

Michelle Handelman

Selected Press

BOMB

A Surreptitious Form of Activism: Michelle Handelman Interviewed by Jane Ursula Harris

The filmmaker on her 1995 film BloodSisters documenting San Francisco's leather-dyke scene.

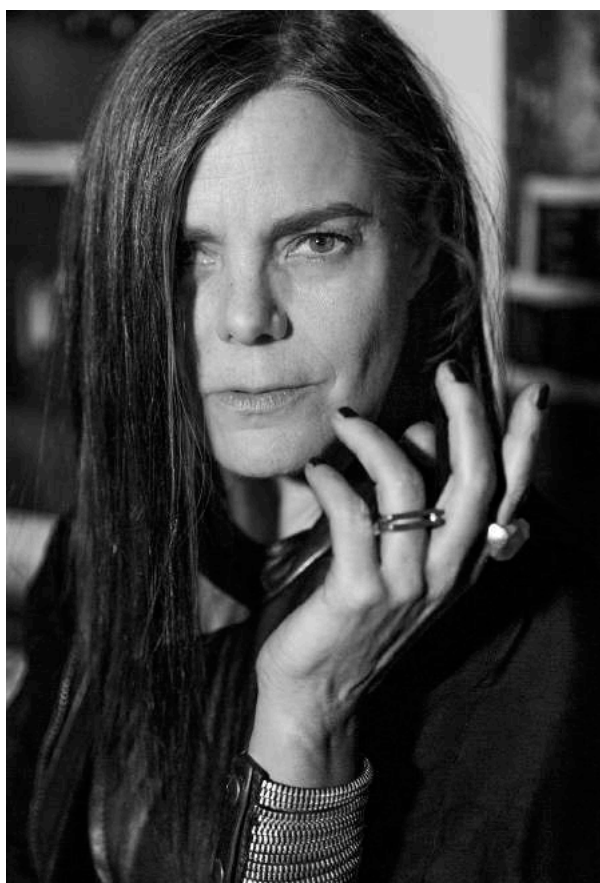


Still from *BloodSisters: Leather, Dykes and SadoMasochism*, 1995. Courtesy of the artist.

Michelle Handelman is best known for sexually charged, highly stylized video installations featuring queer icons like Zackary Drucker, Flawless Sabrina, John Kelly, Shannon Funchess, and Viva Ruiz. These lush, darkly erotic fantasies with their elaborate sets and Felliniesque costumes invoke decadence, fetish, and horror. Many draw upon the outré literature of deviants and outlaws: fragments of Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) are adapted in Handelman's *This Delicate Monster* (2004–07), for example; and Marguerite Duras's *The Lover* (1984) is one of three texts that inspired her film *Hustlers & Empires* (2018). These sources are always transposed into the feminist and radically queer milieu of the artist and her performers who merge the characters they play with versions of themselves.

Handelman's groundbreaking documentary, *BloodSisters: Leather, Dykes and SadoMasochism* (1995), reveals the origins of the artist's interest in the transgressive power of fantasy and pleasure. A feature-length film on the mid-'90s leather-dyke scene in San Francisco, it bears the themes of survival, risk, and belonging that mark subsequent work. The doc centers around eight self-described leather dykes who personally discuss the stigmas associated with S&M subculture—even among feminists and lesbians—and the fluid identities it presciently fostered: "There are people who top from the bottom, and bottom from the top. There are pushy bottoms and passive tops," Donna ShROUT clarifies. "I primarily identify as a faggot. I'm really into other butches, and I'm often effete," Robin Sweeney shares. It's a brave, complex, and unflinching look at a much-maligned subculture. To celebrate the film's twenty-fifth anniversary in conjunction with the fiftieth anniversary of Pride, the artist and I talked about its impetus and legacy.

—Jane Ursula Harris



Michelle Handelman. Photo by Grace Roselli.

Jane Ursula Harris

What motivated you to make *BloodSisters*?

Michelle Handelman

I moved to San Francisco in 1986, right at the height of the AIDS crisis, when the leather scene was still fairly underground. Through my friend Scott Shatsky who worked at The Gauntlet piercing salon, I met Skeeter and Jaime (who both appear in the film), and they invited me to the 1992 International Ms. Leather contest. I had been involved with S&M as a practice, yet I didn't know much about the leather community and the depth of its activism. But that night at the International Ms. Leather contest my mind was blown wide open. The event was beyond anything I had expected: it was politically charged, hardcore, and sexy as hell. And immediately I knew that I had to make a film about these powerful women, to amplify their voices, and to capture a piece of queer, feminist history in the making.

JUH

And it really was history in the making that you captured. Near the end of the film, Patrick Califia (then known as Pat)—a pioneer in the scene, already infamous for his BDSM fiction collection *Macho Sluts* (1988)—points out the progress he'd observed, noting all the "little young dykes" who'd "never done anything but S&M" and how different that was from when he came out. What kind of progress have you observed in the wake of your film?

MH

It's interesting you bring up that line, because I see that as one of the most important moments in the film. It acknowledges the importance of struggle, the belief that change that's worthwhile must be hard-won and can happen within one's lifetime—if you're lucky. When *BloodSisters* was first released, no one in the United States would broadcast it. It was too controversial. Like *Patrick*, it took over twenty years for me to see its full impact. But now that it's been screened internationally and is accessible via home video, I get emails from young, queer people around the world thanking me for giving them back a piece of their history they didn't know existed.

JUH

The film particularly underscores just how fluid and nuanced BDSM roles were back then. Did you choose your subjects to cultivate this diversity for a vanilla audience, and did any of it surprise you?

MH

From the beginning, I found sympathetic resonance with the leather scene specifically *because* of these nuances, so, no, it wasn't a surprise for me. It was the reason I was there in the first place. And, yes, I wanted to cultivate this awareness for a vanilla audience. I always thought of *BloodSisters* as not only a historical document but also a teaching tool. That's why I structured it the way I did. I wanted to keep it palatable enough so that TV would broadcast it and so it could reach people who harbored biases against the scene and perhaps change some minds.

JUH

Yet *BloodSisters* got caught up in the culture wars of the 1990s. What was that like?

MH

That was confirmation that I was doing something right! In 1997 the NEA was up for ratification, and the American Family Association (AFA) put together a "sizzle reel" of films distributed by Women Make Movies (WMM), which they used to lobby against the NEA. I never received NEA support, but WMM did. The AFA put together clips from *BloodSisters*, along with clips from Barbara Hammer and Cheryl Dunye films. I managed to get a copy of the tape, and of course they picked the sexiest scenes! I immediately called all the female California reps and found out that they'd only sequestered male reps to screen the tape. They would not allow any female reps in! It was infuriating thinking about all these hypocritical, horny men watching lesbian sex scenes in the halls of Congress while actively trying to silence us—because you know they were turned on!

JUH

What happened after that?

MH

It became a bit of a news story, and Debbie Zimmerman, executive director of WMM, was interviewed on several news outlets, including the *New York Times* and NPR. After the story died down Debbie said, "I always knew we were going to get in trouble for this film," and just like that she dropped *BloodSisters* from the WMM roster. I was shocked...and furious. She ended up connecting me with Water Bearer Films who handled the home-video market, but the message was clear: WMM did not want leather dykes in their collection. WMM is an archive of films made by and about women—in some ways you could call their collection canonical—and I always thought they should have supported *BloodSisters* and held it up as an example of free speech. But we were kicked out of the canon. And ultimately that's fine with me, because canons are hierarchal systems of oppression.



Still from *BloodSisters: Leather, Dykes and SadoMasochism*, 1995. Courtesy of the artist.

JUH

It makes me think of the feminist sex wars, and the idea that BDSM was an aberrant mirror of the patriarchy, which brought on third-wave feminism right at the time you were filming. Did *BloodSisters* at least get support among some feminists?

MH

Those feminist sex wars you're referring to were still very much alive, and the theoretical texts that started to deconstruct gender and desire—by Judith Butler, Barbara Creed, and Laura Kipnis, to name a few—were just starting to appear when I began shooting, so they hadn't yet made their cultural impact. While *BloodSisters* was successful in that it played at over fifty festivals around the world, it was still met with a lot of resistance. There was a lot of "We're showing this, but..." People were afraid. I never saw *BloodSisters* as an important documentary in terms of filmmaking; I knew it was flawed, but I always knew it was an important film in terms of *representation*, and I thought other women would recognize that too. But I was wrong. The people who were really excited by *BloodSisters* were outliers—radical thinkers, underground writers, European programmers, queer feminist filmmakers like Monika Treut and Barbara Hammer, and the sex-positive community of sex workers and artists developing around that time. So now, it's been galvanizing to see all these young festival programmers actually loving *BloodSisters*. I think it's a reflection of what Patrick says about seeing social change happen. It's humbling.



Still from *BloodSisters: Leather, Dykes and SadoMasochism*, 1995. Courtesy of the artist.

JUH

I love how you interspersed toy tutorials, sex scenes, and your own leather-fetish-based sculpture with activist footage like the Pride March where two leather dykes carry a sign that reads OUTCASTS (with the O rendered as a pair of cuffs) and the National Leather Association press conference in New York City in 1994, among others. Can you talk about what you decided to include and your process in putting it all together?

MH

Wickie Stamps, one of the featured voices in the film, said to me, “You’re here because you want to find out something, and once you find that out, you’re gone. You’re on to the next thing.” And I’ve always held that statement close in term of my working process, which is very research-based. With *BloodSisters* I wanted to know *everything*. I wanted to *experience* everything. So, I had to find a way formally to include all that. It was important to follow my tribe to the 1993 March on Washington and the NYC Pride March, not only to show the commitment of my subjects but for my own need to be at these events and be counted. I wasn’t there only to document. But editing was a nightmare! This was before digital editing, so it was insane wrangling nearly a hundred hours of footage! Funny enough, one of the things I got shit for was making it so colorful! I remember a lot of the community coming up to me and asking, “Why is it so colorful? Shouldn’t it just be black and red?” That was my aesthetic imprint on the scene, which in a way presaged the next generation’s non-binary, queer, punk style, and amazingly became the driving force of the film.

JUH

One of my favorite lines in the film is when Patrick (speaking of his fictional work, which was often banned) says, "Writing goes places a picket line can't." It speaks to the power of art and fantasy as a surreptitious form of activism. Would you agree?

MH

Yes, what Patrick says is important, because we usually think of political activism as something that one *does* as opposed to what one *is*, and what one *is* goes into everything an artist makes. For me, Patrick is not only speaking about the power of fantasy and metaphor but also the subversive power of art. All of my work is about desire and power, and I've chosen to use the opulent and visceral forms that I do precisely because of what Patrick is saying. I'm interested in the aggressively seductive qualities of immersive installations, and how they infiltrate, infect, and subsequently become part of the viewer's psyche and body, blurring the boundary between fiction and reality. But I don't really believe in the concept of "fiction" when it comes to cultural experiences. Culture molds our bodies and identity. All the layers are there.

JUH

As you remastered *BloodSisters* and found yourself looking back at the film twenty-five years later, what struck you the most?

MH

I was surprised that as far as filmmaking goes, it wasn't as bad as I thought it was! (*laughter*) But most importantly, I was struck by how *BloodSisters* had captured the burgeoning trans community with Patrick Califia, Tala Brandeis, and Susan Stryker, all people who started the public conversations on gender fluidity and trans identity back in the early '90s. And I was also struck by how radical and vital the film still feels, as the need to take to the streets is more potent now than ever.

BloodSisters: Leather, Dykes and Sadomasochism will be screening online as part of OUTFEST film festival's Legacy Project on Wednesday, August 26. This fall, Kino Lorber will be releasing a restored version of the film. [Watch the trailer here.](#)

A Live Panel discussion on Friday, August 28 will be livestreamed on OUTFEST's Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube feeds featuring Michelle Handelman in conversation with Patrick Califia (writer/activist), Queen Cougar (leather titleholder/activist), and Pony Lee (CruiseLA).

Michelle Handelman also has a new video, Solitude Is an Artifact of the Struggle Against Oppression, on view in the online exhibition [Artists & Allies III at signs and symbols, NYC.](#)

*Jane Ursula Harris is a Brooklyn-based writer who has contributed to Art in America, Artforum, BOMB, Paris Review, Flash Art, The Believer, Vice/GARAGE, Surface, and Time Out New York, among other publications. Her essays appear in catalogues including Carnegie Mellon/Miller ICA's forthcoming *Jacob Lawrence: Spirits Roaming on the Earth*; Participant Inc.'s *NegroGothic*; M. Lamar; *Hatje Cantz's Examples to Follow: Expeditions in Aesthetics and Sustainability*; Kerber Verlag's Marc Lüdgers: *The East Side Gallery*; *Phaidon's Vitamin D: New Perspectives in Drawing*; *Phaidon's Vitamin P: New Perspectives in Painting*; *Universe-Rizzoli's Curve: The Female Nude Now*; and *Twin Palms's Anthony Goicolea*. Harris curates on a freelance basis, and is an art history faculty member at the School of Visual Arts.*

[BloodSisters](#) [Michelle Handelman](#) [Jane Harris](#) [queer culture](#) [queer theory](#) [queer literature](#) [bdsm](#) [s&m](#) [documentary film](#) [documentaries](#) [transgressive art](#) [1990s](#) [protest](#) [sexuality](#) [sex](#) [leather scene](#) [sadomasochism](#) [san francisco](#) [lesbian cinema](#)

COVID Reviews: Leah Mayers, Janny Taylor, Marina and Cecília Resende Santos, Michelle Handelman, Autumn Ahn, Anne Labovitz, Reid Silvern

By Lori Waxman

This summer, art critic Lori Waxman writes reviews for artists whose work was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The first, the second, third and fourth and fifth rounds of 60wrđ/min COVID reviews have come out each with a week's interval. This is the fifth week.



Michelle Handelman, still from "These Unruly and Ungovernable Selves," 2020, single-channel video, color, sound, runtime 06:00

Michelle Handelman

What's an artist who regularly dives deep into queer dystopias to do while stuck in quarantine? In addition to checking in remotely with her real-life friends, Michelle Handelman also found a way to visit with the characters that populated her films of the past decade. The result was exhibited online at the New York gallery signs and symbols: "These Unruly and UngovernableSelves," a six-minute video collaged primarily from pre-existing footage, including one eerily prescient scene of an old lady bewildered at her isolation in a futuristic ticket booth. Everyone, including the old lady, who happens to be drag legend Flawless Sabrina, remains remarkably sultry, edgy and punk, despite the apocalyptic situation we all currently find ourselves in. One gets the feeling they've known it all along and, while most folks have been busy leading "normal" lives, they've been developing tactics for dealing creatively with a world in which "we are being asked to do things that are tearing at our souls," when "separateness was an achievement," our days filled with "the jangly nervous tension of doing nothing" and a "wish to obscure the reality of death." These and other unsettlingly apposite phrases appear in between clips. Together they add up to a production that feels most of all like a trailer for the horror movie that is life right now, just a little bit sexier.

