

“SCHMARTWORLD”
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By Whitney Kimball

A clip shows a close-up of a head, topped with a translucent auburn coil, and face smeared and speckled with a brown paint-like putty that’s definitely poop. Pan out. The face belongs to one of three semi-nude performers who have just plodded out of a white cardboard pipe. They’re performing Butoh, or “dance of the dark soul”¹: a highly-controlled slow motion postwar Japanese dance originally designed to reflect taboo subjects, like homeless, prostitutes, and drunks. In this case, it’s apparently applied to something along the lines of “Everybody Poops”. The face cringes, frowns, and opens his eyes wide, alternating masterfully between shades of deep focus. It takes a minute to grasp the full extent of what we’re watching: an artist pouring all of his technical mastery into a three-minute-long poop joke. The camera cuts to an audience of wide-eyed children. Pause.

The scene, we’re told, was followed by a collaboration between a Kukatonan dance troupe and a local noise band.

Art could be like this! I thought.

Before her 2012 artist’s talk at The Hole Gallery, I had never seen anything like Jaimie Warren’s travelling variety show “Whoop Dee Doo” in an art gallery before. It’s not art for everyone; it’s *for* everyone, and because of that it’s art.

The show travels across the country and pairs unlikely collaborations of local talents—drag queens, beauty queens, clogging troupes, heavy metal bands and army vets—to perform goofy quasi-educational scenarios with monster puppets in splashy colorful cardboard and paper maché sets built with the help of local kids. (The above episode was titled “Your Body Isn’t a Wonderland, It’s Gross”). People are surprisingly open; something about giant eyeballs and flying banners make people go yay, while forcing them to immediately make new judgements about cultures that are different from their own in a world where everybody’s weird. Shouldn’t art reflect more than one set of values?

Critics have been saying as much for years, in various ways, about the tyranny of market culture, producing a surge of protests, Facebook rants, mournful goodbyes and even art world breakups.²³ “It is time to Go Rogue,”⁴ Jerry Saltz proclaimed over Facebook in 2010. Saltz was

¹ Sanders, Vicki. “Dancing and the Dark Soul of Japan: An Aesthetic Analysis of “Butō”” *Asian Theatre Journal* 2nd ser. 5.Autumn (1988): 149. JSTOR. Web. 30 Aug. 2014.
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25161489>>

² Sarah Douglas, Dave Hickey is Retiring (Sort Of), *Gallerist NY*, *The New York Observer*, October 12, 2012

³ Sarah Thornton, Top Ten Reasons Not to Write About the Art Market, *TAR Magazine*, October 2012
<http://blogs.artinfo.com/abovetheestimate/files/2012/10/THORNTON10ReasonsMarketTAR.pdf>

responding to his wife Roberta Smith's call for art institutions to end a long, dry streak of white male "[Post-Minimalism](#)"⁵. "Generation Blank," Saltz later christened the new crop of "university echo chamber" laureates. Before Smith, Anton Vidokle had penned "Art Without Artists?"⁶, a manifesto against curatorial overstepping. "New York Must End", wrote Christopher Hsu, on the city's mainlining of cultural delicacies. These may sound like distinct problems, but they all come down to some version of what Robert Hughes dubbed "The Mona Lisa Curse": the business of art making for the ruling tastes of the auction market. The famed documentary imagines the art market as a roaring flood in the streets of Florence. "[The market] has changed art's relationship to the world, and is drowning its sense of purpose," Hughes says. "If art can't tell us about the world we live in, then I don't think there's much point in having it." Hughes doesn't find a point, and grimly concludes that money wins.

Four years after Saltz's Facebook post, artist William Powhida presented a less virile, if more pragmatic, vision of what "going rogue" might actually look like. Years-deep in activism and organizing to combat gentrification in New York City, Powhida published a call for "[Redefining the Role of the Artist](#)"⁷, into an agent whose work extends outside the studio. "Being a political being requires work outside the studio," he wrote, "all for the very purpose of having a studio in a neighborhood that doesn't hate you for who will arrive soon after you do—a douche in a suit with a rental agreement." Basically: talk to your neighbors. Coincidentally, housing activists cite that bit of wisdom as a fundament; urban planner Tom Angotti [lists](#) "Talk to people in your neighborhood" on top of his list of five anti-gentrification tactics⁸, without which, he writes, "gentrification will remain unchecked". The idea brings to mind another [piece of advice](#)⁹ which Gran Fury gave to a group of Occupy Wall Street artists a few years back, when asked how to better engage their audience. "Have more parties."

Talk to your neighbors, have more parties. Simple rules, but since activists have found them key to changing systemic problems, it follows that the strategy might work for art. For this curatorial fellowship, I've organized six performers who have little more to do with each other than that: the idea that taking risks as an art maker is talking to people who don't necessarily share the same sets of values as they do.

+The Videofreex are a pioneer video collective which, in the early seventies, left the New York City underground video scene to found the first pirate TV station in Lanesville, New York. Described as "electronic Johnny Appleseeds," the artists ran an independent

⁴ Anonymous, For Posterity: Roberta Smith responds to Jerry Saltz's facebook friends re: Post-Minimal to the Max, cjn212, February 15, 2010, <http://cjn212.blogspot.com/2010/02/for-posterity-roberta-smith-responds-to.html>

⁵ Roberta Smith, Post-Minimal to the Max, The New York Times, February 10, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/14/arts/design/14curators.html?_r=0

⁶ Anton Vidokle, Art Without Artists?, e-flux, 2010, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/art-without-artists/>

⁷ William Powhida, Redefining the Role of the Artist, Art F City, April 4th, 2014, <http://artfcity.com/2014/04/04/redefining-the-role-of-the-artist/>

⁸ Tom Angotti, Five Things You Can Do About Gentrification in NYC, tomangotti.com, February, 2013 <http://tomangotti.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/five-things-you-can-do.pdf>

⁹ Arts and Labor, Arts and Labor meeting minutes, Arts & Labor, March 28th, 2012, <http://artsandlabor.org/827/#sthash.VsaZH86z.dpbs>

media station for nearly ten years, while broadcasting the mundane comings and goings of the rural town.

