

EMA ✓

✓LIN

KEMBRA PFAHLER

→ Selected Press

THE VOLUPTUOUS HORROR OF

KEMBRA PFAHLER

Interview HANS ULRICH OBRIST
Photography DAVID BRANDON GEETING
Assistant MICHAEL WOLEVER
Dress RICK OWENS

Kembra Pfahler has sewn her vulva shut for Penthouse, has danced on bowling balls strapped to her feet, and has sunk a crucifix in her vagina, live on stage. Using whatever is *sitting* around, in a practice she calls *availabilism*, Pfahler uses her own body and influences from *butoh*, Viennese actionism, and low-budget horror films in her pioneering performance art and as the lead singer of her iconic band, *The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black*. So, how did a surfer girl from the sunny shipwrecked beaches of Southern California become the goth punk pinup of your gritty, downtown New York dreams? Hans Ulrich Obrist finds the answer.





KEMBRA PFAHLER Hi Hans.

HANS ULRICH OBRIST Hi Kembra, great to see you.

PFAHLER It's such a strange time.

OBRIST Indeed. It's a very scary time.

PFAHLER You're in Berlin now?

OBRIST I was in Berlin, but now I'm in London. Where are you?

PFAHLER I'm in New York City.

OBRIST So you've been there for the lockdown?

PFAHLER I have been. I'm really glad I was able to stay this whole time. What I've seen has been unprecedented. I'm really glad that I didn't leave.

OBRIST And have you been working during the lockdown?

PFAHLER I feel like production and making things under stress—that did not happen. For a lot of us here, we're just really reevaluating how we're working, and there's been weeks where all of us are just sitting with completely confused expressions. It's been very good to sit through the feelings of terror and just sort of process. Unprecedented is the only word I can think of. It's nothing that I've ever really experienced, and I was here during AIDS in the '80s, and they've made comparisons to this generation of survivors. In my building—I live on the Lower East Side near Avenue C—there's a lot of survivors of AIDS, people who have been taking meds for thirty years, so that was confusing for a lot of folks. Is it safe to stay here, do we want to stay here? For the most part, my community stayed here. Otherwise, there's been what's termed "white flight." It's essentially the idea of people returning to suburbia—that really happened.

OBRIST I also didn't leave the city. I stayed for the lockdown in London, and then it was only in July, in the summer really, that I spent some time in Zurich. I'm always in cities.

PFAHLER Me too. I feel very comforted by brutality—Art Brut. I've been approached by so many people in the art world and so many other artists wanting to document this extreme change that's happening in New York. Everyone asks, "Is it going to be interesting again? It must be wonderful right now." And that's humorous to me because it's not wonderful to see what's happening in New York City. The city is extremely violent, as you've heard, I'm sure, and that's real. Whatever you might've heard in Europe, it's much, much, much worse.

OBRIST You've always lived in cities, and of course, the earliest influence is Los Angeles. You once said in an interview that actually the earliest influences are the SS Dominator, Redondo, Hermosa, Malibu. Can you talk about your beginnings, about how you came to art, and about LA?

PFAHLER It's funny because I'm fourth-generation Los Angeles. My grandparents came from Germany and Italy. They came to America and immediately went to the West Coast to make their dreams come true. For some reason, my family, they've all been athletes. My grandfather was a professional baseball player, and my grandmother was a soft-

ball player. They met playing baseball, they started a business in Los Angeles, and my father was a surfer. I was never educated about my history. My history was always just, "We are from Los Angeles." So culturally, the things that were always celebrated in my family were sports, like baseball and surfing, and I always felt like we were just hatched out of an egg on the West Coast. And my grandfather was in the military, and we were always living by the ocean. But my grandfather decided that he had to hang himself in front of the family on Christmas. So, we always felt like that was a very exciting occurrence in our family mythology. My history on the West Coast and in Los Angeles was just mostly about athletics—surfing, baseball, and I guess what could be perceived as the American capitalist dream. We were always encouraged to be successful, start our own business, never anything toward art, ever.

OBRIST How did art enter your life? Because you've been doing pioneering work as a filmmaker with *Cinema of Transgression*, you've been a pioneer of performance art, you've been pioneering as a musician, as an actress, so it's so interdisciplinary, your activity. It brings all the art forms together, it's almost like *Serge Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes—dance, choreography, music, it's the Gesamtkunstwerk*. How did that begin?

PFAHLER It was mostly out of this idea that making the best use of what's available, and I say availability, but performance to me and using the body was not about show business, it was simply using the body as another tool like painting, or drawing. My performance has more to do with making a drawing than anything else. And we're in the Lower East Side, and probably the same thing with artists working in Berlin or any other city, it's one of the only ways I think that we have to socially communicate with one another, when we start bands, when we do performance. Otherwise we're sitting there alone. I love the idea, because it's not always easy to collaborate, but it's necessary and I think it takes tragedy away from being an artist when we can get out of our own individual practice.

OBRIST And drawing is key, because of course, art began with drawing. You once said in an interview that in a way, the drawing came out of this idea, drawing and performance sort of happened when you were living in these apartments that had nothing in them, and so you started to fill these apartments not only with things, but also with performances and drawings. Can you talk about that?

PFAHLER When you're making a drawing, you're basically giving birth to this new idea. If you're working with more than one person, you need to express to them and show them what you're doing, and a drawing is just a really great communicator to say here's my idea, and usually the drawings that I made are of my sculpture or costuming. Those are the subjects of the drawings, and I call that non-fiction illustration, because the things that are in the drawing really happened.

OBRIST But before you mentioned availability, and availability is a movement which of course is connected to the 20th-century, historic avant-gardes. I'm very interested about when such movements are born. Can you tell us about the moment you had the epiphany for availability?

PFAHLER It came literally like, you know, a light bulb going off, Hans. That sounds corny, but it was like turning the lights on. When you have awareness like that for an idea—I feel like I created a temperature in my surroundings for that to happen. So it wasn't anything that was so planned. I set the temp for these ideas to happen. And I think that happens when you work in your studio, when you spend time with your work, you're creating an atmosphere for new ideas to be born. It also was born out of necessity because I had a professor called Joseph Kosuth. Do you remember Joseph Kosuth?

OBRIST Yes, of course, yes.

PFAHLER So, he was my professor at SVA, and he said to me in class one day, "What are you?" He said, "You represent 50% of the world as a female," and I looked at him and I said, "Are you talking to me?" He confused me so much as a teenager. When I was seventeen years old, I didn't know what I was. I didn't care what gender I was and his question really was ridiculous to me. So, I said to him, "I am an availabilityist." I make the best use of what is available. So, I created that movement as a result of an aggressive question.

OBRIST And it's interesting also because, of course, you mention in interviews often this idea of gender fluidity at the time. Many of us, you said are gender fluid, but we didn't talk about it. The language was just being born. It was you, it was Vaginal Davis, Bruce LaBruce.

PFAHLER I agree completely, and I always encourage everyone I work with to create new words to describe their work. Now more than ever, I think language plays a gigantic part. It's almost been an explosion of new language. The way people articulate themselves now. And I think that's fantastic. And I'm not talking about Urban Dictionary, I'm talking about new words to describe—I feel like we're in a very liminal phase, anthropologically liminal. We're in this phase where we're hunting and we're gathering all of these new tools to describe the end of the ritual which has not actually yet happened.

OBRIST You also had two incredible teachers, Mary Heilmann and Lorraine O'Grady. I've actually just interviewed Lorraine O'Grady last year, and I wanted to ask you a little bit about the inspiration from these two teachers, because you also recently worked with Lorraine O'Grady on a group show at *The Kitchen*.

