

## Not Just Naked People: Experimental Action Performance Art Festival in Houston

by [Brandon Zech](#) | February 27, 2017



*Peter Clough*

and international artists. Rising out of the ashes of [Lone Star Explosion](#), a biennial that took place in 2012 and 2014 and was supposed to happen in 2016, ExA filled a niche that Houston has a [long history of](#) but has recently lacked: a strong presentation of young and subversive performance art. Drawing on connections that ExA's curators have made from past festivals and visiting artists, this year's lineup offered a glimpse into the many ways performance is interpreted by both emerging and veteran artists across the world.

Right off the bat, there were a few performances that radiated a charming, if not surprisingly sweet tone. Houston artists Raindawg and CAT SCOTT performed a piece in which they both stood atop Notsuoh's stage in silky robes. As a chorus of [slowed-down crickets](#) played behind them, Raindawg sensuously caressed SCOTT's body. Like an impassioned lover, Raindawg took his time in working his way up SCOTT and eventually opened her robe and dropped his own. At the time I felt the performance dragged a bit, but in retrospect, I realize the two performers created something that is so rare to witness in our tumultuous time—a moment of unfettered love, appreciation, and acceptance. For the duration of the piece, the audience sat transfixed in the couple's tender embrace.



Another gracious performance was Eric Thayer’s durational piece; it essentially formed a community portrait of the festival’s attendees. For this first part of the work, three performers stood grooming their own hair and continuously dropped their loose strands into a metal bowl. After a while, the performers broke from formation and began running their hands through the hair of the (sometimes unexpected) audience members. The collected hair was carried back to the bowl. While forced participatory performance can sometimes be uncomfortable for an audience, no one seemed to have a problem with this interaction—perhaps because the action seemed innocent enough, or because it recalled the nice feeling of having one’s hair shampooed at a salon. Either way, the gesture was kept basic and straightforward, which made it successful.



*Image courtesy of Chun Hua Catherine Dong*

Others pieces in the festival were more explicitly political. **Chun Hua Catherine Dong's** performance, which took place in Notsuoh's narrow stairwell, was intended for one viewer at a time. It placed the viewer literally in the crosshairs of the performance: Dong, face covered and clad in camouflage, was holding a rifle aimed down at the viewer. Since there were no instructions for the piece, I was unsure of the limitations of the performance, and I began to climb the stairs. As I neared, Dong grew tense, and once I was a few steps away from her, she stood up and menacingly loomed over me. I continued to advance and ended with the gun pressing hard against my throat;

the prevalence of surveillance and police brutality.



Dallas-based artist Christian Cruz also took a political stance in a performance that aimed to shed light on Mexican culture in Texas. Wearing a green polka-dot dress, Cruz sang *Dale Dale Dale* as she danced. She was grounded by a thick rope looped around her arms, transforming her into a piñata. In a monologue evoking stand-up comedy, Cruz discussed the irony of getting a piñata shaped like something we love only to tear it apart in a matter of minutes. She also delivered deadpanned quips that undermined the seriousness of her message, such as “I’m the piñata in case you can’t visualize abstract performance art,” and “...don’t worry, I didn’t get naked this time.”

In a panel discussion at the CAMH, Cruz suggested why she may be poking holes in her own message—she said that she is “doing that thing that we all hate,” i.e., playing the role of the token performance artist dealing with Latinx

her act; she's sidestepping being stereotyped.



In possibly the most complex and ritualistic performance of the festival, Chinese artist Miao Jiaxin played God by going through his own seven days of creation: light, air, water, food, money, woman, and for Sunday, a flea market. Beginning in a magician's top hat and cape, Jiaxin tied bags around his head, doused himself in water, was pined in the face (with cake), pelted with coins, had his pants forcibly removed, and traded audience members renminbi for dollars. Then, while dancing to house music, he burned his new money in a giant wok, setting off a grid of smoke detectors above him. Taking aim at America's capitalist consumer culture, desire for beauty, and past issues with cultural insensitivity, he smeared the ash on his face and walked through the audience asking to be kissed.



My favorite performance of the festival was Vincent Tiley’s two-hour durational work *Sad Pretty Boys*, which consisted of three young men sitting in chairs and crying. In front of each performer was a stack of postcards that had each boy’s headshot on one side and his signature on the other. Instead of performing himself, Tiley chose to cast pretty boys from the Houston community, bringing up issues of authorship and his own role as director rather than performer. The piece’s profundity was in the flood of emotion the performers exuded, and how captivating it was to watch them cry. They became movie stars—objects of intense scrutiny and admiration—and at the same time, we knew they were okay, because they were gorgeous and the situation was clearly contrived to make us feel their sadness. Yet at the same time there was a discomfort in the fact that three grown men were openly crying and inviting everyone to witness their woe.

As an overall experience, Experimental Action was well put together. As always with big festivals, a few of the performances seemed ill-informed and

traction over the past year and this festival was the culmination of its reemergence. I definitely missed Lone Star when it didn't happen in 2016, and am thrilled that Performance Art Houston stepped up. It can only get better from here.

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