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ROSELEE GOLDBERG

IN THE 10 YEARS SINCE Goldberg founded the Performa biennial, performance art has moved swiftly into the establishment as museums, universities, and even art fairs are now regularly creating dedicated spaces and programs for the genre. However, as Goldberg explains to Sara Roffino, performance has been an integral part of artists' practice for hundreds of years—a fact underscored by a focus on the Renaissance in this year's edition, taking place November 1 through 22 at venues throughout New York City and featuring work by Francesco

Vezzoli with David Hallberg, Erika Vogt, Robin Rhode, Oscar Murillo, and others.

SARA ROFFINO: *Why was the Renaissance chosen as the theme for this year's Performa?*

ROSELEE GOLDBERG: It was a period when artists were actively engaged in live performance. It could be thought of as part of their job description in the courts and palaces of the aristocracy whom they served. Artists moved between creating paintings and pageants, designing spectacles to celebrate a royal visit or a triumphant battle,

and working with apprentices to create what we know now as static paintings or sculptures. Imagine the studios of the time those great narrative paintings and classical themes were painted! Models of all ages from different classes mingling in a bustling studio workshop—it had to be a very theatrical place. With this year's Performa, I wanted to show that live performance was integral to the artist's experience in the Renaissance and beyond. It is not a recent phenomenon. **SR:** *How do you develop the themes for each biennial?*

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RG: One of the reasons I started Performa was to make the history of performance widely known, and to integrate that history into the history of art as we know it. Even though my book [*Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*] was published in 1979, showing the significance of performance in shaping 20th-century art, it took the creation of Performa to get the attention of a larger public—the critics as well as academics and curators. With the intention of uncovering this history, each biennial is anchored in a historical theme that we start researching two years in advance. We pull together a selection of texts that are bound in a reader, much as I do for my students at New York University, and we provide these readers for the artists, writers, curators, our staff, and anyone interested in getting to know the details of the particular historical period.

We begin by reaching out to scholars and specialists in the field. With the Renaissance, the first person I called was Hal Foster at Princeton, who in turn put us in touch with a really interesting group of Renaissance scholars, including Alexander Nagel, Rebecca Zorach, and Pamela Smith. Much to my surprise and delight, I discovered a generation of art historians who are looking at the Renaissance through a lens of contemporary art, much in the way that we approach the



historical precedent to today's performance. It's been an extraordinary process of discovery. I should point out that the artists whom we commission for the biennial are not expected to respond directly to this historical anchor, although quite a few of them do.

SR: You've said that many artists who are thought of as painters or photographers or sculptors are actually performance artists. Can you explain this?

RG: With all due respect to the *New York Times*, I was misquoted as saying that Jackson Pollock, Cindy Sherman, and



Leonardo da Vinci are performance artists. They are certainly not performance artists, though aspects of their work have involved performance. By the way, I rarely use the term "performance artist" to describe artists, except in the broadest sense, to describe a history. Rather, I follow the work of those artists who use "the live" as one medium among many for expressing their ideas. Visual artists throughout the 20th century have

done so—Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, Yves Klein, Yoko Ono, Vito Acconci, Joan Jonas, Mike Kelley, to name a few since the 1960s—and many contemporary artists today use performance among a range of media. Very few artists use the term to describe themselves, either. Tino Sehgal does not call himself a performance artist—no way!

SR: Much has changed since Performa started. Marina Abramović's *The Artist Is Present*, in 2010, for instance, brought a lot of critical attention to the form, while museums and universities are integrating it into their programs. Has this popularity and institutionalization affected performance?

RG: It has brought more attention to performance and created an avid audience who enjoy the experience of being up close and personal to the artist, being able to turn to others in the room to discuss and argue their take on the work. Going to a

museum used to be a quiet, contemplative experience; it was a place to study, to be left alone, removed from the street. But the museum of today is a bustling cultural palace, with large spaces set aside for crowds and events, and some now also have dedicated performance spaces. The effect of this heightened attention from academics and museums is that people can build a bank of references, they can compare one with the other, they are acquiring knowledge and entering into a very contemporary conversation about media and engagement, narrative versus abstraction, time and space. We will see more and more museum-quality performance because the setting demands it, because curators are becoming more effective producers, and because audiences will be expecting it.

SR: As museums are under increasing pressure to present sensational experiences, performance becomes more vulnerable to becoming spectacle. How do you deal with this?

RG: So much of the art of the past two decades has had a spectacular aesthetic, dazzling surfaces of color, brilliant imagery, surround sound—which has as much to do with new technology as with the highly tuned media world that we live in. Think of the pristine vitrines of Jeff Wall, Matthew Barney's performances and films, the film and video installations of Pierre Huyghe or Pipilotti Rist, and the recent mega-installations of Paul McCarthy or Kara Walker. It is not at all surprising if performance of the same era carries the same boldness of aesthetic, the same richness of imagemaking, the same desire to seduce and overwhelm. Performance

FROM TOP:
Jesper Just
A performance still from *True Love Is Yet to Come*, a 2005 Performa commission.

