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A Day in the Life of RoseLee Goldberg, the World's Busiest Performance Art Curator

See what it takes to pull off Performa, New York's performance art biennial.

Brian Boucher (<https://news.artnet.com/about/brian-boucher-244>), October 25, 2017



Performa founder RoseLee Goldberg and artist Anu Vahtra in SoHo. Photo by Evelyn Raudsepp, courtesy of the artist.

Presented by *Cartier*

Anu Vahtra was walking the streets of Manhattan's SoHo neighborhood on a recent sunny October afternoon to plan her project for Performa, New York's biennial of performance art. The Estonian artist's piece, called [Open House Closing. A Walk](http://17.performa-arts.org/events/anu-vahtra) (<http://17.performa-arts.org/events/anu-vahtra>) (2017), takes the form of a walking tour that delves into SoHo's intertwined histories with art and real estate development.

"The neighborhood is intriguing at this moment because it's becoming more and more empty, like it was in the '70s," Vahtra said, alluding to the district's storied period as an enclave for artists like Gordon Matta Clark, one of her inspirations. Today, the neighborhood's "100 to 120 vacant storefronts" are largely in the hands of massive corporations whose tenants could no longer afford the rent.

Vahtra, who studied photography and often creates architectural interventions, is not versed in performance. Luckily, there to offer suggestions and prod her with questions was RoseLee Goldberg, the indefatigable South African art historian who founded the biennial in 2005 after serving as a curator at the performance venue the Kitchen. Performa's seventh edition kicks off November 1.

"You don't want your audience getting bored and wandering off," Goldberg told Vahtra, firmly but not unkindly. "Will you use audio devices to help people hear you? What's your wardrobe going to be like? Maybe you should play music at some stops? You should think about how to surprise the audience."



A research photograph taken by Anu Vahtra in SoHo. Courtesy the artist.

In the month before the first curtain goes up, Goldberg keeps a manic schedule of 18-hour days, fielding updates on artists' productions, offering numerous interviews to press, and writing for biennial publications. (Goldberg estimates she churns out between 8,000 and 10,000 words a day during this period, between interviews she gives and her own writing.) She also makes it a priority to attend a few non-biennial performances a week to stay abreast of what's happening in the field. (In the run-up to this year's event, Goldberg has taken in performances by Sarah Michelson, Simone Forti, and Yvonne Rainer, among others.)

She doesn't slow down once Performa kicks off. During the biennial (November 1–19), she will do her best to take in each of its 130 or so performances—twice. Two weeks before opening day, we joined Goldberg as she hammered out details for a few of the events.

Working on a Shoestring

Since it first launched, Performa's staff has almost tripled in size, according to an accounting in *The Art Newspaper* (<http://old.theartnewspaper.com/news/news/performa-s-ten-year-balancing-act/>), and Goldberg has been able to offload some programming, fundraising, and publicity-related tasks. Its shoestring budget (\$675,000 in 2005) has grown to a modest but respectable \$2.5 million in 2014, according to *TAN*.

The initiative has been ambitious from the start, both commissioning artists early in their careers who have gone on to greater fame and staging memorable performances by already high-profile names.

This year, Performa has assembled another star-studded program, including contributions from South African multimedia artist [William Kentridge](http://17.performa-arts.org/events/william-kentridge) (<http://17.performa-arts.org/events/william-kentridge>), American painter [Julie Mehretu](http://17.performa-arts.org/events/julie-mehretu-in-collaboration-with-acclaimed-jazz-musician-jason-moran) in collaboration with acclaimed jazz musician Jason Moran (<http://17.performa-arts.org/events/julie-mehretu-and-jason-moran>), and American artist [Barbara Kruger](http://17.performa-arts.org/events/barbara-kruger-the-drop) (<http://17.performa-arts.org/events/barbara-kruger-the-drop>).

