

# A.K. BURNS

## Presentation

Born in 1975 in Capitola (USA). Lives and works in Brooklyn (USA).

**A.K. Burns's interdisciplinary practice explores the body as a contentious domain where social, political, and material forces collide. Engaging deeply with questions of materiality and (re)production, Burns examines how the "deployment of power" is connected to the body, its functions, physiological processes, sensations, and pleasures. For Burns, the body is not an object with inherent boundaries and properties but multifaceted and porous, permeating and penetrated by its surroundings. These inquiries take shape as visually seductive and socially critical videos, sculptures, writing, sound, drawings, and collages.**

A.K. Burns' work has been exhibited at Julia Stoschek Collection (Düsseldorf/Berlin), New Museum (New York), Tate Modern (London), MOMA - Museum of Modern Art (New York), Sculpture Center (New York), The Whitney Museum of American Art (New York), MET - The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), MMK - Museum für Moderne Kunst (Frankfurt am Main), SOMArts (San Francisco), ICA - Institute of Contemporary Art (Philadelphia), Leslie-Lhman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art (New York), KADIST (San Francisco), Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Los Angeles), Harvard Art Museums (Cambridge), Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (Portland), Human Resources (Los Angeles), The Center - The LGBT Community Center (New York). Burns received in 2018 the New York Foundation for the Arts - NYSCA/NYFA Artist Fellowship, in 2016-17 the Radcliffe Fellow at Harvard University and a recipient of a 2015 Creative Capital Foundation Visual Arts Award.

Her work is part of prestigious collections as Kadist Foundation (San Francisco), Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection - MoMA (New York), Film & Video Archive - MoMA (New York), Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Los Angeles), Museum of Modern Art Library (New York), among others.

Née en 1975 à Capitola (Etats-Unis). Vit et travaille à Brooklyn (Etats-Unis).

La pratique interdisciplinaire d'A.K. Burns explore le corps comme un domaine litigieux où les forces sociales, politiques et matérielles entrent en conflit. S'engageant profondément dans les questions de matérialité et de (re) production, Burns examine comment le «déploiement du pouvoir» est lié au corps, ses fonctions, ses processus physiologiques, ses sensations et ses plaisirs. Pour Burns, le corps n'est pas un objet avec des limites et des propriétés inhérentes, mais il est multiforme et poreux, perméable et pénétré par son environnement. Ces enquêtes prennent la forme de vidéos, de sculptures, d'écrits, de sons, de dessins et de collages visuellement séduisants et socialement critiques.

Les œuvres d' A.K. Burns ont été exposées à la Julia Stoschek Collection (Düsseldorf/Berlin), au New Museum (New York), au Tate Modern (Londres), au MOMA - Museum of Modern Art (New York), au Sculpture Center (New York), au Whitney Museum of American Art (New York), au MET - The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), au MMK - Museum für Moderne Kunst (Francfort am Main), SOMArts (San Francisco), ICA - Institute of Contemporary Art (Philadelphie), Leslie-Lhman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art (New York), KADIST (San Francisco), Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Los Angeles), Harvard Art Museums (Cambridge), Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (Portland), Human Resources (Los Angeles), The Center - The LGBT Community Center (New York). Burns a reçu en 2018 la New York Foundation for the Arts - NYSCA/NYFA Artist Fellowship, en 2016-17 le Radcliffe Fellow à l'Université Harvard et a reçu un Creative Capital Foundation Visual Arts Award en 2015.

Son travail fait partie de collections prestigieuses telles que Kadist Foundation (San Francisco), Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection - MoMA (New York), Film & Video Archive - MoMA (New York), Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Los Angeles), Museum of Modern Art Library (New York), etc.



JSC - Julia Stoschek collection, *Negative Space*, Düsseldorf, Germany, 2019





JSC - Julia Stoschek collection, *Negative Space*, Düsseldorf, Germany, 2019





Talk with A.K. Burns and curator Lisa Long at JSC - Julia Stoschek collection, Düsseldorf, Germany, 2019

**Free Radicals, 2019**

etched mirror, xerox, spray paint

miroir gravé, photocopie, peinture aérosol

43,2 x 35,6 cm (16.93 x 13.78 in.)

unique artwork

BURN19081





*MakeMake: Fish (out of water)*, 2019

mirror, xerox, spray paint, oil paint

miroir, photocopie, peinture aérosol, peinture à l'huile

43,2 x 35,6 cm (16.93 x 13.78 in.)

unique artwork

BURN19085





FRONT International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art, *The Dispossessed*, USA, 2018



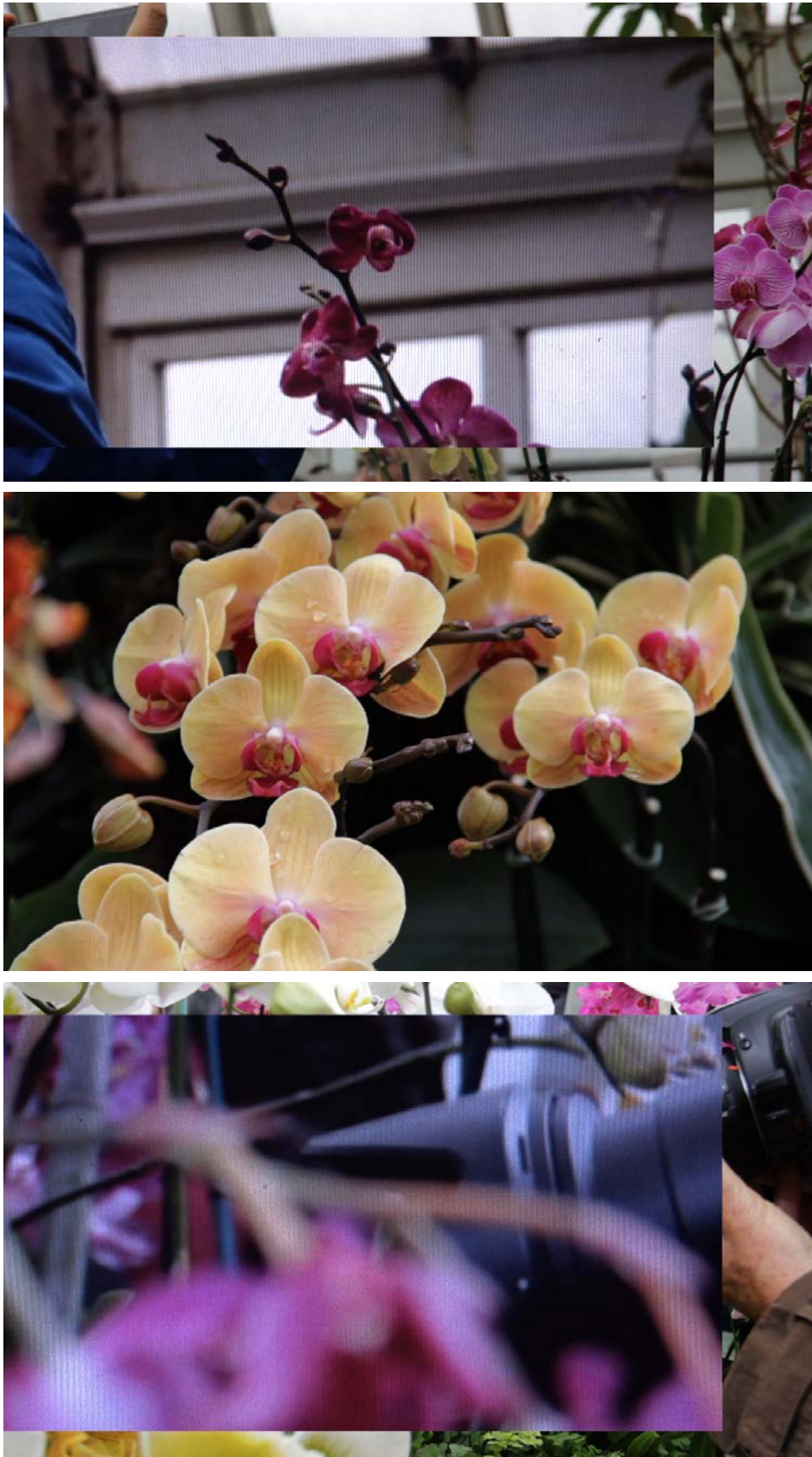


Harvard Art Museums - Lightbox Gallery, *Survivor's Remorse*, Cambridge, USA, 2018



Michel Rein, *ANY MEANS*, cur. Ami Barak, Paris, France, 2017





*Orchid Show, 2013*

HD video, color, sound

vidéo HD, couleur, son

13'34"

ed. of 3 ex

BURN17019

### ORCHID SHOW, 2013

*Orchid Show* documents the annual event at the New York Botanic Garden as it is compulsively captured, reproduced and glossed over by visitors through the appeal of the image of flowers. In the video, the camera lurks, observing the observers, while the sounds of the garden folds into a composition for piano by Ruth Crawford Seeger, *Kaleidoscopic Changes on an Original Theme, Ending with a Fugue* (1924), by one of the few celebrated female composers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Orchid Show* critically observes notions of spectacle, gender and beauty as a query into the staging and imaging of nature.

*The Orchid Show* documente l'événement annuel du Jardin botanique de New York qui est capturé, reproduit et survolé par les visiteurs de façon compulsive à travers l'attrait qu'engendre l'image des fleurs. Dans la vidéo, la caméra se cache et observe les observateurs, tandis que les sons du jardin s'incorporent dans une composition pour piano de Ruth Crawford Seeger, *Kaleidoscopic Changes on an Original Theme, Ending with a Fugue* (1924), une des rares et célèbres femmes compositeurs du XX<sup>e</sup>. *Orchid Show* observe de façon critique les notions de spectacle, de genre et de beauté comme une interrogation sur la mise en scène et l'imagerie de la nature.



*Specter Species*, 2017

Taxus Baccata, burlap

Taxus Baccata, toile de jute

variable dimensions

unique artwork

BURN17021





*Better Off Without You*, 2017  
archival ink jet print transfer  
transfert jet d'encre  
21,3 x 27,3 cm (8.4 x 10.4 in.)  
ed. 3 ex  
BURN17033



Michel Rein, *ANY MEANS*, cur. Ami Barak, Paris, France, 2017





*Any Means*, 2012

porcelain vase, cast concrete, packing tape, foam fill, enamel paint, copper dust, epoxy

vase en porcelaine, béton moulé, ruban adhésif, mousse de rembourrage, émail, poudre de cuivre, époxy

61 x 30,5 x 30,5 cm (24.02 x 11.81 x 11.81 in.)

unique artwork

private collection





*Discard (T-shirt)*, 2014

cast aluminium

fonte d'aluminium

39,4 x 50,8 cm (15.35 x 19.69 in.)

unique artwork

BURN17007



*Discard (work shirt)*, 2013

cast aluminium

fonte d'aluminium

77,4 x 62,7 cm (30.5 x 24.7 in)

unique artwork

private collection



***Release Valve, 2017***

aluminium, fiberglass, brass, oil paint, iron-on, air mattress, fishing lures

aluminium, fibre de verre, laiton, nylon antidéchirures, fermeture éclair, apprêt émail, argent plaqué cuivre, pièces de monnaie

133,4 x 55,2 x 12,1 cm (52.36 x 21.65 x 4.72 in.)

unique artwork

private collection





*Figuratively, 2012*

penny, archival ink jet image transfers on vinyl coated canvas

pièce de monnaie, impression jet d'encre transférée sur toile revêtue de vinyle

48 x 28 x 2 cm (18.9 x 11.02 x 0.79 in.)

unique artwork

BURN17002



*Window In My Way*, 2012

penny, archival ink jet image transfers on vinyl coated canvas

pièce de monnaie, impression jet d'encre transférée sur toile revêtue de vinyle

35,6 x 27,9 x 11,4 cm (13.78 x 10.63 x 4.33 in.)

unique artwork

BURN17001



***Before the wake, 2014***

spirulina, polyurethane, torn catalog pages containing photos of Glen Canyon, Utah taken by Tad Nichols before it was dammed in 1956

spiruline, polyurethane, page de catalogue montrant des photographies du Glen Canyon (Utah) présent par Tad Nichols avant le barrage de 1956

30 x 30,5 cm (11.8 x 12 in.)

unique artwork

BURN17009





New Museum, A.K. Burns : *Shabby But Thriving*, New York, USA, 2017



*A Skeleton Reclining, 2017*

wood, studs, metal coils, plastic webbing, underglow, topping soil, foil-wrapped hard candy, resin

bois, goujons, bobines en métal, sangle en plastique, led, terreau, bonbon emballé, résine

78.74 x 127 x 68.58 cm (31 x 50 x 27 in.)

unique artwork





New Museum, Installation views of *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon*, New York, USA, 2017







New Museum, A.K. Burns : Shabby But Thriving, New York, USA, 2017



**Leave No Trace, 2016**

vocals and sounds: guitar, cymbal, large cardboard tube, small plastic bucket, bamboo, rocky sand, XLR cable touching tongue, no. 2 pencil, dental floss, contact mics, dynamic mic, looper and various effect pedals

voix et sons : guitare, cymbale, grand tube en carton, petit seau en plastique, bambou, sable rocaillieux, câble XLR touchant la langue, crayon no. 2, fil dentaire, micros de contact, micro dynamique, boucleur et pédales d'effets diverses

MP3 format 31'8"

unique artwork

BURN17028



**LEAVE NO TRACE**

The record  
 a recording of listening  
 the vocal folds of a reclining feline  
 or feedback  
 between a microphone and a nine-foot cardboard  
 tube  
 Chords and discord that I'm certain I cannot redo

Ethics for a lived practice  
 temporary and portable  
 displaced, terrestrial wilderness

Be prepared  
 equipped  
 to act  
 Gatorade, 1965  
 Therm-a-rest, 1971  
 Lonely Planet, 1972  
 Gore-Tex, 1976

Detract  
 resistance  
 to impact  
 carefully covered up  
 covered over, glossed over  
 glossy glass mirrored back

The record  
 a rotation may be repeated  
 What is audible (or what is heard)  
 dissipates as fast as it arrives  
 You can hold on to it but I don't recommend it

Sliding a finger between the sheets of plastic  
 split the seal open  
 Maneuver your hand inside the pocket  
 avoiding the surface, the grooves  
 Pull out the pair  
 slip them on  
 fingers  
 as each enters its respective prophylactic canal  
 Now the record

To be tracked  
 or not  
 was wild ever wild  
 Passive and active constructions  
 a line traced  
 a line erased

invisible, inaudible  
 undocumented

Without history  
 Sports Bra, 1978, originally constructed by  
 sewing two jock straps together  
 Necessity, the mother of invention  
 raised capital  
 The dad of desire

Oh, leisure class, she's gone wild  
 Polar Fleece, 1979  
 Leatherman, 1983  
 Advil, 1984

An unregulated space or body  
 that wilderness  
 a dark web  
 a black market  
 a fugitive off-shore hacker separatist living stealth

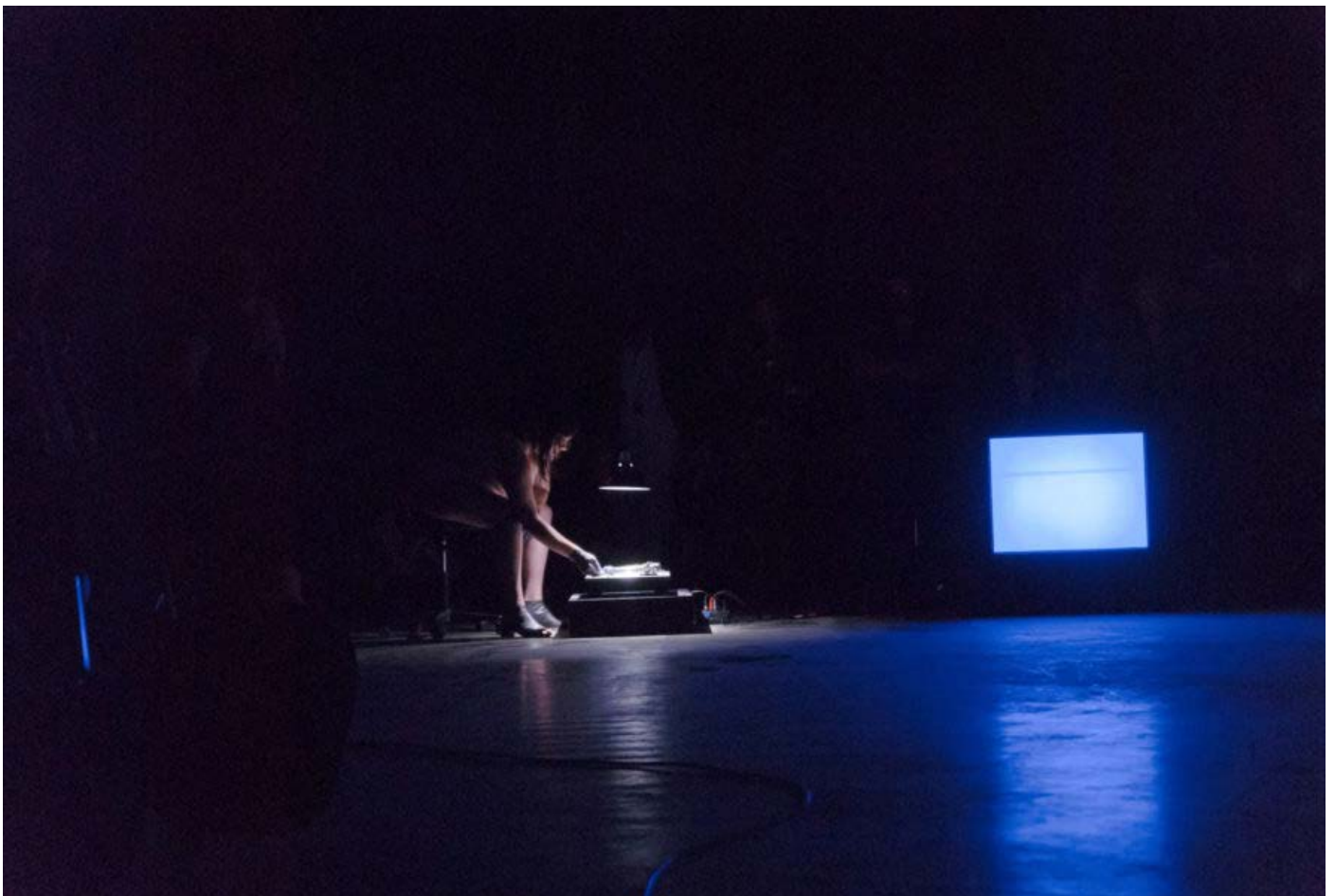
So stealth she passes  
 accelerating  
 spinning-out  
 leaving a torrent trail of dust

Carbon, digital, footprint  
 Teva, 1988  
 LED, 1994  
 Solar Backpack, 2006  
 on-the-grid  
 because she is the grid

Disappearing  
 occurs at the margins  
 May appear powerless  
 or corrupt  
 Super-human  
 flying above the law and under the radar

What matters is what is perceived to matter  
 the law  
 objective  
 always subjective  
 I'm suspicious  
 she seem like she may be hiding something

No time, no place, no money  
 No time, no place, no body



Portland Institute of Contemporary Art's, TBA:16 live arts festival, performance w/ Jen Rosenblit and keyon gaskin, the record release of *Leave No Trace*, USA, 2016



The Public Body at Artspace, installation view of *Community Action Center*, Sydney, Australia, 2016





*You're Fired*, 2017

cement Hydrocal mix, rebar, steel wire

mélange de ciment Hydrocal, barre d'armature, fil d'acier

104,1 x 38,1 x 24,1 cm (40.94 x 14.96 x 9.45 in.)

unique artwork

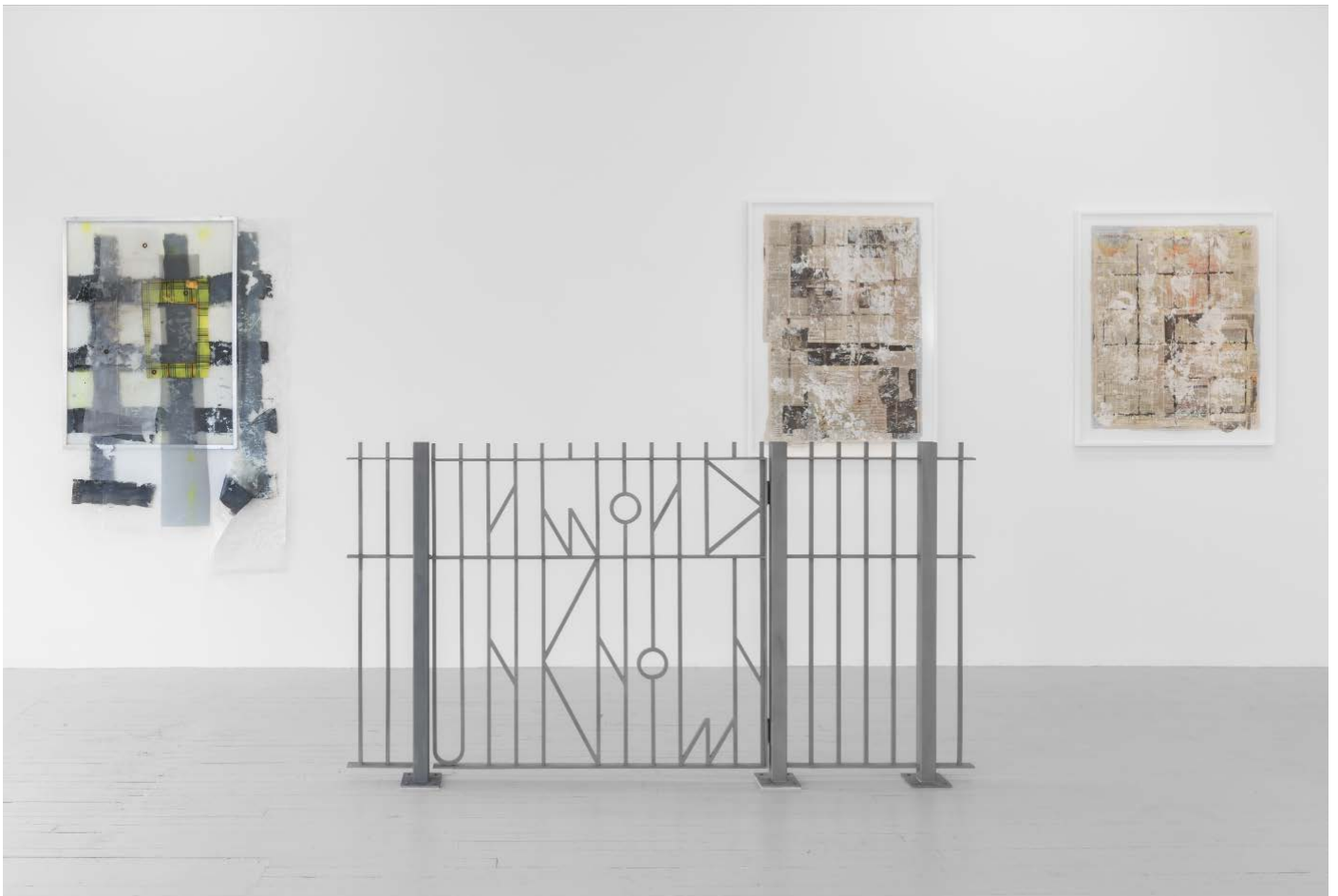


*Hand Out (She Was Warned)*, 2017

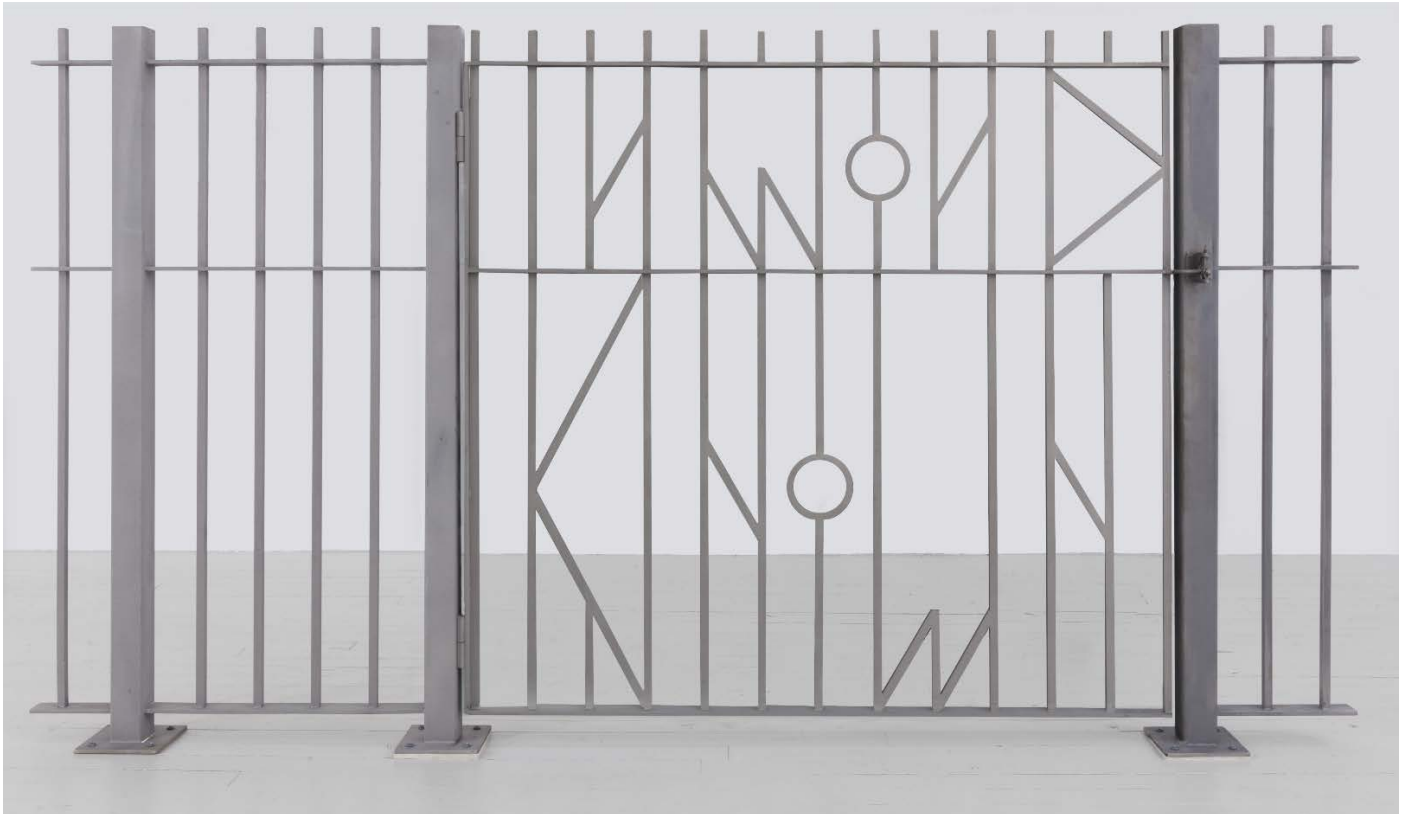
cement Hydrocal mix, concrete, rebar, steel wire, nitrile glove, gold plated brass

mélange de ciment Hydrocal, béton, barre d'armature, fil d'acier, gant en nitrile, laiton plaqué or  
10,2 x 25,4 cm (3.94 x 9.84 in.)

