

Keeping History Alive While Envisioning The Future

by cristiane bouger

Celebrating the 100th anniversary of the publication of the *Futurist Manifesto* written by the Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in 1909, Performa, directed by RoseLee Goldberg, organized a special Futurist Banquet at Inside Park in New York on February 20, 2009. Prepared by chef Matthew Weingarten, the inventive menu consisted of recipes from the *Futurist Cookbook*, written by Marinetti in 1932. Live music, Futurist poem readings and performances were part of the celebratory evening, which launched in grand style the historical theme of the Third New Visual Art Performance Biennial to be held in New York from November 1-22, 2009.

Marinetti's manifesto was published in Paris on the first page of the daily newspaper *Le Figaro* on February 20, 1909. The influential text would introduce one of the most provocative and radical artistic movements of the last century, leading the Futurist practices in the decades to follow. Futurism was seminal in the development of performance works and avant-garde practices.

Following the centennial celebration, Performa held a session on architecture, speed, and motion in Shanghai, on May 23rd. The event was organized by Defne Ayas, one of Performa's curators. According to Ayas, the *Futurist Manifesto* was published in Shanghai in 1921, and had a vast influence on the artists and designers of the period.

As stated by Performa's media department, this year "portions of the biennial will look back to the radical propositions of the Futurists a century ago, inspiring a vision for the 21st century in today's artists."

In 2004, the historian and critic RoseLee Goldberg created Performa, a non-profit multidisciplinary arts organization "dedicated to exploring the critical role of live performance in the history of twentieth century art and to encouraging new directions in performance for the twenty-first century." In 2005, Performa

05, the first Biennial of New Visual Art Performance was launched in New York City, followed by Performa 07, in 2007.

In two editions of the biennial, Goldberg consolidated Performa as one of the most anticipated events in the town. Beyond the fact that she made a brilliant work, it seems Performa came into existence at the right time and at the right place. A feeling that something has deeply changed in the city, a certain thirsty state for new ideas, and the breathtaking sense of urgency that was remarkable in the New York scene in the past could be sensed. Young artists who moved to the city did not find the New York they read about in books. This lack of excitement could also be seen filtered in the new directions that Performance Space 122, under the artistic direction of Vallejo Gantner, took a couple years ago with a program more focused on international productions. The subject was also addressed by dance critic Gia Kourlas in an article for *The New York Times* on September 6th, 2005, in which she stated: "New York is no longer the capital of the contemporary dance world," causing a certain turbulence in the dance community.

Goldberg did not feel so differently about the state of things. Concerning the creation of Performa and the scene that preceded the launching of the first biennial, she states: "I did feel New York was becoming too grown up and too focused on the market at that time. I came to New York for the first time in the early '70s and I know very well what that mood was and how everything was bubbling up from the bottom. Without being nostalgic, I felt that it was possible to reignite that, and yes, I felt an urgency to make things happen. Another very strong reason for creating Performa was that I felt it was really time to focus on the extraordinary history of performance and to show how it has shaped the twentieth century. For me, creating Performa was a necessity and it was exciting to see its take off so quickly. Even so, there is a lot of work to do."

"Contemporary performance is not the same performance art of the 1970s."



PHOTO: JOHAN PERSSON

The reception could not have been more enthusiastic. Defying any skepticism that came before the first biennial, Goldberg achieved the quick respect for her efforts and for the uncontested success of the biennial dedicated to live art works. Somehow, Performa gives back to New York a parcel of its effervescent days.

The biennial is made up of a profusion of visions and perspectives, cross-disciplinary fields, a confluence of emerging and established artists from all over the world, a network of venues and financial support headed by the visionary mind of one of the most respected historians in the field.

Written by Goldberg and first published in 1979, *Performance Art – From Futurism to The Present*, became a fundamental book for any person interested in performance art studies. Goldberg is also the author of *Laurie Anderson* (2000),

Performance – Live Art Since the 60's (2004) and *PERFORMA – New Visual Art Performance* (2007). Creating support for new directions for performance in this century is an ambitious endeavor and a natural and clever continuation of Goldberg's research in the field.

Committed to her role as an art historian, Goldberg wants to keep the history alive and shows that it continues to be written by current productions and that it is not limited to the aesthetic practices of the 1970s. She states: "Quite honestly, I think people have a very limited idea of what performance art is. They tend to think of it as weird and that it comprises strange and disturbing things that people do to themselves. But that describes a particular historical period of several decades ago. Today we are looking at new kinds of work that articulate very different concerns. Contemporary performance is



PHOTO: PAULA COURT

not the same performance art of the 1970s.”

In order to avoid an out-of-date understanding of what Performa is about, she opted for the term “New Visual Art Performance,” instead of “performance art” as a nomenclature for the biennial. In her perspective, “‘Performance art’ has always been a problematic term. Nobody is comfortable with it. It is used very generally to describe a broad range of work covering a hundred year history, when in reality the term is more specific to the ‘70s. I wanted to avoid the term, and to show that visual artists have always made performances. I do not call Marina Abramovic or Laurie Anderson performance artists and I doubt it is a term that they use to describe themselves. They are artists who work in many media including performance. In addition, in bringing this material to a wider audience, which is the nature of a biennial, it was important to indicate that we covered a broad range of art and media.”