—Lori Waxman 2020-07-27 9:12 AM

•FLASH FEED

28 May 2020, 10:00 am CET

Michelle Handelman, “These Unruly and Ungovernable Selves”: an online video exhibition



Michelle Handelman, *These Unruly and Ungovernable Selves*, 2020. Single-channel video, sound. 6'. Courtesy of the artist and signs and symbols, New York.

Michelle Handelman's video exhibition "[These Unruly and Ungovernable Selves](#)" opens today through signs and symbols' website.

These Unruly and Ungovernable Selves is a new video work by Michelle Handelman that recontextualizes characters from her previous works into a hypnotic visual essay about the trans-guring of interiority during periods of isolation and fear. *These Unruly and Ungovernable Selves* takes as its starting point the current coronavirus pandemic and filters it through Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* and his idea that "the threshold must be carefully distinguished from the boundary." Handelman's characters, who have already struggled with existential questions of belonging and fear in her projects *Dorian*, *A Cinematic Perfume*; *Irma Vep*, *The Last Breath*; and *Hustlers & Empires*, are collaged with found images and texts to take on a new form as they cross the threshold into a multiverse that simultaneously denies and struggles with containment. Handelman writes: "While in lockdown I've been thinking about spaces of containment and agency, the agitated state where inertia rubs up against desire, the fear of an unseen invader. When we find ourselves cut off from all that forms our identity, then who are we? And how do we trans-gure interiority during periods of isolation and fear. As my dear friend and trans activist Zackary Drucker says, "When you hit a wall, when all you see are walls, shift your plane of gravity and make it the floor."

Michelle Handelman's video will be viewable online from Thursday, May 28 at 6:00pm until Wednesday, June 10 at 6:00pm.



[BLOG](#) → [THREE TO SEE](#)

Three exhibitions to see in New York this weekend

From Siah Armajani on democracy and exile, to Michelle Handelman's look at otherness

[VICTORIA STAPLEY-BROWN](#) and [MARGARET CARRIGAN](#)

9th May 2019 23:00 BST



MORE



Siah Armajani, *Seven Rooms of Hospitality: Room for Deportees* (2017) Courtesy of the artist and Rossi & Rossi

It seems like an ideal moment for *Siah Armajani: Follow This Line* at the **Met Breuer** (until 2 June), the first major US retrospective of the Iran-born artist, who came to the US in 1960 as a young student to escape political persecution and deals with themes like exile and democracy in his work. It does justice to his decades-long career, with a range of objects from the mixed-media works he made in Tehran in the 1950s, like *Shirt #1* (1958),

inscribed with spells, poems and school exercises, to architectural maquettes in the *Dictionary for Building* series, to the *Sacco and Vanzetti Reading Room #3* (1988), an angular space that references both Soviet Constructivist and American vernacular architecture (and the anarchist immigrant brothers executed for murder). One standout—and extremely timely—recent piece is *Seven Rooms of Hospitality: Room for Deportees* (2017), a large-scale installation that includes a barbed-wire fence as part of a series that looks at “aspects of migration and immigration”, the artist says.

It would be “unthinkable to have a retrospective [on Siah Armajani] without having his [outdoor] public work”, a major part of his practice, says Nicholas Baume, the director and chief curator of the **Public Art Fund**, which has recreated one of the artists best-known projects, the delightful *Bridge Over Tree* [↗](#), at Brooklyn Bridge Park. “That piece always evoked excitement, smiles, happiness,” Armajani says of its original presentation at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 1970. Though the work, a nonsensical covered bridge with a sharp rise over one little tree, was inspired by Heidegger’s notions of “location” and “neighbourhood”, the experience of climbing its steep steps is one of simple joy. There is something magical, almost meditative, about it, and it is fun to see children enjoying it so much. It is also the perfect setting, playing off of the nearby Brooklyn Bridge, and can charm even jaded and cranky New York commuters spotting it from trains crossing the Manhattan Bridge.

Toeing the line between political manifesto and camp opera, the video artist Michelle Handelman’s *Lover Hater Cunt Intellectual* [↗](#) (until 26 May) offers a daring and dramatic inquiry into femininity and otherness as a wellspring of power. On view at the downtown gallery **Signs and Symbols**, the multimedia installation transforms the space with dark, post-apocalyptic wallpaper bearing images of burning cars overlaid with text reading in big, bold letters: “You have no idea how weak I am”. The centrepiece is a video in which the Latinx performance artist and activist Viva Ruiz despairs, dances and lectures, proclaiming: “My identity is a revolving door of possibilities” and “I want everything because queerness is a borderless state”, all set against a vibratory lo-fi goth soundtrack. The work is an outgrowth of Handelman’s larger project *Hustlers & Empires*, commissioned by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art last year, which explores how resistance to oppression can shape identity.

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BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

Michelle Handelman: *LOVER HATER CUNTY INTELLECTUAL*

by [Alex A. Jones](#)



Michelle Handelman, *The Struggle*, from *Hustlers & Empires* (still). Courtesy signs and symbols, New York.

Michelle Handelman's body of work *Hustlers and Empires*, of which a new installment currently appears at Signs & Symbols Gallery in the Lower East Side, is a symbolically-layered, operatic examination of "the hustler." Here the label encompasses those who transgress society's norms as a way to survive, and those who must survive in spite of their transgressions, including the sex worker, the pimp, the drug dealer, the addict, the queer outsider. The newest film, *LOVER HATER CUNTY INTELLECTUAL*, focuses on a character who is in fact a "layering of persons," portrayed by the queer feminist artist/activist Viva Ruiz, whose performance is partly autobiographical and partly inspired by the libertine

NEW YORK

signs and symbols

April 18 – May 26, 2019

20th-century novelist Marguerite Duras. The film is carefully constructed in a universally familiar visual language of glamour, with sets that imitate the fashion runway, the music video, and the late-night talk show. These deconstructed sets include conspicuously fake lights and cameras, winking at the “production” of glamour while portraying Ruiz’s character like a celebrity. She dances and mugs for the camera; she passes out drunk. But she’s not a celebrity, she’s a hustler: her life is defined at intersections of empowerment and precarity—limited options meet freedom from society’s norms, sexual violence meets desire.

Handelman’s project, originally commissioned by SFMoMA as a 70-minute, multi-channel film and installation, exists within a lineage of artworks that explore glamour as a subversive and protective tool endemic to queer aesthetics. Seminal in more ways than one was Jean Genet’s first novel, *Our Lady of the Flowers*, written in 1942 while Genet was imprisoned for petty theft, vagrancy, and “lewd acts.” With only his imagination to sustain him, Genet dreamt up flagrantly homoerotic stories of hustlers, criminals, and drag queens of Paris. He described them with all the poetry and divine grace of the gods and goddesses of Mount Olympus, using glamour as a protective, magical gesture against a world that brutalizes the dispossessed and the queer. His heavy, rose-scented prose cloaked the morbid stench of disease, addiction, and murder that trailed his characters, as well as the bleak reality of his own imprisonment. In his later book, *The Thief’s Journal*, Genet wrote: “Limited by the world, which I oppose, jagged by it, I shall be all the more handsome and sparkling as the angles which wound me and give me shape are more acute and the jagging more cruel.”



Installation view: Michelle Handelman: *LOVER HATER CUNTY INTELLECTUAL*, signs and symbols, New York, 2019. Courtesy signs and symbols, New York.

Two decades later Warhol’s portraits of drag queens elevated their glamour to the level of royalty like Grace Kelly and Caroline of Monaco. Warhol’s conceptual provocation was to question accepted notions of glamour by expanding them to include gay men, and this was later elaborated upon by the artist collective General Idea, formed in 1969 by AA Bronson, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal. In multimedia projects like the fictitious beauty contest *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant* and the satirical *File Magazine*, General Idea pioneered camp as an artistic strategy. Throughout the 1970s, as mass media culture came into bloom, they performed notions of glamour and celebrity in order to examine their power, and to investigate the role that media played in creating them. Echoing the literary achievement of Jean Genet, General Idea equated glamor with myth-making.

Today the concept of glamour is pervasively influenced, whether consciously or not, by queer and drag culture. From the cartoonish Kardashians to the popularity of *RuPaul's Drag Race* (not to mention white girls whining “Yasss, queen” over brunch), the popularization of aesthetics and tropes largely sparked by the 1990 documentary *Paris Is Burning* has reached its commodification-point. And while *Drag Race* serves up unimpeachably groundbreaking, satirical television, it also elevates an ultra high-budget, dry-cleaned version of drag culture that effortlessly holds mainstream appeal. It is therefore extremely prescient for Michelle Handelman’s films to re-foreground class barriers and outsider status in the aesthetics of queer culture. Even Warhol once described his drag queen subjects as “outsiders with bad teeth and body odor,” but that was precisely why he found them glamorous. In *LOVER HATER CUNTY INTELLECTUAL*, Ruiz’s character encapsulates how the authenticity of the hustler is tied to class and freedom: “There’s a difference between a hustler and a thief. A hustler doesn’t have a choice. You are pushing to survive, maintain. If you choose to hustle people and you don’t have to, then you’re a thief.” In one of the most memorable lines of *Hustlers & Empires* (delivered exquisitely by performance artist John Kelly) glamour itself is framed as a survival tactic: “Instead of dying I will perform for you. In this way I preserve intact my critique of your hypocritical way of life which has been my only joy in this world.”

Like *General Idea*, Handelman aims for both intellectual and theatrical impact, and a full elaboration of her project’s many-layered storytelling would constitute a much longer text. The video on view at signs and symbols admittedly feels like a fragment or redux of the spectacular *Hustlers & Empires* more than an expansion upon it, but Handelman is on to something productive in her elaboration on the film’s individual characters. The blending of real-life figures (here, Ruiz with Duras) offers something between an archetype and an individual—more specifically, a “lover-hater-cunty-intellectual,” a sexually-empowered, iconoclastic femme with an axe to grind. She is a model of power and glamour that is general enough to allow for the viewer’s identification. Instead of validating queer or feminist experience through the amplified difference of identity politics, Handelman begins to draw a pantheon of transgressive personas, inscribing a greater mythos that confounds society’s norms.

Contributor

Alex A. Jones

ALEX A. JONES is a contributor to the *Brooklyn Rail*.

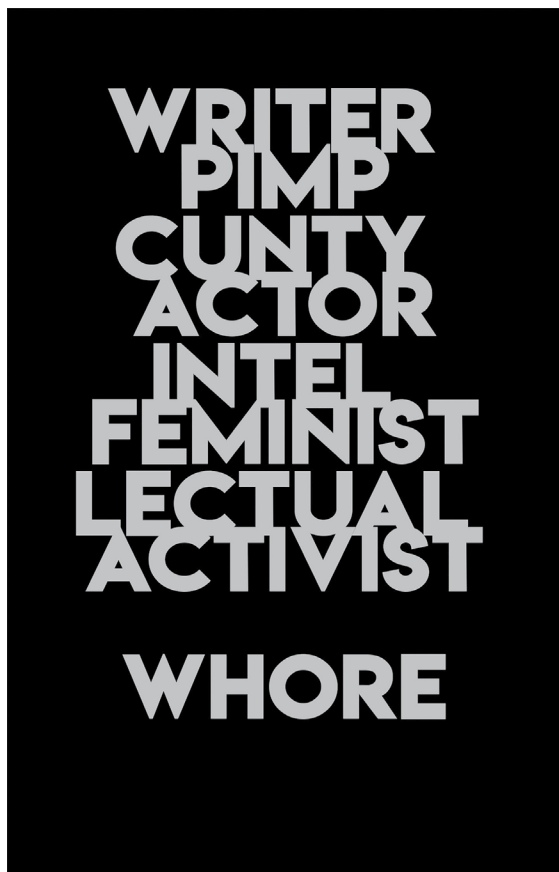
Art World

Editors' Picks: 11 Things Not to Miss in New York's Art World This Week

A new show by Wardell Milan and a talk by Marc Quinn are on our agenda.

artnet News, April 15, 2019

Thursday, April 18–Sunday, May 26



Michelle Handelman, *Actor, Pimp, Cunty Intellectual*, from "Hustlers & Empires."
Courtesy of signs and symbols.

7. "LOVER HATER CUNTY INTELLECTUAL" at signs and symbols

Michelle Handelman brings her project *Hustlers & Empires* (2018), commissioned by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, to New York. The installation, featuring video, text, music, image, and performance, tells the story of "hustlers" through a trio of manifestos delivered by queer performers. Inspired by her own youth in the 1970s, exposed to drug dealers and pimps, Handelman asks viewers to consider sexual transgression as a means of survival.

Location: signs and symbols, 102 Forsyth Street

Price: Free

Time: Opening reception, 6 p.m.–8 p.m.; Wednesday–Sunday, 11 a.m.–6 p.m.; performances Saturday, May 4 and Sunday, May 5 at 4 p.m.

—Sarah Cascone

filthy dreams

You Have No Idea How Weak I Am: Michelle Handelman's "Hustlers & Empires"

For Minorities Who Don't Even Fit Into Our Own Minorities

Emily Colucci · March 16, 2018



Michelle Handelman, *Hustlers & Empires*, 2018, 4k multiscreen installation. Production still. Photo credit: Mr. Means

Is there a choice to be a hustler? That question, which flits onscreen in a flurry of bold black and white text, is posed to three iconic historical and fictional hustlers who sit on a futuristic dystopian panel that resembles purgatory for radicals in Michelle Handelman's new multi-channel video installation *Hustlers & Empires*.

Of course, the figure of the hustler is one that traverses, particularly queer, cultural history. From the novels of Jean Genet and John Rechy to Warhol's films like *My Hustler* and even, songs such as former Cockette Bambi Lake's "The Golden Age of Hustlers," recently revived by Justin Vivian Bond, the hustler has been idolized, romanticized and worshipped as a symbol of transgression and a boldfaced refusal to live according to the rules of, as bell hooks articulated, "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy."

And yet, within this legacy, the vulnerability and very real hardships faced by hustlers are often underplayed. As "The Lover" in Handelman's video, modeled after novelist and filmmaker Marguerite Duras, musician, performer and artist Viva Ruiz responds to the question of hustling as a choice. "There's a difference between a hustler and a thief," she says, "A

hustler, you don't have a choice. I think you are pushing to survive—maintain. I think if you choose to hustle people and you don't have to, then you're a thief." She's not wrong. For most, hustling isn't a conscious life decision, but one made in order to survive.

