

Performance, Indoors and Out

By HILARIE M. SHEETS

Live performance will be erupting, and possibly disrupting, New York for three weeks starting Nov. 1, when Performa 11, a [performance art biennial](#), begins its fourth season. The events, mostly free and including a shamanistic dating show at El Museo del Barrio and a medieval-style rap joust at Marlborough Chelsea, will take place in theater, gallery and museum spaces as well as curbside.

The Israeli collective Public Movement will stage a choreographed public demonstration in Washington Square Park. Tyler James Ashley will conduct interactive Russian Constructivist-inspired exercises in Times Square. Tamar Ettun will lead a pilgrimage in a partially inflated stationary hot-air balloon in Red Hook.

“We’re setting up a radical form of urbanism,” said RoseLee Goldberg, founder of Performa and a pioneer in the study of performance art through her writing, teaching and curating over the last four decades. “We’re very aware of the audience moving through the city, and we want to hold them and give them specific experiences and provoke different memories.” She said that 40,000 people participated in Performa’s 2009 season in New York.

Most of the 120 pieces to be performed are new ones she commissioned, many to artists who have never worked in the format. “Somehow when you say to them, ‘Will you try a live performance?’ they jump at it,” said Ms. Goldberg, who provides her artists with outside expertise to help them execute ideas and raises project money from foundations, corporations and individuals.

Ms. Goldberg’s initial inspiration was a 1998 video by the Iranian artist Shirin Neshat, “Turbulent,” about the clash of men and women, politics and religion, East and West. “I’d been going to performances for decades and seeing a lot of retakes on conceptual art and endless monologues, and I thought, ‘Why can’t we have something of this level of pleasure and sensuality and intellect?’” recalled Ms. Goldberg.

She produced Ms. Neshat’s first live performance piece in 2001, a collaboration called “Logic of the Birds.” Founding Performa in 2004 was Ms. Goldberg’s endeavor to “provoke a new chapter in performance history.”

Ms. Neshat is now having her solo directorial debut with an operatic courtroom piece titled “OverRuled.” “It’s far easier to make photographs and videos and films because you’re editing yourself,” said Ms. Neshat. “In the magic of the live situation, there could be disasters or it could be unpredictably wonderful, depending on the chemistry of the audience and the cast.”

Elmgreen & Dragset are leading off the events with a piece titled “Happy Days in the Art World.”

“The beautiful thing about Performa is you get all these visual artists to do things that are out of their comfort zone,” said Michael Elmgreen. “If we do a museum exhibition today, after many years working we are quite sure about how it will work. When you do live stuff, you are absolutely on thin ice.”

ELMGREEN & DRAGSET

“Happy Days in the Art World,” the first performance in New York by the Berlin-based team of Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset, who have collaborated in multimedia since 1994, is a satirical look at the internal and external pressures of being cultural producers in today’s art world.

In references to how the characters of Samuel Beckett never really know where they are, the play begins with two dressed-up, middle-aged men, played by Joseph Fiennes and Charles Edwards, waking up in a bunk bed, hung over and not knowing who they are or how they got there.

They slowly piece together their shared lives as artists from the time they met, against the backdrop of an ever more market-driven, celebrity-obsessed contemporary art scene. “It’s about what it means to be an artist in the 21st century, worrying about the Russian oligarch coming across the potato fields to buy their work,” according to Ms. Goldberg.

Mr. Dragset said: “It’s like a jester putting up a mirror to the king. It’s no more critical of the art world than it is of ourselves.” The artists, who broke up as a romantic couple in 2004 but have continued working together, may make a cameo appearance on stage.

In a second event on opening night, audience members can walk down a long hallway connecting multiple gallery spaces to see a live retrospective of past Elmgreen & Dragset performances focused on the masculine role.

“Happy Days in the Art World,” Skirball Center for the Performing Arts, 566 LaGuardia Place at Washington Square South, Nov. 1 and 3, 7:30 p.m., tickets \$25 and up. Followed

by live retrospective at Skylight SoHo, 275 Hudson St., on opening night only.

