

Work That Is Performed, but Isn't Performance Art

By Grace Glueck

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It looks like performance art and it plays like performance art, but the title of the big two-part show at El Museo del Barrio is "Don't Call It Performance." The no-no comes from the veteran performance --oops! performative -- artist Vito Acconci, who holds that performance is a theater term.

The visually oriented performative art made by artists, unlike stage and movie productions, is for the most part unscripted, non-oral and played out in real time. With the body as its predominant mode of expression, it casts a critical eye on the conventions of society and tries for a relationship with the viewer that is more direct and spontaneous, meant for less structured spaces than stages, silver screens and museums.

Of course, drama and theatricality are part of performative art's appeal, but to distinguish it from these professional mediums the preferred term nowadays seems to be performativity, and its practitioners performative artists.

Call it what you like; the genre is alive and well and kicking at the Museo del Barrio, which is exhibiting the work of no fewer than 60 performative artists, most recorded on video, with a few live presentations. Because of its size, the show is divided into two sets of 30 performative presentations each: the first set, which I saw, ended last weekend, and the second continues through Nov. 7.

Visitors are allowed an unlimited number of entries to the show on one ticket. Each of the two sets has different players and pieces, but the show's five categories remain the same. They deal with behavior; meditative and spiritual explorations; popular culture; social and political views; and sound, including language and music.

While Latino and Latin American artists predominate, the sophisticated performative culture flourishes among artists worldwide, so the show includes some of their North American and European colleagues. Oddly, considering that Rafael Montañez Ortiz was

already a well-known performative artist when he helped establish this museum in 1969, this is the first exhibition here entirely devoted to the genre.

The show was originally organized for the Reina Sofía Museum in Madrid by Berta Sichel, director of its audiovisuals department. The version here was organized by Paco Barragán, an independent curator based in Madrid, and Deborah Cullen, curator at El Museo del Barrio.

EDITORS' PICKS

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"Performance is still the only discipline within the scope of the visual arts that offers a direct, vivid, spontaneous product without recourse to mediation," Mr. Barragán writes in the show's catalog.

The Latino and Latin American artists in the show express their cultural outlook and current concerns. For example, the prevalence of Roman Catholicism south of the border, with its notion of the body as housing the divine spirit, and its rituals of submission, provides the "conceptual backdrop and social subtext" for many performers, writes Coco Fusco, a performative artist and cultural critic who has edited a book on Latin American performance art.

Spirituality seems to irradiate the work of María José Arjona, a Colombian now living in Miami. Almost in slow motion, she demonstrates that her daily life has soulful substance by placing a bandage in the form of a white cross on her chest, covering herself with what looks like blood, then stripping off the bandage to reveal the white, unbloodied imprint of the cross on her skin, which suggests the purity of her heart.

On the other hand, the work of Ernesto Pujol, a Cuban living in New York who was trained as a Catholic priest, could be perceived as more critically motivated. In his work "The Nun," he is dressed in a nun's habit and inflicts wounds on himself as a child's lullaby plays in the background. Then he regards a group of small white phallic sculptures with the intensity reserved for religious contemplation.

The role of women, particularly in Latin American society, is an important topic here. Among the artists who investigate it is Beth Moysés of Brazil. In "Memory of Affection," conceived for the International Day of Non-Violence Against Women, she orchestrated a march through a neighborhood of São Paulo by women in their wedding gowns, symbolizing love and union, and also evoking their perceived roles as nurturers and peacekeepers. Stripping the petals off roses as they walked, the women buried the prickly stems in a hole they dug together. The idea was to stress the need for hope and peace in daily life.

A more cynical view, of women as stereotypes, is taken by Claudia del Fierro of Chile. In "Identity," she poses in various roles -- secretary, factory worker, cleaning woman -- walking in and out of different workspaces without drawing the notice of mostly male fellow workers.

Physical assaults on women, in this case stoning, is the concern of Mikael Varela, a Uruguayan working in Sweden. His symbolic rendition in the video "Arco Iris" shows people throwing paintballs at him as he stands in a courtyard until he collapses.

The show seems far less concerned with overt political and societal unrest than it might have been in earlier days, perhaps because of the decline of oppressive military regimes in Latin America. But in "Cockfight," the Mexican artist Yoshua Okon, who lives in Los Angeles, explores the corrosive atmosphere that still exists in Mexican society. He evokes influences from corruption to machismo in vignettes like an exchange of insults between two schoolgirls and the spectacle of police officers dancing the Charleston.

The Australian artist Luke Roberts's complex visual essay "Pacifica," using clips from the movie "Apocalypse Now," touches on the marginalization of less developed societies. He plays the role of Pope Alice, a spiritual leader in the lost continent of Lemuria, who serves to question the stereotypes that victimize whole peoples.

But in general, the tone of performative art today has shifted onto "a more intimate, personal and indeed easygoing level," in Mr. Barragán's words. More than a few of the works are pure -- and funny -- aesthetic explorations, like "One Minute Sculptures" by Edwin Wurm, an Austrian artist who, with the aid of accommodating garments, pushes the boundaries of sculpture by twisting his body into different and expressive sculptural shapes.

Yael Davids, an Israeli who lives in Amsterdam, is preoccupied with how humans relate to objects like tables and bookcases and, in his most oddball presentation, an aquarium. With his head, equipped with breathing apparatus, immersed in a water-filled plastic tank, he stands in a public space, playing the role of a fish gazing out at its viewers.

There are works that pay even more sensory tribute to the human organism, like "Celestial Bodies: A Sci-Fi Adventure" by the Brazilian artist Cyriaco Lopes. It narrates a journey through a fantastic world, which turns out to be the artist's own body. His nipples are planets; his closed eyes indicate an eclipse; his tongue, oozing out between his lips, is the lava spewed by a volcano.

In this show you get some sense of performative art as practiced by a younger generation: its ambitions, failures and, most important, its vital presence in the art world.

"Don't Call It Performance" remains at El Museo del Barrio, 1230 Fifth Avenue, at 104th Street, Manhattan, (212) 831-7272, through Nov. 7.