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NATIVE STRATEGIES

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The performance art journal of Los Angeles

SO FUNNY IT HURTS

NATIVE STRATEGIES: SO FUNNY IT HURTS
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Native Strategies *is a new experimental platform and journal for performance art in Los Angeles. Initiated by Brian Getnick, Zemula Barr, and Molly Sullivan, each issue will be released following a series of performances curated around themes, strategies and ideas present in the work of Los Angeles-based performance artists. Over the course of five years, the interviews, essays, reviews, drawings and photo documentation from each issue will be compiled into a book.*

In Los Angeles, performance art happens not only in museums and galleries, but also in nightclubs, theaters, streets and homes. These many local communities are often unaware of each other's practices. Building an awareness of these diverse efforts and communities as part of a larger whole is central to our mission. Therefore, we are dedicated to the inclusion of those artists who are not formally educated within the university system and who perform within these diverse contexts.

In my own practice as a performance artist, I rarely know what the project means until well after it is completed. I have a similar feeling about ***Native Strategies****; I expect that the people who become involved over the coming years will experiment with the form and production of this journal as a performative project itself. This statement is therefore not a manifesto but an invitation to those of you who desire to respond to our city's performance culture over the course of the next five years and feel an urgency to spread the word.*

- Brian Getnick

Brian Getnick in conversation with Jared Baxter

My first encounter with the work of Brian Getnick came via his contribution to the 2011 incarnation of LACE's annual performance art festival, GUTTED. His piece, entitled *Three Little Numbers*, intrigued me because of the way it seemed to evolve out of the artist's mask, a remarkable silicone and silk construction with an opaque, chalky whiteness that recalled the makeup worn by butoh dancers and a comically exaggerated nose recalling vaudeville. At times, hesitating in front of the microphone placed center stage, Getnick's gestures invoked Kazuo Ohno; at others, spoon-feeding an infant-sized doll replica of itself took on the aspect of a mute and perversely oedipalized Edgar Bergen.

By commingling a serious, postmodern dance style with anachronistic forms of entertainment, combined with the primacy of the role of the costume itself, the performance reminded me of Mike Kelley's use of subcultural referents and craft materials to call attention to the implicit exclusions underpinning the definition of so-called high art practices. Likewise, in performances such as *A Delight for Children and the Elderly,* in which an occult sacrifice is carried out by a grotesquely misshapen Mickey Mouse and its double, Brian echoes Paul McCarthy's subversions of mainstream icons like Santa Claus.

Yet where the work of these artists, indicative of broader currents in their generation of Angeleno art, traffics in the storm and stress of infantile regression, Getnick exercises a showman's restraint, drawing laughs at GUTTED by staying silent at the mic stand after no less than three musical introductions raise the mere expectation of a song. Over the course of several emails and a conversation at La Fuente #1, a Mexican restaurant in his and my neighborhood, we elaborated upon this generational difference and explored his general concerns in curating *So Funny It Hurts*.

Jared Baxter: What were the origins of the series, and how did you approach the artists who performed in it?

Brian Getnick: Since moving to LA, I've been seeing a type of performance art that has an urgency in its engagement with its audience, through humor and through anachronistic forms of entertainment, as you call them. This kind of work is often hilarious but also frenetic, unstable, ecstatic, irresponsible—it has an edge. *Annie Okay*, Asher Hartman's epic performance in 2010 at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, for instance. Every character in that weird, sprawling musical introduced themselves as a hideous parody of ethnicity, class, and gender, but as you watched it unfold you began to distrust their claims. Something in the way they moved, repeated gestures, sprang to life, murdered, died, and transformed disrupted an easy read. Very few people got to see that piece, so in a way I created this series out of a selfish impulse to see the work of some of my favorite artists again. And to the extent that I chose the artists in *So Funny It Hurts* through the lens of my own work, it's also true that they themselves, most of whom I've known for a few years, have shaped my performance style as well.

What I proposed to them was that they play with and amplify a tendency I saw in their work to move within an oppositional structure in order to dismantle it. This procedure is what I've come to understand by the term satire. I know this

definition isn't what's commonly thought of as satire, which is more on the level of Stephen Colbert or Jonathan Swift. That kind of work really means to humiliate the enemy, and what I'm more interested in is the potential for empathy through a deliberate confusion of self and other. It's this particular confusion that I believe begins to mine a kind of politic in art, which isn't necessarily propagandistic, but still political in that it negotiates with power through an externalized subjectivity.

JB: How does this conception of satire operate, in practice?

BG: Well, in my own work, I identify these oppositional forces by thinking about the anxieties and desires that are shared between me and the audience. Even though a certain percentage of the people who go to these kinds of performances are unknown (and you want that, of course), the truth is that most of the audience members are artists themselves. I know most of the people in that room by name. It's just a condition of performing in a small community, which is what the performance art world is, even in LA. I wouldn't assume it's the whole world in that room.

Likewise, there was the fact that *So Funny It Hurts* took place in a gallery, which is a darkly funny space to me. The gallery is haunted by the promise of delivering an object into time, and if we believe that, then we're all somewhat concerned about our mortality. When an artist's work is based in the presentation of a body, a body that leaves the gallery when the performance is over, that question of whether or not the content of your work will "make it through time" doesn't disappear. And to whom is the content being delivered, ultimately? These questions are very funny things, because you end up actually making work for this anticipated audience, these sort of theoretical babies that grow up to be critics. Lately, I really don't have any faith in that baby audience, to tell you the truth—I don't have faith in this canon-machine that the gallery is implicitly a part of, and I don't even think gallerists believe in this. I think it's just something that was handed down and got

embedded in that white cube architecture. So, within these parameters, performing for mostly artists in a gallery space, you can make certain assumptions about how the audience is predisposed to react to certain things. It's one of the anxieties I like to play with. Speaking of which, there is also the secular anxiety of performing in front of an audience of artists.

In school, artists are taught to look for the intentions of other artists in their work and measure the success of the work by how well the artist fulfills those intentions. If they don't fulfill them, we see it as failure (it's cliché!) and our reactions to this event are often boredom, anger, and embarrassment. There's very little that's truly scary to artists except for seeing a performer who seems unaware of what he or she is actually doing, or who (we think) he or she actually is.

I think that any of these failures are actually very productive places for artists to explore. They generate strong reactions from our audience, and they indicate where the oppositional forces, the taboos, are within our community. My feeling is that contemporary art should be anathema to orthodoxy, and if there's a consensus against a certain mode of expression, that's like a neon light that says "try me on." Two of the taboos within high performance art that I am most invested in are anachronistic forms of entertainment and explicit therapy. Some artists that have engaged with these taboos in the past are Mike Kelly, Paul McCarthy, and Johanna Went. They use them as weapons shot back against the more subtle and contagious violence within iconic representations of goodness.

JB: It's interesting that you bring these artists up, because their approach to these same taboos seems to produce radically different results. I mean, if you compare your piece, *Three Little Numbers*, to a Paul McCarthy or Johanna Went performance—

BG: Did we talk about my dialogue with Johanna on Saturday?

JB: No, you talked to her?

BG: Yeah, something great happened there. I mean, something really crazy happened there, culminating with me kicking a hole in the wall. I hadn't planned that but she brought me to it. At first, I had thought that Johanna and I were being paired together because we were similar in that we both use costumes and we both got our start performing in night clubs in LA, but these are almost superficial comparisons. At the end of this conversation or, as some people saw it, battle, I realized, no, our differences are far more compelling. She comes from the punk generation, and if you don't know her work, she'd basically get on a stage with 50 or more costumes and tear them apart, lobbing bits of them or whole soft-sculpture body parts at the audience. She used that tactic at our "talk" too.

In the '90s, when I started to become particular about the culture I consumed (I'm 34), the sound of punk was harmonious to my ears. So I got the pretty detritus of her generation but not the ethos. I see this as comparable to how Stravinsky's work sounds gorgeous today, but in its own time caused riots. In the '80s, Johanna was making riots. But one difference is that I don't believe in a structure that's assumed to be there by everybody. I think you have to introduce the structure, reveal the structure, and then take it apart. That night I became the structure Johanna was taking apart. She took apart everything I was saying. I think she threw a couple of ducks at me at one point. That night I was embodying a polite and expected conversation among artists, basically the straight man to her id. Usually it's me that is the id. I mean, if I'm going to be taken down by someone, I would expect it to be by someone in their early twenties, not late fifties, but that's also so great, that someone could maintain that anti-establishment ethic all her life. I felt so embarrassed up there but also empowered. How many times do you feel something at a "talk?" In the end it was a very cathartic experience, not only for me, but also for a lot of people in that room who felt bad for me and then relieved when I kicked the wall and broke her sign.

JB: That's interesting, because I felt that the performance work in *So Funny It Hurts*, in general, was very anti-cathartic. In Kale Likover's, for instance, there's a light, comedic song that's preceded and undermined by a harrowing monologue about his experiences in a mental institution. There, structure was mobilized so that the audience didn't even get the release of laughter. Similarly, in Paul Outlaw's piece, he tells a very personal, emotional story, then follows it by playing an old racist cartoon depicting a homeless black man and singing a blues song. The audience's desire for empathy, which might otherwise be channeled towards an experience of catharsis, is short-circuited by this invocation of minstrelsy. In contrast to Went's and other earlier performance artists' approach to the abject, these performances, through their juxtaposition of the confessional and the (once) comedic, highlight the implacable perseverance of the fourth wall, calling the "nowness" of catharsis into question as something that emerges through, and remains within, historically-conditioned performance styles.

