



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

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

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. ■

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