

A City of Ambitious Dreaming - Performance Art in New York

By Robert Ayers

New York City enjoys a special status in any history of performance art. Whether one takes one's bearings from Happenings, or from Warhol's Factory, or from the Dematerialization of the Art Object, these developments all seem inexorably linked to this city. New York still acts as a powerful magnet for both young experimental artists and well-established ones from all over the world. Institutions such as PS122, The Kitchen, and Franklin Furnace continue to enjoy international reputations. But despite the honorable tradition, and despite the continued presence of artists of the first rank in the city, it is now a matter of historical record that the circumstances for radical artists worsened sharply during the 'culture wars' of the nineteen eighties, and in 2005 it there is sometimes a pessimistic sense that something of the legacy has been lost. To test the reputation against the reality, I sought the opinions of key individuals on the New York performance scene to get their perspectives. To begin with, I spoke to as many artists as were willing, and then I deliberately sought out people with different backgrounds and experiences. Debra Singer has been Executive Director and Chief Curator of The Kitchen for just over a year. She arrived from the Whitney Museum where she had been Associate Curator of Contemporary Art since 1997. Martha Wilson founded Franklin Furnace in 1976. She has been its Director ever since, and in that position has done as much as any individual to support performance art here. Mark Russell was Artistic Director of PS122 from 1983 until 2003. He has recently been appointed Guest Director for the 2006 and 2007 Portland Institute for Contemporary Art Time Based Arts Festivals. Dan McKereghan has been making solo performance art for the last decade, and in 2002 he founded the Currency festival. Vallejo Gantner has been Artistic Director of PS122 since December. He was previously Director of the Dublin Fringe Festival.

I began by asking people about current problems. There are problems for performance artists here as anywhere else to draw attention to their practice. Martha Wilson points out that you won't find 'performance art' identified in any of New York's listings pages, whether they be in Time Out New York, the Village Voice or the New York Times. "Franklin Furnace tried valiantly for years and years and years," she told me, "to write to The New Yorker and The New York Times, to ArtNEWS and to Artforum, whoever we could write to to say, 'performance art is distinct from theatre, and its ideals are opposed to theatre, and we'd like a separate listing.' So I tried for about a decade to get performance art to be recognized as its own thing and I can tell you that none of these publications makes any distinction. In fact what's happened is quite the opposite. All of these publications have conflated stand-up comedy, performance art, and theater." Put it another way, and there is the perennial problem of just knowing what 'performance art' is. Debra Singer puts it like this, "I generally avoid the term 'performance art' and just use the word 'performance' because it tends to cause confusion: if you are talking to a visual arts museum curator and you use the term 'performance art' it will have a different meaning for them than for someone working within the theatre realm." So, for Singer, it has ironically ceased to be an issue. "For decades now so many artists have been working between and across disciplines that we don't worry so much about any of that. At The Kitchen, we present all disciplines and everything in between."

The truth is that, as well as offering remarkable opportunities, New York imposes particular problems on those of us who choose to work here. To begin with, there is a complex financial dilemma. Martha Wilson puts it as simply as this, "The lack of funding for performance art would be the first and most substantial problem that we have." When asked whether funding had become more difficult over time, she responds, "Yeah, I would agree, and my analysis of that is that in the seventies, the avantgarde

was America's greatest product and we were given money and told to go crazy with the money. In the eighties, the government - Ronald Reagan and everyone on down - started to view artists in the opposite way: the virus eating away at the health of the body politic, and so we were then the evildoers. And first they killed the [National Endowment for the Arts] critic fellowships and then the fellowships for individual artists. So we now don't get any federal money at all for our performance program. It's now much easier for example for us to apply for money to do museum work: to catalog the work of Karen Finley, or to digitize the slides, or to develop the terms to describe the work, or to link our database to other databases around the country. It's a lot easier raise money to do museum work than it is to raise money to present the work of Karen Finley." Mark Russell makes much the same point: "Funding for all the arts is in deep trouble these days and that puts something that exists on the margins like performance in a delicate condition. The culture wars did not end, they continue on but in quieter more insidious ways. There are those in power now that are interested in 'starving the beast' - always the last to get fed anyway, contemporary art institutions are suffering and it will get worse." Exacerbating the situation for New York artists is the fact that this is an enormously expensive place to live. As Debra Singer puts it, "Because of a real estate boom in New York, conditions for artists in general, and for performers in particular have become hideously difficult. You've got artists all over New York who are no longer able to afford to live here or to afford their rehearsal space."

