

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Performa 15: Rewarding Musical Turns, and Unused Real Estate

by [Paul David Young](#) on [November 29, 2015](#)



Agatha Gothe-Snape, “Rhetorical Chorus (LW)” (2015), a Performa Commission (Photo by Paula Court, courtesy of Performa)

In the final phase of [Performa 15](#), which ended on November 22, a couple of performances turned profitably to music, creating synergies with standardized hand gestures in one case and the dynamics of theater lighting in the other.

Agathe Gothe-Snape’s [Rhetorical Chorus](#) took place at the New York Society for Ethical Culture, inside its peaceful, dark wood interior. Above the dais the Society had inscribed these words: “The place where people meet to seek the highest is holy ground.” On either side of the stage large projection screens were placed so that the audience could see them easily. Already on the dais was an older woman, seated, not doing much of anything. Projected onto the screens were texts derived from Gothe-Snape’s interview of Lawrence Wiener along with elementary line drawings based on his gestures. On a small video monitor, a man in a fake beard and a cobalt-blue mock-cassock gestured and spoke endlessly, though the monitor’s sound was extinguished.

The Wiener-derived texts were tantalizing prompts, suggesting unrealized trains of thought or dialogues. My favorite: “If you don’t accept Hegel and you don’t accept Aristotle.” After these projected texts and drawings had cycled through a couple of times, a man appeared on the dais and recited the texts again, his script laid out on the floor before him, a recitation that also included hand gestures, which became a motif picked up by the woman, who was joined by a chorus of about a dozen singers in teal and tangerine gowns printed with photos of gesturing hands. This hand language, the center of the piece, gathered meaning as it assumed new form and function in each segment... The program notes tie the stylized gestures to “a byzantine [sic] tradition of cheironomia, a

musical system notated by hand gesture,” though that term has classical origins and refers to the ancient study and systematization of the use of gesture in oratory

As the woman imitated the hand gestures of the blue monk on the screen, the singers appeared to be guided by her in their pitch, attack, and duration. At times the singers changed places on the dais, perhaps to disguise the fact that this part ran too long. Though its aesthetic was abrupt and bare-bones, enough happened to reward close attention.



Agatha Gothe-Snape, “Rhetorical Chorus (LW)” (2015), a Performa Commission (Photo by Paula Court, courtesy of Performa)

Also rewarding was the performance created collectively by dancer/choreographer Claudia De Serpa Soares, visual artist Eve Sussman, and drummer Jim White called [More Up a Tree](#), held at the new BAM Fisher space, a black box with a full complement of performance technology and the adaptability of variable seating, or none in this case, except for the disabled. The chairlessness was intended to encourage spectators to move around during the performance, but most attendees remained planted throughout.

In the center of this black box, Sussman, known principally for her work in film and video, had constructed another box, a rectangular, roofless chamber with transparent walls of tinted Plexiglas and plywood supports. The clamps holding the Plexiglas in place at the top of the box lent it an improvisational air.

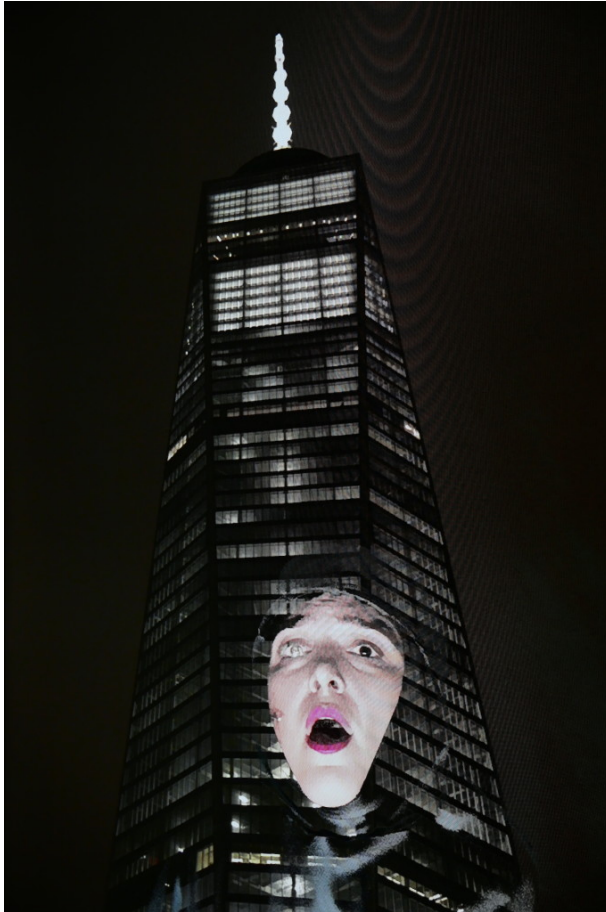
At the start of the show, Soares and White lounged about, talking casually to each other inside Sussman’s Plexiglas box,. The petite Soares wore black sneakers and trim shorts, with changes of tops during the show. White does a pretty good Einstein imitation with his disheveled clothing, unkempt hair, and bushy moustache.

The overriding variable was the lighting. At times, it flooded the performers in the interior of the box, thus rendering the outside invisible to them. At other points, illumination of the spectator area and relative dimness in the Plexiglas box created reflections of the audience on its walls and erased the performers from view.

After the audience had gathered, White began to drum, and Soares responded with presumably

improvised movements to the ever-changing rhythm and tone. White's a fantastic drummer, coaxing something close to melody out of his drum kit, if needed, or breaking through into a pounding crescendo. The press materials describe the theme of the piece this way: "... that the emotional reaction to music is extraordinary because it is so commonplace — mysterious like gravity." That assertion may or may not be correct. Watching the performance did not unpack its meaning for me.

In any case, White's music is extraordinary and well worth hearing, with or without a Plexiglas box; one can easily imagine him as part of a delectable jazz trio in an intimate subterranean club. I wish I could say I enjoyed Soares' dancing equally. At least here, her range was limited. She tended to keep both feet planted on the ground, often gesturing with her palms curled into a cup and held upward. She and White had a nice rapport that was enjoyable to see. When she watched herself in the reflective Plexiglas, just as a dancer might do in a studio mirror, the surveillance aesthetic of the piece found its mark.



Jesper Just, "in the shadow/of a spectacle/is the view of the crowd" (2015), a Performa Commission (Photo by Paula Court, courtesy of Performa) (click to enlarge)

Unrewarding was Jesper Just's *in the shadow/ of a spectacle/ is the view of the crowd*. Just was given the raw space on the top floor of 225 Liberty, which must have really lovely, sweeping views, not, however, to be seen on this visit. Instead three tiny portals were left on blackened windows along the show's path. Apart from the blacked-out windows, Just installed a kind of fencing to herd us along a path marked by projections, video screens, a colorful, pseudo-science apparatus of tubes and lights, and a live video feed of One World Trade Center. A slow bass line played on the sound system. Though the project was described as a symphony in four parts, the crowd rushed through to the end to discover a solitary inert singer whose cue would not arrive for a long time. People nonetheless took photos of her and posed for the video camera that would later be used for the singer's overlay on the One World Trade Center live feed. Attendees queued up to peek out the portals, as if they were at a mountain overlook, pointing out their apartments and other developments and taking photos of themselves, ignoring Just's installation, as it had little to offer.