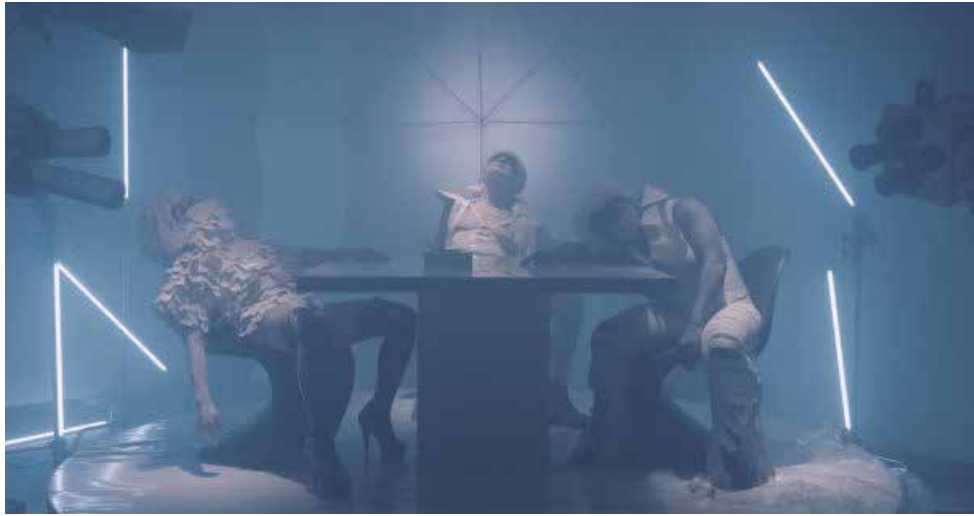
And yet, what if these two notions are not mutually exclusive? If transgression is the only means of survival, can it not be both a powerful form of defiance and a precarious balance between life and death?



Michelle Handelman, *Hustlers & Empires*, 2018, 4k multiscreen installation. Production still. Photo credit: Mr. Means

It's this dualism that Handelman explores in *Hustlers & Empires*, which is currently on view through March 18 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, through a whirlwind of multi-genre musical performances, rousing monologues and witty dialogue. In its totality, the video ends up appearing like a cinematic manifesto. As in her previous *Irma Vep*, the last breath, which starred Zackary Drucker and Flawless Sabrina, Handelman draws from historical and cultural texts, reconfiguring them through the inclusion of today's queer performers and artists. Through this method, she creates both a sense of intergenerational lineage and dialogue, as well as imbues the original text with new and sometimes, subversive meaning.

In *Hustlers & Empires*, Handelman casts a multi-talented group of performers including Light Asylum's Shannon Funchess as "The Pimp" after Iceberg Slim, whose 1967 novel *Pimp* defined Blaxploitation-era Black masculinity in the late 1960s and 1970s. Downtown chanteur and sometimes, chanteuse John Kelly, who is certainly no stranger to inhabiting the roles of romantic fictional figures, plays "The Actor" based on the titular character from Fellini's short *Toby Dammit*. A washed-up alcoholic Shakespearean actor who loses his head over a Ferrari, Toby is a *Filthy Dreams* role model if I've ever seen one and no, it's not just his drunken swagger and bleach blonde hair. And finally, as previously mentioned, Viva Ruiz, known for her work with *The Crystal Ark* and her wearable art project *Thank God For Abortion*, plays the desiring and desirable "The Lover," inspired by Duras' incarnation in her thinly veiled autobiographical novel detailing her teenage affair with an older wealthy man in French-occupied Saigon.



Michelle Handelman, *Hustlers & Empires*, 2018, 4k multiscreen installation. Production still. Photo credit: Mr. Means

Curated by Frank Smigiel as a part of the Limited Edition series organized by the museum's Open Space, the SFMOMA installation not only features the video on multiple screens, but sculptural elements from its production such as the horrific inferno-like car crash backdrop that appears in later scenes, reminiscent of Warhol's lurid *Death & Disaster* series. The installation will culminate on Saturday with live performances including a more ambient performance during the day with a perfectly named nine-person Hustlers Chorus, as well as intermittent appearances by Funchess, Kelly and Ruiz, and a more formal evening event with the performers all singing their songs from the film. While I sadly am not able to fly cross-country to see the installation, I spoke with Handelman about her new project to fill in the gaps.

Hustlers & Empires, like *Irma Vep*, the last breath, came from, as Handelman explains, "a very personal perspective." "All my work is about me and my life," she says, "it's not like I'm an academic taking a critical approach." This new project expands on Vep's investigation of the underground. Handelman felt a connection with Vep, originally played by Musidora in *Les Vampires*, whose participation in criminal economies directly echoes Handelman's childhood when, after her parents' divorce, her dad "went off the grid and became part of the 1970s counter culture," running a massage parlor and selling drugs. "With *Irma Vep*," Handelman recalls, "I realized this is my story. As I started to segue into this piece, I realized I needed to explore this specific area of my life more."



Michelle Handelman, *Hustlers & Empires*, 2018, 4k multiscreen installation. Production still. Photo credit: Mr. Means

This drive led Handelman to the three characters, beginning with Iceberg Slim whose novel the artist read when she was young. While not obvious, each character has resonances with Handelman's creative practice. For example, both Slim and Duras draw from their own lives lived on the edge to fuel their artistic production like Handelman, though, as Handelman notes, "I think the way I do it is a lot more abstract." While Toby Dammit as a fictional character is the one outlier, Felini's film is directly culled from the Edgar Allen Poe short story "Never Bet The Devil Your Head." "Poe is inside everything I do in some way," Handelman observes.

From its opening, which starts with a rhythmic, almost chant-like description of hustlers ("charismatic...irresistible...cunning... the charming psychopath"), the video employs the combination of these characters and their three corresponding actors to reveal how different forms of control—whether racial inequality, the church, misogyny, homophobia, colonialism, capitalism—imprint themselves on the bodies of those perceived as "the Other" and how those labeled as outsiders can resist. The installation examines how, as Handelman pinpoints, "we find ourselves in these compromised situations that force us to transgress to survive."



Michelle Handelman, Hustlers & Empires, 2018, 4k multiscreen installation. Production still. Photo credit: Mr. Means

With a flurry of archival footage, cars, strange liminal spaces of bars, bedrooms and stages and passionate monologues, *Hustlers & Empires* bombards the sense and provides viewers with an enormous and exciting range of references to mine. And while the video prompts the audience to dive into these potential intellectual interpretations, it is also just a cathartic viewing experience—a musical ode to, at once, abuse at the hands of hegemonic power and the possibilities of undermining that power.

Asked why she chose to have musical performances as a part of the video, Handelman responds, "Sound is seductive. As gob-smacking as an image can be, sound is where the emotional content is in any film." From Funchess's bold song, in which she spits, "Fuck you for showing me that violence equals love" to Ruiz's danceable chant "I'm so mad," illuminated by a vibrant pink background, and Kelly's moving operatic song, mirroring the piece's title, the musical segments add a lightness and pop sensibility to the video, while also refusing to relent on its anger.



Michelle Handelman, Hustlers & Empires, 2018, 4k multiscreen installation. Production still. Photo credit: Mr. Means

Beyond the music, my personal favorite aspect of the video is the talk show, which Handelman tells me was partially inspired by Sartre's existentialist (and thoroughly nihilistic) play *No Exit*. Like a (possibly dead) hustler version of *The View*, the three characters ponder questions like "How do you define living on the edge?" to a surreal clap and laugh track that is eerily similar to the one in Fellini's *Toby Dammit*. Not only do these scenes present a fascinating character study as each figure defines hustling ("really smart people with disadvantages," says Iceberg Slim or "The Pimp"), but they also confuse the boundaries between reality and fiction. At times, it's hard to tell whether the person talking is one of the performers in character or the performer as themselves. As Handelman reveals, "The performers were all instructed not to act...they're being themselves, but they're channeling the characters through themselves now as fierce political artists."

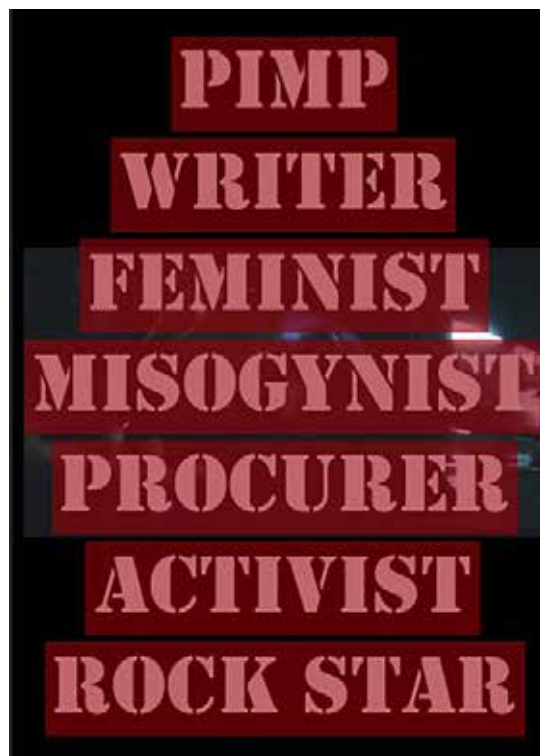
With this amalgamation of the real and unreal, the performers and their identities work to "queer" some of the characters' original texts. For example, by taking on the role of the violently misogynistic pimp, Funchess twists it by embodying that quintessential over-the-top masculinity as a Black woman, bringing, as Handelman notes, "the tension between the misogyny and the forceful feminism." It's a deliciously subversive moment when Funchess, as Slim, turns to the camera and states, "Patriarchy is the biggest con of all." Similarly, at one point, Funchess drives a car, waving and nodding at invisible passersby with an overlaid scrolling text that reads, "Ultimately she knows the pimping game is part of a racist system of oppression and therefore, her puffed-up self-confidence is merely a Band-Aid on her already lost and battered soul."



Michelle Handelman, *Hustlers & Empires*, 2018, 4k multiscreen installation. Production still.
Photo credit: Mr. Means

Like this statement, *Hustlers & Empires*, as a whole, deals with the vulnerability and precariousness of those on the edge. “The Edge,” writes Hunter S. Thompson in his first book *Hell’s Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs*, “There is no honest way to explain it because the only people who really know where it is are the ones who have gone over.” Handelman’s video depicts this sense of mortality and doom for those who have gone over the edge—the three characters seem to act as voices from the abyss. And yet, the video isn’t depressing or sad. In contrast, it’s pissed.

According to Handelman, this was the performers’ influence. Originally setting out to make a film that was “sad and heart-breaking,” she remembers, “It was my performers who were like, “Uh-uh, I’m not playing the victim here....Fuck that. I am here, I am fierce and I’m going to talk from that perspective’.”



Michelle Handelman, *Hustlers & Empires*, 2018, 4k multiscreen installation. Production still. Photo credit: Mr. Means

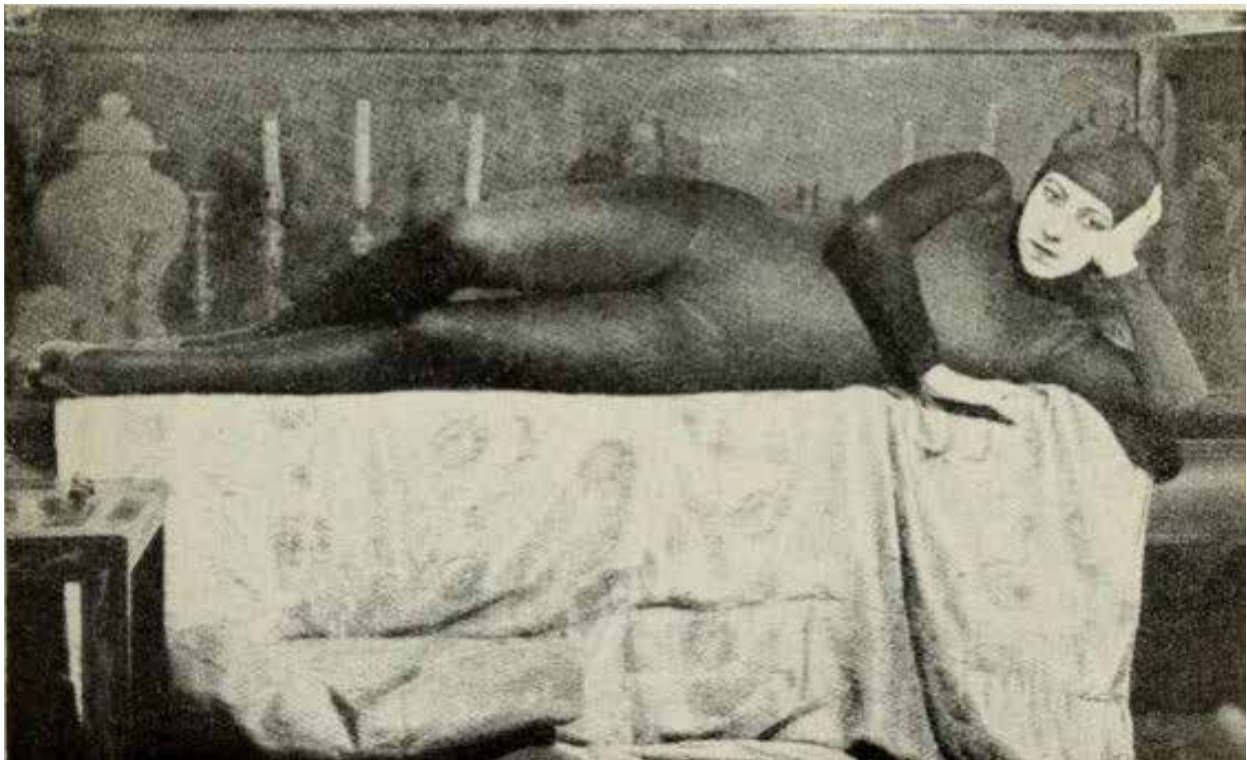
“You have no idea how weak I am,” says each character at the end of their first monologues. This ambiguous statement can be understood two ways. On one hand, it could be seen as a statement of weakness, anxiety, fear and helplessness in the face of mortal danger and yet, on the other hand, it could be taken as a proclamation that one’s power has been underestimated, underappreciated and under-recognized. By the second monologue, however, there’s little doubt at the force of each character’s resistance. A battle cry for transgression as a means of survival with an awareness of the danger that comes with it, *Hustlers & Empires* reflects, as Viva Ruiz says as “The Lover, “disappearance occurs at the margins. I’m here, front and center, resisting erasure.”



From Musidora to Maggie Cheung: Celebrating a century of Irma Vep

The legacy of French film's first screen supervillainess

Alicia Fletcher · Mar 7, 2018



Musidora as Irma Vep in Louis Feuillade's LES VAMPIRES

To mark International Women's Day and celebrate the tremendous success of TIFF's initiative Share Her Journey — a five-year commitment to increasing opportunities for women in the film industry, which has already raised a remarkable \$971,000 that will directly support new programming aimed at tackling gender parity head-on — we are proud to collect and present all the entries in this ongoing series by programmer Alicia Fletcher about the trailblazing women of silent cinema.

Learn more about Share Her Journey, and go here to donate today!

In *Irma Vep*, Olivier Assayas offers both a celebration of the origins of the French film industry and a critique of its contemporary state of schizophrenic disarray through a fast, funny account of a dysfunctional film shoot in present-day Paris. The film in question is a remake of *Les Vampires*, the famed 1915 serial by the great French filmmaker Louis Feuillade, which episodically chronicled the dastardly doings of a band of super-criminals who prey on Parisian society. "When the

[producers] came to me and asked me to make a remake of Les Vampires, I told them they were out of their mind,” says burned-out New Wave director René Vidal (Jean-Pierre Léaud) to Hong Kong superstar Maggie Cheung (playing herself) in Assayas’ film. His objection hinges on one of the serial’s most iconic characters: Irma Vep (anagram of “vampire”), the beautiful and deadly Vampire operative who stalks the roofs of Paris in a catsuit, who was incarnated in the original serial by the legendary actress who went by the screen name “Musidora.” Explaining to Cheung why he wants to cast a Chinese actress as his new Irma, Vidal lays it out plainly: “A French actress cannot be Irma Vep after Musidora. It’s blasphemy.”