unique artwork







*Known Known*, 2016

sandblasted steel

acier sablé

203,2 x 109,9 x 12,7 cm (79.92 x 42.91 x 4.72 in.)

unique artwork



*She Was Warned*, 2017

cement Hydrocal mix, concrete, rebar, steel wire, steel concrete reinforcement, plastic, pigmented resin  
mélange de ciment Hydrocal, béton, barres d'armature, fil d'acier, acier et béton armé, plastique, résine pigmentée  
185,4 x 63,5 x 30,5 cm (72.83 x 24.8 x 11.81 in.)

unique artwork  
private collection

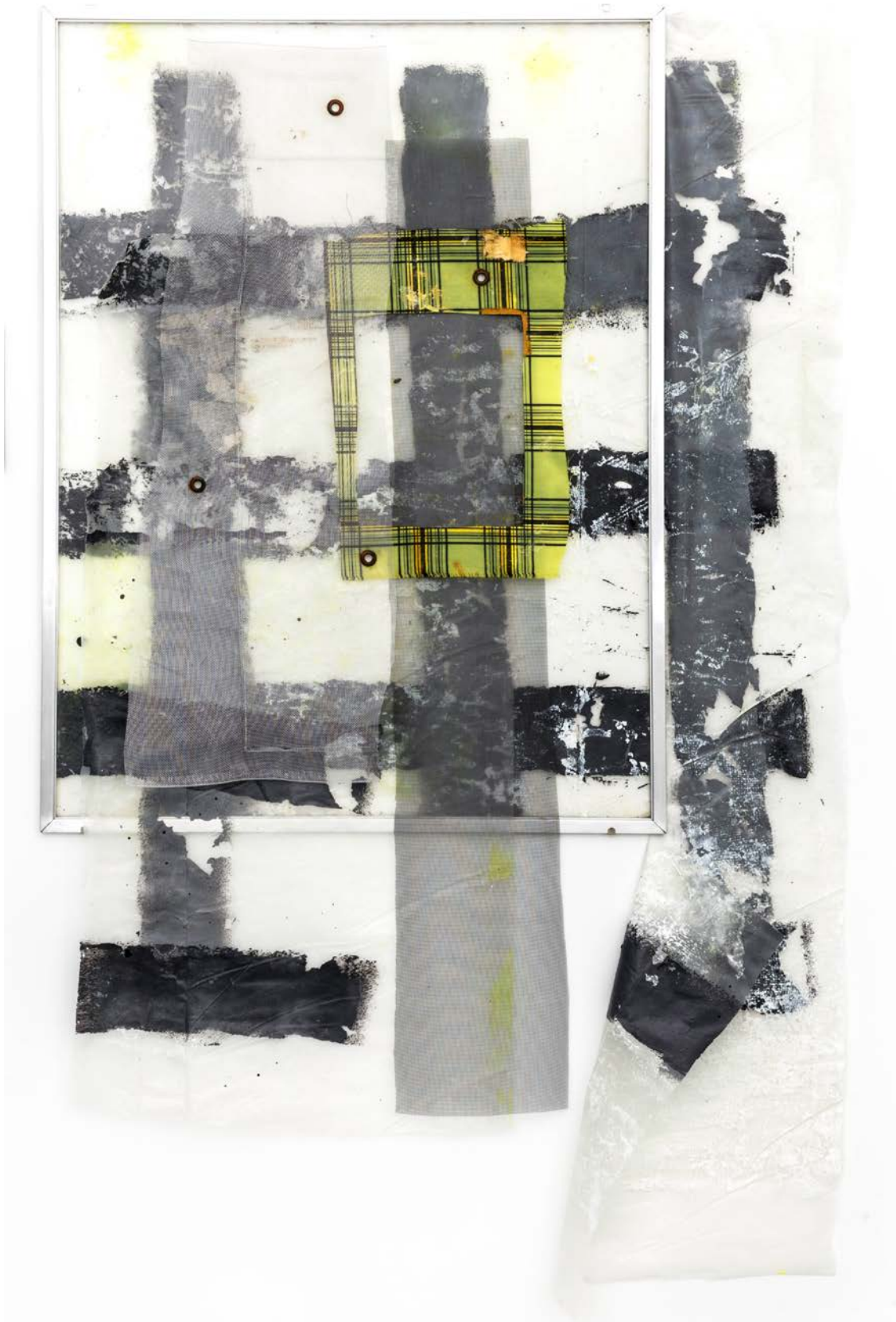


*Post Times (Mogul)*, 2017

newspaper, pigmented resin, enamel primer, polyurethane  
 papier journal, résine pigmentée, apprêt d'émail, polyuréthane  
 103,2 x 86,7 cm (40.6 x 34.1 in.)

unique artwork  
 private collection





*Because She Is the Grid, 2017*

aluminium, fiberglass, brass, oil paint, cotton fabric, pigmented resin, drop cloth, enamel primer  
aluminium, fibre de verre, laiton, peinture à l'huile, tissu de coton, résine pigmentée, toile de  
protection, apprêt d'émail

157,5 x 99,1 x 7,6 cm (61.81 x 38.98 x 2.76 in.)

unique artwork

private collection



Participant, Inc., A.K. Burns : *A Smeary Spot*, New York, USA, 2015





*After the Sky Box*, 2015

sand, concrete, Walmart office chair, woven polypropylene sand bags, India ink, plastic resin  
sable, béton, chaise de bureau Walmart, sacs de sable en polypropylène tissé, encre de chine, résine plastique  
165,1 x 53,8 x 63,5 cm (64.96 x 20.87 x 24.8 in.)  
unique artwork





N/A Gallery, *Fear of Commitment*, Oakland, Canada, 2014





*Barrier Island (Overextended Stay)*, 2013

sand, resin, cayenne, bee pollen, spirulina, beet powder, catalogue pages, bamboo

sable, résine, cayenne, pollen d'abeille, spiruline, poudre de betterave, pages de catalogue, bambou

198,6 x 81,2 x 8,9 cm (77.95 x 31.89 x 3.15 in.)

unique artwork





TAG, installation view of *Touch Parade*, The Hague, Netherlands, 2011

***Touch Parade*, 2011**

video 1: crush 9:22 minute loop / Video 2: squeeze, 5:49 minute loop / Video 3: wading, 3:41 min

vidéo 1: écraser 9:22 minute boucle / Vidéo 2: squeeze, 5:49 minute boucle / Vidéo 3: wading, 3:41 m

Ed. of 3 ex

BURN17040

*Touch Parade* is a video installation that explores “plastic love” or fetish culture and the assimilation of marginalized sexuality on the internet. In questioning what is an explicit and/or illicit image, fetishes found on YouTube that consist of banal gestures, are re-performed by Burns. Unlike other pornographic content these videos evaded censoring because they were not culturally recognized as representations of sexuality. The simultaneous display of touching, accompanied by the layered sound of the various actions, provokes empathic corporeal cognition in the viewer as a way towards questioning culturally limited notions of desire.

*Touch Parade* est une installation vidéo qui explore «l’amour plastique» ou culture fétichiste et l’assimilation de la sexualité marginalisée sur Internet. En s’interrogeant sur ce qu’est une image explicite et/ou illicite, les fétiches trouvés sur YouTube qui consistent en des gestes banals, sont rejoués par Burns. Contrairement à d’autres contenus pornographiques, ces vidéos ont échappé à la censure parce qu’elles n’étaient pas culturellement reconnues comme des représentations de la sexualité. L’affichage simultané du toucher, accompagné du son superposé des différentes actions, provoque chez le spectateur une cognition corporelle empathique comme moyen de questionner des notions culturellement limitées du désir.

A.K. BURNS

EXHIBITIONS / ARTWORKS BIOGRAPHY PRESS / PUBLICATIONS

MICHEL REIN PARIS/BRUSSELS





A.K. BURNS

EXHIBITIONS / ARTWORKS BIOGRAPHY PRESS / PUBLICATIONS

MICHEL REIN PARIS/BRUSSELS



*Community Action Center*, 2010  
SD single-channel video,  
colored  
vidéo SD monocanal,  
couleur  
71'  
Ed. of 3 ex  
BURN17041



## COMMUNITY ACTION CENTER, 2010

*Community Action Center* is a single channel video work A.K. Burns conceived, produced, directed, propped, shot, and edited in collaboration with A.L. Steiner. This project is an archive of an intergenerational community built on collaboration, friendship, sex and art. The work rethinks how sex and sexuality is imaged and imagined for marginalized bodies — in particular women, queer and transgender. Inspired by gay porn-romance-liberation films and feminist practices of the 70s' and 80s' the work opens with a recitation of Jack Smiths, *Normal Love*. This video seeks to expose and reformulate paradigms that are typical of porn typologies by using tropes for their comical value, critical consideration and historical homage.

A.L. Steiner and A.K. Burns worked with artists and performers who created infinitely complex gender and performance roles that are both real and fantastical, set to a sound track of music culled from the worldwide sisterhood: Chicks on Speed, Effi Briest, Electrelane, Chateau featuring K8 Hardy, Lesbians on Ecstasy, Light Asylum, MEN, Motherland, NGUZUNGUZU, I.U.D. (Lizzi Bougatsos & Sadie Laska), Kinski and Thee Majesty (Genesis P-Orridge), and featuring original compositions by Justin Bond, Nick Hallett & Sam Greenleaf Miller, Ashland Mines & Wu Tsang, Sergei Tcherepnin and Tri-State Area with A V Linton.

*Community Action Center* est une œuvre vidéo à canal unique élaborée, produite, réalisée, étayée, tournée et montée par A.K. Burns en collaboration avec A.L. Steiner. Ce projet est conçu comme une archive d'une communauté intergénérationnelle construite sur la collaboration, l'amitié, le sexe et l'art. L'œuvre repense la façon dont le sexe et la sexualité sont imaginés et représentés pour les corps marginalisés — en particulier les femmes, les homosexuels et les transsexuels. Inspirée par les films pornographiques, romantiques et libérateurs gais ainsi que par les pratiques féministes des années 70 et 80, l'œuvre s'ouvre sur une lecture de *Normal Love* de Jack Smiths. *Community Action Center* cherche à exposer et à reformuler les paradigmes caractéristiques des typologies du porno en utilisant les tropes pour leur valeur comique, leur considération critique et leur hommage historique.

A.L. Steiner et A.K. Burns ont travaillé avec des artistes et des interprètes qui ont créé des rôles de genre et de performance infiniment complexes, à la fois réels et fantastiques, sur une bande sonore tirée de la fraternité mondiale : Chicks on Speed, Effi Briest, Electrelane, Chateau featuring K8 Hardy, Lesbians on Ecstasy, Light Asylum, MEN, Motherland, NGUZUNGUZU, I.U.D. (Lizzi Bougatsos & Sadie Laska), Kinski and Thee Majesty (Genesis P-Orridge), et comprenant des compositions originales de Justin Bond, Nick Hallett & Sam Greenleaf Miller, Ashland Mines & Wu Tsang, Sergei Tcherepnin et Tri-State Area avec A V Linton.



*Community Action Center*, in collaboration with A.L. Steiner, Taxter & Spengemann, New York, USA and Horton Gallery, Berlin, Germany, 2010



Callicoon Fine Arts, *pregnant patron penny pot*, New York, 2012





*Time to Remodel*, 2012

wood, Formica laminate

bois, Formica stratifié

152,4 x 38,1 x 38,1 cm (59.84 x 14.96 x 14.96 in.)

unique artwork



*Like a Rock*, 2012

wood, Formica laminate

bois, Formica stratifié

82,5 x 58,4 x 7,3 cm (32.28 x 22.83 x 2.76 in.)

unique artwork



*Like a Rock, 2012*

wood, Formica laminate

bois, Formica stratifié

82,5 x 58,4 x 7,3 cm (32.28 x 22.83 x 2.76 in.)

unique artwork





*Untitled, Eclipse, 2019*  
Negative Space series  
film 16 mm transféré sur vidéo,  
couleur, sans son  
16 mm film transferred to video,  
colour, without sound  
13'  
ed. of 3 ex  
BURN19086

**UNTITLED, ECLIPSE, 2019**

Shot in the field in Nebraska in 2017, *Untitled, Eclipse* depicts a total solar eclipse. During the eclipse, the sun seemingly transforms into a black hole in the sky—representing a void or negative space. The work is projected on a large angled screen, amplifying the residue of heavy film grain as well as the entanglement of astronomical phenomena, technology, and representation.

Tourné en plein champ dans le Nebraska en 2017, *Untitled, Eclipse* dépeint une éclipse solaire totale. Pendant l'éclipse, le soleil semble se transformer en un trou noir dans le ciel - représentant un vide ou un espace négatif. L'œuvre est projetée sur un grand écran à grand angle, amplifiant le résidu de grain du film ainsi que l'enchevêtrement des phénomènes astronomiques, technologiques et représentatifs.

# NEGATIVE SPACE

## A WORK IN FOUR PARTS

POWER (the sun): *A Smearly Spot*, 2015

THE BODY: *Living Room*, 2017

SPACE (void/land): *Leave No Trace*, 2019

Also titled *Leave No Trace* is a vinyl record and poem completed in 2016

WATER: *What is Perverse is Liquid* (TBA)



## NEGATIVE SPACE

Conceived as a non-linear and layered narrative, this series envisions a world wherein boundaries are fluid and hierarchical relations permute. This cycle of works playfully corrupts science-fiction tropes exploring the intersection of politics and fantasy to build idiosyncratic<sup>1</sup> allegorical imagery.

Burns deliberately locates the work in a speculative present filled with the detritus of everyday life. Filmed in stunning but familiar landscapes, like the desert of the Southwest United States, *Negative Space* exposes the tension between utopian proposals of sociality and apocalyptic anxieties. The works challenge long-standing assumptions about social orders, marshaling familiar images and objects to ask how value is assigned to resources, how marginalized bodies navigate a fraught social reality, and how different forms of matter come to matter.

As a formal term in art, « negative space » denotes the matter between and around the subject. If the subject is the focus of our attention, a definable entity, negative space is considered subordinate to the subject. Burns sees negative space as unfixed, malleable, and ultimately as an open set of possibilities. Recognizing this hierarchy, Burns uses this concept of negative space as a proposal for reorienting the viewer and as an analogy for generating agency within a subjugated position.

A quasi-science fiction four-part epic *Negative Space* explores the violence of boundary making practices and agency as enacted through subjugated positions. Each work is non-linear and allegorical, built around a physical system: power (the sun), the body, space (void/land) and water. Through a process of conjuring and deconstructing science fiction tropes, the videos work at intersection of politics and fantasy. *Negative Space* raises questions about the allocation of resources, environmental fragility, marginalized bodies, and their relationship to place.

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1. personal reaction to the influence of outside agents.

## NEGATIVE SPACE

Conçue comme un récit non linéaire et stratifié, cette série envisage un monde où les frontières sont fluides et les relations hiérarchiques permutable. Ce cycle d'œuvres corrompt de façon ludique les tropes de la science-fiction en explorant l'intersection entre la politique et le fantastique pour construire une imagerie allégorique idiosyncrasique<sup>1</sup>.

Burns situe délibérément l'œuvre dans un présent spéculatif rempli de débris de la vie quotidienne. Filmé dans des paysages époustouflants mais familiers, comme le désert du sud-ouest des États-Unis, *Negative Space* expose la tension entre des propositions utopiques de socialité et des angoisses apocalyptiques. Les œuvres remettent en question des hypothèses de longue date sur les ordres sociaux, rassemblant des images et des objets familiers pour se demander comment la valeur est attribuée aux ressources, comment les corps marginalisés naviguent dans une réalité sociale tendue et comment différentes formes de matière deviennent importantes.

En tant que terme formel dans l'art, « l'espace négatif » désigne la matière entre et autour du sujet. Si le sujet est au centre de notre attention, une entité définissable, l'espace négatif est considéré comme subordonné au sujet. Burns voit l'espace négatif comme un espace non fixé, malléable, et finalement comme un ensemble ouvert de possibilités. Reconnaisant cette hiérarchie, Burns utilise ce concept d'espace négatif comme une proposition pour réorienter le spectateur et comme une analogie pour générer l'agencement dans une position soumise.

Chaque œuvre est non linéaire et allégorique, construite autour d'un système physique : le pouvoir (le soleil), le corps, l'espace (vide / terre) et l'eau. À travers un processus de conjuration et de déconstruction de tropes de science-fiction, les vidéos travaillent à l'intersection de la politique et de la fantaisie. L'espace négatif soulève des questions sur l'allocation des ressources, la fragilité de l'environnement, les organismes marginalisés et leur relation au lieu.

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1. réaction personnelle à l'influence d'agents extérieurs.



**POWER (the sun)**

*A Smeary Spot (Negative Space 0)*,  
2015

Negative space series  
4-channel video installation with  
6-channel sound, TRT 53:13  
installation vidéo 4 canaux avec  
son 6 canaux, TRT 53:13

Ed. of 3 ex

BURN17046



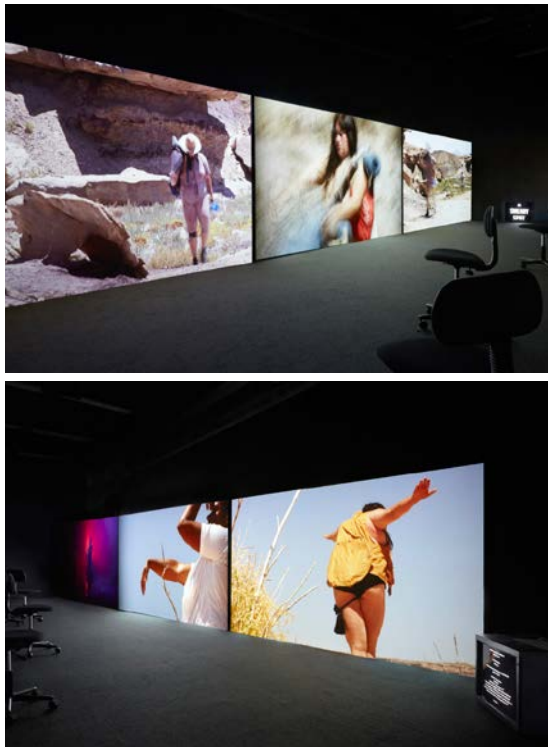
## A SMEARY SPOT (NEGATIVE SPACE 0), 2015

*A Smeary Spot* (2015) is a video installation constructed as a 4-channel spatialized audio-visual panorama. This episode is the introduction and orbital center around which the other three episodes in *Negative Space* circulate and conceptually echo. The video is staged in two sites: the deserts of southern Utah and a black box theater. The desert and theater operate dually as real and psychological spaces that represent the vast infinitude and unfixed qualities of the void.

Performers navigate the desert observing the land, gathering garbage, equipment for provisional living (camping gear) and seeking im/material resources like water, smoke (air), and light.

In the theater, performers build their world from a central pile of waste while reciting a script culled from multiple texts. With each recitation a performer engages with props (the material world) in subtle and humorous ways that alter or augment the meaning of what is being said. Through this process the authority of language, and other boundary making devices are unhinged—exposing multiple meanings and ambiguity.

Over the course of the 53 minutes a poly-vocal recitation of the script unfolds like a manifesto, rooted in ontological fluidity and difference. The work voices an alternative to the current state of queer, migrant and race-based politics that advocate for equality through assimilation. Assimilation asks marginalized persons to adapt to hegemonic systems, *A Smeary Spot* wishes to cultivate difference as a vital aspect of a healthy ecosystem.



Installation view of *A Smeary Spot*, 2015 at Participant Inc., NY, USA

### INSTALLATION

*A Smeary Spot* is projected on three horizontally aligned freestanding walls that cut at an angle the architecture of the exhibition space.

The gallery is painted black to mimic the aesthetics of the black box theater. Wheeled office chairs (props also used in the video) provide mobile seating and 6-channel audio, scored by Geo Wyeth, orchestrates the audiences' attention across the three primary video channels.

The fourth channel runs separately on a box monitor and contains footnoted credits.

## A SMEARY SPOT (NEGATIVE SPACE 0), 2015

*A Smeary Spot* (2015) est une installation vidéo construite comme un panorama audiovisuel spatialisé à 4 canaux. Cet épisode est l'introduction et le centre orbital autour duquel les trois autres épisodes de *Negative Space* circulent et font écho conceptuellement. La vidéo est mise en scène dans deux sites : les déserts du sud de l'Utah et un théâtre de la boîte noire. Le désert et le théâtre fonctionnent en duo comme des espaces réels et psychologiques qui représentent la vaste infinitude et les qualités non fixées du vide.

Les artistes naviguent dans le désert en observant la terre, en ramassant les ordures, les équipements pour la vie provisoire (matériel de camping) et en cherchant des ressources im/matérielles comme l'eau, la fumée (air) et la lumière.

Au théâtre, les artistes construisent leur monde à partir d'un tas central de déchets tout en récitant un scénario tiré d'une multiples textes. À chaque récitation, l'interprète s'engage avec les accessoires (le monde matériel) de façon subtile et humoristique, ce qui modifie ou augmente le sens de ce qui est dit. Par ce processus, l'autorité du langage et d'autres dispositifs de délimitation exposent sans retenue de multiples significations et ambiguïtés.

Au cours des 53 minutes, une récitation poly-vocale du texte se déroule comme un manifeste, enracinée dans la fluidité et la différence ontologique. L'œuvre exprime une alternative à l'état actuel de la politique queer, migrante et raciale qui prône l'égalité par l'assimilation. L'assimilation demande aux personnes marginalisées de s'adapter aux systèmes hégémoniques, *A Smeary Spot* souhaite cultiver la différence comme un aspect vital d'un écosystème sain.



Vue de l'installation *A Smeary Spot*, 2015 au Participant Inc., NY, USA

## INSTALLATION

*A Smeary Spot* est projeté sur trois murs autoportants alignés horizontalement qui coupent en biais l'architecture de l'espace d'exposition.

La galerie est peinte en noir pour imiter l'esthétique du théâtre de la boîte noire. Des chaises de bureau sur roulettes (des accessoires également utilisés dans la vidéo) offrent des sièges mobiles et un système audio à six canaux, noté par Geo Wyeth, orchestre l'attention du public sur les trois principaux canaux vidéo.

Le quatrième canal fonctionne séparément sur un moniteur de boîte et contient des crédits notés en bas de page.



## THE BODY

*Living Room (Negative Space 00)*, 2017

Negative Space series

2-channel HD video installation,  
color, 5.1 audio

installation vidéo 2 canaux HD,  
couleur, audio 5.1

36'

ed. of 3 ex

BURN17035



## LIVING ROOM (NEGATIVE SPACE 00)

*Living Room* is the second episode in *Negative Space*. This episode is focused around exploring dueling notions of the body as both an exploited and agential resource. It is a two-channel video filmed within the interior of a building. Shot in a series of found and constructed interiors, the video treats the entire building as both a stage and metaphorical organism.

The work is divided among four sites within the building: living room (psyche), stairwell (mouth to anus), bathroom (kidneys), and basement (uterus). The building exists as a hermetic ecosystem in the narrative of *Living Room*, wherein performers play various bodies-celestial, political, metaphysical, animal-working to co-subsist. This video features a unique soundtrack by Geo Wyeth and choreography by NIC Kay.

*Living Room* est le deuxième épisode de *Negative Space*. Cet épisode se concentre sur l'exploration des notions de dualité du corps en tant que ressource à la fois exploitée et agente. Il s'agit d'une vidéo à deux canaux filmée à l'intérieur d'un bâtiment. Tourné dans une série d'intérieurs trouvés et construits, la vidéo traite l'ensemble du bâtiment comme un organisme à la fois scénique et métaphorique.

