

You Had to Be There

Performa 05 was a sprawling biennial that encompassed a wide range of open-ended mediums.

Performa 05, the first biennial of visual art performance, was successfully launched in New York, Nov. 3-21, under the oversight of art historian and curator RoseLee Goldberg. Events included live performances, film and video screenings, exhibitions, radio broadcasts, lectures and a symposium, and took place at more than 20 venues scattered around the city, with a concentration on the Lower East Side. Goldberg's timing could not have been better, as the overheated art market has piqued an appetite for endeavors with no saleable commodities. Publicity was ample and events well attended; scheduling and other glitches were accepted as somehow true to the spirit of what can be, after all, an ad hoc medium.

The biennial's official roster included more than 40 events (aside from related performances and exhibitions around town that were not listed on the schedule), some with multiple installments and locations. Goldberg worked in alliance with alternative art spaces, galleries and museums, a bar and an ex-synagogue (home of the Angel Orensanz Foundation), all of which acted (at least) quasi-independently. The site for one of the most ambitious projects, Marina Abramovic's *Seven Easy Pieces*, for example, was the Guggenheim Museum, where, over seven nights, the artist restaged historical performances by herself and others, and presented a new one [see article this issue]. Curated by the Guggenheim's Nancy Spector, it was listed in *Performa 05's* schedule as a principal attraction but was also an independent event. Similarly, New York University (where Goldberg has long taught) featured "Not For Sale," a two-day symposium on writing about performance and new media. *Performa 05's* strategies also involved plugging itself into existing series, such as "Band Nights" (which it launched, at Artists Space), "Scout" (readings at Participant Inc.) and "Personal Archive" (at Anthology Film Archives). Galleries and not-for-profit spaces generously allotted space and time: White Box, for instance, mounted an experimental music and sound exhibition that was the site over three weeks of live installations by, among others, the Internet radio station *free103point9*, which broadcast from the Chelsea space.

The biennial is the main focus of a non profit organization, also called *Performa*. It was founded in 2004 by Goldberg, and relied for sponsorship of biennial events on grants, individual contributors and case-by-case funding rather than a single corporate or institutional sponsor. The Swiss Institute, supported by an alliance of diplomatic funders, mounted a two-day series of multi-artist, simultaneous live works, called "24-Hour Incidental," while the Consulate General of the Netherlands helped pay for a film retrospective by Bas Jan Ader at Anthology, and the British Council an installation by

Carey Young at Paula Cooper. *Performa* alone commissioned two original works, one by Francis Alÿs at the Slipper Room, a Lower East Side burlesque bar and cocktail lounge, and the other by Jesper Just, *True Love Is Yet to Come*, his first opera, at Stephan Weiss Studio in Greenwich Village (where a benefit dinner for *Performa 05* was held on opening night, a closing party, co-sponsored by the Village Voice at the live-music venue Bowery Ballroom, also benefited *Performa*).

Art in America editorial staff members Brian Boucher, David Ebony, Faye Hirsch, Cathy Lebowitz, Leigh Anne Miller, Nancy Princenthal and Constance Widdham fanned out across *Performa 05* events and made some choices. What follows describes a few of the highlights but is by no means an exhaustive survey. To find a complete listing of artists and venues, go to performa-arts.org. —F.H.

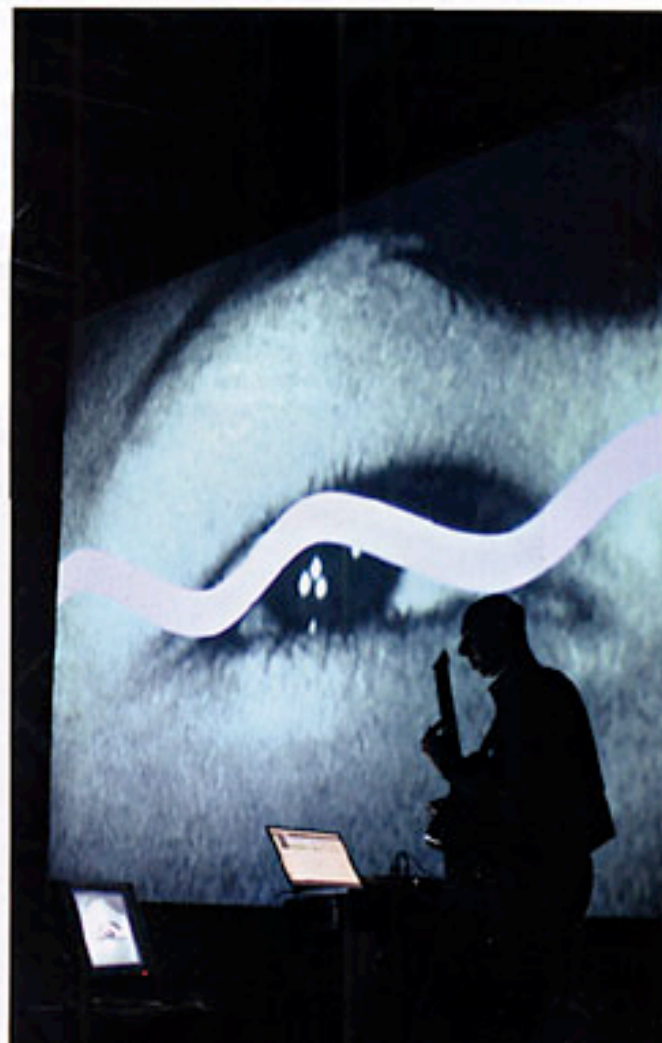
Jesper Just, *True Love Is Yet to Come*, at Stephan Weiss Studio

