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Postcards from Performa 11: Pt 1

NOVEMBER 24, 2011 by *Kristin M. Jones*



Ming Wong, *Persona Performa*, 2011. Photo: Paula Court. Courtesy of Performa.

Featuring more than 100 artists working across a wide range of disciplines, Performa 11 has, for the past three weeks, taken over a range of venues and sites across New York City. In the first of a series of

reports from the fourth edition of this international biennial of visual art performance, Kristin M. Jones visits a spoken word choir, a walking tour, and a tribute to Ingmar Bergman.



L'Encyclopédie de la parole, Chorale, 2011. Photo: Elizabeth Proitsis. Courtesy of Performa.

Each edition of Performa brings some surprising connections with the urban landscape. Even an event that wasn't intended to be site-specific, *Chorale* by the spoken vocal ensemble L'Encyclopédie de la parole, created memorable resonances with the surrounding space, and with New York's past and present. Though free of musical notes, their performance at the Performa Hub in Little Italy was hard to separate from the labyrinthine building where the Hub set up camp this year, which until recently was the home of St. Patrick's Old Cathedral School, where children must once have learned chants and hymns.

In one of the Hub's empty rooms, the choir performed texts from the collective's collection of speech recordings. They've gathered and indexed approximately 600 documents – from movie scenes to answering machine messages – but were performing in English for the first time. The selections suggested a soundtrack for our lives: a video dance tutorial, Robert Byrd addressing the U.S. Senate, a tourist's safari clip from YouTube, commentary by CNBC's *Mad Money* host Jim Cramer, and a hypnotist's soothing words. Rhythm, changes in volume and gestures derived from the source material but also called attention to layers of artifice and suggested deeper levels of meaning. For the grandiloquent Byrd speech snippet, in which the exclamation 'Barbaric!' was repeated several times with pauses for emphasis, the conductor used long, flowing gestures. The Cramer selection built to an excited crescendo with choir members stamping their feet for emphasis and crying out '...and he's nuts! They're nuts! They know nothing!' The safari video piece, on the other hand, with its 'Oohs' and 'Oh, my gawds,' was a hilarious tour de force of multiple voice parts and rhythms.

Without singing, the choir had mastered some of the techniques of a chant choir; when the text called for speaking in unison, they spoke with one voice, even while adjusting rhythm and volume according to the text. In lieu of chanted prayers or other forms of choral singing, do we now seek emotional satisfaction through sharing clips with colourful commentary on YouTube or enjoying the creative ways in which speech is used to enliven mundane subjects on television or audiotapes? Clearly, politicians and TV commentators aren't the only ones who are now always performing, perfecting rhetorical flourishes or grabbing snippets of life with the expectation of sharing them with the world via media such as the Web.



Asli Çavuşoğlu, *Words Dash Against the Façade*, 2011. Photo: Paula Court. Courtesy of Performa.
And what about enriching our lives by reviving more ancient uses of language, such as Assyrian and Greek fortune-telling practices? On November 11 at 11:11, a group gathered by Cleopatra's Needle, an Egyptian obelisk behind the Metropolitan Museum of Art that has been a mysterious presence in Central Park since it was transported from Ottoman Egypt in the late 19th century, for *Words Dash Against the Façade*, a walking tour hosted by Asli Çavuşoğlu, with the goal of interpreting ornamental façades. The curator Adam Kleinman, wearing a jacket emblazoned with NASA Apollo logos, joined her in leading the tour. After rituals including the burning of the publication *Broken English* and a singer's

hymn to Apollo, pedicabs, or 'chariots,' whisked participants to Hearst Tower (given the Cold War-era echoes of Kleinman's jacket, one couldn't help noticing that all the drivers seemed to be Russian men). There, in addition to façade-gazing, we attempted to interpret our reflections in cups of water – with little success, as the day was windy and our hands shook from the cold – and the artist commented on fortune-telling as a narcissistic activity. Next, we trekked to a location used in the movie *Ghostbusters* (1984), where a musician used the façade as a musical score.

At the final location – the restaurant the 21 Club, whose façade is lined with jockey statues – the signs took a sinister turn. While a knot of participants waited for the artist, who had been trapped behind the Veterans Day parade, a woman slipped a couple of us scraps of paper with photocopied news stories about neo-Nazis in the military and poisoned tap water to which she had appended feverishly racist musings in tiny type, ending with '11/11/2011 NYC.' Çavuşoğlu eventually arrived, and the group 'listened' to the jockeys and examined the colours of their cheerful satins, while behind our backs wounded veterans wheeled or walked by and spiffily uniformed bands marched in formation. We had travelled from Cleopatra's Needle, a symbol of a possible 'resetting,' to use Çavuşoğlu's term, of relations between the United States and Middle East, to visible signs of recent tragic consequences of war in the region.

The open-endedness that allowed for a revelatory ending in *Words Dash Against the Façade* was lacking in a promising commission, Ming Wong's *Persona Performa* at the Museum of the Moving Image in Astoria, Queens. MOMI, housed in a building that once contained studios for Paramount, recently reopened after a sleek expansion, and the museum's seductive white interior, in which visitors seem to float rather than walk, were an appropriate setting for a tribute to Ingmar Bergman's modernist masterpiece *Persona* (1966), about shifting identities between an actress and her nurse, which also invokes the materiality of film. Various silent video and film installations throughout the space – including a panoramic projection of Fårö Island, where the director lived and where the film is set – were hauntingly effective, but over-scripted elements included a hammy white-suited kid playing Bergman-as-emcee and an actor clad as Death from *The Seventh Seal* (1957). At the heart of the piece were 24 multi-racial residents of Queens grouped into similar-looking pairs, who performed in the main space and eventually in a large theatre, where they were filmed onstage. In the middle section, when they threaded through the space like a strip of celluloid – wearing blonde wigs and black-and-white gowns, and repeatedly stopping in front of the audience to reenact the scene where Liv Ullmann's character becomes unable to speak – for a moment they seemed to become one with each other, the site and the projected images that surrounded them.

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