Exhibition Guide

My Barbarian

October 1, 2022 – January 15, 2023
Over the last two decades, **My Barbarian** (Malik Gaines, Jade Gordon, and Alexandro Segade) has produced an expansive body of work that uses performance to theatricalize the social issues of our time. Motivated by a carnivalesque sensibility, the trio combines the spirit of radical theater with institutional critique to realize performances that are at once spectacular, timely, and incisive. Founded in the Los Angeles DIY club scene of the early aughts and influenced by local figures such as artist Vaginal Davis and the Chicano art collective ASCO, My Barbarian has played a central role in contributing to the experimental artistic community of Los Angeles.

Resisting any singular logic, My Barbarian’s performances are rife with references—ranging from classical mythology to occult ritual to pop culture. In the trio’s works, these disparate influences are presented through a queer lens that embraces the aesthetics of camp to satirize and scrutinize topics such as capitalist greed and other forms of systemic violence. Filtered through fantastical scenes, including squirrels singing in protest (*Squirrel Radio Action*, 2005) or two employees eating the head of their boss (*Night Epi$ode 3: Who’s For Dinner? / Watery Grave*, 2009), these works invoke allegory and irony to defamiliarize the familiar, drawing poignant parallels between the quotidian and the melodramatic.

Marking an important moment in the group’s homecoming to Los Angeles, this twenty-year survey traces the history of My Barbarian’s work through an immersive installation featuring a two-hour compilation of edited footage from their years of performing together live and for the camera, including footage not previously released. Alongside the video installation are numerous objects from the collective’s substantial archive—including sculptures, paintings, drawings, masks, costumes, and puppets—which are illuminated with and animated by choreographed lighting. Together, this dynamic, multi-media presentation demonstrates how My Barbarian performances reveal the theatricality of everyday life and occasional irrationality of society’s institutions, including art institutions. By doing so, they invite the viewer to reconsider the world around them, while simultaneously participating in the collective construction of a new reality.

*My Barbarian* is organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York and curated by Adrienne Edwards, Engell Speyer Family Curator and Director of Curatorial Affairs, with Mia Matthias, former Curatorial Assistant, Whitney Museum of American Art. The presentation at ICA LA is organized by Anne Ellegood, Good Works Executive Director, with Caroline Ellen Liou, Curatorial Assistant.

Lead funding for My Barbarian is provided by Karyn Kohl and Silas Dilworth. The exhibition is generously funded by Beth Rudin DeWoody, Tim Disney, Charles Gaines and Roxana Landaverde, Jill and Peter Kraus, Sarah and Joel McHale, and the Younes and Soraya Nazarian Family Foundation. Additional support is provided by The Audrey and Sydney Irmas Charitable Foundation and Carla Shen. Special thanks to VIelmetter Los Angeles.

ICA LA is supported by the Curator’s Council and Fieldwork Council.
STAGE LEFT

1  Medieval Drawings, 2006
   Selection from thirty-eight drawings
   Watercolor and marker on paper

2  In collaboration with Jeff Ono
   Standelabra 1 (4-Armed Bull Priestess), 2021
   Steel with black matte paint
   Includes: Breastplate (2005), Phallus 1 (2005), Phallus 2 (2005),
   Gourd 1 (2005), Gourd 2 (2005), Mask (Panjandrum) (2005),
   You Were Born Poor costume (2005-21), Mask (Bull God) (2005),
   and Mask (novitiate) (2005)

3  Günther (mask), 2014
   Synthetic resin and acrylic

4  Hanna (mask), 2014
   Synthetic resin and acrylic

5  Harry (mask), 2014
   Synthetic resin and acrylic

6  PoLAAT Mask #4 (Mandate to Participate), 2016
   Synthetic resin and acrylic

7  Three Figures at El Eco, 2010
   Watercolor, marker and acrylic on paper

8  Three Figures at the Espacio Escultórico, 2010
   Watercolor, marker, acrylic on paper

9  Masks of the World, TR.4065.3, 2015
   Synthetic resin, fiberglass, and acrylic

    Synthetic resin, fiberglass, cardboard, wood, acrylic,
    raffia, and synthetic hair

11 Masks of the World, M.73.113.7, 2015
    Terracotta, glue, mother of pearl, acrylic, and sand

    Synthetic resin, fiberglass, plaster, papier-mâché,
    and acrylic

13 Masks of the World, M.71.73.247, 2015
    Brass, acrylic, linen, and foam

14 Margit (doll), 2015
    Plastic, plaster, wire, and textiles
    Collection of Carla Shen; courtesy Vielmetter
    Los Angeles

15 Kurt (doll), 2015
    Plastic, plaster, wire, and textiles
    Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody; courtesy
    Vielmetter Los Angeles

16 Hedi (doll), 2015
    Plastic, plaster, wire, and textiles
    Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody; courtesy
    Vielmetter Los Angeles

17 My Barbarian, 2021
   Three-channel video, 120:00 minutes
STAGE RIGHT

17 My Barbarian, 2021
Three-channel video, 120:00 minutes

18 I Heart Mimesis, 2008
Linen, lace, and satin banner on wood dowel
Courtesy of the artists and Artist Pension Trust

19 Standelabra 2 (Dancing Pagan), 2021
Steel with black matte paint

20 Sorry 4 the Plague (Squirrel Radio Action), 2005
Permanent marker on foamboard

21 Death, 2014
Clay, felt, and acrylic

22 Heard-Hearted Barbara Allen, 2014
Clay, silk, thread, cardboard, sand, and acrylic

23 Sweet William Wake, 2014
Clay, felt, and acrylic

24 Lifeboat Monster, 2009
Papier-mâché and acrylic

25 Red Office Worker, 2009
Papier-mâché, acrylic, and wig hair

26 Standelabra 3 (3-Headed Oracle), 2021
Steel with black matte paint

27 Your Son Has Been Shot, 2013
Oil stick on craft paper

28 Factory (Suklinov Works), 2013
Oil stick on craft paper

29 Mimic 1, 2013
Papier-mâché and oil stick

30 Unemployed Man, 2013
Papier-mâché
Collection of Robert and Anne Conn; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles

31 Prison Guard, 2013
Papier-mâché
Collection of Robert and Anne Conn; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles

32 Home of the Teacher III, 2013
Oil stick on craft paper

All works collection of the artists and courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles unless otherwise noted
My Barbarian
Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles
October 1, 2022–January 15, 2023
ICA LA presentation organized by Anne Ellegood, Good Works Executive Director, with Caroline Ellen Liou, Curatorial Assistant

My Barbarian
Medieval Drawings, 2006
Selection from thirty-eight drawings
Watercolor and marker on paper
Each: 8 ½ x 11 in. (21.6 x 27.9 cm)
Collection of the artists; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles

My Barbarian
Burning Flag, 2005/2021
Textiles, sequins, acrylic
75 ½ x 41 in. (191.8 x 104.1 cm)
Collection of the artists; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles

My Barbarian
I Heart Mimesis, 2008
Linen, lace, and satin banner on wood dowel
86 ½ x 56 ½ in. (219.7 x 143.5 cm)
Courtesy of the artists and Artist Pension Trust

My Barbarian
PoLAAT Mask #4 (Mandate to Participate), 2016
Synthetic resin and acrylic
13 ½ x 10 ¾ x 5 ¼ in. (34.3 x 27.3 x 13.3 cm)
Collection of the artists; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles
My Barbarian
_Lifeboat Monster_, 2009
Papier-mâché and acrylic
11 x 9 x 7 in. (28 x 22.9 x 17.8 cm)
Collection of the artists; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles

My Barbarian
_Red Office Worker_, 2009
Papier-mâché, acrylic, and wig hair
17 x 13 x 4 in. (43.2 x 33 x 10.2 cm)
Collection of the artists; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles

My Barbarian
_Three Figures at the Espacio Escultórico_, 2010
Watercolor, marker, acrylic on paper
16 ½ x 23 1/8 in. (41.9 x 58.7 cm)
Collection of the artists; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles

My Barbarian
_Three Figures at El Eco_, 2010
Watercolor, marker and acrylic on paper
16 ½ x 23 1/8 in. (41.9 x 58.7 cm)
Collection of the artists; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles

My Barbarian
_Mimic I_, 2013
Papier-mâché and oil stick
11 ½ x 6 ½ x 5 in. (29.2 x 16.5 x 12.7 cm)
Collection of the artists; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles

My Barbarian
_Prison Guard_, 2013
Papier-mâché
11 ¼ x 9 x 4 ½ in. (28 x 15.2 x 11.4 cm)
Collection of Robert and Anne Conn; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles
My Barbarian
*Unemployed Man*, 2013
Papier-mâché
11 ¼ x 8 x 4 ½ in. (28.6 x 20.3 x 11.4 cm)
Collection of Robert and Anne Conn; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles

My Barbarian
*Home of the Teacher III*, 2013
Oil stick on craft paper
18 x 24 in. (45.7 x 61 cm)
Collection of the artists; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles

My Barbarian
*Factory (Suklinov Works)*, 2013
Oil stick on craft paper
18 x 24 in. (45.7 x 61 cm)
Collection of the artists; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles

My Barbarian
*Your Son Has Been Shot*, 2013
Oil stick on craft paper
18 x 24 in. (45.7 x 61 cm)
Collection of the artists; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles

My Barbarian
*Death*, 2014
Clay, felt, and acrylic
14 ½ x 16 ½ x 2 ½ in. (36.8 x 41.9 x 6.4 cm)
Collection of the artists; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles

My Barbarian
*Heard-Hearted Barbara Allen*, 2014
Clay, silk, thread, cardboard, sand, and acrylic
15 ½ x 5 ½ in. (39.4 x 14 cm)
Collection of the artists; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles
My Barbarian
_Sweet William Wake_, 2014
Clay, felt, and acrylic
18 x 8 ¼ x 3 in. (45.7 x 21 x 7.6 cm)
Collection of the artists; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles

My Barbarian
_Günther (mask)_ , 2014
Synthetic resin and acrylic
11 ½ x 7 x 4 ½ in. (29.2 x 17.8 x 11.4 cm)
Collection of the artists; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles

My Barbarian
_Hanna (mask)_ , 2014
Synthetic resin and acrylic
9 x 7 ½ x 5 in. (22.9 x 19 x 12.7 cm)
Collection of the artists; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles

My Barbarian
_Harry (mask)_ , 2014
Synthetic resin and acrylic
11 ½ x 7 x 4 ½ in. (29.2 x 17.8 x 11.4 cm)
Collection of the artists; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles

My Barbarian
_Hedi (doll)_ , 2015
Plastic, plaster, wire, and textiles
28 ½ x 10 ½ x 5 ½ in. (72.4 x 26.7 x 14 cm)
Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles
My Barbarian

*Margit (doll)*, 2015
Plastic, plaster, wire, and textiles
24 × 10 in. (61 × 25.4 cm) each
Collection of Carla Shen; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles

My Barbarian

*Kurt (doll)*, 2015
Plastic, plaster, wire, and textiles
24 × 10 in. (61 × 25.4 cm) each
Collection of Carla Shen; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles

My Barbarian

Synthetic resin, fiberglass, plaster, papier-mâché, and acrylic
25 × 5 × 8 in. (63.5 × 12.7 × 20.3 cm)
Collection of the artists; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles

My Barbarian

Synthetic resin, fiberglass, cardboard, wood, acrylic, raffia, and synthetic hair
19 × 13 × 5 in. (48.3 × 33 × 12.7 cm)
Collection of the artists; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles

My Barbarian

*Masks of the World, M.71.73.247*, 2015
Brass, acrylic, linen, and foam
9 × 10 × 1 ½ in. (22.9 × 25.4 × 3.8 cm)
Collection of the artists; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles
My Barbarian
*Masks of the World, M.73.113.7, 2015*
Terracotta, glue, mother of pearl, acrylic, and sand
11 ½ x 7 x 4 in. (29.2 x 17.8 x 10.2 cm)
Collection of the artists; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles

My Barbarian
*Masks of the World, TR.4065.3, 2015*
Synthetic resin, fiberglass, and acrylic
16 x 16 ½ x 2 in. (40.6 x 41.9 x 5.1 cm)
Collection of the artists; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles

My Barbarian in collaboration with Jeff Ono
*Standelabra 1 (4-Armed Bull Priestess), 2021*
Steel with black matte paint
Stand: 48 x 15 x 69 in. (122 x 38.1 x 175.3 cm)
Base: 18 ¼ x 18 ¼ x 1 ¼ in. (46.4 x 46.4 x 3.8 cm)
Collection of the artists; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles

My Barbarian
*Standelabra 2 (Dancing Pagan), 2021*
Steel with black matte paint
Stand: 20 ¼ x 7 x 69 in. (50.8 x 17.8 x 175.3 cm)
Base: 18 ¼ x 18 ¼ x 1 ¼ in. (46.4 x 46.4 x 3.8 cm)
Collection of the artists; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles
My Barbarian
*Standelabra 3 (3-Headed Oracle)*, 2021
Steel with black matte paint
Stand: 46 ½ x 10 x 72 ¼ in. (118.1 x 25.4 x 183.5 cm)
Base: 18 ¼ x 18 ¼ x 1 ¼ in. (46.4 x 46.4 x 3.8 cm)
Collection of the artists; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles
*Moon Goddess* (2012), *Gown by Alexandro* (2012–21), three wigs, and three porcelain busts

My Barbarian
*Sorry 4 the Plague (Squirrel Radio Action)*, 2005
Permanent marker on foamboard
20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)
Collection of the artists; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles

My Barbarian
*My Barbarian*, 2021
Three-channel video, 120:00 minutes
Collection of the artists; courtesy Vielmetter Los Angeles
About the Artists

Founded in 2000, My Barbarian’s work has been presented at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Roy and Edna Disney/Cal Arts Theater, Los Angeles; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco; Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; The Kitchen, New York; The New Museum, New York; Participant Inc., New York; and many other U.S. venues. International exhibitions include those at Museo El Eco, Mexico City; De Appel, Amsterdam; Townhouse Gallery, Cairo; The Power Plant, Toronto; El Matadero, Madrid, and others. They were included in two Performa Biennials, the Whitney Biennial, two California Biennials, the Montreal Biennial, and the Baltic Triennial. My Barbarian has been supported by USA Artists, the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, the Mike Kelly Foundation, Art Matters, the City of LA Cultural Affairs, and others. According to Catherine Quan Damman in *Artforum*, My Barbarian bring “high-theory arcana into bawdy populist forms, marshaling their multicultural demographics to burlesque liberal fantasies of the melting pot, and vamping the world historical only to burn it down and throw a party around the flames.” My Barbarian is represented by Vielmetter Los Angeles.
Part 1

[27:35]

(Percussive music)

As we look about us
Things seem worse than ever
Try not to dwell on the now

I remember Gomorrah. A hotter clime, a hotter time was had by all in Gomorrah.

[26:42]

In Gomorrah I was given the gift of a golden goat. Why can’t we go back? Go back, go back.

