

DIARY

ERASE ERRATA

November 28, 2007 • New York • David Velasco on Participant Inc.'s new space and the end of Performa

New York



Left: Performance view of *ERASE*. Right: Artist Alessandro Codagnone and playwright Tom Cole. (All photos: David Velasco)

If Performa 07 kicked off with Francesco Vezzoli's well-heeled, celebrity-fueled bang, it went out with a well-bundled flurry of parkas, scarves, and sensible shoes. Last Monday, on the festival's penultimate evening, I attended the premiere of *ERASE*, a thoroughly degenerate theatrical collaboration between artist duo Lovett/Codagnone and playwright Tom Cole at Participant Inc.'s new Lower East Side digs.

Before entering, visitors were asked to sign a daunting waiver: “I understand that my presence in the space may result in physical or emotional injury, paralysis, death or damage to myself, to property, or to third parties.” Visions of Abramovic and Burden danced in my head as I scanned the room for loaded guns, but I saw only silver emergency blankets on the seats. Participant’s dogged owner, Lia Gangitano, put to rest thoughts of pierced arteries spurting blood or other suitably GVAR-esque carnage, noting, “They’re just to keep you warm.”

The waiver had less to do with the performance than the in-progress state of Participant’s new Houston Street headquarters, which, in keeping with the nonprofit’s irreverent programming, was once the sex club El Mirage—the kind of cozy institution whose minions would buzz you in, pat you down, and then make you expose yourself to “prove you weren’t a cop.” Or so I’ve heard. The space officially opens next January, but for now there’s an elegance to its disrepair, with dented antique tin ceilings and spavined plaster walls (“Very pre-Giuliani,” as one guest observed). There’s also a massive hole in the floor, which was covered over for the occasion with an equally massive, treacherous-looking slab of wood. (They told me it was “reinforced.”) Sadly, some interim tenants had already looted the place. “Only a stray dildo here and there to remind us of its former glory,” Gangitano said.



Left: Participant Inc. owner Lia Gangitano with artist Ellen Cantor. Right: Artist John Lovett with Ethan Shoshan.

The hour-long play, a speculative, schizophrenic meditation on the psychic world of Jürgen Brandes, the young German man who famously consented to his own cannibalization and murder by another man in 2001, was actually subdued and disappointingly bloodless—at least physically. But the (willfully stiff) dialogue was anything but. Weaving together such priceless imagery as snuff porn, choking to death on one’s own blood, and “peeling skin from swelling babies,” the show made at least a few audience members blanch. An exploration of acts so marginal, they “erase”—hence the title—their subjects (literalized in the play’s unique *mise-en-scène*, which eschewed frontal visibility, instead placing actors by the walls and behind a large partition, from where they were seen only via a large hanging mirror), the performance also paradoxically highlighted the ways in which abject deeds and their doers come to be celebrated or, to put it in the show’s terms, “un-erased.” After all, isn’t one of the (many) allures of marginal behavior the notoriety that accompanies stepping beyond the purview of the kosher?

The next night, I attended Performa’s “Grand Finale” at the Hudson Theater, though “grand” seemed a bit of a stretch. (Pomp was one thing Vezzoli had down pat.) I was not the only one surprised to find that the finale was seated and that it essentially consisted of a lineup of bands (including crowd favorites Dynasty Handbag, Stars like Fleas, and artist Ingar Dragset’s Asia Today) interrupted by very short DJ sets (by the likes of Baby Bitch T and Vanille Putin). Some grumbled that for a biennial of “visual art performance” it was unusual, even trite, to close with a musical showcase, especially one comprising performers for whom aesthetics weren’t really a concern. (One possible exception was the campy yet entertaining HK119, a London-based electroclash derivative that recalled an Oskar Schlemmer repertory troupe auditioning for a remake of *The Hunger*.) Most apropos given the events of the preceding weeks was musician and impresario Nick Hallett’s reprising of Meredith Monk songs, but even still, the evening seemed incongruous to the festival as a whole. It may be interesting to imagine the obverse scenario—trotting out Matthew Barney’s Cadillac-humping bull at the end of Coachella, perhaps—but given the dearth of performance-art venues, do bands really need the extra airtime?

As I deliberated, DJ Cory Arcangel seized the decks, launching into an arch, train-wrecked mix of Kylie Minogue and Madonna. It was the happiest sound I’d heard all night, and I sank back in my seat to enjoy it.



Left: HK119's Heidi Kilpelainen. Right: Artist Cory Arcangel and Rhizome director Lauren Cornell.



Left: Artists Bec Stupak, K8 Hardy, and Lainie Dalby/Visceral P.L.A.Y. Right: Performa 07 director RoseLee Goldberg.



Left: Artist Nick Hallett. Right: *ERASE* actors Susan Bowen, Jim Fletcher, and Stephanie Fischette.

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