IT’S MUSIC! NO, IT’S DANCE! NO, IT’S... SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY. IN NEW YORK CITY, THE RULES OF PERFORMANCE ARE BEING DRAMATICALLY REWRITTEN—AND YOU JUST HAD TO BE THERE.

THE FOMO EFFECT

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BY JUSTIN DAVIDSON
PORTRAITS BY NICHOLAS CALCOTT

AROUND THE TIME a flock of sheep ambled out into the Park Avenue Armory’s great vaulted Drill Hall in the middle of what might loosely be called an opera—or maybe it was when a quartet of zeppelins hovered over the stage—I realized that the performing arts in New York had taken a startling turn. That 2016 production of Louis Andriessen’s hectic and periodically mystifying opera (if that’s the word) De Materie made it clear that the mainstream and the margins had merged. Performances that would once have been grouped under the catchall rubric experimental—borrowing from (and exploding) various genres in service of a can’t-miss moment—have become a new standard in today’s “experience economy,” infiltrating major arts organizations and leading to the creation of new ones. I’ve lost track of the cross-genre, multimedia fusions of music, art, video, and theater I’ve attended in recent years, many of them huge, technically sophisticated, and moving.

The new emblem of New York’s performance rethink is the Shed, an outpost of deliberate unpredictability in the colossal new corporate neighborhood Hudson Yards. The building itself, designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro with the Rockwell Group, performs a kind of slow-motion public dance. At rest, the inner structure sits beneath a quilt of translucent plastic like a mantle of bubble wrap mounted on a steel frame. Beneath that is a glass box full of art spaces, a rearrangeable Rubik’s Cube of galleries, dance studios, theaters, and concert halls. At the touch of a button, the outer shell trundles out on gargantuan wheels to enclose a section of plaza large enough for a festival stage. The artistic...
director of this cultural Rube Goldberg device is Alex Poots, who is determined to make the building a giant playground for artists, both established and new. “I wouldn’t want the Shed to be typecast as some kind of trendy interdisciplinary place,” Poots says. “We bring par-
ity across art forms. If a painter wants to paint, that’s great. But because here none of the forms is a poor relation—because we’re not a performing arts center with a little gallery, or a museum with a concert series—we can follow what artists want to do in a way that’s not possible in other places.”

Poots comes from a cohort of arts administrators as restlessy
creative as the artists and audiences they serve. For years, pre-
scribers of traditional dance, classical music, drama, and opera
have been fretting over the ebbing of their audience base. Die-
hard (but die-eventually) subscribers are being replaced by a gen-
eration unused to loyalty and often untrained in the fine points of
each genre. As the old subscriber model breaks down, per-
forming arts institutions are competing for fickle and choosy
cultural consumers who call the babysitter first and buy tickets
later. Seducing those audiences is difficult and expensive, espe-
cially when they can immerse themselves in unorthodox, ambi-
tious programming just by firing up their tablets and watching
Game of Thrones or, if time is tight, the music video for Child-
ish Gambino’s “This Is America.” More importantly, artists, who
come from all over the world and have wildly disparate cultural
backgrounds, are often even more impatient with outdated pres-
cedures and constraints.

Poots recounts that some years ago he wondered aloud to the German painter Gerhard Rich-
ter was attuned to the contemporary composers Steve Reich, an
slow-moving mystical meditations. “Richter said, “Sometimes I
paint to music.” It turned out that next to his CD player were
albums by both Reich and Pärt.” That intuition, that a collec-
tion of disparate creators might share a similar sensibility, led to
the Shed’s inaugural art-and-music commission, “Reich Richter
Part,” which weaves together new works by all three.

The Shed’s inaugural Season, which includes the debut of two
African artist and director William Kentridge staged The Head
and the Load, a tragic and fiercely surreal spectacle about the
tragic and fiercely surreal experiences of African porters during
World War I. Kentridge (and an enormous cast) told the story in
a collage of African and European languages, Dada gibberish,
new and old music, shadow puppets, monologues, dance, and charcoal
drawings that formed, dissolved, and marched across an extra-
long screen. It was hard to imagine seeing it anywhere else.

It’s not easy to win an audience’s trust and keep challenging it
at the same time; consistency and surprise tend to work in opposi-
tion. But even as New York’s major institutions roam into new ter-
ritory, the city has proven able to absorb ever more hours of live
performance in ever more audacious forms. It turns out that new
organizations don’t cannibalize one another’s audiences or donor
base, so long as they offer something genuinely new.

The Shed and the Armory could confine themselves to
importing prepackaged extravaganzas from countries where gov-
ernments fund theater, opera, and dance. But both institutions
have long been segmented by genre, audience, and real estate. Symphony orches-
tras play symphonies in symphony halls, museums keep
their galleries quiet and the paintings still, and theaters take
place pretty much exclusively in theaters. But an undercurrent of rebellion runs through the city’s cultural history too. Start-
ing in the 1970s, artists of indeterminate genre converged on the
Kitchens, a nonprofit space in then-scruffy, now ultrachic Chel-
sea. Around that time, the Brooklyn Academy of Music was gath-
ering its own stable of innovators, including the director Robert
Wilson and the composer Philip Glass, whose 1976 collaboration
Einstein on the Beach remains the apotheosis of What-do-you-
call-that? performances.

Four decades later, the antithesis of what do you call that? performances
stands robust at venues like Brooklyn’s Roulette, which stages the Mix-
ology Festival, an assault on category and convention—even convet-
tions it helped create. One vintage moment came in Feb-
ruary, with Jon Bauer’s multimedia work Prepared Desktop, in
which everything that has ever gone kaboodle on your laptop—
spinning wheels, mysterious error messages, eternal downloads,
Gabriel Florenz, artistic director of Pioneer Works in Brooklyn, "Solid Light Works," at last year's "A Prelude to the Shed." In 2017, the Guggenheim Museum, which has a long tradition of hosting workshops and performances in a variety of genres, installed the pop star Solange Knowles in the rotunda at the base of its famous spiral ramp for a one-time-only nondenominational ritual called "An Ode To Negro Superman." In 2017, the Guggenheim Museum, which has a long tradition of hosting workshops and performances in a variety of genres, installed the pop star Solange Knowles in the rotunda at the base of its famous spiral ramp for a one-time-only nondenominational ritual called "An Ode To Negro Superman." In 2017, the Guggenheim Museum, which has a long tradition of hosting workshops and performances in a variety of genres, installed the pop star Solange Knowles in the rotunda at the base of its famous spiral ramp for a one-time-only nondenominational ritual called "An Ode To Negro Superman."