(Rock music)

Gomorrah, Xanadu, Babylon, Atlantis
Gomorrah, Xanadu, Babylon, Atlantis
Gomorrah, Xanadu, Babylon, Atlantis
Gomorrah, Xanadu, Babylon, Atlantis
Gomorrah
Xanadu
Babylon
Atlantis
Gomorrah
Xanadu
Babylon
Atlantis

[25:35]

You were too beautiful to live
You were too beautiful to live
In Gomorrah I was given the gift of a golden goat
I took the golden goat, I slit its golden throat
Gomorrah, golden goat
In Xanadu I learned to do the secret sacred dance
I played the Pleasure Dome, I played in Kubla’s home
Xanadu
Do a dance
In Babylon I lost the true love baby of my heart
I broke a beating heart

[24:36]

I shattered it like art
Babylon
Baby heart
Atlantis, in this scene I start to swim
I swim an ocean race

I swim in sunken space
Atlantis, is the place
Gomorrah, Xanadu, Babylon, Atlantis
Pompeii, Nineveh, Carthage, Galveston
Ctesiphon, Chaco, Troy, Kumari Kandam
Ys, Koumbi Saleh, Mologa, Dresden
nochitan, Aztlan, Dwarka, Helike
Thérouanne, Tikal, London, Herculaneum
Chicago, Tenochtitlan, Dunwich, Kitezh
Sodom, San Francisco, Rungholt, Hiroshima
Newark, Jericho, Nepata, Vilcabamba
Ulundi, Stalingrad, New Orleans, Eden

(Gentle music)

[23:24]

- Action.

Cassandra: I am Cassandra, princess of Troy, historically represented as a mad, crazy woman tormented by visions of death and destruction. I can look into the future and see everything that’s going to happen. I cannot change the coming events, for no one will listen to me. I represent environmentalists and others whose warnings go unheeded.

[22:37]

Lo, it is my mother Hecuba and my brother’s girlfriend, Helen of Sparta. In the future, in the future, in the future, people will still be named Cassandra like me and Helen like her, but not Hecuba.

Chorus: The feminist reader will decide that the female roles have nothing to do with women. The feminist reader might conclude that women need not relate to these roles or even identify with them.

(Gentle music)

Tell us of the future
Tell us what you see

[21:37]

Tell us what will happen
Will it affect me
Tell us what the future
Tell us what you see
Tell us what will

(Piano music)

Sun God: Shakuntala Dubois, you must find your job.
And I, the Mighty Sun, who is God of Light and Formal Education and Careers, Spirit of Scheduling, I command you, set yourself to that Purpose, for the Mighty Sun is your boss.

[20:30]

Brunhilde: So I figured it out, and it’s like a 10th of my income goes to my hair.

(Birds chirp)

Shakuntala: That is much.

Mahabharata: Your hair is so cute though.

Brunhilde: How many hours of labor do I pay per follicle per year?

Mahabharata: But you don’t do labor.

Shakuntala: Mm mm. This tea is good.

Mahabharata: Mm.

Brunhilde: I go to work for a living is what I’m saying.

Mahabharata: That is so wrong.

Shakuntala: Seems like a waste of money to spend on hair, which grows so freely.

Brunhilde: I do it for me.

[19:34]

Mahabharata: Hm.

Shakuntala: Mm mm. Hm, hm, hm.

Mahabharata: You can spend your money however you want, she can spend her money however she wants, he can spend his money however he wants, they can spend their money however they want, that can spend its money however it wants.

Brunhilde: That is so great. Oh my God. Are you saying you don’t like my hair?

Shakuntala: I love your haircut, that’s not the point. The point is, you know how you want your hair done, do it yourself. Do your hair yourself. What kind of tea is this?

Mahabharata: I don’t agree with that Shakuntala.

Shakuntala: Mm. Mm hm.

Brunhilde: I don’t agree with that either Shakuntala. I agree with Mahabharata.

[18:38]

Shakuntala: You always agree with her, Brunhilde.

Mercutio: This land is beautiful for the five reasons. The first is this tree stump. It leads the eye to this clump of leaves.

Persal: I see.

Mercutio: What is the second reason this land is beautiful?

Persal: The sky?

Mercutio: That is the fifth reason. The second reason is this patch of dirt. It is warm in color.

(Bird chirps)

[17:39]

The third reason is this insect on this twig. So fragile, yet so terrifying. The fourth reason is that the land is fully rendered in perspective with a vanishing point over there. The fifth reason is...

Persal: The sky. I love the sky. One could imagine being anywhere within it or beyond it even as one is seemingly beneath it. Do the gods live up there, or is my future self in the sky? Do you know Mercutio Iglesias?

Mercutio: I wouldn’t know Mr. Purcell Sam Shepherd.

(Gentle music)

[16:31]

Narrators: The hearts of the bondsmaids who share the same suffering and hatred as Ching-hua burn like fire. They are torn by anxiety for her. If only they could save their class sister. The bondsmaids dance. The Civil Guards drive them away. Chung-hua refuses to yield. She continues to fight courageously. She continues to fight courageously.

(Harpsichord music)

Purcell: I knew I’d discover you.

Shakuntala: You did not discover me. I have always been
here.

Purcell: Marry me and let me take you back to my country where you will be a very well paid consultant.

[15:35]

Shakuntala: I don’t fit in well with business types.

Purcell: You’ll love these guys. They’re rich.

Shakuntala: I’m sick of rich people.

Purcell: Come back to my hotel.

Shakuntala: What’s your name?

Purcell: Hm.

Shakuntala: Hm. Mm mm. Mm mm.

Shakuntala: Uh huh. Uh huh. The sky clears.

Narrator: Red Army Cadre Hung Chang Ching and his messenger Pang enter disguised as peasants.

(Piano music)

They are on a scouting mission.

[14:29]

Hung and Pang discover the fainted Ching-Hua.

(Renaissance music)

Evita: Servility, don’t just toss things everywhere. Now, where was I? Oh yes my dear, I cannot possibly believe you would do such a thing.

Shakuntala: I am a grown woman and Daddy’s gone now. We’re all free.

Evita: To get engaged to a tourist who stumbles in the yard! We don’t even know what kind of people he comes from, if any.

Shakuntala: I looked into his eyes and I saw that he is really special.

Orfeo: I can totally identify with what you’re saying.

Evita: Shakuntala, I swear you are just too sensitive.

[13:37]

It’s charming in a child, but a woman must have Boundaries and Attitudes.

Shakuntala: I’m going to marry Purcell, Mama, and you can’t… And you… God. Get out of my way.

(Harp music)

I, object

You incorporate bodies, monies

I, object

You don’t own me even though you bought me

[12:32]

You want to return me

But you don’t own me, you don’t own me

Even though you bought me

I, object

On table or pedestal

You want to show me off

Even though it was you

who lost the receipt

I… Object

[11:34]

You incorporate

Bodies, monies

I, object

I, object

(People chatter)

(My oracular vernacular)

Maybe, maybe, if and when

Address the future imaginary

Speculation undoes the the present

[10:36]

Contemplation becomes the object

Immaterial, profound

Saint Galadriel: Eros vita lumen. On pale afternoons, quiet clouds go by in the blue. Conscious minds alight on fervent hands. Oh, the gold dust that floats in the air behind which are the vibrant waves, tender humid eyes, mouths overcome with laughter, curly hair, and the rosy fingers that caress each other. On pale afternoons, a friendly Faerie tells me
secret stories. I began to feel a yearning for, the longing to satisfy an infinite thirst. I said to the amorous Faerie, “I want to feel in my soul, the deepest, the most profou—”

(Piano music)

[9:32]

Dido: But death alas, I cannot shun. Death must come when he is gone. Thy hand, Belinda. Darkness shades me. On thy bosom let me rest. More I would, but death invades me. Death is now a welcome guest. When I am laid in earth, may my wrongs create no trouble in thy breast. Remember me, but ah! Forget my fate.

[8:30]

Workers: And so you will see it again and again, gladly or ungladly. Gladly or ungladly.

(Sung)

Moon Goddess:
Mama, my baby, Mama, my baby
Mama mama
Ba-ba-ba-by
Mama mama
Ba-ba-ba-by
Ma ma ma
Moon

(Upbeat music)

[7:30]-

You see a troupe of Troubadours
A strolling band of nightingales
Ply their trade from door to door
Courtly love for sale
Courtly love for sale
Courtly love for sale
Medieval is our morality
Moral ist Mittelalterlich,
Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho
Medieval is our morality
Moral ist Mittelalterlich
Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho
Medieval is our morality
Moral ist Mittelalterlich
Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho
Medieval is our morality
Moral ist Mittelalterlich
Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho
Medieval is our morality
Moral ist Mittelalterlich
Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho
Medieval is our morality
Moral ist Mittelalterlich
Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho
Medieval is our morality
Moral ist Mittelalterlich
Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho

[6:34]

Performers: We now present for ye a parable which effects ye for this, the story of Everyman. A play of morals and moral concerns, especially those pertaining the freelance artist. And so begin we do on the right, in heaven.

God: I am God.

Good Deeds: And I am Good Deeds, servant and messenger of God.

God: Look ye now my servant at Everyman going about his way.

Everyman:
(Sung)
I, my name is Everyman

[5:34]

Heaven is to my right hand
Earth in the middle, that’s the plan
And left of center is hell’s hot land
I, my name is Everyman
Would I were the son of God.
I am not privy to my Lord’s plan
I worship him, though I find it odd.

- Everyman speaketh in a most ambivalent manner.

[4:35]

- He is nuanced, true.

Everyman: I am so poor. Mayhap I needst a new career path.

- Once again, Everyman is vulnerable. I shall take the form of a patroness of the arts. Eine Schutzherrin der Künste.
I am a learned lady, a richly attired woman of profound boredom.

Everyman: I am an overeducated person of some talents and few prospects.

- Hm, mayhap ye couldst illuminate a text for me?
At Golgotha Three Marys stood
Three grave women in the shadow of the cross
At Golgotha Three Marys wept.
Three sad women in the
Meadow of great loss
Mary the mother lifted her head
Mournful as the wind she said

“I gave birth to you, though a virgin I remained
Pleasure never mine, though quite pregnant I became

[3:37]
Was it really worth the excruciating pain
I’ll never understand why God played tricks upon my brain.”

At Golgotha Three Marys stood
Three grave women in the shadow of the cross
At Golgotha Three Marys wept
Three sad women in the meadow of great loss
Mary, Martha’s sister, not well known
Talking to herself ‘cause she was all alone

“I was such a convert that
I followed you around
Devout as an apostle
A Christian pound for pound
Know I’m not the fairest Mary in this town
A crush on you I had
And yet you always turned me down”

At Golgotha Three Marys stood
Three grave women in the shadow of the cross
At Golgotha Three Marys wept
Three sad women in the meadow of great loss
Mary Magdalene, wrong gone right
Cried through the ever gloomy night

“Jesus, this must end our scandalous affair

[2:35]
Remember when I washed your feet
With tears and golden hair
I soothed you with my ointments sweet
In skimpy underwear
And played with little Jesus
Till he grew up way down there”

Everyman: Look at this bill from the church. I must again find work, else the church send the bill collectors to throw me in the debtors’ gaol.

- Just think, in your dungeon cell, you will be free to pray all day long with no interruptions. ‘Tis like a residency program.

Devil: Look upon the true face of God.

Everyman: The devil!

Good Deeds: What hath ye done with God, foul pestilence?

Devil: Taketh not that tone with me, for I am God and the Devil.

[1:45]
And now I command the hell mouth to open.

(Rock music)
Flung down
An abysmal pit
Might as well try to make the most of it
This is hell
It ain’t so hot
So this is hell
It’s all you got
When you’re in hell
Ignore the smell
When you’re in hell

[00:00:36]
Say it’s swell
Just say it’s swell
Swell in hell

- And so ends the story of Everyman, the story of you. Let this serve as a warning to ye, for if ye take the path of the artist, Dann wirst du für alle Ewigkeit in der Hölle brennen.

[00:00:00]

End of part 1.
Part 2

[29:12]
Cop: I had an uncle who used to be a cop. One day they caught him selling cigarettes on the black market, right after the war, and he had to leave the force. And every time he got drunk, he’d start sobbing because he couldn’t be a cop anymore and being a cop was something special. Then he got sick and I became a cop.
- I already tried professional training. I’m not cut out for work, I use people instead. It got started with one who hadn’t had it in a long time. Everybody’s so grateful it’s impossible to say anything bad about it.

- It took a long time for me to admit to myself that I like men better than women. I

  t’s frightening, if you’ve had a normal upbringing. I thought I’d have to live underground, bus depots, toilets. But as a matter of fact, it’s completely different. My boyfriend is a dancer from Guinea and we live like man and wife, we visit friends, have fun, all perfectly regular.

- Look into my eyes. Age isn’t a problem. Older wearer flesh can respond passionately. You will come to know your own skin through my touch.

- You got some ID? Shit, people who don’t have ID, they don’t exist.

  Butcher: Now. Every Friday night, I buy myself a girl. Now I’m the butcher, and I got a kid working for me who gets hit when he deserves it.

- I lived with a group of women for quite a while, it was a commune, sort of. We tried to work out where the oppression of women in our society originates. We wanted to know why marriage is so much more deeply embedded in women’s consciousness than in men’s, stuff like that. We had decided to treat men exactly the way that we thought that they treated us. Of course, that’s repressive.

- There are books, You should read them, where women become complete females. Blindfolded, or chained and tied up, for women, happiness is submission.

- I have a great deal of contact with men in my profession, and I sleep with a lot of them.

- It’s not a problem for me, it’s like drinking a cup of coffee. I lie in bed and fondle myself. There’s never been anyone who could do it just the right way.

- Hey, you know, you are real hot.

  Lover: Your mother is a bitch.
Cop: Cigarette? I think you’re beautiful.

Model: Oh, I like to hear that.

Cop: I mean this very seriously.

Model: I’d like to sleep with you.

(Slow pan-flute music)

Lover: We can’t handle a kid.

Wife: But a child will stick by you.

Lover: Every moment I spend with you is one moment too many.

Wife: Karl?

(Slow eerie music)

Teacher: How much do you make a day?

Lover: 100, 200.

Teacher: You’re very attractive.

Lover: I know.

Teacher: Well la-di-da.

Lover: I’m sorry?

Teacher: Don’t you like it?

Lover: What? With men?

Teacher: Yes.

Lover: I don’t want to get involved in too much.

Teacher: Why not?

Lover: I’m afraid.

(Ethereal flute music)

Wife: How do you get a figure like that?

Model: I take care of myself.

Wife: Me, I have to work.

Model: I’m sorry, but I work too.

Wife: Things turned out better for you.

Butcher: 12,000 marks.

Lover: 12,000 marks? That’s crazy.

Butcher: Seeing as it upsets you so much, I’m gonna have to insist on prompt repayment.

(Experimental jazz music)

Model: By the way, I fired the maid.

Lover: But we worked out an arrangement for this marriage, you and I.

Model: I couldn’t stand the freedom!

