



## Exploring *Community Action Center*

**Art critic and Le Tigre cofounder Johanna Fateman revisits a video love letter to queer sex, politics, and music.**

Almost 15 years after A.K. Burns and A.L. Steiner stormed the cinema at MoMA for the premiere of their ribald “sociosexual video” *Community Action Center* (2010), the work remains a codex for a multigenerational constellation of artists who came together to explore the outer limits of gender, sexual liberation, and radical erotic aesthetics. Sexually explicit, but gleefully defying the conventions of normative pornography, this “unique contemporary womyn-centric composition” acts out “the erotics of a community where the personal is not only political, but sexual.” This fall, the siren call of *Community Action Center* issues a loud echo: the release of the soundtrack to the video, featuring a dazzling line-up of artists, from Mx Justin Vivian Bond, Chicks on Speed, Tri-State Area with AV Linton, and Nick Hallett with Sam Greenleaf Miller to Electrelane, Light Asylum, Effi Briest, NGUZUNGUZU, Lesbians on Ecstasy, MEN, Sergei Tcherepnin, Thee Majesty, Kinski, Chateau featuring K8 Hardy, and MOTHERLAND. In addition to a launch party for the soundtrack at The Kitchen on October 8 and a screening of the video at Light Industry on October 16, acclaimed writer and musician Johanna Fateman offers this tribute to celebrate a landmark in genderqueer culture.

**—Stuart Comer, The Lonti Ebers Chief Curator of Media and Performance**



L. Steiner, A.K. Burns. Production still from *Community Action Center*. 2010

The orgiastic, through-the-looking-glass melee that kicks off A.L. Steiner and A.K. Burns's 69-minute cult video *Community Action Center* is accompanied by voiceover—Justin Vivian Bond's performance of a text by *Flaming Creatures* filmmaker Jack Smith. Bond's wryly magisterial elocution of Smith's absurd pornographic fable *Normal Love* (1963) takes on a special significance, both as the first sound viewers hear, and as one of the very few incidences of speech in the almost dialogue-less sex odyssey. (Music is its primary aural component.) In this anarchic opening, an assortment of mostly lesbian, non-binary, or transmasculine New York artists from the directors' milieu (appearing here under pseudonyms) gather in a loft studio to use, among other things, paint, clay, fruit, and colored tape in a ribald, vegetarian revision of Carolee Schneemann's landmark group performance-art piece (and film) *Meat Joy* (1964).

Participants in various states of undress wrestle, slurp from halved watermelons, and get spanked. The phallic, scatological, and art-historical associations of a banana are mined in a collaborative mutilation. Two people eat a cream-filled doughnut off the body of another. Pee streams through tighty whities in a close-cropped shot. To conclude, as the performers fling themselves into a sprawling pile, Bond declaims the last lines of Smith's fantasy: "The freaks became overstimulated and soon we were in the middle of a gang fuck which spread all over the heavens. Saints and cupids dicked each other with their wands and the sky dripped come."



Throughout its 17 or so scenes of sex acts and erotic tableaux, CAC accumulates references and pays homage to feminist performance and video art as well as to avant-garde and experimental film history (while winking at vintage stereotypes or signifiers of lesbian culture and tropes of gay porn). But it is anchored, via the directors' song selections, in a particular moment, the first decade of the millennium, and connected to a particular, international scene of post-postpunk bands and underground electronic music producers—a loose network adjacent to, and overlapping with, the sliver of the queer art world we see on screen. From my time as a member of the band Le Tigre, or (less so) from my life as an art critic, I know just about everyone involved with this project, to some degree. Watching the film for the first time since its premiere, it is the music, not surprisingly, that is most bittersweetly transporting to a bygone era. I hear my former bandmate JD Samson's voice in Lauren Flax's remix of MEN's song "Simultaneously"; inclusions from Electrelane, Chicks on Speed, and Lesbians on Ecstasy—bands Le Tigre toured with—recall the nights I watched their sets from behind, peering at them from backstage.



The Community Action Center soundtrack on vinyl

Maybe in 2010 the soundtrack, however personally meaningful, did not seem to merit close analysis, culled as it was from what was close at hand, socially speaking, for Burns and Steiner—and from what was familiar to me. (CAC's music direction, the kind of exchange that it entailed, the requesting and the granting of rights, was another form of "community action," I imagine.) The way that the songs work as a layer of meaning, as a contextualizing ambience, is clearer to me now that more time has passed.