Performa 05 commissioned this multimedia opera by the young Danish artist Jesper Just, his first live endeavor. He collaborated with Vision3, an imaging company whose new software program, called Eyeliner, allows the interaction of onstage performers with hologramlike, 3-D projections. Starring Norwegian film and TV star Baard Ove, who appeared live, and in the projected images, Johannes Lilleøre, a Danish actor whom Just features in nearly all his short films [see article this issue], the 30-minute opera traced the fruitless pursuit of a young man by an older one who perishes in the end. Also putting in a brief appearance, in projection, was the Finnish Screaming Men's Choir, a performance ensemble whose members declaim lyrics at the tops of their lungs. Much of the footage for the projections was taken from a trilogy of films that Just is in the process of completing.

Following his usual method, Just organized the work around sentimental odes, which Ove here sang in a heartfelt, deliberately unpolished manner. Each segment of the opera corresponded to one of the songs, opening with "Whispering Grass," which Ove addressed to an oversize, three-dimensional projection of Lilleøre, who vanished when

embraced, and closing with "Cry Me a River," in which Ove, himself becoming (at least partially) virtual, tumbled through a watery cascade to meet his death. In between we saw him pursuing his elusive love-object in a variety of settings, the most surreal of which was an antique merry-go-round from Copenhagen's Tivoli Gardens, looking quite spectral in the vaporous grissaille of the imaging program. Each of the men was mounted on a carousel horse way too small for him, engaging in a low-speed "chase" destined to fail from the start. The climax ("You Always Hurt the One You Love") had Ove on his knees being chastised by a circle of screaming Finns dressed in white suits and repeatedly shouting, "You always hurt! You always hurt!" Above, Lilleøre's lovely face materialized among drifting blossoms, in keeping with the lyrics ("You always take the sweetest rose/ And crush it till the petals fall").

View from the premiere of Christian Marclay's silent video *Screen Play*, 2005, accompanied by live performances by various musicians.



The main objective of Ben-Tor's energetic monologues, delivered in German and English, is to skewer what she calls "the domain of idiocy," in this case aspects of Western liberalism.

True Love Is Yet to Come had all the ingredients of Just's best work—the songs, the older man/younger man trajectory, Lilleøre—and, like his films, expertly straddled the fine line between tragedy and absurdity. The passion that fires the older man ennobles his most abject gestures, a transformation that has been the stuff of opera since its invention. The smoke-and-mirrors visuals served the formula well, enveloping the theme of lost love in a fugitive, dreamlike atmosphere. —F.H.

Christian Marclay, *Screen Play*, at Eyebeam

Funded in part by a 2005 Eyebeam Moving Image Commission, Christian Marclay's 20-minute silent video collage *Screen Play* consists of hundreds of short clips from found black-and-white films. With three live musical performances accompanying consecutive screenings of the piece, the premiere presentation at Eyebeam recalled the silent film tradition. The performers gave widely varying sonic responses, all in a modern, atonal style, to images that ranged from horseback chases to rowboats in crashing waves, from a house in flames to raindrops on water. Simple computer animations of brightly colored moving dots and morphing lines punctuated or interacted with the images on

screen and often formed the five horizontal lines of a musical staff, literalizing the artist's concept of a "video score."

As he has in many previous works, here Marclay edited together associative strings of images; for example, a snowball becomes a globe becomes a disco ball, then a bowling ball, then the sun. The audience laughed as his intercutting made a fey conductor seem to repeatedly direct the opening and closing of flower petals in time-lapse video; I shook my head with wonder each time the voluminously spreading smoke from a rocket launch blended seamlessly into time-lapse footage of a dandelion bud opening into a sphere of white. This was followed by a shot of two high-heeled shoes adorned with white puffs.