(Sung)

It is through
The conceptual faculty
That all good standing
Usually finds expression
And thus is it
Differentiated from
The faculty of judgment and deduction
As the faculty of formal reason
For judgment and deduction or reason
Are in the formal sense
Only aspects of what’s understood

In that they appear as forms
Of abstract
Conceptual
Analysis
A concept is not
However determined
Determined in a purely abstract manner
Understanding
Understanding
Needs to be
Needs to be
Differentiated from
Differentiated from
Reason
Reason

Therefore, in the comprehension of concepts As a whole

(Mellow jazz music)

[19:36]

- Jazz, the Double Agency needs you to curate an exhibition for the museum.
- The show is called Masks of the World. It’s an interface designed to reinforce ludic capitalism.
- Double Agency can’t be compromised.

Tour Guide: And here we have a prime example of European culture. Something which you as non-Europeans may not be so familiar with. A depiction of plenitude. European beauty—

(Bones crunching)

—increases as it moves towards the lightness on the spectrum of values. Therefore, this image is beautiful regardless of what it depicts

(flesh thudding)

Because it is bright and you can see it.

Lorelei: Franka Petersen.

Franka: Why, yes.

(Flesh thudding)

[18:39]

- This way.

(Fists crunching)

(Body thudding)

(Electronic beeping)

(Electronic machinery whirring)

(Phone dialing)

(Phone ringing)

(Electronic interference)

[17:58]

- The new plans will impact all areas.

(Machinery whirring)

(Electronic interference)

(Body thudding)

[17:12]


(Glasses clinking)

We are all the same. Language. And, I brought a mask with me today.

(Gas hissing)

(Coughing)

- Pure propaganda, Miss Petersen.

(Glasses clinking)

- Maybe so, but isn’t everything?

- I’ll make sure your Masks of the World exhibition never mounts!

[16:21]

- Maybe, but I doubt it.

(Intense dramatic music)

Welcome to all the people
We are the Board of Supervisors
Of all the places
This museum is the one
That 50 years ago today

(Distant screaming)

Was established
Using distinction
And buildings
We were so moved
When a professor spoke at the museum
She asked are the objects really so dead
Are the people really so alive

No one knows
Masks of the World
Is anyone here from cultural affairs

[15:10]

Like the angels
Who lived in the city before us
I believe in truth
And community partnerships
It is my honor
To introduce the mayor
Mayor Jessica
Montez

(Uptempo rock music)

Thank you thank you thank you thank you Victor
I have lived in or near this city all of my life
I was a kid when I first came here
The pictures on the wall of naked people
White women with long blond hair
And muscle guys with tiny- You know what I mean

[14:12]

Or it was a bunch of blobs of paint
Or a TV playing something you would not give
Five minutes to at home
But you’re tired
So you sit in front of it for six minutes
And then the bookstore
And I realized
Culture isn’t something you can control
Culture is something you support
Whether you like it or not
Because you are it
And that is why I’m so excited, wow
By this exhibit
Masks of the World
Faces of people
Coming together
Being on a wall
So thank you thank you
thank you thank you, Victor
And thank you so much, Los Angeles
I am your mayor
Jessica Montez

(Intense drum music)

[13:14]

Thank you Mayor

Now it’s my honor to introduce to you
Ms. Franka Peterson,
The curator of Masks of the World

(Slow ethereal music)

I chose these masks
You see on display
From the collection
Tucked away
Faces in boxes
Never seeing the light
Hiding, hidden
Kept out of sight
Are they from theater,
Ritual,
Art

[12:13]

What is a bodiless mask
With no heart
This exhibition would not be
Without the support of two very key
Individuals whose generosity
Has graced us institutionally
First, Yusef Ben Salem
Cultural attache to the Sultan of Brunisia
And Arnold St. Petersburg
Gas extraction magnate from Eastern Rusvar
Thank you both
In my home land
Of Brunisia
We have many reasons to believe
That art is something you must fear
Because it has power
So much power

[11:14]

You feel it emanate
From the surface like electricity
It is shocking
In my homeland of Brunisia
We suffer much at the hands of brutality
Imposed upon us by outside forces
In the form of political influence
And we blame you
People of the West
But art brings us together
Hey
In Eastern Rusvar we have a joke
But I will not tell it to you
You don’t get my jokes
And that is the joke
Which is funny because it is true

[10:12]

Much like art, yes, it is like that
Funny because it is true
Look at the faces on the wall
Staring
They do not know what
They are talking about
I gave money
To go to parties
And everyone is so nice
Even though I know
They don’t get my jokes
I am Lorelei Montoya
AKA The Eye
I am Convener of the Ninja Symposium
I know the reason for this exhibition

[9:13]

To unleash neo-liberal propaganda
On the world
This world that is no longer a world
This world that is a marketplace of ideas
About the world
Ideas with no concept behind them
To be a ninja is to be an idea
Even if no one in the world can see you

(Horns blowing frantically)

(Cymbals crashing)

[8:32]

Narrator: There’s this story about the ground squirrels in Angeles Crest National Forest. Every so often a bunch of them are found dead, and we here in the park take notice of the die-offs. The squirrels are disease vectors, the fleas on the squirrels carry the bacterium Yersinia pestis, the black plague.

(Bright harp music)

We are the squirrels
Of the forest
We are carriers of bubonic plague
You are the people
Of the city
Heed our warning, dire
Why do you tempt fate?
Homeless coyotes eat pets in Glendale

Deer on the 210 have no place to stay
Just as the forest grows smaller and smaller
So too the city collapses from its weight
So too the city collapses from its weight

[7:09]

We are the squirrels
of the forest

Narrator: As an independent biologist, not associated with any university, but as a webmaster of a popular website, I’ve been documenting the activities of a particular group of squirrels. I’ve tracked them all the way from Angeles Crest Forest to Hollywood, to city hall in downtown L.A. At city hall, they had a rally.

Squirrel: If action is not taken

(Sung)
We’ll be gone
Notify the city
Notify the council
Tell Mayor Hahn
We’ll be gone
Anticipate the future
Feature of your landscape
Formulate escape plans

[6:13]

We’ll be gone
Councilman Reyes
Councilwoman Greuel
Councilman Zine
Councilman LaBonge
We’ll be gone
Councilman Weiss
Councilman Cardenas
Councilman Padilla
Councilman Parks

Councilwoman Perry
Councilman Ludlow
Councilwoman Miscikowski
Councilman Smith
Councilman Garcetti
Councilman Villaraigosa
Councilwoman Hahn
Assert your bureaucracy
Tell the communities
Call our neighbor cities
We’ll be gone
LA Police Officer: Who has a permit for being here? Do you have a permit?

[5:14]

If you don’t, you need to leave.

- They can’t finish singing their song for just, like, ten seconds?

LA Police Officer: No no, you can’t be doing that. You can’t be filming. You all have to be on the side there, you guys can’t be right here.

- Okay—

- Okay.

(Rhythmic drumming)

P-o-L-A-A-T
PoLAAT, PoLAAT
PoLAAT, PoLAAT, PoLAAT, PoLAAT, PoLAAT
PoLAAT, PoLAAT, PoLAAT, PoLAAT, PoLAAT
Post-Living Ante-Action Theater
Post-Living Ante-Action Theater

- Star.

- Star.

- You are touching your pinky toes, let’s not make it a big production.

(Audience laughs)

Open this up, please. There’s a lot of, like, discomfort, tension, I just want you to like-

- Aah! That’s right, good good.

[4:13]

- Feel the weight of your bodies.

- If you notice any tension in your jaw try and keep it there.

(Audience laughs)

(Sung)

Don’t tear me down
And I won’t make you feel bad
To make myself feel good
I’ll give you something you can use
To make improvements
Help me grow
And I’ll return the favor
Face me critically but full of positivity

(Audience laughs)
- Dos, tres, quatro, uno, dos, tres, quatro, uno, dos, tres
- Now I want you to visualize.
- Amber!
- Your sixth chakra, okay?
- Sixth chakra!
[1:13]
- And I want you to visualize—
- Malik, sixth!
- A very dirty hypodermic needle sticking directly into your third eye.

(Folksy guitar music)
Draw a perforated line around your body
Draw a perforated line around your body
Draw a perforated line around your body
Draw a perforated line around your body
Draw a perforated line around your body
Draw a perforated line around your body
Draw a perforated line around your body
Draw a perforated line around your body
Draw a perforated line around your body
[00:00:18]
Draw a perforated line around your body

[00:00:00]
End of part 2.

Part 3

(Mysterious music)
[33:59]
- This wine is good. I’m so glad you’re here, did you find a babysitter?
- I had to get a sitter, and that’s no easy task with my kids. I hate my kids. (Laugh) You’ll hate your kids too.
- Since when do you hate your kids? I thought you loved your kids.
- Well, eight more years and they’re out of the house, but—

- Uh, I totally understand, puberty’s gross.
- Yeah.
- Look, you look great. If that’s any consolation, you look absolutely fantastic. And you’re doing so well at work!
- Cheers to me!
- You’re one of three women that work at Bissell, Bissell and Mortimer.
- It’s okay. I’m a single mom, I’m a working mom. I’m good at my job. I’m a copy editor.
- I know.
- You are really good with computers. It’s the key to the future. You know computers, you’re not going to get laid off.
- You are amazing at computer graphics and these days, really everything needs graphics.
- Well, you know, I’m learning.

(Loud knocking)
- Did you hear that at the door?
- Who is it? Who is at the door?
- Oh.
- Who is it?
- Well, I’ll get it.

[33:07]
You sit down because you made a great dinner. I’ll get the door.
- All right.
- Oh, oh my gosh. It’s Mr. Bissell. Did you invite Bissell?
- Why is your boss here?
- Well, I don’t know why he’s here.
- Why is he here? I’m freaking out.
- Okay, look, you look great.
- Oh my God, do I look okay?

- How do I look? I think I’m okay, I’m just a little drunk.

- Take a deep breath.

- Just a little drunk. Well, whatever. He’s seen me drunk before at the office parties, okay.

- Okay, I’m gonna open it. Open it.

(Both inhale deeply)

- Let’s just open the door.

(Door creaks open)

Mr. Bissell: You’re fired.

(Animals screech and roar)

TV Announcer: You are having a Night Epi$ode.

Moderator: So now I would like to introduce our esteemed panelists. First is nightmare curator Stel, internationally feared and hated for her work on blockbuster exhibitions that have destroyed every institution and artist she has ever worked with.

(Audience laughs)

[32:07]

Blind curator Omez is resident alien at the University of Darkness, and is admired for his deeply flawed theoretical writings, including his recently published book “The Title is Unpronounceable”.

(Audience laughs)

[32:07]

And lastly, Garnic is HP Lovecraft curator of inter-dimensional practices at the Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane, where he has mounted major exhibitions including the infamous Gateway to Hell show, which has never closed and remains open to this day leaking demons, monsters, and other malicious entities into our world. So please join me in welcoming our panelists.

(Audience claps)

[31:05]

Are there any objections?

Audience: Yes! Yes! Boo!

- Let us begin.

(Knocking)

(Mysterious music)

Narrator: In the stillest hour between night and day, you lie awake, paralyzed by fear and regret. The world is negative. If only you could sleep.

[30:05]

You have so much work to do tomorrow. For an hour, neurotic images flicker before your minds eye, and you realize sleep is a luxury in a doomed economy.

All:

(Sung)

Terror, madness, anxious fears or shadows wake you from the Night Epi$ode.
Negative reflections, eerie recollections light the Night Epi$ode.

[29:10]

Taxes spinning, papers dancing, numbers, figures haunt the Night Epi$ode.
Sexual frustration at your health insurance fills the Night Epi$ode.
Money flies like bats around all time and space within the Night Epi$ode.
Poorer, poorer, older, older, poorer, poorer
Ah, the Night Epi$ode.
Poorer, poorer, older, older, poorer, poorer

[28:11]

Ah, the Night Epi$ode.

(Rhythmic humming)

(Eerie music)

- As blind chief curator, my interest is in work that negates visuality, and thus, the West. As we all know, art objects are intrinsically racist and sexist and most typically homo- and
transphobic. That is why, ideologically, I curate nightmares.

(Audience laughs)

- Fuck! Fuck, someone’s fucking tweeting me right now. God, who could it the fuck be.

[27:17]

“The America I know and love is not one in which my parents will have to stand in front of Obama’s death panel so his bureaucrats can decide, based on a subjective measurement of their level of productivity in society, whether they are worthy of healthcare. Such a system is downright evil”.

- Level of productivity in society is not a subjective measurement, carbon footprint plus available funds in checking, minus Facebook friends times a trillion.

(Audience laughs)

- We need our own criteria, this panel has to rock.

- But the question is, who deserves to die?

- That’s actually the theme of my new show.

- Discuss.

- Yes, I have been appointed executive curator of the Britney Biennial. The show is called “Younger Than Britney”.

- Well who’s in it.

- The major commission has gone to Veronika Phoenix.

- Huh, Veronika Phoenix.

- Yet, isn’t she too old for “Younger Than Britney”?

[26:10]

- I’m only counting the time that she became a dead artist, which is one year. She’s one year old.

(Audience laughs)

And the youngest artist in “Younger Than Britney”.

(Audience laughs)

- Well then I suppose we should Skype her into this conversation.

- She only answers séances.

- Don’t you have the séance app on your phone.

(Audience laughs)

- A séance won’t be necessary. Veronika Phoenix is here.

(Sung)

Driving hands free.
I loved my Prius, did he see?
In the SUV.
She’s unliving the death dream now.

[25:11]

Talking to Jeff, says there’s trouble, it was all toxic.
I wasn’t rich compared to other Scientologists my age.
Driving hands free.
I loved my Prius, did he see?
In the SUV.
Must confront, did it have to be.
Hey, what happened?
Should I kill him and his family?

[24:05]

Should I kill Jeff and his chosen family?
He’s gay and they just adopted a Russian baby.
Driving hands free.
You convinced me to invest everything.
It’s an SUV.
Fake flower, evil power, in my life Jeff.

(Mystical music)

- The patriarchy can’t be solved by improving the communication skills of the men in our lives.

[23:05]

One of the most common accusations against witches is night flying. The ability to soar above the landscape of daily life, with eyes that penetrate the darkness and see what we are not supposed to see.

(Upbeat piano music)

Grave hand, melting face, guilty finger, choking choke,
Scratch the window, psychic war, how did I fall off the
grid?
Heels dug into the mud as I slid.
Transformed into a distortion of my former form.
I’m a bell ringer.
Bell ringer?
I ring the bell for the Purple Cat, Black Champagne,
Green Lips, Blue Gums, Rainbow Strangler,
Violet Gun, Death Star
Death-is-Fun, Nail Polish, Steak Tartar, Worm Eyes,
Moth Breath, Ghost Car, Smell-of-Death!

[22:03]
Night flying on fabric wings
Night flying with the night things
Veronika I. Phoenix, returns again and again.
My comeback is coming back again.
V.I.P.
R.I.P.
V.I.P.
R.I.P.

- What’s happening? Where am I?

(Audience laughs)

- Veronika Phoenix possessed your body and used it to promote her own pro-witch agenda.

(Audience laughs)

- Veronika Phoenix pretends to be political when her true interest is in international travel.