PFAHLER Lorraine and I did a play together with ANOHNI called, *She Who Saw Beautiful Things*. It was at *The Kitchen* with Lorraine and Laurie Anderson, and it was written by ANOHNI. I went from being a young artist who—I feel like my life would not be the same had Lorraine O'Grady not encouraged me. We had a show in 2014 called





Future Feminism, which was very polemic because it was not popular. Even in 2014 it was very unpopular to be speaking about feminism the way we were speaking about it. It was before the Me Too movement, it was before all of this bullshit got monetized. And one of the things that Lorraine said to us while we were doing this, she said, "There's room for all sorts of feminists in our culture. There's room for Black feminists, for queer feminists, for punk rock feminists, there's room for us all, the problem is that we don't know how to work with one another. We sweat the small stuff." She was talking about taking risks, and she was talking about working hard and making sacrifices, and she had a kind of ethic to the way she made artwork that has stayed with me my whole life. Sometimes I feel it's necessary to make performances that are aggressive with such strong content that they have another life altogether in the retelling of the story. Sewing my vagina shut was a good example of strength in the retelling, and it was essentially a 'one-liner.' The strength lays in the conceptual simplicity of a new creation myth. I thought about things like that when I first started. I liked the book *Daughters of Copper Woman* as it was a creation myth transcribed by indigenous women. It wasn't Christian, and it had the right to exist.

OBRIST You said once that *Future Feminism* was another manifesto, very powerful, it was about eradicating misogyny, but it was also in memory of Ashley Mead who had been murdered. Can you tell me more about the project and how it relates to Ashley Mead?

PFAHLER That was an incredible, very painful story that happened. It was like a terrible, bad dream. This woman was our assistant, and she came from out of nowhere to work on *Future Feminism* with us, and we found out later that she was in an abusive relationship with her husband. So, she returned home after a show, and she was trying to leave her relationship. She was murdered by her husband and chopped up in small bits. It was the most shocking, brutal thing we'd ever experienced. So we had a show for Ashley in Aarhus, Denmark, where we put back together her body parts, and we made a sculpture to look like Ashley, and we put her on a little sculptural ship, and we went to the ocean in the middle of the night, and we had a ceremony for her, basically for her daughter, so that when she grew up, she would see that her mother wasn't just a tragedy. I think every show that we do that's around *Future Feminism* will always include Ashley Mead. It just was a horror story, Hans. It was a shocking horror story. It's something that changed our lives forever.

OBRIST Eric Hobsbawm talked about a protest against forgetting.

PFAHLER There's a difference, I think, between—I call it yesterbating—where there's a kind of romanticism around nostalgia. That's a new word I made, Hans, yesterbate. Where we constantly think about a nostalgic past. I think there's a big difference between historically remembering not to make the same mistakes in the future and

romantically obsessing on nostalgia. I've always been very opposed to nostalgia. I'm not interested in romantically yesterbating.

OBRIST You are also the protagonist of the *Voluptuous Horror Of Karen Black*. It's interesting that when you came to New York from L.A., at the very beginning of your time in New York, there was this festival of art films at MoMA, and you somehow, through that, came to Karen Black. Can you tell me a little about what prompted this obsession with her, what prompted the genesis of the band, and where the band stands now?

PFAHLER Karen Black is not a character that I suddenly become. There's nothing kitsch or comical about me also becoming Karen Black. Doing this is literally just a part of my identity. I got to meet the actress Karen Black many times, and I worked with her many times, with Hal Willner and Lou Reed. We did a wonderful piece called *The Raven* by Lou Reed at UCLA's Tisch School, and she asked me why I named the band after her. Essentially, growing up in LA, most of my education came from cinema and watching horror films, and I loved Samuel Z. Arkoff, the B films. I loved all the things that weren't so popular. I loved Karen's singing voice. She had a fantastic presence on film, and it was sort of like the way a poem is born, where I can't really give a definitive answer as to why. There was an artist called Mike Kuchar. Do you know him?

OBRIST Yeah, I also knew his brother, George. I did a show once with his brother.

PFAHLER I knew them in the '80s, and Mike always would say to me, "Your artwork looks very voluptuously horrific." And I was like, oh that's interesting, thank you for describing my work like that. So, one afternoon I was writing, I just thought to myself, I'm going to make a band and call it the *Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black*. I love the idea of paying tribute to this very strange-looking woman. She was always teased in America for the way she looked, and the way she acted because she was sort of beautiful but strange looking at the same time. And I love that kind of imperfection the Japanese describe as wabi-sabi. So, when I'm in the character of Karen Black, it's just like me putting on a costume, and transformation is just a way to get more muscle doing performance. In a way, when we started, it was so unpopular to go into drag. This was like 1982, '83, '84. Most bands and most performers were very minimal, and they didn't do a lot of costuming, except for the drag performers. Like Ethyl Eichelberger, Jack Smith—they were all my friends. They weren't just people I studied in school, but Jack Smith lived a couple of blocks from me.

OBRIST And you did the last film with Jack Smith.

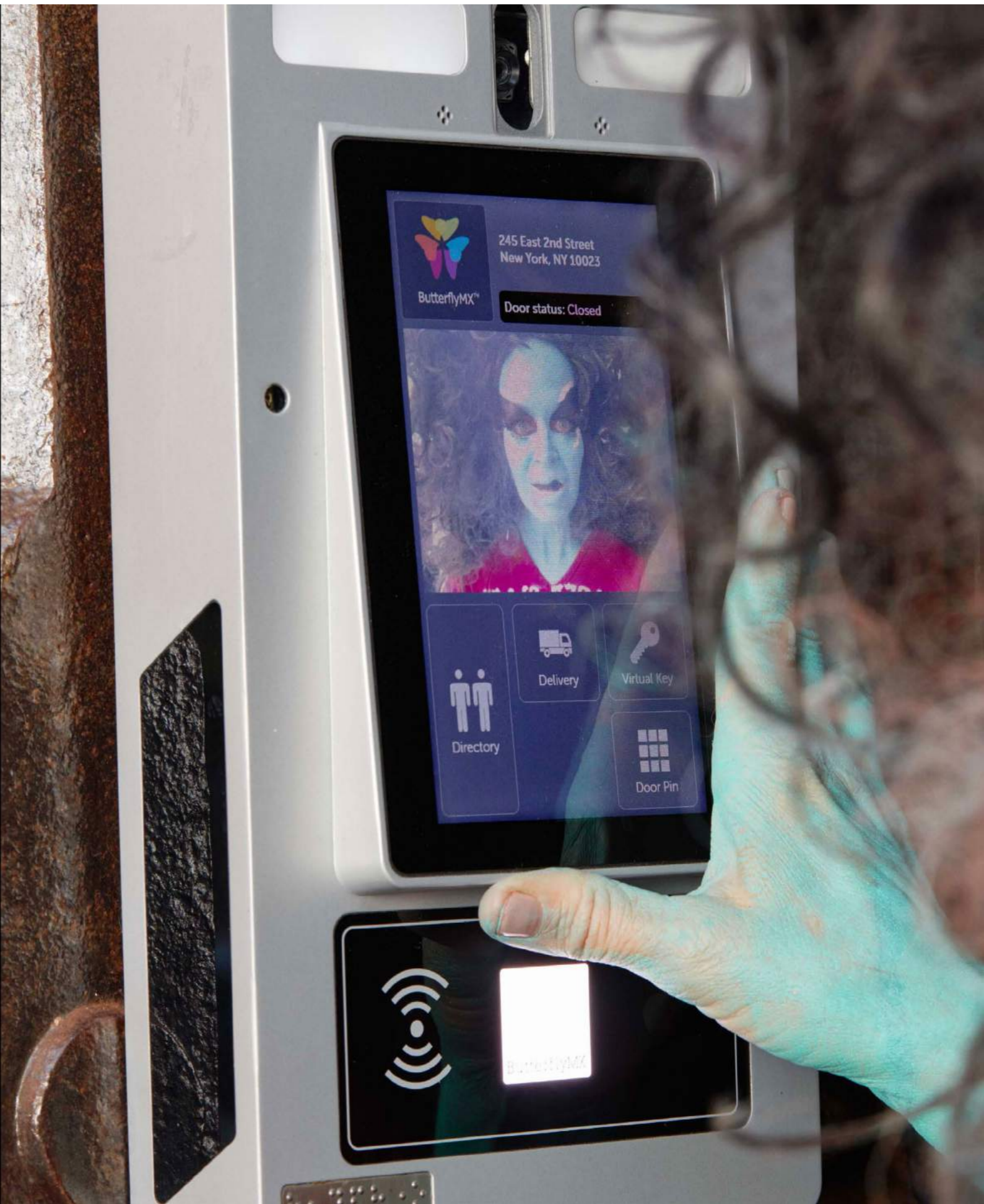
PFAHLER I did. *Shadows in the City*. Quentin Crisp was my neighbor as well, and I just read *The Naked Civil Servant* again because I wanted to remember Quentin. He lived two blocks from me, so my early education as an artist in New York—I