Les travaux sont répartis sur quatre sites dans le bâtiment : salle de séjour (psychisme), cage d'escalier (de la bouche à l'anus), salle de bains (reins) et sous-sol (utérus). Le bâtiment existe en tant qu'écosystème hermétique dans le récit de *Living Room*, où les interprètes jouent de divers corps - célestaux, politiques, métaphysiques, animaliers - pour co-exister. Cette vidéo présente une bande sonore unique de Geo Wyeth et une chorégraphie de NIC Kay.



### SPACE (void/land)

*Leave No Trace (Negative Space 000)*, 2019

Negative Space series

five-channel HD video installation with plastic skull, rubber tires, color, sound

installation vidéo HD cinq canaux avec crâne en plastique, pneus en caoutchouc, couleur, son

31'8"

ed. of 3 ex

BURN19087

## LEAVE NO TRACE (NEGATIVE SPACE 000), 2019

*Leave No Trace (Negative Space 000)* (2019) installation, explores the demarcation of space and how it changes the formation of bodies; formalized as the void, landscape, and grid. The video is projected on to the five visible sides of a white cube propped up on a fake human skull, making the cube slightly askew, a morbid nod to its use in the video as both a presence and a negation.

A solitary arch made of stacked speakers stands in the middle of an empty stage, shadows are cast across the floor as theater lights are used to echo the movement of the sun across the sky. Through this simulation of a sundial we experience «felt time» as opposed to mechanized time.

Cut to a land-locked trailer where skulls are gathered into an Ikea bag from otherwise empty kitchen cabinets. These remains of a human body are toted across the desert and later used to prop-up a collectively built platform.

*Leave No Trace* juxtaposes immaterial forces and what A.K. Burns calls the «non-event» sites of a theater, like the battens and theater grid, with desert sprawl.

A group gathers on the site of a demolished building repurposing garbage to construct a new space, one without walls, that will serve as a stage for movement and a protest tableau. The platform borders a military base demarcated by barbwire and threatening signage. Suited in Chelsea Manning's jacket a performer trespasses while vocalist Shannon Funchess traverses a web-like theater grid, singing an a-cappella version of «Supernature», that conjures a macabre narrative of technologically altered beings.

Returning to the stage we find a critical homage to Félix González-Torres 1991 conceptual performance piece *Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform)*—reinterpreting desire through a non-binary body.

The closing recitation is a text by A.K. Burns about the borderless sensation and impotence of human superiority as experienced within the desert.



## LEAVE NO TRACE (NEGATIVE SPACE 000), 2019

L'installation *Leave No Trace (Negative Space 000)* (2019), explore la démarcation de l'espace et la façon dont ce même espace modifie la formation des corps ; formalisé par le vide, le paysage et la grille. La vidéo est projetée sur les cinq côtés visibles d'un cube blanc appuyé sur un faux crâne humain, rendant le cube légèrement de travers, un clin d'œil morbide à son utilisation dans la vidéo comme une présence et une négation..

Une arche solitaire faite de haut-parleurs empilés se dresse au milieu d'une scène vide, des ombres sont projetées sur le sol tandis que les lumières du théâtre sont utilisées pour faire écho au mouvement du soleil dans le ciel. A travers cette simulation d'un cadran solaire, nous faisons l'expérience du « temps ressenti » par opposition au temps mécanisé.

Dans une remorque fermée à la circulation des crânes sont rassemblés dans un sac Ikea à partir d'armoires de cuisine vides. Ces restes de corps humains sont transportés à travers le désert et utilisés plus tard pour soutenir une plateforme construite collectivement.

*Leave No Trace* juxtapose des forces immatérielles et ce qu'A.K. Burns appelle les sites « non-événement » d'un théâtre, comme les lattes et sa grille, avec l'étalement du désert.

Un groupe se rassemble sur le site d'un bâtiment démoli qui réutilise les déchets pour construire un nouvel espace, sans murs, qui servira de scène de mouvement et de tableau de protestation. La plateforme borde une base militaire délimitée par des barbelés et une signalisation menaçante. Habillée de la veste de Chelsea Manning, une performeuse s'introduit dans l'espace tandis que la chanteuse Shannon Funchess traverse une grille de théâtre en forme de toile, chantant une version a-cappella de « Supernature », qui évoque un récit macabre d'êtres technologiquement modifiés.

En revenant sur scène, nous trouvons un hommage critique à la pièce de performance conceptuelle *Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform)* de Félix González-Torres 1991 - réinterprétant le désir à travers un corps non binaire.

La lecture finale est réalisée à partir d'un texte qu'A.K. Burns a écrit sur la sensation d'une existence sans frontière et l'impuissance de la supériorité humaine telle qu'elle est vécue dans le désert.

**WATER: *What is Perverse is Liquid* (TBA)**

*What is Perverse is Liquid* is a semi-fictional text written about the experience of being in the deserts of Utah for the project *Negative Space*, published in *The Third Rail* (Issue 3)

*What is Perverse is Liquid* est un texte semi-fictionnel décrivant l'expérience dans les déserts de l'Utah en relation avec le projet *Negative Space*, publié dans *The Third Rail* (Numéro 3)

« I'm squatting over a rusty-hued lump. You can imagine, like squeezing out an entire tube of toothpaste. I am right there, on the second tier of your turd-like impression. Barely noon, it registers 112 degrees. The view is so vast that the only thing I can comprehend is that my sense of self is entirely out of scale. There is nothing behind me or beyond. It's a type of nothingness that only excess can produce. It is the deprivation of familiar whims and I am reminded that there is no convenience like the bounty of a corner bodega. But I packed my gut before I arrived. The yogurt, banana, and green tea are culminating at my anus, so I make use of what lines my pockets, crumpled notes, and a used tissue. With the impossible intention to leave no trace, I burn and bury the waste.

Few things can be here. The snakes, scorpions, and kangaroo rats are infrequent at best. Have you ever seen a kangaroo rat? I doubt it. They're nocturnal, and if caught in a flash of light, they move like meth addicts. They're exactly what they sound like, a tangelo—with the hind legs of a jackrabbit, a Cat Dancer for a tail, and the body-face of a stout mouse.

Everybody offers up like a banquet. Thwack! The flies, landing subtly on exposed skin, quickly tease out a tiny piece of meat from the surface, leaving you bloody, bruised, or both. Thwack! Moving is what you do here. You can come and go, but you cannot stay. It is a now place because it is a non-possessed place.

I'm here with another. She is Donald Ducking about the landscape in an oversized t-shirt, ass to the wind. She gathers hardened sap from the few spindly pine trees. Later we set fire to small bits. Under flame it liquefies and bubbles as it boils. The fumes are a thick sweet pleasure. The sun is impossible and omnipresent. A glaring hot white blowout. Wetness pools as fast as it evaporates around the edge of my shades and anything else that touches anything else. At this hour, the exposure is violent and our bodies become terracotta-like. I'm over it. This kind of beauty is exhausting. The only thing we desire is to put water in, or on, our bodies.

Into our sports utility rental we go. The breeze of conditioned air engulfs us. After an hour or probably more of all-terrain travel, the engine begins to smolder. Exhaust barreling along a dusty path, we emerge over yet another expanse. The mouth widens, the line spreads, and an ocean-like river divides the horizon. We land in an entirely artificial town or constellation of properties, demarcated by slabs of cement and awkwardly placed trees. Such greenery appears like a mirage of grotesque luxury. Everything is ironic, even the way the water meets the land. There is no edge, no bank, no beach, just a liquid-filled void. Stripped bare, we submerge. Dripping dry. Over a parched surface, she draws Death—the thirteenth Major Arcana attributed to Scorpio—neither an end nor a beginning, but both, a sign of transformation. Scorpio, assigned the element of water, may have perceptions that border on psychic, but Scorpio's insights are often clouded by the intensity of feelings or deluded by an elaborate imagination. This vital solvent is formless on its own, and that's why those with this sign are quickly shaped by their relationships to others.»

# PRESS/PUBLICATION



## A.K. BURNS

## A Guide To The Best Shows in Dusseldorf and Cologne During DC Open

Celebrating a new season of exhibition openings, your guide to what to see in the Rhineland cities



### A.K. Burns, 'Negative Space'

Julia Stoschek Collection, Düsseldorf

6 September – 15 December

Given the recent focus in art on the socio-political significance of the body, it is surprising that A.K. Burns has had so little exposure in Germany to date. Her show at Julia Stoschek Collection, 'Negative Space', consists of four multimedia installations and a dozen collages, in which she applies paper cuttings, varnishes and oil paints to shop-bought bathroom mirrors. Standout works include *Body Building, Building Body* (2019), an intelligent composition of human and architectural bodies on a mirrored grid, and *Leave No Trace* (2019) – one of the dramatically staged installations – in which the artist opens up a space with sci-fi narratives to engender a dream of a LGBTQ-friendly society.

## JULIA STOSCHEK COLLECTION: A.K.BURNS 'NEGATIVE SPACE'



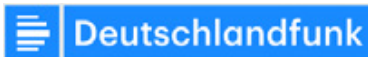
A.K. Burns's interdisciplinary practise explores the body as a contentious domain where social, political, and material forces collide. Engaging deeply with questions of materiality and (re)production, Burns examines how power is connected to the body, its functions, physiological processes, sensations, and pleasures. For Burns, the body is not an object with inherent boundaries and properties but multifaceted and porous, permeating and penetrated by its surroundings. These inquiries take shape as visually seductive and socially critical videos, sculptures, writing, sound, drawings, and collages.

NEGATIVE SPACE, A.K. Burns's first institutional solo exhibition in Germany, is comprised of three multi-channel video installations that are a part of an ongoing cycle of works by the same name. Conceived as a non-linear and layered narrative, this series envisions a world wherein boundaries are fluid and hierarchical relations permute. This cycle of works playfully corrupts science-fiction tropes exploring the intersection of politics and fantasy to build idiosyncratic allegorical imagery.

Burns deliberately locates the work in a speculative present filled with the detritus of everyday life. Filmed in stunning but familiar landscapes, like the desert of the Southwest United States, the Negative Space series exposes the tension between utopian proposals of sociality and apocalyptic anxieties. The works challenge long-standing assumptions about social orders, marshalling familiar images and objects to ask how value is assigned to resources, how marginalized bodies navigate a fraught social reality, and how different forms of matter come to matter.

At JSC Düsseldorf, Burns will restage two video installations *A Smeary Spot (Negative Space 0)* (2015) and *Living Room (Negative Space 00)* (2017), and premiere a new episode entitled *Leave No Trace (Negative Space 000)* (2019). In addition, the exhibition will include twenty-one collages related to the series, a new film observing a total solar eclipse, and an experimental sound work presented as a vinyl record.

**N**EGATIVE SPACE is part of HORIZONTAL VERTIGO, a year-long program at the JULIA STOSCHEK COLLECTION in Düsseldorf and Berlin, curated by Lisa Long.



## A.K. BURNS

# Der amerikanische Albtraum

Von düsterer Science-Fiction, die im Hier und Heute spielt, bis zum transfeministischen Manifest: Die Videos der New Yorkerin A.K. Burns fesseln. Sie sind zum ersten Mal in Deutschland zu sehen: Alpträume, aus denen man irgendwie nicht aufwachen möchte; böse Märchen, die auch für Befreiung stehen.



„Kinder, die mit Messern spielen! Gleich schlachten sie die Wohnzimmersofas und weiden sie aus. Im Aquarium nichts Grünes mehr. Auch da ist Wüste. Die Aquarien sind auch nur halb voll!“

Und der amerikanische Einrichtungstraum auf Halbmast – im Video „Living Room“ von A.K. Burns. Dann geht der grell erleuchtete Albtraum weiter: Die Kleidung der Kinder nimmt das biedere karierte Muster der Sofas an. Das „System“ hat sie gefressen. Bis sie schließlich spastisch und wie Kaulquappen am Boden herum zucken. Während Karl Marx zitiert wird. Also da müssten mal Freud und folgende ran, um dieses Leid zu deuten.

A.K. Burns: „Es geht um diese Angst, die mittlerweile überall da ist. Und die gefühlte Enge, die vielleicht mit der politischen Situation seit 2016 zu tun hat, also seit der Wahl. Es ist gemeint als Gegenwehr.“

Manche „Acting Agents“ – menschliche Protagonisten in den Videos von A.K. Burns – tragen überall kleine Pflaster, als hätten sie sich bei Ganzkörperrasuren geschnitten.



## Die Alltäglichkeit der Xenophobie

„Microaggression! – die Leute sagen dir: Ich bin kein Rassist, bin nicht homophob! Ich doch nicht! Und dann tun sie doch etwas, was verletzt. Es geht nicht um Vergewaltigung, nicht die großen Sachen. Sondern zum Beispiel das: Du gehst als Frau die Straße lang und sie grinsen dich an. Gut, man ist das als Frau ja gewohnt. Die meisten Frauen brauchen es ja sogar, als Bestätigung.“

A.K. Burns braucht es nicht. Die Künstlerin mit intersexuellem Look weicht etwas zurück, als hätte sie geahnt, dass jetzt gleich wieder die Frage kommt: Wofür steht „A.K.“? Sie ist bei Wikipedia einsortiert unter Transfeminismus.

„Transfeminismus, was ist das nun wieder? Gute Frage! Gehen Sie damit mal mit dem Mikrofon unter die Leute. Vielleicht definiert es jeder anders? Für mich: Gibt es natürlich glücklicherweise die Geschichte des Feminismus, auf der ich aufbauen kann. Aber Transfeminismus bewegt sich in dem Sinn weiter, dass er – in dieser heteronormativen Welt –, nicht nur auf Frauen schaut, sondern generell die Machtfrage stellt.“

Also mehr als die #MeToo-Frage: Wo sind die Frauen in den Museen?

## Rache-Akte mit Humor

„Bin ich überhaupt eine Frau? Das ist meine Frage.“

Veranschaulicht in dem Video „Eclipse“ mit einer totalen Sonnenfinsternis, gefilmt in Utah. Und wie es ist, in die Sonne, beziehungsweise ins Nichts zu schauen. Darum dreht sich ein feministischer Science-Fiction-Text von Joanna Russ von 1976, den A.K. Burns hier zitiert und bebildert. Es ist eine Denkweise, wie etwa beim Afrofuturismus von Sun Ra: Wenn auf dem Planet Erde an den Machtverhältnissen nichts zu ändern ist. Dann bleibt als Zuflucht nur das Weltall.

Aber von Opfergehabere in den Arbeiten von A.K. Burns kaum eine Spur: dafür Humor, mit lauter kleinen Racheakten am weißen, proaktiven, optimierten Mann. Im Video „Leave No Trace“, ganz neu und für die „Julia Stoschek Collection“ entstanden, wird er geradezu zum Idioten erklärt. Seine ganzen Qualifikationen und sein Status ist hier einen Dreck wert: ausgesetzt auf einem Wüstenplaneten. Die Rache der pluralistischen und diversen, der eigentlichen Wirklichkeit der USA.

„Inzwischen geht es auch um die Frage: Wie überleben wir, da alles niedergeht? In Science-Fiction wird ja Technologie oft romantisiert. Alles sieht so futuristisch und toll aus.“

## Wendet sich alles zum Guten?

Während es bei A.K. Burns als Requisiten vor allem eins zu sehen gibt: Müll, Müll und nochmals Müll. Thema Klima, auch bei ihr. Bis dann wieder, in dieser aufwändigen, komplexen Ausstellungsarchitektur – mit Kafka-krummen Wänden und würfelförmigen Projektionsflächen – alles wieder verschwindet in einem digitalen Linienraster. Das war also wirklich nur ein Albtraum, diese Wüstenaquarien und -planeten, diese Aggrokinder, diese Sonnenfinsternis für womöglich immer? Zumal die letzte Projektionsapparatur auf einem Totenschädel steht. Das Vanitas-Motiv schlechthin.

Doch alles könnte sich noch guthin wenden, durch Fantasie und Humor. Wie auf einer queeren Party. A.K. Burns ist von vielem inspiriert und will selber andere inspirieren. Das gelingt. Aus ihren Video-Alpträumen möchte man eigentlich gar nicht mehr aufwachen.

„Alles ist hier am Kämpfen und mit Überleben beschäftigt. Aber am Ende jedes Videos steht eine Tanzszene. Als Akt der Befreiung. Es ist der Moment, wo du frei bist, mit und in deinem Körper. Das ist mehr als Flucht und Jammertal. Denn so kann man der Welt auch noch was Positives abgewinnen.“

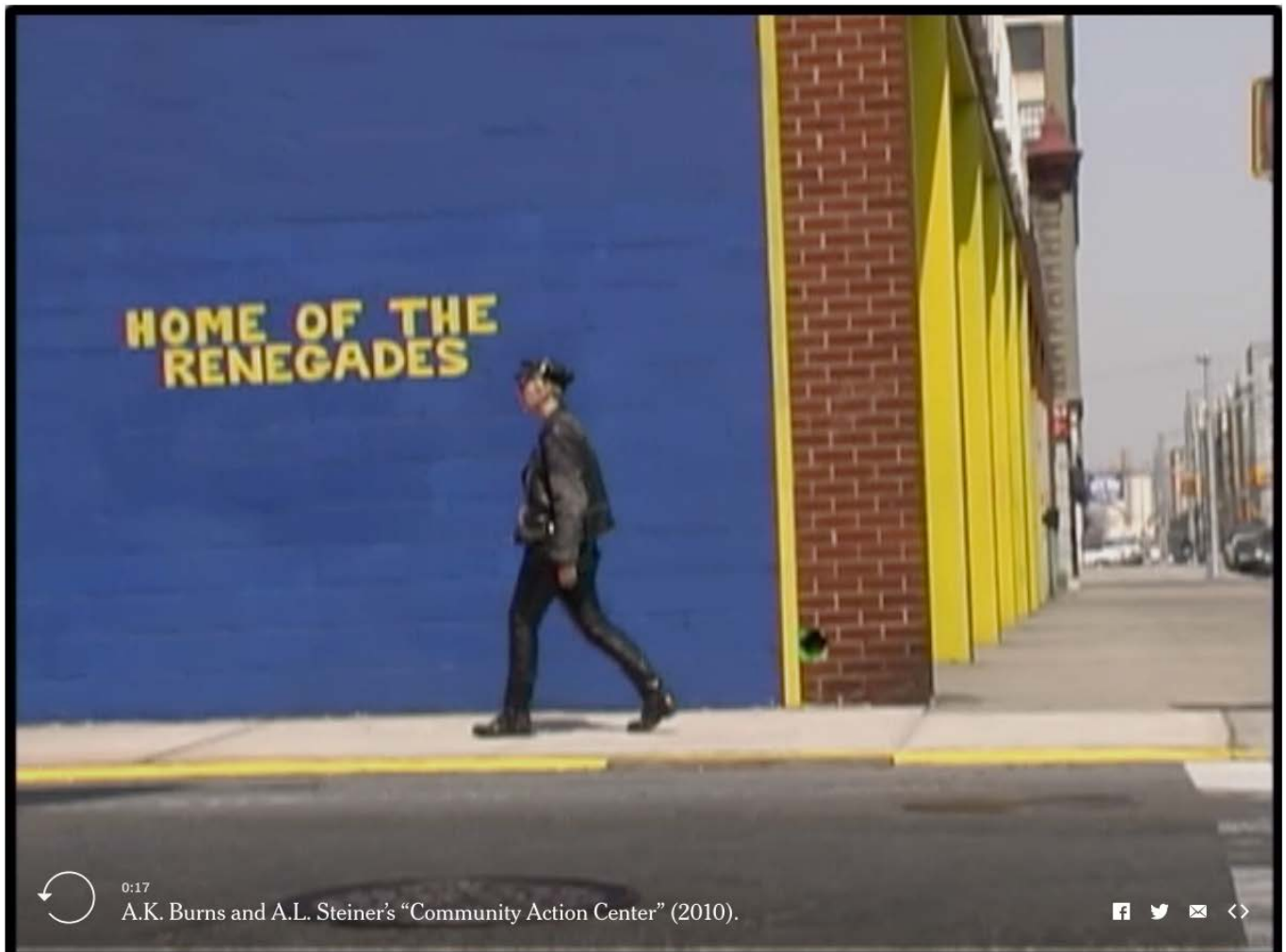
**A.K. BURNS – NEGATIVE SPACE**, kuratiert von Lisa Long, JSC Düsseldorf, 6. September – 15. Dezember 2019



A.K. Burns  
The New York Times Style Magazine  
July 17<sup>th</sup> 2019  
By David Breslin, Martha Rosler,  
Kelly Taxter, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Torey Thornton

# A.K. BURNS

## The 25 Works of Art That Define the Contemporary Age



Three artists and a pair of curators came together at The New York Times to attempt to make a list of the era's essential artworks. Here's their conversation.



## 20. A.K. Burns and A.L. Steiner, “Community Action Center,” 2010

“Community Action Center,” a 69-minute erotic romp through the imaginations of artists [A.K. Burns](#) (b. Capitola, Calif., 1975) and [A.L. Steiner](#) (b. Miami, 1967) and their community of friends, is a celebration of queer sexuality as playful as it is political. We watch as a diverse, multigenerational cast engage in joyfully hedonistic acts of private and shared pleasure involving paint, egg yolks, carwashes and corn on the cob. Although the video opens with the cabaret star [Justin Vivian Bond](#) reading lines from Jack Smith’s experimental film “[Normal Love](#),” there is otherwise little dialogue. Instead, the focus is on the dreamlike visuals — captured with an offhand intimacy on rented and borrowed cameras — and the visceral sensations they evoke. “Community Action Center” is the rare ribald work that doesn’t refer to male desire or gratification, which is partly why Steiner and Burns, who are activists as well as artists, describe it as “socio-sexual.” Radical politics needn’t come at the cost of sensuality, however. The piece is meant to titillate.

**KT:** It’s a really important work, too.

**TLF:** I haven’t seen it.

**KT:** They spearheaded this project to essentially make porn, but it’s much more than that, with all kinds of people from their queer community. It includes so many artists that we know and that are making work now, and very visible, but it was all about figuring out how to show their body, show their sexuality, share their body, share their sexuality, make light of it, make it serious, collaborate with musicians. It’s a crazy document of a moment that opened up a conversation.

the other artists : Sturtevant; Marcel Broodthaers; Hans Haacke; Philip Guston; Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro and the CalArts Feminist Art Program; Lynda Benglis; Gordon Matta-Clark; Jenny Holzer; Dara Birnbaum; David Hammons; Barbara Kruger; Nan Goldin; Cady Noland; Jeff Koons; Mike Kelley; Felix Gonzalez-Torres; Catherine Opie; Lutz Bacher; Michael Asher; Danh Vo; Kara Walker; Heji Shin; Cameron Rowland; and Arthur Jafa.

**them.**A.K. Burns  
them.  
August 8, 2019  
By Zachary Small

# This Queer Artist's Latest Work Shows Public Art's Complicated Link to Gentrification



At first, it's hard to see why [A. K. Burns](#) is in Cleveland, Ohio, making her first-ever public art installation. Burns has a certain level of anxiety about being here — not necessarily because she's uncomfortable as a queer woman in the Midwest, but more because the assignment has her contending with her work's relationships to gentrification and the big money donors who back public art in this country.

Burns hesitated but ultimately accepted an invitation from [FRONT International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art](#) to conceive of a new public work that could comment on the ongoing gentrification issues plaguing the Ohio city's poorest neighborhoods. More specifically, FRONT tasked Burns with making a piece that addresses the history of a small district called Hingetown, which has rapidly transformed in the past twenty years from a working-class neighborhood with a vibrant gay nightlife scene to one of Cleveland's trendiest places to live. Just take a look at the neighborhood's [own website](#): its coffee is "unbelievably delicious" and its art museum is "kick ass."

The story of Burns' first public sculpture is one of controversy because the work engages how gentrification has led to queer erasure in the neighborhood. It's also a story about manipulation, one that shows just how vulnerable artists are to the financial whims of cultural institutions who often take advantage of their ethical brands.



The history of Hingetown follows a common gentrification narrative. “Hingetown” itself never really existed. That name was a marketing ploy created in 2013, a rebranding exercise to attract real estate investors to an otherwise undesirable location built alongside a six-lane freeway and a housing project called Striebinger Block, wedged between Cleveland’s Warehouse District, the Market District, and Gordon Square. To visitors, this neighborhood must have looked abject and defunct. Speaking to *Vanity Fair* for a profile of the neighborhood in October 2015, Fred Bidwell, a leading player in the redevelopment of Hingetown who first moved to the area after making his fortune in advertising, described its transition from slum to something: “This place, which was a nowhere, toxic corner, has become a destination.” A full year before Bidwell’s comment, two officers shot Tamir Rice dead only a few blocks to the west of the neighborhood.

Surely, Hingetown’s former inhabitants would beg to differ. Writing for *Belt Magazine*, Greggor Mattson, a professor of sociology at Oberlin College, describes how gentrification erases the overlap between queer people and working-class communities: “If the Striebinger Block was ‘a corner of poverty,’ it’s because Cleveland queers are also poor. If we stood in the lots described by gentrifiers as ‘missing teeth,’ they reflected our own bodies.” Although sometimes blamed for starting the cycle of gentrification by attracting artists (and later techies and bankers) to low-income areas, queer people are more often than not part of those vulnerable minorities at risk.

As an artist, Burns has had to think about gentrification for a long time. In 2013, she moved her studio from Industry City, in Brooklyn, to Maspeth, Queens. “There’s no bus or subway to the studio. There’s no train. No grocery store. It’s all very unappealing for gentrification,” she told me with a half-smile as we stood in her studio discussing her upcoming project for FRONT. Of course, these facts, along with the arrival of artists, make an area ripe for gentrification, and Maspeth has been no exception in recent years. “Every time I have to move my studio or home to be able to afford being an artist, I try to be as conscious as possible about where I place myself because I know that it’s going to affect my environment.”

