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COVER STORY

REDCAT's innovators show that . . .

The future is NOW



ANTONIA KAP REDC.
Kristina Wong's work in progress is "Cat Lady"

BY RACHEL LEVIN, SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Performance artist Kristina Wong never imagined that living in her West L.A. apartment with her cat Oliver — her sweet, reliable companion as a single woman — would prove as difficult as navigating a bad relationship. But several months ago, she and Oliver became locked in a territorial struggle. Oliver “had this huge problem where he was spraying everywhere,” says Wong. “I was a victim in my own home. . . . It became his domain.” Soon she began to worry that she was morphing into the stereotype of the single woman that she most feared: a musty cat lady.

Desperate, she consulted a cat psychic, who suggested that she and Oliver

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were energetically linked. Wong, 30, began to contemplate whether Oliver’s anxieties were actually reflective of her own, which sparked an idea for a new solo performance piece. After dealing with themes of war, race and suicide in previous pieces, Wong thought, “Why not cat ladies and loneliness?”

Her work in progress, “Cat Lady,” has fittingly found a home at the REDCAT New Original Works Festival — a three-week program opening tonight that features nine contemporary dance, music, theater and hybrid works by emerging and established artists, all based in Los Angeles. In its fifth year, the festival has become synonymous with the spirit of its acronym, NOW, offering the immediacy of experimental work in progress by the region’s artists of the moment. Aside from a select few showcases such as Anatomy Riot and EdgeFest, opportunities for local performing artists to workshop new pieces in development are rare.

Each year, the most vital and promising eight or nine NOW Festival proposals are selected from a pool of approximately 100 applicants, with an emphasis on innovative work that bends genres and traditions. The current roster ranges from nationally and internationally recognized artists such as com-

NOW FESTIVAL

WHERE: Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater, 631 W. 2nd St., L.A.

WHEN: 8:30 p.m. tonight-Sat.; 8:30 p.m. July 24-26; 8:30 p.m. July 31-Aug. 2.

PRICE: \$18

INFO: (213) 237-2800; www.redcat.org

ON THE WEB: For a photo gallery of NOW Festival performers, go to latimes.com/nowfest.

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poser Ann LeBaron and choreographer Rosanna Gamson to local stalwart Lionel Popkin to the postpart theater collective of recent CalArts graduates Poor Dog Group (see sidebar).

REDCAT (the Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater) plays gracious host for such an eclectic guest list. Tucked away below downtown's Walt Disney Concert Hall, REDCAT — which curates and produces the NOW Festival — is an extension of CalArts and its experimental, interdisciplinary approach to making art. When the concert hall was being built, says REDCAT Executive Director Mark Murphy, "Frank Gehry referred to [it] as a new living room for Los Angeles, and I thought, 'That makes us the basement laboratory.'"

We conferred with three of the "mad scientists" who will be performing their genre-busting alchemy in REDCAT's subterranean lab during this year's festival — the contemporary/West African company Baker & Tarpaga Dance Project, the theater/dance performance trio Cloud Eye Control and solo performer-cum-cat lady Kristina Wong — to see what's bubbling in their test tubes.

FROM CAT LADY TO REDCAT LADY

"As an artist now, I just want to propose the insane," says Wong. She's found a way to weave together the lives of cat ladies and male pickup artists ("two extremes of loneliness internalized by opposite genders," she says) through spoken text, video and a little Martha Graham-style interpretive dance in elastic-waisted pants.

After vying for space with her feline companion, Wong is reveling in the creative space — both literally and figuratively — afforded her by the festival. It provides the artists that rare combination of "money and a room of one's own" that Virginia Woolf once deemed necessary to the creative process: compensation in the form of an honorarium (close to \$2,000) and access to professional rehearsal/performance space.

"When artists are self-producing, meaning they're renting a theater somewhere," Murphy says, "they're doing their own marketing and they're raising their own money . . . at the same time they're trying to choreograph or develop a new performance. If we can remove those managerial requirements and allow them to focus on the work, hopefully they'll be able to make their best work."