Musidora as Irma Vep in Louis Feuillade’s Les Vampires



Maggie Cheung as Maggie Cheung in Olivier Assayas’ Irma Vep

Deathly pale, with intense kohl-rimmed eyes and often baring a gruesome sneer, Musidora (real name Jeanne Roque) made herself immortal in Les Vampires, but she was no one-hit wonder. In addition to embodying the iconic Irma, she was also a feminist and queer pioneer, a famed actress, screenwriter, director, and producer, as well as the poster child of Europe’s avant-garde in the 1910s. Aggressive yet graceful, terrifying yet alluring, with a measure of androgyny and a flare for the dramatic, she was one of French cinema’s first true superstars, and her Irma has inspired filmmakers and artists for more than a century.

Born in Paris in 1889, Roque committed herself to the arts at an early age, writing her first novel at the age of 15 and appearing in Parisian theatre and cabaret productions, including some staged at the renowned Folies Bergère. In her early 20s she became interested in France’s burgeoning film industry, and made her screen debut in Raphael Clamour’s Les misères de l’aiguille (1914), a socialist- and feminist-infused film that documented the plight of urban women workers. Looking to brand herself and gain a stronger foothold in the industry, Roque adopted the moniker “Musidora,” which in Greek translates to “gift of the Muses.”



Les Vampires

Soon thereafter, Musidora was cast by Feuillade as the lead female villain of *Les Vampires*, and her unique make-up, exotic costuming, and sinuous physicality did much to contribute to the ten-part serial's outstanding box-office success. Thanks to her performance as Irma, Musidora became France's leading actress, with her distinctive face recognized around the world.

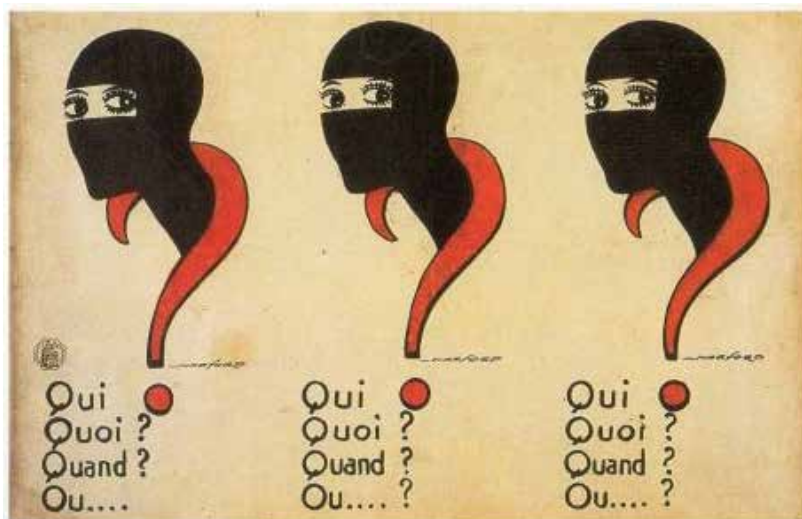
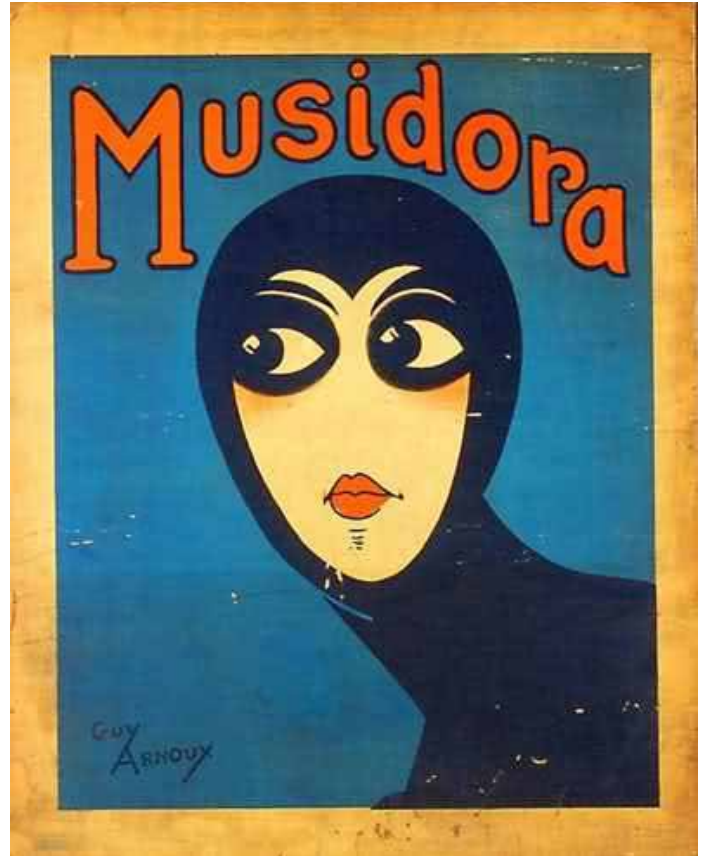
After playing another tough female criminal in Feuillade's *Vampires* follow-up *Judex* (1916) — a serialized thriller about an avenging caped crusader, which was reverently remade by Georges Franju in 1963 — Musidora expanded her repertoire to include screenwriting, editing, directing, and producing under the auspices of her own production company *Société des Films Musidora*.

However, like such fellow silent-era female pioneers as Lois Weber and Nell Shipman, Musidora faded into obscurity in the 1930s, and by the 1950s she was living in poverty. In the years immediately preceding her death in 1957, she was discovered by Henri Langlois, founder of the Cinémathèque française, who secured her a job at the theatre's box office. (One wonders if the future nouvelle vague filmmakers such as Godard and Truffaut, who religiously attended screenings at the Cinémathèque, recognized the still-living legend who handed them their change.) It is fitting that, in her final years, Musidora was entrenched at the institution that would do so much to keep her legacy alive through its celebration of Feuillade and his screen muse.



Maggie Cheung in Olivier Assayas' Irma Vep

While Assayas' *Irma Vep* is by far the best-known cinematic tribute to Musidora, it is but part of an entire artistic lineage that paid homage to the actress' iconic likeness. Poster designers in the teens and '20s had already recognized the graphic possibilities of Musidora's vivid visage and catsuited silhouette.



Original 1915 poster for Les Vampires

In the 1950s, famed fashion illustrator René Gruau transformed the deadly dame into an icon of haute couture, while in her 1985 photography series *Sur les toits* (On the Roofs), artist Béatrice Tatareau and model Lys Reygor recreated Irma's wall-scaling exploits.



René Gruau illustration, 1953



Béatrice Tataireau, Sur les toits, 1985 (©ADAGP 2017)

In 2013, the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University premiered video artist Michelle Handelman's tribute to the legacy of Musidora and her most recognizable role with Irma Vep, *The Last Breath*, a multi-channel installation currently on tour. Comprising four individual screens, Handelman's piece reflects on the transgressive elements of Musidora, both in her screen image and her personal life. (The openly bisexual actress had a lengthy list of lovers in Parisian art circles, and also had a long-term affair with famed novelist, journalist and playwright Colette; Musidora even produced a number of the latter's most highly regarded plays.)



Michelle Handelman, *Irma Vep, The Last Breath* (four-channel installation, 2013)

Starring transgender activist, artist, actress, and producer of television's *Transparent* Zackary Drucker, as well as drag icon Flawless Sabrina, Handelman's piece utilizes Musidora's persona to comment on contemporary projections of queerness and the fluid evolution(s) of gender identity throughout the past century.



Musidora was (and is) more than her image. In the early era of the French film industry, she was at once an emblem of modernity, a boldly divergent voice, and an all-round artistic entrepreneur during that lamentably brief period in silent-cinema history when women could expect increased opportunity and respect for their work behind the camera. As the homages paid her by Assayas, Tatareau, Handelman and others attest, Musidora truly is a muse for the ages.

Northwest Notes: Dispatch from the Pacific

Noah Dillon · August 29th, 2015



Ai Weiwei, *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads: Gold*, 2010. Bronze with gold patina, dimensions variable. Images courtesy of Ai Weiwei.

The Pacific Northwest is beautiful this time of year. I travel there every few years and typically end up in the area during summer, missing the rain for which it's infamous. This year I visited Seattle, Portland, and Vancouver, seeing a lot of the gallery and museum scene. The Seattle Art Fair ran during the start of August. It's mostly a small-ish regional fair, though there were booths by Gagolian, David Zwirner, Pace, Zürcher, James Cohan, and other New Yorkers. I skipped it though, having a kind of snooty distaste for those conventions. I mean, who in their right mind would want to attend an art fair? Oof.

So I went straight for the regional institutions. There's a lot to see. First: The Henry Art Gallery at the University of Washington. It's set in the city's hip and young U district, and it's a smartly designed, well organized space. They show emerging and established artists in a variety of media. They do not have a large space, so there aren't clusters of galleries with an expansive selection from their permanent collection. Instead, they have well-curated exhibitions and I had just missed the school's MFA exhibition, which runs for a month, rather than the week that many New York students get.



Michelle Handelman; still from Irma Vep, *The Last Breath*; 2013. 4-channel video installation (color, sound), TRT: 37:00 minutes. Image courtesy of the artist.

On view while I was there was, among other things, Martin Creed's *Work No. 360: About half the air in a given space* (2015), which was comprised of a large gallery filled almost to capacity by silver balloons. Visitors could enter through one of two doorways and push their way through the claustrophobic mass, being disoriented and kind of pleasantly bewildered by the balloons' power to constrict and delight. Also on view: a handsome retrospective for photographer Ilse Bing, a show of un-stretched and shaped canvases by Allan McCollum and Karen Carson, and a solo show by Michelle Handelman, with video and photography conflating vampirism, psychotherapy, and class-and-queer antagonism. The video draws from a Silent-Film-era series about Parisian thieves, called *The Vampires*, so one can forgive Handelman's melodrama. It's richly textured in a fetishistic way, and the accompanying photographs are exciting.

A few days later I took the train down to Portland, where I met up with artcritical contributor, publishing magnate, and poet extraordinaire Paul Maziar, and his friends, who showed me the nightlife — great host and hostesses. We remarked on the aesthetic qualities in the bright redness of neon lights adorning one of the construction cranes which has been expanding the city of late. Maziar's been consuming Marcel Duchamp, so we say, "Sure, why not? Call it industrial-scale readymade sculpture."

Next morning I left my kind hosts and took a long walk into downtown of the beautiful city, finishing up at the Portland Art Museum. The institution is currently hosting Ai Weiwei's *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads: Gold* (2010), which is displayed among the museum's many galleries of Asian art and artifacts. The suite of 12 animal heads represents the Chinese calendrical zodiac, and is based on a sculpture formerly of an imperial garden outside Beijing, designed by Europeans, used by the Chinese elite, then looted by French soldiers in 1860. The scale and craftsmanship of Weiwei's sculpture is spectacular, however, despite the didactics, I got the sense that I was missing something pretty fundamental about the subtleties of the artist's choice of representation. Is it something about the Chinese government's complicated relationship to Weiwei, to the nation's own history, and the waves of European colonization and Chinese reclamation in these images? I can't tell.

The aforementioned Asian art and artifacts galleries are really top rate. The layout of the building is labyrinthine, which can vary the experience between excited discovery and a confused, lost feeling.

Another exhibition, "Gods and Heroes: Masterpieces from the *École des Beaux-Arts*, Paris," collects more than 140 paintings, drawings, and sculptures from the school, from between the 15th and 19th centuries. I can have a hard time with some of the flowery, academic work that the institution produced and inspired, but it's hard to argue with some of the works on view in this show. Albrecht Dürer's *The Vision of the Seven Candlesticks* (ca. 1498), kind of made my jaw drop a little. And PAM also has a great selection of Modern and contemporary work, including a selection, on view now, of reductivist work by Robert Mangold, Dorothea Rockburne, Judy Chicago, John McCracken, and others — stuff that really gets me going. And there's a large display of photographs, which the museum calls a "Fotofolio," by Ansel Adams, Paul Strand, and Edward and Brett Weston and Minor White. Their silver gelatin prints of the American West made me wish to flee New York and find an abandoned mission on top of a mountain.



David Hockney, The Seven Stone Weakling, from A Rake's Progress: A Graphic Tale in Sixteen Etchings, 1961 – 63. Portfolio of 16 etchings, 12 1/3 x 15 7/8 inches.

Also there, now closed, was a show of David Hockney's print suite, A Rake's Progress (1975), along with a set of prints by William Hogarth, made in 1733, on which Hockney's sequence is based.

Full from Portland, I went back to Seattle. I took a breather and went to the Seattle Art Museum, at which the main attraction is currently "Disguise: Masks and Global African Currents," which was a kind of unremarkable show about artists using the imagery of African masks in their work. The hanging was gimmicky and impoverished, and several of the artists felt slight and arbitrary (no Keith Sonnier?). But, next to it was a great, like, really out of sight display of actual African masks, along with archival footage of performers at a carnival in the Côte d'Ivoire. That stuff is way more exciting and intellectually engaging than much of the show's contemporary work.



Louise Lawler, Anonymous, 1991. Cibachrome print, 54 1/2 x 40 3/4 inches, © Louise Lawler.

As well, a small but nonetheless excellent show, called "The Duchamp Effect," rounded up post-War artists making use of Duchamp's innovations. There was a lot of toilet humor and pointing at contradictions between image, language, and actuality. One very smart touch was the inclusion of a photograph by Louise Lawler, showing two artworks in a collector's home. Lawler's photograph shared gallery space with the two artworks it pictures: a painting by Jasper Johns and a sculpture by James Rosenquist.

I left Seattle's piney metropolis for an excursion north, to Vancouver. Even Canada's border is beautiful, with enormous gunnera unfurling at the edges of Peace Arch border-crossing park, and a sculpture by Daniel Mihalyo and Annie Han — a billboard-like form of negative space

overlooking the Pacific inlet there. A few minutes away, Vancouver is a really, really pretty city, seemingly compacted into the natural concavity of the Salish Sea's coast. There are tall skyscrapers, the city is sparkingly clean, and I arrived immediately after Pride weekend, with festive banners and the debris of feather boas all over the place. I mean, it's a really beautiful city. And in Canada, HBO has its own regional programming, including mandated indigenous programs and movies, which are very cool and sort of an entertaining (if small) gesture at reconciliation after hundreds of years of genocide and oppression. I liked the movie Rhymes for Young Ghouls (2013). It's good.

