All the Way Back To the Futurism

Directed by RoseLee Goldberg, the performance art biennial Performa 09 keeps the artistic legacy of the early 20th century alive. By Hanae Ko

“I wanted to write a new chapter in the history of performance art,” explains RoseLee Goldberg of her decision to start the New York performance art festival Performa, now in its third edition. As the author of the well-known surveys Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present (1979/2001) and Performance: Live Art Since 1960 (1998), Goldberg has already written the previous chapters on the 20th century. Running from November 1 to 22, Performa 09 will feature an extensive program of performances, exhibitions, educational forums, film screenings, and radio and television broadcasts, and will be presented with a consortium of more than 60 arts institutions and a network of public and private venues throughout the city.

The biennial is operated by the nonprofit arts organization Performa, which Goldberg established in New York in 2004. In an interview with ArtAsiaPacific in August, Goldberg noted that she created the festival because performance art “has never been fully understood.” More than 25,000 people attended events during Performa 05, which was held in more than 20 locations, including the living room of curator and gallerist Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn’s New York Upper East Side home, where Israeli artist Tamy Ben-Tor staged a live performance.

This year, Performa will pay tribute to the centenary of FT Marinetti’s Futurist Manifesto (1909) by exploring new ideas in a variety of mediums, using Futurist edicts that were written for disciplines ranging from painting to poetry to music, as a template. Futurism—an art movement that originated in Italy, renouncing tradition and embracing youthful energy and technological advancement—is not so much the theme as the inspiration for this year’s festival. “I thought there was a real need to acknowledge the Futurists as having triggered this idea that art wasn’t just about what goes on in museums,” Goldberg explained.

From dance compositions to street happenings, Performa 09 will
showcase the work of approximately 100 artists— including Beirut-based actor and playwright Rabih Mroué and Mumbai-based performance artist Nikhil Chopra— with 11 receiving Performa Commissions for new works. With major support from the Toby Fund, a private foundation established by art collector and philanthropist Toby Devan Lewis, and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, the selected artists will receive more than USD 350,000 to create new performances, with the cost of individual projects ranging from USD 30,000 to 100,000.

For the Commissions, artists will face the challenge of thinking outside the box as well as the white cube. Korean photographer and video artist Yeondoo Jung will stage his first live piece, Cinematician, co-commissioned by the International Festival for Arts and Media Yokohama, at the Asia Society. The performance will feature a popular Korean magician, who will manually construct the setting of the stage on which he is standing, while a camera simultaneously films his act and projects a live feed on a screen hanging above the stage. As the piece unfolds, the video feed will be transformed by special film effects to portray a spectacle of illusions that complement the live act.

Berlin-based Israeli video artist Omer Fast (SEE P. 55) will also hold an onstage performance, co-produced with the Artís Contemporary Israeli Art Fund, which plays on the childhood game of “telephone” to trace the arc of an Iraq War veteran’s story. The first-person account will be performed live, and an actor—who has no prior knowledge of the narrative—will attempt to reenact the veteran's story for another actor, who will then try to retell it to another. With the story transforming as it is retold by a sequence of performers, who are recast for each edition of the three-night event, Fast will confront the challenges of communication, as well as the relationship between memory and reality.

Another Israeli video artist, Guy Ben-Ner (SEE P. 110), best known for his playful videos of himself collaborating with his family to perform his take on classic novels such as Moby Dick, will present a “live film” (also funded in part by Artís) featuring an ongoing phone conversation he has with himself, cutting repeatedly between Berlin and Tel Aviv. Shot over the course of a year, the film always remains “live.” In contrast to the standard editing process, which is done with post-production software after filming is completed, Ben-Ner’s work is edited entirely in-camera: the cut from one scene in one city to the next scene in the other city is made once the artist has traveled the distance between the two.

Goldberg says the Commissions will be a huge challenge for artists who do not specialize in the medium of performance. Yet they rise to the task, she said, because “it obviously triggers something that makes them feel that this will be an interesting, new direction.”

Besides major performance and exhibition venues, Performa 09 will stage events on the street, as well as performances on television and the radio, providing a variety of opportunities for the audience to experience and interact with hundreds of different artworks.

Following the biennial, several Commissions will travel to Milan, Mexico City and Shanghai. “The most complicated and difficult task that we face is to find very particular spaces for each work, so that the audience can have the ultimate experience,” said Goldberg. “Each venue also has its own constituency that feels most comfortable in that space, so I try to mix and match the audiences as well. It’s a social experiment.”