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Performance Meddles With Media at APAP

by *paul david young* 01/13/12

While the annual gathering known as APAP (Association of Performing Arts Presenters) is under way through the end of January, New York is awash in festivals—COIL, Under the Radar, American Realness—each presenting a suite of performances, clamoring for attention and bookings from theaters and promoters across the nation and abroad. The shows in these festivals tend toward the artier end of the theater scene. The ubiquity of video, at these events and in art performance generally, makes genre distinction less and less clear.



Video is at the center of two remarkably similar and equally dispiriting shows, the Berlin-and-London-based group Gob Squad's *Super Night Shot* and the New York-based performance company Big Art Group's *Broke House*. Both feature live video production, four-channel projection in the theater, breathless gossipy interviews with the actors in the clichéd fashion of reality TV, a lot of handheld camera work, and two modalities of acting —listless and overwrought. *Super Night Shot* at the Public Theater has four projection screens with four image streams placed end-to-end horizontally across the stage and nothing else.

The premise is that Gob Squad will recruit people from the streets nearby in the

hour before the show to participate on the fly by giving on-camera interviews. The resulting recording, later screened in the theater, is a hyped-up attempt to generate something from nothing. The artists ham it up, frantically repeating stock phrases ("I'm so nervous"). The video is interspersed with some planned routines, like twirling umbrellas in front of lights, which is about as visually exciting as the piece gets. Like the troupe's Warhol-derivative "Kitchen," which plays again later this month at the Public, "Super Night Shot" shamelessly and uncritically panders to the audience.

For *Broke House*, part of the American Realness festival at the Abrons Art Center, Big Art Group keeps the cameras turned on the stage. Scrim at the stage front reflect four video streams and partially block the view of much of the live action. The premise is again a video about making a video, and results in the same hackneyed scenes: frantic participants, outtakes, a screaming diva, etc. French New Wave cinema and mainstream entertainment have stomped this path cold for 50 years, and Big Art Group has added nothing to the mix. In a calculated high-low pairing, they tell you that they will enact a scene from Fassbinder's film *Year of Thirteen Moons* in the style of Paul Verhoeven's *Showgirls*, though even this flicker of sarcasm is lame and void of thought. Otherwise, the show is pretty much standard reality TV with an overlay of gratuitous drag. *Broke House* is only slightly less lazy than Gob Squad's *Super Night Shot*. Both make one hunger for the *Real Housewives of Anywhere* or a mediocre high school production of Chekhov.

Lost in its own techno music, Polish director Radosław Rychcik's production of Bernard-Marie Koltes's "In the Solitude of Cotton Fields" flounders at LaMaMa E.T.C. The European tradition of director's theater is ham-fistedly employed here to make hash of the play. An unconventional presentation—not this one—would be entirely fitting for Koltes's strange poetic text, with its flirtatious mixture of crime, drugs, and sex. Rychcik, however, relies too heavily on the four-man band, which is talented enough, but the long, repetitive musical stretches, sometimes accompanied by dancing and miming by the actors, voided any sense of the overall piece. The lengthy video sequence, containing sundry appropriated images, felt similarly irrelevant, visual noise on top of the rest of the noise. The intensity of the actors, at first impressive, wore thin. To make matters worse, while the actors yelled in Polish, their bodies consistently blocked the projected translation for much of the audience, further obscuring the play. "Cotton Fields" became a mute Polish rock performance, with a few phrases of Koltes occasionally visible behind the dancers.

By contrast, other shows were literate and literary and used their stagecraft to stimulate thought. The Builders Association's *Sontag Reborn* at the Public (Under the Radar), Mariano Pensotti's *El pasado es un animal grotesco* (The past is a grotesque animal) at the Public (Under the Radar), Rabih Mroué's *Looking for a*

Missing Employee at the Baryshnikov Arts Center (COIL), and Deborah Stein & Suli Holum's *Chimera* at HERE (Under the Radar) tell stories about their elusive protagonists intelligently and creatively. *Sontag* stars Moe Angelos, who also wrote the script, adapted from Susan Sontag's posthumously published memoirs. Angelos interprets Sontag as precocious, pretentious, and touchingly uncertain as she comes to terms with adulthood and sexuality while aspiring to join the intellectual elite. Angelos performs the younger Sontag, paired handsomely with a black-and-white video projection of Angelos as the chain-smoking, older and wiser Sontag and another projection of the cluttered desk in front of her.

More clearly emulating the lecture-performance form, *Missing Employee* is a kind of biographical documentary. Rabih Mroué, a Lebanese performer/director/actor, follows the trail of a ministry of finance employee who disappears and is the subject of months of conflicting press accounts and pleas for justice. The disappearance links to larger government scandals and murder. Like Sontag, the piece is low-key and smart: Mroué films himself from within the audience, seated, talking to the camera, while the screen projections show his hands flipping through his notebooks of press clippings and, on the other side, the diagram an assistant draws, also from within the audience, during the show to illustrate the changing press information. This visual becomes a bit stale over time, but Mroué tells an arresting story of duplicity, murder, and intrigue.

Also a form of lecture performance, *Chimera* focuses on a single, highly ambiguous figure, a research scientist who discovers her own medical mystery and sees her life unravel. Playwright Deborah Stein's text provides enough surprises to keep the audience following the mutations of storyline and character, and there's the occasional video projection to give them something to look at. Suli Holum performs all in white in and around her all-white kitchen-cum-lab, though she does a memorable costume trick with a bright green apron string. A "performance seminar" by David Levine called *Anger at the Movies* (COIL at PS122) had its participants sit around a seminar table and talk about representations of their professions in the movies. Levine screened the video clips that participants had sent in to provoke discussion in a relaxed atmosphere aided by complimentary beer.

Sans video and thus bucking the trend, *El pasado es un animal Ggrotesco*, written and directed by Argentinian Mariano Pensotti and performed by four actors and some fast-stepping stage hands on a revolving stage at the Public, narrates four fictional lives episodically from 1999–2009. Almost the entire text is spoken as voiceover: the actors pass the microphone while the stage turns, making visible the passage of time. The stories are extreme (a severed hand in a box on the doorstep) and mundane (the vagaries of love, job changes). The production is simple and smoothly choreographed to tell these complex tales quite effectively. Without losing coherence, the play manages to avoid the obvious outcome that all the characters

surprisingly know each other or are related. There is some overlap, but it's not overdone.

Many shows continue. Check the various festival and venue web pages for schedules. Above: Production still from Rabih Mroue's "Looking for a Missing Employee." Courtesy of the Artist



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[Eli Hansen, I've Made a Lot of Love Out of This One, 2010](#)

Mixed Media

Image courtesy the artist and Macarone Gallery.

In his sculpture and installation, Eli Hansen, who lives and works in Taco

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