

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,

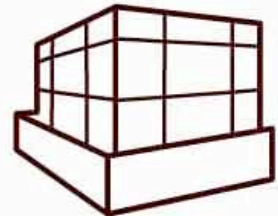
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Mark Wallinger's "State Britain."

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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-smearing. 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.

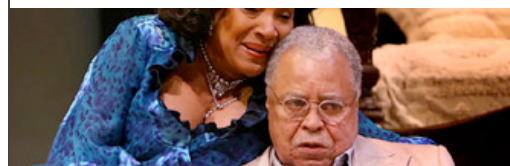
**ONE BIG SHOW** Some people hated Documenta 12, the exhibition of contemporary art and sculpture in Kassel, Germany. I had problems, but no contemporary show in 2007 has stayed more vivid in my mind. I keep returning to my first impressions: the excitement of seeing, one after another, artists young 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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