Diverse musical interpretations imparted varying moods. The first performance, by TOT Trio, comprising cellist Okkyung Lee, percussionist Tim Barnes and DJ Toshio Kajiwara, offered a quiet accompaniment that seemed independent of the visuals. Elliott Sharp followed on solo guitar, contributing thunderous, distorted sounds that lent

the images an ominous atmosphere. Finally, harpist Zeena Parkins led percussionists Christine Bard and Jim Pugliese along with pipa player and singer Min Xiao-Fen in a lively, humorous, jazzy interpretation with vocal parts; at times they provided sound effects for the video, which seemed better each time as it was able to support these dissimilar readings. —B.B.

Tamy Ben-Tor, *Exotica, The Rat and The Liberal*, at Salon 94

At Salon 94 during Performa, and afterward at her one-person exhibition at Zach Feuer gallery in Chelsea, which also included a handful of recent videos, the charismatic Israeli Tamy Ben-Tor presented herself live as four characters delivering monologues in German and English. Costume changes she made in front of the audience between acts allowed Ben-Tor to catch her breath during the energetic, 25-minute performance. Her main objective is to skewer what she calls "the domain of idiocy," in this case aspects of Western liberalism—the globalist taste for the latest, hottest marginalized culture, for example, or postmodern relativism. Ben-Tor's characterizations, however—from the sultry intonations of the extremely pale "Exotica," anemically performing a generic Middle-Eastern dance, to the toothy Germanic screech of "Rat," a girl with hideous buck teeth and a stock-totalitarian skirted uniform, to the mousy, whispered uncertainties of the intellectual "Liberal"—are ambiguous enough to veer toward an apolitical anarchy.

Most discomfiting is the fourth character, unnamed in the piece's title, but somehow embodying each of its elements; she is an American Jewish lady with a mop of black frizzy hair and big sunglasses, crazily rapping against Holocaust denial in lingoes tied to racial stereotypes. The point may be vague (a way to jolt Holocaust discourse out of cliché?), but the perverse, taboo-breaking joie de vivre is not. Although Ben-Tor is presently in the MFA program at Columbia University, she comes from a career in experimental theater in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Clearly she is opting for an audience that might better recognize strains of Cindy Sherman and Bruce Nauman in this manic, darkly comedic work. —F.H.



The back room at Michelle Handelman's *Laughing Lounge*, 2005.
Photo Takuya Katsumura.

An object and Gellin's facsimile; in *Tantamounter 24/7*, 2005.
Courtesy Leo Koenig Gallery, New York.



Gelitin, *Tantamounter 24/7*, at Leo Koenig

The four-man team of Viennese performance and installation artists known as Gelitin (Ali Janka, Wolfgang Gantner, Tobias Urban and Florian Reither) transformed themselves into a giant "copy-duplicator-transformation machine" in *Tantamounter 24/7*. For seven days and seven nights, the group was confined to a large plywood container without doors or windows. Outfitted with running water, a bathroom, electricity and art supplies, the temporary habitat was installed inside Leo Koenig Gallery in Chelsea. Near the gallery entrance was a wooden box several feet tall connected to the habitat. The box's lid was



Sharon Hayes's *in the near future*, showing the eighth of nine actions, Nov. 8, 2005, 8-9 a.m., City Hall, Chambers Street and Broadway, New York. Courtesy Art in General, New York.

covered in handwritten text inviting visitors to place inside it an object that Gelitin would attempt to duplicate in some way. A yellow lightbulb fixed to the box's top signaled when the group was ready to receive an object. A blinking white bulb meant that the original object and the facsimile were ready to be unloaded from an exit slot nearby.

The results, some of which were on display at the gallery desk, were witty and often funky approximations of the original objects in all sorts of materials. A paper version of a houseplant or a small reading lamp duplicated in tin foil were among the examples. Some were simple, such as a thoughtful colored-pencil rendering of a doll. Others were more challenging. On the day we visited a mother put her young daughter into the box. Apparently, she spent several happy hours in the habitat helping Gelitin with its reproductions. —D.E.

Michelle Handelman, *Laughing Lounge*, at Jack the Pelican

Incorporating video, photography and performance, Michelle Handelman's postfeminist work focuses on the spectacular. The artist has been involved in a wide range of projects, from *Blood-*

Sisters, her documentary about the leather-clad lesbian community in San Francisco, to collaborations with DJ Spooky. *Laughing Lounge* was inspired by the German cult film *Kamikaze* (1989) and a therapeutic practice that seeks to heal through laughter.