(Audience laughs)

[21:01]
- But today’s nightmares must include inter-dimensional travel. That is why the best artist working today is Silas Shepherd Stevenson, whose sketches revealed a split entry point between planes of existence. One night, he left me a strange message. He demanded a midnight studio visit. I came right to the bad part of town. I crept up the narrow stairs to find him waiting for me.

[20:14]
He closed the door and disappeared, leaving his last drawings on the table, and immediately, upon looking at them, I went mad!

(Audience laughs)

- All of this masterbatorialist chit-chat when our mandate is to kill members of the public.

- What about that new happening group, The Wall Street Situationists?’

(Sung)
Mama! ♪
She worked so hard to send me to business school.
I saw her at a party and pretended I didn’t know her.

[19:04]
Like I didn’t even know her.
I’ll never see her again.

(Whistling)

As you know, nightmare curators are themselves failed dreamers. I too have made nightmares. Not what you sociopaths would call masterpieces, but rather proficient adequacies, which, of course, tell the future.

[18:12]
There will be nightmare curators, murder critics, patrons of terror—

(Woman screaming)
— suicide academics, and yes, there will be artists as well. Trapeze artists.

(Audience laughs)

So much for the undead, but where are the people?

- I’m supposed to be at the LA Art Fair thing, that’s across town in 13 minutes.

- You’ll never make it.

- When will the humans realize that art is not a fair?

- I love the fair. Carnival rides are the best installations in the world! When I have had my fill of cotton candy, and interactive performances by Ketchup, Hotdog & Mustard, I go back to my hotel room and chat with sex strangers from the internet.

[17:05]
As night time falls on Los Angeles, my poor soul falls into the abyss.
(Sung)
$18 is the monthly fee, to chat and hook up with a couple.
Into one guy, he not me.
The other guy is trouble.

(Slow jazzy music)

$80 for a lap dance.
Go-go boy got my number.
Uh oh oh oh oh.
I was bored sensing distance, his dick was big but not hard, no.

[16:05]
His dick was big, but only so-so.
Burnin’ money, wasting my life.
Cruisin’ down the death drive.
Burnin’ money, wasting my life.
Cruisin’ down the death drive.
Cruisin’ down the death drive.
The dark room is my aftermath.
Hanging out on a dark path.
800 negative bank account.
Bathhouse bubbles up from hell.
Unfortunate mens’ eyes, they do abound.

[15:05]
Wander in a towel, under evil spell.
$8000 is the devil’s bill.
What can they take if I’m destitute?
Back taxes from a void I’ll never fill.
I’ll prostitute while I’m still cute.
While I’m still cute i’ll prostitute.
If labors love it’s my lack thereof.
Cruisin’ down the Death Drive.
It’s not erotic, not even alive.
Cruisin’ down the Death Drive.
The dark room is my aftermath.
Cruisin’ down the Death Drive.
Hangin’ out on a dark path.

[14:06]
Cruisin’ down the Death Drive.
As night falls on Los Angeles...
Cruisin’ down the death drive.
My poor soul falls into the abyss.
Cruisin’ down the Death Drive.
Cruisin’ down the Death Drive.
Cruisin’ down the Death Drive.
Cruisin’ down the Death Drive.
Cruisin’ down the Death Drive.

- And so went the story of my friend, whose name is
  Charlie, who went to the LA Art Fair to sell his soul, but
  was only allowed to rent his body.

(Audience laughs)

[12:58]
Does he deserve to die?

- Oh, it’s the Board. “Because of the job-killing healthcare
  bill, there’s going to be cut backs at every level.”
  Apparently one of us has to die.

- This drink for me?

(Audience laughs)

(Coughing)

(Grunts)

- Shall we dialogue with the audience?

- I think that we’re all sufficiently humiliated by now.

- Well, I’m actually too busy anyway.

- Yeah, I’m actually too busy also. Excuse me, I’m so
  thirsty. Garnic has some water, I’ll just drink his water.

[12:05]
I’m so thirsty!

- Give me some of that, I am, after all, the chief curator.

(Groans)

(Audience laughs)

Audience Members: You lie!

(Sung)
All the teachers, there’s no school.

All: No more telling lies, time to socialize.
All the nurses, there’s no hospital.
No more telling lies, time to socialize.
All the lawyers, there’s no love.
No more telling lies, time to socialize.
All the engineers, no engines.
No more telling lies, time to socialize.
All the mommas, they can’t mom.
No more telling lies, time to socialize.
All the babies, they can’t babe.
No more telling lies, time to socialize.
All the public service specialists, there’s no public.
No more telling lies, time to socialize.
Dance for socialism now!
Nah nah nah nah nah!
Nah nah nah nah nah.
Dance for socialism now!
Nah nah nah nah nah!
Nah nah nah nah nah.
Dance for socialism now!
No more telling lies, time to improvise.

(Simultaneous singing)

(Silence)

(Fast music)

We can worship one another.
The goddess or her brother.
Pagan rights protect us one by one.
We, can worship stars at midnight.

[6:49]
We… can worship the Transformer.
Nine muses for performers,
Seven rights protect us one by one.
One!
Defy the Christians.
Two!
Dance in a circle.
Three!
Sacrifice with dignity.
Four!
Anoint your body, body, body, body.
Five!
Tell the future.
Six!

Respect your Mother.
Seven!
Follow your spirit guide
Uh huh, uh huh, uh huh huh huh.
Uh huh, uh huh, uh huh huh huh.
Uh huh, uh huh, uh huh huh huh.
Uh huh, uh huh, uh huh huh huh.
Uh huh, uh huh, uh huh huh huh.
Uh huh, uh huh, uh huh huh huh.

(Slow guitar music)
[5:00]
- The night sky is broken, a black window, John.

(Sung)
Hermaphrodite, child of Aphrodite and Hermes.
Sing with your many genitals! They speak, John.
Lead my hand daemon, John!
We have lived here,
At Newcastle house, nigh on six months.
At Gordon’s ancestral home.

[4:12]
We: Pam, Maisy,
Colin, Roger, Nick,
Kouf, Juju, Mary and Joan, all seek guidance in this matter
Which affects our living collective.
Should John be removed from the commune?
We turn to the cards.
The two of pentacles!
Pros and cons.
We could take one road, or we could turn and take the other.
We have choices.
This is the unconscious mind, the nine of swords.
Fear, apprehension, we’ve had enough.
Knives in the old oak.

[3:05]
Shadows on the wood.
This card is our guiding force, the hermit.
We stay home.
Business and property and profit.
I trust you recognize the meaning of this symbol.
Hermaphrodite, take my hand!
The deciding card,
John must go!
Shadows on the wood.
Shadows on the wood.
Shadows on the wood.

[2:15]
- Let us pray.

(Upbeat guitar music)
Osiris,
and Isis.
Rebirth and death
And love.
Hawk-headed Horus is yours.
Testicles turn into flowers.

[1:02]
We cut them down.

(Slow guitar music)

(Rhythmic humming)
Mami wata
Green black water of life.
Wash us down, through your smoking mirror,

[00:00:16]
Tezcatlipoca, Huitzilopochtli, Xochi, Quetzal

(Repeated dings)

[00:00:00]
End of part 3.

Part 4

[29:02]
- I had to leave because my lover was driving me insane.
She painted me constantly, Nude, and I just found that incredibly, incredibly boring. And as her muse, I felt like I had to leave, or else her art would be shit.

- Well, that’s very nice of you.

- It was a sacrifice, but I felt that I could meet someone else. Someone else creative in Mexico.

- Oh. You might find someone here. Are you an artist?

- No.

- You seem very creative.

- No, not really.

[28:04]
- I mean, the way you dress and like this, I mean, the colors that you’re wearing are so muted yet sensual.

- That’s a nice way to put it, thank you. Marie gave me this necklace.

- It’s pretty. It’s really, really nice. And it actually matches your—
- Lipstick?
- Lipstick, yeah.

- That’s what I was thinking when I went out. But, I’d like to give you this necklace.

- No, no, no, no, no, no.

- No really.

- I mean, she gave it to you.

- No, I think you should have it.

- No, are you sure?

- I’m absolutely sure.

- Okay.

- Thank you.

- Oh.

(Thunder rolling and rain pouring)

(Suspenseful music)

(Thudding)

(Indistinct chatter)

(Giggle)

[26:56]

- Ok, You might wanna back away.

- Yeah, back away.

- I think Alex might be possessed.

- Malik, this wasn’t part of the rehearsal.

- Sometimes it gets out of control. Oh, I’m a little frightened actually.

- I’m a little frightened also.

- Okay, I think that Alex is possessed.

(Shaker rattling)

- You know, I keep hearing that we’re speaking German right now, you and I, Malik, and the ghost seems to understand German.

- We are speaking German right now. And he understands. So, could it be Matias Goeritz?

[26:05]

- Does anybody have some other questions, ‘cause this is an opportunity that may not come again.

- Who has a question for Matias Goeritz?

- Fuiste un Nazi?

- You know, we have had this conversation before, like what would we do if we had the opportunity to ask Matias Goeritz a question, you had something right?

- El Eco was your, sort of, utopian vision for collective artistic production and it closed after two months. So I guess I wonder, does that constitute a complete failure, and is the failure of El Eco the entire failure of the modernist project?

(Mystical folk music)

[24:57]

Ecos de los ecos de los ecos de los ecos
Ecos de los ecos de los ecos de los ecos

[23:33]

Producing collectivity, collective production
Oye oye oye que paso? Solamente un eco

- Escuchando lo que ya termino
- Escuchando lo que no empezó

(Sung)

Homosexuales
A fin de evitar espectáculos
El de las parejas homosexuales es complicado
Porque traen la discusión de si están casados, o no

Arquitectura emocional
Ruinas
Del modernismo socialista

- ¡Estoy listo!
- Caigo en las calles de la memoria.
- ¿Mira?

[21:50]

- Yo sé que es amor.
- Yo sé, es más grande que todo el respeto y el miedo hacia Dios
- Aunque a veces, de tanto quererte…
- ¡Ey!
- ¡Estamos cantando!
- Sí, ya vi. Quitale la mano de encima.
- ¡Ay, ya! ¡No fastidies!
- ¿Cuál otra me vas a cantar?
- ¿Eh?
- ¿Cuál quieres?
- Me va a cantar.
- La que tú quieras.
- Estamos cantando.
- La que tú quieras.
- Estamos cantando.
- Ella canta.
- ¡Qué bonito cantas, verdad.
- ¡Ya!

[21:03]

- ¡Ey!
- Tranquilízense!
- No pasa nada, ok.
- ¡No te enojes!
- Relájate.
- No, por favor. No pasa nada, relájate
- ¿Qué te pasa a ti?
- Estamos cantando.
- Cantando.
- ¡Cantemos!
- ¡Otra!
- Isabel; si no la sacas, mañana…
- Si no me saca, ¿qué?
- Mañana ya no tienes bar.
- Eh, eh, eh.
- No me toques, no me toques.
- Si no me saca, ¿qué?
- No me toques.
- ¡Ya, corazón!
- Si no me saca, ¿qué?
- Corazón, ahora sí muy corazón.
- Bueno, estamos aquí tranquilas, relájate.
- No pues no, yo no estoy tranquila.
- No pasa nada, relájate por favor.
- Ya no quiere vestuario, Isabel.
- ¡No!
- ¡Ey!
- Un gusto, mañana te cierro.
- Shhh.
- No te van a cerrar.
- ¿Por qué eres así?
- Ayúdame.
- ¡Qué horror!
- Debes ir de inmediato.
- Aquí están tus boletos.
- Lleva contigo tu pasaporte a la estación del tren.
- No puedes ir con él. Es demasiado peligroso.
- Espero tener al menos unas cuentas horas, de lo contrario, hasta la próxima vez.
- You must go at once. Here are your tickets. Comrade Irina has your Finnish passport at the railroad station.
- Mrs. Vlasova, I’m sorry, but you cannot go with him. It’s too dangerous.
- I had hoped to have at least a few hours.

[20:03]
- Mother, until next time.
- Next time.

(Audience laughing)

How often you hear mothers lose their sons. I have kept my son, how have I kept him. The third, the cause, that is what united us. He and I were two, the cause was our third.

[19:04]

How often I have heard sons talking to mothers. But our talks are better. We speak of a common cause. Oh. The Oedipal dramas of art history. Are staged between fathers and sons. Across the body of the mother. To resolve the ambivalence of his active and passive wishes the son is faced with a dilemma. Should he kill the father or seduce him?

[18:03]

But what of the daughter? She is given the father’s name, which positions her as his potential rival. I had the desire to be somebody different. I picked the name Alex as a nice androgynous nickname. A woman mimics a man who masquerades as a woman to prove his virility. A girl thing being a boy thing being a girl thing to be a bad thing.

[16:58]

In the first few years of the child’s life, that process we usually refer to as socialization, has become rather stereotypical when we refer to the role of the mother and father. And generally we think well of the father as the law-giver, right? The one who installs this kind of a taboo against incest, which means a child can’t have the first object, and in that sense is able to sublimate, and perhaps we think of most creative work coming from that place, or all social contracts coming from that place. But the mother, on the other hand, we’re thinking of her as the real agent of satisfaction, or we’re thinking of her as the imaginary good or evil caretaker, but she also has a symbolic role.

[16:07]

Not exactly like the one I described for the father, but it’s equally important in the way the child makes that passage into language and culture. And basically she’s saying you can’t kill your brothers and sisters. And to negotiate that rivalry is what’s absolutely crucial to any kind of communitarian project.

- Hudson river valley, 1930, Eleanor, a celebrated humanist, philanthropist and woman at large, created Val-Kill Industries as a means to employ young men, women and people of colors, hit hard by the Depression. The goal of Val-Kill was, as Eleanor put it, “To supplement the income of local families and sustain a healthy balance between rural agriculture and urban industry, all the while creating the best handmade replicas of my favorite type of furniture in the Dutch colonial style.” This is the cottage workshop where Val-Kill was founded and where, today, Eleanor will sit down at her typewriter to write the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, inspired by an argument she had at dinner the night before with a well-known robber baron.

[14:58]

Eleanor will submit the Universal Declaration to the United Nations, after much proofreading. Whereas recognition of the dignity and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and
peace in the world.

- Are you listening there? Are you listening, you bastard?

- Therefore the General Assembly proclaims this Universal Declaration of Human Rights. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

[14:07]

They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act in a spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood.

(Hammers hammering)

(Machinery drilling)

- Not with you around.

(Stomping)

Your son has been shot. He went to the wall built by men just like him, and men like himself.

[13:04]

Made the weapons that shot him. Made the bullets that pierced his chest. Your son has been shot. The men who shot him were no different from him. The chains that held him were made by men like him. And men, just like him, put the chains on him. But they didn’t blindfold him so he saw them. He saw the factories at dawn. At dawn, they were empty but soon they were filled. With men just like him, workers just like himself. He thought these will be our weapons. These workers are the weapons of our revolution.

[12:05]

At that moment, Mrs. Vlasova reached for the flag. “Let me have the flag, Smilgin,” she said, “All of this must be changed.”