was fortunate to have some really incredible artists around me, like George Kuchar, Jack Smith, Quentin Crisp, Lorraine O'Grady. To this day, in New York City, there are a lot of fantastic living artists. They haven't all disappeared. It's not just a myth that they were here and they're no longer here. I feel like working with a band, and working with music, if you think about it, this type of collaborative, spontaneous music that happens, it's really the last thing that you can't put into a picture frame.

OBRIST When you talk about Karen Black, you also talk about Japan. Your work is inspired by Japan, through your husband Samoa Moriki, but also Noh, and through butoh. You of course talk about butoh. Our friend ANOHNI has always had a poster of Kazuo Ōno in his bedroom, and on his apartment walls, almost like a shrine, and I actually saw the last European performance Kazuo Ōno gave, in Venice. Then I got so obsessed with Kazuo Ōno that I wanted to meet him. I was in Yokohama installing a show, and he lived by Yokohama, so I told my friend to arrange a meeting, and we went there. It was really the strangest and probably the most intense interview I've ever done because by then Kazuo Ōno was not travelling anymore. I think he was 101, and when I arrived his son was there, and was also a great butoh master. The son took me aside before we entered the room to meet Kazuo Ōno and said, "You just have to know my father had a stroke and is not speaking anymore. He's in bed, but he's really, really excited to see you and to do this interview," and so I said, "Are you sure?" And he said, "No, no, no my father wants to do this interview, but he cannot speak anymore, but he really wants to do this interview." Then, I didn't really understand how it's going to work, but the son said that's what the father wants, let's start, and I started to ask my first question. Then, the father would sort of move his eyes and the son would interpret that and give the answer. It was really, really incredible. When we left, I said goodbye and the son said you should really give my father your hand, he wants to touch you, he wants to say goodbye, and that was the strongest handshake, the most extreme.

PFAHLER He is such an important artist. One hundred—I didn't realize it. He made me think so much about beauty in the changing body as well. I love how he used his body all the way up until the end, and that's something—I hope I can live to be elderly as well. Being a sixty-year-old woman now, sometimes I'm naked in front of a group of people, and I never think about it. My intention is never about showing off sexuality as much as using my body as a tool, but there was a whole decade there, when I was with Deitch Projects, where they wanted me to do nude performance, and it was because the collectors were all there around the Whitney Biennial. I found that to be so humorous but offensive, and I was not naked for about ten years during this time because they kept saying, "This







will be good for your career if you take your clothes off now." I said, "Mmm, no." I really only would be nude in my performances when I felt like it was necessary to make the piece more beautiful.

OBRIST The show you refer to is the 2007 show you curated for? Can you talk about it a little bit?

PFAHLER Yeah, that was a good experience. It was *Womanizer*. There was a woman who would stand on 8th street, and she was always protesting porn by showing an image of a woman being shoved into a meat grinder. She was protesting pornography for about ten years and that show was born because of that poster, mostly. Getting to work with Genesis [P-Orridge] was a good experience too, and the other women involved. It's something that I don't do that often, curate things. That show was a good experience, but it's not something that's a really big part of my life. We did performances for that show as well, Genesis did a performance, and it was right before Genesis's wife died, so I got to work with Jackie [Lady Jaye] a lot before she died. That was a shocking tragedy. So, that show was basically born because of this woman protesting pornography, and we called it *Womanizer*, and about two months later, Britney Spears came out with the "Womanizer" song. I wanted to do a show lately called *Manizer*.

OBRIST The idea is you would like to do another exhibition, and that it's so far unrealized?

PFAHLER I just got the idea for *Manizer* the other day. I thought that would be humorous. I had done a film with Bruce LaBruce called the *Misandrist*, and misandry is the opposite of misogyny. Misandry isn't a word we use very often, but it's the actual devaluation and hatred of men. First of all, all of these issues that we're having about fighting our gender politics and sexuality, all of that I feel is just a massive distraction so that we fight with one another instead of look out to the big picture of this looming, global shitstorm that's coming, so mostly in my work I try not to sweat the small stuff. That's a temperature in New York, I don't know if it's in Berlin or Zurich, but we have a way of killing one another in New York as artists. I see you've got a lot of books around you. I'm still reading a lot, I try to stay connected with tangible things, you know?

OBRIST It's the same for me. I'm obsessed with books.

PFAHLER There are some great new bookstores in New York. Karma is a fantastic gallery too, and they've got a bookstore on the Lower East Side called Mast Books. These bookstores are having little events with the authors. That's still happening, so that's nice. I did a performance last month at The Hole gallery where I performed behind a glass window.

OBRIST Oh you did a performance live behind the window without direct contact with the public.

PFAHLER They were watching from outside of the window.

OBRIST And what did you do?

PFAHLER It was a piece that I'm working on called "Slippery When Dead," which is the title of my new album. It was inspired by a surfing film that my father made called *Slippery When Wet*, and he made that film in 1958 with Bruce Brown, the filmmaker who did *Endless Summer*. I just love this film so much. It was done in sixteen millimeter, the musicians made the soundtrack, they projected the film on the wall and played along with it, so some of the techniques they used I'm still using to this day. I love making live soundtracks for films.

OBRIST We haven't spoken much yet about the apartment. I see some fragments of the apartment in the background, but the apartment is famously a Gesamtkunstwerk, the color red plays a very important role in it. Can you tell me a little bit about how the apartment works and how it grew over time?