On this viewing, I was struck by a lyric from Light Asylum's neo-darkwave "Shallow Tears." The song, which endures as an underground classic for the soaring, melancholic beauty of its spare synth-and-drum machine instrumentation, and the remarkable range and timbre of singer Shannon Funchess's unornamented vocals, is cued during a transformative bondage-and-piercing vignette starring the actors Pony and Stargëizer. Funchess's desolate, abstract narrative includes the line, "On that day, I was searching for the one / And I found honey dripping from the sun." The image's serendipitous echo with CAC's opening performance (Bond reading *Normal Love*), namely its sky-dripping-come sign-off, made me realize something that perhaps should be obvious: While the soundtrack was assembled mostly from what was available (several compositions were made specifically for the project), it is still another text to contend with in this complex film, an element as intentional as scripted speech.



Production still from *Community Action Center*. 2010

With several of its scenes shot outdoors, in the woods, the film enters the fraught terrain of a historical feminist debate about the representation of women's bodies and nature—*Dyketatics*, Barbara Hammer's sun-dappled 1974 landmark of experimental-lesbian cinema, was charged with essentialism by some critics, for example. Music, I think, helps to establish CAC's relationship to such imagery. While the work's visual and narrative references are clearly critical and even parodic of 1970s cultural feminism, CAC manages also to reclaim anti-patriarchal, earth-based spirituality as territory for sexual and artistic exploration, after Hammer.





Production still from *Community Action Center*, 2010

The late artist's deep influence pulses throughout CAC and its liberationist ethos more generally, but in thinking specifically about the directors' use of sound, the barebones score of *Dyketactics*—its unexpected, alien-sounding accompaniment of meandering synth lines—comes to mind. Hammer had originally wanted to use two songs by Alix Dobkin's lesbian folk group Lavender Jane, but Dobkin, a separatist, refused to grant Hammer permission when she wouldn't promise to bar men from viewing the film.<sup>1</sup> So, Hammer's electronic composition, made by experimenting with a Moog synthesizer, is a solution to a problem, an element of unpremeditated DIY brilliance that heightens the short film's otherworldly quality and connects its two parts: a kaleidoscopic sequence depicting a group of nude women performing rituals on "witches' land" in California's Napa Valley, and a sex scene featuring the filmmaker and her lover. It's for the best, I think, that Dobkin's music wasn't used; it would have (further) tethered the idyllic, tender mood of Hammer's work to a strain of lesbian-feminism associated with anti-trans ideology. The watery oscillating tones leave it open.

In CAC, a notion of New Age-y women's (or wimmin's) Pagan-inspired spirituality is taken to a hilarious extreme, such as when a solo woodland ritual includes the performer masturbating with a hunk of raw amethyst (set to the forest-y instrumental composition "Amethyst Action" by Nick Hallet with Sam Greenleaf Miller); or when an art witch—styled after Joan Jonas's alter-ego Organic Honey crossed with an early-career Karen Finley, perhaps—fucks herself with a broomstick (accompanied by an original noise composition by artist Sergei Tcherepnin). Yet, none of it seems to be played (entirely) for laughs. Absurdism never devolves into slapstick; the music is sometimes wild, abrasive, unpolished, even funny, but it's never clownish. It's thoughtful, and thoughtfully placed.

MICHEL REIN PARIS/BRUSSELS



The Community Action Center soundtrack

It would be fruitful to go through, scene by scene, track by track, and consider the social, sexual, aesthetic-ideological dialogue between sound and image. The conversation buzzes through the film, as a complement or an irritant; it's not really—once you start paying attention—in the background. There's also the pleasure of listening to the songs, compiled, which I've done while writing.

The release of the *Community Action Center* soundtrack by Cruisin' Records is a brilliant gift to overstimulated freaks for the 15th birthday of Burns and Steiner's feat. A time capsule, a roller-coaster ride of a mixtape, a lens through which to view and understand an important film.

1. <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-barbara-hammer-17555> ↑

## Johanna Fateman

Musician and co-chief art  
critic at *CULTURED* magazine