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Performa '11 POOR PLAYERS TO THE STAGE by Emily Nathan

Performa founding director RoseLee Goldberg claims that Russian Constructivism is the thematic point of departure for this year's edition, Performa '11, Nov. 1-21, 2011. To contextualize that history and to anchor the event, Goldberg has collaborated with Moscow's Garage Center for Contemporary Culture in curating "33 Fragments of Russian Performance," an enthralling archival exhibition featuring documentation of Russian performance from the avant-garde '20s through the present, installed in the old classrooms of the Performa Hub on Prince Street through Nov. 23, 2011.



Judging the 100-some events and commissions that comprise Performa '11 by "33 Fragments," though, ultimately leads to one question: has performance art lost its way? Under the direction of Garage curator Yulia Askenova, the exhibition is intelligently organized by topic and chronology, with articulate wall texts that provide social, political and historical context for each performance archive, photograph or video; by turns hilarious, provocative and shocking, it stands as a testament to what artists have historically sought through and found in the medium of performance: a free space for expression and liberation from systemic oppression.



From the practicality of Constructivist theater, which united the world of art and life, to the Futurist poets, who painted their bodies and faces like canvases and took to the streets, provoking reactions from a generally apathetic and resigned public, to the Blue Blouse Theater Group, which produced vaudevillian spectacles that were accessible to an uneducated audience, performance has traditionally served as a tool of resistance. But what are we fighting for, or against, now? In Performa '11, most of the commissions bring us right back into the conventional institutions -- the gallery or the theater -- that performance was pioneered to eschew, and they frequently fall

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back on conventional devices: sets, actors, scripts. What is unclear is exactly what "performance art" is supposed to be and do, and how it differs, or should differ, from theater.



Over at the velvet-curtained Abrons Art Center in the Lower East Side on Nov. 9, British artist Simon Fujiwara (b. 1982), known for weaving fantasy and biography into installations that blur the line between fact and fiction, presented *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*, a 90-minute, three-act play performed on a rotating stage. Beautifully produced with elaborate sets, props and rehearsed lighting, the piece starred Fujiwara as himself, his best friend as his best friend and a young actor as a young Simon, in a series of meta-vignettes that slipped in and out of the real-time present and re-enactments of moments from Fujiwara's past -- his encounter with the painting that made him want to be an artist, for example.



Using Brechtian methods to puncture the divide between audience and action (frequently, Fujiwara addressed us directly), actor and character, *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* conflated and confused true and false, jumping back and forth between embellished memories and a dubious here-and-now. Fujiwara thus set his audience up to be suspicious of everything he said, and opened a window onto the fictions inherent in the process of performance. In the end, though, I was left wondering, wasn't that a play?

This question has haunted a number of the biennial's most anticipated events, though "theater," strangely enough, is perhaps the only art form not included in Performa's description of itself. (It is billed, rather, as breaking down "the boundaries between visual art, music, dance, poetry, fashion, architecture, graphic design, and the culinary arts.") On Nov. 11 at Cedar Lake on 26th Street, Iranian artist Shirin Neshat staged a "mock trial" titled *Overruled*. Here again, the power of her performance was in the details: the scholarly set featured piles of old books stacked beside sagging, vintage filing cabinets; yellowing scrolls leaned against wooden ladders; a long table at the front of the stage was sparsely appointed with one intricate, high-backed chair.

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Neshat used colored light and costume to visually organize her actors, to compelling metaphorical effect: white for the venerable judge and his 15 minions, who busied themselves about the scene, stacking and un-stacking books, scribbling notes, flipping pages; green for the jury of dark, uniformed soldiers that flanked the stage on either side; red for the live band, which played haunting melodies throughout the production, and black for the defendants, who were charged with heresy against God: the endorsement of pleasure. Sincere, dramatic performances on all sides -- there were even tears, and poetry about nature -- were bolstered by periods of live, traditional Persian music and song. Although dealing with issues of censorship that feel, by now, a bit hackneyed and even somewhat corny, Neshat's production was spellbinding, if not particularly groundbreaking.

