

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

W



LIGHTS! ARTISTS! ACTION!

As the curtain is about to rise on Performa, the New York performance art biennial now in its 10th year, three artists on the roster take *W* behind their scenes.
Photographs by Jason Schmidt



Act I THE EMPTY SPACE

Like many New Yorkers, the Danish artist Jesper Just became more acutely aware of the missing Twin Towers once their replacement was finally completed, in 2014. Morning sun reflects off the glass facade of 1 World Trade Center (1 WTC) directly into Just's bedroom window—so now, every day, he's awakened an hour earlier. "That was my starting point," says Just (*at left*) of the piece he will present for Performa this month. "I always begin with a place. If I don't have a place, I have no ideas, nothing." Building on his fascination with the ways in which architecture dictates our behavior, Just is collaborating with fellow Danish artist FOS to create an elaborate, circuitous installation involving sound, video, live classical music, and funhouse-like mirrors on the 54th floor of 4 World Trade Center. The piece offers a deliberately distorted view of 1 WTC, which Just says he has come to think of as a prosthetic on the city's skyline. Just explored similar concepts earlier this year in *Servitudes*, an immersive eight-video work featuring the model Dree Hemingway (whose image is projected here) and Rylee Sweeney, a young girl who suffers from a debilitating neurological disease, that was filmed on location at 1 WTC. But while *Servitudes* was shown at the Palais de Tokyo, in Paris, the new piece, given the vantage of downtown New York, will no doubt achieve a greater sense of urgency and trepidation. "The motion of the exhibition incites anticipation for a climax of action," Just says. "However, there is none. There is no pyrotechnic finale." ALIX BROWNE »



Act II THE STUDIO

Wyatt Kahn makes a somewhat surprising appearance on the Performa lineup. The artist has become known for his elegant, puzzle-like works, in which individual blocks, wedges, and slivers of raw canvas come together in a sort of relief, blurring the line between painting and sculpture. If there is any action to speak of, it's happening behind the scenes, in the artist's Bushwick, Brooklyn, studio. Which is where Kahn takes us, in an autobiographical puppet show he will stage at the Swedish Cottage Marionette Theatre, in Central Park. Kahn (*above, standing*) plays a version of himself—though with a strikingly smaller physique and a relatively inflated head—as he completes a new work for an upcoming art fair. Whenever Kahn exits the room, the paintings in his studio become animated, talking behind his back (“Does he still have that cat poster up?”) and engaging in the dialogue between component parts and overall form that is at the crux of his output (“He was messing with the arrangement a lot. Do you think that means something?”). All of the artist’s anxieties are projected onto a work in progress, the individual elements of which appear to be experiencing a crisis of existential proportions. In this photograph for *W*, Kahn auditions four actors for the part of Amigo, an already finished artwork whose perfection he is struggling to transcend. “He seemed stretched pretty thin,” one of the puppets observes of the artist. Being a canvas, he would know. A.B.



Act III THE STAGE

Francesco Vezzoli knows a thing or two about spectacle. He invited the supermodel Veruschka to sit and embroider her own portrait for three days at the 2001 Venice Biennale, cast Courtney Love in his 2005 trailer for a mock remake of Gore Vidal's polysexual classic *Caligula*, and paired Lady Gaga with Bolshoi Ballet dancers in his Prada-costumed 2009 *Ballets Russes* fantasia for the 30th-anniversary gala of the Museum of Contemporary Art, in Los Angeles. For Performa, Vezzoli has teamed with David Hallberg (*above, from right*), one of the world's great ballet dancers and the first American to be a full member of American Ballet Theatre and the Bolshoi Ballet simultaneously. Together, they are taking dance back to its origins in the 15th-century royal courts of the Italian Renaissance, exploring the manners, mores, and sumptuous settings of the time. (Expect the stage at St. Bartholomew's Church, in Manhattan, to be garlanded in fruits, flowers, and ivy reminiscent of paintings by Mantegna.) Hallberg, who has spent the past year learning the stripped-down gestures of the era, will be accompanied by non-ballet-trained dancers. While Vezzoli will remain in the wings, he sees himself "very ambitiously as the Diaghilev" (the founder of the Ballets Russes), orchestrating the extravaganza. Here, at Brooklyn's Kings Theatre, they go through the motions of a fragment of their period pas de deux. "It's Renaissance minimalism," Vezzoli says—though with plenty of maximalist panache. DIANE SOLWAY