Artists everywhere find it difficult to afford space, but getting the perspective of someone like Ricardo Francis gives a vivid sense of the pressures this can put on a project. A multi-media artist in his late twenties, and based in Far Rockaway, Francis runs a company called Apanamae Productions with two colleagues. Since April he has been putting together a piece called I (ran) to IRAQ. Having put out an internet call for participants, and after meeting one hundred and fifty of them, he started out with a group of eighteen performers. Four have since pulled out because of other commitments, and another is about to. "Money is a big issue," he told me. "Luckily most people on the production side usually volunteer their time and efforts towards the project. Actors are usually very patient and they get a modest stipend for their contributions too. We will have to do a lot of networking, cajoling, and inventive events to generate a working budget to handle this large but not impossible project."

These difficult economic circumstances have undoubtedly damaged New York artists' feeling of professional or even social kinship. As Dan Mckereghan puts it, "What's lacking right now is a sense of community among artists. Individuals tend to be isolated or working in a kind of parochial environment that doesn't encourage exchange." Mark Russell goes further, "New York's performance scene is splintered into many different scenes, because of the dislocation of the centre of the art world in Manhattan to Brooklyn and beyond. Also the career demands of being in dance or theater or visual art are making it difficult to hang out with artists of other media. The cross fertilization so important to New York's culture is more difficult to achieve these days."

When I asked Debra Singer about the nature of artistic community she responded, "Well, in New York it's very pluralist: it's a question of communities." And she offered a further perspective: "One other thing that I think is very specific to audiences in New York as opposed to other American cities with smaller cultural scenes than in New York, is that there is not a large awareness across the disciplines of what is currently going on. Dance people are mostly just going to dance and visual art people are going to and music people to concerts - because there is always such an exciting selection within whatever your favorite area might be. As a result it means that there are very specialized conversations, but not necessarily enough cross-disciplinary ones. At every tier - at an artist-to-artist level, or artist to critic and curator, and just at general audience level - it's surprising how much

intensely field-specific knowledge there is, as opposed to 'across the fields' knowledge." It's what Vallejo Gantner calls, "The stratification between genres: theatre is theatre and dance is dance."

Part and parcel of this breakdown of a sense and community has been what Vallejo Gantner sees as a souring of the relationship between artists and venues: "I've been stunned by the lack of trust between programmers and artists. I've come across that a lot and been horrified by it. It's a poverty-culture issue: everybody's so defensive about what they've got, and they're so afraid of losing it, they feel they can't afford to be generous." But quite clearly venues have not been spared their own financial difficulties. Indeed one of the more far-reaching results of New York's unique economic circumstances has been the loss of a number of key venues. As Martha Wilson puts it, "Performance art is alive and well, but maybe not so alive as it was when Franklin Furnace, for example, and Dixon Place were venues where the artist had a week to come in to prepare an installation in the space, and rehearse in the space, and perform in the space. Those days are long gone. When Franklin Furnace gave up its own space, we had to abide by other people's schedules: there's a performance at seven and there's another performance at nine and you have to break down the set in the forty five minutes in between."