PFAHLER Well, tile red is the traditional color for these tenement apartments on the Lower East Side. When I was painting my apartment, I liked the idea of creating a filmic atmosphere where I could always shoot films. I don't really live domestically; I don't have any towels or dishes, it's just mostly like living in an art studio. In Japanese culture, they attribute emotions to colors, and people say to me, doesn't it make you angry to live around the color red? And that's not happening at all. The apartment has also not been touched since the 1960s. The walls are the same texture. My landlord, when he bought this building, he said, "Do you want me to change your apartment and we can redo the walls and make it fresh and new?" And I said, "No, I want to keep it the way it is, and I want to turn it into, ultimately, a residency where students can live and work on the Lower East Side." It's a nice little neighborhood to make artwork in. So, the color red is not significant or anything strange, it's just something that I like. Maybe I'll change it. I've been in here since 1982, and it's funny the way time passes. I don't really realize how long I've been in here. Life and working...it hasn't really felt like work. I've been fortunate to be able to stay alive as an artist for all of these years, decade after decade, and a lot of people—most of my friends—didn't make it. Most of my best friends died in the '80s of AIDS. My girlfriend died of AIDS, my boyfriend died of AIDS, and so a lot of great artists in this neighborhood—David Wojnarowicz didn't get to live.

OBRIST Rainer Maria Rilke wrote this little book, which is *Letters to a Young Poet*. What do you advise young artists?

PFAHLER I advise them to read that book every day. I've been reading that book so often since I got it in the early '80s, and I love the idea that it's the artist's job to find beauty and excitement within their everyday life. There's never a poverty of ideas. As an artist, it's our job to always look—that's what Rilke established with me. And also, that we should trust our instincts and make work about the things that we've experienced. I'm not that into fiction.

OBRIST That's a great conclusion. And now my very last question. We know a lot about

architects' unrealized projects because they publish them all the time, but we know almost nothing about artists' unrealized projects. And there is such a range of unrealized projects. There are projects which have been too big to be realized, too expensive to be realized, then there are the projects which are too small to be realized, and then there are the projects where maybe the artist just forgot them in their lockers, or in the studio, then there are the unrealized public art commissions, which are more like competitions, and then there are the censored projects. Then as my friend, Doris Lessing, pointed out, there is not only the censored project but the self-censored project. Projects we haven't yet dared to do. It's a whole range, and I wanted to ask because we've talked about all your genius, extraordinary, realized projects—but we haven't talked about your unrealized projects.

PFAHLER One of things that I've been afraid to really work on is the story of my grandmother and my grandfather who hung himself on Christmas, and I always wanted to tell the story about my mother's life, and my grandmother's life, just because it's such a strange American Gothic story, but I've always felt like I couldn't tell it until I got a lot older. I feel like I can't tell that until I'm seventy years old. I always felt like it would hurt my family a great deal if I told this story. That's maybe a self-censored project that I feel I want to have the courage to tell without hurting people around me. I think that what happened with my family is quite common, and it's tragic, and yet it's a very typical American story. For example, when my grandfather hung himself, his brother came out to Los Angeles to console my grandmother, and one night, they went out drinking, and they were both arrested. They were put in jail, and the policeman told my grandmother that they had killed someone while they were drunk driving. It's just a horrific tragedy that happened. My brother is in a band called Jawbreaker. He's a drummer, and it's something my brother and I just started talking about. Also, in the tradition of Rainer Maria Rilke suggesting that we write about experiences that have happened to us, we make artwork about our history, about our family. And my mother says she can't speak about it; she'll explode. It's too painful a story. There's that story, and then the other unrealized project is to change the world one show at a time, one song at a time, one poem at a time. I feel like artists can be the visionaries of the culture, and I hope that someone writes a song, or writes a poem, or does a performance that changes the world as we now know it.

end

Though she was born and raised by the beach in LA, Kembra Pfahler has become an icon for New York City art punk culture. Whether she was sewing her vagina shut as part of Richard Kern's radical 1992 film, *Sewing Circle*, performing with her band, The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black, or modeling for Calvin Klein, her name has become synonymous with downtown NYC cool and as legendary as her signature style. Her jet black hair, painted brows and cat-eye makeup, have made her a muse for everyone from Rick Owens — whose new book, *Legaspi: Larry Legaspi, the 70s, and the Future of Fashion*, features Kembra on the cover — to Mugler designer Casey Cadawallader, who tapped the artist for the brand's recent SS20 runway, and Shayne Oliver, former creative director at Helmut Lang, who cast Kembra as the star of his first campaign for the label. At almost 60, she's working as hard — if not harder — than she was when she cut her teeth as a young artist in Manhattan. Kembra is still constantly performing, putting on art shows, and now leading a class about being an IRL creative at Columbia University. For her students — and the rest of us, really — there's no better teacher than the original queen of horror, whose ethos is "to always remain calm and do whatever I want," she tells me. "That's the best advice my mother ever gave me. And that's exactly what I do: whatever I want."

PHOTOGRAPHY: KATRINA DEL MAR
WORDS: ALEXANDRA WEISS

KembrA

Alexandra Weiss: How do you describe what you do?

Kembra Pfahler: I'm an interdisciplinary artist whose main influences are film and horror, even though I grew up on the beach. As far as describing what I do, I did start a few movements, like Availabism. So, I invented these kinds of philosophical adjectives to describe what I did, simply because I had to.

What's the philosophy behind 'Availabism'?

Availabism means creating, by any means necessary. Art is not contingent upon having the 'right' equipment. It's about making the best use of what's available. I started the movement when I was going to art school. I saw a lot of artists getting very frustrated because they didn't have the right graphic arts equipment, or the right painting equipment, and they always used that as an excuse not to do stuff. And this country is filled with endless overabundance. We have so much available to us here, and there are limitless resources to make music and art. So, I just make the best of what's available to me. I'm not even concerned with being an artist anymore — I'm just a person who gets to design her own life. It's really a privileged existence to be able to do that and to be able to do something I love. Doing press and stuff — I've never solicited it, I've never even had a PR person, or a manager.

I know — it's hard to get hold of you! I emailed like, eight different people to track you down.

You can always DM me — I always respond, because not that many people actually write me. Growing up in Los Angeles, in the punk movement, it wasn't cool to have fans. We just had friends and collaborators. It's never been part of my aesthetic to have any sort of hierarchical system, and that comes from being a punk in the 70s. So, this will probably be one of the last PR things I do, actually. I've decided I don't want to do any more pictures or interviews. I feel like I don't need to — there's

enough material out there. I mean, I'll always talk to young artists, but I feel like with magazines now, I really want to take responsibility for how I'm participating and being complicit in the harm that's being done by corporations, and I feel like the best I can offer the culture is to keep doing records and art shows. That's going to speak more for my work than any PR.

As for Availabism, you said you started it because you had to find a way to describe what you were doing. Is that because no one else was doing it?

Yeah, and because I didn't identify with the title 'performance artist' — that seemed really corny to me. Growing up in Los Angeles, I think everything with me related to a kind of anti-show business mentality. I grew up loving Kenneth Anger, not Hollywood movies — and Kenneth Anger was from Santa Monica. Thankfully, I would go to the Camera Obscura on Ocean Avenue. I was just compelled and driven to the strange little nooks and crannies of culture. My interests have never been that popular.

Where did your interest in horror come from?

I mean, there are a lot of things that happened in my childhood that probably made me gravitate towards it, but it will probably take the rest of my life to figure it out and I'm not that into self-analysing at the moment. Although I guess with writing songs and doing artwork, it comes out naturally — or what I would call 'anti-naturally.' But horror is very prophetic, and I was always attracted to it instinctively. I felt like I learned more from watching films than I did from reading history books, and I know it might have been a sort of delusional perspective to be informed by *The Blob*, or *Jaws*, or *The Exorcist*, but horror helps me make sense of what's happening in our political climate. In a lot of ways, I feel like everything that's taking place right now is just a wacky, terrible 3D horror film.



