

BOOKS

Is the Living Body the Last Thing Left Alive?

Alex Sainsbury, director of Raven Row in London, once said: 'Laundry is not usually something we have to worry about during the course of an exhibition.' Claire Bishop, in her essay in this compendious document about the 'The New Performance Turn', quotes this comment in her analysis of the tension between de-skilling and re-skilling as performance art and dance finally enter the museum – often stripped of the disruptive anti-virtuosity and institutional critique that accompanied the history of visual performance and new dance in the 1970s and 1980s. She goes on to make some interesting points about the current fashion for getting dancers to hang around as artworks in museums all day on zero-hours contracts.

BUT THIS BOOK IS NOT JUST IMPORTANT FOR UNDERLINING THESE TENSIONS; IT ALSO TEASES OUT NUMEROUS 'INSTITUTIONAL IRRITANTS' WORLDWIDE, INTERNATIONAL HISTORIES WHICH HAVE NOT BEEN CONSIDERED TOGETHER BEFORE

I was part of that history as editor of the UK-based *Performance Magazine* from 1979 to 1987. Often mistaken for a house magazine for visual performance, sometimes deliberately, this was more a magazine about art and life, although it was also a home for new dance, theatre, music, video and film influenced by the late-1960s to 1980s 'performance turn' taking place in the West – typified by John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Laurie Anderson, the Wooster Group, Derek Jarman, the Kipper Kids, Pina Bausch, Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh, Robert Wilson, Impact Theatre, Mona Hatoum (Interview AM396), Stuart Brisley (Interview AM46), Anne Bean (Interview AM398) and many others. We also reviewed cultural phenomena such as the Crufts dog show and the royal wedding of Prince Charles to Diana Spencer. During this time, we were very aware of the tensions between rehearsed theatre, performance and dance, and what Bishop describes appositely here as 'transgressive, disrupting the audience/performer boundary, exceeding the limits of the body, unsettling gender norms and expectations, refusing the digestible temporality of entertainment, staking out

oppositional politics and operating with guerrilla tactics' while definitively not entering the museum.

All this has changed. Performance art has entered the museum with a vengeance in the 'new performance turn', as Catherine Wood's essay avers, taking issue with Bishop's stance that: 'Performance may have crossed from the shadows to the brightly lit spaces, but it continues to carry, by stealth, its potential for transgression and transformation.' This is exemplified by artists such as Xavier Le Roy, Jerome Bel, Tino Sehgal (Interview AM359) and, in the case of the Tate, Tania Bruguera (Interview AM400), Mark Leckey (Interview AM392) and many others.

But this book is not just important for underlining these tensions; it also teases out numerous 'institutional irritants' worldwide, international histories which have not been considered together before, such as the 'Porn-Art Movement' in 1970s Brazil, the performance protests against martial law in 1970s Taiwan, and Lorraine O'Grady's *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* (MBN)

Finally, this coming from Hong Kong, which is moving slowly to becoming part of China, we are reminded of that moment at the end of 2000 when it seemed that anything went in performance and, according to Anthony Yung, 'an experimental creativity directed at the extreme margins was very quickly rendered as a "pissing contest"'. This escalation was finally ended by the announcement in 2001 by the Chinese Ministry of Culture of the 'Notice of the Firm Determination to Ban Performances and Exhibitions of Gory, Violent and Lascivious Scenes in the Name of Art'.

This did not stop artist 'Professor X' from publishing in 2016 'The Cruel Tales of the Underclass' about videos apparently uploaded by people from farming villages which involved 'a variety of discomfiting bodily performances ... including all kinds of self-abuse, violence, eating various (weird) objects, forced tattooing and excessive bodybuilding'. This powerful essay ends with Lui Chengrui's 'A Smile', which responded to a number of works by artists who had sewed their mouths shut. In this, Liu 'got someone to sew his eyes and mouth open and took a few photographs of him, smiling'. This forms one of the three holographic images adorning the cover, which you have to wave around (it might be argued) in an act that forces readers to engage in an act of performance with the book itself. ■

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featured in Adrienne Edwards's chapter 'I am Not Here To Entertain You: Invaluable Performances of Blackness', to give a few examples.

Being a compilation of conference papers, Skype interviews and artists' documentation, the book is something of a ragbag of ideas, but it contains some interesting curiosities. For example, David Riff's 'Dancing Marx' concatenates Karl Marx's juvenile poetry with Martin Parr photographs from the 1980s for no apparent reason. But my favourite combination of divergent histories here is Simon Soon's 'The Athame and other Malay Weapons: A Postwar Performance and Productive Power'. This starts by highlighting the social changes in postwar UK as exemplified by Alex and Maxine Sanders, self-styled King of the Witches and his High Priestess/Witch Queen, naked – 'sky-clad', in Wiccan parlance – pointing black-handled knives at the camera in a publicity shot for Malcolm Leigh's 1969 film *Legend of the Witches*. The point here is that a Malay tradition of 'pointing' with a knife, to let evil spirits in, has been translated from an animistic indigenous religion to a performative transformation of postwar decolonialised belief systems.

