



# DB 14

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The Dallas Biennial (DB) is an artist-run biennial and non-profit curated by Michael Mazurek and Jesse Morgan Barnett. DB looks to the now ubiquitous format as a means to advocate art production and investigate exhibition and curation. [Dallasbiennial.org](http://Dallasbiennial.org)

Page 4: Richard Roth, *30 Compacts*, overall dimensions variable, 1995 – present

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# An Interview with Performance Artist Nancy Popp

## Power, Activism, and the Female Body in Performance

By Performance Southwest  
March 31, 2014

**Nancy Popp** is a Los Angeles-based artist and educator. Her performances, videos, drawings, and photographs draw upon the rich traditions of durational, corporeal performance and political intervention to explore relations between body and site, and often incorporate public and architectural spaces.

The co-founders of Performance Southwest (PSW), Courtney Brown and Alison Starr, sat down with Nancy to discuss her *Untitled (Street Performances)* series as part of the 2014 Dallas Biennial (DB14).

**Performance Southwest (PSW):** Can you share a little about how you chose the construction site that you used for your *Untitled (Street Performance)* performance you created as part of the DB14?

**Nancy Popp (NP):** I choose construction sites based on their location in the city, the purpose of the building being constructed and its relationship to the community around it. I'm interested in critiquing redevelopment in areas of a city that are being gentrified, asking questions such as, who is eventually served and how does the development change the community? In investigating the restrictions on these sites, I also choose sites based on their accessibility and if I can feasibly enter them to scale and perform on them; I take my physical abilities and limits into account when choosing a site.

**PSW:** What are the core ideas in your work?

**NP:** A friend of mine, writer and art historian Janet Owen Driggs, talks about this kind of democratic humanism of the body. The body can be a lot of things – it's a layer, it's a form of identity and I think about it as a site, like a landscape or a place is a site. And it has similar readings and history and layers. I think about exploring the body as a territory and a site similar to the landscape and how it is explored.

And then I have this deep connection to activism and protest, the use of the body as a representation in that way of an individual, of a perspective, of a viewpoint of a framework or subjectivity. There is a lot, there is a multi-layered approach to the body as the site of a practice.

**PSW:** Where does the activism come into your work, what does it reference?

**NP:** I was involved in Occupy Wall Street and Occupy LA. I see the importance of activism and the long history

of putting yourself in a public space to represent ideas – the power of the individual. This relates to the agency of the individual in a public space, the presence of a person in space, in a space that is accessible to a broader community.

There was a talk given by Judith Butler at the 2011 Venice Biennial titled “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street” right before the Occupy Movement started. It was about the presence of bodies in the street and what it

means in terms of the role of society and the political force of public protest. What does it mean to have an individual occupy public space? I think bodies and spaces are really intimately related. And bodies change identity in different spaces/places.

**PSW:** Can you speak to what the female body in the space means in your work?

**NP:** This is something I've explored when a performance happens in public, particularly in other countries. Because women's bodies were not necessarily bodies in public; they were bodies in private, bodies of intimacy in a domestic environment. Women (thus women's bodies) haven't always had a public role in public space. They were much more highly controlled in public space.

For me it's an exploration of the agency of a person. Because I happen to be female there is a gender read on that. There's definitely a feminist overtone to the work, and I don't deny that at all; it's very clear to me but I don't want the emphasis to be on gender or sexual identity.

The performance I created for DB14 was very matter of fact. It's not a performance of femininity in any way; it's a performance of individual agency that happens to be in a gendered body. In that way it pushes against all these gendered limitations that we have in public space, or the notion of what women are supposed to do.

**PSW:** In light of that, what is your process in considering interjecting yourself in private spaces, like construction sites, that clearly state, “Do not to enter”?

**NP:** I didn't target those sites because they are off limits. I'm interested in construction sites because architecture itself is so influential in shaping a city: how the city is used, who the city is for and what communities or demographics are welcome, or unwelcome, there. It's a literal investment on the part of the community. It's a capital investment, an investment in shaping the landscape and an investment in what that land is going to be used for.

I see architecture as a kind of crystallized concentration of resources and power in a city. The values of a society are very clear. They are represented by the architecture.



