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ART

Celebrating the Intangibles Money Can't Buy



Librado Romero/The New York Times

Terence Koh's solo show in the Whitney Museum's lobby gallery.

By HOLLAND COTTER
Published: December 23, 2007

Correction Appended

WITH Wall Street shaky but art prices sky-high, even the art world's professional boosters started sounding moral about art and money in 2007, as if opportunistically positioning themselves for a fall. Too late. By now everyone knows that art is business, the art world a public relations machine. The sheer bulk of hyped product made the past season look not eclectic and textured but sleek and flat.

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What did give it texture and color in memory were the intangibles: individual acts, gestures or encounters. In no special order, here are a few examples:

TWO PERFORMANCES In "Babel," presented this fall for Performa 07, the New York performance-art biennial, Dave McKenzie stuffed a microphone into his mouth, emphatically signed the words "I'm talking to you. I am doing this for us" to each member of a tense audience, then repeatedly crashed to the floor with seizures, as if something were exploding inside him. Other Performa events were elaborate and tightly scripted: performance art institutionalized. This one was the real, raw, unpredictable, up-close thing.

The artist Paul Chan brought the Classical Theater of Harlem's production of "Waiting for Godot" to two Katrina-wrecked neighborhoods in New Orleans. He taught in the city's schools, ran student workshops, raised money, talked to everybody, went everywhere and turned the city into a theater.

THREE INSTALLATIONS At a fancy Upper East Side gallery usually reserved for de Koonings and Twomblys,

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Adrian Dennis/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images
Mark Wallinger's "State Britain."

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Katrin Schilling/Documenta GMBH
Trisha Brown's "Floor of the Forest."

David Hammons and his wife, Chie, displayed a half-dozen full-length fur coats on salesroom clothing stands. Seen from the front, the furs had a vintage elegance; seen from the behind, they were ruins: shaved, torched, torn, sutured and paint-smeared. The price of slaughtered fashion? Not for sale.

Terence Koh's solo show in the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#)'s lobby gallery had just one element: an electric light so bright that you couldn't look at it and yet couldn't escape its glare. Like a person's life, it turned on; gave off its energy intensely, randomly, wastefully; and then turned off. Brilliant.

Mark Wallinger's monumental "State Britain" filled the main hall of Tate Britain with an ensemble of more than 600 banners, photographs and hand-painted placards protesting the war in Iraq. The piece was powerful and conscientiously unoriginal. It was in fact a precise replica of another ensemble, amassed earlier by the political activist Brian Haw across from the Houses of Parliament and destroyed by the police. Mr. Wallinger's reconstruction — a grand "yes" directed at Mr. Haw's great "no" — won him the Turner Prize this year. Mr. Haw, who continues to protest in Parliament Square but with many fewer placards, should get one too.

A TALK During the heady spring weekend that "Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution" opened in Los Angeles, the artists Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz spoke informally at a gallery. In the 1970s the two collaborated on germinal public performances protesting violence against women; at the gallery that night they spoke of past and present as a continuum, and what it meant still to be artist-activists in the world today. Their audience was small; their message was epic. Most of the listeners were students, and they listened, avidly, as if they had already learned an important lesson: Don't miss history.

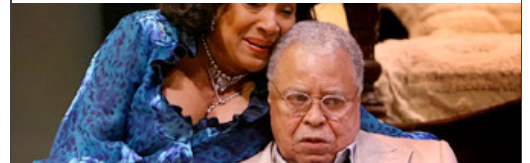
TWO MUSEUMS At the reopened Detroit Institute of the Arts, drawings by Michelangelo and paintings by [Jacob Lawrence](#) sit side by side. With this and other similar gestures, a great and venerable American institution, in a great and distressed American city, gives the 21st century a rough draft of a new kind of "people's museum." How will it work? Will it work? Questions for another year.

The [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) opened its new Greek and Roman Galleries, a showcase for the sculptural tradition on which most of premodern Western art is built. In a special exhibition gallery nearby a show called "Eternal Ancestors: The Art of the Central African Reliquary" represents a different classical tradition. A single carved wood Fang figure, once called the Black Venus in the West, is to my mind the single most beautiful sculpture in the Met these days.

ONE BIG SHOW Some people hated Documenta 12, the exhibition of contemporary art and sculpture in Kassel, Germany. I had problems, but no contemporary show in 2007 has stayed more vivid in my mind. I keep returning to my first impressions: the excitement of seeing, one after another, artists young and old from Europe, the Americas, Africa and Asia, some of whom I did not know, most of whom I never imagined together. The stimulation of watching canons crumble, reputations restored or freshly made, and all mediums mixed.

My first sight, walking through a gallery, was [Trisha Brown](#)'s beautiful 1970 "Floor of the Forest" being performed to the [Grateful Dead](#) song "Uncle John's Band." The young dancers made great scooping, embracing motions with their arms. Then they did a little

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twisting motion with their hands, like hitchhikers thumbing a ride, and they repeated that gesture again and again.

Correction: December 30, 2007

An article last Sunday about outstanding art in 2007 misspelled the name of the performance piece that Dave McKenzie presented at Performa 07. It was “Babel,” not “Babble.”

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