While touring SoHo with Vahtra to hunt for stops on the walking tour, the characteristically persuasive Goldberg talked her way into the cavernous former Chinese goods retailer Pearl River Mart. The owner of the now-vacant space happened to be standing in the doorway. The storefront still contained traces of its former tenant, with relatively intact floorboards where shelves once resided and patches worn down by foot traffic between. "For me, it's like a work already," Vahtra said. "So now it's about claiming it for myself."

As we continued down the sidewalk, Goldberg subtly offered material for Vahtra to work with, reminiscing about SoHo's heyday, recalling visits to Food, Gordon Matta Clark's legendary restaurant, and pointing out where cultural titans like Jonas Mekas and Trisha Brown once lived.

"We should have another conversation this week about how you're going to contrive to hold people's attention," Goldberg told Vahtra.

Location, Location, Location

Real estate is a key component not only of Vahtra's performance, but the entire biennial; securing key sites on the cheap is essential. In Manhattan's East Village, Goldberg and Esa Nickle, Performa's producing director, visited the Connelly Theater. The unconventional space, which is leased from the Catholic Archdiocese of New York by the non-profit Cornelia Connelly Center, offers lower rental rates than similar spaces in the area. Next month, it will host a performance by South Africa's [Kemang Wa Lehulere](http://17.performa-arts.org/events/kemang-wa-lehulere) (<http://17.performa-arts.org/events/kemang-wa-lehulere>).



Kemang Wa Lehulere. Courtesy the artist.

For the performance, *I cut my skin to liberate the splinter*, Wa Lehulere and a half-dozen studio assistants will play his own sculptures, constructed out of desks from schools in poor neighborhoods, which double as musical instruments.

In a splurge, Goldberg decided to spring to fly both the sculptures and studio assistants in from Cape Town rather than asking Wa Lehulere to hire local performers or make the works with found materials in situ.

She noted that besides symbolizing today's educational inequities, the desks reference a history of student activism, from protests against segregation in the 1970s to today's demonstrations against colonialist statues.

"This is the most challenging thing I've ever done," Wa Lehulere said of the performance. Not sounding as though he was kidding, he added, "If someone asked me to do this again, I would say no."

See video of Wa Lehulere demonstrating one of his sound sculptures below:



0:00 / 0:31



Having seen an early rehearsal, Goldberg inquired about one particular sculpture during a Skype call back at the Performa office. “What about the door with the window in it?” she asked, with guidance implicit. “That felt like a marker in the space.” It would remain, Wa Lehlere said.

Eyes always trained on specifics, Goldberg went on to ask how he planned to arrange the sculptures for maximum drama. He said he had been watching videos of himself and his staff rehearsing the piece so that he would be able to direct himself and tinker with the sculpture placement and lighting design.

On that last point, Goldberg had good news. “You just lay out your dreams on the plane on the way here,” she said. “You’ll have a lighting designer at your disposal.”

A Moment of Respite

After the tour with Vahtra, Goldberg and Job Piston, Performa’s special projects manager, headed to a skate park beneath the Manhattan Bridge, where [Barbara Kruger](http://www.artnet.com/artists/barbara-kruger/) (<http://www.artnet.com/artists/barbara-kruger/>) will stage an intervention.

Not only will Kruger cover the park with signage bearing her trademark aphorisms (“I shop therefore I am,” “Your body is a battleground”), she will also deliver her first-ever performance. Though the details remain tightly under wraps, “you may not even know you’re seeing a performance,” Piston said coyly.



The Lower East Side Skate Park, which will host an intervention and performance by Barbara Kruger. Photo Brian Boucher.

The site—underneath one of Manhattan’s busiest bridges—isn’t a natural fit for a performance venue. But Piston said Kruger was thrilled by the thunderous bridge traffic.

On the sunny October day we visited, the park sounded like a freight train, barreling toward us like the biennial’s November 1 opening date. But despite looming deadlines, Goldberg seemed content to spend a long while just watching the skaters. “It’s like watching the ocean,” she said with a sigh.

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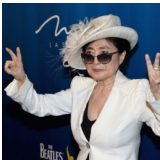
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