



Richard Move, Martha@ . . . The 1963 Interview, 2011. Katherine Crockett, Richard Move, and Catherine Cabeen.
(Photo: Christopher Duggan)

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PERFORMA CONCLUDED A WEEK AGO, much to the relief of those of us who averaged a performance a day—or close to that: Over the biennial's three weeks, I attended eighteen Performa-related events. Yet performance in New York doesn't begin and end with Performa; it's a year-round sport. Performa claims a lot of territory, but what remains outside its borders is often as interesting as that which gets stamped with its logo, if not more so.

I took a break from the Performa schedule to catch Richard Move at New York Live Arts. Move has been performing as choreographer-dancer Martha Graham since 1996, originally appearing at the downtown club Mother. His act moves beyond drag impersonation to capture something so true to its subject that the Martha Graham Dance Company went from threatening to sue Move to inviting the performer to choreograph for them.

Martha@ . . . The 1963 Interview saw Move shifting closer to reenactment, in a "metatheatrical re-creation" of a conversation between Graham and dance critic Walter Terry held at the 92nd Street Y. As the lights dimmed, Move reversed onto the stage, teasingly ankle first, clad in a wafting white robe. At six foot four, Move towered over his interviewer (played by diminutive actress Lisa Kron) and explained, in the velvety tones of a bona fide grande dame, Graham's classical heroines; meanwhile two dancers from Graham's company illustrated excerpts as Medea, Clytemnestra, and Jocasta. Gripping and hypnotic, it provided a firsthand glimpse of how the legendary Graham translated character and emotion into movement. Later, in the lobby, as we watched the real Graham camp it up in a projected video clip (courtesy of Charles Atlas), a friend commented, "I've always thought, if anything, Richard plays it down."

Move's work was actually sparer than many Performa events, which this year pushed visual artists onstage more than ever before. Some artists made this disciplinary leap better than others, while the New York Times lamented this expansion altogether (the art world is well known for its allergy to theater). These high-end productions begged comparison to experimental theater elsewhere in the city. While Elmgreen & Dragset found inspiration in Beckett, Elevator Repair Service has recently been turning classics of American literature into stunning live performance. In the epic Gatz—playing at the McCarter Theater in Princeton next month—The Great Gatsby is read word for word over six hours. A few weeks back, I caught The Select (The Sun Also Rises), a relatively short three-and-a-half-hour production featuring ten actors playing multiple roles and doubling as sound effects operators and stagehands. The Select engages the audience's imagination so expertly that a trestle table becomes a perfectly believable stand-in for a bed, a bull, and even an enormous trout.



Left: Elevator Repair Service, *The Select (The Sun Also Rises)*, 2011. (Photo: Mark Burton) Right: The Civilians, *Let Me Ascertain You: Occupy Wall Street*, 2011. Kelly McCreary, Michael Friedman, and Emily Ackerman. (Photo: Richard Termine for the New York Times)

The Civilians is another company with a novel approach to the stage. Billed as "investigative theater," its scripts (and songs) are taken from interviews conducted by the group's members, centered around meaty themes—past shows have focused on the evangelical movement in Colorado, Brooklyn's Atlantic Yards development project, and the adult entertainment industry. At the end of October, the Civilians hit Joe's Pub for a one-night-only performance of their investigations into Occupy Wall Street. (The show was supposed to be screened live at Zuccotti Park as well, but that evening the cops removed the encampment's generators, citing "safety hazards.") The idea is similar to the "Living Newspaper" format that inspired Liz Magic Laser's *I Feel Your Pain*—one of the best pieces in Performa—but while Laser harked back to Bill Clinton's presidency (among other political moments), *Let Me Ascertain You: Occupy Wall Street* was up-to-the-minute current.

A few days earlier at the same venue, I caught performance artist-turned-playwright Taylor Mac's cabaret show of songs from the '30s. It was relatively straightforward, aside from his ratty glam, pseudo-drag costume, and a brief display of his genitals. Mac told a story about old-school performance art—in other words, what used to go by that name before it was cleaned up and institutionalized: Performing at a downtown venue in the early '90s, he saw a man give himself an enema with milk and then drink the residue with cereal, and a woman who removed a chicken piece by piece from her vagina. It was then that he realized, "Taylor, you're not a performance artist, you're just putting on eyeliner." The Joe's Pub gig was a warm-up for a twenty-four-hour concert (take that, Ragnar Kjartansson!) in which he will cover American popular songs, each hour dedicated to a different decade since the country's independence. Mac is the kind of downtown performer you never see in Performa—that is, until Justin Vivian Bond was added to the Performa calendar (singing in a gallery, ironically enough).



Left: Maria Hassabi, *Show*, 2011. Maria Hassabi and Hristoula Harakas. (Photo: Francis Coy) Right: Taylor Mac, excerpt from *24-Hour History of Popular Music*, 2011.

To Performa's credit, one of the most engaging works this month was by an alum. In *Show*, at the Kitchen, choreographer Maria Hassabi (class of '09) stripped the theater of seats, scattering spotlights on the floor along one wall. On the night I attended, many in the audience (led by choreographer Sarah Michelson) quickly began to sit on the floor. The doors shut, and we sweated in silence for a good ten minutes, waiting for the performance to begin. Hassabi and collaborator Hristoula Harakas eventually appeared and picked their way through the crowd toward the center of the room, stopping right next to me. Unsure of whether I should move or not—whether I was supposed to move—I felt Harakas hook one toe underneath my thigh; I finally shifted, and the dancers began an agonizingly slow sequence of movements. The next hour was like this: Hassabi and Harakas, eyes locked, pressuring the audience to move and react, thereby gradually gaining space. *Show* was a tense, exhausting combination of immersive dance and installation.

The stakes are high for a performance art biennial in the performance capital of the world. After a few weeks of marathon spectating, I'm left imagining what a parallel program to Performa might look like, and what the consequences might be of demarcating a world of "visual art performance" (Performa's term for what it showcases) versus regular old performance. Aside from quality, the main difference was the crowd: How many members of the art world-centric Performa audience saw Move, ERS, the Civilians, Mac, Hassabi, or any of the other intelligent, explorative performers working regularly in New York? Do we need the white cube to legitimize the black box? Did Performa convince its crowds that there is value in seeing performance outside the biennial pilgrimage? Here's hoping.

— Nikki Columbus