

Like time
in a
black hole,

the Performance Art Festival in Cleveland was always just arriving. Now, its sixth annual incarnation faded into early spring, the PAF announced itself like a squawling baby too long in the womb. More than 100 performances in ten venues spread over eight weeks, it can no longer be dismissed as a Rust-Belt oddity, nor can it be ignored. Its insistence on its own importance makes it, well, insistent.

Its most spectacular event—Kain Karawahn's fire performance *Cease-Fire*—works as an edifying metaphor for the whole festival and its philosophy: they spread like liquid fire into far corners of the city, ignited, sputtered out, moved on. Sometimes the result was permanent burn marks on the landscape, sometimes it was nothing more than the lingering smell of smoke in a stubborn city already full of acrid odors.

Cleveland Performance Art Festival

Community
Outreach
or Shotgun
Wedding?

by Amy Sparks

Cease-Fire; Why Don't Cities Have Forest Fires?
by Kain Karawahn.

Spreading horizontally in geographic terms, and vertically in economic terms, the PAF, fueled essentially by one busy man who calls it the largest festival in the world, reached into virgin territory—the staid, conservative Cleveland Museum of Art and the traditional African-American theater Karamu House, for example—presumably turning more people on to the virtues of art outside the frame.

Or did it? “I am a soldier,” proclaimed Festival Director Tom Mulready, who speaks often as if we are at war. He doesn’t just want to coax people away from their televisions, he wants to march them in orderly fashion into the performance arena. Better yet, he wants to marry performance to a mass audience. For Mulready believes performance is good medicine—just the nutrients the depleted culture needs. “It’s good to have an enemy.”



Undesirable Elements by Ping Chong

A capitalist whose product is a concept, whose packaging consists of identifying “the other” for the dominant culture, whose trade magazine is the festival’s own jam-packed poster with sensationalized lingo, whose sales area is all of culture, Mulready eschews the wimpy hand-wringing taking place in art circles today. “More and bigger is better” seems to be the sales mantra; performance art’s undeniable is the pitch.

For one thing is clear: as much as Mulready touts the festival’s emphasis on emerging artists and the highly democratic “no-star” system (and always brings the talk back to art and artists), he never fully steps into the shadows. Mulready is the festival; it

is his greatest performance.

Since he can’t quite manipulate mass media—yet—Mulready did the next best thing this year. If people aren’t going to come to see performance, he’ll have to take performance to them, resulting in what can only be called, at worst, venue-driven programming, at best, community outreach. Meticulous and exhausting negotiations with large and small institutions resulted in ten different festival venues and sites—from downtown’s Public Square to a stairwell and parking lot at Cleveland State University to the bowels of the elitist Cleveland Play House—with Mulready playing matchmaker, never mixing the mild with the wild.

For example, the benign, stylish, Kabuki-esque Kathy Rose was fitted to the Cleveland Museum of Art, sure not to offend a soul at that touchy institution. Ping Chong’s sweet multicultural collage for

all my might before it slams shut again.”

Reaching wider (but not necessarily deeper) into the community, luring unsuspecting audiences into their own venues under the guise of entertainment, the festival exposed more people to performance art than ever before here, according to informal surveys conducted at each performance. Plus, box office figures doubled. But how successful is the apparent success of these matchups?

After so much verbal spewing, so much frenetic energy on stage and off, a schedule that is draining for both aficionados and the technical crew, the PAF is now like a monster out of its box.

Identity, sexual and body politics (sometimes all three together) were the prevailing issues among those artists who had issues. Many artists still can’t keep their rhetoric in check with any kind of writing craft. Exceptions to this (among the performances I saw) were solo artists Lenora Champagne (New York) and Heidi Arneson (Minneapolis). Deftly weaving fairy tale-like narrative with mundane anecdotes of being female, sprinkled with “advice” from Audrey Hepburn, Champagne led the audience through a daffy examination of the female body, its appetites and its power. Arneson, who presented a work-in-progress called *Sex Secrets*, delivered a poignant, at times hilarious, but underneath deadly serious piece exploring sexual identity and taboo via early sexual experiences. Arneson’s timing is impeccable, her stagecraft flexible enough to incorporate improvisation, and her ideas quite fresh.

What Champagne and Arneson achieved through craft and subtlety, solo artists Ken Choy (San Francisco) and Patrick Scully (Minneapolis) tried to do through bumbling histrionics or politics packaged neatly inside a giant ego. Scully, an HIV-positive gay activist, gave what amounted to a speech about his life, barely structuring it into three parts that had little to do with one another. His drag queen persona challenged the politically correct gay party line, but it didn’t evolve from there. He did remind us how beautiful, white, smart, privileged and well-liked he was, all the while standing naked with nothing else on stage. Awkwardly co-opting Malcolm X’s “by any means necessary” phrase as a kind of mantra, Scully, instead of initiating a call to arms, became merely irritating. *Being* something and presenting it to a like audience is not nearly enough; the idea of identity deserves more.

Identity politics get an extra push from Mulready who says “performance art is still seeking its identity. We’re not here to write the book on it, we’re here to present these specific personalities. The identity of the

artist is more important than a specific piece.” He risks ending up trafficking in personalities, which begins to smell more like talk-show entertainment than art. Unfortunately in some of this work, identity exploration ends up being so much “me” instead of “we.”

Ironically, the one performance that sought to reach deep into the area’s multicultural community and tell untold stories of individual identity and collective racial/ethnic histories, Ping Chong’s *Undesirable Elements*, was more charming than transcendent. Kicking off the festival, it turned out to be among the festival’s mildest work.

