For nearly three decades, Felicia Young has made it her life’s work to use the arts to raise awareness for the ecological issues facing New York City, from climate change and conservation to sustainability.

New Yorkers are encouraged to become part of Young’s mission on Saturday, when her nonprofit Earth Celebrations launches “Ecological City — Procession for Climate Solutions,” a six-hour procession of visual art, giant puppets, costumes and more through the Lower East Side’s community gardens, neighborhood and waterfront.

“The key component is that it’s through the arts that you can build an emotional connection to the natural world,” Young said. “It’s visceral, direct experiential connection to both physical sites — whether it’s a river, a park, a garden, a tree, a flower — whatever we have within our city or neighborhood, it’s rooted in site.”

“Ecological City” is also rooted in similar processions Young has spearheaded in the neighborhood since 1991 to successfully save community gardens on the LES and around the five boroughs.

Saturday’s pageant, which Young promises isn’t so much a parade as it is a “transformative experience,” will feature dance, musical, theatrical and poetic performances at 20 sites across the neighborhood to celebrate the area’s climate resiliency and ecological sustainability.

“If people don’t have a connection to the importance of our water or the importance of green and open space in our city, then they can’t actively mobilize in wanting to preserve that,” Young said.

Adding the arts into the mix of conservation and sustainability efforts brings that conversation to a whole new level, she added, “especially when you’re not just having artists presenting work about a particular issue, but you’re actually engaging the community through the arts to create themselves.”

Earth Celebrations’ “Ecological City” begins at 11 a.m. at Loisaida Inc. Center, the event’s partner, at 710 E. 9th St. It will then proceed through the LES to East River Park. (The event’s rain date is Sunday). For more info, visit earthcelebrations.com.
Artists, educators, and community activists crowded into a meeting room on the ground floor of the Loisaida Center in Alphabet City to discuss the Ecological City Project, a multi-faceted sustainability effort launching February 24 with a series of workshops. The project is organized by Earth Celebrations, an arts-based organization founded in 1991 by self-described “social action artist” Felicia Young that aims to promote sustainability and ecological harmony at a community level from its base on the Lower East Side.

Speaking to the Center for Artistic Activism in late 2016, Young elaborated on her perspective on art and its role in the community. “When you look at most cultures throughout history, art isn’t separate, it’s integrated into the life of a community. It’s part of culture, ceremony, healing,” Young said.

To that end, Ecological City aims to bring together gardeners, students, environmental activists and concerned residents of the East Village and Lower East Side for six months of arts-based workshops culminating in the Ecological City Pageant on May 12. Featuring giant, hand-crafted puppets and nature-oriented costumes, the Pageant will be a Carnivalesque procession along the myriad community gardens and green spaces of the Lower East Side and East River waterfront, stopping at fifteen spaces to highlight the various sustainability efforts undertaken there by community groups.

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The Ecological City Project hinges on “gardens, neighborhoods, and the arts,” Young said. Earth Celebrations has been active in fighting to preserve community gardens across the Lower East Side against encroaching development while also promoting sustainability and urban resiliency projects. Far from a starry-eyed paean to going green, Wednesday’s meeting took full view of the implications of climate change and the challenges facing coastal metropolises.

Young and others put the Ecological City project in the context of ongoing efforts to ready New York for rising seas and increasingly volatile weather events, including the proposed seawall—“The Big U”—intended to wrap Lower Manhattan in a protective berm. As for Mayor Bill de Blasio’s climate readiness strategy as a whole, “the gardens are a boon to the whole initiative going forward,” Young said. While they may not attract the attention of starchitects or elite design firms, Young said the gardens and green spaces are the sinews of the community and an important bulwark against coming environmental challenges.

In the meantime, the months between now and the pageant will turn the Loisaida Center into a hive of activity as volunteers construct the fabulously intricate puppets and costumes that will adorn marchers on May 12. Among the ideas being floated so far? Alternate energy spirits with wind turbine headdresses alongside avatars of climate change and pollution sporting gas masks and wild-fire inspired garb. To what extent our future is characterized by one or the other likely lies in the hands of governments. Even so, groups like Earth Celebrations are a reminder that sustainability is just as important — and all the more attainable — at the street level.
BY SARAH FERGUSON | There’s a last-minute frenzy building across the Lower East Side, as performers and activists finalize their costumes and scripts for the Ecological City Pageant that’s happening Sat., May 12, from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Orchestrated by local artist Felicia Young, this six-hour procession is like a roving theatrical production to dramatize our collective efforts to confront climate change.

