

You had to be there

Getting to grips with performance art

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RoseLee Goldberg

PERFORMANCE NOW

Live art for the 21st century
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A body lies in a cot suspended from the ceiling – or perhaps it’s a straightjacket. It dangles, like a swing of white and baby-blue satin into which Nicholas Hlobo’s body is tenderly strapped with pink ribbon. In “Ungamqhawuli”, the coloured ribbons untie traditional gender notions, while, as a whole, the sculpture in motion strings together child’s play with Xhosa rituals around sex, silence and sleep. It also serves as a visual reminder of South Africa’s AIDS/HIV epidemic.

It is an arresting image with which to open a book on performance art, and this exemplifies how performance is often received: as a high-resolution image, retrospectively. With over 260 illustrations in colour, some full-page, RoseLee Goldberg’s *Performance Now* is a coffee-table book. But it’s also the kind of book we might want to spill some coffee over – generously. It won’t be harmed by it, and besides, performance sways between imagined and real action, between liveness and documentation, and resembles in some ways what Cocteau described as “theatre poetry”: “a coarse lace, a lace of rigging, a ship upon the sea”. It needs some tension.

Performance as a visual art is distinct from, but also related to, theatre. It’s “live art by artists” (as Goldberg defined it helpfully in an earlier book) and (in this book): “most often the vision of a single artist, responsible for every element of the work. The artist is director, playwright, performer and lighting, costume and set designer rolled into one. ... It’s often highly personal; the artist might even be described as ‘performing the self’, their personal signature being very much the essence of the work”. According to Goldberg, “the work rarely contains text or spoken word, often has no narrative arc and is not required to ‘make sense’ in the way theatre productions are frequently required to resolve character relationships and plot by a play’s end”. While Goldberg distinguishes theatre and performance art along the lines of text, what also determines the genre of a piece is the cultural and material context in which it is presented and received (book, gallery wall, stage, street, someone’s tiny closet in their grandmother’s abandoned shed), the conditions and intentions for its liveness, its play with fictionality, realism, autobiography and bodies. It also depends on a contract with the audience: whether we call something theatre, art, memoir, or poetry partly shapes what the audience expects to see and do.

Of course, many theatre-makers have troubled these distinctions, too. One might think of Richard Maxwell, who recently presented a “play” at Greene Naftali Gallery in Chelsea, not to mention Meredith Monk, Robert Wilson, Laurie Anderson, Richard Foreman, Karen Finley or Taylor Mac, as examples of makers who sit between theatre and visual art (and music and drag in Mac’s case); and the theatre collectives or experimental companies The Wooster Group, Hoi Polloi, Forced Entertainment, and Christoph Schlingensiefel — all of whom Goldberg mentions. *Performance Now* is not an academic book with in-depth discussion but more of an archive we can easily keep at home (and archiving performance art is difficult, so a reference book like this one is a feat and a treat). But Goldberg is best when she brings in her historical knowledge in relation to new developments; such as the emergence of “conceptual dance” from the late 1990s onwards “in which talking about dance while dancing created a form of lecture in per-

formance”, a practice harkening back to Trisha Brown and Yvonne Rainer. While contemporary trends are always hard to sketch without the benefit of historical hindsight, lecture performances have become more popular (one might think of Rabih Mroué’s “Pixelated Revolution”, Gordon Hall’s “Read me that part a-gain, where I disin-herit everybody”, Hito Steyerl’s “Is the Museum a Battlefield”), as have re-enactments of lectures by figures such as John Cage. As with other art forms in this new century, there is also, at least in some quarters, a greater awareness of and insistence on intersectional approaches to art making and curating.

Goldberg is also excellent at highlighting explicitly political work, such as the cult classic about NYC’s drag and vogue scene “Paris Is Burning”; a lecture performance by Coco Fusco, or Regina José Galindo’s body art. Goldberg’s book also introduced me to new work (for example, Carrie Mae Weems “Grace Notes: Reflections for now”) and invited me to think again about performance art’s locus, intentions and its relationship with neighbouring arts such as dance, music and theatre. The book is remarkably wide-ranging in terms of aesthetics, geography and formats and throughout Goldberg notes how much performance art challenges misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, racism, fascism and capitalism. But her case for performance as a global language (as Chapter Two proposes) is not really convincing. While one would hope that performance has the potential to communicate across linguistic, national and cultural barriers, its visual and time-based nature as well as the movement of bodies and objects in space make it only superficially more globally legible than text. Performance is also not inherently political. Some artists do sell out. There is an institutional, economic, and political difference between many relatively low-budget performances and the work of performance mega-stars such as Marina Abramović — all of which are included indiscriminately in Goldberg’s book. That is both useful and somewhat safe — you don’t have to say what you really think.