BG: That's an interesting point. I hadn't thought about that. I thought Nathan Bockelman's performance was the most jagged in its assessment of the possibility of catharsis. He basically tried on, took off, and left hanging a series of overdone tropes. Taking off his clothes, playing a song on the guitar, demanding that someone pour fake blood on their eyes. (By the way, I loved how you refused to put down your drink as you poured blood in your eyes, Jared.) All of these actions were handled with that low blood sugar deadpan that he's so good at, like a stunt man on tranquilizers. On the one hand, he was pointing to a certain failure within each action by abandoning them before the expected climax was reached. At one point, he paused in his guitar solo and asked the audience: "is this OK?" As in, "should I really do this to you, expect you to listen to my earnest song?" I know this sounds like it was a cynical work, like he's only pointing to the clichés of the performance artist's craft, but what I got from it was more along the lines of "these are just the tools of the trade, and if you expect them to provide catharsis by themselves, they're empty." But in a grouping, in a specific arrangement, they can do something else, they can be both referential and formally abstract, like a sculptural installation. I love this about curating: seeing an artist strive for and against the expectations of his or her craft, generating something absolutely entertaining and potentially new.

MARCH 10

Alice Cunt in conversation with Brian Getnick

"Even sitting there naked, those aren't our bodies, they're not what we see when we're in our dreams. What were supposed to be is the imagined self."

The first show I saw of Alice Cunt's was at Nacho Nava's weekly dance and performance party, Mustache Mondays in downtown Los Angeles. Alice was wearing a cloud of intestines from which tapered breasts and an angry looking phallus shook with a hurricane's intensity. He looked like a vengeful fertility goddess made of garbage. I remember the crowd that night, usually so game for spectacularly weird performances, was visibly unnerved, edging back from the body that wheeled and flailed on the dance floor. There was even a moment of amazed quiet, as pieces of intestine, wig hair and bits of paper-mache began to fly off. Finally, a roar of cheers erupted as the costume completely dissolved and Alice, howling, crawled off stage. Fadera Fae, the indomitable MC at Mustache Mondays took him aside after the show. "No one knows that that wasn't a character, that was you," Alice recalls her saying.

The following Tuesday at Wu Ingrid Tsang's and Ashland Mine's party Wildness at the Silver Platter, Alice appeared as another storm, this one electrical. From a darkened closet behind a barricade of crackling televisions, a pair of mirror-encrusted legs arose like antennae. As they scissored back and forth, the sounds of machine metal percussion and a synthesizer's drone grew in the room. Suddenly the legs flipped around and Alice's towering figure began a series of back bends and contortions that sent shards of mirrored glass flying to the ground. Everyone had been given flashlights prior to the show so they could see his body and the glass and metal merge under the searching lights.

These early performances seemed to be consistently about a transformation from a singular body into a fragmented one. It was as if Alice was demonstrating a simultaneous integration (through the costume) and disintegration (the performance) of pop cultural references, gender, and rituals. He did this with an explosive energy.

So one afternoon in 2009, while we were sewing costumes together, I informally asked Alice why he made costumes and underwent transformations within his performances.

Alice Cunt: That's what I would look like if I were naked, I'm showing inner nudities, one under the other. If I were truly naked you would see constant movement and transformation. People think that I'm just portraying a character but few people know it's just me manifesting over and over again. Even sitting there naked, those aren't our bodies, they're not what we see when we're in our dreams. What we're supposed to be is the imagined self.

Brian Getnick: When did you first perform in LA?

AC: When Mustache Mondays moved to the La Cita night club, I did my first performance. Nacho asked me to perform even though he didn't know if I performed. He just assumed I did because I was wearing crazy costumes.

BG: I saw that show, you were amazing with all those intestines flying around and the enormous red dick.

AC: That first performance I did was with an alien fat suit; a fat suit from another planet. I was influenced by old sci-fi and horror films from the early 90s and before. I love anything with practical special effects: in-camera and live special effects stuff, because when someone hand crafts a gross texture it connects you more to the film. I love it when the seams show a little more.

BG: How does that rough engineering inspire you in your own work?

AC: I take shortcuts with even more accessible materials, anything that's available, things from the dumpster.

BG: Do you think your performances are funny?

AC: I do things that make me laugh, that's why I do them, to entertain myself. I don't know if I believe people when they compliment me. Once in a while I hear, "what the fuck was that? I loved it," but ultimately it was for my own fun and for my friends, what winds them up and lets them go, even if it's for their own detriment. I'm a bored person until I let my imagination leak out of my head.

BG: What do you think of Johanna Went's performances? You know how she would tear up her costumes and throw them at the audience? I thought of you when I saw videos of her work. It's so raw and at the same time intelligent.

AC: I like being transported into that era when people did shit like that.

BG: People do shit like that now, what's the difference?

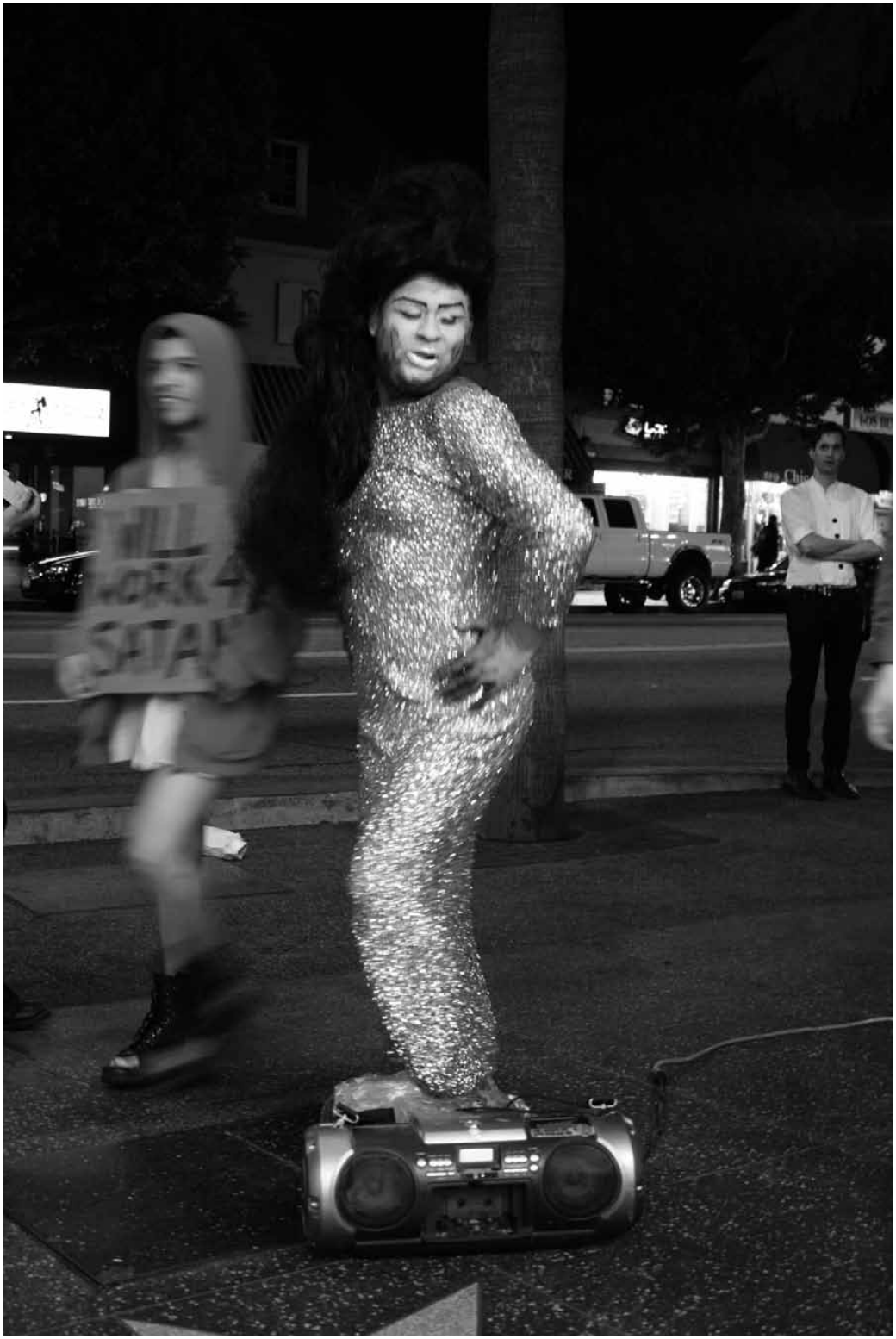
AC: I think it's more legitimized now but I also think that the art world perverts something that used to be honest when they critique it.

BG: That's interesting because I invited you to be critiqued.

AC: Well, galleries are also fun to do stuff in because you have more room and freedom. There is

Previous Spread: Alice Cunt, *The Satanic Progression of a Diva Obsessed, The Satanic Obsession of a Diva Possessed* (photo of performance), 2011. Photo by Tyler Binkley.

Right: Alice Cunt, *The Satanic Progression of a Diva Obsessed, The Satanic Obsession of a Diva Possessed* (photo of performance), 2011. Photo by Tyler Binkley.



is no pressure to entertain, there is freedom to be boring. It just so happens that what I do is entertaining enough to be in a club. The difference is that at the gallery you get feedback.

BG: So what are you planning for your upcoming show at LACE?

AC: I'll be doing a performance as a homeless diva outside LACE on the street and then a satanic diva inside the gallery. In San Francisco, the street is exciting because pan handlers aren't necessarily homeless and people are willing to stay and watch it and be entertained. People in Los Angeles feel safe only when they see something on the stage. I like the elimination of the stage for entertainment. Ultimately all art is entertainment because it works on your senses visually and audibly.

BG: Then why do you think people are shy about calling performance art entertainment?

AC: People have a need to dissect things that are their validation and therapy. Performance art is obviously a form of therapy: you spill your guts out in a gallery to understand why you do what you're doing. There is no explanation for what we do but we want to hear other people talk about it. It's to get insight. It helps me understand why I do what I'm doing. Seeing other people do it like Johanna Went, for instance; I dream about the imagery she uses too and making people out of garbage.

BG: Why do you think you don't get money for performing at galleries?