This disappearance of key venues is rendered all the more frustrating when set against New York's status as a global theatre centre. This not only means Broadway's glitz, but also the fact that, through the success of organizations like the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and the Lincoln Center Festival innovative performance of all sorts (much of which borrows unashamedly from the inventions of performance art) can be seen here all the time. The connections are more tenuous than one might imagine, and Martha Wilson was scathing of my suggestion that there might be any sort of trickle down. "I think it was supposed to trickle up!" she laughed, "But Joe Melillo [BAM's executive producer] never did come to Franklin Furnace to see what the grass roots community was doing. He's not interested in the development part; we're interested in the development part because we are the ones who are developing the new stuff. But you're right, there's some gulf. When you get to be Pina Bausch or Robert Wilson, you're operating on an economic and social level that we're not. If you're doing a crawl in a Superman suit, that work is not going to appeal to the opera house at any point." In fact, what relationship there is seems to be a negative one. Dan McKerighan puts it like this: " There is tremendous market pressure from the traditional performing arts institutions that forces live art toward the realm of entertainment and marginalizes work that doesn't conveniently fit into preexisting forms."

Then, despite the enormous student body that works in and around the city - including a huge number of art students - there is not a single college here that specializes in practical performance art. Drama of all stripes, yes, dance, of course, but no performance art. Students taking the enormously prestigious performance studies course at NYU, established by Richard Schechner, can include performances as part of their thesis submission, but it is an overwhelmingly theoretical program, and does not seem to feel particularly relevant to most artists working in the field. As Dan McKerighan put it, " To my mind, it's closer to sociology or cultural anthropology than art." Martha Wilson outlined her experience of working in performance studies: "It's a very academic program with a lot of reading. Toni Sant and I taught two courses there, and there was no provision for paying guest artists --- which is one of the things that I think is imperative - or for showing video, so I was dragging in videotapes to the class, and then asking Coco Fusco to come in and speak to the students and then paying Coco Fusco \$150 out of my own pocket, because there is no provision for paying fees. They think it can all be done in books." What this deprives the city, by contrast with places as different as Chicago or Tempe or even Glasgow or Brighton, is a community of young artists, constantly renewing itself and bringing new enthusiasm and intelligence to the creative mix. But Mark Russell sees grounds for optimism: " Performance has moved into the academy very much so in the last ten to fifteen years.

The intersection with those working in the field is sometimes tenuous, as happens with the isolation of academia, but the performance studies department at NYU is very fertile. They are treating this field with more and more respect and the dialogue between those studying and those doing is getting richer."

Indeed the picture is far from entirely gloomy. "It's extraordinary that what happens does happen, in the end," is how Vallejo Gantner puts it, "That amazing things still do happen." Because, despite all these difficulties, people still bring an enormous enthusiasm to their work here. In his six months of working here Gantner has been struck by a change of mood: "The economic situation and the election of President Bush and other things sapped the energy and the get-up-and-go out of a lot of the New York performance scene. And to be frank the scene in New York had become a little bit static. That has changed pretty radically in the last two years with changes at The Kitchen, at Dance Theater Workshop, at PS122, and at The Public Theater. There's been that transition, that change of blood, as it were, so there's quite a different scenario happening at the moment." It appears that part of the difference actually began when financial pressures saw venues closing, because of course, this didn't prevent artists from working. Quite the reverse. When I asked Martha Wilson how artists responded to having to "work to other people's schedules" as she had put it, she responded simply, "I think the first thing that artists have done in order to continue to do weird or durational work is to just do it outside and not worry about the venues. For example, of the artists that Franklin Furnace has given money to in the last year, Nicolas Dumit Estevez is doing pilgrimages to various art museums (they're based on religious pilgrimages in Spain, and he's doing them outside), the Ride Dive group is doing guided tours of Lower Manhattan, and Alexander Komlosi did his The Professional Human Being interviews with members of the public in a tent at a County Fair in upstate New York." Although performance artists have always done some of their work outside the confines of venues, the range and proliferation of such work in New York is remarkable. From work that you might find in street fairs, like Marjorie Kouns' Body as Canvas, that she staged at this August's Howl festival's Art Around the Park in Tompkins Square Park; to William Pope L's now celebrated crawl up Broadway ten blocks at a time; to the elaborate underground social interventions of a remarkable troupe called Improv Everywhere; to the 'guerilla consulting' of the nsumi collective.

