

The State of Performance Art 2019

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In a 1994 article called “Performance Art Is Dead: Long Live Performance Art!” I wrote: “Whatever happened to performance art? It seems to have disappeared into a fault line in the cultural terrain, swallowed up by theater and entertainment on one side, and the commodity driven art world on the other . . .” The article critically examined the evolution of performance art in response to the cultural and political environment of the 1980s and early 1990s. Now, twenty-five years later, the question is worth reconsidering, in 2019, when the term has been totally co-opted and appropriated by media culture to identify, promote, and sensationalize public actions and entertainments.

In Los Angeles, producer, curator, and educator Deborah Oliver has been committed to rejuvenating and reactivating performance art with a new generation of artists in the twenty-first century. Oliver’s goal has been to reconnect performance art to its process-based visual-art roots by re-situating it in the immersive environment of the art gallery where the audience would become participating viewers free to interact in real time with a broad range of live actions and diverse aesthetics. Produced and curated by Oliver, the *Irrational Exhibits* project began in 2001 around the idea of presenting simultaneous durational performances in individual installations that function as the sets for the artists’ actions, all within a clearly defined art context.¹ Staged in the wide-open spaces of the white box galleries of Track 16 and later at LACE, the events became performances in themselves, a kind of three-ring circus with ambling crowds and loosely orchestrated, sometimes colliding or overlapping actions. The artists’ engagement with materials and the body reflected the visual and even painterly origins of performance art in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as contemporary questions of identity, sexuality, gender, the politics of culture, and the ethics of bio-sciences and technology. In the years between 2001 and 2017 these events had an almost rowdy exuberance. *Irrational Exhibits* celebrated works that embraced unpredictability and the messiness of organic processes and materials, and engaged with

the chaos of our times. It encouraged risk-taking and accepted the potential for failure in the act. Oliver's commitment to this structure was a response to how detached we have become from a sense of community and shared face-to-face experience in this age so dominated by media culture and technology.

But the world had changed since 2017. We are living in strange times, and for a generation of emerging artists the challenges are greater than ever. Not only does the center *not* hold, but all the established rules of discourse have been discarded. In an insidious battle between veracity and mendacity, all the old definitions and meanings have been turned inside out. Language and images are no longer trusted representations of reality. There is no solid ground in the arena of doubt, only the giddy spectacle of ensuing chaos in which Nero, the star performer, doesn't simply fiddle, but sets the fires to burn down the nation, while declaring there are no fires, and the media lies. In such a moment of cultural, perceptual, and political crisis, how does this generation of artists deal with performance as an *art* form, rather than the mediated spectacle they produce and consume? And how is it informed by its own historical role when all the rules have changed?

Oliver's latest one-night performance event *Irrational Exhibits 11: Place-Making and Social Memory* (1), featuring eighteen artists in five gallery spaces on two floors of the old Bendix building in downtown Los Angeles was a perfect opportunity to explore these questions. This time around many of the pieces revealed a distinct psychological shift evidenced by the safe haven of static aesthetic formality versus the riskiness of the expressive activism of earlier years. But then at the end of 2019 we are living in a deeply divided, dysfunctional Orwellian world in which the so-called "establishment" are now the renegades, outlaws, and morally debased deviants outrageously defiant of all the previous norms of civility, rationality, and responsibility. All the bourgeois standards of moderation and stability that previous generations rebelled against and critiqued in their art, have given way to the media spectacle of inchoate rage, boisterous demagoguery, deceit, and terror. The response to that is perhaps ironically reflected in the subtitle *Irrational Exhibits 11: Place-Making and Social Memory*. The theme alone suggests the desire to forge common ground and a connection to personal histories and cultural memories within a communal framework. It was intended to provide a forum for young artists whose concerns were about exploring ways of belonging and inclusion within existing structures, not with tearing them down. However, if you are living in what feels like a state of siege (and who isn't these days), the psychological impulse (in America) is to seek stability and safety, not disruption or aggressive confrontation.