AC: Maybe because it's an open forum. I still don't know why you have to work to get into them when you won't get paid for it. That's why I like the idea of pan handling. I might make some money outside the gallery while I do my performance. Why is it so much harder for performance artists?

Left: Alice Cunt, *The Satanic Progression of a Diva Obsessed, The Satanic Obsession of a Diva Possessed* (photo of performance), 2011. Photo by Tyler Binkley.

Tactical Abjection: On the Drag of Alice Cunt and Kale Likover

by Hans Kuzmich

Routine was, "Faggots over here, dykes over here, and freaks over there," referring to my side of the community.
–Sylvia Rivera, talk at Latino Gay Men of New York (LGMNY)[1, 2]

And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master.
–Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection [3]

One spring night on Hollywood Boulevard, in a shimmering gold lamé dress, long black wig, plastic bags around his feet, and soot covering parts of his body, Alice Cunt begins his performance for a crowd gathered in front of the Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE).[4] For *The Satanic Progression of a Diva Obsessed, The Satanic Obsession of a Diva Possessed,* Cunt has chosen to be accompanied by the artists Rroses Jade Camellia and Ajax—both dressed in long ratty t-shirts, hoodies, and platform boots modified with scissors and duct tape. Camellia holds a cardboard sign that reads "WILL WORK 4 SATAN" and Ajax shakes a paper cup imploringly at the audience. The performers' genders are auspiciously indeterminate, and their drag crosses class lines to produce something like trans-grubby-glamour. Slinging a boom box over his shoulder, Cunt drags the extension cord from out of the gallery behind him as he walks, lending a domestic quality to the famous public monument to the entertainment industry known as the Hollywood Walk of Fame. A perennial attraction for tourists, this particular stretch of Hollywood Boulevard is also home to large numbers of low-income and homeless youth, many of them queer and trans. [5] Social service agencies, vintage entertainment industry fixtures such as Musso & Frank, and luxury developments share the streets with adult stores, smoke shops, and clothing warehouses.

The boom box is failing but Cunt, unruffled, futzes with it, finally handing the job to Camellia. After a tense minute, it plays the Supremes—a soundtrack, which persists for nearly the entire 30-minute work. Cunt proceeds to lip-sync and vamp: striking poses and holding frozen smiles, puffing up and twirling his hair, gyrating his hips and motioning with his hands. The performance has an informal and improvised quality: at one point, Cunt's wig gets caught on his dress; at another, he produces a burrito from a paper bag and bites into it. "Hey! You hungry?" Camellia and Ajax flock to him and the take-out is passed around in a classic scene of a drag mother with her children. The artists have now fully taken over a section of the sidewalk. Food packaging and plastic bags mark out a perimeter of spatial intimacy and mirror the ubiquitous scenes of homelessness in the neighborhood. The three artists share a similar background of having grown up occasionally homeless and performing on the streets. Cunt subsequently described The Satanic Progression… as, in part, "a re-living" and homage to the street drag communities he has lived and performed with in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Kauai, Hawaii.[6]

The audience swells, now including many of the passers-by and extending from LACE to the curb in a tight semicircle. Many snap pictures, punctuating the event with flashes of light. The audience's presence determines this scene—otherwise potentially indistinguishable from other activity on the street—as a performance.

The artists run up to cars stopped at the light in front of LACE, a limo among them: "Can you spare some change?" They prance alongside pedestrians. They flirt with everyone, daring them to react. Some respond in surprising ways, for example when a pick-up truck driver turns an ostensible solicitation for sex into a threat. A moment later, Superman and Supergirl in full costume (including bulging ersatz muscles) walk past the gallery in the direction of Grauman's Chinese Theatre. When the traffic dissipates, the performers loiter, all the time on alert for new signs of activity.

The work is replete with questions of visibility. "Can you spare a dollar? Just a dollar!" The performers' repeated requests for spare change—often accompanied by incessant hand waving or other demands for recognition—for the most part go ignored. Rarely do they effect meek smiles, and rarer still, coins or dollar bills. Invisibility turns violent when cameras too lose their interest. As the activity shifts toward the adult store next door, its owner is visibly irate. He yells, "Can you just . . . just get out?" and not without an element of unintended camp, "You're the devil!" The conspicuous cameras buffer the performers from pedestrians' hostilities, but even they do not prevent a cab driver from honking and shouting homophobic slurs. The sense of vulnerability—of queer and trans bodies, bodies of color, bodies of those excluded from what little remains of a social safety net—comes to the fore. The crowd is urged to consider our positions as witnesses to the violence provoked by the performance, and by extension, state-inflicted violence.

The themes behind the chatty teenage dialogue of the Supremes' lyrics—exclusion, refusal, rejection—resonate differently in Cunt's performance of homelessness and gender queerness. "Sometime's up / Sometime's down / My life's so uncertain / With you not around" and "Where did our love go / Ooh, don't you want me / Don't you want me no more" are lyrics

Above: Alice Cunt, *The Satanic Progression of a Diva Obsessed, The Satanic Obsession of a Diva Possessed* (photo of performance), 2011. Photo by Zemula Barr

addressing an old lover.[7] But they may as well be speaking on behalf of homeless youth to a state, whose neoliberal social policies have resulted in vast inequalities with often violent consequences on their well-being.[8] In this context, the soot on Cunt's body begins to take on racial connotations, the marks also resembling an exaggerated rendering of a drag king's facial hair, extending to his neck and upper back.

After approximately fifteen minutes, LACE's staff instruct the audience to head inside, leaving Cunt, Ajax and Camellia behind, leaning against a trash can. Waiting inside the gallery is scantily clad Kale Likover on a small makeshift stage, his arms outstretched in a tilted cross. He wears DIY burlesque drag: pasties, garter belt, a sizeable wig, and make-up. Strung beads connect various parts of his costume and to his body. The white of his dress, his pose, and stillness have a celestial quality, as though he might take flight or levitate effortlessly. Likover waits for the audience to settle down, then suddenly springs to life. He sings a cappella: "Look at this drag, isn't it neat? / Wouldn't you think my transition's complete? / Wouldn't you think I'm the boy who has everything?" Opening his twelve-minute set, Likover's trans male spin on "Part of Your World"—originally sung by the mermaid Ariel in Disney's *The Little Mermaid*—traces an economy of gender transition. The performer's hirsute appearance and chest scars signal access to hormones and expensive top surgery, which accord him passing privilege even in full-on drag. Yet, the narrative of *Surviving Detachably*—a reference to a transman's potential arsenal of packing devices—describes a transition that, so far, leaves the singer longing for more: "I'm ready to know what the cisgender know / Ready to have a penetrating glue gun / Ready to shoot that hot cum inside somebody." The humor of the performance comes from Likover's slapstick miming of the salacious lyrics, as well as his complete lack of acknowledgement of his drag, taking for granted that a "penetrating glue gun" goes perfectly with a skong (that is, a skirt-thong).

For his second song, Likover changes into a bright green '80s prom dress with a matching headpiece. Both are heavily decorated with fabric mushrooms and other vegetables. He sprinkles pieces of actual packaged lettuce around the stage and launches into a cheer about "tossing the salad." Usually, slang for eating ass, in *Cucumbers Optional*, the phrase is re-signified to account for trans male sexuality: "If you break a nail, don't hesitate / You don't need your hands, except to hold the gates / … / Whether it's Greek, Waldorf, or Beet / Salad can be good, even without meat." The song's celebration of the imaginative powers of trans and queer sexuality receives a hilarious twist, in Likover's actual personification of the "salad" in question.

In his final number, Kale Likover sports a gold sequined smock and begins by reading from a diary. The story is set in South Africa, when he was "just a college girl, studying art of course." He describes fantastical pot-induced hallucinations, which landed him in a mental institution for the first time, and the bouts of mental illness that led to his subsequent hospital stays. Likover is a gregarious, moving storyteller and his narrative is surreal and affective—the line between performed and lived psychic instability unclear. He declares "the road to sanity has not been without setbacks," alluding to tales too dark to address tonight. He opts instead to sing his last song of the evening. Like everything leading up to this final number, *Morphine Mountain* is hysterical when sung by Likover. Stripped of the masterful performance, however, the lyrics produce a different mood:

Left: Kale Likover, *Cucumbers Optional,* (photo of performance), 2011. Photo by Zemula Barr.

