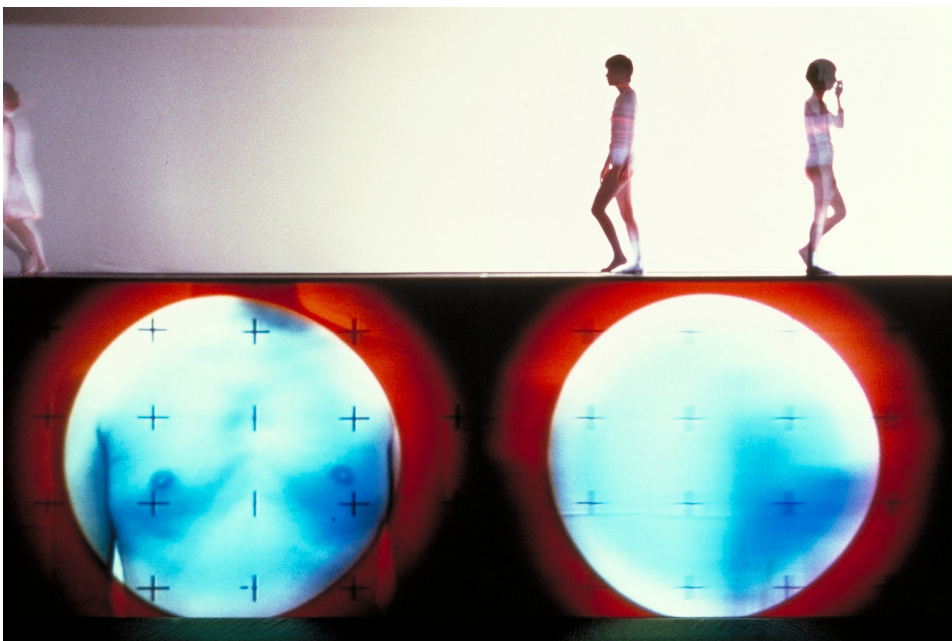
Photo by Fukunaga Kazuo.



19

S/N (1995), Performance, Spiral (Tokyo).

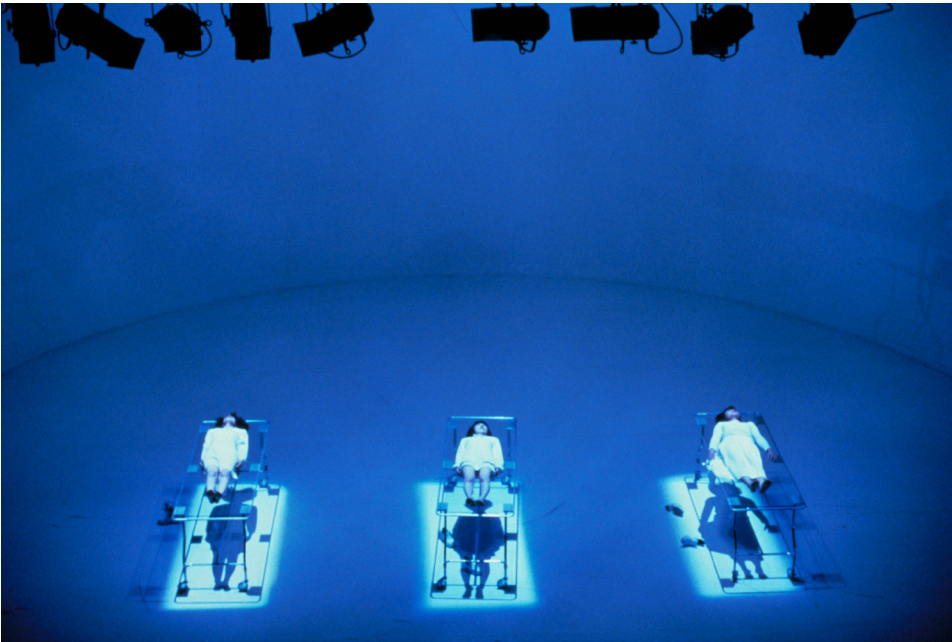
Photo by Takatani Yoko.



20

S/N (1995), Performance, Spiral (Tokyo).

Photo by Takatani Yoko.



②

*OR* (March, 1997), Performance, Maison des Arts (France). Photo by Emmanuel Valette.



22

*OR* (March, 1997), Performance, Maison des Arts (France). Photo by Emmanuel Valette.



23

*OR* (March, 1997), Performance, Maison des Arts (France). Photo by Emmanuel Valette.



24

*OR* (October, 1997), Performance, Park Tower Hall (Tokyo). Photo by Fukunaga Kazuo.



25

*OR* (1997), Video Installation, ICC (Tokyo).  
Permanent Exhibition Work.

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