

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

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When the Art Isn't on the Walls: Dance Finds a Home in Museums

By Hilarie M. Sheets

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On a recent Thursday evening at the New Museum in New York, the elevator door opened onto a fifth-floor gallery with a pole-dancing class in action. Some visitors looked confused and headed for the exit, but many more crowded around the edges of the floor watching the dance collaborators Brennan Gerard and Ryan Kelly learn strenuous and hypnotic moves — the kind more often practiced by strippers or teenage subway performers.

The pair are artists in residence in the museum's "Choreography" season, in which they are exploring how race, class and sexuality intersect in pole dancing. Their research will culminate in a museum exhibition opening Feb. 4 incorporating dancers of all stripes — subway and exotic included — rotating on tandem poles.

Trained in experimental theater and ballet, Gerard & Kelly are migrating from dance venues to the contemporary art world in search of bigger audiences, new patrons and the intellectual support of curators, a shift that scores of performing artists are also making as invitations from museums accelerate.

While art museums have dabbled in live performance since the 1960s, "the real estate has changed," said the choreographer Ralph Lemon, whose recent work at the Museum of Modern Art and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis blurs the line between theater and gallery installation. "Museums are now offering performance spaces beyond just the gardens and basements and unannounced hallways."

The trend is proving a sure way to drive up traffic. "Live performance encourages audiences to be more frequent visitors to your building," said Sam Miller, president of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. "In terms of being responsive to what artists are doing today and bringing in a more diverse audience, it makes sense."

But some wonder if such spectacle isn't a cheap and quick way to generate buzz. What are the hourly wages of a dancer compared with the soaring costs of insuring and transporting fine art?

The watershed moment in cohabitation between visual and performing art came in 2010, when Marina Abramovic held silent court in the atrium of the Museum of Modern Art before 560,000 visitors and Tino Sehgal filled the spiral of the Guggenheim with "interpreters" who guided visitors artfully into conversation. After the choreographer Sarah Michelson won the best-in-show Bucksbaum Award at the 2012 Whitney Biennial, contemporary dance — long neglected in the narratives of Modernism — began gaining a measure of parity with the visual arts in museums.

The new Whitney Museum in downtown Manhattan, designed by Renzo Piano, has committed for the long term, dedicating a substantial increase in budget for performance. Set to open May 1, it will have a dedicated theater, the Whitney's first, with a sprung dance floor and retractable seating in prime real estate on the third floor and a multimedia gallery on the fifth. Each gallery will have pine wood floors over neoprene pads to protect performers' feet.

At the Museum of Modern Art, under expansion by Diller Scofidio & Renfro to incorporate the site of the demolished American Folk Art Museum, "performance will heavily impact the spaces we're designing," said Stuart Comer, chief curator of the department of media and performance art.

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While plans are still fluid, he said there will be at least one major space upstairs in the run of galleries, for live performance.

“We don’t want to ghettoize the medium,” Mr. Comer said. “Our collection includes dance and performance as well as painting and sculpture. We want to stress the deep roots in the 20th century of these art forms.”

A pioneering multidisciplinary institution, the Walker has commissioned 265 performance works since the 1960s. The difference is that Mr. Lemon’s “Scaffold Room,” which had its premiere in September, was planned years in advance by curators in both performing arts and visual arts, rather than something squeezed into an empty gallery for a day or two. “Anything you put in the white gallery space becomes overtly beautiful and sculptural,” Mr. Lemon said.

His two female performers portrayed a series of provocative characters through monologue, movement and music. Viewers could watch open rehearsals, attend full performances or happen upon unannounced iterations of different lengths.

“A good number of museums are really looking at dance and saying how can this art form, which up until now has mostly been presented in theaters and thought of as a kind of entertainment, be integrated into art history,” said Philip Bither, senior curator of performing arts at the Walker. The museum setting allows dance artists to think more experimentally about everything from the duration of works — some only a few minutes long — to their relationship with spectators.

If museums offer performing artists the possibility of having their work viewed within the canon of modern art, there have been plenty of headaches. “You hear lots of frustrated choreographers saying, ‘I got to the gallery, and they didn’t even know I needed water or a place to change’ — things that your standard performing arts producer would just know,” Mr. Bither said. The electrical system at the Whitney’s 1966 Breuer building couldn’t handle theatrical lighting, said Jay Sanders, an organizer of the performance-heavy 2012 Whitney Biennial later hired as the museum’s first curator of performance.

Brian Rogers, artistic director of the Chocolate Factory, a performing arts space in Long Island City, is skeptical of museums “rediscovering performance,” recalling that in the 1960s, dances by Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown at the Whitney helped usher in a new era but fell out of fashion, in part because of the difficulty of collecting such work.

Mr. Rogers cites Xavier Le Roy’s retrospective last fall at MoMA PS1 in Queens, in which dancers told personal stories, as a successful example of the current trend. “But putting work made for a performance space, where there’s a social contract around how the audience and artist relate to each other, into a noisy museum space sometimes upends the intentions behind the work,” he said. “The social engineering aspects of it may seem fascinating to a museum curator, but I wonder if that’s just grasping at novelty.”

Mr. Rogers also worries that New York in particular, which already has an extensive network of performance spaces including The Kitchen, Danspace Project, PS122 and the Chocolate Factory, “may be overbuilding, with too many spaces that will need to be supported in the long run.”

Johanna Burton, director and curator of education and public engagement at the New Museum, who organized the “Choreography” season, is not sure any museum has yet figured out the right balance between visual and performing arts. But, she argued, “we’re not just providing spectacle” and noted that museums need to “make sure there are questions being put forward: What does it mean to have pole dancing in a museum?”

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Keisha Franklin giving a pole-dancing lesson as part of Gerard & Kelly's residency at the New Museum. Credit: Richard Perry/The New York Times

She added that people often come to a museum with a desire to be challenged, not expecting to love everything.

While many artgoers walked out of Ms. Michelson's shows at the Whitney, which hadn't happened in theaters, she said she didn't feel rejected. "I wasn't used to it, and it felt very exciting," said Ms. Michelson, who will perform at the Walker throughout September.

David Henry, director of public programs at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, has increased the interpretive tools for understanding contemporary dance, including gatherings after performances where visitors discuss what they've seen. He is also leading dance directly into his institution's art exhibitions. Last fall, within a show on fiber art, the choreographer Trajal Harrell and the sculptor Sarah Sze staged a duet between two dancers connected by two threads, performed in a gallery without seating. "I wanted people to have the space to move and to see it in the way they would choose to see a sculpture or painting," Mr. Harrell said.

The economics of "acquiring" an ephemeral performance work is something museums and artists are still negotiating. Mr. Sehgal is widely cited as the first artist to crack the code of selling such an event to museums for their permanent collections by developing rules about how such pieces are to be re-performed.

Mr. Sehgal's work was the first live performance to be acquired by the Guggenheim. It has now just acquired its second, Gerard & Kelly's "Timelining," designed for couples in a variety of intimate relationships, which will be shown in the rotunda from June through September. "The museum got a certificate of authenticity as they would with a Sol LeWitt," Mr. Gerard said. The artists created guidelines for its presentation, even for performers' pay.

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The Walker and Mr. Lemon are developing another model for the acquisition of “Scaffold Room.” The museum will not be claiming ownership of the physical production but rather of a “collection of memories” of those who participated and those who watched it, Mr. Bither said. Their interviews will be incorporated into a document outlining the performance.

Mr. Lemon would like the interviewees to be called back periodically. “What’s beautiful about that idea to me is as these rememberers are remembering, the oral histories can continue to morph and change,” he said. “The ephemerality of the piece can continue to be alive.”

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