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**Performa Biennial — New York’s mesmerising performance art festival returns**

*The opening weekend saw minimalist dance and atmospheric sound-based works unfold at spaces across the city.*

By Justin Duyao



Anna Maria Häkkinen's 'Afterglow, low lingering slips of light', 2023 © Maria Baranova

It's a big year for the Performa Biennial. The first time since the pandemic that the widely celebrated performance art festival has been able to return to its original indoor format, it is also the biennial's 10th edition, marking nearly two decades of outstanding work cementing the critical role of live performance in the history of 20th-century art.

Founded in 2004 by art historian and curator RoseLee Goldberg, Performa — New York City's only performance biennial — has presented over 800 artists at more than 200 venues across the city. This year's biennial will showcase almost 50 artists and collectives from around the world, including the Finnish Pavilion Without Walls, which brings together experimental performance, dance, and

sound-based artists from Finland; the Performa Hub, featuring a range of programs, including the launch of the Performa Archives and a new series, titled “Protest & Performance: A Way of Life”; as well as commissions by some of the most exciting intergenerational artists working in the field today.

“Performa has always taken pivotal moments in history as a lens through which to consider the contemporary cultural landscape,” Goldberg says about Performa’s conceptual anchor. “By forging generative connections with cultural institutions around the world, [the biennial] not only brings new artistic voices to New York, but also supports the creation of new work that continues to expand the understanding of performance today.”

The opening weekend’s schedule ranged from minimalist dance and spellbinding monodrama to atmospheric light- and sound-based performances. For each event I attended, the excitement was palpable. Lines of anxious attendees stretched around street corners. Once seated, each performance space buzzed with anticipation.



‘The Malady of Death’ by Haegue Yang, a monodrama with Noma Dumezweni, 2023

To catch Anna Maria Häkkinen’s dizzyingly beautiful *Afterglow, low lingering slips of light*, commissioned for the Finnish Pavilion, attendees shuffled aboard a ferry to Governors Island just before sunset, where composer Keliel filled the The Arts Center with an immersive score that fused the elegance of a harp with the undulating soundscape of electronic dance music. In the foreground, Häkkinen’s group of emerging, New York-based dance artists put on an entrancing show, an effortless balance of synchronicity and surprise.

Later that evening, attendees filed into the Guggenheim Museum’s Peter B. Lewis theater, where Haegue Yang staged her monodrama, *The Malady of Death*, based on the 1982 book by Marguerite Duras.

Although the theatre is somewhat large, Yang's lone performer — the award-winning actor Noma Dumezweni — shrunk the space to the size of a hotel room, absorbing the audience for a full 75 minutes.

The following afternoon, a much smaller group lined the walls of Canal Projects' performance space for the multidisciplinary artist Barnett Cohen's delightfully irreverent *im a pause im a fiction im a pervert im a dream*. In a flurry of fragments, the show's two performers, Deja Bowen and Ray (Tsung-Jui) Tsou, unravelled the complexity of Cohen's text, which explores in unsettling detail the injustice, violence and absurdity present in everyday life.



Nikita Gale's 'Other Seasons, 2023 © Maria Baranova

“What about the psychopaths?” Cohen asks. “What about the psychopathic in us?”

Finally, Nikita Gale's genre-bending *Other Seasons* transformed Plaxall Gallery's former warehouse space into a haze of light, colour and sound. Using seasons as a structuring device, Gale fused choral, strings, wind, percussion and digital acoustic elements to reimagine Antonio Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. Playfully crafted and masterfully executed, Gale's collaboration with the New York-based The Unsung Collective cut to the heart of the ephemeral nature of weather, especially in light of our ongoing and worsening climate crisis. Sometimes humorous and other times deeply moving, *Other Seasons* captured Performa's ultimate aim — to celebrate the diversity of contemporary performance art.

To November 19, [performa2023.org](https://performa2023.org)