PfahleR



The theme for this issue is 'Unreal' — unreal as in fantasy, but also in the sense of social constructs. Like, is gender real? Is sexuality real? Is art real? Does it even matter? I think your work speaks to the subject, both in terms of illusion and by defying convention. What do you think?

I can definitely see that. But oddly enough, I always find that the truth is stranger than fiction, and that's really my guiding principle. I don't do comedy or sarcasm very well, and I always thought that if I don't play for laughs and come out as truthfully as possible, my work will be even stranger... or more unreal. There's just so much absurdity in the truth, and it's my job to transmit the ideas that flow through me —

As you put it, 'anti-naturally.'

Yes. But I use the term 'anti-naturalism,' because I grew up with a love of urbanity, even though I grew up right on the beach. I love that song 'Moon Over Marin' by the Dead Kennedys, which was all about having the beach close down. And the reality of my childhood was that there was a chain-link fence all around our beach at Sunset and on the Pacific Coast Highway, because the ocean was so polluted and contaminated. 'Moon Over Marin' prophesied all of the eco-terrorism going on right now, so my desire to embrace urbanity really had to do with the fact that my truth, and my reality, were not about a natural environment. It was about making the anti-natural — or the unreal. That is my true nature: that I never really got to experience nature growing up in a fast food and movie-infested Los Angeles, and now, I don't go to the country on vacation. I'm too busy doing my art to even rest. And as they say, there's no rest for the wicked — there's no rest when you get to be an artist and get to be alive.

So many people see horror films as being just about death — or at least an existential fear of it — but I think that can be a shallow interpretation. With horror being such a big inspiration for you and your work, does death play a part in it?

Well, I survived the 80s, when most of my friends died of AIDS. So, I would have been living in a state of absolute denial to not acknowledge the amount of deaths that were happening around me. And the holocaust that's happening now, where everyone is overdosing and dying of cancer. There's a lot of suicides, too. So, there's this really big, strange death wave that I'm seeing. But my work has not been a celebration or investigation of death throughout all of these decades. Contrarily, it's been about creating a new vocabulary of images, which is much more about trying to create a new paradigm of existence for life. Lately, though, I think death has crept in not of my own desire or as a popular horror subject, but because of what's happening, and the climate that we're living in — I'm actually calling my new body of work *Slippery When Dead*, after a surf movie my dad was in by Bruce Brown, *Slippery When Wet*. But I do think the future is here, and that the future is unreal... and anti-natural.

As for horror, there are so many different aspects — the monster, the shadow, the Other, the future... death is such a small part of it. Plus, I've never been into slasher films — I always had to cover my eyes when I was a kid. I'm not into violence.

That's interesting. Do you think there have been parts of your practice that have been violent? Or at least that others perceived as violent?

I mean, sewing my vagina shut was an act of violence. It speaks to self-harm, even though I didn't hurt myself doing it. But I was so angry at the time of that film that there was a strange fantasy that kind of eclipsed all of the violence — it was almost post-violence in a way, because it turned out to be something that was very healing to do. Clearly that film was extreme and there are a lot of things I do that are physically taxing — like walking on bowling balls — but most of my work is more playful and cartoonish.

So, it's more about pushing yourself physically?

Yeah, and I was always obsessed with the idea of original imagery. I always liked doing things that I felt were difficult to copy. So, it would be hard to copy, and why would you want to walk on bowling balls anyway?

One thing people have imitated is your look — your signature red lips, thin brows and winged liner.

It's funny, because I can't imagine why anyone would want to look like that. Growing up in the punk scene, I never would have had the audacity to emulate my favourites because I always thought they would beat me up if they saw that I was trying to copy them. That would be such a low blow.

Even your Karen Black costume, though — it's become pretty iconic.

Interestingly enough, the Karen Black costume and what I wear, it's not about examination of a character as much as it's literally just a way to combat extreme shyness. When you transform in such an extreme way, it gives you this ammunition. My Karen Black costume is as much me as anything else — it's as much me as going to buy black hair dye or wearing black eyeliner. It's just me using the art of transformation as a way to illustrate a personal mythology. In some ways, I think that's what we all do when we're putting ourselves together. Whether it be full transformation from top to bottom, which is what my Karen Black look is — it gives you muscle. It definitely gave me muscle — a lot of it. I was really shy and didn't want anything to do with show business, so creating that look was very contrarian too, because I loved the idea of looking very ugly... sort of.

What about the nudity aspect of the performance? Was that equally important?

For almost a decade, when I was doing a lot of work in the 90s with Deitch Projects, I wasn't naked. I would actually refuse to show my vagina, because I was involved with the art community in such a way that they were always expecting me to be naked, and I was very turned off by that. Then I realised, 'I'm almost 50, I'm going to take my clothes off again just to bother you. And because I feel like it.' I only do what I feel like in my bands and with my art, never what I'm supposed to do.

As you've gotten older, has being naked on stage started to feel different, or more liberating?

It's amazing, because it's 'wrong.' I always think to myself, and I always say to the people watching me, 'Have you ever seen your grandmother naked? Because I'm going to take my clothes off.'

Do you consider your work overtly feminist?

I do, but others might not.

Why?

Just because I have existed in a theatrical goth death rock band, and there hasn't been that much of an open marriage or open discussion between the different feminist collectives. I think there's been, traditionally, more separatism than inclusion. But Lorraine O'Grady, who was my surrealism professor at SVA, she talked about this a lot at our Future Feminism show at the Hole [in 2014]. She said that there's room for all sorts of feminism — Afrofeminism, punk feminism, teenage feminism... there's room for everything. And what I'd like to do is, rather than have a fight over ownership of these ideas, I'm interested in sharing them, and making them hot and important again.

Do you think art can do that?

I believe that it can. Great art is freedom. The freedom to choose, and to speak, and to live. In other countries, you can't walk around on the sidewalk as a woman wearing a shirt with a Karen Back symbol on it. You're not allowed to shave your eyebrows, or do performance art where you sew your vagina shut, or sing and lead a rock band and smash eggs on your butt. There's such a myopic way of viewing our privilege, and most of the countries around the world don't have any of the same kinds of possibilities that I've had as an artist. Even my mother's generation didn't have the same kind of opportunities that I have. So, freedom for me is just the fact that I've chosen to be an artist, even if it's never going to be popular, or make me a million dollars. I have choices, and success for me, is getting up in the morning, running out the door and showing up to transmit the work that flows through me.

It's like Mike Watt says: 'The truth is easy to understand,' and I wish the idea of freedom was more so. But I mean, life is torturous and difficult no matter how you cut the mustard, and the culture we're living in is basically *The Handmaid's Tale*. So, I wish art could be taken more seriously as something that can help find solutions to the problems in our world, because it's been so deeply helpful for me. Art has been such a panacea for me — it's totally saved my life.

What do you think you'd be doing if you weren't an artist?

I honestly can't imagine.

Kembra Pfahler:

Text by
Jessica Stoya

Photography by
Fumi Nagasaka

All looks by
Rick Owens AW19

“To qualify as if
you’re an artist,
you have to
be practically
willing to die”





I never really wanted romanticism to be part of my practice the way Mary Shelley and Blake and all of those Romantic poets used to

In 1992, she had her vulva sewn shut in Richard Kern's *Sewing Circle*, a feat she performed again, twice, most recently for *Penthouse* in 1998. Elsewhere, Pfahler has exhibited paintings, portraits and curated exhibitions under her concept of 'availabilism', the practice of making art with whatever is close to hand. In 2014, she also co-organised *Future Feminism* in New York alongside singer Anohni, musicians Sierra and Bianca Casady from CocoRosie, and performer Johanna Constantine, an art, music and performance event that later toured Europe. Here, actor, model and writer Stoya recounts her conversation with the artist at Pfahler's New York home, including discussions on the relationship between art and dissent, artistic personas and the exact way she feels about gender equality.