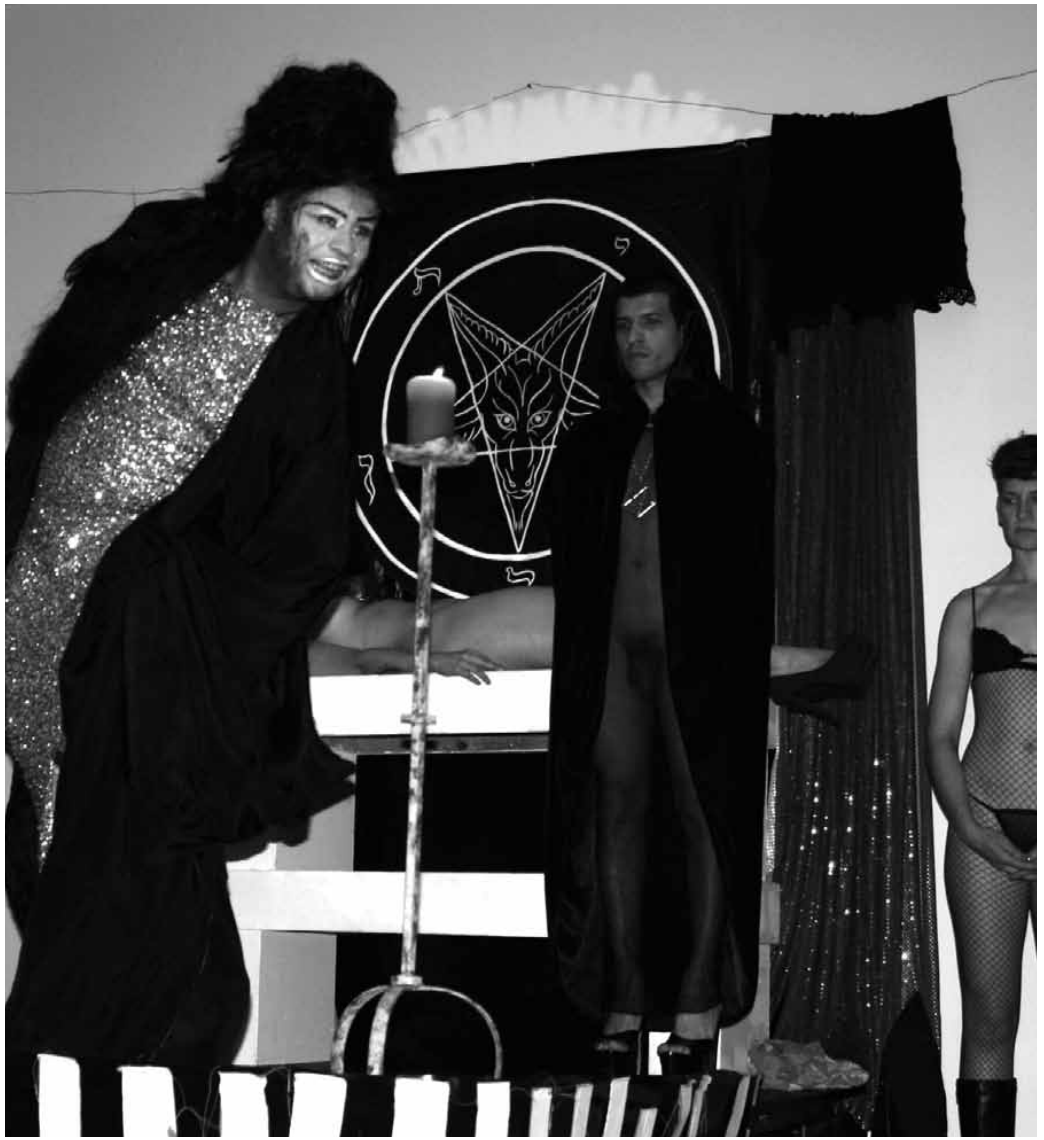
I feel sickly, oh so sickly.
I feel sicky and icky and white.
And I pity those who vaccinate me tonight.
I'm contagious and inflamed-geous.
It's alarming how infectious I feel.
I'm so sickly that I hardly can believe you're real.
See that ill bloke in that mirror there?
Who can that lethargic boy be?
With the night sweats,
nipple discharge, such a sickly me.
I'm asthmatic, and lymphatic,
full of flagellants and fatigue.
It's time for the doc to operate on me.

In Julia Kristeva's famous formulation, what causes abjection is "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."[9] If *Cucumbers Optional* dealt with abject personification, focusing on its carnivalesque aspect, *Morphine Mountain* explores bodily abjection, echoing the vilification of the trans body historically within the medical and juridical discourses. Likover takes on these narratives as a kind of drag. In his performances, the place of abjection occupies a significant place for working through oppressive narratives. While the parody itself does not necessarily displace the dominant norms, it registers the ambivalence of opposing the same regimes of power by which one is constituted.[10]

With a graceful kick, Likover jumps from the platform and makes an exit. The gallery is darkened and a satanic film dialogue transmits from the speakers above.[11] Cheers of "hail Satan!" provide the soundtrack for a procession of sinister figures led by what appears to be a black cloaked anti-bishop. They carry a candelabrum and knives (among other props), and the curtain above the stage opens to reveal a mural of a pentagram. A psychedelic animation is projected over it, causing the central goat head to pulsate, and radiate its designs onto the body of the now stationary anti-bishop. He raises a sword over one of the acolytes—now lying naked on the pentagram's altar—and kneels facing the audience, Ajax and Rose Jade Camellia flanking him. Suddenly, to the cue of The Supremes' "Baby Love," his long hat is flung off to reveal Alice Cunt's dirty diva as the mother of a satanic cult.

Cunt proceeds to lip-sync and vamp as he did on the street, but now wielding two swords and incorporating elements of a satanic ritual. After a few minutes, Ajax and Camellia pull Cunt's dress down to his waist and sit him in front of the "sacrificial" platform, with his exposed back to the audience. Ajax takes a lit candle and pours wax on Cunt's back. Moments later, Camellia approaches with a knife and uses it to carve lines into Cunt's back. Unwavering in his lip-syncing, Cunt gets up and vamps his way into the projector's light, revealing the state of his back: the cuts are clearly visible through the mixture of pink wax and blood. He eventually extinguishes the candles with the palm of his hand, and the procession exits to the sound of the earlier film dialogue.

The move from the street to the stage echoes the Supremes' own rags-to-reaches saga. The performance score also encapsulates Cunt's artistic trajectory. Having performed in Los Angeles' nightclubs for the past ten years, in the past two years his work has begun to also appear in galleries. His Supremes-inspired, and ultimately détourned, set of references are steeped in abjection, as a possible mode of resistance to the assimilating pull of the art world on the one hand and mainstream gay culture on the other.



Above: Alice Cunt, *The Satanic Progression of a Diva Obsessed, The Satanic Obsession of a Diva Possessed* (photo of performance), 2011. Photo by Tyler Binkley.

Abjection moves beyond the possible, the tolerable, and the thinkable, in a revolt that cannot be assimilated.[12] As the mainstream gay rights movement in the U.S. celebrates the recent passage of a bill to repeal Don't Ask Don't Tell (DATL) and steams ahead in its fight for gay marriage and hate crimes legislation, it is met with a queer radical critique of the harmful role of marriage in a neoliberal state and as a form of social organization that deflects attention away from the erosion of social services through emphasis on more conservative definitions of identity and formations of family.[13] It is in this contemporary U.S. landscape that forms of kinship, sex, and identification are met with abjection, and offer artists possibilities for anti-assimilationist queer critique and resistance.

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1. My thanks goes to Brian Getnick and Jeannine Tang for their editorial help, and to Mary Kelly for her feedback on this text.

2. Sylvia Rivera, "Sylvia Rivera's Talk at LGMNY, June 2001, Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center, New York City," *CENTRO: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 118.

3. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.

4. Alice Cunt performed *The Satanic Progression of a Diva Obsessed, The Satanic Obsession of a Diva Possessed* on March 10, 2011, as part of the series *So Funny It Hurts*, curated by Brian Getnick. Each of the work's two parts lasted approximately 15 minutes.

5. The Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) estimates that there are 4,200 homeless youth ages 24 and under in Los Angeles County on any given day and close to 9,500 throughout the year. Of the homeless youth surveyed in Hollywood in the course of a study by the Hollywood Homeless Youth Partnership, 40% identified as LGBTQ. S. Rabinovitz, M. Desai, A. Schneir, and L. Clark, *No Way Home: Understanding the Needs and Experiences of Homeless Youth in Hollywood*, Hollywood Homeless Youth Partnership (2010), http://www.hhyp.org/downloads/HHYP_TCE_Report_11-17-10.pdf.

6. In conversation with the author on May 4, 2011.

7. The Supremes, "Come See About Me" and "Where Did Our Love Go," *25th Anniversary*, Motown Records, 1986, MP3.

8. Vincent Lyon-Callo, *Inequality, Poverty, and Neoliberal Governance: Activist Ethnography in the Homeless Sheltering Industry* (Peterborough: Broadview, 2004), 11. On criminalization and surplus labor: Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007).

9 & 12. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1.

10. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 125.

11. The audio is excerpted from *Satanis: The Devil's Mass*, a 1970 American documentary about Anton LaVey and the Church of Satan, directed and produced by Ray Laurent.

13. Yasmin Nair, "Against Equality, Against Marriage: An Introduction," *Against Equality: Queer Critiques of Gay Marriage*, ed. Ryan Conrad (Lewiston: Against Equality Press, 2010), 5.

Right: Kale Likover, (photo of performance), 2011.

Kale Likover in conversation with Melinda Guillen

Kale Likover is a Los Angeles-based artist working with a variety of materials including the body. Frequently using personal experiences as narrative and the visuality of nostalgia, Kale's performances explore the transformative elements of gender identity and expression. His work seeks to disrupt the dichotomous conceptualization of gender and provokes a critical dialogue concerning the complexity of gender and sexual expression and presentation. He received a BFA from UCLA in 2006 and has performed in *Confusion is Sex #1 and #2*, *Trans/Giving* and *Queer Mondays* at Highways.

Melinda Guillen: In your artist statement, you mention that you explore how gender is not finite but rather influenced by cultural experience. Can you speak a little bit about how the social, political and spatial aspects of Los Angeles influence your work?

Kale Likover: How we perceive the space that we are in defines us, our actions, and how we present ourselves. Being part of the diaspora of LA makes it easy to find community and develop oneself in that community. The transgender community in LA inspires a lot of my work.

MG: Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) has a long history of queer and feminist performance. How has, if at all, its history, location or other elements of LACE influenced your upcoming performance for the show?

Right: Kale Likover, *Surviving Detachably* (photo of performance), 2011.

KL: I am excited to be part of the queer and feminist history at LACE. I am also excited by the fact that anyone could happen upon the show because of its prime location on Hollywood Boulevard. Even people just searching for the wax museum. I hope that the location will bring in some folks who wouldn't necessarily seek my performance out.

MG: *So Funny It Hurts* is conceived around the expression of humor or play as a way of communicating pain. Do you find that the experience of pain is also something that can be challenged, deconstructed or transformed similarly like the persisting dichotomy of gender?

