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Artists Brawl at the Cultists' Anniversary Bash

By Faith Cummings

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'We want to be much edgier than last year,' said the co-founder.



Casey Legler. Photo by Paul Porter/BFAnyc.com, courtesy of The Cultivist.

Art as competition—that was the subject matter behind the Cultivist's knockout one-year anniversary party last night. The company, founded by Marlies Verhoeven Reijtenbagh and Daisy Peat, bills itself as “the world's only global arts club, offering uniquely privileged access to every aspect of the art world.”

Though the much-hyped Frieze Week event was staged in the Church Street Boxing Gym in Lower Manhattan, this was not your typical athletic competition, but instead a sensory experience that challenged the participating artists, as well as the onlookers.

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The first round saw Carlos Rolón and Naama Tsabar simultaneously reciting the love letters of boxer Jack Johnson to his wife in overlapping cadences, while MC Mickalene Thomas took the reins on the night's soundscape, providing the music for each break between rounds with help from screenwriter and film director Scott Sanders, aka DJ Suckapunch. The tunes were all from Prince—an artist that very much defied tradition.



Photo by Paul Porter/BFAnyc.com, courtesy of the Cultivist.

Next up was visual artist Shinique Smith, who eschewed her vibrant installations for something pared down, though no less interactive: a reprise of Rosie Perez's mesmerizing boxing robe-clad moves in Spike Lee's classic film *Do The Right Thing*. That gave way to the night's first bout of real boxing action, with artists Shaun Leonardo and Cheryl Pope actually trading jabs and hooks.

"I first got this idea from watching Cheryl in the ring," said the Cultivist's Director of Programming and the night's co-curator, Joey Lico. "We then knew this would be the perfect way to do something groundbreaking because so many of these artists aren't performance-based at all."

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Zoë Buckman. Photo by Paul Porter/BFAnyc.com, courtesy of the Cultivist.

The sparring was broken up by spoken word from artist Zoë Buckman, who told the tale of her visit with a self-professed swami in Harlem who spewed “racist, sexist, and xenophobic” diatribes. Her words played against this ill-advised advice by highlighting her feminist and activist upbringing, which Buckman continued to explore in her latest exhibition at Papillion’s space in Los Angeles titled “Every Curve.”

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Art and boxing have had quite the storied relationship, as evidenced by the gritty, realist paintings of George Bellows and Thomas Eakins. This was a modern and real-time interpretation of the sport, separated by three-minute rounds in which each artist presented their work in the ring. But once the initial judges' scores started to come in—with words like “rad” and “poetry” instead of actual numbers—it was obvious that the night would be more of a feel-good event that celebrated each artist's bravery in stepping outside of their comfort zone, rather than a battle.



Kambui Olujimi, Shaun Leonardo. Photo by Paul Porter/BFAnyc.com, courtesy of the Cultivist.

As you might have expected from an exclusive, members-only club, standard cocktails and schmoozing weren't on the agenda. “In this business, we go to parties all week long, so we wanted to create something different to celebrate our first year,” said Lico. “This was poetic research for us and in many ways represented our Round One.”

Artists Kambui Olujimi and Hank Willis Thomas finished the night by recited lines while bumping into one another. “I wish love was as common as hate” was the main theme, as they talked about wanting more from a man than friendship, and even faking orgasms—the latter which caused hoots of laughter from the packed audience.

So what's next for the Cultivist? “We want to be much edgier than last year,” said the company's co-founder, Marlies Verhoeven. If this event marks the beginning of that evolution, they're off to a promising start.

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Photo by Paul Porter/BFAnyc.com, courtesy of the Cultivist.