

Queer Thinking Review,

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Representing diversity: Performance Art Festival 1993

William Roper



Reviewed by Barry Daniels

Giving voice to artists who represent groups at the margins of our society was the great strength of Cleveland's Sixth Annual Performance Art Festival which came to an end on April 19. This year's director Thomas Mulready's smartest ambition festival to date. It consisted of seven weeks of programs located in diverse Cleveland theaters as well as several non-traditional spaces. A panel of distinguished museum and performance space directors selected 25 individual artists or groups who appeared on 18 bills. There were an additional 50 acts presented during the five night Performance Open.

Performance art

Although performance art has a long history, it emerged in its current forms in the late 1960s when traditional gallery artists—conceptualists and minimalists—began experimenting with performance as a new form of gallery presentation. In the 1980s writers exploring the possibilities of storytelling and autobiography began experimenting with performance as a new kind of theatrical presentation. Laurie Anderson's work is representative of the move from gallery show to theatrical presentation. Her early work developed out of her training as a visual artist. In the 1980s she added autobiography and narrative to her repertoire, finally developing large scale, technologically complex performances that combine the visual and the verbal with experiments in pop musical forms.

As Rose Lee Goldberg, historian of performance art, has noted, "By its very nature, performance art defies precise or easy definition beyond the simple declaration that it is live art by artists." That is, unlike traditional gallery art or traditional theater, the creator-artist is present in the work which is thus a "performance."

Some impressions: a collage

Feminist Voices. *The Best Things in Life* by New York based Leonora Champagne is a poetic collage of personal memories and emblems from myth, fairy tales, and pop culture. It effectively communicates the sense of frustration a young woman feels when she confronts the sexist implications of so much of the material that informs her growing up. "If Snow White and Eve both eat an apple, are they the same woman?" she asks. "If paradise is over, what do they wake up to?" In excerpts from *Sex Secrets*, Heidi Arneson from Minneapolis wittily takes us into the world of teenage "girl" sexuality. It is a very funny piece and Arneson is adept at creating a varied group of characters from her own childhood. More importantly she speaks to the reality of women's sexuality and to experiences that have not traditionally been given voice in our male-dominated culture.

The Politics of Race. Canyon Sam, a Chinese-American woman from San Francisco, presents *The Dissent*. In a quiet, centered, delivery, she tells the story of going to China to explore her heritage and winding up in India fighting the Chi-

nese oppression of Tibet. She had "sought wisdom in China and found justice in Tibet." The narrative builds slowly but achieves a remarkable intensity and coherence by the light of the final scene in Tibet. The audience listens rapidly and bursts into applause at the end.

Gay Lives. Texas born, Mexican-Cajun American, Paul Benin-Rodriguez' *Talk of the Town* presents a fictional character, Johnny, a gay teenager, growing up in Cedar Springs (pop. 2413), Texas. Benin-Rodriguez is a storyteller of great personal charm. His comic vignettes are deeply rooted in the experience of every teenage boy who has confronted homophobia in his environment. There is a poignancy to the laughter: it is the humor that makes the pain endurable. *Queer Thinking* is a deeply personal and profoundly political piece by Minneapolis artist Patrick Scully. Paradox is at the heart of his performance. His manner is often as restrained as his content is defiant. He confronts the political issues of being queer while trying to suppress the anger that facing these issues arouses. He is tall, blue-eyed, blond, with a dancer's body, and hung; he was diagnosed HIV positive seven years ago. He juxtaposes egotism and activism.

As Scully has stated, "Queer Thinking is about getting clear on things and then speaking my mind." It charts the trajectory from the personal to the political that is an important aspect of the gay rights movement. **Violence and Dance.** *Cos't Take Johnny to the Funeral* by Chicago collaborative group, Goat Island, is a dance-movement piece inspired by the question, "To be an American do we have to accept violence?" It is an oddity moving collage of movement taken from sport, military maneuvers, and gangster films that evokes a sense of fear for the vulnerable and incomprehensible violence in our world. It is the single piece in the festival to represent the Judson Dance Group in the 1970s.

Musical tales

The multi-media musical performance mode is represented by Danny Mydylack and William Roper. Mydylack portrays a fey and gawky teenager wearing oversized Bermuda shorts and sneakers. He performs a sampler of his amusing work that starts from sketches and often develops into songs. In the sweetest of the pieces, "Story," he covers his bare chest with shaving cream and tells the story of a little boy who likes to draw pictures, drawing a sequence of pictures in the shaving cream to illustrate the narrative as it unfolds. He uses a variety of props including a boombox helmet, a ten foot inflatable dick that floats over the audience, and a sideways TV which allows him to sing a duet with a film of his mouth.

