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Brooklyn Dispatches: Performance Anxiety

by James Kalm

As a painting snob, I've always held performance art at arm's length. I do appreciate the Feminist tactic of using its designation to elevate the drudgery of "women's work" to an aesthetized level, subverting the elite realm of high art. (Witness the glorious Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution at P.S. 1—my nominee for one of the top five shows in New York in 2007—which included many such paradigm-shifting works.) On the other hand, there's an element of spectacle in much performance that borders on schmaltz and publicity stunts, like David Blaine wrapped in critical theory. When asked specifically about the difference between "performance" and publicity stunt during his 2007 sculpture/performance piece "Flatland"

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6sUPYptuzNU>) at Long Island City's Sculpture Center, Ward Shelly stated "The context is actually the only real difference, and the intentions of the person doing it. Whether they want just to get attention or whether they want people to think about the subject. It's really kind of a subtle difference. In a way it all depends on how it's being presented and what we're asking you to do with what we're doing—not just what we're doing, we're asking you to think about it."

Though "highbrow" syllogisms like these are what chased me out of the cafés and back to my studio, recent permutations of performance have become unavoidable, even for me. Perhaps it was *Seven Easy Pieces*, Marina Abramovi's series at the Guggenheim Museum in November 2005, which recreated seminal works from the 1960s and '70s by five different artists as well as two of her own pieces, that indisputably proved that performance might have a life beyond its fleeting moment of origin (and that it had been legitimized in the eyes of the bigs as a practice whose crowd pleasing bankability might

one day match its purely aesthetic value). In this way it has been as influential to a younger generation of performance artists as the Saatchi Gallery's Triumph of Painting exhibit was for new painters.

Young galleries have taken to using "performance" as a come-on to entice visitors to drop by an opening. The inevitable late start also gives the cash bar a chance to squeeze a few extra bucks out of a thirsty crowd. And so it was in early August at Fresh Meat, a mixed bag of a group show at Factory Fresh, on Flushing Avenue near Morgan.

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A ladder leading six feet up to an open window in a black plywood wall is the entrance to Marni Kotak's "Slumber Party," another Maximum Perception offering. Climb up a few steps and peek through the frilly green curtains; inside is an over-scaled bedroom with a huge bunk bed (recalling Lilly Tomlin's character Edith Ann's giant rocker), a soda-and-chip-laden table, and a stereo blasting bubblegum hits. Several female performers lounge around in their jammies, interacting with visitors, joking and yakking like pubescent Valley Girls. Viewers are invited to climb in, join the party, and become part of the show. Though I didn't have the opportunity to experience all the performances, there are a few commonalities worth pointing out that seem to establish precedents and hint at future directions.

As with "Slumber Party," the much discussed "retreat to infancy" is in play. This trend has analogous forms in painting and music and was a popular theme at the recent Whitney Biennial. It mixes childhood fantasy with pop culture and a dose of adolescent Surrealistic sexual angst. These can be potent subjects, but some works lose their bite and drift into a sweet blandness and a gutless aversion to the pathos of maturity.

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