

## Art Basel stages '14 Rooms', an exhibition of 'live art'

By Gareth Harris

Will performance pieces at the annual art event change the genre – and future fairs?



Mirror Check' (1970) by Joan Jonas

A tousled blonde temptress gyrates her hips, her gaze fixed on your face. The masked, bruised body moves suggestively in front of a mirror, grinding her body to a Lady Gaga track. The nightmarish dancer turns even more menacing, uttering: “My mother is dead. My father is dead. I’m gay. I’d like to be a poet. This is my house.” But the scantily clad creation is not real. “Female Figure” (2014) is an animatronic sculpture conceived by the Los Angeles-based artist Jordan Wolfson.

The work features in *14 Rooms*, a “live art” exhibition that will run alongside Art Basel, the modern and contemporary art fair, in hall three of the Messe Basel site. Billed as a “series of immersive and intimate experiences” by the organisers, the exhibition includes works by 16 artists such as Marina Abramovic, Damien Hirst, Santiago Sierra, John Baldessari and Yoko Ono. Paintings and sculpture are largely banished, and replaced by a “material” that is welcoming and repellent in equal measure: human beings.

Performers and participants will intermingle in separate circumscribed spaces designed by the Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron. The show, meanwhile, is supported by an impressive array of backers, including UBS – the leading sponsor of Art Basel – and two Basel cantons, which provided lottery funding. Local powerhouse cultural bodies, Fondation Beyeler and Theater Basel, are project partners.

The co-curator Klaus Biesenbach, chief curator at large at the Museum of Modern Art, outlines the genesis of the project. “I was in Italy on a quest to find works by Caravaggio. Having a day off, I saw a silver painted acrobat performing in front of a teeming crowd outside the Villa Borghese pretending to be a statue standing totally still. For me, it was a revelation about our project.”

There have been various iterations of the exhibition. It was first shown as *11 Rooms* at Manchester International Festival in 2011, later morphing into *13 Rooms* in April last year at Kaldor Public Art Projects in Sydney. Ed Atkins, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and Otobong Nkanga have created new works for the Basel version.

Biesenbach’s fellow exhibition curator, Hans-Ulrich Obrist of London’s Serpentine Galleries, explains with customary zeal why the performance intervention is pertinent. “It is interesting how performance scores can travel through time, like poetry. The work can happen again and again; our exhibition is a series of scores which can be revisited later.”

Significantly, this new edition examines how humanity dovetails with advancements in the digital age. On a stark, imposing screen, the London-based artist Ed Atkins will present a shaved and tattooed 3D head, “No one is more ‘work’ than me” (2014). A male actor is also present in the room, bearing witness, while the avatar “spiels its defence of vitality”, says Atkins. “The presence of the actor/performer is something between the avatar and the audience: a point of identification and so a further point of ambivalent authentication.”

Biesenbach emphasises that other works are rooted in a more tangible reality. Nothing, he says, could be more “analogue” than Bruce Nauman’s “Wall-Floor Positions” (1968), in which a performer in the space touches the floor and the wall in 28 different poses. Meanwhile, a woman scans the contours of her body using a handheld mirror in Joan Jonas’s “Mirror Check” (1970), a piece that may well be the ultimate pre-digital “selfie”.

The Nigeria-born artist Otobong Nkanga will direct a scenario featuring up to three women for her “Diaspore” (2014) piece. Each of the performers carries the plant *Cestrum nocturnum*, also known as Queen of the Night. “In constant dialogue with the plant, these women navigate through a topographical map on the floor which symbolises the idea of dispersal and



displacement," she says.



'Female Figure' (2014) by Jordan Wolfson

The ubiquitous Berlin-based artist Tino Sehgal is revisiting a work originally made in 2004, "This is Competition", which involved building a dialogue word by word. Crowd-pleaser Damien Hirst's installation combines spot paintings and seated siblings (identical twins are perched beneath the dotty works).

Including performance pieces in an art fair raises questions, though, about the status and development of the medium in the past decade. Performance art gained in popularity after the worldwide financial meltdown in 2008, as a reaction to the excesses of the art market. Concept-based and generally devoid of physical objects, it had previously been widely considered anti-market and anti-institution. Has *14 Rooms* made the genre legitimate in the marketplace?



'No-one is more 'work' than me' (2014) by Ed Atkins

"Performance has been recognised as a legitimate source of ideas for contemporary art for at least 60 years. It's never been easy to sell performance but the results [works produced by performance artists] have sold. Yves Klein's 'Anthropometries' body paintings are a good example," says the Rome-based dealer Lorcan O'Neill, who is devoting his stand at Art Basel to works of the 1960s and 1970s by Italian artist Luigi Ontani. "All of the work available is based on his early performances and we'll show three videos, from 1969, of performances made in galleries [priced around €40,000 each]," says O'Neill.

This field is still very much a specialist, niche area with only a small selection of major museums and a handful of collectors prepared to invest both financially and intellectually in "live" works that must usually adhere to complex sets of instructions provided by the artists.

Most collectors subsequently turn to tangible items: documentation of performance works in the form of films and photographs. "Editioned live" works have, however, become more acceptable in the past five years.

Nilani Trent, a New York-based art adviser and collector, says: "I have been offered work by Sehgal and it is well priced and seemingly, perhaps deceptively, easy to recreate with very specific instructions, much like a Sol LeWitt wall drawing. As a collector myself, this is something that appeals to me as I loan long term most of my great works to museums anyway." For the younger collectors Trent works with, buying photography is "still the best way for them to support the artist and build their collections".

She adds that *14 Rooms* also subverts expectations, and could help combat fair fatigue. "I often walk through the fair with blinders: everything is predictable. I can literally tell you what's going to be in every booth before I get there. Performance art makes even a seasoned viewer stop, think, react, interact in a way most people never experience at an art fair, or with art in general," she says.

Since the 1990s, art fair organisers have striven to demonstrate that their trade shows are not just driven by monetary concerns, reflected in eye-watering prices and profits (most fairs now marry cultural and commercial elements through, for example, VIP programmes, public art commissions and talks forums).



'Wall-Floor Positions' (1968) by Bruce Nauman

The *14 Rooms* works are not for sale, says Marc Spiegler, the director of Art Basel. "The

show says more about how Art Basel is developing to reflect the broader scope of the art world rather than any market correlation," he adds, observing that the fair has a history of presenting performance-related work such as "Art on Stage" in 2007 and 2008, and "Il Tempo Del Postino" in 2009.

Obrist and Biesenbach are convinced that a fair setting provides the best context for the exhibition. "This is a counterpoint, and antidote, to the fair," Biesenbach says. "We have taken the show out of the museum but in a way *14 Rooms* is also a draft for a museum to come." Obrist says the show should not only attract an art crowd but people from Basel and the region. "As [the artists] Gilbert & George say – art for all." This performance art spectacle – with its sexed-up robot, twins and avatars – should be enticing.

*Art Basel runs June 19-22, [artbasel.com](http://artbasel.com)*