Other commissions took place off-stage. At the Austrian Cultural Forum on East 53rd Street, Austrian artist Maria Petschnig (b. 1977), whose works generally feature masked strangers dressed in home-made fetish wear, presented *See-Saw, Seen-Sawn*, which comprises a video and a live (but invisible) performance. The silent film took us on a shaky, handheld tour through the hallways of an old house, opening doors onto a commune of near-naked exhibitionists engaged in domestic activities like surfing the internet, shaving or making a bed. These scenes were occasionally interrupted by real-time footage of similarly clothed (or un-clothed) characters, including Maria herself, that was being filmed behind a curtain on the landing at the top of the stairs inside the room. What they were doing was not clear -- it always verged on the sexual but never quite got there -- and it took most viewers some time to realize that the whispers and footsteps heard from above throughout the performance weren't public rudeness, but rather part of the action.

This is not to say that none of the commissions fit more snugly into what one might envision a performance art piece to include -- aggressive spitting and yelling, bordering on offense, come to mind. On Nov. 4, German provocateur Jonathan Meese set up shop at Bortolami Gallery to present *War 'Saint Just (First Flash)*, in which he rallied for the dictatorship of art, which he terms "Totalität," above all else. With long, greasy hair, a scruffy beard and plastic sunglasses, Meese occupied a stage installed at the back of the room that was furnished with black cardboard cutouts of Iron Crosses and makeshift podiums on which he had scrawled "Triumph of Art" in red paint. Pacing manically back and forth, he threw up Sieg Heils and shouted often unintelligible propaganda in both German and English at the audience for over an hour, a convincing parody of a dictator.

On Monday night, Liz Magic Laser's performance, *I Feel Your Pain*, presented a "living newspaper" in five acts, with actors planted throughout the audience in SVA's 500-seat theater on 23rd Street. The specific source material for each short skit -- adapted texts of iconic (and usually humiliating) interviews and speeches made by politicians from George Bush to the Clintons to Anthony Weiner -- appeared like a title card on a large screen at the front before each scene began, alongside a thematic title like "Infidelity" or "First Date." As a camera crew filmed them from a number of angles and projected the live-feed on the screen, the actors sampled and re-contextualized each source text as conversation between couples at

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the movies, munching popcorn and sipping jumbo sodas while spouting infamous lines about the economy or Hurricane Katrina.



The cameras followed them as they moved around the theater, argued in the aisles, shimmied aggressively in and out of occupied rows -- "excuse me, sorry, this was my wife's idea," or "Jesus, you see what I'm dealing with here," muttered apologetically to unwitting audience members, whose reactions were broadcast for all to see. The hypocrisy of the American political program, the emptiness of its rhetoric -- by now clichéd, common knowledge -- was brightened and reinvigorated by Laser's clever, at times hilarious production.



The final scene turned the camera on the viewers themselves and prompted a moment of critical self-awareness. It opened with a montage of apologies to the public made by male politicians (each played by one of the actors), and concluded with a wide shot of the audience filmed from behind, each head tilted back to stare up at the screen, on which was an image of the audience staring up at the screen, etc., ad infinitum, before the theater went black. Although we may know the stories and think the politics are nonsense, Laser seemed to suggest, here we are again -- sitting in the dark, gazing wide-eyed at the TV.

Despite the strength of certain moments in some performances, Performa '11 doesn't seem to have a clear vision for itself -- and it certainly has nothing to do with the history of Russian Constructivism, a movement generated out of social and political urgency. True: pervasive yet ambiguous malaise derives from and is expressive of our cultural zeitgeist, and there isn't one specific, focused cause that we are fighting for these days -- but that's just Postmodernism, and it's not interesting anymore, in and of itself. Performa '11 is entertaining, for the large part -- but it is perhaps most effective in forcing us to reconsider just what it is that we want from performance art.

"Performa '11," Nov. 1-21, 2011, at locations throughout New York City.
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