

Behind the gated facade of a nondescript storefront on a quiet, mostly residential street in the East Los Angeles neighbourhood of Highland Park, several dozen people linger around a pair of long, wide makeshift tables strewn with the remains of an informal dinner. There's a bar in one corner, selling cheap wine and Tecate beer, while a handful of smokers drift in and out of the front. Just after nine, two young women – Dawn Kasper and Karen Adelman – climb onto one of the tables, bantering energetically about their plans for the performance they have just embarked upon. They pace up and down as they talk, moving precariously from table to table. Kasper changes into a white smock and trousers; Adelman reads self-help tracts aloud from her smartphone. They pile up dishes and move them around. They smoke a joint. They sit, and Adelman reads the script of a guided meditation, then – in a startling stroke of unabashed virtuosity – launches into an aching beautiful a cappella rendition of *Amazing Grace*.

The performance, which occurred one Friday night in January at Public Fiction, an artist-run space founded in 2010 by Lauren Mackler, was strikingly unremarkable – which is to say, striking in its unremarkability: its casual, seemingly organic manner of rising up from the crowd and sinking back into it, like a strain of conversation floated between friends. This is a familiar mode for Kasper in particular, whose performances generally involve the shuffling of stuff from one place to another with an air of such desperate, frenzied sincerity that even the most mundane gesture seems to speak from the depths of the human condition. A central figure in LA's increasingly vibrant performance art scene, both as an artist in her own right and as a cofounder of the art space Human Resources, Kasper shuffled her stuff – her whole studio, in fact – to New York this spring to take up residency at the Whitney Biennial for a three-month durational performance called *This Could Be Something If I Let It*. Modest and impromptu as the Public Fiction event was, it epitomised much of what makes the scene feel so vital – the spontaneity, the playfulness, the intimacy, the sincerity – while the pending journey of 'our Whitney representative', as one fellow performance artist affectionately referred to Kasper, underscores the delicacy of translating work that's been cultivated on the fringes of the artworld's sparkle-driven attention span, work that in most cases truly is a strain of conversation between friends, onto an institutional stage.

Performance art is nothing new in Los Angeles, of course. Its generative impact was written all over the 60-plus exhibitions that made up last year's Getty-sponsored *Pacific Standard Time* initiative, in the work of Barbara T. Smith, Chris Burden, Suzanne Lacy, Paul McCarthy, Eleanor Antin and countless others. "It's crucially important, particularly after 1970," says Getty curator Glenn Phillips, who co-organised (with LAX Art's Lauri Firstenberg) a ten-day *PST*-related performance festival in January. Through the 1970s, as Cal Arts, UC Irvine and many of the region's other experimentally inclined MFA programmes crystallised, drawing students and faculty from around the country

## Performance Art in LA

*Cheap wine and Tecate beer; desperate, frenzied sincerity; the fringes of the artworld's sparkle-driven attention span; a dinner that revolved around the butchering of a lamb; why there's nothing that a museum can give you in your career that will help you as a performance artist*

words HOLLY MYERS



top:  
**Anya Liftig, John Burtle, Stephen van Dyck and Adam Overton**  
*Talk to Me Sweetly, Make Me Grow: Seducing Neglected Plants in Parking Lots and Big Box Stores*, 2011, Cypress Park Home Depot in Los Angeles, 20 Feb 2011, presented as part of *Fleshy February: A Month of Multiple Meditations* at the Experimental Meditation Center of Los Angeles. Photo: Anya Liftig

above:  
**My Barbarian**  
*Broke People's Baroque Peoples' Theater*, 2012. Photo: Farrah Karapetian. Courtesy the artists

right:  
**Anya Liftig, John Burtle, Stephen van Dyck and Adam Overton**  
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while gradually eroding the boundaries between disciplines, time-based media flourished. “It becomes similar to drawing,” Phillips says. “Just about every artist draws, whatever their practice is. There’s this moment here when practically every artist makes some foray into ephemeral art. It’s added to the toolkit – and it never really left, that’s the interesting thing. It happens everywhere, but I’ve never seen it as widespread as it is in Los Angeles.”

If there’s anything that distinguishes performance in LA today, beyond its sheer ubiquity, it may be the lack of any one distinguishing factor. Kasper stages messy existential investigations that succeed largely on the basis of her riveting presence, while Liz Glynn creates large-scale, participant-driven spectacles – a dinner that revolves around the butchering of a lamb, a pop-up speakeasy in which to mount other artists’ work – only to retreat quietly into the wings. The collective My Barbarian combines scathing sociopolitical critique with an impressive knack for show tunes. Adam Overton, founder of the Experimental Meditation Center of Los Angeles, among other quasimystical entities, has been reviving the use of the score as a means of generating odd, subtle interventions in the public realm. “People are so inventive,” says Asher Hartman, whose own work rides the once fraught line between performance art and theatre. “These ideas of ‘this is performance, this is not performance’, ‘this is the correct way’, ‘this is the lineage’ don’t seem to exist. There are people who want to perform in a particular trajectory and they do it, but they don’t come down on other people for not doing it. It’s a generous artworld. It’s very connected. People are nice to each other and ask really good questions.”

