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## NEWS

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### STAGE FRIGHT: ON PERFORMA 11

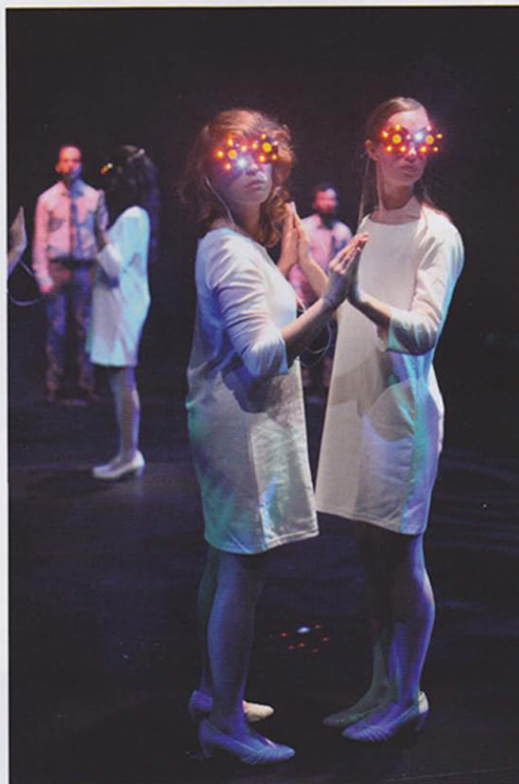
Gillian Sneed

In the introduction to her seminal historical text *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (1979), art historian and curator RoseLee Goldberg explains that despite its origins in disciplines such as theater and dance, performance art can only be defined as "live art performed by artists." Indeed, she explains, it should be understood as a more liberated medium that is not beholden to the confines of those more theatrical genres.

It is curious, then, that Performa 11, the fourth edition of the sprawling three-week biennial of visual art performance headed by Goldberg, was so theatrical this year. Admittedly, one of this year's "research themes" was an exploration of the use of language in performance art versus its use in the theater. Yet staging such a biennial in a city like New York, home to some of the best experimental theater, dance and opera in the world, begs the question: Are performances that juxtapose "performance art" and "theater" innovative or even relevant?

In the case of the biennial's disappointing kick-off commission (one of 13), the answer is a resounding no. *Happy Days in the Art World*, written by the Scandinavian artist duo Elmgreen & Dragset, was presented at NYU's Skirball Center for the Performing Arts. Directed by Toby Frow and starring British actors Charles Edwards and Joseph Fiennes (the lead from *Shakespeare in Love*) playing the roles of the artists themselves, this production was straight theater, and not even groundbreaking theater at that. The artists appropriated liberally from Beckett's *Happy Days* and *Waiting for Godot* in their trite rumination on the existential angst experienced by two middle-aged artists firmly ensconced in the art world.

*That Morning Thing*, an experimental opera from 1967 by Robert Ashley, the veteran multimedia composer and pioneer of opera for television and



ROBERT ASHLEY, *That Morning Thing*, 2011. A Performa Premiere. Photo: Paula Court. Courtesy of Performa.

restaged at the Kitchen, proved one of the more noteworthy examples of this theatrical bent. It involved three acts and an epilogue consisting of vignettes in which members of the cast interacted with each other through gestural movement and layered nonsensical speech. In the first act, a man's lecture on the very composition being performed was accompanied by a track of croaking frogs, while a group of women in white mod dresses and glasses that lit up when they touched hands marched across

the stage. In the third act, a dancer posed like a model to an unnerving recording of a woman's voice slowly recounting the minutiae of her own sexual assault. Though clearly dated — there was a distinct psychedelic vibe and the epilogue involving coerced audience participation was cumbersome — the piece stood out as a significant precursor to so much contemporary music and experimental theater.

Some pieces critiqued theatrical conventions by deconstructing them. Take, for instance,

Liz Magic Laser's cleverly conceived *I Feel Your Pain* staged at the School of Visual Arts movie theater. Reminiscent of Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster's and Ari Benjamin Meyers's *K.62* at Performa 09, in which unsuspecting audience members were shuttled onstage while musicians performed in the audience, Laser's work involved a series of 14 small scenes performed by clusters of actors staged throughout the auditorium. Their dialogues were mash-ups from television interviews with politicians (Bush, Palin, Boehner and the Clintons) reworked to imply romantic entanglements between characters. All of this was then recorded live by a multi-camera team and projected on-screen.

Of the commissions I saw, perhaps the most eccentric was Frances Stark's salacious *Put A Song in Your Thing*, featuring a sound sculpture by Mark Leckey and a cameo by Skerrit Bwoy (a.k.a. Dale Richardson), a dancehall DJ, MC and promoter. Presented at the Abrons Arts Center, the semi-autobiographical piece consisted mainly of projected texts (sexts, actually) of online conversations between Stark and her Italian suitors set to music ranging from Mozart to dancehall. The topics ranged from art and sex to daggering, a genre of club dancing involving the graphic simulation of various sexual positions that was spryly demonstrated by Stark and Richardson at the end of the performance. In another section of the piece, Stark, clad in a dial-telephone-shaped dress, physically submitted herself to Leckey's thunderous "BigBox" sound system. While not wholly cohesive or decipherable, Stark's piece managed to accomplish something few others did in Performa 11: remind us of the radically inventive and unrestrained spirit Goldberg's book tells us is at the core of "visual art performance." Let's hope that 2013's iteration of this by-now established institution will return to those roots.