And like New York’s annual Village Halloween Parade, it’s always better to be in it than to spectate.

“This is not a parade to watch, but a transformational experience,” said Young, who hopes that by enacting mythic dramas about our climate plight, we may engage more deeply in seeking common-ground solutions.

Part passion play, part “eco pilgrimage,” the event’s aim is to help us envision a greener, more sustainable city.

Young and her nonprofit Earth Celebrations have partnered with more than 50 community and arts groups to put on the pageant, but they are hoping to attract many more participants.

They’re inviting people to show up on May 12 and throw on a garden sprite costume or help carry one of the giant puppet ensembles that volunteers and artists have created during the last three months. They’re also looking for people to help paint faces, marshal the crowd and videotape events. To sign up, go to earthcelebrations.com/volunteer-ecological-city-sign.

But it’s also fine to just dip into the spectacle anywhere along the route. Led by samba players and Afro-Dominican percussionists, costumed dancers and bicycle floats, the march will set off at 11 a.m. at Loisaida Inc. on E. Ninth St. between Avenues C and D. Some 20 different site performances will be staged at various community gardens and street corners along the route, and at the closing ceremonies along the East River.

Highlights include an “upcycling” performance, featuring dancers in plastic bags performing to Vivaldi’s “Concerto in F Major” (El Sol Brillante garden on E. 12th St. between A and B); a “mythic” battle between “pollution pirates” and garden river spirits at La Plaza Cultural (E. Ninth St. at Avenue C); and an “aria for climate solutions” sung by mezzo soprano Kat Hall (Parque de Tranquilidad, E. Fourth St. near Avenue C).

Earth School students in handcrafted headdresses will stage a ceremony to honor the green roof at their school, where giant paintings of vegetables will be strung across the facade. Folkie Stephan Said will sing an homage to the pond at Sixth St. and Avenue B Garden.

The pageant will coalesce around 4 p.m. in East River Park. Vangeline Theater is doing a butoh dance about pollution runoff (near the park’s Sixth St. bridge entrance); and a group called Not Fog will stage an interdisciplinary work about sea-level rise (at the painted labyrinth near Houston St.). Members of GOLES (Good Old Lower East Side) and LES Ready! are staging a play about surviving Hurricane Sandy beneath the Williamsburg Bridge, directed by Drew Vanderberg.

There will also be a “water dance” by choreographer Jody Sperling and Art of Motion. At the finale, a goddess sculpture made of bio-remediating mud will be “sacrificed” to the river. In addition, Crystal Field has composed a tribute to the Ecological City, to be sung by the Theater for the New City Chorus.

“It’s all about allowing people to really connect though making stuff,” said volunteer coordinator Christian Tandazo. “There’s a lot of concern about the environment. So, the idea is to use creativity to allow people to connect with each other in a more human and passionate way.”
Eco City Pageant will celebrate wide array of local green efforts
March 7, 2018 | Filed under: News, Community | Posted by: The Villager

BY SARAH FERGUSON | For artist Felicia Young, the process of making art is as important as the outcome.

Twenty-seven years ago, she envisioned a pageant to help save the Lower East Side’s community gardens. The annual “Rites of Spring Procession to Save Our Gardens,” which wended its way around the neighborhood from 1991 to 2005, helped tell the story of these communally-tilled spaces, at a time when the city, under Mayor Giuliani, was seeking to auction garden lots for private development.

By bringing together the area’s disparate gardeners and greening activists, that pageant helped spark the creation of the Lower East Side Community Garden Preservation Coalition, which in turn became a catalyst for the citywide New York City Garden Coalition — a grassroots trajectory that succeeded in preserving more than 400 garden sites.

Now Young is hard at work on another community pageant, this one built around the theme of the “Ecological City.”

The six-hour event, which takes place Sat., May 12, will showcase the various climate resiliency projects that have sprung up in the East Village and Lower East Side in the wake of Hurricane Sandy — everything from bioswales that are being installed in community gardens to absorb storm runoff, to the solar grid that’s being erected at Village East Towers on Avenue C, and the “living berm” / “Big U” seawall that will line the East River to fend off rising tides.

“I don’t think there’s any other neighborhood — certainly not in New York City — where you could find all these different sites where climate solutions are happening,” Young said.

