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PERFORMA 17: ABSURD TIMES, ABSURD ACTS

By Nancy Princenthal, November 9, 2017



Performance art is in some ways like stand-up comedy. Both are often acutely personal and both can cause wincing discomfort (along with maybe a few good laughs). But while stand-up thrives on late-night TV, the scrappy, ad hoc kind of performance art that flourished in the 1970s is often said to have faded, eclipsed by big-budget productions. This month's presentation of the multiveneue biennial program Performa 17 proves again there's a thriving middle ground.

Founded by RoseLee Goldberg, who still directs it, Performa arrived in 2005 as a revelation, presenting little-known artists whose work, even when rough, was visually arresting, emotionally gripping and technically sophisticated. Keeping the energy going has required varying the focus by region and theme.

In this year's iteration, which runs through Nov. 19, the emphasis is on African artists — particularly those from South Africa (Ms. Goldberg's birthplace) — and the "historical anchor" is Dada. Emerging amid the wholesale slaughter of World War I, Dada was the heading for a series of incendiary acts at various clubs and cabarets — noise as music, nonsense as

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poetry — that managed to be both utopian and nihilistic. It suggested that yowling hilarity is the best revenge against an incomprehensibly violent world.

Performa 17's participants responded to the Dada cue in wildly varying ways. Among the standouts in the 19-day program's first week, in various locations around the city, was the quietly grave, thoroughly devastating "Black Paper" by Teju Cole, the Nigerian-American writer, photographer and photography critic for The New York Times Magazine. It began with Mr. Cole entering in natty professional attire — crisp white shirt, porkpie hat, stylish glasses, pressed slacks — and promptly replacing it with the shapeless clothes of the dispossessed. Lying down on a cot at the center of the theater, he pulled a blanket over himself as six screens lit up, surrounding the audience.

The first projected image, of a nondescript hotel room, appeared on every screen. A mingled soundtrack of crickets and traffic, nearly inaudible voices, and percussive music — pings, chimes, and a low piano note struck repeatedly — circulated on speakers behind the audience. Soon the front page of The Times from the morning after Trump's victory appeared on several screens, with its banner headline, "Outsider Mogul Captures the Presidency." Read a year later, it can be seen to brand him an unwelcome, even un-American, intruder. Subsequently, superimposed newspaper pages blurred, but a message had been delivered: alienation would be Mr. Cole's tonic note, played up and down the keyboard.

These images were replaced by captivating photographs that changed too quickly to absorb, offering teasing glimpses of subjects both appealing and forlorn: landscapes, cityscapes and distracted pedestrians from the United States, Europe, Africa and the Mideast; art museums and food markets; hotels and airports. There were quick references to fallen heroes (Martin Luther King Jr., Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X), but much was anonymous. The barrage of photographs grew darker as the sound of pounding, suggesting boots, or cannons, became increasingly loud and fast. At its peak, Mr. Cole sat up abruptly, shouted incoherently, as if trying to shake himself out of a nightmare, and walked off as the screens went black.

Only slightly less somber, the South African sculptor Kemang Wa Lehulere's "Icut my skin to liberate the splinter" was a six-person ensemble piece in which handmade props were sometimes used as musical instruments. Games and furnishings of childhood were a motif: one old wooden school desk, cut apart and reassembled, became a makeshift wooden drum; some were remodeled as birdhouses, into which one performer thrust her arms and legs, and writhed, thus encumbered, on the floor. An image of inadequate shelter in collapse, these miniature homes suggested another motif, seen again in a one-walled tent, whose wire struts were bowed like a cello.

Tires were sometimes pushed along the floor with crutches, or swung aloft, as if in strenuous hoop games. Others, ringed with pipes, suggested the "necklaces" hung around people's necks and set on fire to punish suspected regime collaborators as apartheid came to a bloody end. Mr. Wa Lehulere explained that the casts of human hands in sign-language positions that were ranged in the background spelled out "please remember on my behalf" — the words of an aunt who had been caught up in his country's violence. He did her bidding with honor.

While Mr. Wa Lehulere took up the Dadaist legacy of putting found objects to symbolic use, the Brooklyn-based soloist Narcissister fired up the torch of Dada outrageousness. Alternately live and videotaped, her acts involved successively stripping off layers of clothing, wigs and face masks; the last mask always remained. Narcissister's prodigiously athletic dancing and elaborate handmade costumes, augmented with false limbs and even a fake head, supported confusion about (literally) which end of her was up. Hugely inventive and shamelessly vulgar — her stripping nearly always ended with the extraction of sundry accessories from her privates — Narcissister is a self-identified feminist. She was perhaps more convincingly characterized by her stage name.

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A few Performa artists have taken to the streets, among them Barbara Kruger, who brings her textual provocations to a billboard in Chelsea — Know Nothing, Believe Anything, Forget Everything, it reads — as well as to signage in a Lower East Side skateboarders' park (Whose Hopes? Whose Fears? Whose Values? Whose Justice?); similar questions appear on the backs of Metrocards she designed, issued in several subway stations. (Ms. Kruger will be performing live on Nov. 9 and 16 at Performa's Hub at 427 Broadway.) On a massive digital signboard at Times Square, Zanele Muholi (who performs Nov. 10 at the Bronx Museum) is projecting a pair of haunting black-and-white photographs of herself, putting dignified, sorrowing faces where deliriously (hysterically?) happy ones prevail.

Kendell Geers, a South African sculptor and performer, hewed especially close to the Dada theme with an illustrated lecture devoted to Marcel Duchamp, delivering an apparently serious, conspiracy-minded perspective on the best-known Dadaist.

But the most attentive student of Dada to appear in Performa's first week was surely William Kentridge, a white South African artist. Working across media including hand-drawn animation and opera, he has become something of a rock star and was in top form with his rendition of a sound poem first presented by the Dadaist Kurt Schwitters in 1932. "Ursonate" (primal sonata) is a series of heavily unmlauted phonemes that are meaningless in any known language.

A YouTube recording shows a deadpan Schwitters intoning them with studious musicality. By contrast, Mr. Kentridge, performing at a small podium under the soaring arched vaults of a decommissioned church in Harlem, mobilized his expressive face, hands and, at times, his whole body, variously evoking a charismatic preacher, a disputatious academician and a nosy kibitzer.

On a screen behind Mr. Kentridge, projected images of pages of text spun by furiously, rich with his trademark charcoal-drawn characters, including birds, horses and human figures: soldiers proud and defeated, a rotund German general from World War I and Mr. Kentridge himself.

The performance concluded with the arrival of the soprano Ariadne Greif and two other musicians from the Knights, one playing a French horn. Taking up the poem with rival vivacity, Ms. Greif engaged Mr. Kentridge in an electrifying duet. More polished than any vintage Dada performance, and richer in freely accessible humor, Mr. Kentridge's "Ursonate" nonetheless paid homage to its predecessors by demonstrating how helpful the language of absurdism can still be in addressing a world that makes no sense.