

# Johnen Galerie

PARISBERLIN

Rooms for Improvement

18.07.2011

## Rooms for Improvement

MANCHESTER 07.18.11



Left: Santiago Sierra, *Veterans of the Wars of Northern Ireland, Afghanistan, and Iraq Facing the Corner*. (Photo: Howard Barlow) Right: Björk performing *Biophilia* at the Manchester International Festival. (Photo: Carsten Windhorst)

**UNLIKE ITS NORTHERN NEIGHBOR LIVERPOOL**, Manchester has long eschewed the biennial in favor of a cross-disciplinary, celebrity-laced International Festival. Its first edition, held in 2007, premiered *// Tempo del Postino* (Philippe Parreno and Hans Ulrich Obrist's not altogether felicitous attempt to stage performance art in a traditional theater) and hosted an experimental opera by Damon Albarn and Jamie Hewlett, creators of the band Gorillaz. The second edition, in 2009, saw Marina Abramović giving lessons in watching durational art, another opera (by Rufus Wainwright), and commissions from Kraftwerk, Steve Reich, and the immersive theater company Punchdrunk. In contrast to this energetic flirtation among art, theater, and pop music, the Liverpool Biennial seems crippled by Arts Council funding agendas and routinely weak commissions. Manchester is definitively A-list, Liverpool at best a C.

So much for context; what about *this year's* commissions? I rolled into rainy Manchester last Sunday afternoon in time for Björk's *Biophilia*, a voyage into the "music of the spheres" through six concerts that were billed as "intimate" but which actually housed some two thousand people at Campfield Market Hall, each of whom stood and jostled for a view of the singer's giant ginger afro and futuristic frilly blue dress. As to be expected, *Biophilia* involves new instruments: Huge, sculptural objects littered the stage, such as the Frankensteinian "sharpsichord" (a vast pin barrel harp with gleaming trumpet) and a "gameleste" (the love child of a celeste and an Indonesian gamelan). This nature-meets-technology jamboree is presented as a full-on "project": two albums, a series of iPhone apps, and a children's education program. The pedagogic orientation was audible from the get-go, when David Attenborough—familiar to all Brits as the presenter of innumerable television nature shows—introduced the concert with an authoritative voice-over. Choosing Attenborough to announce each song ("Cosmogony—Music of the Spheres!") was a brilliant move, relocating Björk's eccentricities away from Beuysian holistics and more toward BBC reassurance. Surrounded by a twenty-four-strong choir of Icelandic teenage girls (dressed in blue-and-gold caped robes), Björk worked through the album, interspersing new songs (like "Thunderbolt" and "Virus") with older favorites like "Isobel," "Hidden Place," and (for the encore) an exquisitely spare version of "One Day." The crowd of thirty- and forty-somethings were in raptures, and obligingly roared and danced along to "Declare Your Independence" as finale.



Left: Simon Fujiwara, *Playing the Martyr*. Right: Joan Jonas, *Mirror Check*. (Photos: Howard Barlow)

Comparing the stark brilliance of Björk's searing voice and offbeat lyrics to works of art requires a major change of gear. The next morning I tuned in to *Audio Obscura*, a new Artangel commission from the poet Lavinia Greenlaw: a site-specific work for Piccadilly Station in which you don headphones and meander around looking at punters, presumably mapping the recorded voices of the sound track onto their faces and actions. Somehow these interior monologues (by primarily middle-class and southern actors) never seemed to match the people I was drawn to observing: two women in saris, some kids eating pasties, some chipper old men, a group of girls in burqas. I was left thinking that Manchester has more robust and diverse characters than the wispy, fraught neuroses of Greenlaw's fragmented sound track; not unlike the work of Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, *Audio Obscura's* technology was more impressive than its content.