In its mission of celebrating history, but also envisioning the future, Performa 09 counts on more than 25 curators, which gives to the event a multi-perspective of what performance is. Asked if there is a main directive to conduct this profusion of visions, Goldberg affirmed: “The ‘directive’ is less a directive than an extensive conversation with curators at venues across the city as well as independent curators from around the world. All proposals are discussed and watched over as they develop. The overall curatorial program is very much about the city - cultural activism as a form of urbanism for the twenty-first century.”

For the third edition of the biennial, the team of curators of Performa 09 granted commissions to the artists Guy Ben-Ner, Omer Fast, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Yang Fudong, Mike Kelley, Yeondoo Jung, Arto Lindsay, Wangechi Mutu, Christian Tomaszewski and Candice Breitz for the creation of original works to be specially presented in the biennial. Some of these visual artists are creating

live art works for the first time in their careers. The 10 commissioned artists will receive over \$350,000 from Performa, with individual projects costing between \$30,000 - \$100,000, making the Performa commission one of the most generous awards to artists. The Commission comes with a full production team and presentation during a high profile biennial. After the presentations in New York, many of these projects will tour to other venues, including Milan, Mexico City and Shanghai.

The dance program for Performa 09 also counts an exhilarating selection of works, including Meg Stuart/Damaged Goods with *Auf den Tisch! (On the Table!)*, Deborah Hay with *If I Sing To You*, Maria Hassabi with *SOLO SHOW*, Yvonne Rainer with *Spiraling Down* and Tacita Dean’s 16-millimeter film *Craneway Event*, celebrating the legendary dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham.

In total, Performa 09 will present the work of more than 80 artists at a consortium of more than 60 art institutions, as well as a network of public spaces and private venues in the five boroughs of the city.

The biennial conducted by Goldberg is opulent and Wagnerian in its endeavors. A sense of totality is explicit in the wide coverage of its audacious program. Working as a radar and as an activator, Performa aims to achieve a plural overview of what is happening in the contemporary art world. If, to a certain extent, the biennial privileges visual artists – performance was born among them, after all – with generous commissions for the creation of original work, in another way it creates space for diverse art works, which include such mediums as dance, theater, film, video, poetry, music, fashion, graphic design, architecture, culinary arts and web designed projects. If the biennial pays homage to the history celebrating radical works created by mavericks like Marina Abramovic (Performa 05), Allan Kaprow (Performa 07) and Marinetti (Performa 09), it also

envisioning a sense of urgency in understanding the current production of young and established artists, allowing us to rethink what live art means in the present century. If it presents a confluence of international artists, it also focuses on the diversity of New York’s historical and contemporary scene, as we can see through the work of Deborah Hay and Yvonne Rainer (two of the founders of Judson Dance Theater, in 1962), and in the work of a new generation of choreographers like the New York-based Maria Hassabi. Such diversity is enormously enriching in the continuous exercise of understanding the contemporary scene in its plurality and complexity.

Many of us are still attempting to identify the blurred territory performance inhabits, belongs to or escapes from. In this realm, in which so many questions arise concerning the escaping nature of performance art, I felt that the statement and refusal of considering performance as an art product was replaced by its relationship to the editorial market, institutional relations and the financial support that we can see in the contemporary art world. Did performance art turn into an art product after all? And, above all, is this matter still relevant?

Goldberg generously clarifies this subject: “Performance art has a long history, so it depends which period we are talking about. So does the art market have a long history and the relationship between the two is always changing. In 1920s Paris and Berlin the market for contemporary art was limited. Dada events attracted art crowds and people paid to see Picabia’s “Relâche” or Apollinaire’s “Mamelle de Teresias.” Forty years later, in the 1960s, when there was a more vibrant art market (Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art) performance was an anti-market activity that was also a weapon of activism in a social and politically volatile period. In the 1970s, when Conceptual Artists actively protested the art commodity, performance was at its height, the most visible art form in relation to conceptual strategies. In the last ten years, the very strong art market made many established

artists working in performance begin to think that it was only fair that their work might have a market too. In addition, museums had to incorporate the ‘70s in their collections, and were forced to recognize that much of the work from that period was performance-based. And finally, the role of the museum has changed radically. They are culture palaces that attract large crowds who are fascinated by proximity to the artist and by live art. Performance is not an art product in the commodity sense of the word, but it can nevertheless cost quite a lot to produce. The question is relevant but the answer is a larger historical one.”

As reminded by Goldberg, performance is changing all the time. She has a deep interest in making a new kind of biennial that really allows a transforming experience for the viewer, in a way “that you see something that you will never forget.”

This sounds like New York. Celebrate the town. Welcome to Performa 09!

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NOTES:

By Wagnerian I mean the artistic theory aspect of the term (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), the “total work of art” and not the controversial anti-Semitic Richard Wagner’s thoughts.

ROSELEE GOLDBERG is an art historian, critic, curator and author. She is the Founding Director and Curator of Performa.

GIA KOURLAS, *The New York Times*, “How New York Lost Its Modern Dance Reign”, September 6th, 2005.