Using eight bicultural and bilingual non-performers from the community, Chong refashioned a piece that workshopped in New York last year. The musical cacophony of Chinese, Serbian, German, Spanish, Cajun-French, Burmese, Mexican and Native American dialects, which sometimes rose to babbling heights, had one striking element: all the stories, told in different languages by different generations with different gestures, were similarly peppered with anecdotes of war, rape, political oppression and yearning for something as complicated as democracy, or as simple as land.

The performers merged their own words with those culled from Chong’s New York cast, creating a highly personal, yet universal work in which the barriers between peoples are fragile indeed.

Sexual politics were embedded deep in Nancy Adams’ nonverbal, visual feast of female powerlessness, entrapment, and relationship with work in *Parlor*. Working with gestures, pools of light and simple props, this Boston artist conveyed deep emotional responses to being female in a hard-edged world.

Relationship with work was the whole concept of Cleveland artist Lailla Voss’s nontheatrical action in which she methodically piled drawings and paintings and papers on top of herself until she was obliterated by her own work, before methodically pulling them off again, one by one, in a slow, old-fashioned conceptual piece called *Self-Stacking*. Internal, process-oriented, nondramatic, *Self-Stacking* was extremely difficult for the television- and performance-trained audience to sit through quietly. Some people jeered outright, others tittered in obvious discomfort, unused to this passive, yet confrontational approach descended from visual art happenings.

Voss was not a featured performer chosen by this year’s panel; she was part of the five-day chaos called the Performance Open, in which applicants not chosen to feature in the festival are invited to perform for 20 minutes in a nonjuried, uncensored format. Some of

this work can be dreadful, or merely boring. However, Charles Garoian of State College, Pennsylvania, who has been shut out by the panel two years in a row, performed a most stunning short work in which he was dragged onstage by a rope, his yelling muffled by a gag. He knelt in a spotlight, slowly unwrapping and handling an ox tongue, before being jerked back down to his belly and dragged offstage. He dramatically dealt with issues of family, repression and communication; more of his work should be seen.

Another performance in the Open, by Atlas/Axis from Chicago, was a brilliantly funny ballet skit lampooning the elitism of both ballet and the French language used to define/describe it.

Among other performances I saw the entertainment factor prevails, including the sometimes goofy antics of the Scumwrenches and the slick, jazzy, dazzling poet/performer Dana Bryant. She was accompanied by Cleveland master drummer Linda Thomas Jones, who could transform a whole roomful of people if she were allowed to cut loose.

If art, as described by Barbara Rose in a recent *Art in America* article, requires both intentionality and transformation, much of the performance work today would fail that description, opting instead for dramatic or humorous entertainment, or polished pieces of fluff.

But this year’s festival featured two truly transformative events: the previously mentioned *Cease-Fire*, and Goat Island’s *Can’t Take Johnny to the Funeral*, whose visceral, repetitive gestures and vague military anxiety made for a moving work in which the audience was both voyeur and hapless participant in the insistent, up-close way the performers of Goat Island work.

Cease-Fire, created by Kain Karawahn, a Berlin artist who uses fire like paint and buckets of “dragon-juice” like brushes, was both local and global in its look and implications. Remember, Cleveland is the city infamous for having a river that has burned more than once, a fact that intrigued and delighted Karawahn and his collaborators. Set in an empty, inner-city parking lot, Karawahn used three “stages” for his fire-throwing—a high brick wall, a set built of rocks and ledges with a pole holding four buckets of “fire,” and most spectacularly, an uprooted tree wrapped in gauze like a burn victim, hung upside down on a makeshift metal axle. Highly dramatic and a bit unfocused, Karawahn’s performance consisted of repetitively setting things on fire, spreading fire in circles and lofting it high into the air. The tree was laboriously pulled into the area by Kathe Be, who wore a candle-topped

headress that symbolically evoked the salt miners under Lake Erie, or the sweaty laborers in the nearby humming steel mills.

Cease-Fire was raw, industrial, cynical—much like Cleveland itself—and yet bloomed into images of strife around the world where burning is daily occurrence. A truly pagan fire, subverted and celebratory at the same time, *Cease-Fire* was a cathartic event, coming at the end of eight weeks of activity, and on the verge of spring. Its faults—Karawahn doesn’t need to ask those silly questions of the audience beforehand, and the accompanying music was a bit too overly dramatic—have faded, and the image of the burning tree, which 400 people watched mesmerized until it was just a charred skeleton, remains. Karawahn is unabashedly using the allure of fire as a mirror—what do we see and why do we like to see it burn?

What seems to be missing amidst all this activity is a proper contextualization, or at least a common language with which to discuss it. It’s not enough to just create work, get money for it, slap it up onstage. It needs careful placement in the community, evidence of process, a deeper connection to the space and time it intersects. It could use, frankly, some explanatory labels, which Mulready believes is up to the media. I am not talking about spoon-feeding pablum to the bored and lazy dominant culture, or even shocking people on their own turf. I am talking about reinforcing the idea that this work is more important than entertainment, that it’s important at all.

The festival needs to grow vertically now. Instead of following the “more is better” dictum, why not spend some of the money to commission certain artists to create site- or community-specific work here, workshopping it in the community, spending time here working with local artists and others, instead of recycling material developed elsewhere? Or pay to premiere a work here?

Next year the festival gets local and art professional legitimacy with a concurrent historical exhibition at the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art (as well as, presumably, real explanatory labels), and will be spread over a rumored 11 weeks. But large does not equal largess. Hopefully, something will transcend, be transformed, even burn. Mulready, the self-proclaimed warrior, has not yet called a cease-fire. ■

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Parlor by Nancy Adams. All photos by Craig Wilson, courtesy Performance Art Festival.