

Performance at the Playboy

Ryan McNamara reimagines his staged piece *MEEM* as *MEEM 4 Miami*.

By Carol Kino

Performance has been a part of Art Basel in Miami Beach for years—most notably during the mid-to-late '90s when Jens Hoffmann curated Art Perform as part of the Positions sector. Since then, the art form has been seeded throughout the fair, frequently presented in dealers' booths and other venues. Last year the Public sector was launched with an evening of live performance by artists such as Kate Gilmore, Mungo Thomson, and Ryan McNamara. At this year's Miami show, McNamara returns with a grand performance of *MEEM 4 Miami: A Story Ballet About the Internet*, presented by Art Basel and produced by Performa and Art Basel in the former Playboy Plaza Theater, now the Miami Grand Theater, part of the Castle Beach Resort on Collins Avenue.

The fair's Swiss edition has always embraced performance, presenting events like 2009's theatrically inspired "Il Tempo del Postino," an evening of staged pieces of various lengths by Matthew Barney, Rikrit

Tiravanija, and others, and "14 Rooms," featuring durational works by artists such as Tino Sehgal, Yoko Ono, and Roman Ondák, which ran concurrently with Art Basel 44 this past summer.

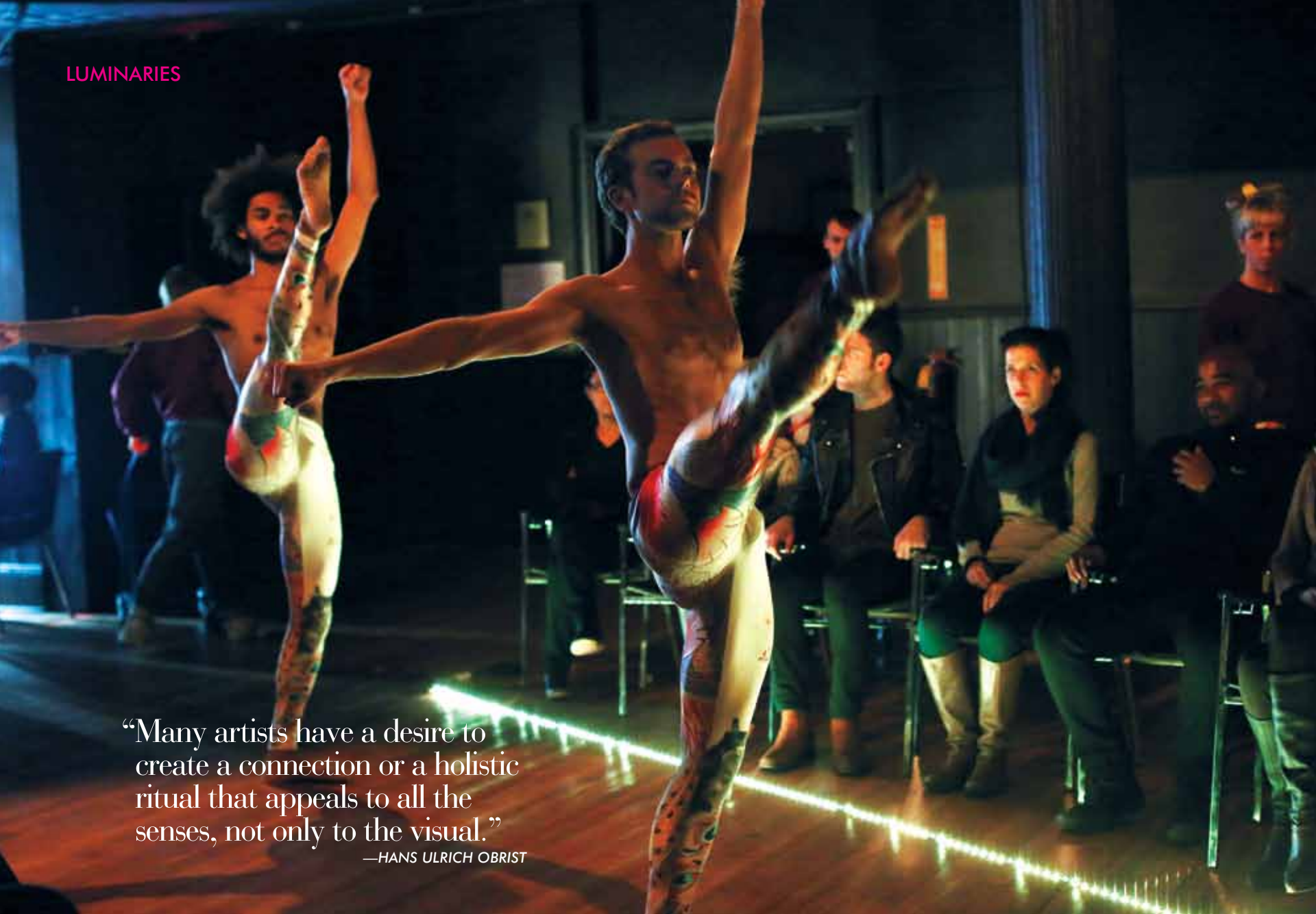
"We live in a time when the notion of art has been expanded," says Hans Ulrich Obrist, who co-curated both exhibitions. Even a few years ago, he notes, biennials and museums typically presented film and video as adjuncts to the regular program, showing them for limited hours outside the main space. But today "film and video are as visible as painting or sculpture," he says. "And with live art, it's becoming the same." Obrist also believes that many artists "have a desire to create a connection or a holistic ritual that appeals to all the senses, not only to the visual," just as Masses and other spiritual rituals once did. "That's something which is very 21st century," he adds.

