



DANCE

As Conceptual Art Evolves, One Mission Is Unchanged: Keep Expanding the Possibilities



Paula Court/PERFORMA

From left, Vanesse Thomas, Adam Pendleton, and Renee Neufville in "The Revival."

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During "Not for Sale: Conceptual Art and Dance in Visual Arts," a symposium last Saturday at the Judson Memorial Church on the final weekend of Performa 07, the Swedish artist Marten Spangberg addressed the need for performance "that is not here to consolidate your identity, but offers the choice to lean forward — becoming oneself differently — to expand the possibilities of what one can be."

At such times, "we feel so now," he said. "We are so there. We are so a part of the thing."

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Of course, while zooming around the city in a vain, sleep-deprived bid to keep pace with the mad schedule of a multiweek festival like Performa, the second visual art performance biennial, you inevitably suffer losses of focus and drive.

One such episode engulfed me while I was bolting down McDonald's chicken strips in the few minutes I had before Yvonne Rainer's "RoS Indexical." Another occurred during a crazed dash from Xavier Le Roy's "Sacre du Printemps," which ended at 7:50 at the Baryshnikov Arts Center, to Aida Ruilova's "Silver Globe," scheduled to start 10 minutes

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later at the Kitchen.

The choreographer David Neumann referred to this dislocation during a recent talk (separate from Performa), recounting how, while dancing in front of an audience, he occasionally suffers a wildly disorienting flash of bewilderment, amazed that evolution has led the species to this.

But performance, particularly contemporary performance, is critical to the species. It is one of the best ways we have of explaining ourselves to one another, and ourselves. It is, in many ways, as close a thing as exists in 2007 to a sacred pact (one constantly being renegotiated between artist and audience).

This exalted status no doubt helps account for the incredibly fierce and conflicting stances that people take on individual artists. As Mr. Spangberg implied, this is especially true of contemporary artists, who often are positing where we might be headed — what we, even now, are only just in the process of becoming as we shed more comfortable conventions. Compare traditional religious services with the spellbinding, multilayered gospel spun by Adam Pendleton during “The Revival,” which he presented, complete with a choir, early on in Performa.

Mr. Le Roy’s “Sacre” was in large part a comment on the mutability of this pact. After watching a DVD of [Simon Rattle](#) conducting the [Berlin Philharmonic](#) in a rehearsal of Stravinsky’s “Sacre du Printemps,” Mr. Le Roy, a French choreographer, decided to stage his own conducting performance — of a recording, which was broadcast through speakers underneath viewers’ chairs.

Mr. Le Roy, who studied molecular biology before turning to dance in 1991, has no musical training. At times, as he seemed to come completely unmoored from Stravinsky’s dark world, I found myself drifting too. I could have done without the pelvic thrusts during some of the music’s most insistent, driving passages.

But the arrangement of the speakers had Mr. Le Roy “conducting” various members of the audience, and the moments in which he seemed to be urging you — specifically you — to achieve a desired quality were electric. He occupied a position of supreme power, and supreme vulnerability, in staking his own energies so firmly to the unpredictable responses from various audience members. The lights were up. What would happen if Mr. Le Roy turned to the woodwinds, only to find one of them scanning the program?

By contrast Carlos Amorales’s “Spider Galaxy” courted the idle passer-by and the hurried lunchtime crowd. Mr. Amorales, a Mexican artist, situated his installation in the public atrium at 590 Madison Avenue, at 56th Street. For eight days the glass-enclosed space, with its little bamboo stands sunk into the stone floor and its collection of English sparrows flying around, held his 400-piece wooden structure, its blond blocks arranged like a spider web and emanating ominous burbles and booms.

Twice each afternoon Galia Eibenschutz climbed atop the blocks and enacted a strange little series of hops, stamps and bends. Sheathed in a colorful, plastic-looking hooded cape that mimicked the sculpture’s fractured surface, she resembled a giant bird.

Viewers could perch on special seating that allowed them to feel the vibrations from Julian Lede’s score. Both times I went, I chose the seats, and both times, watching the people who just happened to be in the area proved more interesting than watching Ms. Eibenschutz, which mostly just led to thoughts like “What am I doing watching a giant bird in the middle of a workday?”



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My favorite moment came at the end, when she ran wildly through the space, her amorphous costume shifting so that she evoked, in my mind, the giant, carnivorous mutant tadpole in the weirdly excellent South Korean movie “The Host.” No children were eaten, as best I could tell.

Still, performance stakes are high, and highly subjective. Pieces seem either necessary — to a viewer’s world, to her sense of herself — or, like Ms. Rainer’s hopelessly outmoded “RoS Indexical,” they fail.

The “why” is mysterious. Less than an hour after my second visit to “Spider Galaxy,” I was in the Museum of Modern Art, where the Butoh artist Min Tanaka performed “Locus Focus,” a mad, mesmerizing duet with a canonical Western art object, Rodin’s “Monument to Balzac.”

Mr. Tanaka ran crazy circles around the sculpture as Balzac’s eternal sneer stayed put. He leaned against the bronze to take off his shoes, then slid down several steps over his red robe, his muscular, lean body contorted like a rigid embryo. I never stopped to wonder why I was watching. It was enough that I was.

In wildly dissimilar ways Isaac Julien’s film, “Small Boats,” installed at Metro Pictures, also played with cultural identity, inviting viewers in even as it complicated the invitation. Like Mr. Tanaka’s dance, it felt so now — no viewer ennui.

As for “The Silver Globe,” I made it to the Kitchen in time (thankfully this city is hopelessly unpunctual; it started around 8:15), logging five Performa events that day. The reward was a hedonistic, wild mix of film, live music (including Ian Vanek of Japanther), dance and sculpture.

Ms. Ruilova exploited Caitlin Cook’s seductive, anarchistic energy, offsetting the choreographer-musician’s grungy glamour against densely satisfying audio and visual bursts. As the singer Daniel Seward menacingly crooned, “We never, ever, ever, ever, ever do anything nice and easy.” I didn’t recognize myself in it, but it was unrecognizably, irresistibly itself. I leaned forward.

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