KL: Absolutely. I think pain is totally transformative. Pain is something I consistently use in my own work. When I was a child, I'd set aside time to draw, about an hour every day, since I was 4 years old because I was dealing with an alcoholic mom. Art, in general, has been used for so long to transform pain and a lot of my work comes out of that. So, I'm dealing with how to build on that. And what is actually powerful about that pain and also what is funny about it. I've been reading a lot of David Sedaris lately and it's so good because his work highlights these really painful, dry issues and lets you laugh about ridiculousness. And how life is ridiculous. How pain is so intense and can be so affecting in one minute and then you have to look back on it and it appreciates. You know, it appreciates like wine. Pain appreciates like wine. But really, you find a lot of value in it later.

MG: It seems that humor, as a device, doesn't necessarily challenge pain by further complicating it. Like, when you are thinking of challenging the dichotomy of gender, you want to complicate it, to reveal its complexity. But with humor, it seems more like a coping mechanism so it's actually making something huge and overwhelming seem manageable and less alienating. Is some of that alive in your work?

KL: Yeah, definitely. I don't think that my work describes the whole gamut of gender presentation and gender identity and how you relate to what we present but I do feel like if I'm able to personify and highlight a certain bit of it, then I'm able to get somewhere with an audience.

MG: Can you allude a little bit to what you planning for the show?

KL: Sure. I'm thinking about pain, humor and how we use one to deal with the other. But I'm still working within the scope of taking something nostalgic and familiar and coming in with my own feeling, using humor and whatever else I can bring to the table. I'm really nervous because it's like being trans and addressing that in my work. I think the experience of pain but also gender orientation is also really personal and so I think because things are really fresh for me, it's a little bit more raw. In some ways, I'm anxious about dealing with this rawness right now but also humor is therapeutic for me and it'll help me negotiate what I've just been through. Pain is just one of those things that has so many different forms and yet it can affect you in the exact same way. Even if I'm going to discuss something from a long time ago.

MG: Do you see pain and humor as a dichotomy?

KL: I mean, the relationship between humor and pain is very muddy. You can be in a place of great pain and still experience humor. So in a way, maybe it is more of a continuum. A continuum is a circle. So, you can experience those things simultaneously. Just like how you can with gender, which I actively do in my work to experience both in different ways.

MG: In terms of reception, how did you feel that the audience related to your performance, *Surviving Detachably*, when you performed an exuberantly nuanced version of the memorable song about transformation, "Part of Your World," in Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, complete with wig and mermaid costume in the *Confusion is Sex* show (curated by Dino Dinco in LA, September 2010)?

KL: I feel like they did relate to it. In a way, it's like forcing the audience to relate to it. That's almost the way that I use humor. If I make them laugh, then they have to take it positively. There's no room for them to be judgmental or criticize me. They have to enjoy themselves and if they are enjoying themselves, then they have to think positively about my gender expression and identity and all this baggage that comes with me. I appreciate my audience but at the same time, I want them to experience something specific.

MG: Do you also feel that when you have the audience laughing that it counters the conventional art viewing experience, which tends to take itself very seriously?

KL: That's true! I know. I'm petrified of that.

MG: It can also be a way of identifying those in the audience like, "Yeah, you're laughing. You get it. You're here with me."

KL: Yeah, the humor is a filter.

MG: So you can kind of separate the assholes.

KL: Yes! If you aren't laughing with me, you're against me!

MARCH 17

Nathan Bockelman in conversation with Carol Cheh

Nathan Bockelman is a multi-media artist working in sculpture and performance. His work often involves the physical investigation of the material and psychological properties of objects. He currently lives in Riverside, California and is pursuing his MFA at the University of California, Riverside.

Carol Cheh: To me, contemporary humor and satire seem to be much more complicated and multilayered than it has been in the past. I think of *30 Rock*, which uses blatant racism and homophobia in its scripts and yet it is so brilliant that it somehow manages to not offend anyone. Or My Barbarian's heavy hipster irony that is also informed by a very sweet and plaintive sincerity. What role do you see humor playing in your own work? How do you want it to function as a tool in your practice?

Nathan Bockelman: Yeah, I think so too. Even a show like *East Bound and Down*, which I've been watching lately, plays with this character, a sort of redneck, failed major league baseball player who is such an asshole—bigoted, misogynist, just the worst—but he's framed as the struggling hero of the show, so his vileness becomes his "charm." For me, the show is packed with irony but strangely undulates between catharsis (wanting to let loose and just BE this dick) and inherent criticism (I'll NEVER be this dick, look at how ridiculous he is). In my work, I've never fully taken on traits or built a character, at least as such; when I perform, I probably do construct characters, but never at such a distance as these TV characters might claim to be created at.

In my performances I think I've been interested in the situation of a space and doing actions within it that unfold over time in a more romantic notion of "performance" or physicality to some degree. In one that I did with Eric Svedas, titled *2 Boys Small World or Hiring a Stage Prop*, I was dressed up as myself and Eric was a similar sort of doppelgänger. We did a whole series of actions and rearrangements, but the actions were task-oriented and costume was never considered in terms of satire. I guess what interests me here is the idea of "dress-up" as an alchemy of the individual and the space—this is where I might stop most of the time. The humor has tended to come out of absurd actions and rituals—spinning on my head, putting a cheap mask on the back of my head and falling backward off a ledge, speaking into a microphone about something while hanging on a wall. I guess you could say it's a lot of physical humor. And as for how it should function, I think it's just to provoke an audience, to sway them into different fields of relation with me and what I'm doing.

CC: I agree that as an artist, much of your work revolves primarily around the body and its presence and reverberations in a physical space, and humor seems to occur incidentally, kind of as a natural by-product of our over-saturated culture. I am thinking specifically of *Feel NRG*, a performance that you and Eric did at Highways in November 2009, and which, incidentally, inspired the name of my performance art blog, *Another Righteous Transfer!*. That piece was hilarious, but I don't think that humor was your focus going into it. It was more about, as you say, the situation of a space, the social context you were in, and provocation of the audience. Do you think it would be more constructive to talk about your performative work in the context of experimental theater? Have you been at all influenced by, for example, Antonin Artaud, Eugène Ionesco, or Jean Genet?

NB: I think I espouse a lot of those ideas indirectly. I am somewhat familiar with dialogues around Artaud, often as compared to Bertolt Brecht, but I'm not completely enlightened on either really. I've read some Genet, but never in the context of theater. While I see how the ideas in their work would relate to mine, I think a piece like Feel NRG came more directly from stand-up comedy and motivational speaking (which would actually relate back to Artaud and Brecht). "Experimental comedy" might be a way to think of it—but then, not exactly. I think there was a genuine investigation into a topic, presented as saying in front of an audience, "What exactly are we talking about here?" In our case, this came to consist of typical or atypical groupings of actions and symbols that we felt represented "energy" or "NRG"—there's a bit of satire! We pulled that usage from titles in club anthems, and rave culture. But it wasn't simply a comment on those appropriated terms or cultures; I see it as more of a weird amalgam of things that Eric and I encountered in our daily lives—hot plates, packing boxes, rubber bouncy balls, baby onesies for adults, burgers, DRI (Dirty Rotten Imbeciles), box cutters, exercise, etc. (Wow, it all sounds really infantile and/or Grungy...) There was an attempt to examine the possibilities of the term "energy" as a general driving force and content for creativity, but I think we also just depended on the collision of our two personalities or identities. I am speaking for the piece myself here, but I think Eric would agree—it's something personal and something guarded, partly a satire of ourselves and others, and partly a real philosophical question (maybe a sophomoric one?!).

Left: Nathan Bockelman, 2011.

Previous Spread: Nathan Bockelman, 2011.

CC: Do you see yourself as a Los Angeles artist? Does this city influence your practice, and if so, how? If you could choose to live/practice anywhere, where would it be?

NB: Hmm, that's an interesting question. It's hard to say. I haven't lived here that long, but a lot of other artists living and working here haven't either. I come from a little bit south of here—San Diego county. Since moving here and experiencing LA, I think it's influenced me a lot, but I couldn't say exactly how. For a participating artist in this city, the stakes are high, and they aren't. It's an international city, and it's not, because it's like ten different cities with different particular scenes. I think LA is just generally weird. It's riddled with uncertain irony and sincerity, totally devoted and passionate, and totally full of itself in a New-Agey sense. But this is where shit is. This is where the art scenes are, right? I'm sure there are tons of other great cities with great art scenes but at the moment LA is where a lot of cross-pollination from different institutional scenes and practices is happening, and that's something I'm involved in.

CC: Name one or two performance artists who you feel have been big influences on your work, and tell us why they are important to you.

NB: I've been influenced by "performances" from Vito Acconci, Mike Kelley, and Stuart Sherman—these are performances I read about and reconstruct in my head, but I don't know how much you can really call those artists "performance artists," when you compare them to someone like Dynasty Handbag, for example, who I think really utilizes the moment and timing in the performative sense. Vito Acconci's work seems to build on you: what he did, documents of what he did, myths of what he did, how he creates an array of simple gestures with big implications in a psychoanalytic and purely phenomenological way. Along similar lines, John Cage and Fluxus with their seemingly simple gestures and scores have also been constant interests of mine. The physicality is there in a lot of that work, but it exists as a result of many other actions or decisions, and the site of performance is not necessarily located in the body, if that makes sense. As far as "body" work, I have to say, Tere O'Connor's "observational" dance choreography has really interested me lately. He seems to take on the tropes and physicality inherent in dance and really toy with them (along with simple theatrical tropes), making a stew of differently gendered bodies and odd action/reaction scenarios—at times uncannily present and at other times completely detached. I find this very interesting.

Above: Nathan Bockelman, 2011.

Lauren Weedman in conversation with Brian Getnick and Zemula Barr

Lauren Weedman is a writer/performer based in Los Angeles whose theater projects, including Homecoming, Wreckage and Bust, present emotionally charged subject matter with a darkly humorous edge. Weedman also plays the character "Horny Patty" on HBO's Hung and has appeared on Reno 911, Curb Your Enthusiasm and The Daily Show with Jon Stewart. In 2007 she published her first book, *A Woman Trapped in a Woman's Body: Stories from a Life of Cringe.*

Brian Getnick: When I saw your one woman show, *Bust*, at REDCAT last year I thought to myself, finally, a performance piece that takes its tragic content seriously enough to be hilarious. Not to get too theoretical here but I was reminded of a quote from Charles Ludlam's Manifesto for the Theater of the Ridiculous:

"Bathos is that which is intended to be sorrowful but because of the extremity of its expression becomes comic. Pathos is that which is intended to be comic but because of the extremity of expression becomes sorrowful. Some things which seem to be opposites are actually different degrees of the same thing."

