

Droitcour, Brian, "McLaren and McLuhan," *Artforum*, November 2011.

McLaren and McLuhan

ARTFORUM



Left: Ragnar Kjartansson, *Bliss*, 2011. (Photo: Paula Court) Right: Artist Ragnar Kjartansson with Young Kim. (Photo: Billy Farrell Agency)

BEFORE RAGNAR KJARTANSSON was named the winner of the Malcolm Award, Young Kim, longtime companion of prize namesake Malcolm McLaren, told us how it would make the winner feel: "This award will let at least one artist know that people do love him, people do care." For those assembled at the Bowery Hotel on Monday night to celebrate the end of Performa 11, Kim shared memories of her late partner moping about e-mails that curators did not answer. She quoted him, affecting a pathetic tone: "No one loves me. No one's gotten back." If Kjartansson still has doubts about the universal love for him, I would like to dispel them now. I didn't catch his *Bliss*—the final aria of *The Marriage of Figaro* performed on loop for twelve hours—but from the moment I got to the Bowery people wouldn't stop gushing about it. Again and again, it was described as "magical," "gorgeous," "delirious."

This was the fourth run for Performa but the first time it handed out a ten-thousand-dollar prize. "What does Malcolm McLaren have to do with performance art?" one woman muttered. The story goes like this: Diagnosed with terminal cancer in 2009, McLaren was unable to realize his project that had been commissioned by Mark Beasley for that year's edition of Performa. And so Beasley established the Malcolm Award—a bid to memorialize his own curatorial work. "I like all my babies," RoseLee Goldberg, Performa's director, said when she opened the night's ceremonies. "I'm out of this award idea, except to honor Malcolm. Malcolm wouldn't want an award either."



Left: Curators Mark Beasley and Jay Sanders. (Photo: Billy Farrell Agency) Right: Frances Stark, *Put a Song in Your Thing*, 2011. (Photo: Paula Court)

At least by recognizing Kjartansson, the biennial got a chance to affirm the persisting importance of low-tech—albeit high-maintenance—performance art in a year when most of the commissions relied on projectors, streaming video, and other devices that require profuse wiring. I saw some of the wholly body-centric events on the program, but they were at its periphery, and they declared their formal ties to the art of the past. At the Performa Hub there was a charmingly clumsy read-through of a 1925

Russian pageant-play about the Paris Commune. Tyler Ashley led a Constructivist workout on the High Line. It culminated in a biomechanics lessons and a peppy reading of a Rodchenko manifesto in the crotch of the Standard—the fancy hotel that looks like a Soviet housing project.

The telesthetic longing that we now know McLaren to have felt so sharply figured centrally in Frances Stark's *Put a Song in Your Thing*, presented at Abrons Art Center at the end of Performa's first week. It wove the artist's feelings about the positive reception of her recent film for the Venice Biennale into Gchat romances with randy Italians, lines of which were projected on scrims. At times Stark would briefly walk onstage to shade the scrims with her own silhouette. In the piece's most dramatic part, she marveled at a towering sound system while dressed as a rotary phone, mute and basking in music. Liz Magic Laser's four-act play *I Feel Your Pain* transposed the televised emoting of contemporary politics to the audience's immediate surroundings. Actors moved around the School of Visual Arts Theatre as they performed adapted transcripts of the news and their images were fed live to the big screen. On the first night, Jerry Saltz said "love" when an actor put a mike to his face and asked: "What's the number one trait of an alpha male?" When the question was posed again the following night, Emily Roysdon, unprompted, shouted: "Entitlement!"



Left: Liz Magic Laser, *I Feel Your Pain*, 2011. (Photo: Paula Court) Right: Performa director RoseLee Goldberg with Laurie Anderson. (Photo: Billy Farrell Agency)

I suppose the beauty of *Bliss* was in the way that Kjartansson saturated the experience of an old masterpiece by splicing it with a contemporary experience of media time—repetition, sampling, sudden immersion in a continuous flow. In other commissions, humbler forms of those same techniques were used to consider the afterlives of a work of art as it encounters new audiences. In *Three Performances in Search of Tennessee*, James Franco and Laurel Nakadate pretended to audition a long line of young women for the part of Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*. One posed in a swimsuit and high heels. Another freaked out and called her mom. All struggled to read the script from a screen while facing the audience. Few could keep up with the slyly loose and hammy rendition of the male lead delivered by a spectrally indifferent Franco on video as the "real" Franco looked on. Ming Wong's *Persona Performa*, at the Museum of the Moving Image in Astoria, lifted gestures, hairdos, and lines from Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* and choreographed them for a cast sourced locally, in "Actoria." It felt off. Were the performers feeling Bergman, or trying to embody Wong's idea of how *he* felt Bergman?

Franco and Nakadate's staged audition drew clearer lines between themselves, their participants, and the Tennessee Williams play. But what irked me most about *Performa Persona* was that the premiere fell on the same night as Hatsune Miku's appearance at the IMAX theater in Times Square—an event with no relation whatsoever to Performa or the art world. Miku is an anime character with a synthesized voice, backed up by live bands. Before November 10, she had never been beamed to America. Blame Performa that I blew my chance to see the world's first holographic pop star.

— Brian Droïcour



Left: Ming Wong, *Persona Performa*, 2011. Right: Laurel Nakadate and James Franco, *Three Performances in Search of Tennessee*, 2011. (Photos: Paula Court)