The Manhattan air is cool. The apartment walls are a warm red. Three black cats of varying builds splay and frolic. Nina, the smallest, hops onto my lap and digs her claws into my jeans for grip.

I'm in the presence of Kembra Pfahler, in the space she has lived in and worked from for decades. She's an artist – largely known for her band The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black – who transcends genre and medium. She's also the originator of availabilism and a teacher, currently at Columbia. She's jet-lagged from bouncing between art gigs in Europe and her class in NYC, and warms up to my questions quickly.

Stoya: Do you think rebellion is important for art?

Kembra: Yes, I do, but I don't think it needs to be necessarily destructive rebellion. It could be like spiritual rebellion where you're just pushing yourself towards the unknown. You know, and maybe that would be, in some cases, towards what's transgressive or not acceptable to mainstream identities or mainstream acceptance. It's exhilarating, to use your vernacular. I do think rebellion is necessary. But again, a sort of tempered rebellion that doesn't kill you. I never really believed in an art practice that was romantic, that would cause harm because I saw so much harm done to

artists growing up in the Lower East Side as a teenager here, and surviving the 'AIDS Apocalypse', and seeing so many great people having to die. You know, the culture was genocidal pretty much because such a large percentage of our artists were 'taken away' because of AIDS. So I think because I saw so much death in my early-20s and my teens, it felt like such a privilege to still get to produce and still get to be here after we lost everyone in the late Eighties ... I never really wanted Romanticism to be part of my practice the way Mary Shelley and Blake and all of those Romantic poets used to.

To have to qualify as if you're an artist, you have to be practically will-



ing to die. And so that really changed me a lot in the Eighties, getting to experience that. And that gave me an appreciation to still be here and to honour all of my friends who died, like my best friend, Gordon Kurtti. They died and we did an art show for him 26 years after his death at [New York's] Participant Inc gallery, where we showed all of his work and I was able to finally honour him. But I remember in the late-Eighties when Gordon died, he was someone who really was my first best friend. As an artist, I don't know if you've had that person in your life, but they're usually very 'catalytic' ...



Stoya: Yeah, you like, hang out with them and you come up with 50 amazing ideas that you never could have come up with yourself.

Kembra: Exactly, that was Gordon and he died when he was 26. And I should get you the book that we made for him. I'm trying to remember to get it, I don't have any books or anything here. I don't keep any books, any pictures up on the wall, even in my apartment. Not to switch subjects but I work really monastically here, I just have nothing on the walls. I'll strip the whole apartment and then start a new piece. And I've done that my whole life here. I don't have any sentimental things on the wall. No pictures. Nothing. I'm not a collector.

I ask about a quote from her on the bifurcation of Marilyn Monroe's public and private personas, and how she manages to move between contexts so easily.

Kembra: In art and films, to have a different name is pretty common, you know, to have a different persona just as far as like having a poetic identity. It's called a poetic identity. It's an intelligent way to handle all that stuff. Do you know, I think it makes it a little bit easier, actually, to have separate names for things. I don't think that I'm being a character when I'm in my Karen Black costume at all, I just think I'm Kembra in costume.

Stoya: What's a persona, and what's just an extension of who you are? And actually are those things the same at the end of the day?

Kembra: I do feel like, you know, I mean, my physical transformation is really extreme. And a lot of times people can't really believe that it's me because I'm such a ... just a regular gal, regular person. When they see me in my Karen Black costume, they're like, "Oh, okay. That's something else." Because it creates such a larger persona, so much bigger.

Stoya: The hair alone.

Kembra: The hair alone. But I do feel that it is simply me and costume and it's coming from examining what my idea of beauty is to me. That is my idea of beauty - the wig, the teeth, the eye makeup, the colour on my body. It really is what I find to be beautiful. So it's an expression of beauty to completely transform like that. And it also is part of a great way to deal with being very

shy, having a different persona. And it helped me with that because I am very shy actually, I never really wanted to be in show business. But I did love the idea of sharing ideas and stories through art and costume.

Stoya: How were the fashion interactions for you?

Kembra: The fashion world interactions have been amazing because to go into the fashion world, to me, is like taking a glamorous vacation. And I don't really ever take vacations. When I go and visit other people's work, that's kind of my time off. It's a working time off. It's a working vacation. So I just love to see how other artists work. And the people that I've worked with in fashion are artists working in fashion, they're artists working with materials and textiles and cloths, and they're really good artists. So I've got to work with some really great fashion people like

Rick Owens. I just did the Rick Owens show with him in the Pompidou Center in Paris, and I've known him for almost 25 years. Yeah, for my whole adult life. So it's just also another examination of what people are finding beautiful. And for me, art isn't that much about ... I mean, it's political. And it has, of course, many different functions in our civilisation, in society. But I guess for me, it's about making life more beautiful. And creating an identity and a lifestyle around me that I find tolerable and beautiful. And a life that is rife with history and mythology and ritual. And that's what performance is about. For me, it's about bringing that into my life where there was none.

Stoya: So early on you worked with *Penthouse* and Calvin Klein. How was that, being so shy?

Kembra: Well, that was me also making the best use of what was



available because I thought to myself, “Who gets invited to do a *Penthouse* spread?” And I was someone who made a decision very early on that it was alright for me to show my whole body. And that, to me ... It gave me power. I didn’t do it because it made me an object, or someone who was exploring adult sexuality. To be naked to me was a beautiful gesture. Because I felt there was so much beauty in the naked body and so much classic fine art. You know, look at the statue of [Michelangelo’s] *David*, everyone’s naked in sculpture. So to me it, it was never intended ... I was always surprised when people took it as a gesture from me that was wanting to be a ‘nudie cutie’ or something. To me, it was just about being a serious, more provocative artist. And that’s why I sewed my vagina shut in *Penthouse* which really turned a lot of heads [1998, photographed by Michael Halsband].

Performance art wasn’t as popular as it is now, in the Nineties. And I was coming from being sort of a famous rock person at the time. I wasn’t as involved in the fine art world. When [*Penthouse* founder] Bob Guccione asked me because my band was famous. And you know, magazines need fodder. They need content. So they needed to get around to me just because they needed to fill the pages too. No one else would do it. It was a great spread. That was a 20-page spread and I sewed my vagina shut and the fire department guys saw [it], and they said to me, “Is that you in *Penthouse*? What on earth were you doing?” because it was such a mixed message. It wasn’t exactly like beat-off material.



Special thanks: Reverend Dr. Katrina D. Foster and St. John’s Lutheran Church, NY

We talk for a considerable amount of time about what porn can do and how awesome not-exactly-beat-off material is. We head out to grab a cup of coffee, and Kembra has some parting words about the support she’s received from galleries in recent years.

Kembra: Emalin gallery I met just a few short years ago and did *Capital Improvements* (2016) with them in London. After we did *Future Feminism* in NYC [at The Hole in September 2014], I moved all of my business headquarters to Europe. I’ve learned a lot from Leopold Thun and Angelina Volk [coordinators at Emalin] – my two gallery owners that have essentially been the strongest advocates for what I

do since I began. I never liked Europe because I always thought everywhere looked like World War Two. And I didn’t like the idea that they would like me more in Europe. As a contrarian, I stayed in the USA where I was most unwanted. Record companies asked me to put on clothes and act more satanic – it would sell more records.

