

Critic's View: Performance Art at Watermill Center Gala Prods Consciousness through Action, Not Theory

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by James Croak

Diogenes was probably the first performance artist, appearing in the 4th century BCE and living into the next. Unattached, mobile, deliberately impoverished, ate where he wanted, slept where he wanted, he lived a life of pranks attracting Athenians to his non-metaphysical philosophy of Cynicism, later dubbed Stoicism. His writings did not survive but we know of his many performances through the texts of those who were often his targets.

He wandered through a [market](#) in broad daylight holding a lantern and seeking an honest mind; he lived for a year in a large vase; he defaced the currency with a chisel, making it appear counterfeit; plucked a chicken and gave it to Plato, announcing that it was a man. But mostly Diogenes taught that action was more important than theory, a radical thought at the time but one that continues today at the Watermill Center in performance art nurturing the next generation in the line of Diogenes, pranking the rest of us into consciousness.



“Tapestries” by Jared Madere. Photo by Lovis Ostenrik. Courtesy Watermill Center.

This year’s “Fly into the Sun” Watermill Center annual fundraising benefit was once again the highlight of the sprawling Hamptons season, wherein the two ends of the economic spectrum, the monied and the money-indifferent, somehow meet for an evening. This year felt a little subdued compared to the [raucous environment](#) of some other years that saw rows of topless girls sauntering through the crowd with sex toys. Nevertheless this one did not disappoint, other Hampton benefits are a facility, the Watermill Center benefit is a live show with more than a score of performances happening at once.

Nudity in performance art seems de rigueur ever since the 1950s, when Yves Klein painted with his trademark blue by [dragging unclothed bodies](#) across canvas while a quartet of cellists performed along the wall. This tradition continues with much nudity in the performances at the Watermill Center benefit, most of it tasteful and useful. Upon arriving, the attendees walked beneath two nude figures sleeping overhead on plexiglass, quiet human sculptures hovering in the air, a performance by [Miles Greenberg](#).



Miles Greenberg performance, "Hands: Giving and Taking Away."

Performance artist [Dana Davenport](#) has an Asian mother and African-American father. A dark skinned woman, she was raised in South Korea in a society where black Korean-speaking women could be counted using only two hands. She experienced rejection because of her appearance, dubbed a *heugin*, or "black person" in Korean language.

Onsite for this benefit she crawled about a massive canvas in the buff scrawling *heugin*, in Hangeul (Korean alphabet) in splashy red letters. Many stared, just stunned, at her dark body, nude and covered with red paint from her vigorous lettering, against a white canvas covered with Korean writing. You might have thought you'd seen it all ... but you hadn't seen this.

Dana Davenport is becoming less unique in Asia; the black/Japanese Ariana Miyamoto was born and raised in Japan, so Japanese that she bows when she answers the telephone. She caused a national identity crisis by winning the 2015 Miss Universe Japan pageant. The connotations that the Japanese population went through—I was in Japan at the time—were a chuckle to an American mutt, but to them it was a social fracture of their homogenous population. The comments ranged from *haafu!*, Japanglish for “half,” to lust and envy: “our women cannot compete!”



宮本・エリアナ・磨美子 *Miyamoto Eriana Mamiko*,

I normally shy from identity pieces, most of them little more than niche marketing by the like-minded, a different shade of Chevy, but Davenport’s performance drilled in: Davenport was made to feel foreign in her own home, speaking her own language, writing her own alphabet, cooking her own food. A chance migration of the genome producing a unique psyche, unwanted at first sight.



Dana Davenport.

Humor is always welcome and often intrinsic to persuasion in performance art. For bull-goose looney humor the award has to go to [Stephen Shanabrook](#) and his “Beaten to a Pulp on a Bed of Moss.” Shanabrook set up a cotton candy machine without an enclosure and then sat next to it while it spun him into a giant cotton candy figure. It is good levity and a standout among the many works scattered across the 8.5-acre site. No profound message attempted here other than absurdity, which is often a lesson in itself. It has the feel of ongoing shtick like comedian Gallagher smashing his [watermelons](#), or David Letterman [throwing things off a roof](#). It’s absurd and too funny to look away. Action, not theory.



"Beaten to a Pulp on a Bed of Moss" by Stephen Shanabrook. Photo by Lovis Osterrik. Courtesy Watermill Center.

Another work that I would judge tied for best with Davenport was a video of a performance by [Regina José Galindo](#) that in a word was a horror. Behind the photograph of Robert Downey Jr., one can see a group of small windowless huts constructed as an enclosure for a screen showing an individual performance on video.



Robert Downey Jr. and Susan Levin at Watermill Center benefit. Photo by James Croak.

In the first hut was “Tierra,” the Spanish word for earth or land, the name given to the performance about the human wreckage created by the 36 year-long Guatemalan civil war. In fighting between the government and various perceived enemies, especially the Mayan people, from 1960 to 1996 hundreds of thousands of civilians were murdered in a conflict almost too awful for words that is conveyed with this performance.

Galindo stands still and naked in a field while a large-track excavator crosses the field and rips up the earth about her leaving her on an ever smaller island, a trophy to its violent work. The video can be viewed [here](#). It is the most unsettling and communicative piece about civil war and its victims one will ever see.



Performance by Regina José Galindo. Photo by Bertrand Huet. Courtesy Watermill Center.

Those who could pony up some serious green for the dinner afterwards heard a private concert by the queen of performance art, [Laurie Anderson](#), in a tribute to her late husband, rocker Lou Reed. One could never overstate her influence among the two generations of rock and performance art that followed her; I don't believe they much merged before her.



Laurie Anderson performing at the Watermill Center benefit. Photo by Maria Baranova. Courtesy Watermill Center.

Many of the performances will be restaged for free during [Discover Watermill Center Day](#) on Sunday, August 13, 2017 from 3 to 6 p.m. Added to these will be additional material from the international invitees who came from afar to work with avant garde theater maestro Robert Wilson.

BASIC FACTS: Performance art and installations return to Watermill Center on Sunday, August 13, 2017 from 3 to 6 p.m. during its annual Discover Watermill Center Day. Free and open to the public. Watermill Center is located at 39 Water Mill Towd Road, Water Mill, NY 11976. www.watermillcenter.org

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