Originally from a California beach town outside Santa Cruz, Burns moved to Oakland in 1998 after studying graphic design at RISD. Eventually, she found herself co-running a gallery there. But when she visited her old neighborhood years after finally making the move to New York in 2003, she noticed a rapid transformation of the area from a fairly unpopulated space into a shopping district with a sprinkling of galleries. There’s a stinging recognition that her gallery may have fomented such a large change in the area. This lesson informs Burns’ work with Hingetown, and how she sees queer culture within a narrative of gentrification. “I don’t believe that queer culture was a thing that changed the neighborhood – the gay clubs were in cohabitation alongside other marginalized economies, like prostitution and drugs,” she explained. “I believe that bringing the arts in created a space where others were drawn to the neighborhood, seeking culture. Even if the culture represented was that of marginalized bodies—museums and arts organizations claimed a cultural high ground that made previously existing cultures and economies incompatible to the new flux of visitors.”

The FRONT Triennial exemplifies this sometimes-caustic relationship between art and gentrification in Hingetown. The same person who called the old neighborhood a “toxic corner” is also FRONT’s founder and executive director, Fred Bidwell, who moved to Cleveland with his wife after a lucrative 35 year career in advertising and marketing in Akron. Establishing the Bidwell Foundation in 2011, he later bought an old transformer station and turned it into a contemporary art space in 2013, where he could support local artists and showcase his collection of photography. This was the same year that the neighborhood was rechristened “Hingetown.” Four years later, Hingetown gained Ohio’s first historical marker honoring its role in the LGBTQ+ civil rights movement as the rare space that catered to the queer community through bars and clubs.



Come mid-July, FRONT will have to answer for its role in eclipsing the queer history of the past with the shiny, millennial Hingetown of the future. Originally, FRONT asked Burns to bring her “UNKNOWN KNOWN” triptych of fences. This work riffed on Donald Rumsfeld’s infamous speech where he leveraged the ambiguity of the unknown to induce fear during the “War on Terror.” Traveling to Hingetown, however, Burns decided against bringing her old work to Cleveland. “Walking around the neighborhood and observing the sites under construction, I noticed that most were locked down with chain-link fences,” she said. Those fences became the inspiration for her public work, which brutalized the fences as a commentary on how gentrification can disappear bodies—particularly queer bodies—from local history. “I was reading a lot of Jane Jacobs,” explains Burns. “But it wasn’t getting me to the language or resolution that I wanted, which was a bit more poetic. In my frustration, I just wanted to crush the fucking fence. Which turns out is the poetics I was looking for.”

*The Dispossessed* is a mangled and ChromaFlair painted chain-link fence that Burns developed for the FRONT Triennial. Twisted into an unimaginable shape, the bruised fence almost resembles a crumpled up paper thrown into a waste bin like a discarded idea. The work stands like a gaping maw, whose negative interior space becomes a foreboding silhouette of local residents whose time in the neighborhood has come to pass during gentrification. The paradoxical presence of disappearance encourages the viewer to contemplate the vanishing of Hingetown’s queer community in recent years. But fences are also often used in the criminalization of people’s bodies, forming borders or delineating public space from private space. Seen in an area of rapid “redevelopment,” Burns’s work questions how the neighborhood’s previous residents will be treated in the new Hingetown.

Originally, Burns envisioned a series of fences scattered across Hingetown, standing in the lots marked for redevelopment and construction. Instead, she only has one sculpture defiantly on display in front of Bidwell’s Transformer Station. After nine months of theorizing and experimentation, FRONT informed Burns that she would not be receiving the funding she had initially requested. Therefore, she would not have enough funds to build multiple sites for the artwork and, by default, get no commission fee since funds were never separately set aside to pay the artist.

“They said I could sell the work, but I don’t have a record of selling large public sculptures,” the artist explained. “That’s a very particular collector base. That’s just not going to happen overnight.” In the end after paying to create the work, there would be very little by way of compensation for Burns, a situation she described as all too common.

Responding to the situation at Hingetown, Bidwell acknowledged the issues surrounding FRONT’s presence in a gentrified area, but avoided addressing the denial of Burns’s request for full funding: “It’s true to say that Transformer Station did lay the groundwork for Hingetown’s transformation which is generally perceived to be positive by the community. We are pleased that AK Burns’s sculpture recognizes the history of the neighborhood and the changes that have occurred here, creating a vital discussion around Hingetown.”

The irony of FRONT’s reluctance to properly compensate a queer artist for a sculpture confronting a queer-displacing gentrification catalyzed by the triennial’s executive director is not lost on Burns. A founding member, along with with multimedia artist A. L. Steiner and performance artist K8 Hardy, of WAGE (Working Artists and the Greater Economy), she has spent most of her career fighting for better economic equality between artists and institutions.

“While there are problems with the gallery system, there is an economic structure to it. The problem is that a lot of artists exist primarily within the non-profit structure, which includes everything from small artist-run spaces to museums. It has no consistent economic structure to it,” Burns says. “There’s all this money moving around, but it’s concentrated in a 1% grouping of artists. How is any community supposed to sustain itself that way?”

You might think that Burns could count herself in that lucky one percent, given her résumé. The recipient of Harvard University’s prestigious Radcliffe Fellowship, Burns has exhibited internationally in venues like the Tate Modern in London and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. She has also co-edited *Randy*, an annual trans-feminist arts magazine and helped draft WAGE’s landmark womanifesto. But FRONT Triennial’s reluctance to meet Burns’s price demonstrates how queer women artists are still being devalued by a system that predominantly skews straight and male. Even with a history of fighting for economic justice for artists, someone like Burns is just as easily discounted as the poor environs of Hingetown.

There is a special humor in seeing *The Dispossessed* sitting outside Bidwell’s Transformer Station. Half-realized and resembling discarded rubbish, Burns’ work serves Cleveland a similar notice to the one Kara Walker’s *A Subtlety* served Williamsburg back in 2014 when she installed her bleached sugar sphinx resembling a naked black woman in the old Domino Sugar Factory scheduled for demolition and redevelopment. Like Walker, who tied the gentrification of Brooklyn to the commodification of black bodies, Burns eulogizes a bygone queer neighborhood with her art. Still, there is another level of irony here that *The Dispossessed* will lure attention and tourism that might further gentrify Hingetown.

Which gets to the bigger question of why Burns agreed to come to Cleveland in the first place. Perhaps by working with the FRONT Triennial to develop their inaugural exhibition, she could create something ethical and responsible. Perhaps gentrifiers can acknowledge their footprint on displaced community and find a path toward development that doesn’t leave other bodies in its wake. Someone has to make the art. If not her, then who else? Unfortunately, it appears FRONT didn’t give the chance to native Hingetowners to be their own best advocates.

Burns sees it as an ongoing battle. “I’m part of a lineage of cranky lesbians who get agitated enough to do something. We have a history of this. It’s really our job.”

## What the Inaugural FRONT Triennial in Cleveland Highlights About the Problems with Art Tourism

At the crux of this ambitious show lies the question: who is this triennial really for?



So goes the thinking of Fred Bidwell, a millionaire collector and former advertising executive from Akron, Ohio. He is the chief funder and public face of FRONT International, the new Cleveland triennial for contemporary art, curated by Michelle Grabner, that opened on 13 July and continues to 30 September. Among the exhibition's 28 venues – which stretch across metropolitan Cleveland, Akron and Oberlin – is the Transformer Station, a disused electrical plant that Bidwell and his wife Laura Ruth Bidwell acquired in 2011 to stage rotating exhibitions of their collection. It serves as a hub for FRONT's film programme, as well as installations by Stephen Willats and A.K. Burns which tackle issues of urban blight and gentrification.

On the Transformer Station's clipped front lawn, A.K. Burns has installed *The Dispossessed* (2018), a gnarled, jet-black chain-link fence. Chain link is ubiquitous in the neighbourhood, cordoning car parks, construction sites and fast-disappearing vacant lots. A small silver plaque notes that the art space is 'part of a wave of gentrification' and states that the sculpture stands 'in critical dialogue with various modes of local "revitalization".' It's a relatively oblique artwork, but a brave and indignant gesture by an artist in response to a financial backer. The ethics of development plague FRONT, which largely ignores the socioeconomic conditions of greater Cleveland in order to repackage it for high cultural tourism. Despite the fact that Cleveland clocked the country's second-highest poverty rate and its ninth highest crime rate just last year – both functions of its declining and disenfranchised population – almost none of FRONT's projects represent local people or the problems they face.



DIARY

# DOWN IN FRONT

July 21, 2018 • Cleveland, Ohio • Zack Hatfield at the inaugural FRONT Triennial



A.K. Burns, *The Dispossessed*, 2018. Installation view at Transformer Station.

The next morning, we went to Fred Bidwell's Transformer Station, the gallery space that helped gentrify Hingetown a few years ago. In its front lawn, A. K. Burns had installed a pair of warped chain-link fences. As we idled around them, eating donuts, Burns herself wandered by and gave an impromptu spiel about the work, which arose from ideas about borders (bodily and geographical) and the tangled dynamics of art and redevelopment. "The lines of gender don't make a lot of sense to me," she said, acknowledging that Hingetown once served as a haven for the local queer community. "And gentrification and the arts have this knotted, complicated history." The fences, she said, could help express some of the rage felt about all of this. "It's actually not easy to crush a fence," she added.

## Hot in Cleveland: Front International Triennial Kicks Off in Ohio with Promising First Edition



A. K. Burns, *The Dispossessed*, 2018, at Transformer Station.

Outside Transformer Station, A. K. Burns debuted the sculpture *The Dispossessed*, a pair of fences that look as though they were crushed by heavy machinery. Standing next to her sculpture, Burns explained that she was fascinated by fences she spotted throughout Ohio City, which she said “appear around construction sites and empty lots, as markers of ongoing gentrification.” She thought that the fences could be metaphors for borders, and she wanted to break them down. “I got so frustrated, and I was like, ‘Ah, I want to crumple these fences!’ ” she said. With a laugh, she added, “You’d think it would be more fun. It’s actually not easy to crush the fence.”



# ARTFORUM

A.K. Burns

Artforum

December 2018

By A.K. Burns

THE ARTISTS' ARTISTS

## THE ARTISTS' ARTISTS

*To take stock of the past year, Artforum asked an international group of artists to select a single exhibition or event that most memorably captured their eye in 2018.*



**Zoe Leonard, *Strange Fruit*, 1992–97**, orange, banana, grapefruit, lemon, and avocado peels; thread, zippers, buttons, sinew, needles, plastic, wire, stickers, fabric, trim wax, dimensions variable. Photo: Graydon Wood.

### A.K. Burns

#### **Zoe Leonard, *Strange Fruit*, 1992–97 (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York)**

I simultaneously squealed with excitement and nearly burst into tears when I entered the central chamber of Leonard's survey at the Whitney Museum of American Art, where *Strange Fruit*, 1992–97, lay like a gathering of recuperating strangers. The now-withered fruits exposed both the fragile temporality of being and the labor involved in surviving. Previously I had only witnessed the installation in pictures and believed it was thread that was used to reassemble those skins into hallowed bodies. But it's the details that you see in person, the urgent deployment of buttons, hooks, and zippers—by any means—that prompted my rare emotive explosion.





A. K. Burns  
The New Yorker  
January 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017

GOINGS ON  
ABOUT TOWN

EXPLORE

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ART MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

## A.K. Burns: Shabby but Thriving

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The white carpeting of Burns's installation was dirty on Day One: the artist had stationed leaking bags of soil around the museum's fifth floor. A battered couch, stripped of its cushioning and glowing like a spaceship, faces the show's centerpiece, "Living Room," a nonnarrative, two-channel video set in a fecund postapocalyptic present and starring an ensemble cast of children and queer artists. It was shot in a prewar building on the Bowery which the museum maintains for its artists-in-residence; Burns treats its interior structure as an analogue for a human being. Upstairs, the kids (in the collective role of the psyche) blur boundaries, dressed in prints that match the sofa's upholstery, while mimicking insects or fish. The adults struggle down stairways (intestines), schlepping garbage bags and furniture scraps. The finale is a party in a dank basement (the uterus), where dancers perform wearing headlamps and T-shirts emblazoned with fragmented slogans: "No," "Her," "Or Bust." Burns's exhibition arrives as many of us are urgently considering the fate of both bodies and the body politic; she has generously provided a punching bag for those who would like to take out some of their frustrations. On Feb. 5, Burns has planned two sessions with lawyers and activists, to help attendees prepare for the resistance.

# The Highlighter

A. K. Burns  
The Highlighter  
January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2017  
by Natalie Whalen

ENTERTAINMENT, REVIEWS, VISUAL ART

## New Museum Exhibit Explores Strange Bodies



Video still courtesy of A. K. Burns and Galerie Michel Rein. © Shabby but Thriving.

Artist-in-Residence at the New Museum, A.K. Burns' new fifth-floor installation, "Shabby but Thriving," is nothing if not thought-provoking.

The exhibit itself centers on a video projected onto overlapping walls. Sometimes the smaller 'wall,' which is more or less a piece of heavy material placed at a slant perpendicular to the other, will provide a close-up on Burns' meticulously crafted scene. The thirty-six minute video, titled "Living Room," is organized within a series. The first in the serial, titled "A Smeary Spot," was debuted in 2015 but is currently housed by the Portland Institute of Contemporary Art.

Surrounding the video is a smattering of sculptural objects, including bags of dirt and a gutted wooden couch with blue light emanating from underneath. These objects act complementarily towards the video, which seems to explore some of these themes of perpetual dirtiness.

Overall, the video is very strange. Admittedly, this exhibit may not be for the first-time viewer of contemporary art. It opens on two individuals (one, a visibly pregnant woman; the other, a man dressed in drag) carrying trash and destroyed furniture down the stairs on a pre-war building, which happens to be the home of the New Museum's artist-in-residence program at 231 Bowery. It is cut with images of children lying on couches, engaging in various dubious activities. One child is looking through bags of dirt for candy; another is staring longingly at a fish tank.

The video ends with a bizarre dance party in the basement of the building. Performers wear oversized shirts with arbitrary words such as "no" and "again" and headlamps as they writhe to the music. What the exhibition seems to and claims to explore is bodies within spaces, and the implications of this dichotomy.

This makes sense given Burns' status as a queer, female artist. In a time where being female and queer is somewhat peculiar in itself, the exhibit is knowingly bizarre—perhaps too bizarre for the audience of giggling museumgoers that I encountered upon attending last weekend. But Burns' work is recognized and highly regarded by authorities on contemporary art: the artist teaches at graduate programs at Hunter College and Columbia University, and is a 2016-2017 Radcliffe Fellow at Harvard University.

Politically minded Burns has not simply left her work to fend for itself, either. The New Museum will feature a series of public programs to complement "Shabby but Thriving." On Feb. 5, the museum will host a day-long program titled "Body Politic: From Rights to Resistance" featuring sessions with, "lawyers, activists, and grassroots organizers on issues of bodies under duress: civil disobedience, protest, healthcare, policing, prisons, immigration, and environmental contamination." Mar. 9 will host a panel on quantum feminism, and Apr. 20 will feature a listening party for A.K. Burns' 2016 experimental record "Leave No Trace."

*"Shabby but Thriving" opened on Jan. 18 and will run through Apr. 23. New Museum admission is free with your NYU ID.*

*Email Natalie Whalen at [entertainment@nyunews.com](mailto:entertainment@nyunews.com).*



## Big hit at the New Museum

Do current politics make you want to punch something? Then head over to the New Museum, where the usually drab education centre on the fifth floor has been remodelled with a Ringside-brand punching bag, courtesy of the artist A.K. Burns and tied to her excellent show, *Shabby but Thriving*. "The Resource Center is just that," she says in an email. "In considering what resources we might need at this critical political juncture, I felt we don't just need things that feed our mind but also our body. And when bodies are under stress it's perfectly natural to want to hit something, to release aggression or to want to scream—hence the padded wall and the heavy bag alongside texts about the body and trauma." Tampons are also available, in metal boxes that usually carry ammunition.



**Beat that: A.K. Burns has installed a heavy bag at the New Museum**

A.K. Burns  
 Le Beau Vice  
 May 31<sup>th</sup>, 2017  
 by Elisabeth Lebovici

## AK Burns par tous les moyens



Si l'identité n'est pas une, qu'elle est une fable, une fiction, une division, une crise, alors pourquoi diable une exposition monographique prétendrait-elle le contraire? " La réclame d'identité", dit Edouard Glissant dans le *Traité du Tout Monde*, " n'est que profération quand elle n'est pas aussi mesure d'un dire. Quand au contraire nous désignons les formes de notre dire et les informons, notre identité ne fonde plus une essence, elle conduit à Relation."

Traduire ici relation par affinités, un mot qui se cherche.

Prenons le catalogue des beautés naturelles : Lake Powell, Utah, par exemple. Du paysage qui s'est composé durant des milliers d'années, un autre paysage a émergé il y a soixante ans. Le lac résulte de la construction du barrage du Glen Canyon, en 1956. L'eau qui l'emplit a transformé le canyon en contenant, mais inversement, elle désigne, par sa fluidité et son volume, la transformation du canyon et sa négation, l'espace négatif qu'elle a construit. Cette relation, techniquement, a un nom, un

corps: damm. Ça veut dire barrage en anglais mais les sonorités du nom, damm, dammed, résonnent comme dans *Femmes Damnées* de Baudelaire.

Autre exemple: les floralies de la société botanique newyorkaise. Des perles de culture. Mais aussi un florilège d'iphones bombardant chacune des espèces, qu'on peut retrouver filtrées et recolorisées chez Instagram. «Mais qu'est-ce que c'est qu'une fleur? Une pro-creation inter sexe et inter-espèce, comme un cyborg».

C'est ce que dit AK Burns, l'artiste dans l'exposition de laquelle on trouve *Lake Powell*, sous formes d'image d'un vieux catalogue de photos éclaboussées à la Spiruline, l'algue verte-bleue vernie et fixée par un polyurethane, pour figurer l'eau damée-damnée, ainsi que la parade des orchidées (*The Orchid Show* (2013) sous forme d'une vidéo, où des vidéos de fleurs tapent l'incruste, et où les sons de l'exposition florale s'emmêlent à la musique pour piano de Ruth Crawford Seeger (*Kaleidoscopic Changes on an Original Theme, Ending with a Fugue*, 1924).

Des états, sinon des étapes de transformation, qui entrent en relation avec d'autres pièces, avec lesquelles pourtant elles n'ont rien à voir —ou plutôt puisqu'il s'agit d'une exposition, elles n'ont pas à être vues ensemble.

Ainsi, ces collages sur toile souple d'images documentaires [un siège de bureau scotché, une sculpture femme-siège d'Allen Jones, des ouvriers en grève...] qui tiennent à une pièce d'un pinceau, fiché sur le mur (série Penny hung drawings, 2012-14). C'est ce «tenir à», cette relation au mur qui reste tributaire de la gravité [peinture/frontalité + sculpture/verticalité] que ces pièces entrent en rapport avec d'autres, par exemples ces grilles ou cadres industriels servant d'accroche à divers matériaux prélevés sur des activités ou citant des activités extra-artistiques... quoique!. La pêche, le camping, les équipements de plein air. Lors de l'exposition de ces dernières pièces chez Callicoon à New York, AK Burns citait Les Dépossédés d'Ursula Le Guin: "...c'était ambigu, à deux faces. Ce qui était à l'intérieur et ce qui était à l'extérieur dépendait de quel côté on se plaçait.»

Le mot 'relief' peut aussi s'observer des deux côtés. Relief aplati, estampé, d'aluminium et relief, au sens de reste, de déchet, de rogation. Celui qu'on plaque au mur, qu'on voit de



l'extérieur, celui dans lequel on s'est placé, le t-shirt dans lequel on a transpiré, dont on s'est extrait, qu'on n'a pas jeté mais plié et moulé... pour le plaquer au mur, le voir de l'extérieur, se glisser à l'intérieur, plier, mouler...

Ayant eu accès à une fonderie, raconte AK Burns, l'artiste avait été sensible à la sensualité de l'aluminium fondu, comme à l'uniforme requis pour y travailler: des chaps de cuir. AK Burns, co-fondatrice de W.A.G.E (Working Artists in a Greater Economy), co-éditrice de Randy, un magazine trans-féministe, et co-réalisatrice de l'inoubliable Community Action Center, le sait bien: Discard (T-shirt) est aussi un moulage d'un travail reproductif, celui de «l'identité-artiste» dans une économie ultra-libérale.





A.K.BURNS

EXHIBITIONS / ARTWORKS BIOGRAPHY PRESS / PUBLICATIONS

MICHEL REIN PARIS/BRUSSELS

# DAZED

A.K. Burns

Dazed

September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017

by Miss Rosen

## The artists using gender as a tool and a weapon

25th September 2017

Text Miss Rosen



"Untitled" from Community Action Center by A.K. Burns + A.L. Steiner, 2010. Digital video Photography A.L. Steiner

## ART &amp; PHOTOGRAPHY - FEATURE

**As the New Museum opens a stellar new exhibition, we survey those using gender to embrace, reject, and subvert the status quo**

Beyond the binary lays a world of infinite possibility, a space of total freedom and fluidity. 'Male' and 'female' are the space where we begin, and when we liberate ourselves from the paradigm of 'either/or' a vast wealth of gender expression begins to reveal itself.

Invariably, not everyone is comfortable within this extraordinary space. Many hold fast to simplistic, reductive thinking that diminishes the complexities and nuances of human experience and may resist enlightenment. Others understand the necessity of expansive and inclusive ideas, conversations and art – and it's here that *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon* takes off.

Curated by Johanna Burton, *Trigger* is a major exhibition featuring the work of more than 40 artists from all walks of life, which will be on view at the New Museum, New York this month and catalogued in a book of the same name on November 21.

By positioning gender at the intersection of race, class, sexuality and disability, *Trigger* exposes deep ambiguities, curious contradictions and fundamental questions at the heart of life on earth. The artists featured here offer ways to use gender to construct and dismantle culture, building new spaces and refurbishing the old. We speak with Burton about the importance of the show, and profile the work of six artists using gender as a weapon and a tool to embrace, reject and subvert the status quo.

**“My experience of art is that its function is to make you feel not uncomfortable in a bad way, but to make you question your assumptions” – Johanna Burton**

**Why is gender so triggering for so many people?**

**Johanna Burton:** Assuming that one could walk away from a gender binary, that destabilisation means you have to think about everything, and when we talk about relationships to power, that kind of destabilisation has a huge impact.

**I admire that you're putting out contradictory information, because people are so desperate to get to the solution before they go through the process. How does art have the power transform our ideas?**

**Johanna Burton:** It seems to me that we've moved into an unfortunate moment in general about consumption: that one goes into a museum to feel good or to feel confirmed in their ideas. My experience of art is that its function is to make you feel not uncomfortable in a bad way, but to make you question your assumptions.

**That brings it back to what I think of as the purpose of art: to depict the profound, complex differences (between us) and also the universality of human experience.**

**Johanna Burton:** The question of universal humanity is one people are debating heavily right now as we talk about experience, and who can represent what. There are a lot of questions that are making people question if we can experience the same thing at all. At the same time, it feels like we're able to acknowledge our differences and still have conversations that are hard and unresolved – and that's a way of connecting.



## A.K. BURNS & A.L. STEINER

*A.K. Burns & A.L. Steiner created the classic video **Community Action Center** (2010), which toured the United States before being acquired by the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The 69-minute work upends porn tropes and reimagines them to represent queer erotic idioms. What's more, the creators require the work to be viewed communally, rather than privately, as most people choose to to porn. The Museum will also restage **Room for Cream**, a lesbian soap opera, performed between 2008–2010.*

**Johanna Burton:** *Community Action Center* is one of the more historical pieces in the show. Having it return gives us a place to talk with the artists about how much has changed in a decade. A.K. and Steiner are just going to screen the movie once and have a discussion. We're thinking about what it means to have history that is built so quickly. *Room for Cream* is a great example: not all of the original cast identifies as lesbians any longer. What does it mean to account for those kinds of shifts within the longer legacy around art history and collaborative practice?



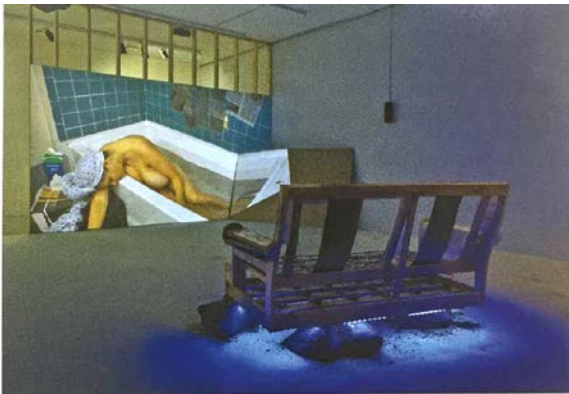
# ARTFORUM

A. K. Burns  
 Artforum  
 May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017  
 by Laura McLean Ferris

## A. K. Burns

NEW MUSEUM/CALLICOON FINE ARTS

In recent months it has been dispiritingly difficult to visit exhibitions without applying the lens of American politics, but “Fault Lines,” A. K. Burns’s show at Callicoon Fine Arts, couldn’t have been read without it—literally. Language was a focal point of the presentation: Steel fences featured the Rusmfeldian terms *knowns* and *unknowns*; a cast-concrete foot on a rebar leg bore the words YOU’RE FIRED; and a



A. K. Burns, *Living Room*, 2017–, wood, metal coils, plastic webbing, underglow lighting, two-channel HD video (color, sound, 36 minutes). Photo: Maris Hutchinson.

similar hand gracefully offered a gold-plated brass IUD in *Hand Out (She Was Warned)*, 2017, its title echoing the silencing of Elizabeth Warren as she opposed the nomination of Jeff Sessions for attorney general.

