

Art

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Against Biennialisation

Francis Frascina

Arabic Agendas

Omar Kholeif

Inside Outsider Art

Paul O'Kane

Bea McMahon

Profile by Chris Fite-Wassilak

the course of 37 minutes, the audience – which is seated among, and able to walk around this strange system – watch as sweat from the seven performers, who are civilians rather than actors or artists, is collected and pumped through a cryptic system, treated in a makeshift lab and eventually sent via what appears to be a live video feed to a Ghanaian desert savannah. The video and performance were perfectly in sync, adding to the authenticity of the strange experiment. The performance was an excellent amalgamation of Kessler's kinetic sculpture and Rottenberg's quirky videos extended into a live performance.

An inaugural prize – the Malcolm McLaren Award – was presented to Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson for *Bliss*: a 12-hour operatic marathon of a scene from *The Marriage of Figaro*. The full cast of singers repeatedly performed the penultimate two minutes of the lavish opera, while visitors were able to wander in and out over the duration. While *Bliss* was undoubtedly an audience favourite, the prize could equally have been awarded to Liz Magic Laser for her 'living newspaper'. *I Feel Your Pain* deftly used live actors planted within the audience, combined with instant video relay, to perform a melodramatic romantic script, which was pieced together by the artist from fragments of recent political coverage. The technical precision and intellectual acuity of Laser's performance was among the best in live work seen in recent years.

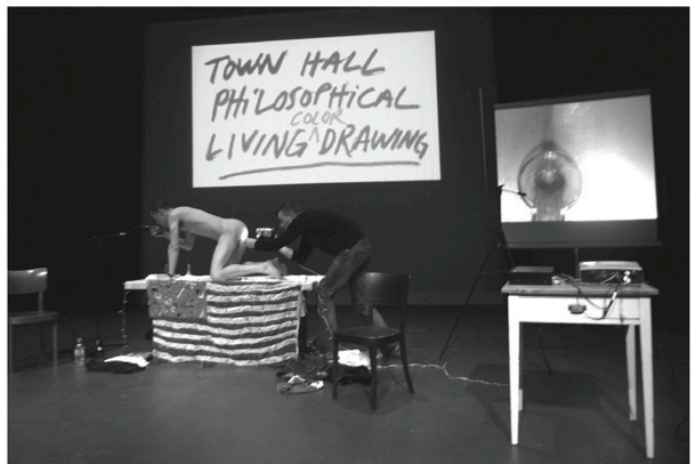
'Performa' took place in lecture theatres, on TV, in galleries and museums, as well as on the street. Events took the form of rap jousts (Rashaad Newsome), Harlem ballroom voguing (Iona Rozeal Brown), a ballet (Will Cotton), stand-up comedy (Performa Ha Ha), a séance (Laurel Nakadate and James Franco) and lectures (Massimiliano Gioni, Boris Groys). This pluralist view of performance art is both its weakness as well as its strength. How do we differentiate visual art performance from theatre? Is this indeed a useful division? Goldberg and her team prove that live art as an expanded field is thriving today and that, like a shape shifter, it can take various forms and be accessed on any number of levels. ■

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Performance Matters: Trashing Performance

Toynbee Studios, Tate Modern and Bethnal Green
Working Men's Club London 25 to 30 October

In the late 1990s/early 2000s scramble towards new institutionalism – that vague notion espousing the value of a reflexive, publicly aware and self-critical arts institution – performance, in all its variant forms, increasingly found itself on the programmes of art galleries, aspiring to the condition of knowledge production laboratories, everywhere. In the past two years in the UK an interest in contemporary dance, enlivened by that other new institutional passion for activating-the-archival, enjoyed a brief ubiquity within gallery spaces and their associated performance studios. Worryingly (because it gave an indication of a self-serving institutional agenda), this exposure came with an attempt to skew dance history in favour of practitioners working within the confines of a certain minimalist



aesthetic that was seen as compatible with Conceptual Art of the 1960s and early 70s as, for instance, in the Hayward Gallery's 'Move: Choreographing You'.

Performance, when usually handled by larger institutions like the ICA and the Barbican in London, or the Liverpool Biennial and others, seems to be presented as a clean, precise, quizzical and sometimes participatory activity. It is a game of Chinese whispers with children selected by Tino Sehgal (at the ICA), a timed series of apparatus-based dance works (Trisha Brown at the Barbican), or a woman in a white dress gently cutting sheets of paper for days (Sachiko Abe at the 2010 Liverpool Biennial). Of course there is also the biennial programme of innovative works at Performa; Marina Abramović's recent retrospective at MoMA, which was anything but staid; and here in the UK Nottingham Contemporary staged a boxing match during its recent Jack Goldstein show. Still, a certain frosty decorum pervades the institutional warmth of the normative curatorial embrace. All in all the practice of performance, within the institutional context, could do with a little dirtying up every now and then, and 'Trashing Performance' stepped proudly into that breach.

The second themed year in a three-year programme tackling the shifting cultural status and presence of performance, 'Trashing Performance' was devised by Performance Matters: a collaborative research project between Goldsmiths and Roehampton universities and the Live Art Development Agency. Spread over six themed days of talks, screenings and performances; positioned across venues including the Bethnal Green Working Men's club, Toynbee Hall and Tate Modern,

Oreet Ashery
Party for Freedom 2011
video

Sands Murray
Wassink
*Town Hall
Philosophical Living
Colour Drawing* 2008
performance
photographed by
Carolee Schneemann

each programme was designed to explore the potency of work that revels, broadly speaking, in the anti-institutional. Cultural and behavioural norms were debunked and subverted, cheap aesthetics were celebrated, kitsch was king and critical values systems were irreverently ignored.

