PERFORMANCE

Performance Art Finds New Audiences

Adithya Sambamurthy

Theater's long, strange stepsister enjoys a renaissance in the Bay Area

by Reyhan Harmanci — June 21, 2010, 11:23 a.m. 0

When asked about performance art, one local curator sighed and offered a joke:

"How many performance artists does it take to screw in a light bulb?"

"I don't know. I left early."

But performance art, long the long, strange stepsister of theater and sculpture, is enjoying a renaissance in the Bay Area. Currently, Southern Exposure has a performance art show entitled Extended Play and a new venue dedicated solely to the form, the Marina Abramovic Institute West, just wrapped up its most ambitious show to date: a 13-day piece featuring SF Ballet dancers called "Making Visible." Longtime Bay Area practitioners such as Tom Marioni and Guillermo Gomez-Pena find their work increasingly celebrated. Marioni said that he has personally enjoyed the fact that renewed interest in performance art has led his famous 1970 work, "The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends is the Highest Form of Art" to be commissioned for Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and SFMOMA, as well as international venues, over the past few years.

SFMOMA curator Rudolph Frieling noted in an interview that making "performative work" a regular part of their programming is a new imperative.

"Our mandate is to follow closely what artists are doing, mirror that and give that a program, " he said. "To create space [for performative work], whether this is in the institution or off-site, on a more sustained basis — that is really the job that we have to do now."

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Performance Art 4

Performance art, however, is an unusually difficult form to show and support on a permanent basis. Loosely defined as a time-based work by a person or a group of people that is not designed for repetition, performance art defies commerce. As it is typically a live event, it cannot effectively be sold, and video or photographic documentation usually exists as a footnote to the piece. (Although this is not always true.) And even if artists manage to find a way to fund their work, through grants or institutional commissions, it can be too emotionally taxing and physically demanding to do long-term.

Outside of a few of the truly bold-faced names — Marina Abramovic, who just wrapped up her hugely popular retrospective at New York's MOMA and Tino Seghal, for instance — curators can have trouble filling seats for experimental avant-garde performances.

"Typically," said Marina Abramovic Institute West founder and commercial gallerist Stephen Tourell, "it so frightens the general public."

MAI

Source: TheBayCitizen

What constitutes performance art has always been a moving target, which hasn't helped its clichéd image as caterwauling at a microphone. Its roots are often traced to turn of the 20th century Dada poetry readings and Russian Futurist body art practices, although the field got kicked off in earnest in the 1960s with conceptual art and sculpture utilizing the human body as a vital canvas. West Coast performance art had its locus in Los Angeles, with feminist artists gathering at the Woman's Building and Chris Burden famously turning a gun on himself in 1971 for a piece called "Shoot."

Locally, artists such as San Francisco Art Institute professor Tony Labat and Tom Marioni engaged in similarly minded work that aimed to bust open conventional genres. Marioni established the Museum of Conceptual Art in 1970 to show and promote all kinds of conceptual art, many of which took the form of live performance art. "It was the first alternative art space in the country," Marioni said, "I wanted to have a space for this new art. [New York artist] Vito Acconci had his first California show there, same with Chris Burden."

It was many things, Marioni said, but never theater or dance. "More like all-night sculpture," he noted.

Marioni closed up the Museum of Conceptual Art in 1984, citing a lack of funding and drift toward more theatrical and spoken word-inspired performance pieces. But as social practice, a form that shares qualities like an emphasis on ephemeral events and audience participation, rose in the early 21st century, artists such as Jennifer Locke say that they met many young artists suddenly interested in performance art.

"I got my MFA in 2004, there were all these younger students excited about performance in the '70s tradition," she said, "People weren't really thinking about [that work] in the '90s."

But why performance art now? Marioni credits the bad economy, saying performance art is cyclical —"in hard times, the art becomes less commercial, less decorative, less-material oriented" — as has Abramovic in interviews. Others relate performance art more closely to broader social art trends.

"'I've been asking myself the same question," said Southern Exposure director Courtney Fink, in response to a query on the causes of the performance art comeback. " I definitely think that there's been a resurgence over the past five years. The only thing that I can pin it to — social practice —is that person-to-person engagement, alive engagement — that has come into its own."

In the hands of the current crop of artists, like 2008 SECA nominee Michael Zheng and Locke, performance art often uses documentary tools like video differently than the original performers — such as in Locke's spring solo show at Queen's Nails Annex gallery, which presented a series of videos shot from a variety of perspectives with a variety of cameras that showcase the former dominatrix and submission wrestler's contorted body. Such a wide array of tools extends the performance way beyond the original action; social media has also given institutions like the Berkeley Art Museum, which has a current online show featuring Marisa Olsen's video called "Double Bind," of herself wrapping her head, more options for distributing such work.

And, along with the earnest nature of social practice projects like interdisciplinary studio REBAR's greening of parking spaces, today's performance artists tend to emphasize emotional connection over shocking spectacle.

Zheng, who rents an apartment in the Sunset district to give performance artists a place to do work, says that one of his favorite current artists is Ulrich Schäfer, a German who came to SFAI on a Fulbright scholarship last year. With great control, he manages to build tension around small movements like pulling a string. "Simple with quiet concentration," Zheng said approvingly in an e-mail.

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