

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Jonathan Griffin, "Il Tempo del Postino," *frieze*, September 2007, p. 176.

Back



Opera House, Manchester, UK

Who said, 'From the start it has been the theatre's business to entertain people [...] it needs no other passport than fun'? It was, rather surprisingly, Bertolt Brecht, a playwright who perhaps would have enjoyed Hans Ulrich Obrist and Philippe Parreno's recent stage-show extravaganza at Manchester's International Festival rather more than one might expect. 'Il Tempo del Postino' took its name from Parreno's notion of 'postman time', a mode of presentation in which viewers are asked not to navigate exhibition spaces at their own pace but to sit tight while the work is 'delivered' directly to them.

The curators referred to their project as a game. They set the rules: 15 artists would each make a new work, no longer than 15 minutes, in any medium except film or video, and 'that could be restaged in the future by anyone so interested.' Parreno's own contribution, *Postman Time* (all works 2007), was an introductory speech delivered by a ventriloquist, referring to architect Cedric Price and his unrealized 'Fun House'. The stage's plush red velvet curtains then sprang to life in an untitled dance choreographed by Tino Sehgal, which set the tone for most of the show's first half.

Although charming, funny and immaculately executed, it in fact simply pointed to an aspect of the theatre that is almost impossible to ignore.

The structure of traditional theatrical space has been the subject of critical discourse for nearly a century now. It is this frame that paradoxically gives life to the tussle between fiction and reality that is stage drama. Some of the participating artists in 'Il Tempo del Postino' fixated on the separation of the audience from the stage in a way that suggested they had never even been inside a theatre, let alone considered it as a space in which to make interesting work. For Olafur Eliasson's *Echo House* a mirrored curtain fell in front of the stage, presenting the audience with a startling actor's-eye view of itself. When people coughed or shuffled, sections of the orchestra mimicked the noises in reply. Soon the auditorium came alive to an infantile call-and-response of claps, yelps, cock-a-doodle-does and mobile phone ring-tones, as the audience enthusiastically took turns at conducting the orchestra.

Other work was less facile in the way it dealt with the conventions of theatrical space. Trisha Donnelly's performance *The Second Saint* took full advantage of the possibilities presented by the medium, using lighting, sound and props to something

Matthew Barney and Jonathan Bepler
Guardian of the Veil
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approaching their full effect. A soprano with bells hanging around her neck sang while Donnelly beat a bass drum, in front of four towering black obelisks that spectacularly toppled over onto the stage at the finale. Pierre Huyghe had fun in the costume-making department for *Hello Zombie*, a trilogy of tableaux in which a ratty troll and a feathery yellow behemoth find a touching if improbable love. Huyghe's work, like Sehgal's, leant towards light entertainment, and as such added to the richness of the whole production rather than aggressively stealing the limelight.

Many of the more successful works exploited the tension of an audience watching something unfold or sustain itself, in real time, just metres in front of them. A screen on stage seemed to glow white-hot as Doug Aitken's American cattle auctioneers rattled off faster and faster bids, selling off members of the audience whom they picked out with their torches. Douglas Gordon and Anri Sala both pushed big gooey buttons with their use of music, respectively staging live performances of Joy Division's 'Love Will Tear Us Apart' by folk singer June Tabor and an aria from Giacomo Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* by four women in Japanese geisha costume who passed the melody between themselves from among the auditorium. While I have never considered Carsten

Il Tempo del Postino

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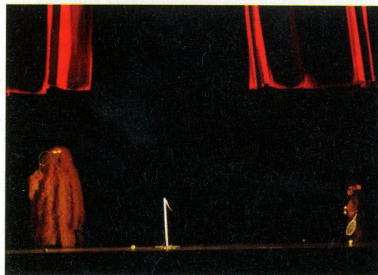
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Höller's observation that the human eye sees the world upside down as interesting as he seems to, he nevertheless engineered a moment of powerful (if cruel) fascination by asking three volunteers who had worn specially made glasses that inverted their vision for nine days to remove them on stage. They appeared, predictably, bewildered and wobbly.

By far the most successful exponent of performance tension (and its attendant risk of humiliation), however, was Matthew Barney, whose show-stopping work *Guardian of the Veil*, made in collaboration with Jonathan Bepler, was so ambitious and accomplished that it up-ended the entire programme. During the interval Aimee Mullins – model, Barney collaborator and double amputee – was carried onto the stage on a stretcher borne on the shoulders of men in 'Department of Sanitation of New York' sweatshirts, heralded by musicians in army surplus and balaclavas. A battered American car sat centre-stage, on top of which Mullins was laid for the duration of the performance. Barney himself entered wearing a black plastic head-dress in which sat a live dog, reminiscent of Anubis, the ancient Egyptian god of the dead. At one point two women, dressed in nothing but ornate head-dresses, arched their backs into the crab position and urinated copiously onto the stage. A highland bull was led down a ramp, taken around the car and encouraged (without success) to mount and presumably to inseminate a large white protrusion from the boot of the car covered in a hairy ginger pelt. The performance ended when a woman who had until this point been standing stock-still in a slab of Vaseline, removed her hand from her backside and released a slick of glossy dark substance that collected around her ankles.

Lasting around three times its allotted 15 minutes, it shared little with the other contributions (with the exception perhaps of Donnelly's piece) and seemed entirely uninterested in playing along with Obrist and Parreno's democratic 'game'. But Barney's 'Guardian of the Veil', though enacting a stereotype of the artist as mystical alchemist, managed to captivate on its own terms precisely because it so arrogantly ignored the rhetoric of the project. Despite its hollow claims to newness and egalitarianism, 'Il Tempo del Postino' inadvertently asked important questions about what we want from art and artists. Personally, if I had to choose between the portentousness of Barney's performance and people clapping at a mirror, I know which I'd pick.

Jonathan Griffin



Pierre Huyghe
Hello Zombie
2007
Documentation of performance