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Upturning the conventions

Maria Hassabi's deconstructed performance in Premiere. All Pictures: Paula Court

New York - The East Village isn't a bad place to kill time. This Manhattan suburb isn't very stimulating during the day, but at night the restaurants that line the streets are buzzing with patrons. We're sitting in an establishment that specialises in vegan raw food, not because it's our cuisine of choice but because of its location – across the road from the Russian and Turkish Bath House, where Rashid Johnson's Dutchman will be performed that evening.

Johnson may well be a star of the art world but we would rather not attend his performance. We are busy talking ourselves out of doing so.

"It's too cold and I'm not willing to get wet," I argue. These are valid points; it is around 4ºC outside and I don't have the prerequisite swimming costume and flip-flops outlined as the dress code for this performance in the press invitation. Why do we need a swimming cossie? Will we be swimming? The idea of appearing in a costume at a performance is making me feel like running a mile. But I don't. I'm too curious and tend to suffer from an acute form of fomo (fear of missing out).

It's some comfort that the handful of journalists outside the bathhouse look as apprehensive as we are. It's a strange reversal; being an audience member is supposed to be a carefree experience – even for critics, who get to observe from a detached position.

Yet this reversal shouldn't come as a surprise; most of the performances at Performa 13, a New York-based performance art biennial, have left us feeling that performance art demands a lot from

its audience – and is in fact all about reversing performance conventions. Conclusions are beginnings. Beginnings endings.

The notion that a performance should or can be entertaining is annihilated too. And in most cases the "performance artist" isn't present. In one case, Ryan McNamara's Meme: A story ballet about the internet, he is hiding under the stage. Vishal Judgeo and his partner/co-performer spend their entire performance concealed behind a screen on the stage. It's as if no one wants to perform.

Ryan McNamara translated virtual experiences into reality in Meme: A story ballet about the internet.

In Premiere by Maria Hassabi there seems an obvious reluctance: the performers have their backs to us for most of the performance. Our entry into the theatre at The Kitchen in Chelsea is unconventional, too; we arrive at our seats after crossing the stage, where Hassabi and a group of performers are positioned.

Most audience members rush across this space; it's brightly lit by stage lights attached to rigs on either side of the "stage" – a place where we don't belong and tread gently. When the excitement of this unusual start has worn off, it becomes clear that the performers, who have their backs to us, are slowly moving to face us. This is all they will do.

Premiere is centred on prolonging what is usually a split second action when the performers confront their audience. Once you realise this is the motivation for the "action", if you could call it that (it is defined by painfully slow gestures), you start to wish the whole thing would end.

This impatience is tied to our demand as an audience to be entertained and stimulated, rather than being trapped viewing an action you take for granted and which carries little weight – performers are usually burdened with negotiating the significance of "facing" an audience, not us.

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It's an interesting reversal, which builds tension between us and them, but it can't be sustained because it quickly becomes banal. Or, dare I say, boring? In an era of overstimulation via different online media, perhaps being boring has become provocative.

Hassabi, a New York choreographer and performer, seems intent on deconstructing and isolating each aspect of performance – at Performa 11, she presented Show, a work in which she analysed and organically established a "stage". In this way her work could be described as metaperformance – performance art about the mechanics of performance. But then, perhaps all performance art is concerned with performance, from the theatrical to the everyday, commenting, analysing and distorting it.

Performance art is parasitic in this way and perhaps is a form that can't claim its own vocabulary – everything is derived from something else. In this context, performance art could be a field that doesn't exist, which is what makes it so intriguing and enigmatic – but also so marginalised within the broader visual arts.

Hassabi's work sounds better on paper. The idea driving it is more interesting than enacting it, though of course, it has no value or meaning unless it is performed because you can't know what it might be like to prolong the action of facing an audience without doing it. But it is so tedious to sit through that by the time the performers face us, we have lost interest in this moment, which is positioned not as the beginning of a performance but the end, the grand finale.

The work implies that the content of a performance, any performance, is redundant, as the most significant aspect of it is when the performer encounters or confronts the audience – it is a confrontation that is often not acknowledged.

You could argue, however, that even though the performers in this piece have their backs turned to us, they are still "facing" us – and performing, so the whole work is a contrivance – does it matter whether we see their faces? In the absence of any narrative or point of interest, the performers become objectified, subjected to our scrutiny; we study every part of their bodies, although their matching denim ensembles deny their individuality.

The work isn't enjoyable; it may even be called torture – once the premise is set, it is just a case of Hassabi and her team following through by moving inch by inch. We label it dull when we finally get to leave the theatre. Are we unable to overlook our ingrained expectations about live performance (of any kind) or is the work really a failure? Should unpredictability or enjoyment be a measure of success in the realm of performance art?

The works at Performa 13 might not be obviously stimulating, but they prompt questions, predictably about performance art and what that term might mean in New York and at a festival such as this.

It was initiated in 2005 by RoseLee Goldberg, a South African expat who has taken the lead in throwing a net over the history and practices that are defined as performance art, though progenitors of this form set out to establish it as one that defied being defined or institutionalised.

Goldberg has been celebrated for her work and her name almost always appears in Art Review's 100 most powerful people in the art world – if you regard that as any measure of success. There is no denying she has come far.

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Despite her profile and the work she has done to establish performance art as a bona fide form, with its own distinctive history (which she famously published in 1979 in Performance Art: Live Art 1909 to the Present), the audience turnout isn't overwhelming. Many of the participants don't count performance art as their main form of expression and the Performa hub – the main base where artist talks and performances are held – is modest and feels like a centre for experimentation or a room in a university.

In South Africa, performance art is only really starting to gain a foothold on mainstream platforms; the National Arts Festival only recognised it as a category last year and a festival dedicated to it, Gipca's Live Art Festival, which started last year, seems to have already run out of steam – it didn't take place last month as planned.