While clearly spurred by the recent downturn of the market, the resurgence of performance is an outgrowth, in many ways, of the city’s thriving culture of low- or no-budget artist-run institutions: Public Fiction, Human Resources, Workspace, Night Gallery, Pieter, Artist Curated Projects and *Native Strategies* (a curatorial initiative that is also a journal) – all of which follow on the heels of the artist-run genre-bending ventures that emerged in the aughts, like the Sundown Salon, Telic (now the Public School), the Mountain School and, most notably, Machine Project, an art space and informal collective that set the tone, in many ways, for the casual integration of conceptual strategies, experimental performance and the daily life of a space. (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, founded in 1978, and Highways, founded in 1989, are the two stalwart midscale venues, joined by REDCAT in 2003.) LA’s museums, meanwhile, have merely dabbled: MOCA’s ongoing Engagement Party series invites artists working collectively in socially based practices – Liz Glynn, My Barbarian, the LA Urban Rangers and Slanguage are a few – to produce a trio of performances over a three-month residency; Machine Project took up residence in the Hammer Museum for a year beginning in the autumn of 2009, producing nearly 80 events on the museum’s campus (both ventures were funded by the same round of grants from the James Irvine Foundation). These efforts feel more like echoes than insight, however: museums scrambling to catch hold of the coattails of what’s already underway. “There may be greater institutional interest” than there once was, says Glynn, who, in her own work and as a frequent Machine Project collaborator, has worked more extensively with museums than perhaps any other artist of late, “but the important work is still being produced in that very immediate, do-it-yourself, I-want-to-show-up-and-do-this-thing-here-now kind of way. As nice as it is that

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top left:  
**LA Urban Rangers**  
*Public Access 101: Downtown LA*, 2011, hikers begin ascent of the Bonaventure Hotel, using this landmark as an orientation device for a bird's-eye view of the city. Photo: Harvey Oppenorth

top right:  
**Nancy Popp**  
*Travertine (with the LA Arts Girls)*, 2006, performance at the Getty Museum, high-density foam, paint, museum architecture. Photo: Bartholomew Cook. © the artist

right:  
**LA Urban Rangers**  
*Public Access 101: Downtown LA*, 2011, Ranger Jenny Price discusses air rights in Banker Canyon, adjacent to the Los Angeles Central Library. Photo: Harvey Oppenorth

below:  
**My Barbarian**  
*Shakuntala Du Bois*, 2012, still from HD video, 30 min. Courtesy the artists





**Nancy Popp**  
*Untitled (Street Performances)*, 2005-10, site-located public performance, Piazza Dante, Naples, 2010. Photo: Karen Stuke. © the artist

there is some additional support coming from the institutions, they're only able to support the scaling up of projects that already exist and are germinated in this situation."

Glynn's ambivalence was commonly held. "It's really hard to get an institution to embrace the kind of ideas that artists come up with when they're constructing a series of interventions," says Nancy Popp, whose work often involves the enactment of durational gestures in public spaces (the climbing of a lamppost, in one ongoing series), and who's performed at the Getty as a part of the LA Art Girls collective. "They're used to thinking of art as an object, as something that's malleable and controllable that doesn't interfere with real time and space and the demographic of the people who are coming. I worry about the limits – that there will only be certain things that can happen within institutions and that that will change the way that people think about performance."

The tradeoff was epitomised, for many, in the controversy surrounding Marina Abramović's involvement in the 2011 MOCA gala: a wave of debate that, while triggered by Yvonne Rainer's public critique of the work as 'exploitative' of its performers, went on to pick the event apart from nearly every angle, from the museum's censorship of male nudity to the once-radical artist's newfound celebrity status.

Brian Getnick, cofounder of *Native Strategies* and an artist who regularly performs outside the gallery setting, often in clubs, was resolute on this point. The issue is not the work itself, he says, "it's how Abramović becomes misaligned with the notion of performance, and how the museum becomes misaligned with the notion of your life or your art becoming valuable. I think we're weakened by this notion of prestige. There's nothing that a museum can give you in your career that will help you as a performance artist." Resources? I ask. "For one performance," he replies, "and it's your responsibility to make that a site-specific work with those resources as a part of that site. It's different than performing under a bridge. But the bridge has many rich resources to offer you, and that may be more resonant for the kind of work that you should be making. The museum offers you something, but it's very, very specific."

It is fortunate for all of us that LA has so many bridges.