On the two days when I was able to attend, audiences were treated to rare excerpts of film and video, insightful glimpses into the research practices of performers, impassioned speech, collective hand-holding and mass confessions of love (at the request of Iranian artist Bavand Behpoor).

Friday 28 October was themed 'Outsider Actions' and the day began in Toynbee Hall's large theatre with a clear introduction by Performance Matters co-director Gavin Butt. 'Outsider Actions' would offer a look at those 'working at the edges of taste and respectability'. The Jerusalem-born, London-based artist Oreet Ashery spoke first. Her lively presentation focused on the research process that led to six hours of raw video footage that, when edited, will constitute a new work titled *Party for Freedom*. Loosely based on the life of Dutch right-wing politician Geert Wilders and the 1918 Vladimir Mayakovsky play *Mystery-Bouffe*, *Party for Freedom* consisted of improvised scenes – a cross between Jerzy Grotowski and *Carry on Camping* – in which naked participants regressed into trance-like states in the English countryside.

A neat double-handed presentation followed next. Bettina Knaup, curator of the mobile feminist performance archive re.act. feminism #2 (currently touring Europe), and Joe E Jeffreys, drag show enthusiast, videographer and creator of Drag Show Video Verite (an extensive video archive of drag acts), shared snippets of their work in a well-paced back and forth. The interplay between Knaup's independent but still institutionally observant style of delivery and Jeffreys' fast-paced informal banter heightened the shortcomings of each. It felt as if Knaup's methodical archival project could do with some of Jeffreys's informality and vice versa. But, at the Tate screening on Sunday 30 March, both showcased the strengths of their respective video archives and approaches. Jeffreys's series of spliced together show clips really presented a comprehensive view of the development of drag, from ballroom elegance to the slick contemporary lip-sync routines of today. Knaup's deft curatorial hand positioned Sands Murray Wassink's *Town Hall Philosophical Living Colour Drawing*, 2008, between a programme of feminist video works by Helen Chadwick and the wonderfully subversive Mexican group Polvo de Gallina Negra. In the video, Wassink – a self-confessed gay male bottom – drew an affecting line of solidarity with feminist performers' reclamation of vaginal beauty by proposing a parallel rereading of the gay male anus.

The second half of Friday shifted towards the overtly political. After a passionate and enlivening speech from the courageous former Mexican newsreader turned extreme performance artist Rocio Bolivar, activist group Liberate Tate presented its cogent case for a BP-free Tate. Its plans for an alternative audio guide for Tate Modern and Tate Britain were both exciting and extremely innovative, and it is encouraging to know that the group will be focusing critical energies on that other corporately aligned (with Shell Oil) arts institution/exploded big-box shopping precinct, the Southbank Centre.

In the field of political science, new institutionalism is a form of institutional analysis with varying schools of thought (for a quick rundown see Peter A Hall and Rosemary CR Taylor's brilliant essay 'Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms'), one of which is sociological institutionalism. This school argues

that institutional conduct is a cultural phenomenon based on inter-institutional influence, as opposed to an external notion of best practice. Sadly, the wave of influence currently spreading through many of the UK's established galleries, and the alternative spaces hungry for their acceptance, seems conservative in tone. To some degree Marcia Farquhar's *Open University* satirised the genteel nature of the gallery responses of the symposium, round-table and publication, in the context of the current climate of social, political and economic meltdown. Friday evening, in the Toynbee car park, a skip-turned-lecture theatre became a platform for anyone wishing to verbally trash a pet peeve, or resurrect something from the cultural garbage pile. But while the audience ate chestnuts, drank sherry and listened to erudite entreaties, the occasion was bittersweet. You had to wonder about the OAPs living in the cramped apartments that surrounded us; the housing is partially owned by the probably cash strapped (because let's face it, everybody is) charity organisation of Toynbee. How long before the dingy blocks are sold off and become glossy new builds? Like so much of east London, it is only a short step away from being privatised, pricing locals out of their own community.

The thing is – to paraphrase the performance artist Scottee – art doesn't matter. It doesn't cure the sick, doesn't save lives, rescue cats from trees or look after the old. But art, and let's just aim for a hand-on-heart definition here, enriches lives, whether it is a collection of bricks on a gallery floor or a woman pulling a plastic Jesus from her vagina (one of Bolivar's set pieces). 'Trashing Performance', with its enriching mix of performance and spirited debate, provided a timely reminder that vitality, irreverence and unfettered expression still have an essential role to play in an increasingly austere, elitist and distant art world. ■

MORGAN QUAINANCE is a writer, musician and curator.

Catherine Opie

Stephen Friedman Gallery London

23 November to 21 January

Catherine Opie's latest exhibition at Stephen Friedman Gallery feels like two separate shows that have been shoehorned into one. In the front gallery space there is a series of early black-and-white photographs that form part of Opie's 'Girlfriends' series, which are being exhibited here for the first time, while in the back space Opie is displaying 'Twelve Miles to the Horizon: Sunrises and Sunsets', a new body of landscape photographs taken during a journey on a cargo vessel as it travelled from Korea to California across the Pacific Ocean. While both sets of images are striking, the style and atmosphere of the two series are so different as to feel almost at odds with one another, and it is perhaps best to view them as individual exhibitions rather than trying to force links between them.

Opie first began working on 'Girlfriends' in the mid 1980s. The photographs capture her friends and lovers in various guises, and document the queer leather culture of San Francisco as well as, more recently, famous lesbian figures including k.d. lang, JD Samson and Samantha Ronson. It was this body of work that first brought Opie to wider public attention, and it also led to her pursuit of other subcultures to photograph, including surfers and high-school footballers. The various series are all linked by Opie's