At the New Museum, Burns’s “Shabby but Thriving” was far more ambiguous and literally messy, sited within a gallery that was partly decked out as a grubby living room lined in a cream carpet smeared with dirt. Populating the space were a number of sculptures individually named *Corporeal Soil*, 2017, each consisting of resin, topsoil, and foil-wrapped hard candies (à la Felix Gonzales-Torres) that have been mixed and fixed and hardened in bags, so that they resemble slumping pillowish shapes even though the packaging itself has been cut away. These collapsing, Eeyore-ish forms are melancholic and invite a kind of sympathy, yet they are also abject, like glittery feces. They’re shit that’s breaking down and getting everywhere, but we’re encouraged to look at them as kindly and appreciatively as we would a body: These are mixed feelings that I really appreciate.

A stripped sofa with soiled pillows beneath it sat within *Living Room*, 2017–, an installation with a two-channel video that is both sprawingly episodic and structurally symbolic. Each section of the video component relates to different spaces in 231 Bowery, next door to the New Museum, where the artist has been in residence this spring, as well as a corresponding body part. In the section “Detox Tub Talks,” relating to the kidneys, artist A. L. Steiner lies in an Epsom salts bath in a dingy bathroom ripping out articles from *The New York Times* and adhering them to the tiles around her with water, accompanied part of the time by keyon gaskin, who appears clad in a hospital gown and covered in Band-Aids. They share a chocolate cake, discuss semantics

and money, and plan a revolutionary protest dance party. At times this conversation is frustrating, being both difficult to hear in the tiled environment, as well as slightly overprescriptive, unlike the rest of the video, which captures a buzzy materialism. In “Animalia Anima,” three seraphic children carry out symbolic gestures on spinning sofas. Memorably, a girl dressed in fish-print pajamas on a matching sofa plays with a fish tank before thrashing on the floor. In “Weight-Bearing,” two figures struggle to descend a staircase, one in high heels and a military jacket bearing a nametag that reads MANNING and the other with a large backpack, a strapped-on pregnancy belly, and pool sliders. Both are further burdened by piles of foam and furnishing material, such as ripped-up sofa parts, that have been awkwardly lashed to their bodies, as a form of allegory for bodies that pass with difficulty through a given system.

From room to room, circumstances, aesthetics, and characters change, giving the video a certain unwieldiness. Individually, however, these vignettes have moments of crackling energy and sensitive texture. A child stabs and tears a sofa apart with vigor, the rips making a satisfying sound, like a body that is opened up with unexpected pleasure, or a soil bag torn away, spilling fertile contents everywhere.

—Laura McLean-Ferris

# MOUSSE

A. K. Burns

Mousse

April 2016

by David Everitte Howe



## BE FREE WITH ME: “WILD” WOMYN TO THE MARGINS<sup>1</sup>

BY DAVID EVERITT HOWE





As the queer underground becomes ever more mainstream, a group of artists including A.L. Steiner, A.K. Burns, and MPA are expressing their resistance to this legitimization occurring in heteronormative terms via a proposal for a wild, "third space" —in the words of the postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha—to advance their desire not to fit.

We see a very, *very* big vagina in the desert, somewhere in the American southwest. It doesn't belong to a human—no, that would be pretty ordinary, your garden variety vagina—but rather, is monumentally carved in stone, like something of a dolmen or monolith. It's worshipped by a clan of prehistoric lesbians, who—incidentally—are crouching on a nearby boulder, naked. This isn't some ancient, forgotten feminist civilization—a la *Mad Max: Fury Road's* all-female desert colony—but rather, the opening salvo of Peaches' uncensored 2015 video *Rub*. Peaches' epic, mystical genital grants courageous pilgrims the magical ability to go "wild." Meaning, board a beat-up pussy wagon—replete with a vaginal talisman dangled from the rearview mirror—which drops intrepid females into a secret warehouse containing a large bath full of naked women doing all kinds of things to each other. The teaches of Peaches, apparently, is still fucking the pain away, and liking it.

After the orgy, party-goers then decamp back to the desert—still naked, a trend—where they play guitar in the sand, surrounded by cacti; engage in shamanic rituals at night; pee in pairs; and have more sex together. The whole set up is so over-the-top and ridiculous that Peaches laughs, seemingly off-cue, as a transgender woman flaps her penis in Peaches' face (lyric: "Can't talk right now, this chick's dick is in my mouth"). *Rub* concludes with a particularly liberatory shot that unfolds in slow motion: a woman riding a horse towards the camera at sunset, naked and bareback, her hair flapping dramatically in the wind with the hills behind her cast in orange. It's a vision of the Wild West, as tamed by a woman. An indelible image, it signals a queering of this symbolically male-dominated landscape, the desert re-cast as a space for difference, in all of the term's open-ended sweep.

Ironically, however, the video also signals a relative mainstreaming of the queer underground. Relative, in the sense that while it may not be mainstream for some, to others it's an instance of a household name enlisting an array of trans-feminist and queer collaborators, in one way or another and in various capacities; they've spent a decade or so challenging the very mainstream *Rub* is marketed for, by plying the gendered tropes of pornography, the media industry, monogamous partnerships, etc. Listed in the music video's ending credits are *Rub* co-director A.L. Steiner—whose *Community Action Center* (2010), made in collaboration with A.K. Burns, is perhaps the most obvious reference point—MPA, and Narcissister. Most interestingly, Steiner, Burns, and MPA in particular are also simultaneously conceiving of worlds far away from our own—marginal, "wild" spaces counter to society-at-large.

Opposite, top - A.K. Burns, *A Smeary Spot* (still), 2015.  
Courtesy: the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts, New York

Opposite, bottom - A.K. Burns, "A Smeary Spot" installation view at Participant Inc., New York, 2015. Courtesy: the artist; Participant Inc., New York; Callicoon Fine Arts, New York. Photo: Chris Austin

"Wild," used here as a truncation of "wildness," is not a *Girls Gone Wild* generalization, but—as theorized most recently by a trio of New York University academics—"a space/name/critical term for what lies beyond current logics of rule," as Jack Halberstam sums it up handily.<sup>2</sup> We have to thank a range of poststructuralist and postcolonial thinkers, from Michel Foucault to bell hooks to Homi K. Bhabha, for various attempts at theorizing a marginal wildness, a real and imaginary "third space" (or heterotopia, as Michel Foucault initially sketched it out). For Bhabha, it's a space that "displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives...the process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation."<sup>3</sup> **For these artists then, how to visualize these "other" spaces is a way to promote and propagate a sense of "not quite fitting"—or better, not wanting to fit—at a time when, ironically, they're fitting more than ever before, with gay marriage and transgender rights ever more visible and accepted;** and with films like *Carol* (2015) representing the historical plight of lesbians, in particular (who escaped the societal strictures of New York by driving out "west, wherever my car will take me" as Cate Blanchett exclaims). This is all a double-edged sword, if anything. Queer legitimization is so often made in heteronormative terms, and under a heteronormative rubric. Maintaining an unclassifiable, open-ended alternative that's neither homo nor hetero, gay nor straight, normative nor alternative—in a sense, forever *neither-nor*—has never been more urgent, and doubly, calls into question the very binary logic of a margin, assuming we *actually* want to do away with it.

At question is how this kind of marginalism is conceived spatially. With *Community Action Center*, space is perhaps less of a key concern than in some of the other works I'll be considering, namely, Steiner and Robbinschild's *C.L.U.E., Part I* (2007), Burns' *A Smeary Spot* (2015), and MPA's newest body of work, which imagines Mars as a potential third space. That said, *Community Action Center* shares with all a sense of the natural landscape as liberating force—here utilized to envision sex and sexuality as something open and amorphous; it's a political act in which tropes of pornography are campily *détourned* for queer use by a community of artists, writers, and thinkers who—quite often—are performing sex acts on each other (or themselves) as a way to enact a new kind of pornography, one free of a misogynistic gaze. Pseudonyms are used by all involved to allow other kinds of representations to unfold—ones outside their "proper" artistic practices. The video's opening shot features friends playfully wrestling and painting (or wrestling in paint) in an art studio, while a voiceover drolly intones about a three foot-long, ten-inch-wide cock; or a stereotypically older bull dyke, Max Hardhand, clad in leather, "taking advantage" of a young woman in a railroad yard, Stargëizer, who clearly likes the attention. In a

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later pairing, Stargéizer's rather wet orgasm segues directly into a scene of another woman whose "porn name" is Jugzz, washing her car in the suburbs—emphasis on wet. Slow motion shots dwell on her pausing to dramatically douse herself with streams of water, as if channeling a preposterously underdressed Jessica Simpson in that terrible country music video where she lathers a confederate flag-laden car. The woman swings her wet hair to and fro, rubs her sudsy sponge on her crotch, and shoots the spray between her legs, all accompanied by an orgiastic dance track. Canned tropes of female sexuality are thus hilariously dressed down.

In this context, maybe the most symbolically rich character in *Community Action Center* is Pony, a nymph-like radikal fairy figure who sexually channels the woods she inhabits, and is perhaps the character most associated with an otherworldly "wildness." She seems to rediscover her vagina several times over during the film's roughly 1 hour and 8 minute running time—*Oh! What's that between my legs? Hmm, what should I do with it?* In one instance, she finds a large, mystical gem in the woods, and uses it not as a makeshift dildo, but as a makeshift...something. She closes the film—again, at sunset—holding up some sort of winged symbol, standing in a meadow. What is it about nature, and not the city, that these filmmakers find so appealing? For Steiner, she looks for "open expanses, places beyond place, a feeling of freedom, a toggling of boundaries—between 'wildness' or more precisely, visual space—wherein terms such as natural, unnatural and human-made can create a montage of meanings, a queered gateway."<sup>4</sup>

She's referring specifically to *C.L.U.E.*, which was shot among monumental rock formations in the Southern California desert and in the redwood forests of Northern California, where these natural forces become visual, almost graphic signifiers of wildness—not to mention the act of disrobing itself. The two dancers of robbinschids, Layla Childs and Sonya Robbins, wear matching bright, monotone outfits, and move around the landscape in a kind of coordinated, forward and reverse choreography that's a bit Yvonne Rainer-like: de-skilled, intentionally clunky even. They dance on boulders, lay on an open road and roll about on the pavement, and wrestle in front of a felled redwood tree's massive root system, which becomes an almost abstracted, monochrome backdrop. Later it becomes the functional coat hanger for their outfits, which hang on its roots as they crawl naked on the ground around it. Whether it's the redwood tree, the wide-angle view of a single lane highway receding into the horizon's flatness, or the railroad tracks they dance around, these settings become projections of the "open road," limitless land, and the mythologized American west, with all of its fucked up histories of manifest destiny, Native American exploitation, and the very idea of ownership, or the lack thereof.

Burns' *A Smeary Spot* directly addresses these very complicated histories, as well as how these kinds of landscapes visually read as wild and are *actually* rather wild. Titled after a description of the sun by science fiction writer Joanna Russ,<sup>5</sup> the film—among other things—follows dancers nív Acosta and Jen Rosenblit as they travel through the Utah desert, camping, swimming, essentially settling the terrain. Burns' attraction towards the film's Utah settings ultimately came down to a more general *look* of otherworldliness<sup>6</sup> than any other conceptual reason, though who's to say that, in this instance at least, the *look* of a place and the place itself are mutually exclusive? While aesthetics may have been a deciding factor in where to situate the work, the place itself and the complicated politics of public land and its historical exclusions became an important backdrop for the film. Loosely regulated—and literally a little lawless—the land is not privately owned. It's the leftovers from when western expansion carved up the landscape into national parks, Native American reservations, and private homesteads. As Burns has noted, about 70% of Utah's land is held as "public" land, in which anyone can legally reside as long as they don't stay in any one place longer than 14 days, and don't leave a mess. In theory, you could live there rent-free,<sup>7</sup> but implicit in this public function is how the term "public" was essentially at the service of an authoritarian

government, forcefully decreeing who gets what, with resources not essentially its own—a kind of butchering and "fencing off" of the commons that John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau considered the inevitability of progress.<sup>8</sup>

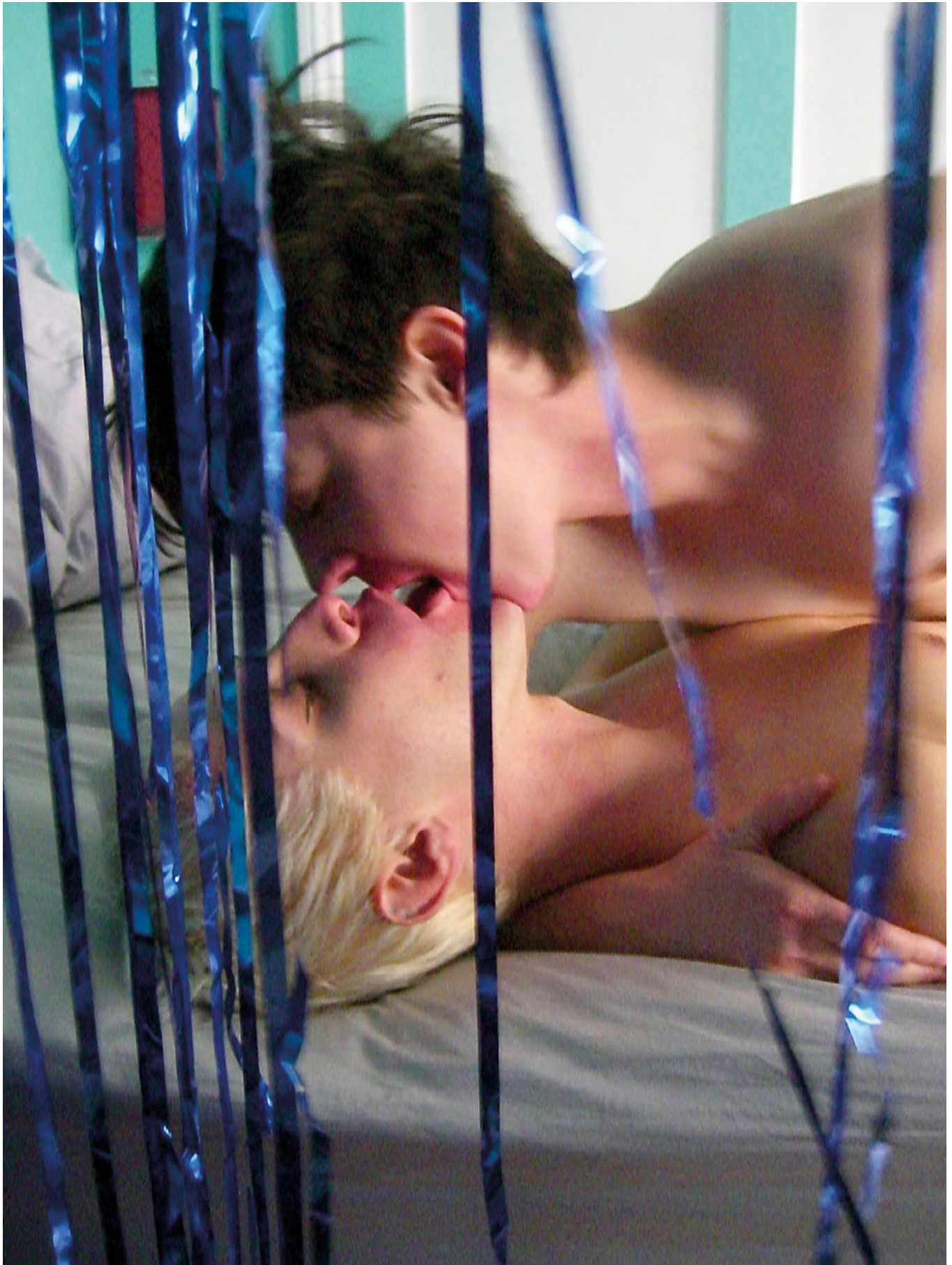
The landscape's foreignness came to represent Burns' notion of "negative space," which isn't very far off, actually, from the concept of a third, wild space, where encounters are staged "between the many who remain many, and become a new entity in their multiplicity," as José Esteban Muñoz conceived it.<sup>9</sup> As Burns notes:

"Negative space, as a formal term, is generally understood as the between, under, inside and around space, the atmosphere, the unseen matter. Positive space is the subject/object, the thing around which we orient our understanding of what is (and thereby what isn't). This sets up a rather boring binary dynamic of absence and shapelessness (negative) vs. occupation and definable shapes (positive). What's compelling to me about negative space is not that it is an inversion of positive space but that it has its own agency, that it is unfixed, dynamic, changeable and ultimately free: an open set of possibilities."<sup>10</sup>

Here again, **the desert becomes the de facto placeholder for a wild land, free of the "mainland's" overriding power structures—whether they're neoliberal, patriarchal, sexual, what-have-you.** But as *A Smeary Spot* illustrates, there's a danger intrinsic to this othering of space. At one point in the film, Acosta performs a kind of duet with a white flag-like fabric, high on a promontory. Flapping ferociously in the wind, it sticks to his body—forming to its contours and shaping it. The scene functions as a dramatic signaling of queer presence; or rather, the presence of queers, *queers-as-colonizers*, which brings to a head the potential pitfalls of forging marginal spaces set apart from the hegemonies of the regular world. Put simply, they could constitute new kinds of hegemonies, reinforcing a binary separation they were tasked to pry apart. As Halberstam notes, riffing off of Walter Benjamin, "going wild might well propel us into another realm of thought, action, being, and knowing, but could also just as easily result in the reinstatement of an order of rationality that depends completely on the queer, the brown, and the marginal to play their role as mad, bad, and unruly."<sup>11</sup>

MPA, for her part, seems to be washing her hands of this whole Earth thing entirely, setting her eyes on Mars. With all the recent news of water on the planet's surface—and the potential for life to already thrive there—her exhibition at the Contemporary Art Museum Houston, "THE INTERVIEW: Red, Red Future," poses the tantalizing question of not *if* we will colonize the planet, but *how*. And more to the point: how we can colonize *differently*—an implicit acknowledgment that we, on Earth, have never been able to do so ethically. Of course, the whole gambit is speculative, but it's the speculation that takes the whole thing to the next level—so to speak—to the next kind of space. Perhaps the most interesting work on view is *The Interview* (2016), which doesn't provide much to look at at all. Rather, it's a direct hotline to the artist, who invites museum visitors on the phone to talk with her about the planet, and how they imagine its future—their future, ultimately—to look like. As MPA puts it, **"In this looking 'there' (Mars) that is a looking 'here' (Earth), I would like to propose that colonization hijacked time into a linearity that distracts and ridicules the experience of dimensional time. Heterotopia exists, I assume, in this colonized frame, and participates in the faith that human evolution is always advancing from a primitive past. I would like to re-state that our past is not primitive, and that our time is collective, dimensional, and multi-versed."**<sup>12</sup> This is all well and good, but ultimately doesn't guarantee that if we did—hypothetically—colonize Mars, it would look any different than here.





A.K. Burns and A.L. Steiner, *Community Action Center* (still), 2010. Courtesy: the artists; Callicoon Fine Arts, New York; Deborah Schamoni Galerie, Munich; Koenig & Clinton, New York. Photo: A.L. Steiner





A.L. Steiner and robbinschilds, *C.L.U.E., Part I (color location ultimate experience)* (stills), 2007. Courtesy: the artists; Deborah Schamoni Galerie, Munich; Koenig & Clinton, New York. Photo: A.L. Steiner



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MPA, *The Interview*, 2016, performance documentation, "THE INTERVIEW: Red, Red Future" installation views at Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2016. Courtesy: the artist and Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. Photo: Max Fields



From left to right - MPA, *The Interview*, 2015; *Red Frame*, 2014; *Mars*, 2014-2015. "THE INTERVIEW: Red, Red Future" installation view at Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2016. Courtesy: the artist and Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. Photo: Max Fields





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This is all presupposing, of course, that we should be trying to deconstruct the center-margin dialectic at all; and not, instead, “being mad, bad, and unruly,” happily *margining* away in the constant tension of action and reaction, mainstream and counter-culture—critique, really—that gives us all, ultimately, a sense of queer purpose. Maybe being dialectical is *a-okay*, and that wildness provides something to—returning to Peaches—rub up against, especially when it’s so quickly co-opted in a political climate where good taste and political correctness make sex, sexuality, and our bodies increasingly normalized, not liberated. In a world of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and continually formulaic RomComs, maybe there’s something to be said for playing the part of the other—and liking it—especially when the alternative is no alternative at all.

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Da qualche parte nel deserto del sudovest americano, compare ai nostri occhi un’*enorme* vagina. Non appartiene a un essere umano – in quel caso non sarebbe altro che una comunissima vagina – bensì è incastonata nella pietra, monumentale, come una specie di dolmen o monolito. Un clan di lesbiche preistoriche, rannicchiate – casualmente – nude, sotto un masso lì vicino, è in sua adorazione. Potrebbe sembrare una memoria di qualche antica e dimenticata civilizzazione femminista – una colonia desertica tutta al femminile stile *Mad Max: Fury Road* – e invece è l’apertura del video *Rub* di Peaches, versione *uncensored*, del 2015. I genitali spirituali, epici di Peaches concedono alle coraggiose pellegrine il magico potere di diventare “selvagge”. Ovvero di salire a bordo di un malconcio pulmino acchiappa-femmine – con tanto di talismano a forma di vagina appeso allo specchietto retrovisore – che trasporta le intrepide in un magazzino segreto, con una enorme vasca da bagno piena di donne nude che si fanno vendicatamente qualsiasi cosa. *The Teaches of Peaches* (dal titolo del suo album del 2000), i suoi insegnamenti, sembrano gli stessi di sempre: “Fuck the pain away”, come dice la canzone. Basta paure, goditela.

Dopo la grande orgia, le baccanti tornano all’accompagnamento nel deserto – ancora nude, ovviamente – e suonano la chitarra sulla sabbia, circondate dai cactus. Si ingaggiano in rituali sciamanici notturni, pisciano a coppie, e si dedicano al sesso tutte insieme. L’intero allestimento è talmente eccessivo e ridicolo che Peaches ride, apparentemente fuori copione, mentre una donna transgender la schiaffeggia col pene sul viso (mentre le parole della canzone dicono: “Ora non posso parlare, ho in bocca il cazzo di questa bambola”). *Rub* si chiude con una scena particolarmente liberatoria, in slow motion: una donna al tramonto, cavalcando a bisdosso, viene in direzione delle telecamere, nuda, con i capelli che

ondeggiano vistosamente al vento mentre alle sue spalle le colline si tingono di arancione. È una visione del Vecchio West, adomesticato da una donna. Un’immagine indelebile, che indica la riappropriazione in chiave queer di un paesaggio simbolicamente dominato al maschile. Il deserto viene riadattato a spazio per la differenza, in una ricerca interamente aperta.

Tuttavia, non senza una certa ironia, il video segnala anche una relativa tendenza a farsi mainstream da parte dell’underground queer. Relativa, nel senso che per alcuni non è mainstream, mentre per altri è un esempio di collaborazione fra una personalità nota e una serie di collaboratrici queer e transfemministe, coinvolte in un modo o nell’altro e con diverse mansioni, ingaggiate in una sfida più che decennale nei confronti del mondo molto mainstream al quale *Rub* si rivolge, invadendo le figure retoriche genderizzate della pornografia, dell’industria dei media, delle relazioni monogame eccetera. Di queste collaborazioni, come leggiamo nei crediti di coda di *Rub*, compaiono anche la co-regista A.L. Steiner (il cui *Community Action Center* del 2010, realizzato in collaborazione con A.K. Burns, è forse il punto di riferimento più evidente), MPA e Narcissister. L’aspetto più interessante che accomuna Steiner, Burns e MPA è l’idea di mondi lontani dal nostro, di spazi marginali, “selvaggi” (in inglese “wild”), contrapposti all’idea generale di società.

Il concetto di “wild” indica uno stato di selvatichezza, in questo caso; non ha alcuna valenza di richiamo alle *Girls Gone Wild* e al porno, bensì – come teorizzato di recente da un trio di accademici newyorchesi – rappresenta “uno spazio/nome/termine critico per ciò che si nasconde dietro le attuali logiche normatrici”, secondo la sintesi di Jack Halberstam.<sup>1</sup> Dobbiamo ringraziare una serie di pensatori post-strutturalisti e postcoloniali, da Michel Foucault a bell hooks fino ad arrivare a Homi K. Bhabha, per i loro tentativi di teorizzare una sorta di stato selvatico marginale, un “terzo spazio” reale e immaginario (o eterotopia come inizialmente chiamato da Foucault). Per Bhabha, si tratta di uno spazio che “disloca le storie che lo costituiscono, e costruisce nuove strutture di autorità, nuove iniziative politiche... il processo di ibridazione culturale dà vita a qualcosa di diverso, di nuovo e irrisolvibile, una nuova area di negoziazione del significato e della rappresentazione.”<sup>2</sup>

- 1 I just want to thank Joshua Lubin-Levy for directing me to relevant texts about “wildness” as a critical lens.
- 2 Jack Halberstam, “Wildness, Loss, Death,” in *Social Text* 121 (Winter 2014), p.138.
- 3 Homi K. Bhabha, “The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha,” in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), p.211.
- 4 As told to the author in an email on February 28, 2016.
- 5 Risa Puleo, “Transformations and Becomings: an Interview with AK Burns,” in *Art in America Online* (September 21, 2015). Accessed February 29, 2016. <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/interviews/becomings-and-transformations-an-interview-with-ak-burns/>.
- 6 As told to the author in conversation on February 23, 2016.
- 7 Lauren Cornell, “If the Future Were Now: an interview with AK Burns,” in *Mousse* (October-November 2015), p.68.
- 8 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), p.171.
- 9 Halberstam, p.141.
- 10 Cornell, p.67-68.
- 11 Halberstam, p.145.
- 12 As told to the author in an email on March 9, 2016.