(Audience clapping)

Because I am a policeman who must enforce the rules, even though I’m corrupt, I am forced to rip open your couch to see what you got hidden in there.

One, two, three, four

[11:08]

An ancient circle, ancient circle, ancient circle
An ancient circle, ancient circle, ancient circle
An ancient circle, ancient circle, ancient circle

(Upbeat rock music)

A repetition, representation

[9:30]

Figuration, reenacted within a cave
Of that passage of which we are told
Leads in and out of the path in between
Of the go-between path that links two worlds,
Two modes, two methods, two measures of replicating
Representing, viewing, in particular, the sun
The fire, the light, the objects and the cave.

[9:02]

Of this passage that is neither outside or inside
That is between a way out and a way in
Between access and egress
This is a key passage
This is a key passage even if it is neglected
Or even especially when it is neglected
For when the passage is forgotten
By the very fact of its being reenacted in the cave
It will found, subtend, sustain the heart
Of all dichotomies, categorical differences
Clear cut distinctions, absolute discontinuities
All the confrontations of irreconcilable representations
Between the world outside and the world inside

(Sung)
Between the world above
and the world below

[8:05]

Between the sky and light and the fire of the earth
Between the gaze of the man who has left the cave
And that of the prisoner
Between truth and shadow, between truth and fantasy
Between truth and whatever veils the truth
Between reality and dream
Between, between
Everything is acted out
Between rehearsal and performance
Repetition and representation or reproduction
Everything is acted out between rehearsal and performance
Repetition and representation or reproduction
Everything is acted out between rehearsal and performance
Repetition and representation or reproduction
I heart mimesis

(Flutes and high pitched singing)

You were born poor and poor you will die
You were born poor and poor you will die

[6:01]

You were born middle-class and that won’t last
You were born middle-class and poor you will die
You were born rich and rich you will die

(Harmonizing)

(Cello and violin playing)

[00:00:00]

End of part 4.
Selected Articles and Interviews

My Barbarian
HAPPIER ENDINGS
Catherine Quan Damman on the art of My Barbarian

IT HAS FINALLY HAPPENED TO ME: The cultural detritus of my adolescence and early adulthood has returned with a vengeance. My students appear in outfits—purchased secondhand, probably on Depop—hailing from my own slutty youth. Each generation must arrogate and then transform the past, lest their shoddy inheritance consume them. This is their divine right and they look lovely. Yet the source material convulses from, let’s be honest, an unsightly time absolutely bereft of glamour. More important, the sartorial is but a minor planet in the universe of that era’s ugliness. How to periodize this terrible epoch, which now seems to stretch all the way through the millennium’s first two decades? The forever wars, the great recession, the days through which the end of history revealed itself to be a nasty farce, too many limping years now crumpled into the peculiar catastrophe of our present—my life. Contemporary problems have roots that are centuries old, but nearer histories laugh loudest.

The backward gaze in medias res is also a function of the midcareer retrospective, which My Barbarian—a collective comprising Malik Gaines, Jade Gordon, and Alexandro Segade—now face: twenty shaggy years of living and making, exhumed and revivified by curator Adrienne Edwards with the assistance of Mia Matthias and now on view at New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art. In My Barbarian’s own words, the group “theatricalizes social issues,” with intemperate renditions of various dramas, high and low. Illustrative too are the operations condensed in what they call themselves: the possessive intimacy of “My” yoked to “Barbarian,” that xenophobic designation measuring the distance from a supposedly “uncivilized” other. Ever on the lam from respectability, My Barbarian grab the beast by the collar and pull it close.
My Barbarian bring high-theory arcana into bawdy populist forms, marshaling their multicultural demographics to burlesque liberal fantasies of the melting pot, and vamping the world historical only to burn it down and throw a party around its fire.

Gaines, Gordon, and Segade met as art students in the 1990s and officially became My Barbarian in 2000 while doing gigs at Los Angeles’s Spaceland and the Silverlake Lounge; in the intervening years, they have frequently shifted modes, adopting a soft-shoe of formats under a variety of auspices. They began in the rich tradition of the semiserious art band, briefly performing under the moniker German Tööthbrush, among other names. The art band is an archetype that informs our time like few others, but we still don’t, I think,
quite know what to do with it. From the Velvet Underground and the Stooges to Red Krayola and Destroy All Monsters, the question was how much rage, irony, and social critique one could fit into the jangling riff, the indelible hook. For My Barbarian, the lineage purposefully invoked is queerer, less white, and more matriarchal. Vaginal Creme Davis’s art-punk band, the Afro Sisters—with Davis accompanied by Clitoris Turner, Pussi Washington, Fertile La Toyah Jackson, and a temporary member, Urethra Franklin—is perhaps the ur-model. In fact, Davis, with Ron Athey, programmed the group into an early appearance at the 2002 Outfest in LA. Experimental ’80s performance, often maligned or forgotten, is in My Barbarian’s DNA: Think of Ann Magnuson (who was in several bands, such as Vulcan Death Grip and Bongwater) or Mary Kelly, Eleanor Antin, Lorraine O’Grady, and Andrea Fraser, all of whom they often cite. My Barbarian also sidle, however uneasily, alongside or contra their contemporaries ART CLUB2000 and Los Super Elegantes (Milena Muzquiz and Martiniano Lopez-Crozet). One work from their early era on the cusp of the queer nightlife and art-world circuits, Morgan Le Fay, 2004, is kind of like if you came home from the Ren Faire, on Molly, and remade Kate Bush’s “Wuthering Heights” music video with your friends. It’s also an earworm (find it on YouTube). Throughout, the shambolic trash aesthetics of Jack Smith, Ken Jacobs, the East Los Angeles collective Asco, and the Bay Area collective the Cockettes reign supreme. This pileup of proper names is no accident, but rather the consequence of their animating attitude: ravenous to adopt, then refashion, but also sweetly in awe of a self-selected pantheon of elders.
My Barbarian shimmer, a fun-house mirror reflection of all the morbid symptoms surfacing in this particular interregnum; above all, the twinned crises of referentiality and sincerity plaguing the early Bush era (Dubya, of course), in which earnestness was both grotesquely accelerated (the “twee”) and mordantly enervated (malignant irony). Consider the forms of affiliation and disaffiliation taken up by one of the era’s most polarizing figures: the hipster. In a living autopsy hosted in 2010 by the journal *n+1*, the hipster was dissected as an intellectual poseur, ever braggadocious about the insider knowledge he alone had accrued; as a white bourgeois subject festooning herself with the baubled signifiers of the lower classes and the nonwhite; and as an endless striver enthralled by a culture industry that, as Mark Greif argued, “often kitschified—or at least made playful—the weightiest tragedies, whether personal or historical: orphans and cancer for [Dave]
Eggers, the Holocaust and 9/11 for Jonathan Safran Foer.” So too did the hipster often adopt elements from the actual counterculture, only to coddle them into market-ready submissiveness. My Barbarian reverse, then weaponize, each of these operations: bringing high-theory arcana into bawdy populist forms, marshaling their multicultural demographics to burlesque liberal fantasies of the melting pot, and vamping the world historical only to burn it down and throw a party around the flames.

My Barbarian’s political commitments are sincere, even if they rarely read as “serious.” The group are deeply versed in capital-\(T\) theory, and their enmeshment in academia—both as art students and, later, as faculty—indexes a contradiction facing many artists of their generation, trained in a promiscuously poststudio but increasingly professionalized MFA world. Commentators, myself included, often find it difficult to characterize their work without invoking “camp.” Setting aside the long-standing debate about whether camp is a technique or a mode of reception—that is, a read—it is My Barbarian’s continual relay between intense arch knowingness and the ecstatic *salto mortale* that makes community theater possible (and for so many, a vulnerability to be avoided at all costs), that pushes one to reach again and again for the word. To abuse a turn of phrase from Lauren Berlant (writing on “identity”), camp is perhaps what My Barbarian are attached to but underdescribed by.
They also know how to pull together a *look*. My Barbarian tend to be underappreciated for the visual side of their production—often handcrafted physical objects such as masks, prints, and costumes. See the sailor suits, a set of mermaid’s sequined fins, superhero costumes evoking the Canadian flag, the pajama pants emblazoned with Barack Obama’s grinning face. “Showcore,” Segade writes in the exhibition’s catalogue, “with its internal illogic and deep-cut referentiality, was not infinitely scalable.” My Barbarian’s sensibility—though I am loath to use that word—with its backroom apocrypha and glittering spontaneity, thrives, above all, on the anecdotal. It seems meaningfully resistant to the logics of the catalogue raisonné, making the prospect of a museum exhibition all the more thorny and enticing.
At the same time, to be properly dialectical about it, the group’s madcap presentation may best exemplify Sianne Ngai’s theorization of the “zany,” “an aesthetic of nonstop action,” the frantic energies of which reveal the “ambiguous erosion of the distinction between playing and working.” Their indefatigable production evokes the hyperextended, exhausted, somehow both underemployed and overworked generation whose frustrations exploded in Occupy. Titles in the group’s expansive project history—Broke People’s Baroque Peoples’ Theater, Flat Busted Beauty Window Fatale, and Post-Living Ante-Action Theater: Post-Paradise, Sorry Again—evince their droll intelligence. You Were Born Poor & Poor You Will Die, performed in New York at Participant Inc. as part of the 2005 Performa Biennial, was a “ritualistic incantation of class warfare.” It began with the group busking for spare change and ended by suggesting that the contemporary economy requires something like blood sacrifice. Both despite and because of the new spirit of capitalism’s favored modes of flexibility, creativity, and regimes of individual
microdistinctions of choice, the work’s invocation of fate—the motor of so much ancient Greek theater—is perhaps fitting for the grim sense that poverty and precarity are now all but assured.


That Performa Biennial was the first, and so the other recent history My Barbarian’s oeuvre shadows is the early-aughts fascination and obsession with “performance” or “theater” in the “art world,” which seemed to reach its frenzied peak in the middle of these two decades. The group’s Post-Living Ante-Action Theater, or polaat, a system they introduced as a commission for the New Museum, began in a mostly parodic mode—a glib joke about having to teach art-world denizens about even the most basic elements of theater and its history. As the project developed, it became more genuine: Incorporating elements of Augusto Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed (in which Gordon is formally
trained), Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s antitheater, Judith Malina and Julian Beck’s Living Theatre, Brecht, and Artaud, the group found their groove in the collective elaboration and squishy proximity that good pedagogy demands.

To abuse a turn of phrase from Lauren Berlant (writing on “identity”), camp is perhaps what My Barbarian are attached to but underdescribed by.

In this regard, *Counterpublicity*, from 2014, is perhaps the highest-proof distillation of the trio’s years of collaboration. Its hot center is Pedro Zamora—a Cuban American who appeared on the third season of MTV’s *The Real World* before dying of aids at the age of twenty-two—and an essay written about Zamora by the late queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz. Muñoz called Zamora’s presence in the world “counterpublicity,” a way of “being for others.” A catchy jingle, lyrics drawn from the academic verbiage in Muñoz’s essay, opens the piece, in which Gaines, Gordon, and Segade read lines culled from footage in
which Pedro meets his roommate Cory and members of the cast describe their questions about having a roommate with aids. The video’s spare production highlights the subtle differences in each of their performing styles. Gordon looks most like an actor, not so much because of her dirty-blonde hair or sharp cheekbones but because of her knowledge about how to hold her face. Segade is the most raffishly exaggerated, eyebrows scrunching suggestively, with serpentine wrists and swivels of the hip. Of the three, Gaines is the most evasive performer: Occasionally, he will look straight into the camera, as might the subject of a documentary, eyes intensely locked, and he prefers a geometric, solid equipoise. Throughout, they change positions, voices, parts. When reading aloud, they sometimes look past one another.

As the work crescendos, Segade recites a speech Zamora gave to a group of students at Stanford University about his experiences of illness. On a panel organized by Visual aids, Segade described how—despite My Barbarian’s long training in theatrical distancing techniques—while performing the role he found himself unable to maintain the gap, too moved by the textures of Zamora’s words: “There’s not one second of my day that I am not aware that I am HIV positive, but that doesn’t mean that my happier moments are any less happier.” In deviating from the grammatical norm to exaggerate and amplify the adjective—not just “happy,” but “happier”—Zamora puts his pleasures into political relation. How not to be “any less happier” is hard work indeed, and it is their attention to these labors that makes My Barbarian’s interest in the “kind of beauty that comes from loving the flawed constructions people make to represent themselves” so indelible.

In the end, My Barbarian’s capacious embrace of sources is perhaps neither pastiche nor collage but rather an acknowledgment of those ready-made containers, a little shopworn, out of which one assembles a life. After all, what are Marx’s “conditions not of one’s own choosing” if not choreography, costumes, scripts, and sets? Sure, you could mount a faithful adaptation, but why? Fucking with it sounds more life-giving, more happier, more fun.

*Catherine Quan Damman* teaches art history at Columbia University and is finishing a monograph on performance and affective labor in the 1970s.
Photo by Becky Shodgrass. Courtesy of the artists and Perisart.
My Barbarian
by Andrea Fraser

I met Alex Segade, one of the three members of the My Barbarian performance collective, my first day on the job at UCLA, where he had just started as an MFA candidate, in the fall of 2006. A few months later I met Malik Gaines and Jade Gordon, the other two members of the collective, when Malik invited me to participate in “Talks about Acts,” a symposium he organized for LA><ART. That was the beginning of what is by now a half-dozen years of exchanges about performance, art, theater, teaching, Brecht, Beal, Bourdieu (our three Bs), and so much more.

My Barbarian has brought tremendous energy, commitment, scholarship, invention, and an extraordinary range of talents, tools, and traditions to a project of developing a new model of critical practice at the intersection between the visual arts and the expanded fields of theater and performance. I was thrilled to record this discussion with the trio this past summer in their Glassell Park studio in LA as they prepared for their first solo show at Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.

— ANDREA FRASER
ANDREA FRASER Since this conversation is going to press, my first question is: What do you think about the press you've gotten so far? A lot of it seems to focus on "excess," "antics," "kitsch," and "camp"—with "hints of intriguing conceptual issues." Sorry to throw this at you!

ALEXANDRO SEGADE Some of my favorite writing has used what we do and extended it to other conversations, like Shannon Jackson's essay "Just-in-Time" for The Drama Review or José Muñoz's book Cruising Utopia. I also like Hilton Als's weird write-up of us in the New Yorker. He's like a carnival Barker speaking about some sideshow—he calls us "whippersnappers." Unfortunately the term kitsch gets used a lot, but everything else on that list I'm okay with.

JADE GORDON Camp is okay; kitsch is not. Kitsch is sort of like garbage. (laughter)

MALIK GAINES Camp relates to theatrical conventions that are critical and also pleasurable. Kitsch is a misinterpretation of our work.

AF A lot of what's been written about you in the context of art journalism also seems to emphasize the theatrical aspects of your work—maybe because these strike art writers as the most novel in the context of what they are seeing in the art world. The three of you each have different backgrounds in theater, yet My Barbarian now exists primarily in the visual art field, both physically and discursively. How do you think the theater practices and discourses that inform your work function in an art context?