After receiving a white feather from the smiling *maitresse d'*, one entered the dark gallery to peals of strained laughter. Dressed in garish club wear, Handelman and her friends sat around on inflatable chairs under flashing disco lights, laughing, while the small audience (it was a chilly Wednesday night) stood behind the chairs, sometimes giggling nervously. A small video screen showed participants talking about their positive experiences in laughter groups in India. The whole encounter was hardly conducive to therapeutic laughter: One felt excluded from Handelman's joke, rather as if one had crashed her private party.

I moved toward the back room to escape the bizarre tension of the lounge. Here, a trio of energetic dancers gyrated on a platform to loud pop hits, their outfits covered with small mirrors that cast light patterns across the wall. One felt safe as a voyeur, and when the ridiculous group momentarily stopped by to laugh, it was actually funny. The show appealed to the desire to have all our senses saturated; the dazzling lights, glamorous dancers and loud music were seductive and great fun. Handelman's performance showed how laughter can be used as a powerful tool for social inclusion, or exclusion. Everyone wants to be seen to be having a good time, as if the volume and intensity of one's laughter were somehow a measure of one's success. —C.W.



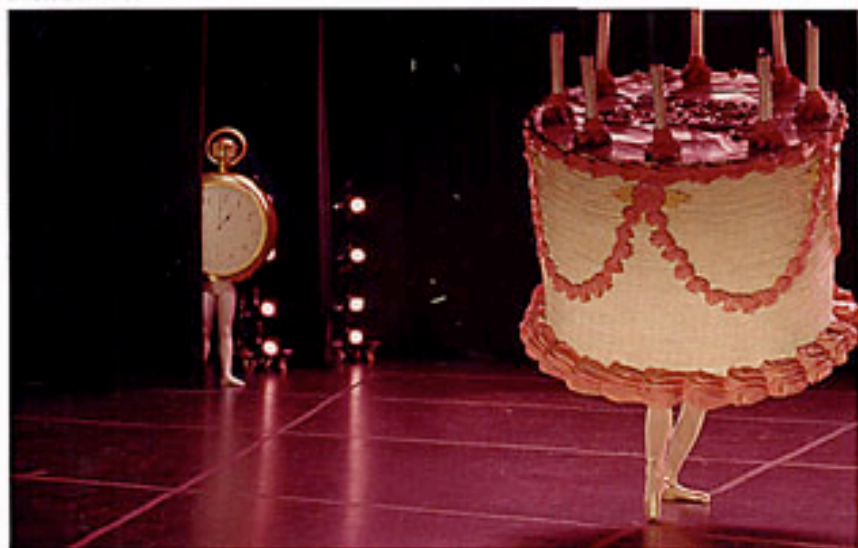
Ron Atkey and Julianna Snapper in a performance based on their opera *Judas Credit*, 2005. Photo Paula Court.

Sharon Hayes, *in the near future*, at Art in General

One of the first artworks funded by Art in General's new commissions program, *in the near future* is Sharon Hayes's initial installment of a project that will continue through 2006. For nine consecutive days, Hayes took to the streets carrying a protest sign for hour-long performances. Each day the event occurred in a different Manhattan location with a different sign.

Some of her placards hark back to the 1960s and '70s, with absurdly anachronistic messages such as "Ratify E.R.A. Now" (neatly printed in block letters) or "Who approved the war in Vietnam?" (quirkily handwritten). However, many of Hayes's posters offered statements that could apply to any number of situations, including "Strike Today" and "We are innocent" or, more ominously, "Nothing will be as before." Potentially more provocative was a sign that alluded to the 2000 presidential election: "A Stolen Election (or other intolerable

Laurie Simmons's film-in-progress *The Music of Regret*, showing a scene from Act III. Photo Paula Court.



Almost entirely naked, Athey dragged himself down an aisle along Crisco tracks squeezed from a giant bra that he had donned, slapping his chest repeatedly on the floor and pulling himself forward.

event) could spark (millions to the streets in) a Mass Rebellion."

Hayes incorporated the documentation of her project into its conception by furnishing herself with invited audiences (sometimes just a person or two). Hence, she had witnesses who watched and took pictures, in addition to the frequent attention of passersby. After the completion of the actions, slides of the nine performances were displayed on nine projectors at Art in General. Viewers were treated to multiple shots of Hayes, straight-faced and stern, holding her placard by the arch in Washington Square Park, confronted by police officers in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral, and standing amid the neon and LCD displays of a bustling Times Square. —C.L.