Lauren Weedman: I'm going to use that quote on my next grant application. Thank you, you just made me 20,000 dollars.

BG: Are there any performers you feel a kinship with who also blur this line between tragedy and humor?

LW: This is always embarrassing because people always ask, "who's your inspiration," and I wish I could make up somebody more obscure. But

Right: Lauren Weedman.

I'm from Indiana so I was watching HBO when it first went on the air, when I was in sixth grade or seventh grade, something like that, and Whoopi Goldberg had a special. She did monologues and they were comedic but they were also really serious. She had a whole monologue about this girl who had given herself an abortion with a coat hanger. At the time people were laughing but they were also really freaked out. And I remember that was the moment where I was like, "oh my god, you can do both. That's what I want to do."

BG: Speaking of doing both, Bust is a performance about your conversations with inmates at a women's prison. How did you approach this project?

LW: I had to sign a bunch of confidentiality agreements. I was truly a volunteer so I can't take their stories. Instead, my idea was that I was not going to take any notes during this whole experience and afterwards what stuck with me and was processed within me, I would use and write the show that way. So it's really my story.

BG: So did you volunteer at the jail because you wanted to write stories?

LW: Well, it was a mixture. I didn't know if it was going to be a play but I got a commission that was about a year away. I knew I wanted to do something and get out of the city so I decided to volunteer and if it ended up being a show, it would be the show. But maybe something else would happen during the year. I wanted to be changed by the experience as a human being, not just for the play.

BG: What do you get from this experience of immersing yourself in a situation?

LW: Well, it strengthens the acting and makes the performance more intense and cathartic. wrote a book, *A Woman Trapped in a Woman's Body: Stories from a Life of Cringe*, based on parts of shows I had done and made them into short stories but I wasn't always able to translate what I was feeling. The editor told me, "remember, we can't see your face." But as an actor I can still remember it and feel it. I was present when it was happening and I have emotions to give out. That helps me connect better with the audience even if the story line is not necessarily a universal theme.

Zemula Barr: Do you think that humor also allows for more of a connection with your audience?

LW: Definitely, that too. Although I've done my shows when nobody laughs and then afterwards people say something like "thank you, what a journey." I did the Bust show in Pittsburgh and I had much older audiences, and as soon as the subject matter was brought up, they just assumed it was a drama. And I was thinking, "there's no way you can't laugh at that. They must really hate the show." But people loved it, they just thought it was too intense to be funny.

ZB: Have you ever had reactions to your shows that were not about missing the joke entirely but perhaps that the joke went too far?

LW: People have left my theater shows if they don't like it but I haven't had much confrontation about it, and the one time I did I thought it was a huge compliment. The person who confronted me worked in the men's jail, and his girlfriend, which made it all the worse, was the woman I had worked for (she was the head of volunteers). He said, "do you really have the right as a white woman to be doing this show and getting all these laughs when there's a black holocaust going on down the street?" And I was like "I don't know, do I have a right? It's just my story as a volunteer." But he said, "it's not just that. You're getting laughs about things that aren't funny." But I felt that everything that the audience was laughing at were the things that I laughed at with the people in the jail at the time. I wasn't doing a satire of them.

He also said that that "nobody is thinking about the jails or the situation that is happening when they leave your show. They're just thinking about how funny and how great you are. It's all about you." I tried to say that's not necessarily the case, people are thinking about the jail, I think it brings some awareness, but right as I was saying this some women passed by us and they were like "sorry to interrupt. Lauren, that was hilarious! You're so funny, we just love you. I just know something's going to happen for you." We were trying to have a deep moment and they just fucked it up.

BG: What are your plans or expectations for the upcoming LACE show?

LW: What I would like to do is a portion of my new show, *No...You Shut Up*, but improvise it a bit.

I like any time that I'm around either performance artists or modern dancers. If I can be anywhere they're going to be, it's going to be a good night. Sometimes that changes the expectations of the audience. I don't know a ton of performance artists, except the people I've met doing the studio stuff at REDCAT. I'd like to be in that world. That's why I decided to do this.

ZB: You also do quite a bit of television work in addition to theater. How do you manage both?

LW: I used to not do television that much. I always felt so awkward and I thought maybe it

Above: Lauren Weedman,

wasn't a good fit. What's good about it is it's really the only hope I have in getting theater shows booked sometimes, if people recognize me from television. The Daily Show was key; I went off Broadway after because of my Daily Show credit. I thought it was problematic because it initially brought people to my show but then I was doing something different. But it did help. I like television now because it allows me to do more theater.

ZB: Los Angeles seems like an obvious choice for a television career, but what do you think of Los Angeles as a place for theater? Now that you are here do you consider yourself a Los Angeles artist or is that even important for you?

LW: It's taken me a while to feel like a Los Angeles artist because I just feel more supported as a theater artist outside of this city. When I call theaters or try to get a rental space the general vibe is that I'm another actress getting ready to do my solo showcase and the respect level is low. The one theater where I have felt excited about being a Los Angeles artist is at REDCAT, when I performed in their studio series and as part of their NOW festival.

I was visiting Berkeley recently and while I was there I kept thinking how I could never live there, even though I share a lot of the same values as all those dirty hippies. When I got on the plane to come home we were sitting by an older drunk guy who kept snapping pictures with his cell phone and shouting out, "LA! Look at this city! Beautiful!" and then he pointed out a horse racing track and said "that's my track! and I live right by there!" I didn't even know there was a horse track in LA. And then to imagine that there were all those neighborhoods and lives and communities around it - it sounds sort of simplistic but it gave me a "this is why I love this city" moment. This city is vast and inspiring and hard to pin down.

Performing the Neurotic Funny Lady: Disidentification and Female Neurosis in Lauren Weedman's No...You Shut Up

By Zemula Barr

In his review of her one-woman show, *No... You Shut Up*, *L.A. Weekly* writer David Cotner awarded Lauren Weedman the title of "Best Neurotic Funny Lady," lauding her performance for its "self-loathing that is so acute and so dense that it sucks all other feeling down into it."[1] In everyday speech, the word "neurotic" has lost many of its clinical associations and simply means overly-anxious and somewhat socially maladjusted, but the history of neurosis as an ailment affecting sexually repressed or "deviant" upper class white women who were either unable to or refused to fulfill their expected feminine roles as mothers is still with us.[2] Numerous feminist scholars have taken this history to task, yet the generalization that women are emotionally motivated and therefore prone to neurotic behavior persists within popular culture as well as in an art discourse.[3]

Cotner's essay instigated the following exploration this stereotype of the neurotic woman in Weedman's performance of *No... You Shut Up* at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (L.A.C.E.).[4] Whereas Cotner

Right: Lauren Weedman.

comes close to equating Weedman's performance of a "neurotic funny lady" with the assumed neurosis of the artist herself, this essay looks at how Weedman's portrayal of "Lauren" provides a space for deconstructing this archetype.

Weedman typically performs for theater audiences, but as she morphs from one character to the next within the gallery space at L.A.C.E., there is no blinding spotlight to shield the audience from her gaze, and no stage to create an artificial barrier between the viewer and the countless characters the artist embodies throughout the show. Her rendering of "Lauren" as the protagonist draws even more attention to the missing fourth-wall, as Weedman's highly physical delivery of her pointed script further exaggerates this character's neurotic behavior. [5] Using only the staging of a chair set against the stark white of the gallery walls, Weedman becomes Lauren, who sits in the in the passenger seat as her boyfriend David drives to a family gathering. She asks if there will be a prayer or grace said for his deceased former wife, Hannah, during the party and David becomes upset that his partner has brought this up while his child sits in the back seat. Lauren points out that his son is wearing headphones and then exclaims, "I'm not a monster!" She then pantomimes banging furiously on the car window's glass, mouthing "help me!"

Feelings of frustration and rage that might be left festering inside are manifested for the audience in this frenetic outburst, drawing attention to the absurdity of a situation in which Lauren is made to feel like a monster and ultimately punished for attempting to be considerate of David and his family's relationship with Hannah. Although Lauren resists identifying as the monster who lacks concern for the feelings of her boyfriend's child, these performative hysterics for the audience's benefit parody the stereotype of the emotionally unhinged neurotic woman, the other monster that haunts Lauren throughout the show.

Weedman's tactics are in line with José Esteban Muñoz's definition of disidentification as a performative strategy that "tries to to transform a cultural logic from within" by neither fully embracing or completely rejecting a dominant ideology such as the belief women are irrational beings.[6] This performance of Lauren resists complete identification with the stereotypical neurotic female, as her use of over-the-top physical gesturing satirizes this generalization about the female psyche. Physical humor often provides comic relief, but here it sharpens rather than softens Weedman's critique. As Muñoz points out, "[c]omedy does not exist independently of rage," but rather it can be used as a tool for channeling anger for political and pedagogical purposes.[7] The palpable anger that is transmitted through this scene in the car a serves the political purpose of calling into question the status of Lauren's "neurotic" behavior as an inherently gendered trait by bringing to light the ways in which such behavior, as it was in the past, is a reflection of the problems with the broader social situation.

For the next scene, the sparse gallery space is now transformed into the house belonging to David's father, George, which is populated by the innumerable eccentrics Weedman embodies at one point or another. As Lauren, she comes across as overly anxious for David's family to accept her, which Weedman exaggerates through the character's incessant chatter that betrays her neurotic paranoia about this relationship. While conversing with David's sister, Lauren not only derides at great length a family friend and masseuse whom she suspects is in love with David, but she also attempts to bond with this fairly reserved woman by discussing her penchant for marijuana. After this and countless other faux pas, Lauren finally stumbles upon the woman she previously maligned giving David a taint massage in a back room. Her suspicion of their inappropriate relationship are now vindicated and with this Lauren storms out of the scene seething with rage.