MG Those terms get picked up on because our strategies are somewhat transgressive in the gallery space since they refer to fun and entertainment. In theater you have a play and in art you have a work, right?

JG We had a set of theatrical techniques and tools that we could work with as a medium. At least for me, this was my set of skills.

AS We're all coming from different backgrounds. I went to art school, as you know, Andrea, since you were my professor.

AF Yes, you got an MFA in visual art, after having gotten a BA as an English major, and Malik, you got a PhD in theater—

MG Theater & Performance Studies

actually, at UCLA. I did writing at CalArts before that.

AS And Jade got an MA in Applied Theater at USC.

AF Applied Theater?

JG Theater for social change, with an emphasis on Augusto Boal. It's not community theater, but theater in the community, where participants are nonactors using theater for political and social change.

MG But we don't use those techniques in a way that is conventional or always legible in theater itself. The art space allows us to change topics, strategies, and genres with each specific project. We can respond to the architecture of a place, or its location, or a specific audience. Those are features of performance art more than theater.

AS Before My Barbarian got started we worked on theater projects together. We didn't exactly have a context; we came from a space that resembled the underground and worked in provisional, DIY venues. We still present work in places that aren't always contiguous with the visual arts, but the art world offered us an opportunity to experiment with the audience in a way that's totally different from theatrical and performance venues, where the audience has a very specific role. Getting people out of their seats is difficult. People are—

JG —passive.

AS But our first audiences were rock-venue audiences, which are not seated or passive but are actively talking back to you.

AF So your first incarnation was as a band?

AS We did theater together before we had a name, and then we started My Barbarian as a band. We could construct performances fairly quickly and actually get paid a little to go on stage, which was the opposite of what theater was offering us.

JG We wouldn't have to pay to produce anything. We could have a guaranteed 45 minutes to an hour on stage to figure out what we were doing. It was an incongruous space, not always welcoming. The question was: What doesn't belong here? That helped form what we do, because we were always allowed to transgress in the rock club.

AF So, how were you different from other rock bands?

AS For one thing, there were three lead singers, which was tricky.

JG Two of whom didn't play instrument

AS We also were heavily invested in narrative, so we were always telling stories—

MG And there were costumes.

JG We required specific attention. We would stop and wait, or we'd try to batti with the clinking of glasses—

AS —and we had crazy music influence: Our models included musicals from the golden age of Broadway, mixed in with psychedelic rock and new wave dance music

AF So you weren't really a rock band.

AS We were an art band.

JG We were masquerading as an art band. We even created alter-ego groups occasionally, German Toothbrush, with an umlaut over both the o's was our avant-garde—

AF Toothbrush!

AS —hippie, progressive band. Maybe because there are three of us and we are kind of prolific, we were too hyper to even be one band.

JG We would get frustrated if we had to play the same songs three shows in a row.

AS At a certain point we became really interested in extending past the five-minute comfort zone for a song into that longer pieces—

JG —and added dialogue and scenes and set pieces.

AS Then we wanted to create situations with the audience. We did our very first gay marriage piece for the Baghdad School of the Performing Arts in 2003.

AF What is that?

JG That's another alter-ego group.

AS That was at the beginning of the second Iraq War. We tried to get the audience to look at it as a ritual they could participate in. Then it became clear that we needed more flexibility. In an art
context you actually have more space to decide how things are going to be set up.

AF So, after the club setting you found the gallery context?

AS 2004–2005 was the transition.

MG A few curators saw us perform as a band and knew that we really wanted to do site-specific things, so they started inviting us to develop projects.

AF It occurred to me when you were talking about audience that in some ways the theater context failed its own radical experiments from the ’60s and ’70s. The visual art context became a place where those experiments could develop and move forward.

JG Absolutely.

MG It hasn’t been the case that doors are flung open for us to do radical theater in art museums—we’ve struggled with that too—but what you just described was our thinking at the time.

JG The doors weren’t flung open for us to do radical theater in any theater spaces either.

AF I’m sure the doors weren’t really flung open for you anywhere. More like cracked open, right?

MG But we think of ourselves as artists; I don’t think of myself as an actor.

AF And yet, reading through your own material as well as your press, much of the emphasis does seem to be on theater, with many references to Boal and the Theater of the Oppressed, and to Brecht in particular. You’re reimagining Brecht’s play The Mother now for a show at Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects. So theater does seem to be very defining. What does that mean in combination with the statement “We’re artists”?

MG My father is a conceptual artist [Charles Gaines] and when I was very young, he told me that the idea is to introduce content and form that aren’t already recognized as art and make them art. That might be why I’m comfortable using things that have been connected to theater and calling them art. That gesture is much more a part of art than theater.

AS I was never convinced that I had to choose. One of the first criticisms we got was, “Your work is too theatrical.” We were like, “Well, we all come from the theater so we don’t think of that as pejorative.” Michael Fried’s “Art and Objecthood” essay—which is taught to every single undergrad art student—actually provides a helpful framework. Fried sees theater as a promiscuous, impure space that lies between the arts. But then you have the opposite view among theater people, who think theater is the mother of the arts. Theater may be a more productive concept within the art realm than within the theater realm. It’s also connected to entertainment in a different way.

AF Entertainment may be an even more challenging term in an art context than in theater. How should art people engage
with what is entertaining in what you do? Which leads to the larger question of the criteria by which you want My Barbarian to be evaluated: Is it pushing the art or theater envelope and moving the practice forward? Is it its social or political impact? Or is it on the basis of—

AS —the success of our spectacle?

JG Brecht said that in order for didactic theater to be effective, it had to be entertaining.

AF Actually, I see you very much in the tradition of '80s performance art, which has been erased from art history to a large extent.

MG Laurie Anderson?

AF And Ann Magnuson, Eric Bogosian, John Kelly, and the NEA four—Karen Finley, Holly Hughes, Tim Miller, John Fleck. All of the stage and cabaret-based work was considered a part of the field of art performance in New York in the '80s.

MG Right.

AF I'm shocked when I hear people saying, "There was no performance in the '80s." Hello? The NEA Four? The most famous performance artists in the history of the United States!

AS Generationally that is the performance we saw first.

MG There are a few specific gatekeepers right now in terms of big institutions. Cabaret-oriented pop performance doesn't conform to the post-minimalist experience they prefer. I listened to Laurie Anderson's record Big Science as a kid all the time. I imagine there were gay men of that generation who would have been our mentors, but didn't live through the AIDS epidemic and weren't able to rise to prominence in a way that we would recognize now or know about. Of course, we were also interested in Eleanor Antin, Lorraine O'Grady, Carolee Schneemann, Adrian Piper, but that more theatrical work was very important to us.

AS We were definitely thinking about those '80s artists. Particularly Ann Magnuson, in my case.

AF Then Magnuson and Bogosian start working in film and TV. It's actually not that that history disappeared; it got split off from visual art history and became more associated with performance studies instead. It is really unfortunate that much of the connection was lost in the process.

AS We've gone back and forth between those two contexts a lot.

JG Because we are a collaboration, each of us tries new mediums and brings the results into the fold under the My Barbarian umbrella. Working in an art context allows for drawings to become set pieces and masks to become sculptures. It allows for a high level of experimentation and the constant addition of more and more ingredients.

MG Rather than occupying a particular disciplinary space, we all are interested
ambivalence as a critical mode that allows us to work as a collective rather than as an individual, to disperse past a beginning and an end. Where is the art exactly? Bringing theater into a museum destabilizes, de-centers things, which helps in the effort to raise political questions in a space that concretizes everything. Some people see ambivalence as wishy-washy or having a negative quality, but I see it as doing more than one thing at a time in a place that demands a singular kind of output.

JG Indistinction—more on that later.

AS I think it’s actually more challenging to bring art strategies into a theater context. You can bring any form into a gallery space, into a white cube. There are certain things that are really difficult to bring into a theater space because of the expectation and training of the audience. Getting people out of their seats is difficult when the seats are so comfortable.

AF In the past you have made distinctions between audiences and the ways various works create different relationships to audiences—between a seated theatrical audience and a mobile art audience that may or may not be engaged in a participatory process. Then there are the people you work with in the context of PoLAAT (Post-Living Ante-Action Theater): they are not audience members, but rather participants who then become performers for other audiences. So there are different strategies, each generating relationships that have different dynamics and implications.

AS That’s been the exploration: the question of what various aesthetic choices communicate and what sort of impact they have on different audiences.

AF And that’s where site and situational specificity come in.

AS Yeah. We do tend to have a consistent position throughout, which is to ask questions about culture which are relatively difficult for us to answer: How will different approaches effectively get us in contact with different audiences so that we can ask those questions? I’ve become less convinced of the idea, for example, that audience participation will automatically have more impact than a well-delivered monologue.

AF That’s healthy skepticism! You’ve been involved in the dialogue about participatory practices, audience experiments, and collective and collaborative process that’s been going on within and between the visual art, theater, and performance studies. Do you find yourself questioning the claims made in some of those debates?

AS I’m less convinced that any one mode necessarily has a certain politics. In many ways Brecht and Artaud are at the root of what we do. There is a productive split between them: Brecht calls for an alienated audience that questions the action, while Artaud envisions a type of ritual theater that surrounds the audience and brings them into the experience. This tension has been generative for many who followed after them—Boal and others who have been huge influences on us, as well as visual and performance artists.
MG People in the art world read Rancière’s *The Emancipated Spectator* and say, “Oh, Brecht is just deeply flawed!” And you’re like, “Have you actually seen Brecht’s plays?” Of course they haven’t; Brecht is a lot of fun.

AS We work with these things as tools. They shape different kinds of experiences but I don’t think they have inherent politics.

JG Democracy can go completely wrong. I mean, look at what’s happening in Egypt.

MG Look at Florida’s Stand Your Ground law.

AF Your approach is difficult to locate, which makes it exciting but also challenging. We can locate you in relationship to visual art and theater, which each have specific histories, institutions, rituals, discourses and so forth—although of course there is also a long history of dialogue between them. Perhaps we can also look at the aims of your practice, which as you said, asks critical questions about culture...
Of course, traditions of critique exist both in visual art history and in theater history. Are you bringing those two traditions together to develop new strategies for how one engages in a critical practice today?

**MG** The answer is yes. *(laughter)*

**JG** Good work!

**AF** Phew!

**AS** That’s why the press just wants to say “they’re antic” and “they use kitsch,” because the rest of it is hard to deal with.

**JG** But that difficulty is a part of the practice, the questions make up the content and the form is the form and—

**AS** —it’s a forum.

**JG** The form is the forum, yeah.

**AF** If the frame of the project is critical practice, then the project itself is an investigation of how one achieves a critical impact, as well as the more fundamental question of how we define critique itself.

**MG** Maybe there’s a difference between critique, critical questions, and critical practice.

**AF** As an artist and performer, it’s quite clear to me that most of the critical strategies that came down to me in the ‘60s and informed institutional critique derived, if not from Brecht specifically, then from Berlin Dada. That was the place and time when avant-garde strategies were turned to explicitly political ends. It was also when work on form, representation, discourse, and narrative came to be considered political work, understood as ideology critique and later simply as critique. So the influence of Brecht was always there. Arguably the most important additions to those strategies in the visual arts came in the ‘70s, with feminism. But at this point in time a post-disciplinary critical practice has become a tradition in itself that exists between fields. The breaking down of disciplinary boundaries has often been framed as a kind of internal or institutional critique, especially when those boundaries are seen as elitist, exclusionary, hierarchal, and so forth. But now that the art world has become a global, multibillion dollar industry that can gobble up anything and everything, do we need to rethink the politics of post-disciplinarity?

**AS** That’s the thing to question: Have you been consumed, subsumed into something that needs you for a certain purpose, like to build audience on Thursday nights so the institution can actually get funding?

**AF** Or to “enliven the museum,” which is a phrase I hear a lot these days.

**JG** But is the problem one of exploitation?

**AS** Our project for the Engagement Party program at the Museum of Contemporary Art here in LA might be an example to consider. It was funded by an endowment to support collective social practice through the museum’s education and public programs department. When we did it, it was right after the collapse of the institution. Thinking a lot about your practice, Andrea, and performing a site-specific critique, we did a series of interviews with people who had worked at MOCA through the crisis and had seen their fellow employees get fired. We took those interviews and turned them into scripts for actors to learn and perform at the opening of one of the museum’s shows.

**AF** I can’t believe I missed that. Damn!

**JG** You would have liked it. *(laughter)*

**AS** We wanted to raise questions in a way that the public could engage with, in the space of the crisis itself, with the people who actually are impacted by it, like, What’s happening with the security guard here?

**MG** When we did it, this was the only functioning funded space within the entire museum that could commission art.

**JG** And they couldn’t actually pay us.

**MG** So they folded our project into having an opening for a show of works in their collection.

**AS** That part of the project, where we were expected to help pay for their opening party through our commission, was the gobbling thing. It happens all the time. I remember Danny McDonald from Art Club 2000 saying to Malik, “Remember, they need you more than you need them.” That’s a potential way of looking at things, but sometimes it’s hard to remember that when you are trying to sustain a practice.

**AF** Your PoLAAT project seems to be very much about formulating, even codifying, a model of critical practice.

**MG** It began in 2006, following a lot of work we had made around Bush-era anxieties. I wanted to be hopeful about the possibilities for democracy and participation. We wanted to bring our experiences as a group to larger and larger groups. Times have changed, of course.

**AS** Yeah, the attempt was to develop with other people the strategies that we had already formulated with our work. It started in the education program of the New Museum. We were playing with the self-reflexivity of institutional critique and the Brechtian impulse toward exposing the apparatus, while embracing critique as a fun, positive, and necessary part of art making.

**JG** The question was: How do we codify our strategies and then teach them? How do we share them and possibly let them exist in a context other than our own?

**AF** So they can be practiced by other people?

**JG** Yeah, some people in Italy used them.

**AF** How did that work out?

**AS** They stayed together as a group after we left, but they broke up after a few performances.

**MG** We modeled these codes after some radical theater projects including The Living Theater, Fassbinder’s Anti-Theater, and Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed, using our own didactic charts and graphs, while keeping in mind some of the perceived failures of ‘60s utopian projects: the sense that their radicality was consumed and repurposed, that their revolutions were re-contained. So there’s also ambivalence there. But we do actually believe in all of the principles.

**AS** The five principles are “Estrangement,” “Indistinction,” “Suspension of Beliefs,” “Mandate to Participate,” and “Inspirational Critique.” They all reflect the conversation we’ve had across disciplines. “Estrangement” is the first principle that can be connected to the Brechtian alienation effect very easily, but we also wanted to bring camp into that conversation.

**JG** In camp there’s this emotional identification that happens across critical distance.
MG In Brecht, as in most Marxist models, all the issues of gender and sexuality and race get reduced to a subset of class, but if you’re looking at queer or feminist performance strategies, they’re happening together, in tandem. That’s what we want to do with “Estrangement.”