Secondo queste artiste, dunque, la creazione visiva di spazi “altri” è un modo per promuovere e propagare un senso di “inadeguatezza” – o meglio detto, una *volontà di non adeguarsi*. Ironia della sorte, ciò avviene proprio nel momento in cui si stanno adeguando più che mai, ora che i matrimoni gay e i diritti transgender sono visibili e accettati, e che film come *Carol* (2015) rappresentano le difficoltà storiche vissute dalle lesbiche in particolare (che scappavano dalle gabbie sociali di New York al grido di “Verso ovest, ovunque mi porti la mia macchina” come fa a un certo punto Cate Blanchett). È un’arma a doppio taglio, se ce n’è una. La legittimazione queer spesso avviene in termini eteronormativi, passando per un’agenda eteronormativa. Affermare un’alternativa aperta, inclassificabile, che non sia né omo né etero, né conformista né anticonformista – che sia sempre *né né*, in qualche modo – non è mai stato tanto urgente come oggi, così come è urgente mettere in discussione la logica fortemente binaria della marginalità, posto che *davvero* ci se ne voglia disfare.

Le opere chiamano in causa il modo in cui questa specie di marginalismo viene concepito in relazione allo spazio. In *Community Action Center*, lo spazio non occupa una posizione centrale come in altri lavori, fra cui per esempio *C.L.U.E., Part I* (2007) di Steiner e Robbinschild, *A Smeary Spot* (2015) di Burns, e il nuovo corpus di lavori di MPA che identifica in Marte un nuovo potenziale terzo spazio. Ciò detto, *Community Action Center* condivide con questi ultimi una visione del paesaggio naturale come forza di liberazione, utilizzata in questo caso per rappresentare il sesso e la sessualità come aperte e amorfe; un atto politico, all’interno del quale i tropi della pornografia subiscono un ostentato *détournement* per essere utilizzati in chiave queer dalla comunità di artisti, scrittori e pensatori i quali – spesso – inscenano atti sessuali gli uni verso gli altri (o verso se stessi) come modo per inscenare un nuovo tipo di pornografia libero dallo sguardo misogino. Tutti i coinvolti usano pseudonimi per consentire rappresentazioni esterne alla loro pratica artistica consueta. La scena d’apertura rappresenta amici che fanno la lotta per gioco e dipingono (o fanno la lotta nella pittura) in uno studio d’arte, mentre una voce fuori campo declama le virtù del cazzo di V lungo 1 metro e largo 25 centimetri; o la classica, stereotipata lesbica, Max Hardhand vestita di pelle, che su una strada ferroviaria “approfitta” di



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**Proprio mentre l’underground queer diventa sempre più mainstream, un gruppo di artisti come A.L. Steiner, A.K. Burns e MPA esprimono la loro resistenza nei confronti di questa legittimazione che avviene in termini etero-normativi attraverso la proposta di un ritorno a un “terzo spazio” selvaggio – per usare le parole del teorico post-coloniale Homi K. Bhabha – presentando il proprio desiderio di non adeguarsi.**

Da qualche parte nel deserto del sudovest americano, compare ai nostri occhi un’*enorme* vagina. Non appartiene a un essere umano – in quel caso non sarebbe altro che una comunissima vagina – bensì è incastonata nella pietra, monumentale, come una specie di dolmen o monolito. Un clan di lesbiche preistoriche, rannicchiate – casualmente – nude, sotto un masso lì vicino, è in sua adorazione. Potrebbe sembrare una memoria di qualche antica e dimenticata civilizzazione femminista – una colonia desertica tutta al femminile stile *Mad Max: Fury Road* – e invece è l’apertura del video *Rub* di Peaches, versione *uncensored*, del 2015. I genitali spirituali, epici di Peaches concedono alle coraggiose pellegrine il magico potere di diventare “selvagge”. Ovvero di salire a bordo di un malconcio pulmino acchiappa-femmine – con tanto di talismano a forma di vagina appeso allo specchietto retrovisore – che trasporta le intrepide in un magazzino segreto, con una enorme vasca da bagno piena di donne nude che si fanno vendicatamente qualsiasi cosa. *The Teaches of Peaches* (dal titolo del suo album del 2000), i suoi insegnamenti, sembrano gli stessi di sempre: “Fuck the pain away”, come dice la canzone. Basta paure, goditela.

Dopo la grande orgia, le baccanti tornano all’accompagnamento nel deserto – ancora nude, ovviamente – e suonano la chitarra sulla sabbia, circondate dai cactus. Si ingaggiano in rituali sciamanici notturni, pisciano a coppie, e si dedicano al sesso tutte insieme. L’intero allestimento è talmente eccessivo e ridicolo che Peaches ride, apparentemente fuori copione, mentre una donna transgender la schiaffeggia col pene sul viso (mentre le parole della canzone dicono: “Ora non posso parlare, ho in bocca il cazzo di questa bambola”). *Rub* si chiude con una scena particolarmente liberatoria, in slow motion: una donna al tramonto, cavalcando a bisdosso, viene in direzione delle telecamere, nuda, con i capelli che

ondeggiano vistosamente al vento mentre alle sue spalle le colline si tingono di arancione. È una visione del Vecchio West, adomesticato da una donna. Un’immagine indelebile, che indica la riappropriazione in chiave queer di un paesaggio simbolicamente dominato al maschile. Il deserto viene riadattato a spazio per la differenza, in una ricerca interamente aperta.

Tuttavia, non senza una certa ironia, il video segnala anche una relativa tendenza a farsi mainstream da parte dell’underground queer. Relativa, nel senso che per alcuni non è mainstream, mentre per altri è un esempio di collaborazione fra una personalità nota e una serie di collaboratrici queer e transfemministe, coinvolte in un modo o nell’altro e con diverse mansioni, ingaggiate in una sfida più che decennale nei confronti del mondo molto mainstream al quale *Rub* si rivolge, invadendo le figure retoriche genderizzate della pornografia, dell’industria dei media, delle relazioni monogame eccetera. Di queste collaborazioni, come leggiamo nei crediti di coda di *Rub*, compaiono anche la co-regista A.L. Steiner (il cui *Community Action Center* del 2010, realizzato in collaborazione con A.K. Burns, è forse il punto di riferimento più evidente), MPA e Narcissister. L’aspetto più interessante che accomuna Steiner, Burns e MPA è l’idea di mondi lontani dal nostro, di spazi marginali, “selvaggi” (in inglese “wild”), contrapposti all’idea generale di società.

Il concetto di “wild” indica uno stato di selvatichezza, in questo caso; non ha alcuna valenza di richiamo alle *Girls Gone Wild* e al porno, bensì – come teorizzato di recente da un trio di accademici newyorchesi – rappresenta “uno spazio/nome/termine critico per ciò che si nasconde dietro le attuali logiche normatrici”, secondo la sintesi di Jack Halberstam.<sup>1</sup> Dobbiamo ringraziare una serie di pensatori post-strutturalisti e postcoloniali, da Michel Foucault a bell hooks fino ad arrivare a Homi K. Bhabha, per i loro tentativi di teorizzare una sorta di stato selvatico marginale, un “terzo spazio” reale e immaginario (o eterotopia come inizialmente chiamato da Foucault). Per Bhabha, si tratta di uno spazio che “disloca le storie che lo costituiscono, e costruisce nuove strutture di autorità, nuove iniziative politiche... il processo di ibridazione culturale dà vita a qualcosa di diverso, di nuovo e irrisolvibile, una nuova area di negoziazione del significato e della rappresentazione.”<sup>2</sup>

- 1 I just want to thank Joshua Lubin-Levy for directing me to relevant texts about “wildness” as a critical lens.
- 2 Jack Halberstam, “Wildness, Loss, Death,” in *Social Text* 121 (Winter 2014), p.138.
- 3 Homi K. Bhabha, “The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha,” in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), p.211.
- 4 As told to the author in an email on February 28, 2016.
- 5 Risa Puleo, “Transformations and Becomings: an Interview with AK Burns,” in *Art in America Online* (September 21, 2015). Accessed February 29, 2016. <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/interviews/becomings-and-transformations-an-interview-with-ak-burns/>.
- 6 As told to the author in conversation on February 23, 2016.
- 7 Lauren Cornell, “If the Future Were Now: an interview with AK Burns,” in *Mousse* (October-November 2015), p.68.
- 8 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), p.171.
- 9 Halberstam, p.141.
- 10 Cornell, p.67-68.
- 11 Halberstam, p.145.
- 12 As told to the author in an email on March 9, 2016.

Secondo queste artiste, dunque, la creazione visiva di spazi “altri” è un modo per promuovere e propagare un senso di “inadeguatezza” – o meglio detto, una *volontà di non adeguarsi*. Ironia della sorte, ciò avviene proprio nel momento in cui si stanno adeguando più che mai, ora che i matrimoni gay e i diritti transgender sono visibili e accettati, e che film come *Carol* (2015) rappresentano le difficoltà storiche vissute dalle lesbiche in particolare (che scappavano dalle gabbie sociali di New York al grido di “Verso ovest, ovunque mi porti la mia macchina” come fa a un certo punto Cate Blanchett). È un’arma a doppio taglio, se ce n’è una. La legittimazione queer spesso avviene in termini eteronormativi, passando per un’agenda eteronormativa. Affermare un’alternativa aperta, inclassificabile, che non sia né omo né etero, né conformista né anticonformista – che sia sempre *né né*, in qualche modo – non è mai stato tanto urgente come oggi, così come è urgente mettere in discussione la logica fortemente binaria della marginalità, posto che *davvero* ci se ne voglia disfare.

Le opere chiamano in causa il modo in cui questa specie di marginalismo viene concepito in relazione allo spazio. In *Community Action Center*, lo spazio non occupa una posizione centrale come in altri lavori, fra cui per esempio *C.L.U.E., Part I* (2007) di Steiner e Robbinschild, *A Smeary Spot* (2015) di Burns, e il nuovo corpus di lavori di MPA che identifica in Marte un nuovo potenziale terzo spazio. Ciò detto, *Community Action Center* condivide con questi ultimi una visione del paesaggio naturale come forza di liberazione, utilizzata in questo caso per rappresentare il sesso e la sessualità come aperte e amorfiche; un atto politico, all’interno del quale i tropi della pornografia subiscono un ostentato *détournement* per essere utilizzati in chiave queer dalla comunità di artisti, scrittori e pensatori i quali – spesso – inscenano atti sessuali gli uni verso gli altri (o verso se stessi) come modo per inscenare un nuovo tipo di pornografia libero dallo sguardo misogino. Tutti i coinvolti usano pseudonimi per consentire rappresentazioni esterne alla loro pratica artistica consueta. La scena d’apertura rappresenta amici che fanno la lotta per gioco e dipingono (o fanno la lotta nella pittura) in uno studio d’arte, mentre una voce fuori campo declama le virtù del cazzo di V lungo 1 metro e largo 25 centimetri; o la classica, stereotipata lesbica, Max Hardhand vestita di pelle, che su una strada ferroviaria “approfitta” di

una giovane donna, Stargëizer, la quale chiaramente gradisce le attenzioni. In un successivo accoppiamento, l'eiaculazione orgasmica di Stargëizer è seguita da una scena in cui un'altra donna, Jugzz, lava un'auto in periferia, con particolare enfasi sull'idea del bagnarsi. Le riprese in slow motion si fermano su di lei che si inzuppa teatralmente d'acqua, come a imitare l'assurdamente svestita Jessica Simpson in quel tremendo video country in cui insaponava un'auto con dipinta sul cofano la bandiera confederata. La donna fa oscillare i capelli bagnati avanti e dietro, si passa la spugna insaponata sull'inguine e fra le gambe le sgorga uno spruzzo d'acqua, il tutto accompagnato da una orgiastica colonna sonora dance. Tutti gli stereotipi preconfezionati sulla sessualità femminile vengono messi ironicamente in riga, uno dopo l'altro.

In questo contesto, il personaggio più ricco dal punto di vista simbolico in *Community Action Center* è, probabilmente, Pony la "radikal fairy" che incarna sessualmente i boschi in cui abita, ed è forse la figura più associata a un mistico "stato selvatico". Durante l'ora e 8 minuti di film, riscopre più e più volte la sua vagina – *Oh! Cos'ho qui fra le gambe? Hmm, e cosa dovrei farci?* –, ogni volta prendendosi la libertà di giocare con se stessa. In una scena, trova nei boschi un grande masso, spirituale, e non lo usa come un vibratore fai-da-te, ma come un fai-da-te...non si sa bene cosa. Sempre lei chiude il film – al tramonto, di nuovo – innalzando in un prato una specie di simbolo alato.

Che cosa trovano di tanto interessante nella natura, questi filmmaker, rispetto al paesaggio urbano? Per Steiner, la protagonista è in cerca di "distese aperte, luoghi oltre i luoghi, una sensazione di libertà, una disattivazione dei confini – all'interno dello "stato selvatico", o più precisamente, dello spazio visivo – laddove termini come naturale, innaturale e antropizzato possano creare un collage di significati, una via d'uscita in direzione queer."<sup>3</sup>

Steiner si riferisce specificamente a *C.L.U.E.*, girato fra le monumentali formazioni rocciose della California del sud e le foreste di sequoie della California del nord, dove le forze naturali diventano visive, espressioni quasi grafiche di stati selvatici, per non parlare dell'atto stesso dello spogliarsi. Le ballerine del duo robbinschilds, Layla Childs e Sonya Robbins, con indosso completi chiari e monotoni, si muovono attorno al paesaggio in una coreografia coordinata di movimenti in avanti e indietro, un po' in stile Yvonne Rainer: limitate nei movimenti, quasi goffe. Danzano sulle rocce, si sdraiano su una strada aperta, si rotolano per terra, lottano davanti alle immense radici di una sequoia caduta, trasformandola in uno sfondo monocromatico, quasi astratto. Che più tardi diventerà, invece, un funzionale appendiabiti, attorno al quale le due gironzolano nude, gattonando. Che si tratti della sequoia, del grandangolo di una strada statale che dirada lungo l'orizzonte piatto, o dei binari di una ferrovia, questi scenari diventano proiezioni della "strada aperta", della terra senza limiti: il West Americano, mitizzato con tutte le sue ormai abusate storie di destino manifesto, di sfruttamento dei nativi e di costruzione dell'idea di proprietà, o della mancanza di essa.

A *Smearly Spot* di Burns parla direttamente di queste storie intricate, di come questo tipo di paesaggi non soltanto appaiano selvaggi ma siano *effettivamente* selvaggi, in qualche modo. Così intitolata da una descrizione del sole della scrittrice sci-fi Joanna Russ,<sup>4</sup> il film segue – fra le altre cose – i ballerini Niv Acosta e Jen Rosenblit che, in viaggio attraverso il deserto dello Utah, si stabiliscono sul territorio fra accampamenti e nuotate. L'attrazione di Burns verso gli scenari dello Utah in cui è ambientato il film si trasforma poco alla volta più in

un'apparenza generalmente spiritualista<sup>5</sup> che in ragioni concettuali, anche se chi dice che, almeno in questo caso, l'apparenza di un luogo e il luogo stesso si escludano l'un l'altro? L'estetica potrà anche essere stata un fattore decisivo per scegliere il luogo in cui girare, ma il luogo stesso e le complicate politiche legate alla proprietà pubblica del territorio e le sue esclusioni storiche sono diventate una scenografia importante del film. Amministrato in modo disinvolto – letteralmente un po' sregolato – il territorio non è di proprietà privata. Sono i resti del periodo in cui l'espansione a Ovest faceva a pezzi il paesaggio per trasformarlo in parchi nazionali, riserve indiane e proprietà coloniali. Come fa notare Burns, circa il 70% del territorio dello Utah è considerato territorio "pubblico", e chiunque può risiedervi legalmente purché non rimanga nello stesso posto per più di 14 giorni e non lo lasci in condizioni disastrose. In teoria, si potrebbe vivere da queste parti liberi dalla schiavitù dell'affitto,<sup>6</sup> ma l'assunto implicito di questa funzione pubblica è che il termine "pubblico" vuol dire essenzialmente al servizio di un governo autoritario, che decreta con la forza che cosa debba andare a chi, decidendo su risorse che essenzialmente non gli appartengono – una sorta di macellazione e di picchettaggio dei beni comuni, che tanto John Locke quanto Jean-Jacques Rousseau consideravano elemento inevitabile del progresso.<sup>7</sup>

L'estraneità del paesaggio finisce per rappresentare la nozione di "spazio negativo" di Burns, non lontanissima, in verità, dal concetto di terzo spazio, selvaggio, in cui gli avventori si collocano "fra i tanti che rimangono tanti, e nella loro molteplicità divengono una nuova entità", secondo l'idea di José Esteban Muñoz.<sup>8</sup> Come ha scritto Burns:

"Per spazio negativo, in quanto termine formale, si intende generalmente lo spazio che sta in mezzo, sopra, sotto e intorno, l'atmosfera, la materia invisibile. Lo spazio positivo è il soggetto/oggetto che la nostra mente interpreta come ciò che è (e di conseguenza di ciò che non è). Si determina così una dinamica binaria piuttosto noiosa fatta di assenza e mancanza di forma (negativo) da una parte, e occupazione e forme definibili (positivo) dall'altra. Lo spazio negativo mi attrae non tanto come inversione dello spazio positivo ma perché possiede una propria potenzialità non fissa, ma dinamica, mutevole, in una parola libera: una gamma aperta di possibilità."<sup>9</sup>

Di nuovo, il deserto diviene *de facto* una variabile del territorio selvaggio, libero dalle strutture prevalenti di potere del "contenente", siano esse neoliberali, patriarcali, sessuali o quel che preferite. Ma come spiega *A Smearly Spot*, in questa alterità dello spazio c'è un pericolo intrinseco. A un certo punto del film, Acosta inscena una specie di duetto con un lenzuolo bianco, simile a una bandiera, in cima a un promontorio. Sventolando ferocemente il lenzuolo si attacca al suo corpo, tracciandone la sagoma e dandole forma. La scena funge da segnalazione teatralizzata della presenza queer; o piuttosto della presenza *delle* queer, delle *queer colone*, che fa venire al pettine il nodo delle insidie nascoste nella creazione di spazi marginali lontani dalle egemonie del mondo "normale". In poche parole, il pericolo che si costituiscono nuovi tipi di egemonie, rinforzando quella separazione binaria che ci si era impegnati a cancellare. Come nota Halberstam, parafrasando Walter Benjamin, "tornare selvaggi potrebbe spingerci in un nuovo regno del pensiero, dell'azione, dell'essere e della conoscenza, ma potrebbe anche facilmente divenire la restaurazione di un ordine razionale completamente dipendente da un ruolo folle, cattivo e insubordinato giocato dal queer, dal nero, dal marginale."<sup>10</sup>

MPA, da parte sua, di tutto ciò che riguarda la Terra sembra lavarsene completamente

le mani, e guarda invece dritto a Marte. Con le recenti notizie riguardanti la presenza d'acqua sulla superficie del Pianeta – dunque alla sua capacità potenziale di ospitare la vita – la sua esposizione al Contemporary Art Museum di Houston, "THE INTERVIEW: Red, Red Future," pone l'intrigante questione non del *se* dovremmo colonizzarlo, ma di *come*. E ancora più precisamente, di come possiamo colonizzarlo in modo *diverso*: un implicito riconoscimento del fatto che sulla Terra la colonizzazione non è avvenuta in modo etico. Ovviamente l'intero stratagemma è speculativo, ma è quel tipo di speculazione che porta il discorso a un altro livello o – se preferite il gioco di parole – su un altro pianeta. Forse il lavoro più interessante a riguardo è *The Interview* (2016), che non fornisce molto materiale visivo. È una sorta di filo diretto con l'artista, che invita i visitatori del museo a parlare al telefono con lei di come vedono il Pianeta rosso e come ne immaginano il futuro: il proprio futuro, in fin dei conti. Come dice MPA: "Guardando lì (Marte), guardiamo qui (Terra), mi piacerebbe proporre la colonizzazione che dirotta il tempo in una traiettoria che ridicolizzi la temporalità consueta. L'eterotopia esiste, credo, in questa cornice colonizzata, e partecipa all'idea per la quale l'evoluzione umana discende da un passato primitivo. Voglio asserire nuovamente il fatto che il nostro passato non è primitivo e che il nostro tempo è collettivo, dimensionale e multi-verso"<sup>11</sup>. Tutto bene, ma non ci garantisce che se - ipoteticamente - colonizzassimo Marte, il pianeta non finisca come quello che abitiamo oggi.

Tutto ciò presuppone, ovviamente, che dovremmo provare a decostruire la dialettica centro - margine, invece di "essere folli, cattivi e ribelli", felicemente *marginandoci* in una costante tensione di azione e reazione, di mainstream e controcultura – critica, davvero – che dia a tutti, infine, una specie di senso dello scopo queer. Forse essere dialettici è la scelta migliore, e forse lo stato selvaggio offre qualcosa – per tornare agli insegnamenti di Peaches – contro cui strofinarsi, specialmente quando viene rapidamente cooptato in un clima politico in cui il buon gusto e la correttezza politica rendono il sesso, la sessualità e i nostri corpi sempre più normalizzati, invece che liberati. In un mondo di *50 sfumature di grigio* e continue banali commedie romantiche, forse c'è ancora qualcosa da dire a impersonare con piacere la parte dell'altro; specialmente quando l'alternativa è nessuna alternativa.

- 1 Jack Halberstam, "Wildness, Loss, Death," in *Social Text* 121 (Inverno 2014), p. 138.
- 2 Homi K. Bhabha, "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha," in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, Londra, Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, p. 211.
- 3 Come detto a chi scrive in un'email del 28 febbraio 2016.
- 4 Risa Puleo, "Transformations and Becomings: an Interview with AK Burns," in *Art in America Online* (21 settembre 2015), consultato il 29 febbraio 2016. <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/interviews/becomings-and-transformations-an-interview-with-ak-burns/>.
- 5 Come detto a chi scrive in una conversazione il 23 febbraio 2016.
- 6 Lauren Cornell, "If the Future Were Now: an interview with AK Burns," in *Mousse*, ottobre-novembre 2015, p. 68.
- 7 Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2009, p. 171.
- 8 Halberstam, cit., p. 141.
- 9 Cornell, cit., p. 67-68.
- 10 Halberstam, cit., p. 145.
- 11 Come detto a chi scrive in un'email del 9 marzo 2016.

## ARTISTS AND IDENTITY



A. K. Burns, *A Smearly Spot*, 2015, four-channel video installation (channels 1–3: HD video, color, 53 minutes 13 seconds; channel 4: digital video, black-and-white, silent, 4 minutes), dimensions variable. Marcelo Gutierrez.

**IN A HYPERACCESSIBLE WORLD**, cultural margins can shift rapidly. Historically crucial social and safe spaces such as cruising spots and dyke bars have been reconfigured or dissolved entirely. A generation has emerged for which identity appears to be fluid and multiplex: Gender cyborgs now assert the singular *they*, bringing it into everyday use—resulting in the pronoun becoming the American Dialect Society’s 2015 word of the year. As the rate of change accelerates, is postidentity what we are building one *they* at a time?

*Post-*, defined as “after,” is a semantic device that champions newness at the expense of the word that it qualifies. This device, which structurally cannibalizes the word to which it is affixed, not only generates new rhetoric on which to capitalize but, with regard to “postidentity,” proposes that the burden of identity is resolved only when differences cease to exist. While declaring something as past may provide space for visionary alternatives to begin to take shape, what is the value of jettisoning identity when it is still visibly present? Those who latch on to the new at the expense of the old are often acting from a position of privilege—one that allows them to remain blind to stark inequities, the persistence of which is made all too clear by the recent anti-LGBT law in North Carolina, the fascist demands to erect a migrant obstacle course on the US-Mexico border, and the long-standing institutional abuses that brought about the Black Lives Matter protest movement.

Society includes what it can identify with. In the case of trans citizens, having their experiences articulated through the spectacle of popular culture offers visibility by demarcating their personhood. Yet while visibility may be a step toward shifting perceptions, it’s far from resolving the persistent issue of violence against difference. With the mass marketing of these branded bodies comes a new set of presumptions that I encounter regularly: that as gender nonconforming, I identify like I look (trans-male), or that I use the all-accommodating pronoun *they*. While the introduction of this third category challenges the fixity of the s/he binary every time *they* is uttered, it simultaneously introduces another frame to fit into. I’m personally not interested in being accommodated or accommodating. What feels politically critical for me is to situate myself next to *she*, but without an interest in participating in the performance of *her*. I may not look or even feel like *her*, but I am in conversation with *her* past and future.