Unlike previous *Irrational Exhibits* events with undefined spatial boundaries, and subsequent bleed-over between works and audiences, the performances took place



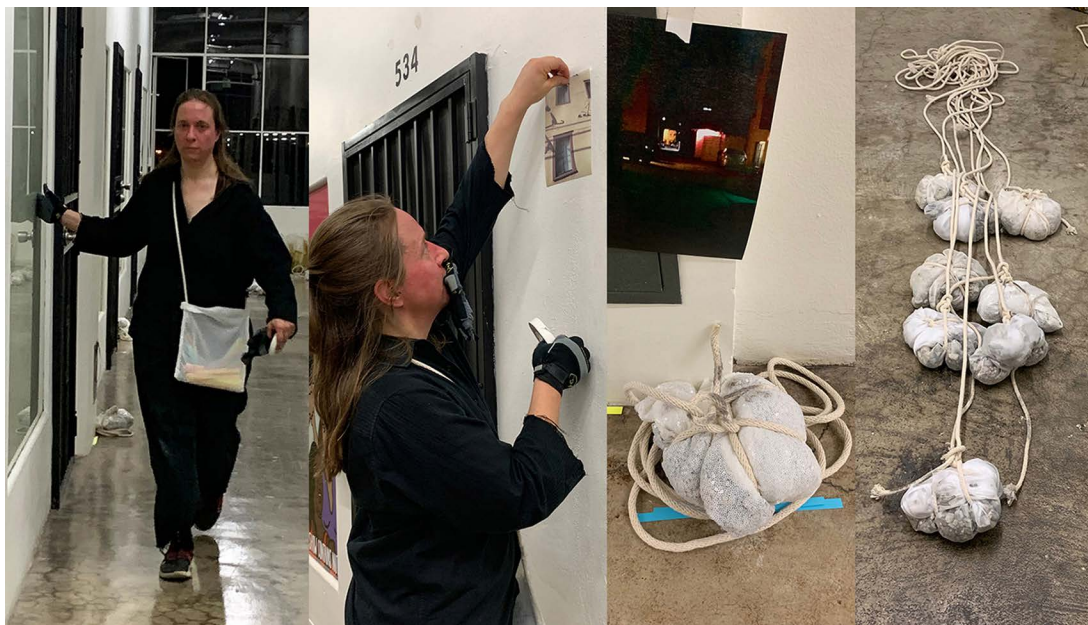
Jerod Thompson, *Creation*. Video stills courtesy the artist.



Teresita de la Torre, *Siempre Era El*. Photo: Jacki Apple.



Sichong Xie, *The Boat Has Sailed, Hasn't It*. Video stills courtesy the artist.



Kim Zumpfe, *Wormhole*. Photo: Jacki Apple.



Anaëis Ohanian, *Amphibium*. Photo: Jacki Apple.

in clearly demarcated territories in a series of small gallery spaces and hallways, thus maximizing the potential for “place-making” while still leaving that open to interpretation. The choices ranged from personal and social histories as a means to establish one’s place, to site-specific explorations captured on video, to ritual actions occupying a space. Elaborate handmade costumes and objects, including a serpentine newspaper sculpture, and an oversized motor-driven wagging tongue demonstrated the artists’ engagement with materiality rather than a text-based narrative. Although meticulously crafted, most of the performances were more like well-rehearsed visual tableaux with few risky improvisations or engagements than exploratory processes with an unknown end. As highly orchestrated presentations these works were carefully framed as art works, as well as reflecting how completely “theatricalized” our everyday lives have become.

With an eye on broadening the conversation, Oliver brought together artists from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. Teresita de la Torre, born in Guadalajara Mexico, migrated with her family at a young age to Laredo, Texas. Her work deals with reclaiming her family’s history and the migrant experience, and in *Siempre Era El* she transformed herself into her father, using his clothes. In her piece *Amphibium*, Anaëis Ohanian, a first-generation Armenian-American, presented the Amphi, a new tribe inhabiting a fictional post-climate change world. Although visually engaging, not all the works in *Irrational Exhibits 11* fulfilled their potential while others succumbed to predictable clichés, despite the genuine earnestness of their aspirations. How does one effectively counter the overwhelming public political and media spectacle we are surrounded by? Three works stood out: Ironically two were performances enacted on video at other locations, and one was site-specific and in continual motion throughout the two hours of the event.

In her piece *Wormhole*, Kim Zumpfe strode through the crowded hallways of the fifth floor attired in a utilitarian black shirt and pants and a reddened face, claiming physical and psychological space and asserting her “place” within it. She aggressively slammed her hand on the walls at regular intervals “marking” them as she passed by. This intensely physical and temporal action was both unpredictable and unsettling in its forcefulness. Referencing what lay beyond those walls in the exterior world, Zumpfe unceremoniously stuck up low-resolution photos at various spots with masking tape. The faded images exposed an inhospitable landscape of urban and industrial blight, destruction and decay. Like notices on walls at demolition sites, they suggested the interior to be a place of temporary shelter of questionable stability. Her third action involved dragging sacks of rocks bound with heavy ropes through the hallways, forcing the milling crowds to make way for her as they went from one small gallery performance to another and congregated in the corridors. It was a confrontational invasive action.