AS Then “Indistinction” came from looking at Bourdieu. Also, of course, from our own practice as this thing that’s hard to locate. There’s a joke in there too in the sense that distinction implies a kind of refinement. But as a performance strategy, “Indistinction” allows us to do things that short-circuit each other.

AF Whereas “Estrangement,” with the Brechtian connection, evokes a Marxist tradition of ideology critique, “Indistinction,” references Bourdieu, who rejected Marxist thinking about class in his own work on social hierarchies and domination. But “Indistinction” also takes me back to the historical avant-gardes and what Kristeva called the revolution in poetic language: the destruction of the order and hierarchies of signifying structures. That’s the Artaudian tradition, right?

MG I think so, except unlike Artaud or someone like Gertrude Stein, we’re less likely to break down meaning in order to show its fallaciousness than to foreground its complexity. We would rather stay with meaningful, contradictory things at once.

AF Does this notion of simultaneity have a particular history in theater? It’s a core strategy in avant-garde traditions identified in the visual arts.

MG Yeah, I was just looking at some of Grotowski’s scenic designs and they do everything they can to break up a proscenium view. There might be an actor here, and then an actor over there, and an actor outside—

JG Also Richard Schechner’s environmental theater pieces, where it’s about creating multiple points of view. The audience was dispersed around the space and depending on where you were in the audience, you would be looking at different things so that people had completely different experiences of the performance.

MG Or in a broader performance context, I think a lot about Nina Simone’s strategy in the song “Four Women,” in which she embodies all of them.

AS Which makes me think about the third PoLAAT principle, “Suspension of Beliefs.” That one was really hard when earlier this year we worked in Israel, where religion is so important.

MG And in Egypt too, in 2008. We changed the name to “Can You Believe What You See?”

AF Is it a way of engaging specific belief systems that emerge in your process?

JG It’s actually more like letting your belief system levitate and float around, suspending it in mid-air so you can walk around it and look at it from above and from below, and maybe look at other people’s belief systems hanging in the air next to you, and ask questions and be critical of your own system.

AS Creating some distance from it, but also being aware of how belief is produced and supported. This is the one where we get very metaphysical in terms of performance. There’s a lot of levitation exercises and supporting each other in—

JG —trust circles.

AF Do each of these principles represent specific phases in a workshop with a group?

JG Yes. The final workshop is the final performance, and then the circle widens from the participants in the workshop to the audience.

MG We organize a final recital as a demonstration of the principles, where all the stuff that got generated in the workshops gets connected.

AS At the end the participants of the workshop—

JG —teach the principles—

AS —to the rest of the people who are there, to the audience. “Mandate to Participate” is always a struggle. Everyone finds audience participation to be a nightmarish concept, despite the fact that participation in an art context, particularly in social practice, is always considered positive.

MG We’re pretty good at it, though.

AS We get better at figuring how to “play” with a larger group of people. This is where key concepts like play or critique work with and against each other.

JG On my own, as a Theater of the Oppressed practitioner, I’ve worked with students or kids or old people who really don’t want to do it, so you develop different strategies for mandating audience participation.

AF That’s quite a skill set.

MG How does “Inspirational Critique” strike you as one of the experts in the field of institutional critique?

AF I’m ambivalent.

MG So are we.

AF I’m fine with tossing institutional—most people understand it too narrowly anyway—but critique is actually a much more problematic term in contemporary art discourse. It’s seriously overused and yet very difficult to define, so it becomes a politically legitimizing term for all sorts of things that may be quite repressive. So I can relate to qualifying critique as a way to grapple with that. But then at the same time, of course, I’m protective.

MG Right.

AF I would hope also that inspiration is already a component of institutional critique, and that bringing it out could be a productive dialogue. One of the problems with critique is that it’s often practiced as a kind of negation that can be about shaming or generating guilt, which just serves to activate defenses.

JG And shut things down rather than open them up.

AF Right. The aspect of institutional critique that should work against that is reflexivity: It’s not about pointing at someone and saying, “Shame on you!” It’s “Shame on me!” That can be comic, but there’s also a pathos there that can be inspirational, like the classical dramatic protagonist who inspires by facing and overcoming—or failing to overcome—various challenges. At the same time, I still value art as an alternative to what Marcuse called an “affirmative culture” that’s all about warding off anxiety and bad feeling. Maybe that’s why “Inspirational Critique” makes me a little nervous.

AS Mary Kelly told me that critique is by definition inspirational, so the term is redundant.

MG It’s a play on words, so it’s a little
Brecht and Artaud are at the root of what we do. There is a productive split between them: Brecht calls for an alienated audience that questions the action, while Artaud envisions a type of ritual theater that surrounds the audience and brings them into the experience.

MG It was rigorous.

AS But in other contexts—

AF—you’re in intensive care. All site- and situation-specific work should be mindful of context and audience. In a previous interview, Malik, you said that theater is social change. You quoted Boal: “Theater is a dress rehearsal for the revolution.”

JG A dress rehearsal for reality.

MG I could stand by that.

AF We’ve located My Barbarian not in an art tradition or theater tradition so much as in a tradition of critical practice, itself defined by the question and ongoing investigation of what constitutes a transformative cultural practice. That’s different from what one finds in other arenas of political art or social practice, where those questions are seen as already answered.

MG Right. Of course we can’t insist that social change is always positive. Nor is collaboration. But through theatrical forms we can enact social dynamics that are frozen and crystallized in much visual art. I don’t know if you can go so far as to talk about our work as rehearsal for revolution, but it’s a place where you can envision different scenarios that maybe alter accepted terms.

JG That’s pretty much what we’re all about, and what Boal’s work is about, creating possibilities, scenarios that reflect possibilities. But we’re definitely not doing strict Boal.

AS Making work that addresses political questions is not the same thing as activism. It can be informed by activism, and it may also be critical of it. We went to Israel under the cloud of a cultural boycott: we broke the boycott and then we made a piece about the boycott. We wanted to know what the artists who we were working with thought. For us the biggest question was: What good does it do to cut off a conversation?

AF There are different ways of conceptualizing political practice in cultural fields. One is direct impact on the model of activism rooted in a larger social movement. Another is the model of critical practice, which aims to impact its own cultural field; that’s the model of institutional critique. Both could be considered site-specific, but in very different arenas. Then there’s art that claims to be political vis-à-vis its subject matter, but we don’t buy that, right? And there’s a fourth model, which is direct impact in the specific arena of its participants in terms of their active relations—like the process that you’re doing with PoLAAT—where it’s about very immediate social and interpersonal relationships. But to describe that model as political, it seems to me that one first has to identify what forms of domination are at work in those relationships and what’s at stake for participants in changing them. Actually, the same is true of the other models as well.

MG And when we discuss these fields, we also should remember the public spaces where we’ve worked—the park, the town square, the boardwalk, the National Mall—where many disciplinary terms fall away and content is addressed more broadly. Here politics are experienced more directly, but the work is still very different from activism.

JG When I was studying applied theater, there wasn’t space for me to be an artist and a cultural activist. My ego as an artist had no place in cultural activism. I felt like I had to remove myself, like I had to sacrifice aesthetics for the good of the collective. It doesn’t leave space for self or play.

AS This is where my impulse toward indistinction comes in. All of these rubrics are fun to parse, but sometimes I feel like I’m playing Dungeons and Dragons, and trying to determine, “Are you a gray-elf or are you a wood-elf? Are you a water wizard or a fire magic user?” It drives me a little bit crazy because there will be, in the end, a work that will be grappled with, and if it’s any good, it’s actually fighting against all of those terms.
MY BARBARIAN
MANDETE

In 2000, My Barbarian officially began as a band with three lead singers. According to Malik Gaines, Jade Gordon, and Alexandro Segade, playing in rock venues guaranteed a little cash and some stage time, a smarter proposition than self-funding their own theater productions. But eventually, their discordant musical influences (show tunes, psychedelic rock, and new wave) and desire to continue experimenting with theatrical narrative, scene, and costume was a perfect fit with rock audiences with whom they increasingly competed for attention. As Segade explains, “Maybe because there are three of us and we are kind of prolific, we were too hyper to even be one band.” Their move to the art world around 2004 has provided a more enthusiastic viewer and institutional support to work as a collective but reception has often overlooked the significance of their ongoing experimentation with audience. Approaching culture as a thing performed, not simply consumed, My Barbarian’s engagement with the question of participation is at the core of their critical practice.

Post-Living Ante-Action Theater (PoLAAT) (2008–ongoing) explores the persistence of 1960s and 1970s social and political struggles on our contemporary imagination. The performance lab, structured as a series of exercises, draws on techniques from important radical theater of the era, including Judith Malina and Julian Beck’s The Living Theatre, Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s antitheter, and Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed. Although invested in these lesser-known (at least by art world standards) histories, My Barbarian’s look back does not attempt to reenact or reassert particular practices, but rather aims to test the durability of these projects within current endeavors to “organize our own lives in the face of increasingly powerful hegemony.”

PoLAAT’s five principles— Estrangement, Indistinction, Suspension of Beliefs, Mandate to Participate, Inspirational Critique—lay out a program in concise, declarative prose one might attribute to a manifesto. But rather than imposing codes of belief and behavior on a group, PoLAAT’s directives expand possibilities for thinking and action. Estrangement, for example, encourages “the performer [to] act out the distance between themselves and what they are doing,” introducing an element of self-reflexivity to encourage an active critique of the performance and the questions it poses. The principle engenders productive antagonism between the performer and her own actions, her participation within the group, and the group and its collective movement—a line of inquiry elaborated through similar meditations on each principle. In practice, PoLAAT’s debut at the New Museum, New York, in 2008 culminated in performances of all five principles, which were explored in form and content. Mandate to Participate stands out for its upbeat, ensemble performance punctuated by song in vocal harmony: “Each rehearsal is a show / Each show is a life / Each life is a rehearsal / For a better life,” emphasizing through rhyme and repetition the intertwined pursuits of aesthetic experimentation and collective agency. But the song also cautions against rehearsing tropes of a radical past, suggesting the need for new artistic strategies, new political horizons: “If we make each show / Better than the show we expect / Then our lives will get respect.”

In other works by My Barbarian, participation is not explored through participatory gesture and is not always manifested as a conscious choice. The Broke People’s Baroque Peoples’ Theater (2010–ongoing), another one of the collective’s long-term projects of recent years, dramatizes the cost of the financial crisis through use of camp and a modest economy of means. The mini series The Night EpiSode presented at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles (2010) jiffs off Rod Serling’s early-70s horror television series, Night Gallery, whose macabre themes seem to anticipate the grim conditions of late capitalism and the 2008 financial crisis. In the episode “Who’s for Dinner?,” presented as a video installation at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, My Barbarian offers up a slice of American procracy depicted through the phenomena of market speculation and carersim. Here, two female colleagues share a home-cooked meal outside of the office. The established, broad-shouldered brunette (played by Segade in drag), is the sarcastic single working mother familiar from American sitcoms. Easily annoyed and exhausted by the “freedom” of a post-1970s, women’s lib life, she is counting down the years (eight!) until her youngest child leaves the house. Although well-intentioned, the younger, fresh-faced
colleague in powder-pink hair (played by Gordon) can only sympathize by steering conversation back to professional life: “You’re doing so well at work…[You’re] one of the three women at Bissell Bissel and Mortimer.” Obliged to return the compliment, she tosses a bone to her younger colleague: “Well, you are amazing at computer graphics… And these days, really, everything needs graphics.” When their boss (played by Gaines) suddenly comes to the door and fires them, reminding viewers of the 2008 bank closures and widespread layoffs, their careerist lives come crashing down as well. In the closing scene, this news possesses the two colleagues and they cannibalize their boss. Their grisly feast is not only an act of revenge against the proverbial man but also a symbolic ingestion (and embodiment) of the capitalist logic that has already overtaken them. The tension conveys the compromised position of the two protagonists, in which there is neither a clear path to redemption nor escape from the system. The work, departing from a populist late-night television show, emphasizes a zombie-like consumption of late capitalist programming that emphasizes individual achievement over commonalities of gender, class, and culture.

Featuring women formative to the collective’s development, My Barbarian’s recent video, Universal Declaration of Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in the Creative Impulse (2013), centers maternal labor, typically confined to the domestic sphere, within public discourse and political life. Featuring artists Mary Kelly and Eleanor Antin in addition to the mothers of Gaines, Gordon, and Segade, the short films that comprise the video explore notions of the maternal in ways that exceed biological or single-family affiliation. In particular, performances by the collective’s mothers are striking for the imagination they bring to the role of mother. Spot lit in a black box theater, Segade’s mom, Irene, delivers an impassioned speech on bullying and queer youth that includes a recitation of federal and state legal protections, suggesting the knowledge of an informed activist, despite the fact her sons have been out of the house for years. In the segment featuring Victoria, Gordon’s mother, a daughter reads the diaristic writing of a single mother in the 1970s that runs parallel to a sequence of black and white stills of Victoria, elevating private thoughts to a public platform. Gaines’s mother Barbara makes her appearance with a cohort of friends in short skirts, sequined halter-tops, and salmon-colored capes, flashing plenty of pasty skin in a countryside talent show. The gathering is part of a “white trash party” conceived as one of the rotating culturally-specific dinner nights organized by the group. In her performance of one possible public perception of herself, Barbara shares some motherly advice: “It’s fun to try to be different from what you really are, someone you could have possibly been.” This performance of contradiction between who one is and the cultural permutations of who one could have become exemplifies My Barbarian’s exploration of everyday life and its potential capacity to shape a culture of the present.

1 Fraser, Andrea, Malik Gaines, Jade Gordon, Alejandro Segade, "My Barbarian," BOMB Magazine, Fall 2013.
3 Ibid
4 Ibid

* * *

Ryan Inouye is associate curator of Sharjah Biennial 12 and is currently based in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates.
I would build that dome an air,
That sunny dome! Those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And I should cry, Beware! Beware!
Their flashing eyes, their floating hair!
Weave a circle round them thrice
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For they are honey-dew, hallowed,
And drank the milk of Paradise

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Kubla Khan

Whether the reader details the epic traditions of a group of talented young artists and performances, introductions from California and Mexico...

My Barbarian is a collective of twelve parodic and highly collaborative artists headquartered in Los Angeles. The core band members, Mac McCullum, Jake Gordinier, and Alex Segal, are the trio and daughter of the same Los Angeles-based collective, conceptual and experimental performers, and conceptual artists. Their current work involves the integration of music and video, and most recently, the group has been working on a new album, "In the Dark Theatre."...
For the interview section of the portfolio, editor Matthew Lyons and My Barbarian chose to expand the interviewer role from one to many, inviting five artists to interview the collective: Zackary Drucker, Miguel Gutierrez, Simone Leigh, A.L. Steiner, and Wu Tsang. Creating a polyvalent exchange that touches on diverse aspects of My Barbarian’s practice, each of the five artists proposed a few questions to which each member of My Barbarian responded separately. My Barbarian then composed this edit.

ZACKARY DRUCKER
You close your eyes and begin to walk through the desert in your mind. A road bisecting your brain, a pile of ancient rocks, a song sung about us being missed when we’re gone. What are the rocks made of? What are the lyrics to the song? What do you see on the horizon?

