Black, Asian and Hispanic artists have, until recently, been absent from performance art. The hegemony of white performers in this Eurocentric form had effectively sealed off spaces that cater to its audience: galleries, alternative spaces, schools. However, the growing plurality in the art world has helped make performance a viable medium for artists of color. Although there have been a limited number of performances by artists of color, several tendencies have been displayed in their works which separates them from most white artists:

1. Use of political concepts, especially ones focusing on racial, sexual, and economic oppression.
2. Connection with revolutionary images and ideas of Third World peoples.
4. Humor, both to illustrate biases and to relieve tension.
5. Symbolism. By men, large ritual objects similar to objects in secret societies, especially musical instruments and weapons. By women, this involves dolls, toys, and costumes.

Of course, some of these tendencies are found in many performance artists' work, but in the hands of artists of color this vocabulary is pervasive and pointed.

Three women of color recently presented performances in downtown spaces; there were similarities in their work, but two of the pieces were considerably riskier than the other one.

Candace Hill-Montgomery's Teamwork: The American Way at Franklin Furnace was both ambitious and problematic. The installation by the artist, slides, a gospel choir, and selected tapes of Malcolm X's speeches. To the delight of some and the chagrin of others, her piece brought together the Black United Front, a Brooklyn-based political group and the downtown art audience.

The installation was elaborate. It consisted of dolls, musical instruments, military toys and toy animals. Hill-Montgomery explained (privately) that the installation symbolized the "Community," a village setting of miniature houses, toy animals and people, and the "Ideal City," composed of painted cinder blocks with a couple at its pinnacle. Between these two settings was a vast space with two musicians on either side and a miniature army (unseen by the villagers).

The choir began the performance with a singing of the Beatitudes. As their voices faded, the speech of Malcolm X about the murder of four black girls in Birmingham rang out. During this time, slides focusing on protests against police brutality were flashed against the wall behind the installation. Hill-Montgomery's choice of speeches combined with the singing in an evocative way, giving the piece a generous texture: the live voices of the singers, the live voice of a martyred leader—the outrage, humor, helplessness and hope were all there. Unfortunately, that tone was not sustained in the imagery. The slides, at first provocative, became distracting as the performance continued; it would have been interesting to have seen slides made by the artist as well as those generalized images brought by the Black United Front. Furthermore, there was no reference during the piece (except for a brief moment at its beginning) to the elaborate installation.

Even with its problems Teamwork: The American Way was distinctive. Hill-Montgomery reminded the art world of a rarely noticed constituency: the black, brown, and yellow people who live next door or in the next borough. She also brought out black people who wouldn't know Soho from midtown striking a blow against the provincialism that pervades the black communities and the Third World art world. The piece ended with Malcolm's speech on the traits of a true revolution (“A revolution is bloody”); the choir sang "Where Would I Be?" The audience gave them and Ms. Hill-Montgomery a standing ovation.
Jessica Hagedorn and company in *Tenement Lover: (no palm trees/in new york city)*
culture shock, political repression in the
which her family and finally she were killed

Bong with a telling of a dream, one in
Hagedorn countered the action of Bong
tougher, more outrageous, more violent.
became progressively crazy, the songs got
adventures in New York City, and as he
read letters from Bong Bong about his
from the songs/monologues: Hagedorn
piece. Also, the changes in tone emanate
between worlds gave a surreal touch to the
ambassador to Mexico. These excursions
ironically, John Gavin was being named

Tenement Lover’s power stemmed from the
conflict which arises when two cultures in-
tersect. Hagedorn’s charisma, the Ganster
Choir’s solid musicianship, and the able
performances of Burgos and Montagne
combined to create an intriguing piece.
Alienation and culture shock are not par-
ticularly new issues, but they are rarely
presented in this way.

Hill-Montgomery and Hagedorn both pro-
vided audiences with performances that
tested the boundaries of their visions. They
used repetition of images, symbolism, and
space to convey two very different insights:
the former involved cultural/political
aspiration; the latter, cultural dislocation.
Some of both of those themes provided
Ntozake Shange with the juicier lines in
Mouths: A Daughter’s Geography. The
choreopoem was performed on the same
bill with Hagedorn at the Kitchen, and was
also directed by Thulani Davis. It would
appear that the only thing connecting their
pieces was the director because Shange’s
piece stayed safely within the boundaries of
the choreopoem, a concept she has
singlehandedly popularized. Mouths is a
series of poems strung together around a
“romance” between Shange and Richard
Lawson, a handsome, yet limited actor.
The poems speak to the problems, pro-
phecies, and passions of black people
whether in America or the Third World.
The poems are danced, and movement
often enhanced the work, especially during
“What are you doin’ on those goddamned
horses” in which Shange’s outraged ad-
monitions to the liberators of Haiti are
displayed in bold and beautiful movement
by the dancers: Ed Mock, Halify Osimare
and Elvia Marta. At other times, the move-
ment was awkward and jarring.

The use of Richard Lawson was the major
flaw in the performance: he simply was not
needed. And his performance especially
during the “some men” excerpts were in-
credibly uncomfortable—which was not
surprising since the poems are angry
harangues or malicious character sketches
of men. When Shange performs them
alone they are wicked, bitter storypoems.
In Lawson’s performance there was an ele-
ment of sadomasochism that detracted
from the poems’ power.

Even though Mouths was entertaining, it
shared little with the pieces composed by
Hill-Montgomery, Hagedorn or other per-
formance artists like Lorraine O’Grady or
Ping Chong. It was a solid, slick entertain-
ment although serious because Shange’s
subjects are serious. It was an “uptown”
piece—the beginnings of what seemed like
a new theater piece. The lack of objects or
visual imagery of any sort could be con-
strued as “poor theater” but the per-
formers were not objectified. Mouths was
compelling as theater, not as performance.

Patricia Jones is a poet and critic
whose recent collection of poems is
Mythologizing Always.