The art business devalued performance. There is now a tiny little window that opened for me where a crevice of light seeps through. Even an inch of light will propel me to finish more, do more and to stick around longer. I’ve never had too much support, so when it does come, I appreciate it and don’t take it for granted. I like the idea of proliferation, not just flipping the script. Now women’s voices are being

heard louder than a whisper. A proliferating voice can obfuscate all others. I am not an equality seeker. I like the idea of only women being heard for the next century. I can’t imagine any real change could happen otherwise. Having compassion to men’s crimes and misogynies will sink the ship, the world won’t last as we know it. It’s women who give birth to men. It’s women who should create a new directive and a new understanding of how we’ll survive as a species.

As for a roadmap, the tenets of *Future Feminism* seem like a great place to start.

MAKE-UP: Ebele Anueyiagu
 HAIR: Kembra Pfahler, with wigs by Marcowigs
 PROPS: Kembra Pfahler
 PRODUCTION: Gillian Doyle @ Home Agency
 PHOTO ASSISTANT: Matt Baffa
 PRODUCTION ASSISTANT: Bradley Ahlstrom



Dominic Johnson, 'Kembra Pfahler: Rebel Without a Cock'

Art Monthly, Jul - Aug 2019, pp. 28 - 29

REVIEWS | EXHIBITIONS |

REVIEWS | EXHIBITIONS |

the set for such an exercise: the office furniture and houseplants could easily describe a room in the civil service or the office of a lobbyist.

Prevent is a controversial element of the government's counter-terrorism strategy. Safeguarding, concerned as it is with potential rather than actual crime, is intellectually problematic in all the ways fans of *The Minority Report* (in both its Philip K Dick and Tom Cruise iterations) will recognise. These problems amplify in the culturally or racially loaded contexts safeguarding tends to occupy. In the light of hostile environment initiatives, or glib attitudes towards citizenship when its revocation presents ministerial PR opportunities, Prevent's limitations become more visible.

But the futurity Prevent concerns itself with is ideally suited to the kinds of pattern that preoccupy Khan-Dossos, since patterns loop, following the rules they prescribe. Everything fits, and each form is set by its neighbour. Such structures offer clear visual parallels for the wider questions within Prevent: issues of determinism and agency, and the balancing of freedoms against constraints. The paintings' patterns can be positioned in the tradition of the grid, too, recalling Rosalind Krauss's assertion of 'the protectiveness of the [grid's] mesh against all intrusions from outside'. Krauss's reading of the grid is full of resonances here: 'The absolute stasis of the grid, its lack of hierarchy, of centre, of inflection, emphasises not only its anti-referential character, but – more importantly – its hostility to narrative.' Prevent, conversely, is predicated on narrative and the idea of one thing leading to or causing another (hence, perhaps, the declaratively linear title 'There Is No Alternative'). Krauss was describing purist grids, which Khan-Dossos's grids are conspicuously not: they are concocted from the iconography of Prevent – symbols like shields, fingerprints and padlocks. But again the repetition of these shapes comes to reflect the ways symbols metamorphosise over time. It is difficult not to see the shield logos at The Showroom in a lineage of shields that links through to the crusades, giving a deeper visual history to policies which present themselves as urgently contemporary.

The history of Khan-Dossos's own practice has similar continuities with this new Showroom work. Her interest in the technologies and aesthetics of green screens or loading pages has echoes here in the temporality of Prevent, a strategy preoccupied with what is about to happen. There is clear logic for an artist like Khan-Dossos, whose work has long been situated in this generative moment, turning to Prevent as a subject. The topic is loaded with connotations about the image and its construction too: Prevent is an exercise in vigilant looking, or surveillance, so to bring that activity back into an art space is to restore it to its rightful habitat. Independent reviews speak a particular language, but Khan-Dossos

offers an alternative review which is more ambiguous and more structurally nuanced: her layered wall-paintings are screens and their subject is screening. The audience, in turn, can practise the same self-reflexivity – scrutinising a policy which places society under scrutiny. ■

Alexander Massouras is an artist and writer based in Cambridge.

Kembra Pfahler: Rebel Without a Cock

Emalin London 1 June to 20 July

Here is a monstrously large phallus with a big bulbous head, glittering in mirror-tiles and flanked by two similarly spangled balls. A collaboration between Kembra Pfahler, Urs Fischer and Spencer Sweeney, *Disco Cock* is ornate, imposing, beautifully produced and brutally silly. The monument – the 'cock' of the title, a proxy for a 'cause' – also brandishes a few multicoloured handprints and smears: remnants from its activation by Pfahler and others (with painted bodies) at the private view. *Disco Cock* is therefore a prop for performances, a trace of prior activities and a sculptural artefact in its own right.

Pfahler is best known as a performance artist, especially for her concept band The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black (TVHKB), active since the 1980s. Pfahler adopts a signature 'look' in oblique homage to Black: monochrome body paint (blue, red, yellow), knee-high black pleather boots with white laces, a giant, tousled, black fright wig, expressionistic eye make-up and black teeth. In her loud, visually explosive live TVHKB shows – typically supported by a proliferation of similarly attired performers, like strange visual echoes of her occulted self – Pfahler performs ambivalent homages to the depthless pomp of rock, lovingly reproducing its exultant spectacle (she's fun to watch) while poking fun at its vacuity and at other times filling it in. In one anthem, for example, apropos of nothing, Pfahler sings, 'Underwear drawer! Underwear drawer! I gotta clean out my underwear drawer!' In another, she appropriates Palm Apodaca's guttural, anti-capitalist, lesbian-separatist rant from the 1970 movie *Five Easy Pieces* (starring the original, luminous Karen Black), the pilfered monologue enabling a song about 'going to Alaska' to escape the moral and aesthetic decrepitude of the city: 'Man! He likes to create a stink! I mean, I've seen filth that you wouldn't believe. Ugh! What a stink! I don't even want to talk about it.'

'Rebel Without a Cock' is Pfahler's second solo exhibition at Emalin. Surrounding *Disco Cock* are props from performances (muted hints at a roller derby *Oliver Twist*, perhaps?) and a series of nine photographic collages

Kembra Pfahler
Black Cala 2009/19




made in 2009 with Andrew Strasser, which show Pfahler in full TVHKB drag (and sometimes her surrogates, Alice and Kathy, similarly attired) interacting with oversized objects – a spilled can, a painted piggy bank, a surf board – in suggestive poses that recreate or resemble LeRoy Neiman's 'Femlins'. Femme gremlins, Femlins were caricatures of pocket-sized women with emphatically simplified bodies: long black manes, a stark triangle of black pubic hair and solid black elbow-length gloves, stockings and high-heel shoes. Neiman created the fetishistic line drawings for *Playboy* in the 1950s, where they remained a regular feature for five decades: Femlins would be shown lounging in champagne glasses, playing with jewellery or money, posing and preening. In her critical rejoinders, Pfahler appears as her alter ego, whose visual effect somewhat resembles the rudimentary shape and style of Neiman's pictures. In one, Pfahler rodeos a skateboarding mouse (Stuart Little, apparently); in another, she pulls the white mouse's tail, watched over by a looming black cat. In others still, she eats a heavily powdered doughnut or prepares to dye her hair black with Color-EZ. Here and there, large blue hands enter the frame to augment the scene.

