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U.S. | NEW YORK | NY CULTURE

## At Performa, A Festival of the Unexpected

Offerings range from live opera in Times Square to a show where paintings morph into rebellious hand puppets



Dancer David Hallberg and artist Francesco Vezzoli will collaborate in a Renaissance-inspired work for the opening night of Performa 15. *PHOTO: L'UOMO VOGUE/CONDE NAST ITALIA*

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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It isn't often we get to see shirtless male dancers sporting postmodern neck ruffs, exploring the courtly beginnings of ballet. Or observe an artist and his father turn a 13,200-piece jigsaw puzzle into a public endurance performance. Or experience a mashup of improvisational theater and counterinsurgency training.

But Performa, a festival for live art, isn't about maintaining convention.

Since its first programs were conceived 10 years ago around a kitchen table, Performa has grown into a citywide biennial for art that dances, spins, swings, screams and

aspires to all manner of performance practice, in presentations that blur boundaries between theatrical happenings and multimedia events.

This year, Performa returns with an eclectic slate of offerings, running Nov. 1 to 22 across New York City. More than 30 local and international artists of all types will perform—in live spectacles that drift from performance art and dance into poetry, film, puppetry and more—at 35 vastly different venues, from intimate alternative spaces to the streets of Times Square.

“It’s not what you think of as your old performance art,” said RoseLee Goldberg, director of Performa, of a genre often written off to the art world’s margins. “I want to commission performance and nurture it in a way where we get work that is just as beautiful as art we see in galleries and museums. I want to see work that was visually dazzling and layered.”



In his performance piece titled ‘Work,’ Wyatt Kahn will turn small copies of his paintings into high-spirited hand puppets that rise up against him. *PHOTO: GENEVIEVE HANSON/WYATT KAHN*

To encourage that, the festival has, in recent editions, instituted a historic theme, which artists could consider or disregard. This year’s theme: the Renaissance.

The idea, Ms. Goldberg said, is to spotlight an underacknowledged history of performance tendencies among visual artists as celebrated as Leonardo da Vinci. The Italian Renaissance master was known to have played music and staged events, ephemeral creations that haven’t endured in the same way as his material art.

Some artists took direct inspiration from the theme. For this year’s opening night, multimedia artist Francesco Vezzoli and dancer David Hallberg tapped a little-known

form of Italian Renaissance court dancing that predates classical ballet.

Presented Sunday night at St. Bart’s Church in Midtown, “Fortuna Desperata” will be a choreographed performance with visual embellishments. Mr. Hallberg, a principal dancer for the American Ballet Theatre and the Bolshoi Ballet, will wear a costume custom-designed by Miuccia Prada, and the division between artists and audience will be relaxed to evoke court dancing’s social atmosphere.

“I’ve been hungry for these kinds of collaborations outside my comfort zone,” said Mr. Hallberg. “I’ve always felt sort of chained at the desk of classical ballet.”

Prompting artists to think more expansively about their practice is key to Performa’s mission, said Adrienne Edwards, one of three core curators—along with Charles Aubin and Mark Beasley—who assist Ms. Goldberg with the program.

While most museums present performance work that is already codified, Ms. Edwards said, Performa is committed to commissioning artists “to make new work, stretch it and then bring it out live.”



Juliana Huxtable, 'There Are Certain Facts That Cannot Be Disputed,' 2015. PHOTO: JULIANA HUXTABLE

For instance, Juliana Huxtable’s performance Nov. 13 and 14 is more complex than she is used to— involving music, lighting, video and

other actors on stage to enliven her written texts about the precariousness of cyberspace.

Ms. Huxtable’s commission, from both Performa and the Museum of Modern Art, gave the idiosyncratic 27-year-old artist an unusual level of support.

“It’s brought a power and sense of experimentation to my work that is really refreshing

and generative for me,” she said.

Edgar Arceneaux, an artist most known for drawings and installations, was convinced by Performa to create his first-ever performance work: a theatrical meditation on the inauguration of President Ronald Reagan.

For an inaugural TV special aired in 1981, actor Ben Vereen paid tribute to vaudeville star Bert Williams, performing in blackface. But a 5-minute introductory segment explaining the indignities Williams faced as an early black entertainer was cut from the broadcast, making Mr. Vereen’s act seem like minstrelsy. In his multimedia piece, to be staged Nov. 20 to 22 at the 3LD Art & Technology Center, Mr. Arceneaux will revisit the episode as a way to contemplate matters of history, memory and race.

“Performa has created a fertile field and been influential in producing a good background for artists today,” said Marian Goodman, who co-commissioned a series of Performa events by choreographer Jérôme Bel at three different venues: her own Midtown gallery, the Martha Graham Studio Theater and El Museo del Barrio at the northern end of Museum Mile.



Still from 'A Time To Break Silence' (2013), by Edgar Arceneaux, whose 2015 Performa work will address memory, race and censorship. *PHOTO: EDGAR ARCENEAUX/SUSANNE VIELMETT*

Ms. Goldberg likened that fertile field to a “museum without walls.” Other highlights this year include an atonal opera in Times Square by Robin Rhode (Nov. 7 and 8), a show of Wyatt Kahn paintings that morph into puppets at a marionette theater in Central Park (Nov. 5 to 8) and an installation by the fast-ascending art star Oscar Murillo in the historic U.S. Custom House (Nov. 16 to 22).

“When there’s so much at stake now in the markets and museums, it’s hard for artists to be truly experimental,” Ms. Goldberg said. “This is a radical way of rethinking art and bringing different disciplines together.”

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