

Johnen Galerie

FRIEZE p. 259 Manchester International Festival

Oct 2011

UK

Manchester International Festival Various venues

Art, once defined by its uselessness, now serves a multitude of functions: entertainment, tourist bait, a means of urban regeneration. This reality has spawned countless biennials and MoCAs, nowhere so much as in the post-industrial, blighted cities of Britain. The last decade or so has seen the inauguration of the Folkestone Triennial, the Glasgow International Festival and the Liverpool Biennial (not to mention spaces such as Gateshead's BALTIC, The Public in West Bromwich and the recently opened Hepworth Wakefield). As 'useful' projects, many of these have been constrained, even undermined, by political and economic agendas. Yet the biannual Manchester International Festival (MIF) seems to have bucked the trend; of all the UK art perennials, it is perhaps the most innovative.

Taking place throughout July, the third iteration of MIF debuted 20-plus new works, many of which had a distinctly cross-disciplinary, genre-defying bent – from *Dr. Dee*, an opera about the eponymous 16th-century alchemist and astrologer, written and performed by Damon Albarn, to Björk's hyper-ambitious multimedia *Biophilia* project, which premiered in the (relatively) intimate space of a covered market hall. The art offerings were forced to compete with these other modes of cultural production. Curators Hans Ulrich Obrist, Co-director of the Serpentine Gallery, London, and Klaus Biesenbach, Director of MoMA PS1 in New York, responded with '11 Rooms', a group show comprising 11 identically sized white cube spaces, each featuring an 'unmediated experience' – in most cases, a work of live art. In spirit it followed Obrist and Philippe Parreno's 'Il Tempo del Postino', a sequential display of time-based art set in a traditional theatre, which premiered at MIF's first edition in 2007. This time, the format of '11 Rooms' allowed visitors to peruse the space actively, opening door after door.

In 1999, Parreno and Pierre Huyghe purchased the copyright to an undeveloped, bit-part manga character named Ann Lee, who has since passed from artist to artist, each of whom uses her as a 'shell' to be filled. Tino Sehgal's room featured his very own *Ann Lee* (2011), performed by a child actor whose elegiac mien and stilted gestures convincingly conjured the emptied avatar. On my visit, this portrayal provoked a polite, even protective, response from the audience, leaving little room for engagement or critique. (After all, what can you really say to an 11-year-old who has been instructed to ask a crowd of strangers: 'Have you heard of Pierre Huyghe? Have you heard of Philippe Parreno?') Sehgal has used child 'interpreters' before to much better effect – for instance at last year's Guggenheim show in New York, when a child, walking up the museum's spiralling rotunda, posed the question: 'What is progress?' This work, however, with its complicated history, lacked both the openness of Sehgal's other interactive situations and the mesmerizing, balletic pacing of his more sculptural works.



Self-referentiality was also rife in Simon Fujiwara's *Playing the Martyr* (2011), in which actors (all named Simon) read aloud from a leather-bound volume, *The Life of Saint Simon*, while caressing themselves. Elsewhere, the performances were playful, often lightweight, if not quite so salacious. The first room contained Roman Ondák's *Swap* (2011): a man sitting at a table offering visitors an object in exchange for something of their own; a pen, a paper flower and a lighter were among those items left behind. Removed from its original (political) context, Xu Zhen's *In Just a Blink of an Eye* (2005) became a party trick of a piece, presenting a figure frozen, *Matrix*-style, in an impossible, back-bending pose. (Spoiler: the participant was supported by a hidden armature.) Visitors to Allora & Calzadilla's room were confronted by a phalanx of dancers who stomped around a central axis like a militaristic kick-line or a human revolving-door. The viewer, trapped, was forced to move with them. Like the artists' US Pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale, *Revolving Door* (2011) evoked the anxiety of hierarchy and power (albeit on a much smaller budget and without the same national specificity).

A couple of pieces lacking in levity seemed strangely out of place. Santiago Sierra's *Veterans of the Wars of Northern Ireland, Afghanistan and Iraq Facing the*

Marina Abramović,
Robert Wilson and
Antony Hegarty
*The Life and Death of
Marina Abramović*
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documentation

Corner (2011) presented exactly what its title suggests: an empty room with an anonymous man turned to the wall – a work of affecting ambiguity. Marina Abramović's 1997 performance, *Luminosity*, occupied another room: a performer, perched naked on a bicycle seat and suspended mid-wall, was illuminated by an intense spotlight; her gaze was fixed on the visitor so that his or her voyeurism was uncomfortably exposed.

Abramović, absent from the original '11 Rooms' line-up (she replaced Cao Fei, who dropped out due to a timing issue but who will re-join the exhibition when it is shown at the 2012 Ruhrtriennale), provided the festival's most indelible impression. *The Life and Death of Marina Abramović* (2011) – starring Marina herself, directed by Robert Wilson, narrated by Willem Dafoe, and featuring musical cameos by Serbian singer Svetlana Spajić and Antony Hegarty of Antony and the Johnsons – may have failed as a cohesive narrative but succeeded, wildly, as an imagistic epic. Over some three hours, it presented a series of tragicomic vignettes tracing the story of Abramović's life and work: her childhood in Belgrade, her psychosomatic haemophilia, her abusive mother, her break-up with Ulay and her move to New York. Any hagiographic excess was tempered by Dafoe's deranged MC and punctuated by Hegarty's sonorous yet fragile voice and Spajić's haunting ululations.

With commissions like this, MIF has alighted on a unique model; its focus on unusual collaborations and durational work give it 'special event' status ('events' being ever-important to an art world dependent on fairs, biennials and blockbuster exhibitions). It has also embraced the notion of art as spectacle, collapsing the high-low divide; this year's highlights included Snoop Dogg performing his classic 1993 album *Doggystyle* in its entirety with all the original featured artists. Neither populist nor elitist – and comfortably so – the festival engages both high and low without compromise or dilution.

Natasha Degen

Allora & Calzadilla
Revolving Door
2011
Performance
documentation