“It’s easy to feel helpless with the Trump administration and their willful political assault on the environment,” she pointed out. “But communities are envisioning pathways to an ecologically sustainable future. It’s happening right here on the Lower East Side; so, this pageant is a way to connect the dots between the solutions that exist now and what’s being proposed.

“The idea is we’re not just creating an art project. It’s also a form of organizing and mobilizing through the arts,” explained Young.

Her past projects include the Hudson River Pageant — held annually from 2009 to 2012 — to honor water restoration efforts on the West Side, and another one she staged in 2015 in Madurai, India, to address the pollution crisis in the sacred Vaigai River.

Young first pitched the concept of the Ecological City Pageant to the LES community during the LUNGS Harvest Festival last September. Since then more than 50 local organizations have come on board.

“The planning meeting we had in February was packed,” she said. “It’s bringing together the old crew of all the people I knew from the gardens and that struggle. It’s really nice to see everyone committed again and moving together.”
The shape of the event is all still very much in process, and Young said she welcomes input. She and her nonprofit group, Earth Celebrations, are holding a series of free workshops where adults and teens can collaborate with artists Lucrecia Novoa and Michele Brody to craft the giant puppets, costumes and props for the pageant. Workshops are happening Wednesdays, from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., and Saturdays, from noon to 4 p.m., at the Loisaida Inc. Center, at 710 E. Ninth St., between Avenues C and D.

The plan is to parade to 15 sites in the East Village / LES, including a “mythic battle between climate consequences versus climate solutions” to be staged at La Plaza Cultural, on E. Ninth St. (Young is still searching for a spoken-word poet to help out with the script.) There will also be an elaborate closing ceremony on the East River, where a giant Gaia sculpture created from bio-remediating mud balls will be “sacrificed” to the water gods, accompanied by Butoh dance and a choir performance by Theater for the New City.

The Lower Eastside Girls Club is creating solar-energy bike floats.

Dancer Jody Sperling — who has performed on ice floes in Antarctica — is choreographing a piece about water quality with local youth to honor the gray-water system that is going in at the LES Ecology Center.

Local children are crafting butterfly and bee costumes to celebrate the Sixth St. Community Center’s new bee farm and the Earth School’s rooftop veggie garden.

And theater director Drew Vanderburg is working with public housing residents to create a short play about rising floodwaters to be staged beneath the Williamsburg Bridge.

“It’s all about engaging people who wouldn’t ordinarily be involved, or who wouldn’t consider themselves as activists,” Young explained, “and yet they do find an entry point for engaging on this issue — whether it’s kids and parents creating art projects to illustrate the impacts of climate change or groups like GOLES and LES Ready!, who are trying to work with NYCHA tenants living along the East River on disaster preparedness.

“It’s pretty hard to get people excited about disaster preparedness,” she noted. “Most people don’t even want to think about it. But you can engage them through performance, and with something that’s fun, and which you can take part in at all different levels.”

Young concedes she’ll need an army to pull off this event. She’s hoping to recruit hundreds of volunteers to help with everything from sewing sprite costumes to marshaling the parade, distributing postcards, and videotaping and promoting the event on social media.

Ultimately, Young hopes the Ecological City Pageant will illustrate the cumulative value of local actions to strengthen our environment — both to reinforce those efforts and to put pressure on City Hall and Albany to do more.

“Both Mayor de Blasio and Governor Cuomo have pledged to meet the carbon-reduction goals outlined in the Paris Climate Accord, even though [President] Trump pulled out of it,” Young noted.

“So they’re financing all these sustainability projects — even though the mayor is doing things like working to destroy the Elizabeth St. Garden [in Nolita].

“It doesn’t make sense,” she said. “So this is about looking at the larger impact of what it means for the city and state to meet our climate goals, so we can can have this model to look at and reaffirm it.”

