

Collecting

How to collect performance art

Preserving performance and staged art can be like trying to keep smoke in your pocket. So what's the best way to begin?

How to collect performance art has become a subject of a lively debate for museums and increasingly private collectors—as an Art Basel Conversation tomorrow will demonstrate (see box, right). Klaus Biesenbach, chief curator of Media and Performance Art at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA), who is one of the panellists tomorrow, says the increasing interest of both groups is logical. “When you look back you understand that video art was the ‘golden frame’ of the 1990s. In 2009 we look back at the first ten years of this century and it is performance... At some point it reached a critical mass and awareness so that now it seems to be everywhere.”

MoMA has, in the past year, added performance art to its former media department and acquired new works such as the choreographed situation piece *Kiss*, 2003, by Tino Sehgal and Roman Ondák's *Measuring the Universe*, 2007. To air discussions on the difficulties of collecting or staging these exciting participatory—but sometimes contractually problematic—works, MoMA has instigated a series of “performance workshops” in the museum involving sometimes as many as 75

was only completed when the gold leaf was thrown into the river Seine and the receipt burnt. But if interventions such as Klein's are comments on the commodification of art, Goldberg also says they can be ironic statements against the artist's works becoming “relics in the museum”. Performance art can give spaces new life, creating what Goldberg calls “performative exhibition aesthetics”. The cynical may take the opposite view: that in the last couple of decades artists themselves have been perceived to be glamorous “attractions” that people want to be close to, so to “collect” artists as performers is a logical step.

What do you actually buy?

Although MoMA buys and raises funds to commission performance art, Klaus Biesenbach says the museum's prime responsibility is to keep pieces preserved “live” and in “presentable states” for future generations. Teresa Calonje, the director of CollectingLiveArt, based in London, agrees saying: “When you talk about collecting and preserving performance, you have to talk about re-staging or re-activating it. Marina Abramovic

umentation of his work (it is even acquired by verbal contract in front of witnesses), also specified that in this case no single collector could buy all 100 words.

Others, such as London-based collector Valeria Napoleone, who specialises in women artists including Spartacus Chetwynd and Vanessa Beecroft, has works that were made during performances or that derive from performance. But she has not bought “pure” performance pieces, which she sees as “more challenging”. Indeed, Jens Hoffmann, director of the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art in San Francisco, says “maybe because of the booming art market in the last four to five years people may have thought that performance posed an alternative to [more commercial] object-based art, but [artists aren't really making] those pure body performances that you had in the 1960s and 1970s, like Maria Abramovic or Vito Acconci. Hardly anyone does that any more.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the definition of what counts as “performance” (and thus what can be collected and shown), has expanded. Paul Hobson of the Contemporary Art Society in the UK, which is working with five museums and galleries on collecting live art, says “even the way that exhibitions create context [can count] as performance”.

More typically, what is purchased is part of the performance, such as video, drawings, photographs, objects and installations. So collecting performance encompasses all the usual conservation concerns of fragility of objects, replacement of worn or disintegrating parts, changing technologies and formats, ephemeral materials, drawings, as well as the form of the “live” and often unpredictable event. Amanda Wilkinson of London's Wilkinson Gallery London (2.1/X7, with Joan Jonas and Sung Hwan Kim in Art Premiere and Clegg & Guttman in Art Unlimited) comments that her sale in 2008 of Joan Jonas's *The Juniper Tree* (1976/94) to Tate in London involved a “book” of documentation with detailed instructions minutely explained down to the colour and type of apple to be used in the piece. “Having the documentation gives the museum confidence and makes it tangible. I always think collectors have to be told with this type of work very clearly that this is how it is,” she says.

In fact, as Sehgal's work (rather counter-intuitively) demonstrates, the form of the legal contract between artist and buyer is becoming ever more important. Lawyer Mark Stephens, of London firm Finers Stephens Innocent, is looking at the ways in which contracts are being drawn up between artists and buyers, as this is increasingly being



Ephemeral: Russell Maliphant and Isaac Julien, *Cast No Shadow*, 2007

“When you talk about collecting and preserving performance, you have to talk about re-staging or re-activating it... How do you protect your work being copied, or badly copied?”
—Teresa Calonje, director CollectingLiveArt

international artists and curators gathered together around a table in the museum. These discussions are themselves a kind of expanded performance piece. If the museum is to be seen as the preserver of ground-breaking pieces then new conversations need to happen, argues Biesenbach.

RoseLee Goldberg, founding director of Performa (a non-profit body that supports and promotes performance art) in New York, says that for artists in the past, coming together, “sitting around in a café in Paris and smoking cigarettes and being up all night, is the heart of performance”. She says that artists such as Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni were the forerunners of artists who now sell performance work. Klein's “sale ceremonies”—the *Zone de Sensibilité Picturale Immatérielle*, 1959—was an elaborate exchange ritual in which the artist gave the purchaser a receipt for the non-existent, “spiritual” work of art, receiving gold leaf in return. The ritual

