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So Big, Performa Now Misses The Point

Performa 11, the visual art performance biennial, has come and gone, completing its sprawling three-week marathon with an awards ceremony on Monday. It

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left me feeling once more grateful for its artistic largesse and revelations, if a bit more dazed and confused than usual. Founded in 2005 by the performance-art historian turned impresario RoseLee Goldberg, Performa is by definition a mutable beast, different each time out, and each time stuffed with events of a highly diverse character. Two big questions seemed to haunt this year's version.

First, has it gotten too big? I would say yes. Ms. Goldberg has said she founded the biennial because she was tired of seeing performance art relegated to the fringe of museum biennials. And, admittedly, it was not small to begin with. But Performa, which has gone from 80 events crammed into 16 days in 2005, to 130 packed into 21 now, has gotten so large that no matter how much you prioritize and plan, much of it is marginalized because you just can't get there.

The second question, more complex, is, has it lost its focus on performance art, or more precisely on "visual art performance"? The answer may depend on which of the several possible Performas you saw. I stuck to the commissions, seeing 12 of the 13 events that Performa produced

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on its own or in collaboration with other organizations, figuring they best represented its ambition and character. Going by these, I would say that a recommitment to performance art is in order, along with an added effort to find newness in the genre.

There were only two truly stand-out events this year: Liz Magic Laser's "I Feel Your Pain" and Ragnar Kjartansson's "Bliss," the winner of Performa's inaugural \$10,000 Malcolm McLaren Award. There should have been more.

According to its news release, the "research theme" — whatever that means — of Performa 11 was "Language, Translation and Misinformation." In this spirit, commissions made use of works by Samuel Beckett, Tennessee Williams, Ingmar Bergman and Mozart. But more plebian material was also used: television interviews with politicians, the intimate Internet sexting between a pair of online-only lovers, and the stories implied by a series of snapshots of weddings discovered on a cellphone in a New York taxi.

The goal, according to that release, was to "investigate the use of language in the field of performance by visual artists versus

of language in the field of performance by visual artists versus that of theater actors." This seems a little redundant, given that Performa takes place in New York and is surrounded by theaters full of actors; the contrast is already there. The phrase's blandness suggests something Ms. Goldberg made up when she realized how many of her main events were tending toward conventional theater.

In retrospect, the words reflect both the problems that plagued Performa 11 and its strange contrapuntal energy. Namely its commissions, at least, formed a

Endurance tests and sexting, but where is 'visual art performance'?

kind of argument about what is and is not performance art, or, more specifically, what constitutes a particular kind of performance art that is implied by the term "visual art performance."

The argument was in many ways between events in which

actors followed scripts, and events in which things proceeded in a much less predictable, more open-ended fashion. In these instances there was little if any theatrical illusion or separation of audience and performers, resulting in a greater sense of process and reality. Although they had patches of tedium, these events also offered moments, sometimes quite brief, of exhilarating vulnerability and openness, the sense of something coming together before your very eyes. Visual art performance may be, above all, a form of Process Art.

Every event I saw had a redeeming thrill or two, but that didn't make it performance art. Much of it was standard theater. This included "Happy Days in the Art World," the opening-night play by the Scandinavian art team Elmgreen & Dragset. Inspired by Beckett's "Waiting for Godot," it was a trifle larded with art world in-jokes but brightened by the fine acting of Joseph Fiennes and Charles Edwards.

Simon Fujiwara's "Boy Who Cried Wolf" had the immensely appealing Mr. Fujiwara himself at its center and an intriguing tapestry of narratives, including one built around those wedding pictures. But basically it pushed Spalding Gray's autobiographical monologues back toward conventional theater.

"Overruled," a play by Shoja Azari and Berhang Azari, directed by the Iranian video-installation artist Shirin Neshat, which centered on the blasphemy trial of a 10th-century mystic, was a rather simplistic polemical harangue — bad Brecht was my first thought — despite the heart-rending singing of the expatriate Iranian musician Mohsen Namjoo.