For information or to register for the free puppet and costume workshops, visit www.earthcelebrations.com.
ECOLOGICAL CITY at various locations in the East Village and on the Lower East Side (May 12, 11 a.m.-6 p.m.). You can encounter characters of all kinds on the streets of New York City, but how often do you get to march with river sprites, earth gods, garden spirits and various towering flora? They'll be out in force for this extravaganza, more of a participatory pageant than a parade. Presented by Earth Celebrations, an environmental and arts nonprofit founded by Felicia Young, Ecological City employs mobile sculpture, giant puppets and costumed performers to celebrate conservation, sustainability and solutions to climate change. Starting at the Loisaida Inc. Center, the procession will spend the day offering theater, poetry, music and dance at various sites, ending with a river-cleansing ceremony at the waterfront in East River Park. (A full schedule is on the website; the rain date is Sunday.)  
212-777-7969, earthcelebrations.com

ECOLOGICAL CITY — ART AND ECOLOGY PUPPET AND COSTUME WORKSHOPS at the Loisaida Center (through May 9). For centuries, art and activism have gone together. Felicia Young, the founder and executive director of the Lower East Side nonprofit Earth Celebrations, has united them in an annual spring pageant and parade of giant puppets, mobile sculptures, costumed characters and site-specific performances. Originally dedicated to the preservation of New York City’s community gardens, Ms. Young’s efforts have evolved into Ecological City, an arts and environmental action project to promote sustainability and combat climate change. She welcomes young people 12 and older to participate in these free workshops (registration is required) to make costumes with the artist Michele Brody (on Wednesdays, 6-9 p.m.) and puppets with the artist Lucrecia Novoa (on Saturdays, noon-4 p.m.). The creations will become part of the six-hour Ecological City Pageant on May 12.
212-777-7969, earthcelebrations.com
Costumed dancers from the Artichoke dance company perform as part of the procession that made 20 stops along the East Village and Lower East Side. (Photos by Kristin Reimer for Earth Celebrations’ Ecological City-Procession for Climate Solutions)

By Sabina Mollot

On Saturday, hundreds of costumed revelers walked, marched and danced their way through the East Village and the Lower East Side for a day-long event aimed at celebrating local green spaces, the East River and sustainability efforts.

The event was organized by Lower East Sider, artist and activist Felicia Young, who has a long history of similar events aimed at (successfully) saving community gardens, through her organization Earth Celebrations. Participants in the event, which was modeled after pageants in India, where hundreds of celebrants from multiple communities take part, made 20 stops throughout the neighborhood.

A few included Campos Garden on East 12th Street between Avenues B and C, El Sol Brillante Garden an avenue to the west, the Earth School on East 6th Street and by the day’s end, East River Park for oyster planting and a river cleansing dance.

Young later said that she’d personally been in communication with 500 people in different organizations who were involved in the event somehow, and that it was the culmination of two years’ work. But unlike the previous costume parades she’s organized since the 90s that were aimed at keeping community gardens from getting bulldozed by developers, this time, it was more about connecting local environmental activists and drawing attention to their projects from rooftop beehives to vertical farming (food grown on sides of buildings) to a rickshaw-driven compost collective. Along with interpretive dances, other participants sang songs or read poems that were specific to the East Village procession’s stops.

Young said she was also inspired by communal art projects in a Nigerian community she’d learned about as an art history student at Skidmore College, in which residents would build large-scale works, usually in response to a social calamity.

“It’s not art as decoration. They commit to it as a community process,” said Young. “Like an elaborate mud hut representing a god. Then they leave it to decay. I said, ‘That’s exactly the kind of thing we needed.’ Ephemeral and in response to some social problem. I don’t know if I believe the magic of it, like all of a sudden malaria or drought goes away, but I do feel that the solidarity is what strengthens the community.”

Her first procession was in response to the AIDS crisis in 1988. She was a gallery coordinator in Tribeca and got sick of what felt like preaching to the choir with politically-charged installations that would only reach arts scene insiders. So she suggested doing a Dia de Los Muertos-style procession to City Hall, working with homeless shelters and poets. She wound up using that type of event over the years to draw attention to the fact that gardens maintained by Lower East Side volunteers were at risk of being reclaimed by the city. After getting gardeners involved in processions she wound up, without really intending to, becoming a community organizer, warning the gardeners she knew whenever their green spaces were on the agenda for redevelopment at local community board meetings. While many of those gardens ended up being saved by an unexpected ally — Mayor Michael Bloomberg — Young said she is once again concerned about the future of those spaces — this time because of natural disasters.

“The wakeup call came from Hurricane Sandy,” she said. “On this side of Manhattan, you have a much more vulnerable community.”

Correction: The print version of this article incorrectly stated that Young was in coordination with 50 people, while the correct number is 500. Additionally, Young wanted to clarify that she is still more concerned about the community gardens being redeveloped for market-rate housing than being destroyed by flooding.