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TAKING THE PLUNGE: 5 FAMOUS ARTIST ON RISKING THEIR DIGNITY-BY TRYING PERFORMANCE ART

By Hilarie Sheets, October 30, 2017



What is it like for an artist to transform her work into a live performance for the first time? “Terrifying,” says the photographer and filmmaker Shirin Neshat.

Luckily, fear hasn’t prevented numerous artists—including Neshat, Julie Mehretu, and Rashid Johnson—from taking the plunge. Since 2004, Performa, the performance art biennial in New York, has asked visual artists working in a range of media to adapt their ideas to live art, sometimes for the first time. The results can permanently change the course of their work.

The art historian RoseLee Goldberg was originally inspired to launch Performa after inviting Neshat to create her debut performance, *Logic of the Birds*, in 2001 at the Kitchen in New York. She asked the Iranian artist to imagine her characters walking out of her videos and onto the stage. Since then, Neshat has staged an operatic courtroom scene for Performa in

STEVEN KASHER GALLERY

2011 and directed a full-blown production of Verdi's opera Aida at the Salzburg Festival this past summer. Goldberg, meanwhile, has become an expert in convincing artists to try their hand at performance.

For the seventh edition of Performa, which takes place across the city from November 1 to 19, the artists Julie Mehretu, Teju Cole, Barbara Kruger, and Yto Barrada have all taken the leap outside the comfort zone of their established media and developed their first ever live works of art.

Artists who have never attempted performance before usually look at Goldberg and her curator Adrienne Edwards with dazed eyes when initially approached. "What's so fascinating is how they come back and say 'yes,'" says Goldberg, who has previously commissioned first-time performances by artists including Omer Fast and Adam Pendleton. "We've had so many conversations where these artists say what it did for them and how it's changed the way they thought about making a sculpture or wall piece."

Here, five artists recount their nerve-wracking, transformative experiences working in the medium for the first time.

Teju Cole

Performa's Edwards initially approached Cole, who is known primarily as a novelist and photographer, about a commission because she was struck by his work's distinctive voice and approach. "Part of his process of photographing is just him walking the streets," Edwards says. She asked the Nigerian-American artist to think about how viewers might enter that experience with him.

The resulting project, begun after Cole started having dreams related to the election last November, is an immersive mosaic experience of this past year. Traveling all over the country, the artist made images about darkness and opacity, including shooting the eclipse. In Black Paper, to be performed November 2–4 at BKLYN Studio at City Point, he will project shifting photographs and videos on large scrim, accompanied by field recordings and text that he will perform live.

Cole was struck by how much more rapidly he could respond to events through performance than through writing a novel. The live medium has also allowed him to present his work with more subjectivity than is possible on the written page.

"Being in front of the public, as a black man who looks a certain way and to whom society responds in a certain way, I think this is quite relevant to the political dimension," Cole says. "I feel like that is here to stay in my work."