Liz Magic Laser
A performance still from *I Feel Your Pain*, commissioned by the biennial in 2011.

can also be minimal, small in scale, conceptual: a simple conversation with a passerby on a bench in Harlem, as in a work by Dave McKenzie for Performa 09. Even with all the museums and galleries now presenting performance, Performa provides the critical context for examining these changes and shifts in scale, aesthetic, content. We're also focused on educating curators and writers to look at this broad spectrum, this complex history, so that we can all make better sense of the range of material being made.

SR: *Performance is ephemeral and time-based, yet it's often transmitted via the Internet and social media. What is the potential in that respect?*

RG: There's no question that performance is ideal for online exhibition. Performance is by nature in motion; it is visually powerful and inventive, and can have impact on the smallest iPhone screen. It is integral to our programming, and we're constantly in conversation with Performa artists about various ways that they might use the Internet, but always in such a way that it has a specific conceptual and aesthetic outcome. We have begun a commissioning program, About Time, that deals specifically with work made over time, and there's more to come. Performa's material is ideal for Instagram, for recycling the imagery of performance in hundreds of ways. It allows instant participation from everybody.

SR: *Is there a risk with that potential?*

RG: We can't stop the speed of new technologies; the avant-garde of technology is irresistible to the avant-garde of the art world, but artists will always find ways to make it personal. Conversely, it's inevitable that pop culture will eat up the newest propositions by artists. Madison Avenue and the media have always looked to the art world for inspiration.

SR: *But pop culture is appropriating performance: Everyone's a performance artist now.*

RG: That statement makes me cringe! It's the equivalent of the old joke "my two-year-old could have done that." Indeed, performance art in the public imagination, based on some of the more difficult conceptual gestures of the 1970s, is often thought of as absurd, but that was another good reason to start Performa, to show its historical threads, explain its context, and to produce work that is powerful, both aesthetically and in terms of content.

SR: *Can you share a few moments when you saw Performa and thought, This is what I envisioned?*

RG: Opening night of Performa in 2005! Jesper Just's *True Love Is Yet to Come* was exactly that. It took everyone by surprise. It took place on a small stage constructed inside the white box of Donna Karan's late husband's space, the Stephan Weiss Studio on Charles Street. We stood rather than sat, there was one live performer, and there was a projection of shifting scenes that included the Screaming Men's Choir, with 25 men screaming "you always hurt the one you love." I looked around and people's jaws were dropped, literally, completely mesmerized. The next day a large photo and review appeared in the *Times*. The very first night of the very first Performa biennial delivered what I had imagined. It was a new way of commissioning and producing work. The list of similarly revelatory work is too long to list here, but includes Adam Pendleton, Nathalie Djurberg, Laurie Simmons, Isaac Julien, Omer Fast, Shirin Neshat, William Kentridge, Ragnar Kjartansson, Liz Magic Laser, Rashid Johnson, Dominique González-Foerster, Cally Spooner, Eddie Peake, Ryan McNamara, and too many more to mention. **MP**

FILM

LEARNING TO LOVE CLICHE

Rick Alverson's uncomfortable entertainment

"FOR ALL INTENTS and purposes, this film isn't a comedy, although I'm sure it will be put in that box," director Rick Alverson says over the phone from his home in Virginia. *Entertainment*, which opens in New York on November 13, stars Gregg Turkington—known for his two-decade-plus stint as the comic persona Neil Hamburger—and the only laughs the film elicits, from a non-sociopathic viewer at least, are nervous ones.

The original conversations about the film, Alverson says, involved inserting Turkington's character into a road-trip narrative (not unlike that of 1971's *Two-Lane Blacktop*), a concept that was eventually abandoned ("We didn't have any interest in a promotional vehicle for a comic character," the director says). Alverson and Turkington have a shared aversion to narrative clichés, a disgust with metaphors and symbolism and easy digestion. But at the same time, Alverson admits, those occasionally tired things are what constitute a shared cinematic language. Counterintuitively, director and actor embraced loaded clichés as raw material: a set of access points for the viewer that, Alverson says with a laugh, is "essentially a trap."

So in *Entertainment* we find Turkington's unnamed character roaming the California desert, occasionally accompanied by a scatologically obsessed mime named Eddie (played by Tye Sheridan), who serves as his opening act. When our antihero is not performing, he's sitting in his hotel room crying into his daughter's voice mail. The slowness and repetition of the scenes, with little narrative closure in sight, generates a certain amount of fatigue for the viewer, as Alverson takes a familiar premise—a man in search of something in the desert—and pushes it as far as it can go.

"What Turkington does as a performer has to do with the end of something," Alverson says. "I think it's about exhaustion." He notes that his previous film, *The Comedy*—also not what its title suggests—was engaged in a similar "cat-and-mouse game of attraction and repulsion." I asked Alverson—a former musician who, in the past, toured with the indie bands Drunk and Spokane—if *Entertainment* was also about his own attraction to and repulsion by the act of performance. "It's probably so close to the surface I don't even realize it," he says, laughing. "But there's a reason in the film why the audience loves the opening act, Eddie, who shits into his hat. I think it's pretty straightforward." —CRAIG HUBERT

Rick Alverson
Gregg Turkington
in a produc-
tion still from
Entertainment,
2015. 105 min.