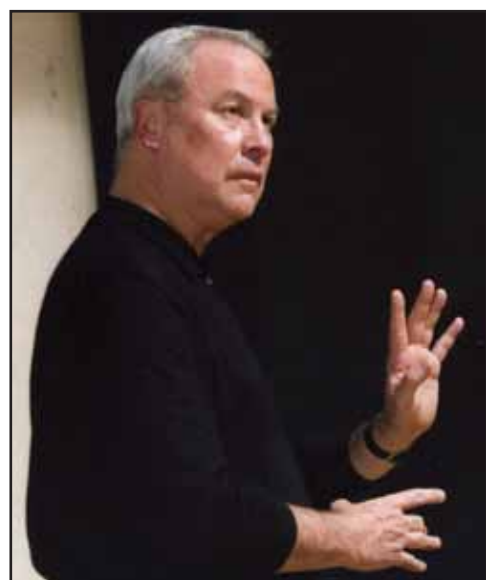
restaged historical performances by other artists and it took her years to get rights and permissions to reproduce the works. How do you protect your work being copied, or badly copied? With old pieces there is often little documentation but one of the beauties of performance is that it remains in the memory of those who experience it.”

Unsurprisingly, collectors such as the financier Dominic Palfreyman see the responsibly to “air” works in the future as a stumbling block, although his charitable organisation, the Felix Trust, has partially funded a number of important exhibitions in this area. “I am part owner of a Tino Sehgal piece, with 99 other people,” he says. “We all bought one word of a 100-word statement. Since none of us know the others there is no way of it being performed. I only know my word is word number four in the sequence. The word is given orally and I have to remember it.” Sehgal, who famously forbids any doc-

requested by the artists themselves. At the moment, Stephens sees the legal contract as emerging from the theatrical environment model to give reassurance on both sides. “Something we see in the theatrical world are contracts on a paid-to-perform basis—and if the artist dies you carry insurance.” This model also allows “editions” to be sold, on a territorial basis—to museums such as Tate in London, and MoMA in New York.

Despite new legal models for the purchase of performance art, Goldberg suggests that the idea of museums buying it is “not so outrageous when you think of their contemporary role. To present performance and provide a meeting place for people is wonderful, people want an exciting relationship with art.”
Jean Wainwright

Speakers: Klaus Biesenbach, chief curator, Department of Media and Performance Art, MoMA, New York; RoseLee Goldberg, founding director and curator, Performa, New York; Anri Sala, artist and co-director, “Il Tempo del Postino”; Robert Wilson, theatre director and visual artist, New York
Moderator: Jens Hoffmann, director, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco
Venue: Festsaal (Hall 1.0), 11 June, 10am-11.30am



Robert Wilson on his early influences and patrons

The Art Newspaper: Museums and private collectors are increasingly collecting performance art. What do you attribute this to?

Robert Wilson: I think they are often of the frame of mind of preserving tradition. [Writer and impresario] Lincoln Kirstein said: “Modern dance will have no tradition.”

TAN: Would you consider selling one of your performances/operas/art collaborations in the same way that you have sold your other works of art?

RW: No, many of my pieces are like a shooting star. They take place only once and for a very short time. They live in memory.

TAN: You work across media on often monumental collaborative projects. Do you see this as separate from the art works that you sell?

RW: Although I work in different media—from drawings to video, to furniture design, sculpture,

museum installations, architectural design, theatre, dance and opera—I see it all as basically one concern. Marcel Breuer said: “In the detail of the chair I designed are all my aesthetics. The same aesthetics that go into designing a building. They are all the aesthetics that go into designing a city.” Albert Einstein said when asked by a journalist: “There is no need for me to repeat what I just said, as it is all one thought.” An artist's work is like a continuum, like the tree that grows. The tree can change, but it is still the same tree, like the river that flows.

TAN: What was the first piece of performance art that you encountered and why did it leave a lasting impression?

RW: Among the art pieces that had an indelible effect on me in the early 1960s were Jack Smith performing in his loft and seeing Yvonne Rainer and the Judson Church dancers performing a dance where they merely picked up pieces of paper and replaced them in the space.

TAN: What was the first work of art that you sold and who was it to?

RW: When I was 21 or 22 I made a rather large abstract gestural painting in violent, shocking colour. A friend of mine brought a playwright and poet named Ethan Ayer to see my work. He bought it for \$400. This was a fortune for me at the time. A week later he came back with a friend of his from New Jersey who was an artist and they looked at my drawings. I had one drawing of about 40cm x 70cm with one line on the page and she acquired it for \$100.

TAN: Which was the first museum to acquire a Robert Wilson?

RW: In the early 1970s Robert Tobin bought drawings of mine for the McNay Art Museum in San Antonio, Texas. Soon after that MoMA bought drawings of mine. ■

Interview by Jean Wainwright

□ Our web TV platform, www.theartnewspaper.tv, will screen a series of related interviews

SYLVIE FLEURY

TOM SACHS

BEHROUZ RAE

CRYSTEL CERESA

CRIS FARIA

BEAT LIPPERT

ED RUSCHA

PHILIPPE ZUMSTEIN

MARC REMBOLD

LALEH JUNE
GALERIE

PICASSOPLATZ 4
CH - 4052 BASEL
INFO@LALEHJUNE.COM
WWW.LALEHJUNE.COM
T. **41*61*228*77*78

WORDS ARE DIAMONDS
MAY 28 - JULY 31, 2009
PICASSOPLATZ, 25 METERS
FROM KUNSTMUSEUM BASEL

OPENING DURING ART 40 BASEL 10 AM - 6 PM