African American tuba player and composer William Roper presents three short pieces that combine poetry, music, and reflections on the African American experience. His performance is hurt by the fact that the audience at Peabody's Dorian Under is clearly waiting for the second performer on the bill, David Thomas of the rock group Pure Ubu. Thomas proved to be a charismatic musician, but his set of songs hardly qualified as performance art.

Visual thinking

Kathy Rose's *Kakukimemo* Visual Theatre is enchanting and is appropriately staged at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Dance Roper performs in front of film maker Rose's abstract animations. References to various sources in the modernist tradition place her work in a historical context while the artist makes us reflect on the relation between movement and painting, between the flat surface and the three dimensional performer.

From Berlin, fire artist Kain Karawahn, accompanied by a guitarist playing driving minimalist rock music, draws pictures with

fire in an empty lot near Cleveland State University. The circles of flame on the pavement and the brushstrokes of fire across a brick wall are ravishing. The audience is free to simply enjoy the magical beauty of fire or reflect on the various meanings it has had in human history.

Loose ends and a beginning

Of the sixteen performances I saw, only four were genuinely surprising. Jane Goldberg's *Rhythm and Schism* started out as an amusing cabaret act mixing comic routines and tap. When it tried to move towards performance art with a slide lecture about Goldberg's life in tap, it became the kind of self-absorbed work that gives performance art a bad name. *Summertime*, Jan Beil-Newman and Noelle Kalom, proved to be a pair of very accomplished dancers whose series of sketches were mostly sophisticated. Ken Choy's *Butterfly* was an unloved and immature piece of work in which ego and ethnicity were passed off as art.

The New World Performance Laboratory's *Epiphany I* (The Gorm of a Performance of Fear), a work-in-progress directed by James Slowak, was a 1960s style collaborative theater piece that seemed mostly self-serving and pretentious. It was unfortunate that this kind of provincialism had to represent Cleveland in the festival. It is no bad that the festival didn't include a larger percentage of "men" in contemporary Performance Art. I certainly have liked to see one or two of the infamous "defendants" like, "Karm Finley, Italy Hughes, Tim Miller, or John Fleck. A short piece by Robert Wilson or Laurie Anderson could have given the festival some of the prestige it was lacking.

Element Cleveland was exemplary of the qualities of this year's festival. Internationally renowned director, Ping Cheng, created a piece using eight Cleveland residents from diverse ethnic or culturally backgrounds. The performers brought their personal stories to rehearsal and developed the piece in collaboration with Cheng who selected and shaped the material. In the Cleveland Play House's two infrequently used experimental theater the performers sat in a circle of rock and spoke into microphones. Their personal histories were woven together into a whole that was rich with the colors of diversity. Foreign language was used like music to punctuate the various stories. The piece reminded the audience of their heritage, their city, their experiences and the need for us to speak our stories to each other.

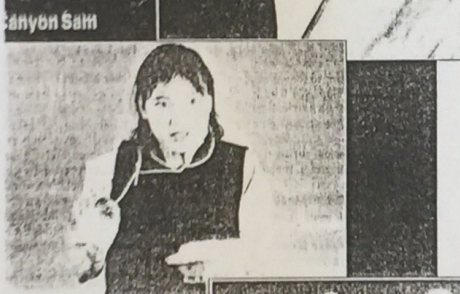
This year's Performance Art Festival sprawled both geographically and temporally. Using so many different spaces for the performances was a good idea. Audiences who regularly attend a given theater were exposed to this alternative type of art. I'm told this was particularly challenging in the Karm House weekend that I was unable to attend. Audiences who regularly attend the Performance Art Festival were introduced to the variety of theaters that exist in Cleveland. Finally, the varied/pampered configuration of performer and audience in both traditional and non-traditional spaces was an important element of the festival as it is in the aesthetics of performance.

Seven weeks is a long haul for the critic. Although I think the rhythm of the festival was good for local audiences, the intensity of a tightly packed two week or ten day festival would allow for more interchange between the

artists to occur and for the possibility of a substantive critical discourse to develop. If the festival is to have national and international credibility, it is important that such discourse be encouraged. Festival director, Thomas Mulready believes the festival is "a kind of training for everybody." He feels that both the public and the traditional art institutions have tended to ignore or marginalize performance art. For him the festival was structured to prepare the audience for the Open, which because it is unsolicited and uncommitted "very heart of the festival," from which the next generation of performance artists will emerge.

When it is good, performance art creates a dialogue with audience, ideas and feelings as well as aesthetic and political issues are explored. We are entertained and engaged by the performance and we celebrate the importance of the experience. Mulready was delighted that this year's extensive press coverage focused on "what the art was about rather than what the art form is." I was

certainly grateful for the variety of points of view I experienced at Cleveland's Sixth Annual Performance Art Festival. The seven weeks offered many graceful and provocative moments.



Leonora Champagne



Goat Island



Kain Karawahn



Danny Mydylack