Laurie Simmons, The Music of Regret, at Salon 94

In the late 1980s, Laurie Simmons made a series of big black-and-white photographs of blown-up objects that were worn like outsized hats by people whose bodies were visible only from the hips down. Signature images not just for Simmons but for the art of the '80s, the "Walking Objects" have proven to have legs in more ways than one. They return for a leaping, tap-dancing, pirouetting encore in *The Music of Regret*, a short film to premiere at the Museum of Modern Art in May; a working version of Act III, "The Audition," was screened at Salon 94 as part of Performa 05. Simmons jokingly has compared "The Audition" to *A Chorus Line*, because each object has a solo turn before being ushered offstage by unseen casting directors.

Unlike Julian Schnabel, Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo and David Salle, peers who have used filmmaking as a way to inflate their work's expressive vocabulary, Simmons has kept to the fairly tight emotional scale of her still images. In fact, the implications of size seem a central theme in the still sketchy film. One object—a house—is greatly reduced from life, and another—a gigantic prima donna of a wedding cake, candles aflame—could conceivably be actual size. But the other objects—they include a cupcake, box camera, pocket watch, leather-bound book and gun—are much bigger than in reality. On the one hand, this tendency to oversize objects makes the dancers seem diminutive—little dolls brought to life, *Netheracker Suite*-style. On the other, the dancing pushes the scale



Michael Smith and Mark Fischer's video *It Starts at Home*, 1982. Photo courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix, New York.

toward human measure (in the register of moving forms, animate bodies prevail). And on the third hand, the symbolism is all carried by the bulky inert things, which we find where expressive features (faces, on people) should be. That tips the scale back the other way. In short, these tryouts are staged in a theater of both spatial and psychological instability.

Also shown at Salon 94 was a fragment of Act I, "The Green Tie," in which the action was played by puppets representing two gentle old men; Act II, furthest from completion, will revisit Simmons's self-portrait dummies. Clearly, a certain kind of tact will be maintained throughout: though "The Audition" features joy, anxiety (there are, after all, both winners and losers) and regret (the prevailing tone is nostalgic), the wobbly, indeterminate scale keeps these feelings safely—or, disorientingly and provocatively—at bay. —N.P.

Ron Athey and Julianna Snapper, Judas Cradle, at Participant Inc.

In conjunction with the "Scout" series of literary events at the alternative space Participant Inc., poet Eileen Myles invited artist Ron Athey and singer/musicologist Julianna Snapper to perform an approximately 20-minute segment based on *Judas Cradle* (2005), their monumental work—part performance art, part opera—that they staged last spring and summer at venues in Ireland, the U.K. and Los Angeles. The Judas cradle is a medieval torture device involving anal penetration, some variant of which the L.A.-based Athey, known for his performances involving self-mutilation and sadomasochism, deploys in the longer piece (though not here). The libretto of the untitled, abridged version at Participant was spoken and sung in a variety of tongues, including gibberish, with texts quoting, among other sources, Inquisition accounts and Italian opera. Athey and Snapper berated each other, sometimes seductively, some-

times antagonistically, from either side of the constricted gallery space, and wound up quasi-wrestling in a narrow aisle between jammed-in spectators. Athey has an imposing, tattooed body and was almost entirely naked. At one point, he violently dragged himself down the aisle along Crisco tracks squeezed from a giant bra that he had donned, slapping his chest repeatedly on the floor and pulling himself forward. (Spectators snatched their bags and coats off the floor.) Snapper's exhilarating voice was driven along in no less spectacular a manner. Here the old genre of s/m performance was taken to a new level of sophistication and black humor. —F.H.

Michael Smith, Selected Videos, at Anthology Film Archives

On two consecutive evenings at Anthology, performance and video artist Michael Smith was on hand to present a survey of his work, 1980-2005, and (in conjunction with Anthology's "Personal Archive" series) sometimes rare footage and films by himself and various artists, comedians and actors who influenced him, selected by Smith and curator Jay Sanders. Here was a concentrated dose of Smith's alter-ego "Mike," a bland yet buoyant character overtaken by the marginalia of popular culture: last-ditch disco, suburban decor, TV reruns and late-night ads. Smith plumbs the dark heart of the loser and finds a desperate and sarreal vein of comedy. The "personal archive" included, among other works, tapes of early performances by Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theater; ineffable faux-magic shows by the late performance artist Stuart Sherman; a bit by comedian Albert Brooks as Dave the Ventriloquist; and an excerpt from Jacques Tati's *Playtime*. Also included was footage of some of Smith's earliest work from the mid-'70s and the delirious art-world puppet shows he staged with Doug Skinner in the early '90s. —F.H.