What becomes obvious when you're considering work like Nsumi's is that, to quote Wilson again, "it seems like the outlines of performance as we knew it are gone to hell, they're starting to bleed in all directions." And one of the reasons that this has happened is because in New York City, like everywhere else, one of the major changes that has affected not only how performance art is made, but also how it is communicated, discussed and promoted, is the emergence of the internet. Franklin Furnace was one of the first arts organizations anywhere to embrace it wholeheartedly - 'going virtual' when it gave up it's Franklin Street venue in 1997 - and Wilson is more aware than most of how it has shifted the ways in which an artistic community, or indeed a community of any sort, functions: "Well, gossip was the way that information used to be passed around. Gossip is not efficient at all; the internet is efficient. That really gets the news to travel, and it's making mass actions possible." Such 'mass actions' include Flash Mobs and the more obviously politicized Critical Mass and Move On manifestations - which, though none are a New York invention, seem to have found a particularly fertile soil here. Wilson's enthusiasm is obvious when she says, "Performance used to be the preserve of artists who knew what they were doing in an art historical context. Now there are these actions that are going on are not related to art." As well as Franklin Furnace, organizations that are exploiting the internet as a performance context are EYEBEAM and Rhizome; and among the many sites that promote performance in various ways, one of the more persevering, is Culturebot, which is

actually a PS122 project, edited by Andy Horwitz, their Associate Producer, and which describes itself as, "part weblog, part gossip column, part arts journal, part lifestyle magazine."

This breakdown of performance boundaries is, of course, an exciting state of affairs, and one that everyone that I spoke to felt energized about responding to. Indeed Vallejo Gantner sees it as framing his ambitions for PS122: "We are trying to reopen the questions about what performance can be, and we want those questions to be occupying not only the downtown theatre companies, but also to start trying to push theatre and dance and performance of all kinds back into a broader social dialogue - so that you need to see what's happening at PS122, or at Dance Theater Workshop, or at Danspace, or at The Kitchen, or wherever, to be informed, and to be a participant in the dialogue in the society, in the same way as you need to read a newspaper, or watch CNN. And that's not to say that we are going to focus more on political work or have more people ranting about social issues - quite the opposite in some ways. I think we are looking for work that asks questions in new ways. We're throwing down a gauntlet and saying, 'How can you ask these questions and how can you answer these questions in more interesting ways?' 'How can you speak to people who aren't expecting it and to try and get performance to do this?' The questions are still absolutely relevant, but we need to reframe them, we need to come at them from a different angle, we need to come at them with new people and we need to articulate and support the conversation that these questions are important and you need to be looking at them."

Debra Singer is equally enthusiastic, and like Gantner, recognizes her obligation in responding not only to the character of new work, but to the circumstances which have brought it about: "Our job is to help artists create and present new work. So one thing we have been doing at The Kitchen is to expand the residency aspect of what we can offer artists when they are here because it's no longer easy for artists to get rehearsal space. I know it sounds quite basic but really it is very difficult. So when we commit to someone - either commissioning their work, or presenting their work - we are trying make sure that at each stage in the development of that piece we offer them access to our space, to physically work in our space." The more you listen to these people, the more it becomes apparent that, rather than an artistic community having evaporated, it has actually just changed. These changes are significant, in nature, in locations, and in methods of operation, but the community is clearly still here. Gantner became aware of it as soon as he arrived at PS122: "One of the things that I think is an enormous strength is that there is an amazing supportiveness among the community. Everybody was at our [fundraising] benefit. Every other programmer in town. Artists gave up their time, six companies worked for free. People put back; they understand that they need to put back, which is a fantastic thing to feel in the middle of." Singer is conscious of it at The Kitchen as well, and clearly feels a responsibility to stimulate not only a sense of community, but the practical means by which it might prosper. "What's special about the Kitchen," she told me, "Is that, unlike larger venues, it's very much 'by artists for artists,' and by that I mean that on any given evening, a large percentage of the audience are artists themselves, and those are the people that come again and again and again. And so for that reason - it seems rather obvious - we lowered all our ticket prices." She goes on, "Another change is that we are trying to offer emerging curators a chance to have their perspectives heard. In New York it's not easy to be a visual arts or a performance curator. When you are starting out, how do you get your ideas presented? So we are presenting events of emerging curators doing things with emerging artists: several artists sharing one evening, with a very low ticket price. It's very much that feel of a community of artists for artists, so it's part of a scene that you might find now in Bushwick [Brooklyn], for example, but we're bringing that experience both for the curators and for the artists into The Kitchen."