Such an encounter reveals that Lauren's anxieties are actually grounded in reality, providing Weedman with a defense of her protagonist's neurotic behavior. Although she parodies Lauren's outward expressions of neurosis through her over-the-top delivery, this character's behavior is also positioned as the exasperated response to the callousness and narcissism of others. As illustrated by the confrontation in the car and her willingness to place herself in a hostile family situation for the sake of her partner, Lauren at times makes herself vulnerable only to have her efforts harshly rebuffed. In many ways, this could be interpreted as another example of the joke Woody Allen attributes to Freud's *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious* as he admits at the beginning of *Annie Hall* that his problems with women stem from not wanting to belong to any club that would have a person like him for a member. Weedman's characterization of Lauren plays into this all-too-common relationship pattern up until this moment of truth in the back room, yet for those of use who have made the same painful mistakes, this is what makes *No...You Shut Up* so funny it hurts.

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1. David Cotner, "Best Neurotic Funny Lady," L.A. Weekly (October 7, 2010), http://www.laweekly.com/2010-10-07/calendar/best-neurotic-funny-lady/(accessed June 24, 2011).

2. From his various case studies of female neurotics, Sigmund Freud concluded that women exhibited neurotic tendencies when they were not able to fulfill their feminine destinies as mothers (in order to replace their desire for the penis with a child) or rejected their expected place in the home and pursued higher education and careers. Sigmund Freud, "Femininity," in *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis*, Peter Gay, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1965).

3. This brings to mind Adrian Piper's response to Donald Kuspit's close reading of her meta-art writings in his article "Adrian Piper: Self-Healing Through Meta-Art." Kuspit used Piper's meta-art text to as evidence for her inner mental and emotional turmoil, presuming intimate knowledge of Piper while reducing her conceptual and intellectual work to art therapy. To read this article with Piper's rebuttal, please see Adrian Piper, "An Open Letter to Donald Kuspit," in *Out of Order, Out of Sight: Volume II Selected Writings in Art Criticism* (1987; reprint, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 107-126.

4. This particular performance consisted of excerpts culled from No...You Shut Up for the So Funny It Hurts performance series curate by Brian Getnick at L.A.C.E. on March 24, 2011.

5. Although Weedman has made it clear in numerous interviews that the show is based on personal experience, in this essay, I have attempted to separate Weedman as the artist and performer from character of Lauren she portrays in order to avoid repeating Kuspit's mistakes.

6. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.

7. Ibid, xi.

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* Many thanks to Brian Getnick for editing countless drafts of this constantly-evolving essay, and to Michael Barr, who has not only been a reliable sounding board for my various academic queries, but is always game to talk about Freud.

APRIL 07

Ultraviolet Rage: Asher Hartman in conversation with Geoff Tuck

Geoff Tuck: In my initial email conversation with Brian about plans for the performance series and publication titled *Native Strategies* and about the program which will be at LACE, *So Funny It Hurts* he used a nice quote:

"Start with something you oppose.
Move towards it."

Tell me a little about your practice and how it draws on an understanding of what you oppose to then explore "the opposed" with an audience. Also, can you see an opportunity for a member of this "opposition" to find in your work a place of understanding that might make them feel safe enough to go a step further and then question, as you question, their own world view?

Asher Hartman: Well, I wish that my work were evolved enough to really allow in members of the "opposition" through empathy and understanding. That being said, one part of my practice, my intuitive practice, is meant to do exactly that, to teach the use of intuition as a tool of acknowledgment in face-to-face contact with another human being. It's very much geared to helping people to see each other energetically, and I would love to use it in situations where people in opposition are in direct contact with one another. In that sense, there are no members of the opposition to play with or against, only the possibility of grasping the essence of a human being beyond the usual flawed means.

But my theatrical practice is a little looser and riskier, I think. It's really meant to let in all comers, all possible reactions, and sometimes the audience itself is the opposition. I think we are almost a little too comfortable as audiences, especially in theatrical settings where we may think of ourselves as "The Customer," who must be entertained and satisfied. Until recently, my work seemed to challenge that inside a kind of home-made spectacle, sometimes by pushing people past their emotional limits. To be honest, I just tried to think of performance theater in a lot of ways, trying to serve the subject matter at hand in the manner that seemed right. Now, I really want to work with the tropes of entertainments, examining their structures, how they succeed, and to take out the substance, the actual entertainment material, like narrative for example, and replace it with layered and complex ideas the audience can further complicate by making meaning, or not.

GT: I want to make sure to ask about your plans for the show. In an earlier conversation you talked about 1970s comedians/actors/performers like Paul Lynde, Wayland and Madame, Leonard Frey, Rip Taylor and more who are escaping me just now. I love your plan to mine their physical language - the gestures they used, and to marry them with the angry and maybe violent words of your characters. Can you expand on this a little?

AH: I'm starting with a base of Paul Lynde, Wayland Flowers and Madame, Barclay Shaw, and Charles Nelson Reilly--not them so much as their gestures, as you say, their essence--because I'm interested in them as icons, as those who inspire, whose fierceness and rage is as you suggest, transmitted in gestures that are repressed, or controlled, or stylized. They are in my view sometimes cultivated as expressions of nonchalance, defensiveness, intellectual strength, in effect, aspects of personality created for consumption.

GT: Do you think that the actions and even the words these performers used do in fact contain and transmit a great deal of fury? I mean fury at their circumstance of being queer in a world that rejected queerness.

AH: Absolutely.

GT: The manner of their performance style is really drawn from the queer culture at large back in that day: fierce, demanding, and outrageous sometimes, conservative at others, but always acting with the understanding that their code must protect them as much as reveal them.

AH: Perfectly put.

GT: Can you give us an idea of the influence these actors who embodied "The Other" to a past generation might have had on you? They must have inspired and influenced you and your own practice, yes?

AH: You know, watching Paul Lynde, there was faint recognition in me as youth. This guy was somehow different than other men, somehow more accessible, more like me, and of course I watched him on *Bewitched*, where he was magical, and not particularly nice. He had a kind of freedom and power that I didn't have, but since he was "like me" in some then unfathomable way, by extension he gave me freedom. He operated as the more powerful, less obedient me. I think it's the same with the other actors. That same faint inarticulable sense that the person was like me and subversively powerful felt liberating, although of course I wouldn't have used those words.

I was totally infatuated with Leonard Fry, the actor who plays Harold in *The Boys in The Band* and in an opposite pitch, Motel the Tailor in *Fiddler on The Roof*. I'm not sure what it was about him, that he was apparently Jewish, self-described in the *The Boys…* as ugly, and glorious in his contempt for everyone, especially his best

Previous Spread: Asher Hartman, 2011.

Right: Asher Hartman, 2011

friend. I think I loved his defiance; his existence was defiance. But this was also true of straight male white actors like Peter Falk, for example. I was entranced by him in *Columbo* as a kid: his raincoat, his guise of idiocy--he made me somehow into "The Other." I was aware that I was like him and not him. He was accessible and foreign, "in" as a white male and "out" as a working cop, not apparently elite in intellect, and yet in fact superior to the idealized classes. I think that's why he had such a wide appeal as an "everyman."

GT: If gesture and physical expression can be embedded in culture and expressive of capitalist imperatives, and "normal" social behaviors are taught the way body language is mimicked from generation to generation, do you think that the queer gestures and structures of the entertainment world might in fact date to some sort of queer originators whose actions were, over time, embedded in the physical language of theater?

AH: Oh, this is a great question I don't have the answer to. Someone must! I wonder if it does come out of theater and some aesthetic, as in Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, or in some bodily codes to identify one another, and of course I'm making a gross assumption and casting all queerness in the same light, which I understand is really tenuous. But queer theater, I mean there may be commonalities of taste, of interest, among some groups, who were successful and spread those ideas through that popular or artistic success. To be honest, I don't know but it's very interesting to think about.

GT: Earlier you admitted that while gender issues are not the focus of you interest in art making, they do keep coming up. Why do you think this is?

AH: Oh, I think you are asking better questions than I have answers. I do think it's interesting that someone who keeps making queer work (a.k.a. me) doesn't really want to make queer work, but can't get away from it. To me that speaks to some innate connection, some ingrained, even bodily coupling with this work that comes right out of simply being queer and growing up seeing queer, lesbian, gay, trans and bi people make art on a regular basis, out or not. I certainly hadn't even heard of queer anything until high school and by that time I had already been bathed in this sort of entertainment. I Dream of Jeannie? Come on. Gilligan's Island could not be more queer. And Bewitched was like queer kid religious training.

GT: I have one final question, about geography: can you talk about your practice in relation to this city we all share, Los Angeles?

AH: I came to L.A. to go to U.C.L.A., and I've been here a long time. Right now, L.A. is a great place to work. Artists are open to all kinds of work; there's a real interest in each other's work, and a general friendliness among the different communities in which there's a lot of overlap. I think artist spaces like Sea and Space Explorations, founded and directed by Lara Bank, Mark Allen's project Machine Project, Monte Vista Projects, Pieter, Outpost, Telic, the wulf, Echo Curio, and many others, have been responsible for a change in ideology, in possibility. These are imaginative, open-ended, welcoming places that seem to think that artists are the most well-positioned to develop the dialogue, so to speak. I see museums and non-profits like L.A.C.E. taking a cue from the wealth of ideas and momentum of the artists here and in turn behaving as if they are also in dialogue with these communities. When I first started making art, the feeling was that the critics and dealers were in charge of the dialogue and that the artists waited for direction. I might be biased, but that doesn't seem to be so much the case at the present. This kind of freedom means that I can make art here, really. I think it's very difficult for someone who does what I do to exist in a strictly market-driven art world. I don't think I had a need to make art here at all until I met the artists who are my community at present. In fact, I was very much interested in leaving. But now, I think there's so much to do here, and so much flexibility—you can leave and come back, for instance—that it seems the very best place to make art. I think the city is also incredibly welcoming to artists from elsewhere, since almost everyone is from somewhere else.

