

Perverted by Theater {read more}

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Luis Camnitzer, *Painting Under Hypnosis*, 1981; documentation; 44 x 42 1/2 inches; courtesy Alexander Gray Associates and apexart, New York



Igor Eskinja, *Albero*, 2006; digital lambda print on aluminum; 48 x 56 inches; courtesy the artist and apexart, New York

Given art critic Michael Fried's vociferous condemnation of theater as the "negation of art," which apparently was being "corrupted or perverted by theatre" when he wrote these comments some forty years ago, it's interesting to observe the extent to which theater is a nonissue for most artists working today. As evidence, *Perverted by Theater* argues that the spectacle and modes of address that have characterized theater throughout the ages seem to be equally at home in the contemporary visual art world.

Despite Fried's protests, contemporary artists have no problem embracing various theatrical tactics—e.g., storytelling, staged performances, leaving performative "residue" behind in galleries—in order to communicate with viewers. In fact, the ubiquitous viewer has become practically interchangeable with the term *audience*. (It's no coincidence that art museums likewise concern themselves with "audience development.")

With the advent of video, many works of art took on explicitly temporal characteristics and embodied performance. But even if a work of art does not *perform* in the literal sense, it still exists in real time, real space and directly engages the viewer once, twice or many times. However still, quiet, solitary or internalized that experience, the work of art is intended to perform *something* on the senses or mind of the viewer. Does any artist believe otherwise while in the act of creating?

The dilemma with *Perverted by Theater*, therefore, is not the legitimacy of its argument that much art is theatrical but that the relatively new works chosen are shoehorned into proving its case. With just a single work by each artist, the selections serve only as examples of the curatorial thesis, which prejudices the viewer in its favor. If theater is typified by, as curators Franklin Evans and Paul David Young suggest, "temporality, the subject/object relation, the audience, the presence of the actor, the performance text...and character, story, and plot structure," then most any work of art could be implicated to some extent. Still, gathering these works together to consider the influence of theater on visual art is an interesting conversation and has its rewards.

One of the more engaging portions of the show is a wall of portraits that collectively illuminate the role of the audience in art (including theater). Two drawings, Shahzia Sikander's ink-and-graphite-on-vellum depiction of her actress mother and David Dupuis' pencil-on-paper *Portrait of the Artist as Bitter Clown*, show subjects who are indelibly aware of the viewer's gaze. Martin McMurray's *Yawning Abyss No. 1*, an acrylic-on-paper painting of a seated man in a bathrobe, and Mickalene Thomas' *Lovely Six Foota*, a large C-print of an afroed black woman gazing at the viewer from a seventies-style "den" set, both manipulate the viewer through provocative clothing and suggestive body language. In all of these, the degree to which the subject is portrayed as being conscious of the viewer/audience is an important element of the work. Self-awareness is the most theatrical of all stage issues, and perhaps central to the work of any artist in any medium.

The mechanics of stagecraft are critical to the readings of other works. Ann Pibal's *Drifter (v.2)*, an acrylic-on-aluminum abstract painting, is composed of a monochromatic gray field with brightly colored concentric circles "downstage center," the most dramatic position for a single actor onstage to hold. Kate Gilmore's video *Before Going Under* depicts a woman holding a bouquet on the right side of the screen lassoed by an unseen figure off left. Much of the video is the off-screen struggle between these two forces, indicated by the taut rope reaching across the work's visual plane. The monitor "as proscenium" and notions of onstage/offstage action are essential to the humor of this piece.

The theatrical role of the text, or script, informs other works in the show, such as Mel Bochner's "Thesaurus" drawings, *Fool and Liar*. Luis Camnitzer's *Painting Under Hypnosis*, a multi-panel documentation of hypnosis in the form of photographs and pages of typed text, recounts an exchange between Camnitzer and a therapist wherein the artist embodies a work of art itself, describing through questions and answers his own creation, from the selection of paint and subject matter to artmaking techniques and the work's framing. Painting as performance is implicit throughout.



Kate Gilmore, *Before Going Under*, 2007; video; courtesy Amy Smith-Stewart and apexart, New York

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Mickalene Thomas, *Lovely Six Foota*, 2007; C-print; 58 x 68 inches; courtesy Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago and apexart, New York

Kabir Carter's *Shared Frequencies*, an audio work consisting of blips, bleeps, and randomly sampled radio static, is played through two wall-mounted speakers. This raw source material is gathered by an antenna, radio scanners and mixing deck—the guts of the piece set up a few feet away. Yet one's inclination is to overlook this equipment and stand before the speakers, the "noise makers," in a position of frontal address that mimics a stage performance. Nearby, the wonderful *Lenscap*, an oil-on-canvas painting by Alexi Worth, similarly plays with perception, in this case depicting a close-up of a hand holding a camera lens cap. The circular, black void in the center of the canvas draws the eye to what lies on the periphery, suggesting a reversal of the subject/viewer, performer/audience dichotomy and nimbly alluding to both Brecht and Magritte.

Other works were chosen for their more schematic relationship to theater; again, these ideas feel as though they are projected onto the works rather than inherent to them. In Igor Eskinja's large photograph *Albero*, a gallery wall and floor appear to be the backdrop for an abstracted tree with bare branches, a simple but compelling image seemingly created with nothing more than strips of packing tape; here, the work alludes to the simple "magic" of set design. Elsewhere, the curators illustrate the theatrical mainstays of plot and character with paintings by David Humphrey and Jackie Gendel, and a wall-mounted sculpture with plastic cacti, mirrors and lights [*Sconce (The Lady from Shanghai)*] by Virgil Marti.

If the term theatrical has had a negative connotation in the visual art world, it's because the tropes of theater have been so well and resolutely defined over history—actors, costumes, props, Aristotle's "unity of action," a proscenium separating audience and artifice, etc. By themselves, these parameters are too determined and limiting for the vast range of visual artists who have interests and questions far outside the field of theater. But for the visual artist who is interested in theatricality, the tropes of theater make perfect sense. Why be aggressively doctrinaire in rejecting them? We can ask these questions in our permissive postmodern, postminimalist age. The growing pains of earlier movements have created space in the culture—and theoretical discourse—for such inclusiveness.

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