The scene that Singer refers to is thriving, and one that we are all familiar with. Performances of all sorts often share bills with music or video or stand up, and the venues themselves come and go, but, when I asked Martha Wilson where she went to see new performance nowadays, she replied, " Oh, there are tons out there. Not in Manhattan any more, but in Williamsburg [Brooklyn] or Red Hook [Brooklyn] there are venues that show underground theatre, I guess you'd call it. It's not always real good but sometimes it's really good. In Williamsburg there's The Flux Factory and The Cave and The Brick." For his part Dan McKereghan told me, " There is always a certain amount of work being presented in various party-style venues. The people at Rubuland are among the stalwarts." The sort of work that happens in these places might be different to what happened at Franklin Furnace back in its heyday, but it has always been in the nature of performance art to reinvent itself, and, once again, this reinvention might be traced back to the disappearance of some of the older dedicated performance art spaces. As Wilson realized, "I believed it was a serious philosophical problem to be dealt with so that the artists would not have to adapt, but in fact what the artists did was just adapt their work to deal with the fact that the venues are now theatrical venues." Indeed, this adaptation has provided not only the basis of this scene, it has also led to the success of the far more mainstream New York International Fringe Festival which claims to be the largest multi-arts festival in North America. Though much of the work that it presents is nearer to what one might expect of a theatre festival fringe, of the more than 1300 performances that it presented this mid-August, there was certainly stuff that was clearly identifiable as performance art.

Like the work that Dan McKereghan will be presenting in his Currency international festival of performance this October. This will be the third staging of Currency, and over two weekends, it will bring to New York the work of something like thirty performance artists and companies. Remarkably, every event is free, and the roster is genuinely international, including the likes of Artur Tajber from Poland, New World Disorder from the Phillipines, and from Britain, Roddy Hunter. Then, in November, a new, and at least equally exciting festival. RoseLee Goldberg, longtime supporter of performance art here, has curated Performa05, which is intended to be the first biennial festival of 'new visual art performance' and which promises to be rather special. Not merely for the artists that it will feature - Jesper Just, Laurie Simmons, Ei Arakawa, Christian Marclay, Francis Alys, Coco Fusco, and Yoko Ono, are just a handful of names on the program - but for the alliance of organizations that Goldberg has brought together to stage it. New York University, EYEBEAM, and The Kitchen, for example, have teamed up with organizations including the Swiss Institute, Anthology Film Archives, Art In General, and Lower Manhattan Cultural Council to form a powerful grouping that even were it this a solitary development, would make one confident for the future of performance art here.

But clearly PERFORMA05 is not happening in isolation. The Guggenheim Museum's season for this autumn includes Marina Abramovic, recently arrived to live here incidentally, offering performances of what she, presumably ironically, calls Seven Easy Pieces: her restagings of, among other seminal performance art works, Gina Pane's Self Portrait(s), Vito Acconci's Seedbed, and Joseph Beuys' How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare. It promises to be a remarkable few evenings.

So, rather than the situation looking pessimistic in New York in 2005, " Whatever you call it, performance art, live art, time based art," as Mark Russell puts it, "I think it is alive and kicking. Performance art continues and will always continue as long as the primal desires underpinning theater and dance and a live action in front of people has contemporary relevance. I think that need is even more necessary now than ever before."