Through self-segregation or separatism, identity-based movements use their prescribed “difference” as a uniting force, building coalitions based on shared experiences to cultivate the language and agency necessary to produce social change. While these are old tactics, they are still in use because identity is a superstructure that we can’t dismantle simply by declaring its “post”-ness. Certainly much changes: We have a black president and black principal ballerina as well as trans visibility in sitcoms and reality shows. But *new* is what capitalism feeds on, and such surges of assimilation are about as permanent as the run of a TV series. This kind of change starts to look a lot more like spinning in circles than moving forward. After we acknowledge that the Ouroboros of newness has nothing more to offer us, we might make space for unassimilated difference, a safe space for the strangers that we all are.

In somatic therapy, the patient can’t change or remove their trauma. They can only slowly reshape trauma-based patterns until those patterns evolve into a healthier set of behaviors. This process is slow, and it hinges on a plural, rather than a reformed or “cured,” understanding of oneself. If systemic change is not a revolution but a slow dance with the perpetrator, I wonder what other language we could create to acknowledge social change as a continuum—an ongoing process—as opposed to terminal cycles of inscription.

A. K. Burns is an artist based in Brooklyn, NY.



## MOUSSE

A. K. Burns  
Mousse Magazine  
October, 2015  
Lauren Cornell

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A.K. BURNS

66

# IF THE FUTURE

BY LAUREN CORNELL

**A.K. Burns** (b. 1975) lives and works in New York. Her practice encompasses sculpture, video, performance and collage. Her work often deals with representations of the body and, in her words, "economies of gender, labor, ecology and sexuality." Burns work has shown extensively in solo and group exhibitions in the U.S., Canada and Europe. In 2008, she co-founded the activist group W.A.G.E. (Working Artists for the Greater Economy); in 2009, with gallerist and publisher Sophie Mörner, she co-founded *Randy*, an arts magazine with a "trans-feminist and vag-centric" perspective; and in 2010, with A.L. Steiner, she debut *Community Action Center*, a "sociosexual" feature-length video inspired by feminist performance art and gay porn-liberation films of the 1970s. Burns new body of work titled *Negative Space* intends to reconsider the genre of science fiction. *A Smeary Spot* (2015), its first episode, is a four-channel video installation shot in both the desert of the American southwest and the black box theater of the Kitchen in New York. *A Smeary Spot* premieres at Participant Inc, NY in fall 2015.

A



# WERE

WHAT IS NEGATIVE SPACE? THE EXPRESSION USUALLY APPLIES TO THE AREA SURROUNDING THE SUBJECT, SOMETHING INDEFINITE, INVISIBLE MATTER. YET IT IS PRECISELY THIS SPACE THAT OFFERS THE GREATEST POTENTIAL, DYNAMISM, MUTABILITY, FREEDOM. A.K. BURNS PUTS NEGATIVE SPACE AT THE CENTER OF A NEW PROJECT, A VIDEO INSTALLATION FOR WHICH SHE DESCRIBES THE FIRST EPISODE, *A SMEARY SPOT*,

A *Touch Parade (crush)* (still), 2011.  
Courtesy: the artist and Callicoon  
Fine Arts, New York

B Top - *Touch Parade (pedal pump)*;  
bottom - *Touch Parade (wading)* (stills),  
2011. Courtesy: the artist and Callicoon  
Fine Arts, New York



B

di Lauren Cornell

**Cos'è uno spazio negativo? Generalmente quest'espressione indica l'area che circonda il soggetto, qualcosa d'indefinito, la materia invisibile. Eppure è proprio tale spazio a possedere in misura più ampia potenzialità, dinamismo, mutevolezza, libertà. A.K. Burns pone lo spazio negativo al centro del suo nuovo progetto, un'installazione video, di cui illustra il primo episodio, *A Smeary Spot*, a Lauren Cornell. Anche il corpo è uno spazio negativo, un *work in progress* disordinato e mutevole. Attraverso questa assimilazione fra spazio negativo e corpo, Burns crea una sorta di manifesto sulle possibilità dell'essere, sulle sue contraddizioni e sulla sua polivalenza.**

**LAUREN CORNELL** Hai iniziato a girare *A Smeary Spot* nel deserto dello Utah meridionale, che si riflette, immenso e vetusto, nei movimenti dei due danzatori, niv Acosta e Jen Rosenblit. Quando abbiamo parlato di questa esperienza, hai raccontato della profonda emozione che ti ha trasmesso il paesaggio. Ti sei soffermata in particolare sul fatto che il lago Powell, creato dalla costruzione di una diga che ha riempito un profondo canyon, determini un'assenza palpabile ed evocativa che si traduce in una metafora perfetta del progetto. Puoi raccontarci come hai definito la grande visione di *Negative Space*, che ha in *A Smeary Spot* il suo capitolo introduttivo?

TO LAUREN CORNELL. THE BODY, TOO, IS NEGATIVE SPACE, A DISORDERLY, MUTABLE WORK IN PROGRESS. THROUGH THIS COMPARISON

NOW

BETWEEN NEGATIVE SPACE AND THE BODY BURNS CREATES A SORT OF MANIFESTO ON THE POSSIBILITIES OF BEING, ITS CONTRADICTIONS AND POLYVALENCE.

**LAUREN CORNELL**

The first shoot for *A Smeary Spot* took place in the desert in southern Utah, with the desert's vastness and formidable age refracted through the movements of two dancers, niv Acosta and Jen Rosenblit. When we spoke about this shoot, you described being deeply moved by the landscape and mentioned, in particular, how Lake Powell, a dammed body of water that fills a deep canyon leaving a palpable and evocative absence, was an apt metaphor for the work. Can you talk about how you define the overarching concept of *Negative Space*, of which *A Smeary Spot* is an introduction?

**A.K. BURNS**

Negative space, as a formal term, is generally understood as the between, under, inside and around space, the atmosphere, the unseen matter. Positive space is the subject/object, the thing around which we orient our understanding of what is (and thereby what isn't). This sets up a rather boring binary dynamic of absence and shapelessness (negative) vs. occupation and definable shapes (positive). What's compelling to me about **negative space is not that it is an inversion of positive**

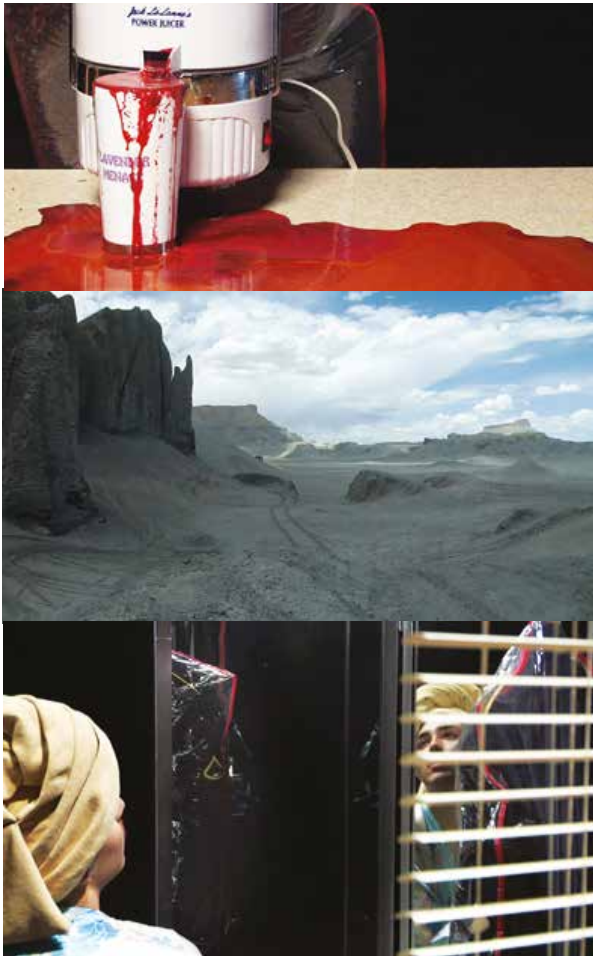
**A.K. BURNS** Per spazio negativo, in quanto termine formale, si intende generalmente lo spazio che sta in mezzo, sopra, sotto e intorno, l'atmosfera, la materia invisibile. Lo spazio positivo è il soggetto/oggetto che la nostra mente interpreta come ciò che è (e di conseguenza di ciò che non è). Si determina così una dinamica binaria piuttosto noiosa fatta di assenza e mancanza di forma (negativo) da una parte, e occupazione e forme definibili (positivo) dall'altra. Lo spazio negativo mi attrae non tanto come inversione dello spazio positivo ma perché possiede una propria potenzialità non fissa, ma dinamica, mutevole, in una parola *libera*: una gamma aperta di possibilità. Per me rappresenta un contesto che richiama per analogia la questione socio-politica dell'uso e dell'abuso del potere. Mi interessava ripensare il genere della fantascienza come pretesto per indagare il punto di incontro tra politica e fantasy. Il titolo, *A Smeary Spot*, è un riferimento al sole – citato in questo primo episodio – tratto da un brano sui viaggi nello spazio della scrittrice di fantascienza Joanna Russ.

**LC** Questo contesto evoca altri progetti ai quali hai lavorato in passato come *Community Action Center*, che celebrava il sesso *queer* come "non fisso... una gamma aperta di possibilità", o *Randy e W.A.G.E.*, due piattaforme concepite per facilitare lo sviluppo di iniziative artistiche multiple e divergenti. Il concetto di spazio negativo sembra a questo punto esemplificare un metodo che utilizzi da tempo.

**AKB** Proprio così, questo concetto è una sorta di metodologia che permea diversi aspetti della mia pratica e della mia vita.

**LC** Come si configura tutto ciò in *A Smeary Spot*?

**AKB** Quando mi sono trovata nel deserto, ho capito che le numerose analogie che emergevano tra quel sito e il concetto di spazio negativo in senso ampio ne facevano il paesaggio ideale nel quale e intorno al quale sviluppare questo progetto di quasi-fantascienza. Il fatto di trascorrere molto tempo in aree pubbliche ci ha reso immediatamente chiara l'analogia tra quel tipo di paesaggio non privatizzato e



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**space but that it has its own agency, that it is unfixed, dynamic, changeable and ultimately free: an open set of possibilities.** I see it as an analogous framework for all kinds of socio-political questions of use and abuse of power. I was drawn to rethinking the science-fiction genre as an excuse to work at the intersection of politics and fantasy. The title, *A Smeary Spot*, is a reference to the sun—that is quoted in this opening episode—from a passage about space travel by science fiction writer Joanna Russ.

**LC** This framework recalls previous works of yours like *Community Action Center*, which celebrated queer sex as “unfixed... an open set of possibilities,” or Randy and W.A.G.E., both platforms that create space for multiple and divergent artistic pursuits to unfold. It seems the concept of negative space encapsulates a long-running method of yours.

**AKB** Yes, this concept is a kind of methodology that permeates many aspects of my practice and life.

**LC** How does this get channeled into *A Smeary Spot*?

**AKB** Once I got to the desert, I realized that was the landscape in and around which I wanted to develop this quasi-science fiction work, because so many analogies emerged between the larger concept of negative space and that site. We ended up spending a lot of time on public lands, and it quickly became clear that this type of landscape that is non-pri-  
vatised, with little regulation, without rent and without a specific function, acts similarly to the loss of Glen Canyon and the dammed body of water now called Lake Powell, as another type of negative space. To explain briefly, public lands are the result of early American westward expansion when land was divided up into private homesteads, national parks and reservations. Everything left over (in Utah 70% of the state is public land) was handed over to the Bureau of Land Management. It is open for any “citizen” to be on as long as you follow the “leave no trace” ethic and move every 14 days. So you could ostensibly live out there for free, forever, if you so desired. But one also has to acknowledge that this potential utopia is, at its core, a tremendously fraught contradiction bound to our national history of violently stolen lands and defended borders.

scarsamente regolato, libero da vincoli immobiliari o funzioni specifiche, e la scomparsa del Glen Canyon con la comparsa, al suo posto, del lago Powell, dopo la creazione della diga, che diventa a sua volta un tipo di spazio negativo. Spiego brevemente che quelle aree sono pubbliche perché, ai tempi dall’espansione verso ovest, la terra fu suddivisa in fattorie private, parchi nazionali e riserve; tutto ciò che non rientrava in quella suddivisione (in Utah il 70% della superficie statale è pubblica) divenne di competenza del Bureau of Land Management. Qualunque “cittadino” può sostare sulle aree pubbliche a patto che rispetti l’etica del “non lasciare traccia” e si sposti ogni due settimane. Questo significa che in teoria si può vivere gratis, per sempre, in quei territori, se lo si desidera. Ma bisogna anche riconoscere che questa potenziale utopia è, di fatto, una contraddizione terribilmente esplosiva frutto della nostra storia nazionale di terre rubate con la forza e di confini difesi con altrettanta violenza.

**LC** Perché hai deciso di abbinare queste aree pubbliche con una sala teatrale, che è l’altra location in cui è stato girato il video?

**AKB** L’elaborazione del progetto mi ha portato a ricercare un altro sito da utilizzare come polo di conversazione con il deserto. Ho cominciato a lavorare nella sala teatrale perché visivamente crea un’illusione di spazio infinito. Il teatro è anche il sito muto del divenire continuo – il palcoscenico in attesa della performance successiva.

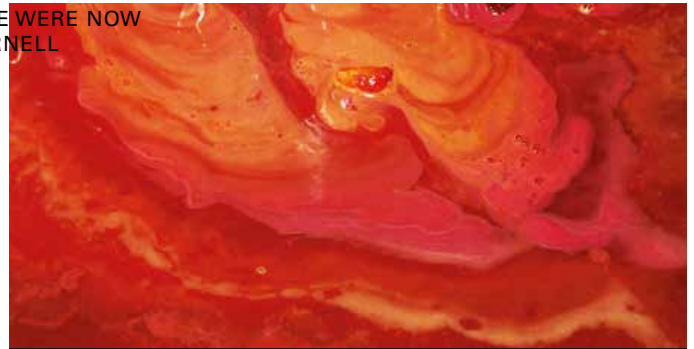
**LC** Nel deserto i danzatori appaiono spesso da lontano: sembrano puntini nel paesaggio, mentre in teatro li si vede da vicino, al centro di un allestimento meticoloso e colorato e circondati da oggetti di scena. Come mai questa diversità nella visione dei performer nei due contesti, il deserto e il teatro?

**AKB** Trovo interessante che tu faccia notare questo aspetto della scala. Ci ho pensato molto mentre mi trovavo nel deserto. Lì ti senti davvero minuscolo e alla mercé della natura che decide della tua sopravvivenza. In un posto come New York ti rendi conto che la città ha al massimo qualche secolo: nel deserto, il tempo assume una dimensione geologica nella quale la tua esistenza non è che un puntino. I cambiamenti di scala, sia letterali che metaforici, rappresentano una tattica che uso per rielaborare il modo in cui il valore è applicato alla relazione tra le cose. Anche i corpi, tutti i corpi, possono diventare spazi negativi; il corpo femminile, il corpo trans, il corpo malato, il corpo vecchio, il corpo nero. Cosa succede quando smettiamo di vedere il corpo (a livello medico, sociale, economico...) attraverso le scale normalmente utilizzate per misurarli in quanto territorio riservato a un uso, a una ristrutturazione e a una produzione di tipo specifico, determinata da genere, classe, razza, ecc.? Con *A Smeary Spot* io propongo un interrogativo: e se celebrassimo e difendessimo il corpo come un work in progress disordinato, in continua mutazione, mai uguale a sé stesso?

**LC** Mi sembra meglio che difendere il corpo come qualcosa a cui adattarsi secondo modelli rigidi e prestabiliti! Quindi, niv e Jen danzano nel deserto, dando vita a una sorta di reazione semi-spontanea al paesaggio. In teatro, le performance sono dettate da un copione, strettamente definite da un testo e da gesti studiati: Nayland Blake recita brani dello scrittore Georges Bataille; Jack Doroshov (alias Flawless Sabrina) recita brani della teorica femminista Karen Barad; mentre Grace Dunham recita brani dell’autrice di fantascienza Ursula K. Le Guin. In entrambi i casi, la tua regia sembra manifestarsi, in



IF THE FUTURE WERE NOW  
L. CORNELL



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C, D, E, F *A Smeary Spot* (stills), 2015.  
Courtesy: the artist; Participant Inc., New York; Callicoon Fine Arts,  
New York









MOUSSE 50  
A.K. BURNS

**LC** Why pair these public lands with a black box theater, the other location where the video was shot?

**AKB** As the work developed, I was looking for another site to bring into conversation with the desert. I started working in the black box theater because on film it gives the illusion of infinite space. The theater is also a mutable site that is constantly becoming—the next stage for the next performance.

**LC** In the desert, the dancers are often seen at a distance. They appear like flecks on the landscape, whereas in the theater the performers are seen in close-up, carefully arranged within colorful mises-en-scène and surrounded by props. Can you discuss your depiction of the performers in these two contexts, the desert and theater?

**AKB** It's interesting that you bring up scale. I was thinking about this a lot while in the desert. You feel impossibly small and at the mercy of nature for your survival. A place like New York City feels, at most, a few centuries old; in the desert, you're on geological time and your own lifetime is just a speck. Literal and metaphorical scale shifts are one tactic I use to rework how value is applied to the relationship between things. **And bodies are subject to being negative spaces as well; the female body, the trans body, the sick body, the old body, the black body.** What happens when we stop seeing the body (medically, socially, economically...) through the scales by which it is usually measured, as limited territory for specific use, restoration and output, determined by gender, class, race, etc.? In *A Smeary Spot* I pose a question: what if we were to celebrate and support the body as a messy, always changing, never the same work in progress?

**LC** That sounds better than supporting the body as something we fit into rigid preset shapes! So, niv and Jen dance in the desert in what seems like a semi-spontaneous response to the landscape. In the theater, the performances are scripted, defined more tightly by an assigned text and gesture: Nayland Blake recites writer Georges Bataille; Jack Doroshov (aka Flawless Sabrina) recites feminist theorist Karen Barad; and Grace Dunham recites science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin. Your direction, in both cases, seems to be part prompt and part improvisation. Can you describe how you direct one of these vignettes?



G



parte, come suggerimento e in parte come improvvisazione. Ci descrivi il modo in cui hai diretto una di queste scene?

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**AKB** In *A Smeary Spot*, i danzatori Jen e niv sono simboli di movimento e azione che attraversano il paesaggio accumulando materia, rifiuti e oggetti. In una scena sembrano impegnati in una specie di lenta danza di seduzione del paesaggio. Per quella scena, ho chiesto loro di misurare il paesaggio con i loro corpi; ciò che appare in video è la loro interpretazione del mio suggerimento. I loro personaggi fanno parte di un gruppo di performer che ho soprannominato "radicali liberi"; una definizione che uso sia per assimilare i performer alle molecole prive di elettroni, sia per rappresentare i loro corpi come attivisti nomadi o promotori del cambiamento. I radicali liberi innescano reazioni a catena che creano altri radicali liberi, e quindi si tratta di un gruppo di performer destinato ad aumentare e caratterizzato nello spazio teatrale per un abbigliamento costituito da maglietta, jeans e stivali neri, una sorta di uniforme da attivisti. Tutti i performer presenti in teatro ricevono suggerimenti aperti e improvvisativi che sono anche materialmente guidati dagli oggetti teatrali con i quali chiedo loro di interagire. A Grace, ad esempio, abbiamo dato un materassino e le abbiamo chiesto di sgonfiarlo. L'azione di far uscire l'aria con la forza era intenzionalmente abbinata alle parole di Karen Barad sul perché la materia è importante, ossia: "Se potere vuol dire possibilità... esistono possibilità particolari di agire in qualunque momento, e queste possibilità mutevoli implicano una responsabilità di intervenire... per contestare o ridefinire ciò che è importante e ciò a cui è impedito di esserlo."

**LC** La scultura è una parte importante della tua pratica. Nei tuoi video di qualche tempo fa, ad esempio *Touch Parade*, si manifesta come un'attenzione particolare agli oggetti di scena e alla struttura dell'allestimento (i cinque monitor sembrano altrettanti corpi in verticale). In *A Smeary Spot*, ogni oggetto – anche quelli sommersi da una densa galassia di altre cose – ha un significato. Che ruolo hanno gli oggetti di scena nel lavoro?

**AKB** Anche se nella mia pratica ho un approccio molto interdisciplinare, in fondo sono una scultrice, cioè percepisco e produco attraverso una sorta di sensibilità di matrice scultorea-materiale-fisica che casualmente mi ritrovo a esprimere attraverso il medium del video. Nello spazio del teatro, l'insieme degli oggetti di scena ha svolto un ruolo importantissimo: qualunque oggetto, utilizzato o nella pila dei rifiuti, ha un significato materiale preciso. Ad esempio, a Nayland Blake, che doveva interpretare il "lavoro ri/produttivo", abbiamo chiesto di attivare alcuni oggetti tra cui uno spremiagrumi. Ho scelto lo spremiagrumi perché è una macchina che trasforma la materia, i solidi in liquidi. E poi i materiali che produce, i fluidi del succo e gli scarti della polpa, sono visivamente colorati. Quello spremiagrumi l'avevo trovato in un negozio dell'usato: era privo sia del contenitore per la polpa che dell'elemento a immersione, quindi ho improvvisato usando una busta per abiti per catturare la polpa, che poi compare anche come contenitore della giacca militare di Chelsea Manning come accenno alle fuoriuscite [intese in questo caso come fughe di notizie, NdT] e ai corpi che fanno fuoriuscire qualcosa, e quindi non si uniformano. Per rimpiazzare l'elemento a immersione abbiamo utilizzato una scarpa sportiva Keds, in pratica un rovesciamento dell'idea di pulizia e di cultura del benessere associata agli spremiagrumi, e anche un cenno auto-referenziale al mio *Touch Parade*. Il costume di Nayland è un grembiule e un sospenorio, quindi un po' un abito con la





**AKB** In *A Smeary Spot*, Jen and niv, as dancers, are markers of movement and action, traversing the landscape accumulating matter, refuse and material goods. There is one scene where they appear to be engaged in a kind of slow dance seducing the landscape. For this scene, I asked them to measure the landscape with their bodies; what you see in the video is their interpretation of that prompt. Their characters are part of a group of performers that I call “free radicals.” I use that nomenclature both to propose the idea that these performers are molecules with missing electrons<sup>1</sup> and to represent bodies that are nomadic activists or those who initiate change. Because free radicals set off chain reactions that create more free radicals, this is an ever-growing group of performers that in the theater space all wear black t-shirts, jeans and boots as a kind of activist uniform. All the performers in the theater are given open and improvisational prompts that are also materially guided by the props I ask them to interact with. For example, Grace was handed an air mattress and asked to release the air from it. The forcing out, the release of confined air was very intentionally paired with the Karen Barad quote on why matter matters. To quote: “If agency is about possibilities [...] particular possibilities for acting exist at every moment, and these changing possibilities entail a responsibility to intervene [...] to contest or rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering.”

**LC** Sculpture is a significant part of your practice, and in previous video works like *Touch Parade* it has translated into a careful consideration of props and the structure of the installation (the five monitors appeared like freestanding bodies). In *A Smeary Spot*, each object—even if it is submerged in a dense galaxy of clutter—has significance. Can you talk about the role of props in the work?

**AKB** While my practice is very interdisciplinary, in my heart I’m a sculptor, or I perceive and make through a kind of sculptural-material-physical scale-focused sensibility, and I just happen to be using the medium of video to express this. Within the theater space, the props played a huge role, so there is a lot of material meaning behind every object you see used or in the refuse pile. For example, Nayland Blake, whose task was to be “re/productive labor,” was asked to activate his props, which included a juicer. I chose the juicer because it is a machine that transforms matter, solids into liquid. It also has a colorful visual output, both in the juice fluids and the pulp waste. I found that juicer in a thrift store and it was missing both the container for capturing the pulp and the plunger, so I improvised by using a garment bag to catch the pulp, which you see later also containing Chelsea Manning’s military jacket, a nod to leaks and leaky bodies, bodies that don’t conform. A Keds sneaker is used as the plunger, which is a kind of inversion on the idea of cleanliness and health culture that comes with juicers, and is a self-referential nod towards my work *Touch Parade*. Nayland’s outfit is an apron and jock strap, so it’s a bit like a dress with an open back, which is meant to give the effect of being a subordinate. It’s my take on a role that represents a conflation of domestic and industrial labor. He’s also covered in yellow dust, which was visually derived from stumbling onto a macro photo of a bee with pollen trapped in its hair,

schiena scoperta che ha lo scopo di comunicare l’immagine di un sottoposto. È il mio modo di vedere un ruolo che rappresenta un lavoro insieme domestico e industriale. E poi è ricoperto di polvere gialla, un’immagine che ho costruito dopo aver visto per caso l’ingrandimento di un’ape con il corpo ricoperto di polline: le api sono un simbolo classico del lavoro. Appena ho intuito che volevo un performer ricoperto di polvere gialla, ho capito che mi serviva un individuo molto peloso per far sì che la polvere gli restasse addosso. Conoscevo Nayland perché avevamo insegnato insieme per un anno nel programma ICP Bard e così ho pensato: ecco l’orso che stavo cercando per il mio progetto! E lui si è gentilmente prestato.

**LC** Ci sono altri riferimenti all’arte? Puoi citarne qualcuno?

**AKB** In *A Smeary Spot* ce ne sono diversi: a un certo punto si vede un’immagine della diga ricoperta da caramelle come quelle che usava Félix González-Torres che poi riempiono un elmetto militare che diventa una sorta di vassoio porta-caramelle; in un altro punto si vede l’artista Marcelo Gutierrez in posa su una pila di materassini che recita *The Screwball Asses* di Guy Hocquenghem adagiato come *l’Olympia* di Manet, un’immagine carica di significati legati alle economie sessuali.