These weighted-down sacks and the effort required to haul them behind her reminded me of the bags of possessions homeless and displaced people drag with them from place to place. At one point, she left these sacks in heaps on the floor like the remnants of the discarded, markers of what has been abandoned, be it persons or buildings, or neighborhoods torn down. They functioned as evidence, artifacts from the no-man's land between homelessness and gentrification. A visceral, task-oriented work, physically demanding in its duration, *Wormhole* evoked a sense of rupture in the social and structural fabric, effectively disrupting the illusion of solid ground.

Jerod Thompson's piece *Creation* was also a site-specific work, but unlike Zumpfe's action it took place at another location and was shown in *Irrational Exhibits* as a video. As a private meditation, it was a coolly minimalist interpretation of "place-making." Formally framing each shot, Thompson observes the rooms of an empty apartment, as he might a blank canvas, or an empty stage, mentally imagining its potential, how he will express his own personal aesthetic sensibility and character within its blank walls and empty spaces. He appears in it solely as a viewer looking into the rooms, to each side, and then directly at us, as he internally considers what kind of statement he wants to make. A flurry of white papers falls from above like a visual manifestation of his thoughts, the possibilities and potentials floating through the air. It is a statement about autonomy and the power to define yourself and your place in the world.

Sichong Xie's *The boat has sailed, hasn't it?* is an intimate poetic meditation on impermanence, place, and memory. The video was based on a series of private undocumented and durational explorations on Wesserunsett Lake, Maine, in 2018, that Xie calls "boat conversations." She constructed a simple wooden seesaw boat and invited a number of different people to join her in it and have a conversation for as long as they were comfortable. She later re-enacted those experiences for the video in which she sits on a floating dock, paddles around the lake in the seesaw boat, and at one point swims to shore and back to the dock. The tiny boat that looks almost as if it was made from folded paper is a mutable object despite its apparent materiality. It feels both substantial and insubstantial. As a metaphor for a transitional state—the changing nature of perception, our relationship to time and the elements—it mediates between thought and action. In the poetic voice-over narrative, *A Float at the Mercy of Wave*, Xie reminds us that "The earth is beautiful but uncertain. Suddenly, The gravity changes. The shifting weight of being on land and water . . . Boats don't sit on the water. They are part of the water. It is a marriage. The water around the hull is part of the boat. It describes the character of the boat. They are not separate." The free-floating dock is both a point of departure into the unknown and a safe haven to return to. Yet

it too is subject to the water it is surrounded by, its stability temporary. The act of paddling the boat is the means to move on, an act of self-determination and a time-marking ritual. "I want to make a boat for escaping. And a community does not become a neighborhood, a house, a room, a roof, a window, a view."

But finding one's place is perhaps a matter of the capacity to adapt. And Xie who was born and raised in China brings an Eastern philosophical perspective to her work as a nomadic artist in America. "The feeling of not knowing where you are heading. The feeling of letting go brings hyperawareness and the feeling of disembodiment: One is entirely oneself in a drastically unembellished way, and at the same time nonexistent, A blur in other people's perception. An appropriate analogy for a global situation as an expatriate Looking for a way to be." Finally, on its own this piece is also a strong statement about our vulnerability in the face of climate change when the necessity of migration may become a fact of life.

The artists in *Irrational Exhibits 11* may not have pushed any new boundaries but perhaps in this time of turmoil, anxiety, and displacement that isn't the point. Regardless of the variability of success of individual works, the artists have sought to find ways to speak to these conditions. Where does that leave performance art in today's contradictory environment? Still tenuously positioned in the space between the commodity-driven art world and multidisciplinary performance, struggling to define itself and to find its own voice in this time of national fracture and planetary upheaval.

NOTE

1. *Irrational Exhibits 11: Place-Making and Social Memory* took place November 9, 2019, Performance, Installation, Media, the Bendix Building in multiple galleries including: Track 16, Monte Vista, Tiger Strikes Asteroid, Gallery 515, Mutable Studios, Los Angeles. Featured artists: Amanda Maciel Antunes, Jamie Burris, Feminist.AI, Linda Franke, Steve Irvin, Prima Jalichandra-Sakuntabhai, Galia Linn Amitis Motevalli, Anaëis Ohanian, Priyanka Ram, Cindy Rehm, Jinal Sangoi, Jerod Thompson, Michael Thurin, Teresita de la Torre, Sichong Xie, HK Zamani, Kim Zumpe.

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