There, I visited the Vancouver Art Gallery, which is hosting an enormous retrospective of Canadian sculptor Geoffrey Farmer, "How Do I Fit This Ghost in My Mouth?" I found myself thinking about Farmer's tremendous archivist spirit, collecting and combining the pieces of National Geographic back issues, fiberglass sculptures, bits of signs, notes, tapes, vehicles, and all sorts of other things. It brought me back to a perpetual question in an era of explosive image production and distribution: is cataloguing and organizing one of the best strategies for an artist trying to cope, resist, or flow with such proliferation? I think probably yes. One small room held an archive of artist lectures and interviews on cassette tape, and invited visitors to sit and listen awhile.



Geoffrey James, Cell decorated with Harley Davidson and East Van Logos, 2013, archival inkjet print. Courtesy of the artist.

On the ground floor was a great “show,” a display of works on paper from the museum’s collection, a trifle compared to the offerings that will be on view following the institution’s addition of a new space, designed by Herzog & de Meuron. The works on paper, over a hundred on one large wall, were intended to entice viewers to see the benefits of the costly and overdue expansion. The next gallery over showed work from another collection in “Of Heaven and Earth: 500 Years of Italian Painting from Glasgow Museums,” with a handsome selection of paintings covering a spectacular historical range, while still appearing intellectually clear and to the point. Upstairs was a group show in several spaces, each artist given their own gallery. Called “Residue: The Persistence of the Real,” this exhibition of documentary photography studies the way that history is retained in images, as in Catherine Opie’s beautiful shots of Liz Taylor’s home and Geoffrey James’s absolutely just mind-blowing shots of Canada’s infamous Kingston Penitentiary, where inmates decorated the walls of their cells so ornately they could be mistaken for contemporary installation art.

Down the street, the Bill Reid Gallery shares the history and importance of First Nations’ arts, with a permanent display of work by Reid, one of Canada’s most famous contemporary indigenous craftsmen. Likewise, the muse-

um promotes the continuing traditions of local tribes, including live, free-form Q & A with an artist working in the atrium. Sean Whonnock was there when I visited, and he told me a lot about the construction of regional iconography, about the craftsmanship of these artworks, his own life, and the traditions of his family and tribe. There’s a lot of great indigenous art and craft all over, and most of these museums had great collections, sustaining cultures that were almost completely wiped out during the preceding centuries.



Gregory Blackstock, OUR STATELY COAST RHODODENDRON COLOR PERSPECTIVES, 2012. Graphite, colored pencil and permanent marker on paper, 47 x 31 1/2 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Greg

Finally, back in Seattle, I hit up the city's monthly First Thursday art walk, down at historic Pioneer Square. The galleries are, in many ways, like those in New York and anywhere else in the world: there are some you'd like to spend a lot of time in, others not so much. One major difference is the organization of openings, all on the same Thursday, with plenty of white and red wines, food, and live music. Totally alien, right? The atmosphere is festive and people are out to enjoy the scene, rather than trying to make the scene. I was taken by Greg Kucera Gallery, which had a diverse collection of works on view by self-taught artists, including Gee's Bend quilts, Henry Darger paintings, drawings by James Castle and Bill Traylor, and so on. In the back was a show by Gregory Blackstock, who is autistic and creates large mixed-media drawings cataloguing all kinds of incidentals: dictionary definitions, sheepshank knots, flags of the world, rottweiler breeds. Blackstock was in attendance and was more open in his discussing his work than any New York artist you've ever met.

The whole trip, whirlwind that it was, showed me some new favorite art spots on the left coast. If you're in the area, you'd be foolish to pass them up.



Bill Reid, Grizzly Bear Panel, 1961. Cedar, polychrome, hand-adzed; 200 x 96 x 32 cm. Photograph by Dr. Martine Reid.

HYPERALLERGIC

Irma Vep as a Space Between the Artist and Her Creation

Hrag Vartanian · August 29, 2014



(via Michelle Handelman's Vimeo channel, Hrag Vartanian/Hyperallergic)

Irma Vep, an anagram for vampire, is the main character in a classic 1915 film, *Les Vampires*, that starred Musidora, a French silent film actress. Artist Michelle Handelman has taken the epic 7-hour film about a bizarre underground criminal gang and transformed it into “*Irma Vep, The Last Breath*,” a video project that is about “living in the shadows, criminal anxiety and the relationship between the artist and her creation, both fictional and real.”

In Handelman's film the roles of Irma Vep and Musidora are played by two artists (Zackary Drucker and Mother Flawless Sabrina) and they offer the audience seemingly intimate revelations about their lives and their place in society.

It is luxuriously shot with rich colors and glowing sets. The characters are conscious of the construction of their identity and reflect on what it means. Art and life are blurred into something that is sprinkled with the anxiety of loneliness and filmed using the language of documentary film. The film also pokes fun at our contemporary obsession with criminals and vampires, those creatures of our popular imagination that consume people to survive.

June 11, 2013

Rhonda Lieberman

06.11.13



Left: Announcement for "The Cat Show," 2013. (Photo: Dana Byerly) Right: Sam Roeck, Contemporary Art Sculpture for Cats #2, 2013, oak, plexiglas, carpet, linoleum, 52 x 30 x 30".

CATS AND ART TOGETHER AT LAST AT WHITE COLUMNS proclaims the press release for "The Cat Show," an exhibition curated by writer and artist Rhonda Lieberman and developed in partnership with New York's Social Tees Animal Rescue. Here Lieberman discusses the origins of the project and the "Cats-in-Residence Program," where cats will be offered for adoption in the gallery on June 14 and 15, and July 19 and 20. The show is on view at White Columns from June 14 to July 27, 2013.

BACK IN THE MID-'90S, I lived in a loft in Long Island City and started tending an outdoor cat colony in an empty lot on my street. I wasn't even a cat person when I moved in, but L.I.C. had tons of street cats and they pulled me in. The cat party started at dusk when we arrived with the cans. It was my favorite art installation at the time! The cats evaded discourse. They didn't buy some discursive, blathering response! Going to this Zen kitty garden cleared a lot of the mishigas in my head.

High-rises were about to go up on the lot, displacing the cats my neighbors and I had grown fond of. We placed some and approached some rescue groups—all overflowing with adoptable pets—and that's when I got a crash course on the overextended rescue situation in NYC. These groups go to animal control to take the animals from death row. Bringing them more from the street was just adding to the overflow.

I thought it would be amazing to help the rescue groups by creating an un-depressing space where the public could meet the cats, a place where strays would be appreciated as the gorgeous creatures they are and not wretches in a cage-lined facility! For animal lovers, it's very depressing to encounter the broken system that treats strays as throwaways. I thought the cat area itself was a great installation and this project would use the art context to actually facilitate adoption—as well as being an aesthetic, meditative space.

Around that time, at MoMA PS1, I went to James Turrell's Meeting, a bench-lined room whose ceiling opens up to the sky. Nothing but presence—like the cat area. "This piece could only be improved by cats," I said to myself. My original idea for the show was for it to be like Meeting—a place for pussies to meet the public—with stuff for the cats to use, because they like to climb, to scratch. No tableaux or tchotchkes—just interactive pieces where cats and people would hang out. In the show's current form at White Columns, the cats do their "purrformance piece" in a kitty playground set within a salon-style kitty kunsthalle of cat-inspired—and sometimes cat-assisted—art and objets. Work by more than fifty artists and a zine with lots of personal pieces express our mysterious and intimate bond with cats through an array of sensibilities: the pieces are moving, sad, beautiful, comic.

Back in 1999(!), the artists and designers I approached got the project instantly. But finding a space that would host rescue kitties—and the funding—was a challenge. This project integrates art and animal rescue, so it kind of fell between the cracks, grant-wise. A space whose name I won't mention agreed in 2003 to do it but kept dropping the ball when it came to development. That was an arduous and disappointing saga—so the project took a catnap there for a few years. But it was always a dream project of mine—one that had nearly happened. People would say, "What about that cat project?" Rather mortifying.

To my relief and gratitude, White Columns, the purrfect partner, stepped up and ended this purgatory. This is the right time for the project. There's so much relational art—it was there in the '90s, too, and part of my mental framework for the project. And the Internet Cat Video Film Fest at the Walker Art Center last summer was a big hit. I've always been passionate about animal rescue, and this was one way I thought I could use my "skills" to help more cats than I could on a one-by-one basis. Plus there's something magical about hanging out with cats anywhere. They're aesthetic and fun, so an art space is a perfect fit.

The point of this show is to use art as a lever to transvalue how we see and treat strays. I propose this as a prototype to show that this kind of thing is possible, hopefully on a sustainable basis at some point. The centerpiece is the cat habitat/kitty playground: an enclosure with a tubular cat tree designed by architects Freecell (John Hartmann and Lauren Crahan) and Gia Wolff. It will swerve around seven other interactive sculptures for the cats to use, and seating so people can visit. Michelle Handelman is doing on-site video documentation and installing a multichannel video of the cats in the space for when they are not "in residence." Social Tees Animal Rescue, a partner for the project, is providing our ten cats-in-residence: Meowrina Abramovic, Bruce Meowman, Jeff Maine Coons, Claws Oldenburg, Alex Katz, and Frida Kahlico, among others. The purr-formers will have artist bios in the zine we are producing for the show, and most of all, we hope they'll all gain purrmanent homes during the two two-day adoption events that open and close the show.

— As told to Lauren O'Neill-Butler

HUFFPOST

What Would The Original Vamp Say To Her Therapist?

Priscilla Frank · August 18, 2013 (Updated December 6, 2017)

What if Irma Vep was one of us? Multimedia artist Michelle Handelman is out to pull iconic film vixen Irma Vep out of her mysterious, screen-dwelling existence and into the therapist's office. It's not easy being a vamp, after all.



“Irma Vep, the last breath” is a multichannel video installation composed of two stories. One tells of Irma Vep, the original vamp, character from the 1915 Louis Feuillade film “Les Vampires” complaining to her therapist. The second is Musidora, the actress who played Vep who, it is rumored, ended her life working anonymously as a ticket vendor despite her earlier goddess status.

The piece stars queer performance artists Zackary Drucker and Flawless Sabrina, aligning the performative aspects of contemporary queerness with earlier vamp tactics. “Irma Vep” explores the relationship and power dynamics between an artist and her creation; in this case, the creation is Irma Vep.

Taking place at the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University, Handelman’s exhibition takes over an overwhelming architectural space designed by none other than Zaha Hadid. The cinematic space combined with the physical space, according to the Museum, “allows space for anxious projections of desire on the void that is Irma Vep—a space

between genders, between vamps of the silent era and the contemporary queer.”

We reached out to Handelman to learn more about the project. *Scroll down for more images.*



How did you become interested in vamp culture?

When I say “vamp” I’m really referring to two things. There’s the vamp from the silent era and then the contemporary vamp which crosses into drag and performative identity. As a kid I was really into gothic horror films. It started with this TV show called “Creature Features” I used to watch with my dad and brother. Then my brother and I would put white makeup all over our faces and pretend to be monsters, and we’d watch all these great horror films— Frankenstein and Dracula and stuff. I just grew up loving horror films since I was five or six. I think I was always attracted to the monsters because of their outsider quality. I always felt like an outsider in every environment I have ever been in. There is something really sexy about them— black and dark and dangerous and forbidden.

Were struck you aesthetically with these films at a young age?

I am really just a product of media like we all are. Television has a huge influence on all of my work. When I was a kid I was enamored with Batman. Everything is shot at a really sharp, slanted angle, and then comes Catwoman in these black latex pant suits. I always say that was my first latex fantasy— not like it was a sex thing for me then, I just wanted to touch it and wear it and chew on it. I just found it all to be exquisitely beautiful because there is a certain sadness to it, a melancholy palette, and also this idea of power.

How do you envision 1920s vamps interacting with contemporary queer culture?

The vamps of the silent era had an outsider agency to them that fueled the narratives. They were outcasts, yet extremely powerful through their identity. Queer culture is relegated to the margins in our society, in fact, even criminalized in some states and many countries. Irma Vep is a criminal and this relationship between being an outsider both within and outside of queer culture is the connection, exploring what it’s like to live life undercover. Even within the queer community I’ve

often felt an outsider because I've always identified as pansexual. I don't really live in a binary existence in that way. In my artwork and my life, everything sort of bleeds into something else in a very organic way.

Do you feel like bisexuals are not welcome in queer communities?

I've always been a real solitary creature, like a panther or a cat. I like to roam around on my own. I spend a lot of time traveling very fluidly through a lot of different worlds. I have always resisted being pinned down to a single word definition; I feel it is reductive to subject anyone to a single word for their identity.



How did this particular project come to be?

I knew I had to do something with Irma Vep. I have pictures of her all around my room and office. My last piece dealt with "The Picture Of Dorian Gray," and I was really struck with how in the book when the painting comes to life, this inanimate object has its own power and agency, crossing time periods and existing in a parallel universe. I started to think about what would it be like if the character of Irma Vep, who has so much influence in the world with her image of this iconic vamp, was actually alive. This symbol of the cinematic vamp, this dark, aggressive woman— if she were real, what would she talk to her therapist about?

How does this play out in the film?

I set up the piece so the only dialogue is Irma Vep on the couch talking to her therapist about things that are both specific to the film "Le Vampires" and also subsequently are specific to any woman's life. She talks about topics like how she has a hard time working with the other vampires or how she is always on the run, she cant keep a relationship together.

Did you research the film heavily for the project?

I ended up doing a lot of research about the actress who played her, Musidora, who actually went on to become one of the first female feature film directors. She produced and directed a dozen films in her lifetime. All of them were lost except for two. Myth has it that in her final days she was a ticket taker at the Cinematheque Francaise and no one knew the old woman who was selling tickets was really this famed old star of the silver screen. But it all started with this character. This character became her identity, became her doppelganger.

That does sound pretty Dorian Gray-like.

It makes you think about the artist and her creation, whether its a character you portray or a painting you make. The power relationship between an artist and her creation fascinates me; sometimes the artist has more power and vice versa.

How does the film interact with the Zaha Hadid architecture of the museum?

The look of my piece was very much inspired by the German Expressionists- particularly "Metropolis". And I love Zaha Hadid's architecture; I love being dominated by architecture. Feeling that power, as a human I feel so small, like just a little element in the world. You feel it in churches all the time; they are designed to elevate the concept of what you're there for. It blew me away; I just felt that that this museum was made for my piece.

What are communicate with this work?

Part of what I do is try to put the viewer off balance in some way. I am interested in creating a destabilizing experience where the viewer has to navigate the piece in an active way. I feel that people often approach art from a voyeuristic point of view, where they're just peering in on it. I just want to shake people up and have them question *what is the function of art, what is the function of life* and when they experience something that makes them uncomfortable they have to figure out *why*.