Is performance art a hard sell? It's demanding for audiences. Maybe the hyper-commercialisation of the visual arts, which has engendered a fetish for objects, has rendered intangible forms slightly irrelevant.

Based on Performa 13 it appears as if the kind of performance art favoured in New York is distinctly more conceptual than that produced here, though Nicholas Hlobo and Nelisiwe Xaba were initially commissioned to produce work for it. Both local artists pulled out – Hlobo was apparently ill.

Hlobo and Xaba's work is more issue based (though Hlobo does seem to be embracing abstraction of late) – and is more concerned with the politics of the body, whereas most of the work at Performa 13 seemed quite apolitical and disconnected from the body.

For a start, apart from a few performances, most performance artists are directors at best; their own bodies are not part of the work. This ties in with the fact that the bulk of artists we encounter appear concerned with ideas rather than the body, though it is their primary tool.

The mind and body are, of course, connected. This is something the French artist Noé Soulier explores in Idéographie, a lecture-performance where he (over)analyses what it is like to move, what it feels like to be inside a moving body and how the mind sustains movement.

The body is an accessory to the ideas; it is through thought that he is able to negotiate a tricky pirouette, but he never surrenders to movement. Everything is so calculated and has been so logically deciphered that it defies dance or even performance, which we expect sometimes operates without logic, explores and exploits visceral responses.

Like Hassabi, he appears to be deconstructing "dance" or performance, stripping it down and making each process transparent to the audience – a lecture does involve explaining what you do, after all. He dubs his mode a "dance of ideas", making the conceptual performance tag I want to hang on every work seem appropriate.

Florian Hecker's CD – A script for Synthesis, which takes place in a small theatre underneath the Guggenheim, also fits this label, though in it Hecker mocks conceptual art, with its emphasis on ideas, theory and textual rhetoric, while eschewing the rituals and form of worship around dematerialised objects – that is, objects that don't have any material properties.

A deadpan voice emanating from two tall, slim speakers on the stage narrates a text about a

dematerialised object that sits on a plinth. It is a coloured ice block – as colour can only define itself through a stable surface, this "object" and the pink itself are fleeting, don't really exist. A chorus of hooded "worshippers" sing texts and ritualise the presentation and elevation of this non-object.

The singing, if you could call it that, is unbearable – audience members keep slipping out the back door. Once the premise is set and you have figured out what the work is about, you don't really feel like witnessing it to the end.

So, we don't. Our patience is wearing thin even though we are dedicated followers of performance art. Physical endurance used to be a quality prized in a performance artist; now it seems to be a characteristic being cultivated in spectators.

McNamara's performance work puts smiles on everyone's faces. Mostly this is because the performance is unique and unpredictable; he is interested in the experience for a viewer, not just being clever. In fact, our experience is the work.

One moment you are sitting in the theatre watching what looks like a cheesy dance routine by men in Eighties leotards and the next, you feel a contraption attach itself to your chair and you are being manoeuvred to another place in the theatre where someone else is performing – also in a cheesy outfit with cheesy moves. Spectators exchange glances as they are moved away and taken to see other performances. Sometimes we turn our backs on the performers and watch what is happening elsewhere in the theatre. What will we see next, what will happen?

These are questions we haven't had to ask ourselves at Performa 13. It's titillating. Well, to a point: as the title suggests, the work is about enacting the "story of the internet" – or how we use it, explore content by moving from screen to screen. It's such a literal illustration. But just because the work is entertaining does that make it a "good" work?

The choreography is derived from performances on YouTube by some non-dancers. McNamara has turned the virtual occurrences into a real experiences, although we can't just 'close down, or minimise a screen' – something we would have relished during other performances. Perhaps it is not just the traditions of performance that shape how we receive it but the internet that has shortened our attention span.

We are wishing we could 'close down' Johnson's Dutchman at the bathhouse in the East Village. He has contrived a very real and intimate encounter that is oppressive in a physical and ideological sense.

After assurances that we won't be swimming, we find ourselves face to face with two actors in a small sauna. They are in swimming costumes and are enacting a rendition of Dutchman, a 1960s play written by African-American playwright Amiri Baraka.

Unexpectedly, the play is set on a subway train and not a bathhouse. This location was clearly selected in order to enhance the intimacy between the audience and actors and to mirror the heated racial encounter between the two characters, a black male called Clay and a white woman dubbed Lula. As the play heats up, we move into hotter rooms. We are boiling, craving a relief.

It also doesn't help that Lula is a particularly irritating character and the acting isn't great.

Johnson has been concerned with the representation of race in his work, so the piece isn't unexpected, but it feels dated and overstated.

Johnson's piece isn't supposed to be a "good" rendition of Baraka's play; in fact the worse it is, the better it is, as this articulates the clumsiness and the contrived nature of representing the dynamics between white and black people and the flaws this entails; such representations almost inevitably replicate the condition the author rejects.

The characters are locked in stereotypes from which they cannot escape, even though the play plots their efforts to do so. The intensity of this exchange can't be translated either, even in a hot sauna, where as an audience we are made to feel vulnerable. We may be stripped of clothing but we are not quite naked and we remain detached.

Once again our experience of the play isn't the object of our interest; it is the idea of staging this particular play in this manner (one can only hope) and setting that is the work. In this way, like many of the other works at Performa 13, the performance isn't the work. This absence, lack or failure even to show the work is meant to direct our thoughts elsewhere. Unfortunately, trapped in a hot sauna, all we can think about is when we will be released.

It is only days later, far removed from the East Village, that I am able to detach myself from the experience of the performance and it starts to make sense. Or maybe I just want it to? - Sunday Independent