

Performance art: a renaissance at Le Printemps de Septembre?

Fifty years after its heyday, performance art is taking a leap back into the spotlight .

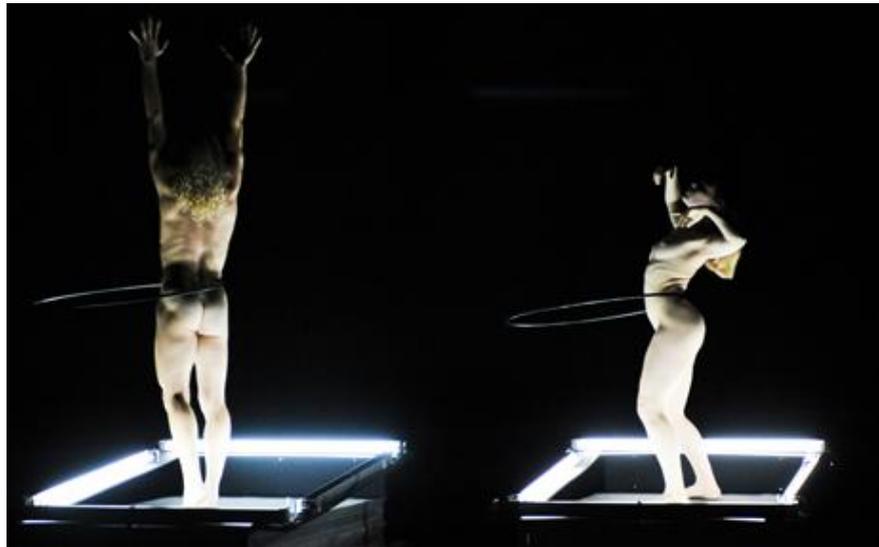
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Published: 12:11PM BST 04 Oct 2010

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I spent last weekend with as improbable a collection of oddballs as you are likely to find anywhere on the planet. We were in Toulouse at the opening of a contemporary art festival which, this year, has dedicated its entire programme to “new” performance art.

What? Can this strange genre of art that, since its Sixties and Seventies heyday, has become associated with pretension and naive political fervour, really be enjoying a renaissance as the festival’s organisers claim?



François Chaignaud and Marie-Caroline Hominal perform 'Duchesses'

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The labours of the 132 young artists whose work has been selected for the festival suggest it is. As does an audience of 200-plus French folk who sat in sombre silence through 35 minutes of naked hula-hoop dancing presented by artists François Chaignaud and Marie-Caroline Hominal as a work called Duchesses.

I was among them. It was pretentious. But it was also surprisingly engaging: well-staged and dramatic. With the statuesque proportions of a Greek god and goddess, the two hula-hoopers achieved what many here are attempting: to become figure skaters on the dangerous thin ice between aesthetics and titillation, frivolity and philosophy.

As I watched the audience shuffle seriously outside to smoke cigarettes at the end of the act, I wondered whether this show would have received such an earnest and affectionate response in the UK. British tolerance for art stunts will be put to the test later this month, when an exhibition devoted to Marina Abramovic, the controversial grandmother of performance art, opens at Lisson Gallery in London. The Serbian artist is best known for her visceral shows in which she mutilates her body, sometimes to the point of losing consciousness.

France, the home of Dada and Surrealism, is undoubtedly the best place for this “renaissance”. It was a Frenchman, Arthur Cravan, who, in 1914, invented the absurd theory that “the first requirement of an artist is to be able to swim”. In an attempt to prove that anyone can reinvent himself, Cravan challenged to a boxing match the then-reigning world champ Jack Johnson. The bout took place in Paris, in 1916. By the time Cravan was knocked out in the first round, he had already become, in front of a crowd of disappointed boxing enthusiasts, the first performance artist.

Another highlight in Toulouse traces performance art’s history. It remembers Cravan’s story, along with that of other pioneering artists such as Paul McCarthy, who in 1976 threw himself around a ketchup-spattered classroom at the University of California.

The new generation of performance artists bear little resemblance to their forefathers. Where the originals saw themselves as anarchists or revolutionaries discordantly clashing symbols and banging drums for attention, these young upstarts are romantics and poets. Their art is less statement than gesture.

One artist at the festival, though, is conspicuously keeping the flame of anarchy alive. She is from Sheffield, her name is Spartacus Chetwynd, and she is a charismatic self-confessed loony.

Dressed in home-made boiler suits and living in a constant state of flux, Chetwynd has lost all distinction between her real life and her performances. Her shows are like bizarre school plays acted terribly by family, friends and puppets. She performs, she says, because she can’t help it.

Chetwynd changed her name from Lali four years ago “to remind people they have a choice in life”.

“Like my art, my name change annoys people. The moment it stops annoying people I will rename myself again. Next time I’ll change it to Marvin Gay. Marvingay Chetwynd,” she said.

This extreme dedication to her philosophy reminds me of Cravan. So I ask her a question. “Spartacus, can you swim?” As luck would have it, she can.

Marina Abramovic is at the Lisson Gallery, London NW1 (020 7724 2739), from Oct 13

Le Printemps de Septembre festival of contemporary art in Toulouse runs until Oct 17

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