**LC** In una descrizione del video, hai scritto che tutti i passaggi concorrono a “formare una sorta di manifesto sull’essere”. I riferimenti presenti — il femminismo, il marxismo, la fantascienza — contengono già una risposta alla mia domanda ma come descriveresti con parole tue il tipo di “essere” che emerge da questo processo?

**AKB** Sai che faccio fatica a descrivere questo tipo di essere. La risposta ovvia mi parrebbe “essere queer” ma poi non mi convince del tutto per via dello svuotamento di significato derivante dall’uso eccessivo che si tende a fare oggi del termine *queer*, che diventa spesso un riempitivo, come se *queer* avesse una sorta di definizione universale. E invece, se una definizione il termine *queer* ce l’ha, è proprio “ciò che non ha una definizione universale”. Quindi, se ti dico che è un manifesto sull’essere *queer*, cosa vuol dire? Essere *queer* implica anche una posizione contrapposta all’orientamento omosessuale come posizione privilegiata. Utilizzo alcuni brani di *The Screwball Asses* proprio perché mette in dubbio la posizione che vede l’omosessualità come sinonimo di marginalizzazione, come forma di ribellione implicitamente politica. Nell’epoca della politica dell’assimilazione gay, questo non è mai stato così evidentemente non rispondente al vero. Possiamo riconoscere la radice del termine, la narrativa storica e l’etimologia, ma non darei per scontato che gli omosessuali siano *queer*, così come non darei per scontato che il femminismo riguardi solo ed esclusivamente le donne. Evito di specificare il tipo di essere perché voglio che sia chi guarda a trarre le proprie personali conclusioni in merito alle *possibilità dell’essere* per le quali non propongo una soluzione unica o universale. Chiedo solo di riconoscere la differenza, le contraddizioni e il valore di un punto di vista plurivoco.

**LC** Quando dici che si tratta di un’opera di “fantascienza”, mi affascina il fatto che, invece di un futuro immaginato, tu descrivi, o amplifichi, le realtà attuali o le “possibilità dell’essere” nel nostro presente. La fantascienza si colloca spesso in un futuro — 1989, 2020 — anche se è chiaramente un futuro estrapolato dal presente. *A Smeary Spot* trasgredisce questa convenzione espandendo la nostra definizione del presente in modo che comprenda anche “il futuro”.



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bees being a kind of classic symbol of labor. Once I knew I wanted a performer covered in yellow dust, I needed someone who was very hirsute for the dust to stick. I had been teaching with Nayland at ICP Bard program over the past year and I thought, “that’s the *bear* I need for this job!” He generously obliged.

**LC** Can you point to some of the other references to art in the work?

**AKB** *A Smeary Spot* includes several: in one part, Félix González-Torres-style candies spill over the image of the dam and ultimately into a military helmet that acts as a candy dish; in another, artist Marcelo Gutierrez poses on a pile of air mattresses reciting Guy Hocquenghem’s *The Screwball Asses* posed as Manet’s *Olympia*, an image loaded with the issues of sexual economies.

**LC** In notes about the work you wrote that, together, the passages “weave into a loose manifesto on being.” Their references—feminism, Marxism, science fiction—imply an answer to my next question, but in your words, can you describe what kind of “being” emerges here?

**AKB** You know I’m hesitant to say what kind of being, because I think the obvious answer might be “queer being” and I’m a little skeptical of the contemporary overuse and thereby depletion of the term *queer*. It often gets used as a space filler, as if queer had some universal definition. If there is any definition for queer it might be “that which lacks a universal definition.” So if I tell you it’s a manifesto on queer being, what does that mean? Queer being also implies that there is an inverse authority of the homosexual orientation as the privileged position. Part of why I use excerpts from *The Screwball Asses* is because that work challenges the position that the homosexual is synonymous being marginalized, a form of rebellion and thereby inherently political. In the age of gay assimilation politics this has never been more obviously incorrect. We can acknowledge the root to the term, the historical narrative and etymology, but I would not take for granted that homos are queer any more than that feminism is strictly about and for women. **I don’t specify what kind of being because I want you to watch it and draw your own conclusions about possibilities of being of which I am not proposing a singular or universal solution, but rather an acknowledgement of difference, contradictions and the value of a polyvocal viewpoint.**

**LC** What fascinates me about you describing the work as “science fiction” is that instead of an imagined future, you are really depicting, or amplifying, current realities or “possibilities for being” in our present. Science fiction often relies on a future time—1989, 2020—even if that time is very clearly extrapolated from the present. *A Smeary Spot* transgresses this convention by expanding our definition of the present to possess “the future.”

**AKB** I think if we literally change the way we see, value and define the world in its present state, that will open new ways of acting and being that will thereby create a new future. It’s a bit utopic. But shit is dismal out there and what we really need right now is not another sci-fi embedded in all the possible outcomes of our failures as humans (wars, surveillance, capitalism, uber-technology, etc.) but an outlet to create another world, different from the one we have.

1 In scientific terms, free radicals are unstable molecules; when they find another stable molecule they “steal” the electron they need to be stable and thereby set off a chain reaction that creates other free radicals, which is how oxidation occurs, for example.

**AKB** Penso che cambiare letteralmente il nostro modo di vedere, valutare e definire il mondo nel suo stato attuale possa aprire nuovi modi di agire e di essere, che a loro volta creeranno un nuovo futuro. Ma le cose sono allo sfascio e quindi adesso non abbiamo bisogno di un’ennesima visione fantascientifica figlia di tutte le possibili conseguenze dei nostri fallimenti come esseri umani (guerre, sorveglianza, capitalismo, ipertecnologia, ecc.) ma di una via d’uscita per creare un mondo diverso che quello che abbiamo.

1. In termini scientifici, i radicali liberi sono molecole instabili. Quando incontrano una molecola stabile le “rubano” l’elettrone di cui hanno bisogno per stabilizzarsi: in questo modo innescano una reazione a catena che crea altri radicali liberi. Si tratta del processo che determina, ad esempio, l’ossidazione.

J

G *A Smeary Spot* (stills), 2015. Courtesy: the artist; Participant Inc., New York; Callicoon Fine Arts, New York

H *After the Sky Box*, 2015, “A Smeary Spot” installation view at Participant Inc., New York, 2015. Courtesy: the artist; Participant Inc., New York; Callicoon Fine Arts, New York. Photo: Chris Austin

I “A Smeary Spot” installation views at Participant Inc., New York, 2015. Courtesy: the artist; Participant Inc., New York; Callicoon Fine Arts, New York. Photo: Chris Austin

J *Touch Parade*, 2011, “Double or Nothing” installation view at TAG, The Hague, 2012. Courtesy: the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts, New York



# Los Angeles

MAGAZINE

A. K. Burns  
Los Angeles Magazine  
July, 2015  
Mark Sitko



## Queer Fantasy Examines Gay Art beyond “Victim Art”

The new exhibition at OHWOW Gallery focuses on artistic diversity within the gay art scene

July 8, 2015 | Mark Sitko

In a joyful coincidence, the group exhibition *Queer Fantasy* will open this Saturday, July 11, at the OHWOW Gallery in West Hollywood, two weeks after the Supreme Court decision to grant the right of marriage to the gay community in the United States. William J. Simmons, the curator of *Queer Fantasy*, did not foresee this development when he began collaborating with the OHWOW Gallery. His aim was to challenge a discourse around Queer Art which assumes a univocal gay motive exists and to question the belief that all queer artists want to participate in the advancement of this speculative agenda. The truth is gay artists in this country have been making work about everything under the sun for decades, and it would be shortsighted to only consider examples of “victim art” as representative of the whole.

Simmons explains the curatorial balance required when presenting queer artists that do not make art associated with gay issues. “It is always a push and pull. At once you have to acknowledge that the standard lineage and history of queer art tends to focus on the depiction of queer bodies, of queer sex, of themes dealing with AIDS. At the same time I don’t want anyone to think this show is an attempt to be post-AIDS or post-identity politics. I think it is an attempt to honor that history while looking with more nuance at the possibilities for queer expression.”

By selecting artists for *Queer Fantasy* of different ages and backgrounds, working in a range of media, Simmons is attempting to reformulate our artistic histories. He explains, “I think that most people think of queer art in terms of film and photography. In the 60’s and 70’s these forms of media were very important because the

work was able to be reproduced, disseminated, and used as activist material. It provided a community with diverse viewing material, but something I have been thinking a lot about lately is how queerness can be made manifest in other media.”

The ten artists involved in this exhibit, A.K. Burns Leidy Churchman, Jimmy DeSana, Celeste Dupuy-Spencer, Mariah Garnett, Jacolby Satterwhite, David Benjamin Sherry, Jack Smith, A.L. Steiner, and John Waters, serve as successful examples of Simmons’ interest in the expanding possibilities for queerness in artistic expression. Simmons has included photographers, filmmakers, and painters, as well as sculptors, and installation artists, “to show how queerness can also be fleshed out into three dimensions, how it can inhabit a space.”

This exhibit is aligned with the 30 year anniversary of West Hollywood’s establishment as an incorporated municipality. “Some of these artists, such as Jimmy DeSana, have never been shown in L.A., ever. At the same time there are some artists that are deeply rooted and inspired by L.A., such as A.L. Steiner and David Benjamin Sherry, who really derive a lot of their artistic identity from that particular context.”

“While it will be a place for people to celebrate this landmark Supreme Court decision, I hope that it will also prompt people to do more research and think further about what else needs to be done. The show runs a historical gamut from the ’60s to the present, so you can sort of see the things we have accomplished that Jack Smith could have never imagined. And with that I hope this is a space where the diversity of queer experience really comes to the fore, and provides the impetus for people to say, ‘hmm, what’s next?’”

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# METROPOLIS

A. K. Burns  
Metropolis magazine  
June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2012  
by Alexander Mayhew



A. K. Burns, *Touch Parade*, 2011, multi-channel HD video, loop, foto: Iete Jan van Rooij

## Double or Nothing TAG, Den Haag

*Double or Nothing* is een term uit de gokwereld, waarbij de verliezer zijn schuld verdubbelt wanneer hij een volgend spel wederom verliest of vereffent wanneer hij wint. Het is ook de zowel omineuze als gedurfde titel van de eerste tentoonstelling in TAG onder het nieuwe directeurschap van Suzanne Wallinga, die de voormalige ongrijpbaarheid van de instelling enigszins wil beteugelen. Wat niet betekent dat zij vanuit de vraag van het publiek zal redeneren; het gaat niet om het consumeren van beeldende kunst, maar om kennisontwikkeling en onderzoek. Met de tentoonstelling *Double or Nothing* wil zij artistieke methodes verkennen die de autoriteit van personen, instituten en objecten tegelijkertijd vergroten en ondermijnen. Bij de drie getoonde kunstenaars staan persoonlijke en materiële transformatie centraal.

Dat TAG meer wil zijn dan een presentatieruimte wordt direct duidelijk in de werken van Eileen Max-

son (1980), die voornamelijk bestaan uit kant en klaar foto- en filmmateriaal, zogeheten *stock footage*, dat zij op internet koopt. Stock footage is goedkoop en wordt daarom vaak ingezet om de productiekosten van een film of advertentie te drukken. De installaties en prints waarin Maxson dit materiaal heeft verwerkt, lijken eerder onderdeel van een *artistic research* project dan individuele kunstwerken. De gebruikte afbeeldingen vertonen op zichzelf weinig zeggingskracht en lijken tamelijk willekeurig gekozen. De manier waarop Maxson de beelden vervolgens inzet, levert nog steeds geen pakkende visuele verrassingen op. Het roept de vraag op wat deze stock footage eigenlijk communiceert en in hoeverre dit voor-gebakken materiaal überhaupt kan worden getransformeerd tot iets authentieks.

Het gevoel dat je als bezoeker naar een creatief proces of onderzoek kijkt geldt ook, zij het in mindere mate, voor de drie video's van Leidy Churchman (1979), die voortkomen uit zijn praktijk als schilder. De kunstenaar maakt picturale composities op de vloer van zijn atelier, waarbij alledaagse objec-

ten over de grond worden gesleept en met olie verf besmeurd. Takjes, zakjes en houten speelgoed slangen maken onderdeel uit van deze voortdurend veranderende, abstracte tableaus, die later weer als inspiratie dienen voor Churchmans schilderijen. Hoewel de video's wel degelijk als zelfstandige werken kunnen worden gezien, zouden ze evengoed als documentatie uit het persoonlijke archief van de kunstenaar afkomstig kunnen zijn. Ze hebben zowel iets dromerigs en tijdloos, als een bepaalde mate van verveeldheid en navelstaarderij, die de kunstenaar gedurende zijn scheppende proces heeft kunnen overvallen.

De kunstenaar wier werk nog het meeste lijkt aan te sluiten bij de wat diffuse thematiek van de tentoonstelling is A.K. Burns (1975). Haar video-installatie *Touch Parade* (2011) is gebaseerd op fetisjvideo's op internet die niet waren voorzien van een expliciete waarschuwing. Vijf van dit soort video's zijn door haar nagespeeld, variërend van het met witte gympen vertrappen van voedsel tot het over elkaar heen aantrekken van rubberen handschoenen. Dat zij als vrouw de hoofdrolspeler is in

de video's valt niet op. Haar gezicht is niet te zien en haar lichaam kan gemakkelijk doorgaan voor dat van een jongeman. De handelingen zijn tamelijk onschuldig en doordat de filmpjes ogen als YouTube filmpjes, associeer je ze niet direct met seksuele verlangens en behoeftes. Burns slaagt erin lichtheid en luchtigheid aan het onderwerp te geven. Zelfs een kind zou zonder problemen naar haar werk kunnen kijken. Het is bovendien intrigerend te bemerken dat je onbewust een voorkeur ontwikkelt voor een van de video's, terwijl je van tevoren geen gevoelens hoeft te hebben bij een bepaalde fetisj. De kracht van Burns' werk is dat je je daar helemaal niet schuldig over voelt. Het werk van Maxson en Churchman lijkt voornamelijk zichzelf te bevragen. Burns beschikt daarentegen over het altruïstische vermogen om de toeschouwer zich over zichzelf te laten verwonderen.

Alexander Mayhew  
freelance kunstcriticus, Den Haag

that particular social body and its respective sensual politics. The erotic sequences that make up the film were improvised by the performers, and the soundtrack similarly emerged from that community, with tracks from Los Angeles and Brooklyn bands like Light Asylum, Chicks on Speed, and MEN. In order to counteract the private, consumerist nature of contemporary pornographic consumption, the title will never be placed on the internet, shown in segments, or available for individual purchase (which includes sale as an artwork to a private collection). The title will only be rented for public screenings to educational institutions, community centers, or other social settings that promote queer social interaction and discourse, or sold to archives that allow the public to access their holdings. As Burns would later relate to me, though this makes the material somewhat trickier to be viewed by "some queer living in Wisconsin . . . anyone [ultimately] has access to it, they just have to organize."<sup>13</sup>

While the site of spectatorship for these two titles—viewing public in a crowded screening hall and a streaming video on a pornographic website—could not be more divergent, the queer desire that stirred the audience at the sold-out screening shares remarkable similarities to that which drove fourteen hundred viewers to engage an online pornographic short, ensuring the production of its feature counterpart. Both titles speak to the desire within their respective communities to see a more naturalistic depiction of contemporary life, to forgo fantasy for accurate self-representation. This has occurred individually, in titles such as

Sachs's autobiographic film, but even more invasively in *I Want Your Love* and *Community Action Center*, which transformed viewing platforms respective to each community into dynamic spaces for queer dialogue and moving image production.

**BRADFORD NORDEEN** is the creative director of *Dirty Looks*, a roaming platform for queer experimental film and video that has screened in venues such as the Kitchen, the Hammer Museum, White Columns, and SFMOMA, and the site-specific off-shoot series, *Dirty Looks: On Location*, a month of queer interventions in New York City spaces. His writing has appeared in *Art In America*, the *Huffington Post*, *Lambda Literary*, and *Little Joe* magazine, among others.

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THE  
NEW YORKERA. K. Burns  
The New Yorker  
March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2013

## GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

**A. K. BURNS**

Sculptures by the artist best known for “Community Action Center”—her brilliant film collaboration with A. L. Steiner, which staked a claim for gynocentric erotica—capitalize on tensions between humble and high art. Freestanding rectilinear pieces are clad in lowly Formica; a vase, broken and reassembled with foam and tape and coated with glitter, has a shabby-chic grace. A sly political subtext may be revealed in the ingenious installation of ink-jet prints on linen: wedged into grooves carved in the wall, each work is held in place by a penny, as if thumbing its nose at the notion that the value of art can be reduced to dollars and cents. Through April 15. (Callicoon, 124 Forsyth St. 212-219-0326.)



## ARTFORUM

A. K. Burns  
Artforum  
November, 2012  
by David Velasco

## Queer Eyes

DAVID VELASCO ON A. K. BURNS AND A. L. STEINER'S *COMMUNITY ACTION CENTER*

*The little cretin shepardess was now ruined for normal love and she ran amok among the other freaks, inflaming them.*  
—Jack Smith, "Normal Love," 1963

**SOME FEMININE PRODUCTS:** Makeup, paint, and brushes. Floggers and Boston creams. Joints. Bananas that bleed when stabbed. Bloody pinkies poked through magazine pages and punctured beer cans held in taut tighty-whiteys. Watermelons split by samurai swords. Adult babies sprung from clay wombs.

FEMININE PRODUCTS says the sign, hoisted atop a stretched canvas above a slew of art supplies. It is both the literal and the conceptual establishing shot for A. K. Burns and A. L. Steiner's sixty-nine-minute "socio-sexual video" *Community Action Center*, 2010, which premiered in June at Taxter & Spengemann's booth at Liste 15 in Basel. What follows is indeed a "feminine product," but it is also a feminist evacuation of the term. The sign is a joke, but it's also serious—funny because it's true—a wry attitudinal kick-start to the work's flaming sense and sensibility.

And what a sensation it is. *CAC*, as its cropped, punning title suggests, is a veritable graveyard of prostheses—phalli chopped, skewered, braided, cracked, peeled, crushed, punctured, axed, bitten off. Is it perverse to find all this sexy? To call *CAC* porn, as its authors sometimes do, is to admit that titillation is its purpose. But if it is a porno, it certainly isn't a conventional one. Except for a brief bathtub musing by poet Eileen Myles, and Justin Bond's reading of Jack Smith's prose poem "Normal Love" in the video's orgiastic prelude, there is no talking. Narrative, when there is any, is parodic. Lighting is mostly natural. "Literal sex was incidental to creative sexual activity," Burns and Steiner note, and to be sure, *CAC* excels at delivering sex sans teleology. The witchy "pizza boy" episode with Gloria Maxximo and Kasimir Solaj, to name one of the video's seventeen or so scenes, is as much *Un Chien Andalou* as it is *Nights in Black Leather*. Pony and Stargëizer's erotic embroidery climaxes with a large feather being sewn onto the latter's face. There are few explicit orgasms—two in the penultimate episode—and only a single pop shot, though it's a gushy one. (Jokes on the proverbial money shot, however, abound.) "From conception to final edit," the artists note, the video took three years to make. There is no straight "fucking."

There are many desires motivating the cameras, held by Burns and Steiner shooting simultaneously, except,



A. K. Burns and A. L. Steiner, *Community Action Center*, 2010, color video, 69 minutes. Production stills. From left: Rhys Ernst and Mai Khunt. Pony.

presumably, when one of the artists is working *within* the frame, whipping or vamping or being fisted. The video responds to a perceived hole in the history of womyn-centered porn—porn being, due to whatever series of unfortunate historical accidents, a genre still almost exclusively dominated by the prerogatives of male desire. *CAC* is a work of, by, and about womyn and queers (the video is dedicated to an apotheosis—"the queerest of the queers"), and as such, it is filled mostly with bodies that read as female, some bodies that read as male, and a few glam androgynous bodies that read ambiguously. *CAC* is also a singular achievement, a thrilling, generous representation of a community of friends, lovers, and intimates. It is critique and satire and the thing itself. It is the question and its answer.

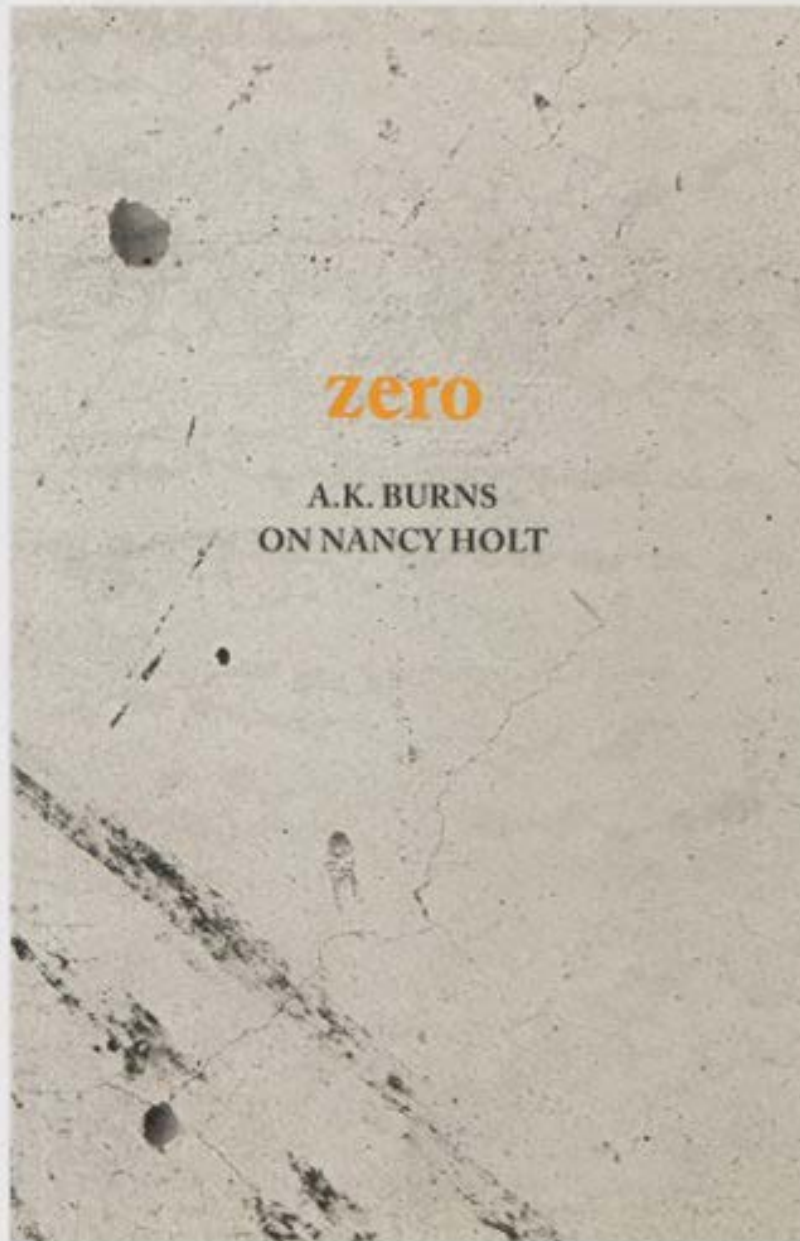
The video, recorded with various borrowed and rented cameras, often has a shrill sort of clarity, like the first gasp of cold air after a puff of Ventolin. If I could freeze one moment from *CAC*'s sexual "events," it would be Pony's ejaculation of an egg into a brook, the crushing of the egg's shell, and the subsequent visual discharge: shots of a split papaya, an octopus, steaming artichokes. (Metonymy lubricates the work's editorial impasses.) I also love the fraught butch-femme cruising scene between Max Hardhand and Stargëizer, Rhys Ernst and Mai Khunt's riveting make-out session, Juggz's T&A car wash.

These are just preferences, and, more exclusively, *my* preferences. But then, *preferences* are both what the video best describes and what it most fervently elicits, a form of taste that, on some base level, resists cultivation. (Preferences can be discovered or nourished or even managed, but they can't be improved.) Indeed,

to have a properly "critical" response to *CAC* would mean suspending one's sexual response, and this would only jettison the work's most valuable contributions and, in a way, engage the work in bad faith. This is not to insulate the video from analysis but simply to acknowledge that the most productive explorations of the work will likely be organized, like the community it represents, around visceral sympathies and stimulations, rejections and revulsions. My responses won't be yours or anyone else's. (Maybe somebody lucky else's.)

Could we call all this "sex which is not one"? Particularly in the queerest scenes, one is reminded of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's epiphanic bemusement that gender of object-choice turned out, in the twentieth century, to be the defining dimension of the term "sexual orientation." The video plunders queer theory, third-wave feminism, lesbian separatism, and gay-male Crisco Disco lubrications, offering not a reconciliation of their differences but rather a site for their promiscuous entanglements. It's porn with an agenda, and in a perfect world we'd play it in schools as a recruitment tool. (To complaints of cliquishness: The Big Bang was cliquish too.) "It is an action movie," the artists add, winkingly. And in this sense it is meant to turn you on, to spark contagious identifications and disidentifications that might extend the reach of this roving "center." Like Smith's "cretin shepardess" and his saints and cupids and angels inspired to gang-fuck throughout heaven, we're all ruined for normal love. Burns and Steiner find this conundrum cause for celebration. It is this optimistic engagement with the possibilities for sexual reorientation that makes *CAC* both art and something wilder. □

DAVID VELASCO IS EDITOR OF ARTFORUM.COM.



Publisher: Callicoon Fine Arts

City: New York, NY

Year: 2019

Pages: 32 p.

Dimensions: 21 x 15 cm.

Cover: Paperback

Stock ID: 115512 C