February 14, 2010

The Boston Globe

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BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE

Art

MIT exhibit bends more than gender

Boundaries blur in works featuring cross-dressers

By Sebastian Smee, Globe Staff | February 14, 2010

CAMBRIDGE - Group exhibitions of experimental video art can be hectic and bothersome. It comes with the territory, right? Not surprisingly, "Virtuoso Illusion: Cross-Dressing and the New Media Avant-Garde," the new show organized by guest curator Michael Rush at MIT's List Visual Arts Center, fits the bill neatly. And yet, in spite of sporadic irritations, it's a rewarding, provocative show. The List's spacious galleries have been divided up into discrete viewing rooms with tall plastic partitions. But sounds spill liberally from one room to the next. Spoken dialogue, if it's attempted - as in the video by Kalup Linzy satirizing daytime soap operas - is an instant casualty. And you're never sure whether that dissonant, oddly timed soundtrack reflects the "avant-garde" credentials of the work you're watching or belongs instead to the film featuring dwarfs and transvestites next door. Never mind. Curators of contemporary art tend not to bother about pristine listening environments for video. Noise spillage and a hectic atmosphere are at one with the prevailing low-tech philosophy of most video art, and with an ongoing war against clinical, "white cube" viewing conditions. Here, the conditions also fit the show's essential thrust, which is - above and beyond cross-dressing - a more generalized interest in blurring boundaries, a gleeful spreading and smearing of identities.

The first work, projected onto a tilting wall above a threshold, is a short film by Marcel Duchamp, made in 1924-25 in collaboration with Man Ray. Duchamp was famously photographed in drag by Man Ray, and signed some of his works with the name of a female alter-ego, "Rose Sélavy" (a pun - typically Duchampian - on "Eros, c'est la vie.") Cross-dressing, we're reminded, is hardly new. Several photographs here by the fabulous Surrealists Claude Cahun and Pierre Molinier emphasize the point. But Rush includes them primarily to buttress his main contention, which is that artists today have gone beyond the obsession with sexual identities that dominated academic art talk in the 1990s. Instead, like those earlier artists, they're chasing bigger subjects, and cross-dressing is merely the means: They're interested in human souls instead of "gendered identities." This sounds - and is - refreshing. But Rush's insistence that cross-dressing is "incidental" to these artists' "multiple expressions of their multiple personalities" feels a little forced. It would be odd, would it not, to mount a show of football-themed work in order to demonstrate how the artists involved have all outgrown their childish obsession with sports? And yet that's more or less what Rush is suggesting. The fact is that a man dressing as a woman and a woman dressing as a man both remain highly charged - and inevitably comic - phenomena. That special charge is what lures the artists here to drag's various possibilities.



Claude Cahun's "Self-Portrait, 1928-1930"

While it may be true that cross-dressing was incidental to Duchamp's conceptual ambitions, it's also true that for him, everything was incidental; nothing was "of the essence." He was bent on undermining every idea of seriousness he encountered. Rose Sélavy's film here, called "Anémic Cinéma" (another piece of wordplay: "Cinema" spelled backward is almost the word "anemic"), features a rotating spiral - one of Duchamp's so-called "rotoreliefs" - and various nonsensical French phrases that also spin in a circle. It's momentarily diverting, no more. But it leads the way to several works by Andy Warhol, who appears in drag in a series of Polaroids further into the show. Warhol took his cue as an artist - and perhaps even as an artistic "persona" - from Duchamp.

"I don't know where the artificial stops and the real starts," he famously said, restating a theme that goes back, of course, to Plato's cave. The tension between appearances and truth is also at the heart of de Laclos's 18th-century play "Les Liaisons Dangereuses," which may be why, when watching the nearby video of Warhol having makeup applied to his face, I could not help thinking of Glenn Close, in the film of "Dangerous Liaisons," putting on makeup in the opening sequences, and pathetically wiping it off at the movie's tragic end. Pathos and defiance are at the heart of conventional performances in drag. We see both in Charles Atlas's video footage of extraordinary drag performances, and in various parts of John Kelly's miscellaneous video excerpts. When, at the end of Kelly's onstage performance, in drag, of Joni Mitchell's "Down to You," he takes off his dress and wig and puts on male clothing, it's funny, after a fashion. But Kelly's performance has been so sincerely matter-of-fact and the song itself so poignant that laughter is withheld and something more disorienting and moving takes hold. The performance could have come straight from a routine by the choreographer Pina Bausch. The best works here are ambitious videos that create self-enclosed fictional worlds. They're by Ryan Trecartin, Michelle Handelman, and the duo Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn.



Michelle Handelman "Dorian", 2009

Handelman's video is a riff on Oscar Wilde's "The Picture of Dorian Gray." Its fragmented imagery is projected on four screens with a soundtrack that's as creepy as its highly stylized depiction of moral and physical decay. The scene that shows the main character's heavily painted face kissing his fouled up alter-ego speaks directly to the Warhol film nearby, but the contrast - between Handelman's camped-up melodrama and Warhol's uninflected neutrality - is neat.

Dodge and Kahn's film "All Together Now" has nothing to do with cross-dressing, as far as I could see. Sure, some of the characters wear hooded suits concealing their gender, but everything else about their identities is also concealed. Regardless, it's an unsettling and weirdly engrossing film. It shows a cast of unwashed adults and children scavenging on the outskirts of a major city. Nothing in the film, which lasts



Ryan Trecartin "K-Corea INC. K (Section A), 2009

just under half an hour, quite makes sense. We watch the obscure workings of a marginal society with a sense that all but a handful of mores have been forgotten. The hooded figures work as a team in some underground location, and at one point engage in mock sex. Dead animals are hoarded, prodded, partly buried. Urine is stored in a bag, saved for some later purpose. It's all, as it sounds, quite disgusting. And yet there are flashes of intimacy, of human sweetness, and then just simple moments of mystery, with the result that you're compelled to keep looking.

Trecartin's film, "K-Corea INC. K (Section A)," which has a spacious, soundproof room to itself across from the gallery's main entrance, is better still. It's a fast-paced, choppily edited parody that skewers the vacuity at the heart of our culture: the insipid ubiquity of corporate-speak, cellphones, BlackBerrys, and body image, but also the deeper bind of a language that no longer denotes, of habits of communication that have hardened into monologues, rants, psychotic self-love. Trecartin appears in the movie dressed as a young woman who uncannily resembles Britney Spears. But, according to Rush in the catalog, Trecartin and his troupe of actors "don't care about gender roles." "Cross-dressing in the 1990s was subscribing to gender roles," he quotes Trecartin as saying; "it's not a role anymore; it's about bodies being in space, whether on the phone, or online, or in a store, or in a movie." The sentiment echoes the argument pushed forward by Rush's show. But a male body in space or on the phone or online is different from a female body, and different again from a male body pretending to be a female body. Trecartin and the other artists here know it.



Michelle Handelman's "DORIAN" on opening night at Participant Inc.
Photo by Marti Wilkerson

GOTHAM ART & THEATER by Elisabeth Kley



Michelle Handelman's "DORIAN"
on opening night at Participant
Inc.
Photo by Marti Wilkerson



Michelle Handelman
DORIAN
"Lord Henry"
photo by Laure Leber
2009
Participant Inc.

Michelle Handelman at Participant

Dorian, a wildly theatrical four channel video installation by Michelle Handelman, can be seen at Participant until June 3. The voluptuous Sequinette appears as a female version of Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray (the ever youthful character whose aging only takes place in his portrait), along with the beautiful Irani-Armenian Theremin virtuoso Armen Ra as her escort Lord H, and artist K8 Hardy as a nightclub performer.

A blood-curdling cameo by Mother Flawless Sabrina (star of the 1968 drag documentary *The Queen*) features Dorian decayed as a violin-playing, skull-faced fiend ripping paper stuffing out of her brassiere. Costumes, wigs, drawings and production stills are also on view. The video installation is \$45,000, photos are \$3,000 (both in editions of five), drawings are \$1,500, and wigs and costumes are from \$1,500-\$3,000. Flawless Sabrina will perform at Participant on May 24, along with soundtrack musicians Stefan Tcherepnin and Nadia Sirota.

ELISABETH KLEY is a New York artist and critic.

The New York Times

Friday, May 22, 2009

ARTS & DESIGN

MICHELLE HANDELMAN

'Dorian'

Participant Inc.

253 East Houston Street, Lower East Side

Through May 31

Inspired by Oscar Wilde's "Picture of Dorian Gray," Michelle Handelman's video installation "Dorian" takes viewers on a delirious bad trip from innocence to experience to death. The surrealistic 52-minute narrative is projected onto four screens that are set up in a square with a circular, revolving bench in the middle for viewers to sit on. A downbeat mix of "The Wizard of Oz," "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" and "Mulholland Drive" set to ethereal, avant-garde music, the video follows the nightmarish adventures of a young woman named Dorian, played by the drag impresario Sequinette. She first appears on the rocky banks of the East River with an old suitcase, looking like an aspiring actress just in from the Midwest. Discovered by a photographer, she is transported to a studio where she models punkish fashions.

From there she plummets into a hallucinatory evening of clubbing and riding around in a limousine in the company of various menacing, gender-bending characters. Then she is in her squalid bedroom, half-naked and drugged out. A mysterious, probably chimerical masked woman whose nude body is covered in glittery black paint hangs out with her, reading a book about Wilde. Finally Dorian confronts a vision of her dead self in the form of a scrawny, ghoulish, violin-playing old man (Jack Doroshow, who is also known as the drag queen Flawless Sabrina).

There are periods of tedium, but on the whole the film casts a captivating spell while delivering a mordant commentary on the decadence of contemporary culture.

KEN JOHNSON

PERFORMANCE

You Had to Be There

Performa 05 was a sprawling biennial that encompassed a wide range of open-ended mediums.

Performa 05, the first biennial of visual art performance, was successfully launched in New York, Nov. 3-21, under the oversight of art historian and curator RoseLee Goldberg. Events included live performances, film and video screenings, exhibitions, radio broadcasts, lectures and a symposium, and took place at more than 20 venues scattered around the city, with a concentration on the Lower East Side. Goldberg's timing could not have been better, as the overheated art market has piqued an appetite for endeavors with no saleable commodities. Publicity was ample and events well attended; scheduling and other glitches were accepted as somehow true to the spirit of what can be, after all, an ad hoc medium.

The biennial's official roster included more than 40 events (aside from related performances and exhibitions around town that were not listed on the schedule), some with multiple installments and locations. Goldberg worked in alliance with alternative art spaces, galleries and museums, a bar and an ex-synagogue (home of the Angel Orensanz Foundation), all of which acted (at least) quasi-independently. The site for one of the most ambitious projects, Marina Abramovic's *Seven Easy Pieces*, for example, was the Guggenheim Museum, where, over seven nights, the artist restaged historical performances by herself and others, and presented a new one [see article this issue]. Curated by the Guggenheim's Nancy Spector, it was listed in Performa 05's schedule as a principal attraction but was also an independent event. Similarly, New York University (where Goldberg has long taught) featured "Not For Sale," a two-day symposium on writing about performance and new media. Performa 05's strategies also involved plugging itself into existing series, such as "Band Nights" (which it launched, at Artists Space), "Scout" (readings at Participant Inc.) and "Personal Archive" (at Anthology Film Archives). Galleries and not-for-profit spaces generously allotted space and time: White Box, for instance, mounted an experimental music and sound exhibition that was the site over three weeks of live installations by, among others, the Internet radio station free103point9, which broadcast from the Chelsea space.

The biennial is the main focus of a non profit organization, also called Performa. It was founded in 2004 by Goldberg, and relied for sponsorship of biennial events on grants, individual contributors and case-by-case funding rather than a single corporate or institutional sponsor. The Swiss Institute, supported by an alliance of diplomatic funders, mounted a two-day series of multi-artist, simultaneous live works, called "24-Hour Incidental," while the Consulate General of the Netherlands helped pay for a film retrospective by Bas Jan Ader at Anthology, and the British Council an installation by

Carey Young at Paula Cooper. Performa alone commissioned two original works, one by Francis Alijs at the Slipper Room, a Lower East Side burlesque bar and cocktail lounge, and the other by Jesper Just, *True Love Is Yet to Come*, his first opera, at Stephan Weiss Studio in Greenwich Village (where a benefit dinner for Performa 05 was held on opening night; a closing party, co-sponsored by the Village Voice at the live-music venue Bowery Ballroom, also benefited Performa).

Art in America editorial staff members Brian Boucher, David Ebony, Faye Hirsch, Cathy Lebowitz, Leigh Anne Miller, Nancy Princenthal and Constance Wynndham fanned out across Performa 05 events and made some choices. What follows describes a few of the highlights but is by no means an exhaustive survey. To find a complete listing of artists and venues, go to performa-arts.org. —F.H.

After receiving a white feather from the smiling *maitresse d'*, one entered the dark gallery to peals of strained laughter. Dressed in garish club wear, Handelman and her friends sat around on inflatable chairs under flashing disco lights, laughing, while the audience the small audience (it sometimes giggling nervously. A small video screen showed participants talking about their positive experiences in laughter groups in India. The whole encounter was hardly conducive to therapeutic laughter. One felt excluded from Handelman's joke, rather as if one had crashed her private party.

I moved toward the back room



The back room at Michelle Handelman's *Laughing Lounge*, 2005. Photo Takuya Katsumura.

Michelle Handelman, *Laughing Lounge*, at Jack the Pelican

Incorporating video, photography and performance, Michelle Handelman's postfeminist work focuses on the spectacular. The artist has been involved in a wide range of projects, from *Blood-Sisters*, her documentary about the leather-clad lesbian community in San Francisco, to collaborations with DJ Spooky. *Laughing Lounge* was inspired by the German cult film *Kamikaze* 1989 and a therapeutic practice that seeks to heal through laughter.

to escape the bizarre tension of the lounge. Here, a trio of energetic dancers gyrated on a platform to loud pop hits, their outfits covered with small mirrors that cast light patterns across the wall. One felt safe as a voyeur, and when the ridiculous group momentarily stopped by to laugh, it was actually funny. The show appealed to the desire to have all our senses saturated; the dazzling lights, glamorous dancers and loud music were seductive and great fun. Handelman's performance showed how laughter can be used as a powerful tool for social inclusion, or exclusion. Everyone wants to be seen to be having a good time, as if the volume and intensity of one's laughter were somehow a measure of one's success.

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Jesper Just, *True Love Is Yet to Come*, at Stephan Weiss Studio

Performa 05 commissioned this multimedia opera by the young Danish artist Jesper Just, his first live endeavor. He collaborated with Vision3, an imaging company whose new software program, called *Eyeliner*, allows the interaction of onstage performers with hologramlike, 3-D projections. Starring Norwegian film and TV star Baard Ove, who appeared live, and, in the projected images, Johannes Lilleøre, a Danish actor whom Just features in nearly all his short films [see article this issue], the 30-minute opera traced the fruitless pursuit of a young man by an older one who perishes in the end. Also putting in a brief appearance, in projection, was the Finnish Screaming Men's Choir, a performance ensemble whose members declaim lyrics at the tops of their lungs. Much of the footage for the projections was taken from a trilogy of films that Just is in the process of completing.