The inconspicuous preposition “for” in Goldberg’s subtitle, *Live Art for the 21st Century*, implies direction and intention (“of” would have situated live art in a period). How performance sits in the century and whether or not it is in the service of it, how it runs parallel or counter to the times — these are age-old questions for the avant-garde and its critics. While Goldberg could still reasonably claim that performance was “the avant-garde’s avant-garde” in her book about futurism, Bauhaus and 1960s–80s performance art, this new book



shows just how common performance has become. Performance has grown up. For that reason, it is a little surprising that the book reads like both an introduction to live art and a refresher for those already familiar with most of the work. Sometimes it lacks detail and paints in broad strokes: *which* dance festivals in Europe are important? *How* doe Jérôme Bel or Boris Charmatz “speak directly to audiences” and how exactly do their “intellectual probes forged by Foucault” work? *Why* were videos “less enticing” before the millennium just because they were “less pristine”? (Were they? And whose videos?) Many claims are simply not substantiated. Sometimes the brief summaries of performances are so enigmatic, they might as well not be there. “Cultural history, the body as material and an elegant sense of space coalesce in a collage of dance, sound and personal anecdote. Starting with the letter ‘A’ and ending with the self-identifier ‘I’, evoked through text and movement, [Will] Rawls creates a personal index of choreographic forms for future development.” A little more description would have helped readers picture particular performances.

Looking through the images in the book, I am intrigued by work that has an air of scriptedness about it. But if I see an image of someone doing a funny dance in a horse costume or a group of men gathered around a fire, say, or pushing a truck, in other words *just doing things*, I am less drawn to it. Partly that is because some photographs become artworks in their own right (as Goldberg also notes early on) and carry the photographer’s signature. Some are downright beautiful — we could frame them. Their composition, poise, the perfectly balanced colour palette, and lighting, make it seem as if they were made for the camera and its frame, not a live audience. Some are film stills (Pierre Huyghe’s

Streamside Day or Tacita Dean’s work), others appear like tableaux vivants, as in the almost Edward Hopper-like photograph of Elevator Repair Service’s *Gatz*, or the explosive and expressive image of a dance performance by Pina Bausch’s Wuppertal company, or Gerard & Kelly’s *Modern Living*, which explores queer intimacy in a dance installation against the striking backdrop of the Glass House in Connecticut and the Schindler House in New York. Other photographs do not work without a title or synopsis or without the actual performance having taken place. Similarly, performance that explores the body, duration, a conceptual conceit, or is site-specific, or a one-off, or doesn’t have a script, often needs a photograph, video, or text to show that it actually happened.

Performance documentation is a tricky issue. In a cultural moment of oversaturation in which every photo has to be Instagrammable, we might want to consider the power of words. To describe moments, complexities, relations, experiences, and also performances. Anyone picking up this book might be lured into thinking that performance art is all about the crystallized gesture, the perfectly back-lit scenery, the carefully curated mess on the floor. This is different from the more in-process and low-fi videos that Goldberg included in her fascinating Whitechapel show (September 2017–March 2018), which screened videos from the Performa archives, a major biennial she curates in New York. Some of the videos were “pristine”, others less so. Some were tedious to watch. I enjoyed them for that very reason. Performance art can be tedious (sometimes deliberately so) or it can turn into tediousness by way of being mediated through film because it is often not made for a camera. The tedious isn’t an aesthetic category in need of being propagated but it might highlight that performance is something you have to sit through, not ponder briefly over a cup of coffee. Documentation is always a detour and medial translation, which is not necessarily to be deplored and can even be harnessed creatively. *Performance Now* is a broad church, a compendium. The bagginess of its use of the term “performance” is perhaps the only way performance can stay, as Goldberg put it in an earlier book on the form, “untameable”.

That said, performance today is sexy. Goldberg acknowledges the changing museum scene that now increasingly welcomes performance. It’s fair to say that without RoseLee Goldberg and her Performa festival, live art would not be what it is today. Since this is Goldberg’s third book-length publication on performance art, and given her renown as a curator, a more self-reflexive approach would have been fascinating. What I really want to read is what perhaps only archival scholarship — or gossip — can reveal: what it’s like working with this or that artist or this or that venue, or receiving funding from this or that sponsor, or directing a festival such as Performa compared to curating events at the Kitchen in NYC or the Royal College in London in the 1970s, or what it was like making Jay-Z’s music video “Picasso Baby” with Marina Abramović and other notable figures in the New York art world. Would this make it a memoir? Not necessarily. It might enact in writing some of the institutional entanglements and complexities of making, curating and consuming performance art in — and for — the twenty-first century.