+Since 2011, the artist-run show ESP TV has been taping experimental, psychedelic, time-based performance and broadcasting weekly on Manhattan Neighborhood Network. Performers have ranged from art world insiders like Martha Wilson to young electronic/noise performer Pharmakon to the pioneering psychedelic light artists Joshua Light Show.

+Over the course of this year, Jenny Drumgoole has been throwing surprise “Happy Trash Day” parties for Philadelphia sanitation workers– which, lately, have evolved into an awareness-raising campaign over the workers’ union contract negotiations. Drumgoole has become a kind of an artist spokesperson for the union.

+Mentioned above, the Kansas City-based collaborative travelling variety show “Whoop Dee Doo” forges unlikely collaborations between local talents: for example, Rihanna drag queens accompanying a clogging troupe, to renditions of Rihanna.

+In 2014, video artist Miles Pflanz and sound artist Kate Levitt collaborated with inmates at Manhattan’s Lincoln Correctional Facility to communicate prison psychology through an experimental art house film, *Pig Story*

+Jeanine Oleson’s performances often create absurd twists of voice and authority– from *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, which staged live opera singers in front of hardcore opera fans a la *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, to performing as Hilton Kramer and Clement Greenberg puppets at a panel about “Womanhouse”

The work is designed to function best without mainstream or art world approval. For this reason, the series is titled “Schmart World”, as in “Art World, Schmart World”. It’s stupid, and that’s the point. I wanted a title that would have the same accessibility as a poop joke used as an access point for new experiences. Deliberately obscured references and invisible histories have no place in Schmart World.

The art world has also recently embraced community and social practice collaborations: Thomas Hirschhorn’s housing project monuments; Laurie Jo Reynolds’ fearless activism against solitary confinement in prisons; and Suzanne Lacy’s mass public conversations. But the artists in this program also belong to a long, international history which is still dwarfed by Modernism (examples of which are detailed in a fabulous collection of essays, *Collectivism After Modernism*). It’s not so much a linear narrative, as a mode of working that’s organically arisen under a certain set of conditions. Simply take a cross-section of the late eighties, three case studies show similar light bulbs going off around the globe:

+ Between 1977 and 1986, the Japanese collective, The Play, held an annual gathering, “Thunder”: in which a group of around fifty people gathered each June to build a

summerlong log pyramid with a lightning rod, in the hopes of capturing lightning. While lightning was never recorded, over five hundred people have been reported as joining together in the act of waiting.¹⁰

+In the late eighties, a group of Cuban artists proposed the Pilón project, a total collaboration in which artists would move to a small impoverished town for several months, with the idea that the art would arise solely from the people in Pilón. (The project was thwarted by the Cuban government, but art historian Rachel Weiss describes the meeting of worlds as a culminating moment for Cuban political art of the 80s).¹¹

+In 1986, in Detroit, artist Tyree Guyton began the “Heidelberg Project”, a now-nearly thirty-year endeavor to raise awareness about Detroit’s urban blight by covering two city blocks with found-object junk sculpture and polka dots, with the help of local children.¹²

Threads of like-minded actions weave together, less in linear movements, but in ideas to be picked up and applied when useful.

“Collectivism”, which technically denotes giving priority to the group, rather than the individuals within it, probably isn’t the right word for what that is. Rather than erase the individual, these projects propose a specific kind of individual creative fulfillment through collaborative work; in *Collectivism After Modernism*, editors Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette identified this kind of fulfillment as a [Marxist vision](#). Collective work, they write, “would liberate and give form to an innate human potential for life, joy, and richness.”¹³ Or, in the words of Ben Davis, art-making based on sharing (in his case, socialism) would fundamentally alter our understanding of what we now know as art.

But the ideas that made up its essence— that great art was something by definition rare and precious, a triumph that had to be scratched out against all odds, a privilege that needed to be defended with boundless righteousness and walled off in its own specific professional sphere— will likely seem strange. Our own present, transformed, will be more interesting than anything we can now even imagine.¹⁴

The hypothetical world Davis describes is certainly far beyond the present reach. But you can imagine something more like this: one night, flipping through cable shows, a flash of something

¹⁰ Reiko Tomii, After the “Descent to the Everyday”, *Collectivism After Modernism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007) 68.

¹¹ Rachel Weiss, Performing Revolution, *Collectivism After Modernism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007) 142.

¹² Steve Neavling, Polka Dot Rebellion: Heidelberg Project survives on guts, vision of Tyree Guyton, *Motor City Muckraker*, March 23, 2014 <http://motorcitymuckraker.com/blog/2014/03/23/polka-dot-rebellion-heidelberg-project-survives-on-guts-vision-of-tyree-guyton/>

¹³ Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, Introduction to *Collectivism After Modernism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007) 6.

¹⁴ Ben Davis, *9.5 Theses on Art and Class* (Haymarket Books 2013), 184.

holds you on a channel. It'll be goofy, ugly, or even banal: a wall of noise; a floating head, maybe. It could be anything as serious as breaking independent journalism, or innocuous as abstract shapes or a birthday party. It won't be new. It'll be as disappointing and thrilling as the world, just with its limitations, and potentials, made a little clearer.

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