Following his usual method, Just organized the work around sentimental oldies, which Ove here sang in a heartfelt, deliberately unpolished manner. Each segment of the opera corresponded to one of the songs, opening with "Whispering Grass," which Ove addressed to an oversize, three-dimensional projection of Lilleøre, who vanished when

embraced, and closing with "Cry Me a River," in which Ove, himself becoming (at least partially) virtual, tumbled through a watery cascade to meet his death. In between we saw him pursuing his elusive love-object in a variety of settings, the most surreal of which was an antique merry-go-round from Copenhagen's Tivoli Gardens, looking quite spectral in the vaporous grisaille of the imaging program. Each of the men was mounted on a carousel horse way too small for him, engaging in a low-speed "chase" destined to fail from the start. The climax ("You Always Hurt the One You Love") had Ove on his knees being chastised by a circle of screaming Finns dressed in white suits and repeatedly shouting, "You always hurt! You always hurt!" Above, Lilleøre's lovely face materialized among drifting blossoms, in keeping with the lyrics ("You always take the sweetest rose/ And crush it till the petals fall").

View from the premiere of Christian Marclay's silent video *Screen Play*, 2005, accompanied by live performances by various musicians.



The main objective of Ben-Tor's energetic monologues, delivered in German and English, is to skewer what she calls "the domain of idiocy," in this case aspects of Western liberalism.

True Love Is Yet to Come had all the ingredients of Just's best work—the songs, the older man/younger man trajectory, Lilleøre—and, like his films, expertly straddled the fine line between tragedy and absurdity. The passion that fires the older man ennobles his most abject gestures, a transformation that has been the stuff of opera since its invention. The smoke-and-mirrors visuals served the formula well, enveloping the theme of lost love in a fugitive, dreamlike atmosphere. —F.H.

**Christian Marclay,
Screen Play,
at Eyebeam**

Funded in part by a 2005 Eyebeam Moving Image Commission, Christian Marclay's 20-minute silent video collage *Screen Play* consists of hundreds of short clips from found black-and-white films. With three live musical performances accompanying consecutive screenings of the piece, the premiere presentation at Eyebeam recalled the silent film tradition. The performers gave widely varying sonic responses, all in a modern, atonal style, to images that ranged from horseback chases to rowboats in crashing waves, from a house in flames to raindrops on water. Simple computer animations of brightly colored moving dots and morphing lines punctuated or interacted with the images on

screen and often formed the five horizontal lines of a musical staff, literalizing the artist's concept of a "video score."

As he has in many previous works, here Marclay edited together associative strings of images; for example, a snowball becomes a globe becomes a disco ball, then a bowling ball, then the sun. The audience laughed as his intercutting made a fey conductor seem to repeatedly direct the opening and closing of flower petals in time-lapse video; I shook my head with wonder each time the voluminously spreading smoke from a rocket launch blended seamlessly into time-lapse footage of a dandelion bud opening into a sphere of white. This was followed by a shot of two high-heel shoes adorned with white puffs.

Diverse musical interpretations imparted varying moods. The first performance, by TOT Trio, comprising cellist Okkyung Lee, percussionist Tim Barnes and DJ Toshio Kajiwarara, offered a quiet accompaniment that seemed independent of the visuals. Elliott Sharp followed on solo guitar, contributing thunderous, distorted sounds that lent

the images an ominous atmosphere. Finally, harpist Zeena Parkins led percussionists Christine Bard and Jim Pugliese along with pipa player and singer Min Xiao-Fen in a lively, humorous, jazzy interpretation with vocal parts; at times they provided sound effects for the video, which seemed better each time as it was able to support these dissimilar readings. —B.B.

**Tamy Ben-Tor,
Exotica, The Rat and The Liberal,
at Salon 94**

At Salon 94 during Performa, and afterward at her one-person exhibition at Zach Feuer gallery in Chelsea, which also included a handful of recent videos, the charismatic Israeli Tamy Ben-Tor presented herself live as four characters delivering monologues in German and English. Costume changes she made in front of the audience between acts allowed Ben-Tor to catch her breath during the energetic, 25-minute performance. Her main objective is to skewer what she calls "the domain of idiocy," in this case aspects of Western liberalism—the globalist taste for the latest, hottest marginalized culture, for example, or postmodern relativism. Ben-Tor's characterizations, however—from the sultry intonations of the extremely pale "Exotica," anemically performing a generic Middle-Eastern dance, to the toothy Germanic screech of "Rat," a girl with hideous buck teeth and a stock-totalitarian skirted uniform, to the mousy, whispered uncertainties of the intellectual "Liberal"—are ambiguous enough to veer toward an apolitical anarchy.

Most discomfiting is the fourth character, unnamed in the piece's title, but somehow embodying each of its elements; she is an American Jewish lady with a mop of black frizzy hair and big sunglasses, crazily rapping against Holocaust denial in lingo tied to racial stereotypes. The point may be vague (a way to jolt Holocaust discourse out of cliché?), but the perverse, taboo-breaking *joie de vivre* is not. Although Ben-Tor is presently in the MFA program at Columbia University, she comes from a career in experimental theater in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Clearly she is opting for an audience that might better recognize strains of Cindy Sherman and Bruce Nauman in this manic, darkly comedic work. —F.H.



*The back room at Michelle Handelman's Laughing Lounge, 2005.
Photo Takuya Katsumura.*

*An object and Gelitin's facsimile; in Tantamounter 24/7, 2005.
Courtesy Leo Koenig Gallery, New York.*



Gelitin, *Tantamounter 24/7*, at Leo Koenig

The four-man team of Viennese performance and installation artists known as Gelitin (Ali Janka, Wolfgang Gantner, Tobias Urban and Florian Reither) transformed themselves into a giant "copy-duplicator-transformation machine" in *Tantamounter 24/7*. For seven days and seven nights, the group was confined to a large plywood container without doors or windows. Outfitted with running water, a bathroom, electricity and art supplies, the temporary habitat was installed inside Leo Koenig Gallery in Chelsea. Near the gallery entrance was a wooden box several feet tall connected to the habitat. The box's lid was



Sharon Hayes's *in the near future*, showing the eighth of nine actions, Nov. 8, 2005, 8-9 a.m., City Hall, Chambers Street and Broadway, New York. Courtesy Art in General, New York.

covered in handwritten text inviting visitors to place inside it an object that Gelitin would attempt to duplicate in some way. A yellow lightbulb fixed to the box's top signaled when the group was ready to receive an object. A blinking white bulb meant that the original object and the facsimile were ready to be unloaded from an exit slot nearby.

The results, some of which were on display at the gallery desk, were witty and often funky approximations of the original objects in all sorts of materials. A paper version of a houseplant or a small reading lamp duplicated in tin foil were among the examples. Some were simple, such as a thoughtful colored-pencil rendering of a doll. Others were more challenging. On the day we visited a mother put her young daughter into the box. Apparently, she spent several happy hours in the habitat helping Gelitin with its reproductions. —D.E.

Michelle Handelman, *Laughing Lounge*, at Jack the Pelican

Incorporating video, photography and performance, Michelle Handelman's postfeminist work focuses on the spectacular. The artist has been involved in a wide range of projects, from *Blood-*

Sisters, her documentary about the leather-clad lesbian community in San Francisco, to collaborations with DJ Spooky. *Laughing Lounge* was inspired by the German cult film *Kamikaze* (1989) and a therapeutic practice that seeks to heal through laughter.

After receiving a white feather from the smiling maitresse d', one entered the dark gallery to peals of strained laughter. Dressed in garish club wear, Handelman and her friends sat around on inflatable chairs under flashing disco lights, laughing, while the small audience (it was a chilly Wednesday night) stood behind the chairs, sometimes giggling nervously. A small video screen showed participants talking about their positive experiences in laughter groups in India. The whole encounter was hardly conducive to therapeutic laughter. One felt excluded from Handelman's joke, rather as if one had crashed her private party.

I moved toward the back room to escape the bizarre tension of the lounge. Here, a trio of energetic dancers graced on a platform to loud pop hits, their outfits covered with small mirrors that cast light patterns across the wall. One felt safe as a voyeur, and when the ridiculous group momentarily stopped by to laugh, it was actually funny. The show appealed to the desire to have all our senses saturated; the dazzling lights, glamorous dancers and loud music were seductive and great fun. Handelman's performance showed how laughter can be used as a powerful tool for social inclusion, or exclusion. Everyone wants to be seen to be having a good time, as if the volume and intensity of one's laughter were somehow a measure of one's success. —C.W.



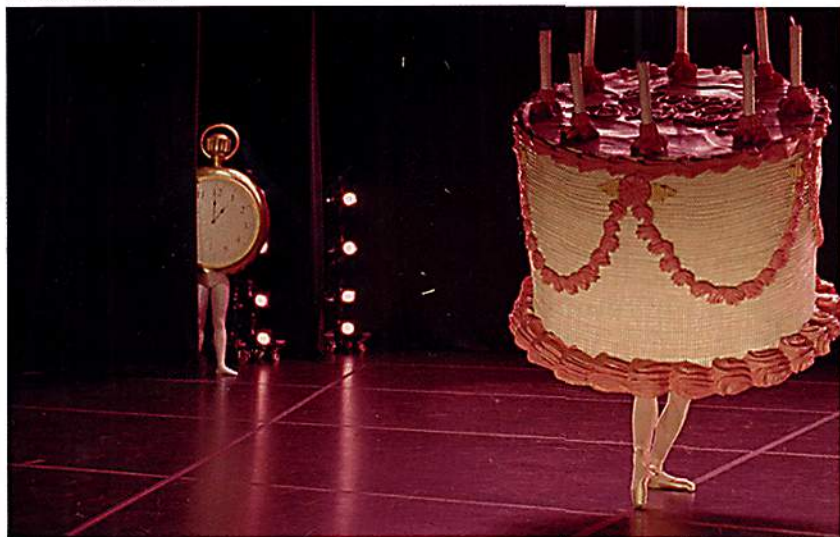
Ron Athey and Julianna Snapper in a performance based on their opera *Judas Cradle*, 2005. Photo Paula Court.

Sharon Hayes, *in the near future*, at Art in General

One of the first artworks funded by Art in General's new commissions program, *in the near future* is Sharon Hayes's initial installment of a project that will continue through 2006. For nine consecutive days, Hayes took to the streets carrying a protest sign for hour-long performances. Each day the event occurred in a different Manhattan location with a different sign.

Some of her placards hark back to the 1960s and '70s, with absurdly anachronistic messages such as "Ratify E.R.A. Now" (neatly printed in block letters) or "Who approved the war in Vietnam??" (quirkily handwritten). However, many of Hayes's posters offered statements that could apply to any number of situations, including "Strike Today" and "We are innocent" or, more ominously, "Nothing will be as before." Potentially more provocative was a sign that alluded to the 2000 presidential election: "A Stolen Election (or other intolerable

Laurie Simmons's film-in-progress *The Music of Regret*, showing a scene from Act III. Photo Paula Court.



Almost entirely naked, Athey dragged himself down an aisle along Crisco tracks squeezed from a giant bra that he had donned, slapping his chest repeatedly on the floor and pulling himself forward.

event) could spark (millions to the streets in) a Mass Rebellion.”

Hayes incorporated the documentation of her project into its conception by furnishing herself with invited audiences (sometimes just a person or two). Hence, she had witnesses who watched and took pictures, in addition to the frequent attention of passersby. After the completion of the actions, slides of the nine performances were displayed on nine projectors at Art in General. Viewers were treated to multiple shots of Hayes, straight-faced and stern, holding her placard by the arch in Washington Square Park, confronted by police officers in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral, and standing amid the neon and LCD displays of a bustling Times Square. —C.L.

Laurie Simmons, *The Music of Regret*, at Salon 94

In the late 1980s, Laurie Simmons made a series of big black-and-white photographs of blown-up objects that were worn like outsized hats by people whose bodies were visible only from the hips down. Signature images not just for Simmons but for the art of the '80s, the “Walking Objects” have proven to have legs in more ways than one. They return for a leaping, tap-dancing, pirouetting encore in *The Music of Regret*, a short film to premiere at the Museum of Modern Art in May; a working version of Act III, “The Audition,” was screened at Salon 94 as part of Performa 05. Simmons jokingly has compared “The Audition” to *A Chorus Line*, because each object has a solo turn before being ushered offstage by unseen casting directors.

Unlike Julian Schnabel, Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo and David Salle, peers who have used filmmaking as a way to inflate their work's expressive vocabulary, Simmons has kept to the fairly tight emotional scale of her still images. In fact, the implications of size seem a central theme in the still sketchy film. One object—a house—is greatly reduced from life, and another—a gigantic prima donna of a wedding cake, candles aflame—could conceivably be actual size. But the other objects—they include a cupcake, box camera, pocket watch, leather-bound book and gun—are much bigger than in reality. On the one hand, this tendency to oversize objects makes the dancers seem diminutive—little dolls brought to life, *Nutcracker Suite*-style. On the other, the dancing pushes the scale



Michael Smith and Mark Fischer's video *It Starts at Home*, 1982. Photo courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix, New York.

toward human measure (in the register of moving forms, animate bodies prevail). And on the third hand, the symbolism is all carried by the bulky inert things, which we find where expressive features (faces, on people) should be. That tips the scale back the other way. In short, these tryouts are staged in a theater of both spatial and psychological instability.

Also shown at Salon 94 was a fragment of Act I, “The Green Tie,” in which the action was played by puppets representing two gentle old men; Act II, furthest from completion, will revisit Simmons's self-portrait dummies. Clearly, a certain kind of tact will be maintained throughout: though “The Audition” features joy, anxiety (there are, after all, both winners and losers) and regret (the prevailing tone is nostalgic), the wobbly, indeterminate scale keeps these feelings safely—or, disorientingly and provocatively—at bay. —N.P.

Ron Athey and Julianna Snapper, *Judas Cradle*, at Participant Inc.

In conjunction with the “Scout” series of literary events at the alternative space Participant Inc., poet Eileen Myles invited artist Ron Athey and singer/musicologist Julianna Snapper to perform an approximately 20-minute segment based on *Judas Cradle* (2005), their monumental work—part performance art, part opera—that they staged last spring and summer at venues in Ireland, the U.K. and Los Angeles. The *Judas cradle* is a medieval torture device involving anal penetration, some variant of which the L.A.-based Athey, known for his performances involving self-mutilation and sadomasochism, deploys in the longer piece (though not here). The libretto of the untitled, abridged version at Participant was spoken and sung in a variety of tongues, including gibberish, with texts quoting, among other sources, Inquisition accounts and Italian opera. Athey and Snapper berated each other, sometimes seductively, some-

times antagonistically, from either side of the constricted gallery space, and wound up quasi-wrestling in a narrow aisle between jammed-in spectators. Athey has an imposing, tattooed body and was almost entirely naked. At one point, he violently dragged himself down the aisle along Crisco tracks squeezed from a giant bra that he had donned, slapping his chest repeatedly on the floor and pulling himself forward. (Spectators snatched their bags and coats off the floor.) Snapper's exhilarating voice was driven along in no less spectacular a manner. Here the old genre of s/m performance was taken to a new level of sophistication and black humor. —F.H.