MALIK GAMBE:
I think the rocks are granite and obsidian with bronze veins. Sort of Yeowite 1970.

JADE GORDON:
Sea-worn green glass rocks or minerals: pebbles and reliefs and scavengers. Soft precision.

ALEXANDRA DESAO:
On the horizon are shipwrecks.

MALIK:
The song might be the first song we ever wrote, sitting around Jade’s living room, when we were a fledgling rock band. Circa 2005, our first three-part harmony. It was called “My Barbarian,” it was about projecting fantasy onto realist relations and also about having an unloved boyfriend, and fitting that about rock.

A.L. STEINER
One or two or all of you have described yourselves in various ways, one recent description of note being a “theater coven.” How does this term apply, and are there any other relevant vocabulary words or idioms that might be useful in describing My Barbarian if we make it to the 22nd century?

ALEX:
“Theater coven” is not a conceptual framework, more of an organizational banding together of allegiances across difference, the affinity of hetertics. This witchy theatrical strain of performance art is often queer and/ or feminist but always trapped in a feminine (or feminizing) dimension again alternate universe. To be more precise, the “Theater Coven” is an unofficial term for people working in performance who have never accepted the supremacy of minimal gestures over elaborate constructions. Piedpasseurs are: Spiderwoman Thalalo, Angels of Light, etc. I’m not advocating for an essentialist “magic” with this term. It’s theatricality as an admission of the artificial juxtaposition in making art, and its ability to transcend the content, even if it shapes the experience, of a given size. A Coven, then, not just a movement, because covens last longer. We have staged the stage with many members of the Theater Coven. And yes, Steiner, I have a lot more time to introduce to the discourse.

SIMONE LEIGH
What has struck me about My Barbarian is how comfortably you navigate being black, white, queer, not queer and now you are even with child. And it’s not hurting, it makes you stronger. How do you manage what appears to be an effortless intersectionality?

WU TSANG
Can you describe your different roles in the collaboration? In what areas do you individuate and in what areas do you overlap/share?

ALEX:
We all sing, we all dance, we all act.
MIGUEL GUTIERREZ
What is the role of the erotic in your process and in your performances?

ALIK This has been a topic of conversation for years. Miguel, Allik and I have a sexual energy that is rooted in our mutual astrological designation as Fire Signs, which tends to be inclusive and in our case in love. We are a Village. To me, she is a sister, and I hope she sees me as a brother. There is a physical attraction that is棣ing, but also a familial honesty. So, Miguel. It's basically the once of the Von Trapp Family, with a built-in incest taboo, sublimated into songs about gaitedness, acted out through the fetishizing of dismissals and idealizations. Sometimes there is a kind of infantilizing that results from this, and we can come off like a Kinky TV show, which is fine because these modes are always really finite, sexually, and while different projects address the position of erotics differently, there is always a queer strategy. For example, the Queer People of Color Performance Theater (2011-14) is a project where the central image is masked and rigged figures with swallowings, and working underneath, referencing various European Classism, but also cultural poetic sex scenes in Latin America. In all our projects, we play with gender representations, and we are doing this as ciphers performing who are attracted to men. That said, my Barbarian is more polysemous perversion than pornographic, eroticism, and I credit Jade with this productive complication. But, to really talk about blisses and gay optics, Allik and I have had to work in other collaborations.

WU What role does writing play in the process? Does everything start from the written word (of a script) or does it flow simultaneously from movement research/rehearsal/enactment? How important is writing to the thing it actually becomes?

ALIK Writing is so important. Over the years, most projects have started with a little a sentence, a paragraph setting historical, stylistic, and theoretical parameters. Most pieces have evolved from a script, and from a specific music work that accompanies our text. In our process, every other day is devoted to the page. Sometimes, if we get lost in the studio seeing and planning and designing and putting to flesh something, we say, "wait, what does it say on this piece of paper?" as a collective. Having a written plan gives each piece a spine, and as artists who express specific, direct content, written language is the most effective for us. We write in many ways, and we're all really good writers! Though a lot of the script writing is done by Allik, and he has a habit to do with the voice of my Barbarian. One process that works for us is deciding together on slow content and tune, writing down bits of ideas, bundling those into Allik, and getting a script draft back from Allik, which we then project on a wall and read through, revising together as we go. Also as the main composer of the group. I've come to like writing back from a pre-existing
text as set of lyrics; it's really fun for me to look at words on a page and make them into melody and harmony that emphasizes the content of the language.

In one sense it's a difficulty for us, as international performance artists, that our work is so rooted in language. In some projects, like the S.P.U.P.I. (2003-13), we've made the act of translation a central element. We've had to learn songs based on our writing in Italian, German, and others. Our Recuerdos (2007) included a simultaneous Spanish translation as a video element. Other pieces have used Spanish as well, which some of us can speak somewhat. Most often, our work has relied on voices speaking and singing in English. While our work now seems to be circulating well in the States, it's harder for us to grow up in Poland with an hour-long play. Maybe this is something we'll address in the next decade of work. It's always good to have a challenge.

STEINER
That age-old question: what's your longevity secret of this 14 year-old ménage à trois, aka "household of three," in the face of compassion fatigue and an uncompromising hurdle towards planet-wide human-made disaster?

ALEX: Malka and Jack and I are always rethinking historical models for what we do. From art activist to theater composer. Personally, I've always been saturated in group identity. Save Broadway shows, super hero teams, new wave bands, style tribes, pantheons. I used to stand at the first B-52's album line into my own group, much of us constructing our talents and personalities to the collective, getting to be more than one person. My Barbarian is the most successful manifestation of this fantasy that I have yet to experience. It has lasted because it shifts shape along a spectrum of group identities; we have been many bands, teams, theater movements, and now eventually will be the crew of a spaceship.

MIGUEL
Jade, what is it like to work with a couple [of sluts]?

JADE: Ha, you mean a couple of drunk sluts? That's how I see it is part of the reason we've been able to work together for so long. They are connected but obviously two distinct people. They're a support structure for each other, for My Barbarian, and for me. I have different relationships with each of them. I make choices about which of them I will talk to about various things and I make those choices consciously. I sometimes feel out-voted and very occasionally a little left out but not that often. That super sensitive part of my ego that needed all the attention or to always get her way kind of went away several years into the collaboration. I sometimes give the Pigs as Medallist between them and I don't mind it. I dislike conflict and feel happier saying "yes, aye." Their coming and going gives me a sense of stability. It is probably some collective lack [single me stuff] that I'm currently projecting onto them.

MIGUEL
What is it like to work transcontinentally after having worked locally for so long?

JADE: As the 12/20 of 88 who's still in LA, it's been a bit lonely for me in the studio. I'm used to working collaboratively, bouncing ideas off of the other two, getting immediate feedback, suggestions, encouragement. It's been hard for me to self-discipline. Mostly, it's expecting me to show up at a certain time for dance rehearsals. But at the same time I feel like I've been able to start developing a stronger sense of trust in my contribution to the whole. My experience of our group work together has been artistic, but local, and fully protected. Being alone forces you to spend time inside your head listening to voices, conjuring up images or characters or just doing things without immediately being praised or criticized. My Barbarian's bicentric transaction corresponded with changes in my personal life. Working together in intense sports, less frequently, has enabled me to fulfill my day-to-day obligations as a new mother. I have kept room for the mundane everyday life stuff but must really fight for the time alone necessary to make art. It's a total slash but a genuine struggle and it's easy to let distractions keep you too busy and tired to make much. When Alex and Malka were in LA we had a 3066 BUT fairly constant routine of just hanging out together in the studio, discussing projects, rehearsing, laughing, etc. working within the predetermined three or four hour stretches of my schedule allows it to be challenging. I spend a lot less time playing with adults. These days and play is a big part of my process.

ALEX: But I would add that in our absence. Jade has kept busy and started working
ALEX: There is nothing f**ked up about the art world, and I like going to shows for free.

ZACKARY
If you spoke every language ever spoken: who would you speak to and what would you say?

ALEX: I would speak French and talk about some high politics/philosophies about human sacrifice. Or I would speak a computer language and talk to computers about their goals. Or maybe I would just speak French and talk to European programmers about our work.

ZACKARY: If I spoke every language ever spoken I'd get tired of words. I would speak in images or telepathically, a new kind of language that transcends nations and time.

MIGUEL
In a parallel universe, or in the multiverse for that matter, what do your life/job/relationships look like?

JADE: I think it's dangerous to ask myself these types of questions. I've escaped a lot of potentially terrible outcomes and have probably not enjoyed myself enough in certain ways or try to conceive of what I should have, if I were to change that. What if I did a better job, or didn't take this or that opportunity? Would I be rich and famous or with some d**guy guy and have my own TV show or be a leaderless cell-militant crystal with baldness? Before he died, my very cranky grandmother always warned of having "greater regrets." I'm still young, I'm proud of what MS has accomplished so far and feel like there's a lot I still want to do (with the group and on my own) and there's time for it. Or maybe this question is more fantasy based? Like, in a parallel universe, I live in Italy and I'm a famous artist with a hot young boyfriend and I have no work and don't care and I walk everywhere and speak five languages.

ZACKARY: I still fantasize about a non-capitalist reality. I imagine if the needed resources were spread out more justly, and production was less destructive, the three of us would still be in the same place, along with everyone else. I'm not exactly sure how it works, I'll admit. Capital incentivizes the maintenance of wacky value systems, but somehow we think, and the five of you we're talking to, were incentivized to make art and be involved in education and not to try to destroy the earth and all life on it while cruelly oppressing the disempowered. Of course we're complicit in bad things as U.S. citizens/consumers and participants in an art market, but our choices, fantasies, and identifications aren't modeled on corruption and exploitation. If our middle-class freedoms created the conditions for us to make anti-violent, anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-classist, pro-body, pro-fun, pro-living work, then maybe there is some state of utopian-ness that can be modeled available to more people. So that they have incentives to promote less damaging life-possibilities. I've thought about Marxist movements and communist states all my life, and they all have terrible flaws. But the basic outline still makes sense. Maybe in an alternate universe, it's easy to solve, everyone wants to join quee/rad-icant performing-arts activism, like the one Alex, Jade and I seek up for ourselves.
YOU WERE BORN POOR
& POOR YOU WILL DIE

BY MY BARBARIAN

SCENE 1
A RITUAL

Enter performers, clad in religious ceremonial regalia with body paint and paper maché masks. THE HIGH PRIESTESS enjoys a bath ritual with incense. THE PANTOMIME & THE NOVITIATE wear plated &_fname:long unpublished robes. MOMENT to similar attire.

SYNOPSIS ONE.

THE PANTOMIME

You were born poor & poor you will die.

THE PANTOMIME repeats the chant. THE HIGH PRIESTESS and THE NOVITIATE equal change from the audience. The change goes into objects which function as rattles, instruments. Three-part harmony is a row with rhythmic percussion.

ALL

You were born poor & poor you will die
You were born poor & poor you will die
You were born middle class & that won't last
You were born middle class & you will die
You were born rich & rich you will die
Ah ah ah ah ah ah ah
Ah ah ah ah ah ah ah

THE PANTOMIME holds these fates as THE NOVITIATE and THE HIGH PRIESTESS play the percussive objects.

All dance in a circle.

SCENE 2

SOLiloquy OF WOE

THE NOVITIATE

If you don't repent I ain't saving you a prayer
Of all my God's prayers, it must be last
The Fates have chosen my mind
All fates are not kind.

Constrained at awe
To serve in the army
By fear I served pleasures
Both poverty and amity
When I humbled down I sought my redemption
(there's more than one way toوضح an emotion)

Debated to letters, nor letters a bit
In the Temple, I tell and that is my plot
To answer the call of the Temple to wise
The City State contracts as new Temple sex

Persecutors press in from without the land
Preachers and preachers gather at hand
Priests confide among all the priests high
A conference from which emerged none
The people are curious, the sky's gone red
The money was burned and the treasury blind
Property owners have foreclosed houses
In event there's a sickness that makes them insane

Oh! What am I from the Temple tower?
As I pound dead lakes this dark hour

The spectral dead, you see, they can't be paid
Our learned scholar has just Messalina played
She was gone, they say, the Temple's down the well
His corpse it was eaten just after the fall

A terrible thing
To be born a king
Or to being born
The most terrible thing!

IN THE TEMPLE INTERLUDE

Love that kills PRIESTESS and THE HIGH PRIESTESS as covenants.

THE HIGH PRIESTESS

The time has come, the vocation, the path of wisdom, the path of death, the path of love, the path of destruction.

THE NOVITIATE

The path of love, the path of destruction.

THE HIGH PRIESTESS

The path of wisdom, the path of destruction, the path of love, the path of death.

THE NOVITIATE

The path of wisdom, the path of destruction.

THE HIGH PRIESTESS

The path of love, the path of destruction.

DEAD CITIES

THE LANGUAGE speaks

The high priests wish to control the people.

THE HIGH PRIESTESS

Young Brutus, with outstretched arm. Hands to be grasped. Seven people. The Temple.

THE MONARCH

I shall be the last of the people that is.

THE MONARCH

I am born to be at the end of time.

THE NOVITIATE

The time has come.

THE MONARCH

Do you now remember the 3rd step?

THE NOVITIATE

I remember.

THE MONARCH

Aha, you devil, Satan, you.

THE MONARCH

You have said, all, I remember.

THE MONARCH

Good God, you are the last of the people that is.

THE NOVITIATE

I shall be the last of the people that is.

THE NOVITIATE

I shall be the last of the people that is.

THE NOVITIATE plays mallets and trims a book.
PERFORMANCES
2014
2013
The Mother, Suzanne Valadiey, Los Angeles Projects, Los Angeles, CA. Post-Living Active Theater (PoLAt). Forgotten Places, Yaffo ES, Jerusalem, Israel.
2012
2011
Tales from the Future, Watertower Center, The Hampton, PA, Post-Living Active Theater (PoLAt)"Tales from the Future," Richard Prince, The Kitchen, New York, NY.
2010
Realistic Culture, LACMA, LA, CA, Eco Escofetio, Enrico Espino, La Moca, Miami, CA, Death Panel Discussion, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL.
2009
The Fourth Wall Museum of Contemporary Art, LA, CA.
Book People's Baroque Peoples' Theater, Grand Arts, Kansas City, MO.
Festivals and Festivals, DePaul University, Colchester Art Center, Vilnius, Lithuania, The Five Principles, HCCA North Miami, FL.
Dance & Dance, Collaboration with Lisa Schnugger, Lincoln Gallery, LA, CA.
2008
2007
Theater of the Unconscious, New York, NY, Post-Living Active Theater (PoLAt)"Theater of the Unconscious," New York, NY.
2006
PoLAt: Post-Living Active Theater (PoLAt)"Theater of the Unconscious," New York, NY.
2005
2004
2003
2002
2001
2000
1999
1998
1997
1996
1995
Each rehearsal's a show.
Each show is a life.
Each life's a rehearsal for a better life.
If we make each show better
Than the show we expect,
Then our lives will get respect.