# Johnen Galerie

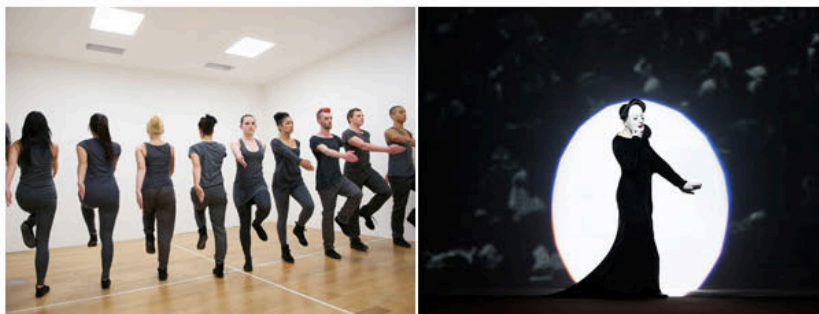
PARISBERLIN

Rooms for Improvement

18.07.2011

The next day I hit Manchester Art Gallery expecting lines for "Eleven Rooms," Hans Ulrich Obrist's return to curating performance (in collaboration with Klaus Biesenbach), but was pleased to find it far from swamped. (Such is the privilege of life in the provinces on a Monday afternoon.) The main exhibition space has been divided into eleven identically sized white cubes that are accessed from a U-shaped foyer. The first room contains Roman Ondák's *Swap*: a table bearing an object that you can exchange for something of your own. (When I went in, there was a box of matches on the table; I took them and left behind a tampon.) Other rooms were more voyeuristic: One contained only a man facing the wall, a veteran of wars in Afghanistan or Ireland (a work of strangely ambivalent dignity by Santiago Sierra); in another, a naked woman relentlessly inspects her body in a small circular mirror (a reprisal of Joan Jonas's 1970 *Mirror Piece*). In a third, an exuberant young actor in a disheveled bed awakes from slumber to effusively narrate from a leather-bound tome called *The Life of Saint Simon*; he ponders the capture of hostages, the desire for masturbation, and the actor's failure to "perform." Simon Fujiwara's ten-minute theater was a perfectly self-reflexive commentary on the key ingredients of "Eleven Rooms": The actors were all, in some sense, hostages to endless repetition without the gratification of applause, performing ad infinitum in sterile and airless chambers.

Stockholm syndrome might well describe the audience's position in some of the participatory works—the best of which included Allora & Calzadilla's *Revolving Door*, in which eight people march sweepingly in formation, malignly trapping you behind them as they silently change direction. Tino Sehgal's *Ann Lee*, the latest installment of Pareno and Pierre Huyghe's rescued manga character, is the project's finest avatar to date. An eleven-year-old girl, ethereal in her gestures (almost floating), tells us about her life as the emptied persona Ann Lee. It's a lonely place: She lives passed from artist to artist, all of whom seem too busy to hang out with her. Unlike previous works by Sehgal, our responses don't make or break the piece (thank God), and the sequence ends with a poetic conundrum: What is the relationship between a sign and melancholia? *Ann Lee* has a lightness of touch and modesty of scale that reminds you how good Sehgal can be once you remove him from the blockbuster Guggenheim/Tate Modern circuit.



Left: Allora & Calzadilla, *Revolving Door*. (Photo: Howard Barlow) Right: Marina Abramović in *The Life and Death of Marina Abramović*. (Photo: Lucie Jansch)

The lightness of touch in "Eleven Rooms" was a telling foil to Robert Wilson's *The Life and Death of Marina Abramović*, which required a trek out to Salford's soul-destroying "MediaCityUK" (a blandly gentrified industrial zone) to find the Lowry Center. Wilson's work is nearly three hours long, and highly variable in pace (from the ponderously drawn out to the rapid-fire), but it contains some visually arresting tableaux; it's accompanied by the music of Matmos, Svetlana Spajić Group (with a trio of Serbian singers), and Antony Hegarty (a curiously rigid performer, dressed in black like Mary Queen of Scots). All the performers have their faces plastered in white pancake makeup to look like Marina (including Marina herself). The look is most disturbing on Willem Dafoe, who seems to channel Johnny Depp's Mad Hatter via Jack Nicholson's Joker. It is Dafoe, however, who holds the whole thing together with a sparkling performance as unreliable guide and narrator. The work is most alive when he's in control, either as the platitude-heavy therapist undermining Abramović's earnest anecdotes, or as the archivist shuffling through a mountain of newspaper cuttings to offer a nonchronological cv of her most recent decade (falling in and out of love, too many airports and hotels, the MoMA show, etc.).

Much like *The King's Speech*, Wilson's performance recalls recent trends in biopics, by elevating a personal story above political context or cultural achievements: There is no mention of communism beyond a coy hammer slowly rising to cross the moon and stars in "Dream Crusher," and hardly any reference to Abramović's art. The occasional video clip of Marina is shown on a screen, but this is interspersed with so many other images unrelated to her output (such as an elephant swimming underwater) that you forget she's a visual artist. And as for the question that's on everyone's lips—how does Marina die?—I'm sorry to report that this remains an enigma. In the penultimate scene the diva is dressed in red, wheeled across stage on an elevated bed, surrounded by undulating watery clouds (death in the air, or at sea?). The final image is of three identical Marinas, dressed in white silk robes, lifted up to the proscenium. In other words, she ascends to heaven in the traditional Christian manner, as is appropriate for this most theological of body artists.

— Claire Bishop