Michael Smith, Selected Videos, at Anthology Film Archives

On two consecutive evenings at Anthology, performance and video artist Michael Smith was on hand to present a survey of his work, 1980-2005, and (in conjunction with Anthology's “Personal Archive” series) sometimes rare footage and films by himself and various artists, comedians and actors who influenced him, selected by Smith and curator Jay Sanders. Here was a concentrated dose of Smith's alter-ego “Mike,” a bland yet buoyant character overtaken by the marginalia of popular culture: last-ditch disco, suburban decor, TV reruns and late-night ads. Smith plumbs the dark heart of the loser and finds a desperate and surreal vein of comedy. The “personal archive” included, among other works, tapes of early performances by Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysterical Theater; ineffable faux-magic shows by the late performance artist Stuart Sherman; a bit by comedian Albert Brooks as Dave the Ventriloquist; and an excerpt from Jacques Tati's *Playtime*. Also included was footage of some of Smith's earliest work from the mid-'70s and the delirious art-world puppet shows he staged with Doug Skinner in the early '90s. —F.H.

PRICE \$4.95

NOV. 7, 2005

THE NEW YORKER

ART MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES



"PERFORMA05"

This extensive program of performance by visual artists is projected to be the first of a biannual series. Artists include Marina Abramović, Laurie Simmons, Christian Marclay, Jesper Just, Sislej Xhafa, Mary Jordan, Michelle Handelman, and Francis Alÿs, among many others. At venues around the city, from Nov. 3 to 21. For schedules, locations, and information on tickets and reservations, see www.performa-arts.org.





October 21-28, 2004
Issue 473

Brooklyn

Jack the Pelican Presents

487 Driggs Ave between North 9th and 10th Sts, Williamsburg (718-782-0183). Subway: L to Bedford Ave. Fri-Mon noon-6pm. Sat performances 2-4pm. **Michelle Handelman**, "This Delicate Monster." Inspired by Baudelaire's book of poems *Flowers of Evil*, Handelman creates a multimedia pop fable with a video installation, photographs and performances every Saturday (sounds to us like the perfect pre-Halloween bash). The masks and costumes used in the piece are collaborations with the designer Garo Sparo. Sat 23-Nov 16.

THE NEW YORKER

MARCH 13, 2000



GALLERIES-CHELSEA

MICHELLE HANDELMAN

This mix of photographs, videos, and sculptures, billed as a “technogarden of hermaphroditic delights,” bears the stamp of San Francisco, from whence the artist recently emigrated. If her “French Tickler” photographs are elegant, and her suture pieces (documenting recreational skin sewing) are cringe-inducing, her short video loop, “ICU” (translation: “I see you”), is plain funny. In it, the artist applies generous false eyelashes to the edge of the camera, murmuring sweet nothings. Through March 18. (Cristinerose, 529 W. 20th St. 206-0297.)

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, JULY 2, 2000

AR 31

ART / ARCHITECTURE

Performance Hops Back Into the Scene



Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

By MICHAEL RUSH

EVER wonder what happened to performance art?

After its heyday in the 1970's, when visual artists from Adrian Piper to Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman and Eleanor Antin were making sculptures of their bodies or trying on different identities in their gallery performances, performance art, many critics think, devolved into autobiographical rants that soon became indistinguishable from stand-up comedy or therapy monologues. Well, it's back: in galleries, on the streets, in museums, on videos, in cyberspace, looking in some cases the way it did in the 70's, and in others very fresh and new.

In the last few months alone, some young artists staged a guerrilla performance to get their artworks "hung" in the Museum of Modern Art by hiding them in their coats, which they checked at the entrance; the artist Nayland Blake, 40, performed on video in an overstuffed rabbit outfit in his show at Matthew Marks Gallery; and, as part of the Whitney Biennial, the online collective Fakeshop (www.fakeshop.com) staged an elaborate interactive performance event with surveillance cameras at a makeshift space in Chelsea. Currently both the Sculpture Center in New

York and the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, Conn., are presenting a performance series featuring three generations of artists.

Why this sudden renewal of interest in an art form that seemed relegated to the history books like Neo Geo or Arte Povera? "It's a new spirit of openness in the galleries," said Mr. Blake, who has been performing since the mid-80's, first in San Francisco and then in New York.

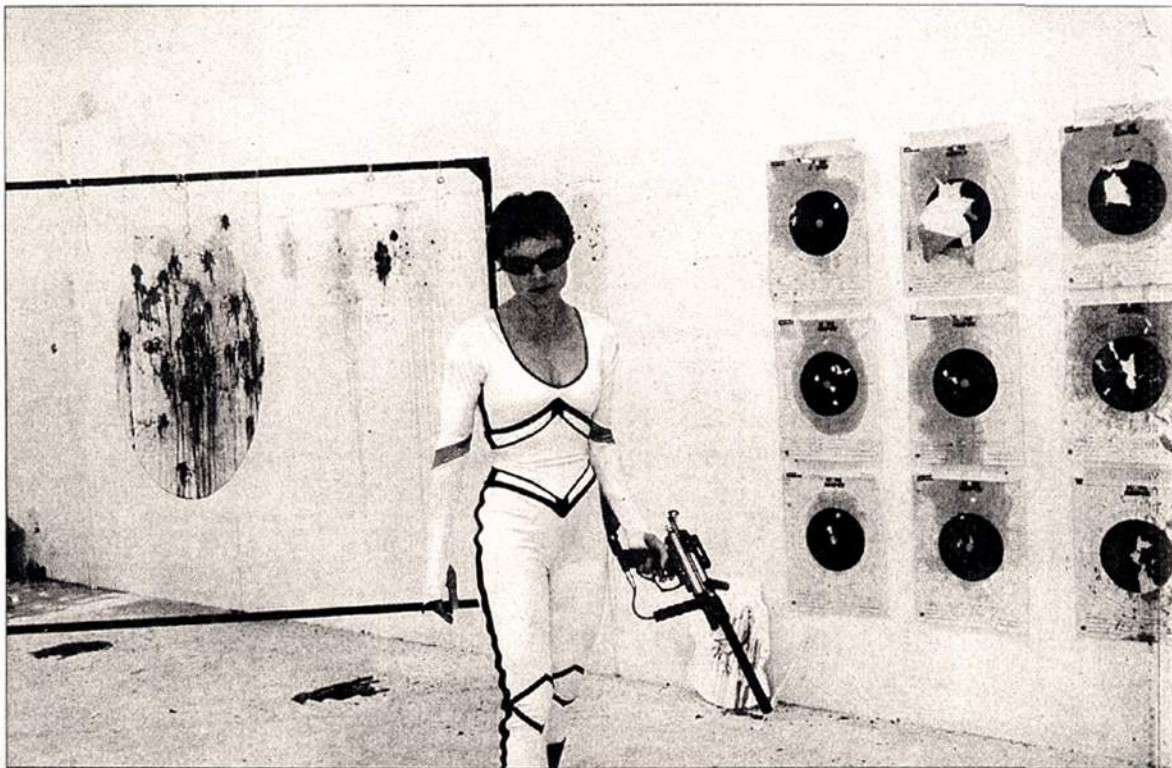
The critic and performance-art historian RoseLee Goldberg agrees. "The galleries are realizing that their spaces are ideal for performances, and there's a whole new generation of artists eager to work in them," she said. Of course, performance never actually disappeared from art, but in the feeding frenzy of the 80's or

The market has cooled, galleries are showing a new freedom and artists are once again putting themselves center stage.

high-priced "objects" like paintings and sculpture, the time-based art of performance as well as video were less in favor because of their lack of marketability.

Part of what changed is that some visual artists have come to see performance as a natural extension of their overall artistic practice, which may also embrace painting, video and installations. Mr. Blake is a good example. In his recent show he exhibited large charcoal drawings, multimedia sculptures and a full-wall video projection of a performance. Echoing the endurance performances of Chris Burden and others in the 70's,

Michael Rush is the author of "New Media in Late 20th-Century Art," published by Thames and Hudson.



Christina Kelly

Mr. Blake filled a bunny costume with 146 pounds of navy beans (equal to the weight of his lover), which, added to his own 270 pounds, made movement, especially dance, almost impossible. But move he did, rendering a hilarious and complicated meditation on relationships, the body and doomed attempts to please another person.

Extreme performance art is also in evidence in the three artists who are occupying (two of them literally) the Sculpture Center on East 69th Street through July 15. William Pope.L, 45, a performer and the curator of the series, is doing what his title says, "Eating the Wall Street Journal." Seated on a toilet atop a 10-foot tower, Mr. Pope.L, naked except for a thick dusting of flour over his black skin, a jockstrap, a silk tie and a gold watch, munches on a stack of Wall Street Journals, aided by milk and ketchup. He then regurgitates the contents to dispel the heavy metals and bleaches in the paper.

"Our consumer society promises power and wealth simply by owning certain objects," Mr. Pope.L said, "which harks back to primitive magic and voodoo. I figured if I also eat it, just imagine how much power I can drain from this fetishized object!" He is not the first to create unusual meals in a performance. The Los Angeles artist Paul McCarthy, who will have a mid-career retrospective in that city in the fall, gained notoriety in the 70's by ingesting large amounts of hot dogs and other edibles and nonedibles, which he, too, regurgitated.

Mr. Pope.L, who studied with the Fluxus performance artist Geoffrey Hendricks at Rutgers in the late 70's, invited his teacher to participate at the Sculpture Center. Mr. Hendricks, 69, is re-enacting a piece from 1971, "Dream Event," during which he will sleep in the space, record his dreams and perform a new work, "Eating and Breathing," with the dancer and yoga instructor Christina Read. Mr. Hendricks, who participated in performances with George Maciunas, Claes Oldenburg, Yoko Ono and John Lennon, Alison Knowles, Dick Higgins and others, became known for his 1971



Thomas Dalzell for The New York Times

CUDDLY AND NOT SO CUDDLY Nayland Blake, top left, in a bunny suit for the video performance piece "Starting Over"; Michelle Handelman, above, dressed for action in her "picnic performance" last month at the Aldrich Museum, in which she and others shot paint guns at canvases; William Pope.L, left, performing "Eating the Wall Street Journal" at the Sculpture Center on June 20.

performance "Body/Hair," during which he shaved his entire body in an act of Buddhist-inspired self-abnegation. A video of this performance will be shown at the Sculpture Center.

While Mr. Hendricks's work may be spiritual in its intentions, Patty Chang's is anything but, though one of her first performances, "Shaving," did suggest some unwitting connection between the two artists. In this piece from 1988, Ms. Chang, 27, strutted into the performing area wearing a red crinoline dress and carrying a bowl of soapy water. She sat on a stool, lifted her hefty skirt and proceeded to shave her groin vigorously as well as defiantly, suggesting a robust sexuality hidden under that proper dress.

MS. CHANG is not one for subtlety. Her other performances to date have included cutting open her breast (actually a cantaloupe concealed in her bra), and standing still in a gray suit with the sleeves sewn into the jacket, forbidding arm movement, as her mouth was held open by a dental clamp attached to a wall by string. "I think of them as sculptures," she said, "not necessarily as political acts." She is essentially living in the Sculpture

Continued on Page 32

The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, JULY 2, 2000



Thomas Dalal for The New York Times

The performance artist Patty Chang on a water bed at the Sculpture Center.

Performance Hops Back

Continued From Page 31

Center and using a water bed and live-feed video to create an as-yet-unnamed performance.

For their "Acts of Art" series, the Aldrich Museum curators Jessica Hough and Aran Winterbottom have assembled a mix of artists — from the well-known dance duo Eiko and Koma, who on Friday will be performing one of their minimalist dances inside a custom-designed trailer they travel in for these occasions, to the musician and sound artist Stephen Vitiello, 36, whose installations were seen and heard this year at P. S. 1 and Postmasters Gallery. On July 14 Mr. Vitiello will project on a wall a three-minute scene from the movie "Twister" slowed to 45 minutes while he performs live with a sampler and electric guitar.

Last month at the Aldrich, the filmmaker and visual artist Michelle Handelman, 35, who has a background in martial arts and dance and likes to "activate people," organized a "picnic performance" during which visitors shot paint guns at canvases (reminiscent of the Japanese Gutai performance artists of the 1950's). And Hunter Reynolds, 41, transformed himself from a mummy-wrapped figure lying on the floor to a whirling dervish in a full-length gown spinning for up to two hours.

From time-based to timeless, performance art can also be found in cyberspace. Martha Wilson, the doyenne of downtown performance and the founder of Franklin Furnace, moved in 1997 from a basement stage in TriBeCa to the Web (www.franklinfurnace.org), where she has presented dozens of new and archived performances. The current rage for viewer-involved activity is available in the performances at www.movingimagegallery.com.

The PlainText Players are a collective of

artists and writers from around the world, including the James Joyce scholar Marlina Corcoran, who log on from their real locations (Munich, Los Angeles, New York) to a communal text space known as a MOO (Multiuser Object-Oriented Space) and proceed to type in dialogue, action and scenery in a steady flow of improvised theatrics. Their work, which was included in the 1997 Venice Biennale and Documenta X, can be found at <http://yin.arts.uci.edu/~players>.

KRISTIN LUCAS, 32, a 1994 graduate of Cooper Union, started out as a V.J. (video jockey) mixing video material culled from friends or found in the garbage into visual collages at parties much the way D.J.'s mix music. She soon found herself in the 1997 Whitney Biennial with a "performative video," as she calls it, "Cable Xcess," in which a fragmented image of her face stares at viewers through a blue haze as a voice-over provides social commentary on television shows. A video document of Ms. Lucas's recent performance "Drag and Drop" can be seen through July 28 at the Sara Meltzer Gallery in Chelsea. In this performance, filmed on a tennis court, the artist faces an opponent who is a video projection that moves according to electric signals from sensors placed under the court.

Performance art, which some critics trace to the virulent gestures used by Jackson Pollock in making his paintings, has radically influenced all forms of contemporary art from video art to conceptual art to multimedia installations. It has placed the person and the body of the artist center stage and allowed for a sense of self-mockery and playfulness to infiltrate a field often bent on the rigors of form and function.

If all the world's a stage, performance artists occupy a special and quirky corner of it.

Time Out

New York

Issue 233

March 9-16, 2000

ART

Reviews



Chelsea Girl Add Christenrose gallery to your next art crawl of the West 20s. Visual artist and performer Michelle Handelman's "Cannibal Garden <part 1>" is a vivid melange of digital photography, sculpture and videos of the artist engaging in wild

behavior like eating candies off of the floor. It's the first New York show for Handelman, who moved here a year ago from San Francisco, where she made a name for herself with provocative work that included *BloodSisters*, a documentary about the lesbian S/M community. For information, see Art, Chelsea & vicinity.



Performance art

The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art is presenting a series of performance arts events this summer. Michelle Handelman, above, perpetrated the second "act of art" on Saturday afternoon in the museum sculpture garden, with the participation of people who came to see "The Adventures of Luck M: AIM." Using paint guns (with tiny video recorders), the artist and her assistant and volunteers from the audience sent blobs of paint onto canvases hanging in the garden. The event was a colorful display, and not the least element was the artist herself, decked out in a Barbarella-type costume and sporting a mauve hairdo. The next event will be on July 7, 8 to 9:30 p.m., featuring Eiko & Koma in Caravan Project 2000. —Bryan Haeffele photo.

Ridgefield Press, June 2000

"Acts of Art" curated by Jessica Hough, The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art