Performance-based work is hard to maintain, especially work like mine that's not performance art and not proper theater. It really almost has no place except the place I make for it. (pulled quote?) I think that's what's also nice about L.A. is that there is still space here. There are pockets of places in which a person can work and invite people to see the work. I also have a great, I should say, incredible, group of performers I have the privilege to work with, and they're here. I am hoping to establish a company, a regular group who work with one another consistently. I don't know if I could do that anywhere else now. I think we've established a trust, a working method, and a sense of collaboration that's hard to find anywhere.

Lastly, I have to say, L.A. is funny. You really have to have a sense of humor to live here, because the city is made of so many different types of people who get into each other's salads, if you will. And because of that you find all kinds of odd behavior and circumstances, alongside tragic circumstances, such as any you'd find in a city. Its metropolitan nature, the great diversity of cultures, all of this is terribly important to me. I don't think I could live in a city that wasn't diverse and didn't have a sense of the absurd.
I'm glad you asked these questions, because come to think of it, I think this must be one of the best places in the world to be making art at the moment, and I'm glad I'm here. I have the best friends in the world. We help each other; we get along, we support one another. What more can you ask for?

Above: Asher Hartman, 2011.

APRIL 14

Going Berserk: Paul Outlaw in conversation with Danyel Madrid

Los Angeles-based performance artist Paul Outlaw is best known for depicting myriad characters during a single performance, many of whom exist decades, if not centuries apart. The contrasts between these personalities are heightened, drawn out and played with through transformations that are elegantly fluid or deliberately jarring. In his own words: "…the experience of transformation—especially quick transformations from one character to another or from one reality to another—can be like being in a lucid dream-state, like being possessed, like playing games like a child, or suffering from a dissociative identity disorder. It all depends on the demands of the work, and how far I let myself go." He will soon complete his solo performance trilogy, *Here Be Dragons*, *Berserker*, and *The Late, Late Show*. Within the framework of *Here Be Dragons*, Outlaw explores issues of race and sexuality through the portrayal of twenty-five different characters. In Berserker, Outlaw takes on three characters: Nat Turner, Jeffrey Dahmer, and Outlaw himself, while in *The Late, Late Show*, he focuses on an immortal traveler at three different times in his life: 1855, 1955, and 2155. Outlaw and his panoply of characters illustrate the complex, multi-faceted nature of race, sexuality and American society contained within his body as well as within a wider political discourse.

On a sunny Sunday morning, I met with Outlaw in Griffith Park to discuss his practice and his many characters that he brings to life.

Danyel Madrid: As you mentioned earlier, a majority of your performance background stems from experimental theatre. How definitive is that boundary between experimental theatre and performance art?

Paul Outlaw: Performance art is one corner of the experimental theater world. Or let's put it this way: performance art is experimental, but it doesn't have to be theater.

DM: How have the documentary-style performances of actors/artists such as Anna Deavere Smith informed your practice?

PO: It was after seeing Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror* (1992) that I was first inspired to create a solo theater project. I was especially intrigued by the vast number of characters she embodied, the humor that was an essential ingredient of the piece, and the starkness of the staging.

DM: Your work tends to utilize the themes of transformation and contrast. I also noticed your work is riddled with allusions, stretching from the myths of the ancient world to contemporary politics. How do you research your characters and thread their stories together to create these rich performances?

PO: I spend a lot of time doing online research and finding library materials. There's a lot of reading, scanning, photocopying, and compiling. It's detective work. I'm looking for photographs, audio and video footage, maps, all kinds of things. Google is an amazing tool. Sometimes I find things by accident that lead me to re-think aspects of a project or that turn out to be defining motifs or narrative points. My background in traditional theater and songwriting comes in handy in bringing it all together. Even when the goal is not to create a "play" per se, I'm always aware of pacing, momentum, dynamics, exposition, etc.

DM: For the characters you portray, I know you must feel a sense of integrity to portray them accurately. But do you ever have other feelings towards these characters?

PO: I always feel a responsibility to express a truth about the characters I portray, whether they are fictional or based on real people. That truth can be connected to something physical (a gesture, a dialect, etc.), something emotional or to some factual detail from that character's life. Beyond that, I usually feel joy in bringing characters to life in performance; even when a character's existence is not particularly joyous, there is a feeling of delight that comes from sharing his/her story with an audience.

DM: In *So Funny It Hurts*, the series of performances by eight Los Angeles-based artists, we think about the idea of something we oppose, and then moving towards the opposition as a form of confrontation. I know you will be focusing on the movement of black conservatism within American politics for your performance. How will you deal with this issue? Will this performance affect you differently because it revolves around a movement you vehemently oppose?

PO: At this point in the development of the piece, I can't say too much about that. It's too soon, and I'm not sure what the piece will become. Right now I'm gathering material, mostly photographic, audio and video, and seeing where it takes me. My intent is to create a very theatrical piece that is not necessarily a theater piece. I don't think that I will ultimately be any more (or less) affected by it than anything I've previously done. After all, I've portrayed Jeffrey Dahmer.

Previous Spread: Paul Outlaw, 2011.

Right: Paul Outlaw, 2011.

Four dead comics enter the room. Pieces of wood hang from the back of the ventriloquist's suit. He is surprisingly unencumbered by them, he moves freely in this deconstructed cabinet. There is a false hand in a glove that trails neon yellow wig hair from the arm of the magician. On his back, a poster of a rooster is tacked like a mean joke. On the stand-up comic, pink and white marshmallows wobble unappetizingly, and on the singer, flabby red sacks bulge and drip from his sleeves, nasty and presumptuous like a turkey wattle.

Paul Outlaw as a singing bride is terrifying behind the diaphanous wedding veil that looks as if it's clotted with ashes. The dress he wears seamlessly merges into a jagged angular set piece, like a crushed sailboat anchored to a chair. Dress and ship glow green and blue in their folds.

So Funny It Hurts was made richer by the involvement of the artist Curt LeMieux who collaborated with both Asher Hartman and Paul Outlaw in the design of their costumes and set pieces. LeMieux is one of those rare artists whose work remains recognizably his own but at the same time is tailored beautifully to each artist's performance. His sculptures, in his own words, use "...recognizable imagery—abstract and repressed images of humans, animals, architectural and machine-like forms—and questionable materials ranging from blobs of paint and glue to non-art materials, such as socks and sticks and other unlikely but charged substances, [to] reopen their associative meanings, allowing the viewer to explore origins."

Angelino artists have a history of pushing against the standard hierarchy that relegates objects and costumes to a supporting role only as material remnants of the performance. Paul McCarthy, Mike Kelly, and Johanna Went, for instance, created performances in which objects took the form of puppet-like stand-ins for the subconscious or terrifying effigies of the cultural forces they wanted to destroy. Lemieux's performance-activated objects are similarly hyper-present; the categories of costume, set and prop can barely contain them. They are more like understudies who refuse to wait in the wings and who unexpectedly take the stage next to the actors, singing another song from another story.

Contributor Bios:

Carol Cheh is a writer and curator based in Los Angeles. She is the founder of Another Righteous Transfer!, a blog devoted to documenting LA's performance art scene, and currently writes for ArtInfo and the LA Weekly Style Council blog. Her curatorial projects have included You Don't Bring Me Flowers: An Evening of Re-Performances (PØST, 2010) and Signals: A Video Showcase (Orange County Museum of Art, 2008). She also served as exhibition coordinator for Tubular!, a show of California State University Long Beach MFA candidates curated by Doug Harvey (Pacific Design Center, 2010) and has diverse work experience at a number of museums, including SITE Santa Fe and MoCA. Carol is completing her master's thesis in art history, which explores mutated notions of authorship in the work of new media artist Ryan Trecartin.

Melinda Guillen is an arts writer and organizer from Las Vegas, Nevada. She recently graduated from the Master of Public Art Studies: Art/Curatorial Practices in the Public Sphere program at the University of Southern California. She is a contributing writer to the Art21 blog and has curated projects for Workspace, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) and Raid Projects. Most recently, she co-curated Work After Work, an exhibition exploring the economic conditions of artistic production at the MAK Center for Art and Architecture's Mackey Garage Top and wrote an essay for the exhibition catalog titled, "Entering the Familiar Unknown: Criticism and the Institution of Critique." She currently lives and works in Los Angeles.

Hans Kuzmich is an interdisciplinary artist working in Los Angeles and New York. He completed the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program in 2010 and is currently pursuing his MFA at the University of California Los Angeles.

Danyel Madrid is a Los Angeles-based writer, arts administrator, and long time lover of the Angeleno art scene. She has worked at several art-related organizations, including the arts/contemporary culture TV network Ovation, artist group Slanguage, the Daniel Weinberg Gallery, and as the director at Anna Helwing Gallery. Interested in both contemporary and ancient art, she studied art history and classics at the University of Southern California as well as archaeology on-site in Athens, Greece. She enjoys eating dangerously from taco trucks and reading everything from the comic book series Love and Rockets to dusty books written in ancient Greek.

Geoff Tuck, born in 1960, graduated from Ganesha High School in 1978. Mr. Tuck is a self-taught writer and artist. In 2007 Tuck began publishing a Los Angeles based art and culture e-newsletter called Notes on Looking and in 2010, inaugurated Notes on Looking as an online blog. He has written for X-TRA Contemporary Art Quarterly and has contributed to various museum and exhibition publications, including catalogs for Kaycee Olsen Gallery and the Studio Museum in Harlem.

Left: Asher Hartman, Curt LeMieux, 2011.

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