This new McNamara piece, which premiered in New York last year at Performa 13, mimics the cacophony of the online experience by presenting the

audience with simultaneously staged dance events. Intensifying the chaos, audience members are randomly wheeled off to other parts of the theater by a crew of so-called "people-movers," who transport them in their chairs using cannily designed dollies.

Staged at the Connelly Theater in Manhattan's East Village, *MEEM* proved so popular that it received Performa's grand prize, the Malcolm McLaren Award. It won kudos from Art Basel's director, Marc Spiegler, too, who recalls it fondly as "mind-blowing." Performa founder RoseLee Goldberg says Spiegler texted her immediately after a performance to say, "We're taking this to Basel." Significantly expanded and adapted to fit the new, larger space, it will run five times: at 8 PM and 10:30 PM on Wednesday, December 3, and Thursday, December 4, with an invitation-only performance on Tuesday, December 2.

"There are very few pieces that I've actually even thought would make sense to do in a new space," McNamara says, noting that his work is often site-



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specific. Yet after presenting *MEEM* for the first time, he and the performers remained “so excited about it” that they were eager to tackle it again. “But we’re not just pulling it out of the dusty box,” he says. “It’s definitely reinvigorated. We’re calling it a new version.”

In *MEEM*’s original incarnation, McNamara explains, “the focus was much more on the stage, just because it was a smaller space. But this space allows me to break away from that and play with that traditional proscenium.” Although the new project has additional dances and requires many more dancers, the steps are still based on snippets of movement the performers found on YouTube; McNamara then transformed them into choreography through a lengthy collaborative process. “It becomes this collective stew of movement based on the encyclopedia of movement that has emerged on the Internet,” he says.

At age 35, McNamara has a history at Art Basel since 2009, when he staggered through a crowd, performing a zombie dance, in *Move on Up: A Tribute to Klaus Biesenbach* at the Raleigh Hotel. His collaboration with Performa began that year, too, when he mounted *Ecks Ecks Ecks* at X Initiative as part of

Performa 09. A tribute to gay culture performed by 40 men in togas, it recreated the exploits of the Sacred Band of Thebes, an elite Theban army brigade comprising male lovers, which quashed the Spartans in battle in 371 BC. (This campy ballet, danced to a techno beat, was later reconceived as a film, directed by Pierce Jackson, which premiered at Performa 13.)

Goldberg recalls being especially excited by McNamara’s first gallery show, in 2010, when he transformed the Chelsea gallery Elizabeth Dee into a studio, filled it with backdrops, costumes, and props, prodded people into fantastical improvisatory performances, and documented the results with photos.

“The results that came out of it were terrific,” Goldberg says. “You saw an eye at work, a lot of humor, an understanding of dress-up, and a photographer capable of lighting and taking a photo right there.” McNamara also interests her, she adds, “because he is very much a people person—he really works close up and personally in his performances. And like every artist, he has this rampant imagination and does totally different things each time.”

Since then, McNamara has collaborated with

Performa on other projects, including, for its 2012 gala, *Re: Re: Re: Relâche*, in which he reimagined *Relâche*, the performance organized by Francis Picabia and Erik Satie in Paris in 1924 that became notorious for launching Surrealism—and also for not taking place when scheduled. Like Picabia’s original, McNamara’s performance featured blindingly bright lights and dancers in polka-dotted bodysuits. But instead of cameos by Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp, it included an appearance by McNamara himself, who dangled by strings over the crowd for 90 minutes, before being taken away in a wheelchair.

McNamara also had a brief cameo in the last performance of the original production of *MEEM*—“Very few people saw it,” he says—and thinks he might well do the same thing this time around.

But it’s not exactly because he loves to perform: “I’m not someone who’s had acting classes or was a dancer or anything like that.” Instead, when he’s putting a piece together and he’s nervous, “it kind of gives me something to do,” McNamara says, “rather than just panic.” For tickets to *MEEM 4 Miami: A Story Ballet About the Internet*, visit performa-arts.org. **ABMB**