SHIRIN NESHAT

In “OverRuled,” Ms. Neshat will transpose the visual poetry of her films to a stylized courtroom scene, evoking political trials in Iran against artists and young people charged with crimes of immorality.

The audience will sit in the courtroom, amid the defendants wearing black, including the Iranian singer Mohsen Namjoo, who composed all the music, facing a row of men in authority wearing white and surrounded by two rows of revolutionary guards in their green military uniforms, serving as a kind of chorus.

“It’s going to be something between a court of law and a concert,” said Ms. Neshat, adding that the audience might feel a bit uncomfortable if they expect to be passive.

“This trial is very much about all of us artists who are not allowed to go back to our country and are highly censored from our own people,” said Ms. Neshat. “In a way, it’s us on a trial facing our own government and saying, how dare you consider my art as my crime. Although it starts with a prosaic example of what is going on in Iran, it’s about the confrontation between the rhetoric of theocracy and the imagination of the people and leads to dialogue that is absolutely universal.”

“OverRuled,” Cedar Lake Theater, 547 West 26 St., Nov. 11, 8 p.m. and Nov. 12, 5 and 8 p.m., tickets \$35, \$100 opening night.

IONA ROZEAL BROWN

When Iona Rozeal Brown was 11, her mother took her to see Kabuki theater at the Kennedy Center in Washington. “Kabuki is color and bright lights and beautiful sounds and white makeup; it never left me,” said Ms. Brown, who has long painted hybrid figures, conflating characteristics of hip-hop culture with traditional Japanese motifs.

Ms. Brown brings her skills in sampling genres and styles, mirrored in her after-hours work as a D.J., to her first live performance titled “Battle of Yestermore.” Through music and dance, the characters in her paintings come to life to enact the myth that Ms. Brown wrote and scored.

“Most of our fairy tales have princesses who are being held by monsters and then Prince Charming comes and rescues them,” said Ms. Brown, who was inspired by writers including J. R. R. Tolkien. “Well, what if he’s not? What if he’s a monster, too? It speaks to cycles and people getting caught up in abusive relationships.”

She tells her 21st-century fairy tale using House of Ninja voguing legends and a lineup of break dancers, who do their specialties and also incorporate certain moves taught to them by a Kabuki master whom Ms. Brown invited to rehearsals.

“Battle of Yestermore,” Skylight SoHo, 275 Hudson St., Nov. 17 & 18, 8 p.m., tickets \$30.

MIKA ROTTENBERG AND JON KESSLER

Mika Rottenberg, known for her video installations showing absurdist contraptions that comment on female labor, asked her former Columbia professor, Jon Kessler, who also makes mechanical sculptures with a video component, to work with her after she was approached by Ms. Goldberg. Their collaboration, titled “SEVEN,” syncs video monitors showing events happening in Botswana with live action in a New York gallery.

At regular intervals, lab technicians in a remote African village are seen on the monitors loading canisters filled with clay from the Kalahari Desert, home of the earliest human fossils, into a “transporter.” In New York, a zany sci-fi laboratory starts to buzz and light up and the canisters pop out.

“The core samples come out of the transporter, almost like a 1930s pneumatic tube from a department store,” said Mr. Kessler. Elsewhere in the lab, seven performers rotate on a “chakra juicer.” One rides an exercise bicycle that turns a potter’s wheel inside a heated sauna containing another sweating performer. Lab technicians, using the performers’ collected sweat and clay transformed into pots, create seven rainbow-colored chakra juices that are then transported back to Africa for a culminating ceremony.

“It’s a play on the new age, also woven with how the art world has gotten deeply into ceramics,” said Mr. Kessler, noting that there will be seating but the audience will be free to walk around and peer up close as they would at a typical gallery show. “We chose the Kalahari because it’s clay and worked well with our theme. It’s using chemistry and alchemy to go back to the birthplace of man.”

“SEVEN,” Nicole Klagsbrun Project Space, 534 West 24 St., Nov. 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, 12, 16, 17, 18, & 19, hours vary, tickets \$7.