And "The Battle of Yesterday," a lively first-time performance work by the artist Iona Rozeal Brown, translated her gangsta-geisha portrait paintings into real life while showcasing her brilliant skills as a D.J. and mixologist. But this tale of monsters and princesses spiced by voguing and break dancing felt like an Off Off Broadway hit waiting to happen.



Similarly, I loved watching the amazing Kristin Anna Valtysdottir lead a team of Icelandic musicians, along with Aono Jikken Ensemble, in providing the music, dialogue and sound effects for Guy Maddin's 1989 cult classic, "Tales From the Gimli Hospital." But the polish and precision, the perfect dovetailing of moving image and live sound, seemed in some ways the opposite of performance art.

In fact, all of these events seemed too canned or framed to qualify as performance art, or at least as "visual art performance." The so-called fourth wall of theater seemed very much in place.

On the other hand, several works that evinced more in the way of unpredictability, process and close brushes with real life had déjà vu problems, mustering a kind of old-time performance-art disjointedness, even when bits of new technology were involved. You often felt you were seeing works in progress, although there are worse things than emerging from an event wondering, "What was that?" and having it stick in your mind for days.

This was the case with Ming Wong's "Persona Performa." Based on Bergman's film "Persona," and incorporating video installation, dance and live projections, it teetered fascinatingly between reality and art, but was also overly indebted to the 1970s work of Dan Graham and Trisha Brown.

In the fitful "Put a Song in Your Thing," the artist Frances Stark ruminated, mostly in words typed onto a screen, on the difficulty of making art, and sexted with her Internet lover, repeated-

ly donning and shedding an elaborate dress in the shape of a rotary-dial telephone. Finally, wearing little but a net bodysuit, she erupted into the latest athletic, suggestive form of club dancing, called daggering, with a handsome D.J. named Skerrit Bwoy, achieving something that felt shockingly real and risqué.

The results were similarly erratic when the video artist Laurel Nakadate teamed up with the versatile actor James Franco for "Three Performances in Search of Tennessee," a concoction that swirled uneasily around "The Glass Menagerie," with a combination of séance, karaoke auditions and improvised readings from the script.

Among the commissions I saw,

Performa 11's most genuinely transformative moments came in the final week. In a series of skits that turned exchanges between television anchors and political figures — including the likes of Glenn Beck, Sarah Palin and the Clintons — into hilariously charged personal encounters, brought audience, performers and camera crews together in what felt like a new kind of space. The actors performed seated in, or moving through, the audience, but their images were also projected on the theater's big screen, along with those of many audience members. Especially in the first of the two performances, the sense of conspiratorial participation was intoxicating.

Five days later Mr. Kjartansson's "Bliss" turned a snippet of

Mozart at his most sublime into a work of endurance art. Basically, Mr. Kjartansson had a group of professional opera singers in pe-

riod costume, accompanied by a small orchestra, repeat for 12 hours the denouement of "The Marriage of Figaro," in which the Countess forgives the rascal Count with a brief aria, repeated by the entire cast, that is, in itself, a form of divine redemption.

You expected this daffy, daz-zling, infinitely touching thing to unravel and degenerate as drinks and snacks were passed around, rest breaks were taken, and voices noticeably weakened. And yet fall apart it did not. Under the vigorous baton of the somewhat obstreperous David Thor Jons-son, a jazz musician and frequent Kjartansson collaborator, and led by the seasoned tenor Kristjan Johannsson, who, as the Count, never left the stage, day turned to night, and art, or at least Mozart, triumphed over the encroaching chaos of life. Once again the audi-ence, the performers, the ingen-iously recycled material and the space itself merged into some-thing that felt new and whole, something that was being creat-ed with our help, as we watched.

Let's hope that the next Perfor-ma will trim its sails, tighten its focus and deliver moments like these at a higher rate than its im-mediate predecessor.