*Untitled (Street Performances)* 2014 Dallas Biennial  
March 30th, 2014  
McKinney/Routh Site  
Mason Line; Photo: Michael Mazurek

I think a construction site is really interesting because it's in a state where it's still open. It's not fixed, it can still be accessed in a certain way and the resources are still in the process of forming the space and the resources are more transparent and clear – who's building it, who's funding it and why.

That's why I'm interested in construction sites. They just happen to be off limits. They happen to be considered private property. It's a transformative site that was once public that was then bought and now is under construction.

This is a transition of a public space (one used for one purpose) being transformed to be used for another purpose. It just happens to be a period where the site is being controlled and so people aren't being allowed to enter. I don't really use it because it's off limits. I choose it for other reasons. However, one of the consequences of



Untitled (Street Performances) Broad Museum Construction Site, Los Angeles  
February 10th, 2013  
Mason Line; Photo: Sandra de la Loza

those reasons is that they start to block off access to the site.

**PSW:** How do you decide where you make your work and will you speak to the variety of locales you utilize for your performance work (i.e. private vs. public)?

**NP:** I try to be really careful how I choose the site by researching each place. I try to get to know the people in the local community, to help me choose the location. Or I sometimes talk to them and let them know the issues I am interested in and let them suggest sites to me. I do this everywhere I stage a public performance. I look at it as an opportunity to get to know the city and try and understand it from different viewpoints.

**PSW:** Can you talk a little about the Artist's role within their respective community, and your role, as an artist and activist, as a native of Los Angeles?

**NP:** The way the gentrification in Los Angeles moves is from west to east, from the ocean inland. It's now past downtown and is moving into the traditional Hispanic neighborhoods in East L.A. and in Boyle Heights. There is a really interesting movement going on in East L.A. Local people call it "Gente-fication", from the Spanish word "Gente", meaning "person". The movement is about local resident-centered re-development that meets the needs of the people who currently live there; it's not about displacing them for more wealthy individuals to move in.

The neighborhood that I live in used to have a huge K-Mart store. By the time I moved there it had already shuttered and it has been empty since. Once you have that massive parking lot and huge structure, how do you tear it down and build again? It takes massive resources. I think that it is really important to think about how the landscape is being changed and what the effects are over time, how it is going to keep changing.

I wonder sometimes if it's like Manifest Destiny and Westward Expansion made its way to the West coast and is now rolling back east in these waves of gentrification. It's like economic expansion. You can't have constant economic expansion. The bubble is going to have to burst. Now we are seeing these bubbles and they pop. Then, there is an economic recession and on the rebound there

is another bubble that's formed. And then that bubble pops, and is followed by another recession and so on.

It's this kind of cycle that's being perpetuated, where there's a new wave of economic colonialism each time. People get forced out as others that take advantage, come back, and buy up again. The cycle continues.

Just a couple weeks ago in LA there was a talk by a great artist and community organizer named Nicholas Lampert; he just wrote a book called "The People's Art History of the United States". Nicholas is based in Milwaukee, where I am in residence at Lynden Sculpture Gardens through the end of 2014. In the book, he reframes art through social movements and activist principles and protests; it's great.

The question was raised, "How do you form that history?" All history is exclusionary. Any history you form is going to leave someone out. Representation is inherently

undemocratic. Another thing we talked about is how can you tie in the reality that artists are part of gentrification. Artists seed this gentrification without realizing it. Wherever artists go, the developers will follow.

How can artists use their influence and agency to push back against the developers and say, if you are going to come into this neighborhood you need to bring in resources that people want and need? I think that's not outside the realm of possibility but it does mean acknowledging what role artists play and then working with the "opposing" side, and leveraging what influence we (as artists) have.

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*Performance Southwest (PSW) is a project in support of the proliferation of performance art outside of the mainstream American discourse. PSW's mission is to educate audiences through collaboration in practice, scholarship, and curatorial development.*  
[Vimeo.com/performanceSW](https://vimeo.com/performanceSW)



Untitled (Street Performance) 2014 Dallas Biennial  
March 30th, 2014 McKinney/Routh Site  
Photo: Trae Rowland



*Untitled (Street Performances) 2014 Dallas Biennial, Harwood Site*  
March 28th, 2014  
Photo: Nancy Popp



*Untitled (Street Performances) 2014 Dallas Biennial, McKinney/Routh Site*  
March 28th, 2014  
Photo: Nancy Popp