CROSSING BORDERS

The dual rewards of financial opportunity and "friendly" territory are two themes festival participants Olivier Tarpaga and Esther Baker-Tarpaga, the husband-wife team behind Baker & Tarpaga Dance Project, deal with explicitly in their festival piece "Sira Kan/On the Road," through the lens of immigration.

The couple's romantic and creative union is a story of East meets West. Tarpaga, 30, immigrated to the U.S. in 2002 from Burkina Faso in West Africa, arriving first in New York City. He met Baker-Tarpaga, 33, when she traveled to New York to delve into the city's thriving African contemporary dance scene while still a graduate student in the World Arts and Cultures department at UCLA. The two married and joined forces to create Baker & Tarpaga Dance Project in 2004, settling in Los Angeles.

Though Tarpaga's immigration journey has had a happy ending, he's troubled by recent reports of Senegalese men seeking better opportunities by cramming onto fishing boats bound for such destinations as Spain's Canary Islands and either dying along the voyage or getting thrown into prison upon arrival. "Sira Kan/On the Road" explores both the pain and brotherhood of these dangerous journeys, through movement, spoken text and live drumming. As Baker-Tarpaga points out, such struggles of immigration are often the result of arbitrary boundaries drawn up in political treaties by outsiders, which dictate who can and cannot cross into specific realms.

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— MARK MURPHY,
REDCAT executive director,
on Frank Gehry calling Walt
Disney Concert Hall a new
living room for L.A.

[Cover Story, from Page 7] scribe creativity. While the company's piece traverses political borders, "there's this crossing of borders even in our relationships with movement and aesthetics," notes Baker-Tarpaga. Tarpaga explains, "We transform our traditional dance movements to a contemporary aesthetic, exploring the floor, exploring the air," as opposed to maintaining the traditional, grounded West African stance.

HEADED FOR THE STARS

Navigating new terrain across genres is also germane to the trio that composes performance group Cloud Eye Control. Animator Miwa Matreyek, 28, singer-songwriter Anna Oxygen, 29, and theater-smith Chi-wang Yang, 30, all met as graduate students at CalArts. After graduating in 2007, they formed the company in July of that year. Through a blend of projected animation, acting and live music, they create performances that convey an almost cinematic experience. Though they've traveled to San Francisco and Portland within the past year to present work, the NOW Festival marks their Los Angeles premiere.

In their festival offering, "Subterranean Heart," Oxygen mine deep within the earth for gems, only to discover a diamond inside her that releases a song which changes the world. The companion piece "Final Space" sends her to the moon to probe for new habitat, a voyage that leads her and the audience into a kind of guided meditation.

"In each of these stories," says Yang, the "outward journey through technology [is] ultimately a personal or spiritual journey of trying to understand or battle against oneself." While technology is essential to creating the mind-bending illusions in their work, a quote they encountered about the limits of technology — which Oxygen stumbled across in a book she randomly pulled off a library shelf — inspired these pieces. Yang paraphrases: "Humans will go to Mars before they actually understand themselves."

It's this type of reflection on the immediate human condition that defines contemporary performance for REDCAT executive director Murphy. In this year's festival, he says, "the artists without exception are responding not necessarily in a direct narrative way, maybe in a more abstract way, to issues they're dealing with in their daily life, whether . . . it's a quest to take over the world in outer space or just to get home someplace safe and serene."

For the artists, in their restless journeys to create new original works, the festival has become a base camp from which to launch. And for audiences, it's become a unique home base at which to put their fingers on the pulse of cutting-edge contemporary performance. With the fifth anniversary of the festival, says REDCAT Associate Director George Lugg, "There is now a community of people interested in this kind of work that is starting to share history. A long conversation is starting to take form."

Lugg has many hopes for this year's NOW Festival: that it will bring attention to artists in the region, that audiences will discover a fondness for work outside their usual preferences and, on the most micro level, "that Kristina Wong will have a healthy relationship with her cat."