The photographs burlesque the misogyny of Neiman's imagery, retooling his fetishistic imaginings in Pfahler's Technicolor junk and kitsch aesthetic. Pfahler doesn't need to do much to expose the original illustrations' political shortcomings. There is comedy in these works, but it's

often more rarefied than the tone and effect of Pfahler's live performances: the latter, though conceptually shrewd, are uncooked, urgent and chaotic, and rarely feel arch or studied. Indeed, there is plain-speaking power in two unforced, comparatively unadorned portraits in the series, *Classic Glamour* and *Look Glamorous*, where Pfahler reclines blue and otherworldly in a red spot-lit glow. They give pleasure not because we can consume her without terrestrial distractions, but because they complement more brazenly the abrasive, antagonistic, unlaboured abandon of her live performances. In another strong image, Pfahler performs a 'butt print', presenting her blue backside to a stretched easel-mounted canvas: more akin to a manipulated document, we are pulled to one of her signature live acts (developed for Deitch Projects to create multiples), as she tightens the circle on what otherwise can seem like an elliptical relation between the glossy, restrained photographic series and her wit, chaos and sway as a performance artist. ■


Dominic Johnson runs the MA Live Art programme at Queen Mary University of London.



Resonance FM

Resonance FM
The best radio station in the world - home of *Art Monthly Talk Show* - is available on FM and on DAB in London, on Radioplayer and online worldwide. resonance.fm

EXTRA



Resonance EXTRA
Global sound- and transmission-arts on DAB in Brighton, Bristol, Cambridge, London and Norwich, on Radioplayer and on line worldwide. extra.resonance.fm

BUFFER ZONES

Paradise Works
Salford M3 7LE

Larry Achiampong & David Blandy / Simon & Tom Bloor
James Bridle / Marco Godoy / Jeremy Hutchison
Hilary Jack / Sally Payen / Yelena Popova / Ella Littwitz
Edward Clydesdale Thomson / Gavin Wade

info@paradise-works.com | www.paradise-works.com | 11.Jul- 3.Aug 19




Orit Gat, 'Condo New York'

Art-Agenda, 08 July 2019

I'm leaving New York in a month. The other night I told that to an acquaintance who asked if I had read *Goodbye to All That* (2013), a collection of writing about "loving and leaving New York." I've only read the 1967 Joan Didion essay that gave the book its title.¹ A friend suggested we go to the used bookstore around the corner. "They probably have a shelf dedicated to it," I said.

"You see I was in a curious position in New York," Didion writes: "it never occurred to me that I was living a real life there." She came for a few months and stayed for eight years. I came with an intention to stay, but "a real life" is elusive or impossible under the current political system. The third iteration of *Condo New York*, an initiative begun in London in 2016 in which local spaces host visiting galleries, opened in the same month MoMA closed for renovations as it soaks up the building of its displaced former neighbor the American Folk Art Museum, and in the same week I skipped an opening at the New Museum because I didn't want to cross the picket line of its employees rallying the museum to negotiate with the union they voted to join. The real life of an art institution, some would say, involves looking away from the "defense technology" company the vice chairman of your board may own. A project like *Condo*, the reality of which is traveling with small drawings and video work to show in a different city and expand your collector base, can be a reminder of the role galleries play in the art ecosystem, for artists and collectors, yes, but also visitors and one another. Eighteen New York spaces—including nonprofit *White Columns*, hosting *Visionaries + Voices*, an artist-run space in Cincinnati dedicated to artists with disabilities, showing paintings and sculptures by Curtis Davis—are hosting 20 others.

Several exhibitions cohere as group shows. At *Queer Thoughts*, hosting *dépendance* from Brussels, an aquarelle on canvas by Sofia Duchovny, *Heart Shaped Box (ripped)* (2019), makes this 1990s object into the subject of a sorrowful narrative. Next to it is an acrylic on paper of a bird (*Toucan*, 2019) by Genoveva Filipovic and an untitled drawing by Peter Wächtler (2018) of a figure on

horseback going through a dark wood. The three works are not fully representative of these artists' practices, yet together feel like a lucid group show of contemporary drawing. (There's also a monitor with a funny short film, *Mayonnaise Number 1* [1973], by Charles Atlas of a model pretending to be in a Renaissance portrait only he eats the fruit, breaks the pose, ruins all illusion.) *Lomex*—named after an urban planning proposal by Robert Moses, the man who imagined New York City as a collection of highways, called *Lower Manhattan Expressway*, which luckily was never realized because it would have razed much of the Bowery area in favor of a road—hosts *O-Town House* from Los Angeles, exhibiting little drawings by Gerry Bibby (*Note to Self 1, 2, and 3*, 2019) printing tiny poems and scribbling notes on found envelopes. They're framed like family photos and placed on the mantelpiece of the gallery that kept its apartment layout (which used to be Eva Hesse's studio), a small gesture that allows viewers to stop and read before looking at louder work like John Boskovich's framed pink bumper stickers reading messages like *Screw Guilt and Reality: What A Concept* (both 1997).

Chance meetings happen across *Condo*. At *Company*, two artists who graduated a year apart from Yale with MFAs in photography are showing in the gallery's two spaces. At the main gallery on the Lower East Side, photographs by John Edmonds merge portraits with West African sculptures; *Two Spirits* (2019), in which a bare-chested man wears an African mask, feels like a re-appropriation of Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* (1911) in MoMA's collection. Around the corner at *Baby Company*, *Commonwealth and Council* from LA present David Alekhuogie, whose photographs repurpose flags to pay tribute to African-American quilting. *Chapter NY* hosts London gallery *Emalin*: two paintings by Paul Heyer, *Summer Fruit and Broom Tree* (2019), in shades of blue and purple that are much darker than the titles suggest, hang by two photographs from Bruce LaBruce and Kembra Pfahler (*Wall of Vagina I and II*, 2004/18) drawn from a photo of three stacked naked bottoms that Pfahler remembered seeing in a porn mag, and three drawings by Pfahler (*Wall of Vagina Study I,*



II, and III, 2019) made for the show in pen, acrylic, and glitter. The works come together formally, in their purple and black colors, and conceptually, in the fact that this departure from what a regular visitor to *Chapter NY* would usually expect from the gallery's program is still presented in a restrained exhibition of only seven two-dimensional works.

Coherence, though, isn't necessarily what makes a good *Condo* project. Several galleries simply handed over their spaces or parts thereof. In Chelsea, *Metro Pictures* gave its upper floor to Glasgow gallery *Koppe Astner*, showing Miguel Cardenas, who makes the most of the space with murals on both ends of the wall leading to it, framing his small landscape paintings and sculptures on pedestals. In Tribeca, *Bortolami* is hosting Paris gallery *Jocelyn Wolff*, with works by Katinka Bock, which echo the sculptures of Ann Veronica Janssens in

the main space. But where Janssens spills glitter on the gallery floor (*Untitled [White Glitter]*, 2016–ongoing)—accompanied by a warning not to step on it—Bock covers her part of the gallery with fine rocks (*Sand*, 2018). Treading on it, Bock's show feels foreboding, intense, grating, and much more effective. Uptown, *Petzel* gave its Upper East Side location to *Edouard Malingue Gallery* from Hong Kong, showing gradient paintings (*Vertical Gradient #1–8*, all 2019) by Chou Yu-Cheng that look like they were made digitally by simply reproducing Photoshop's color palette but are actually handmade abstractions in a refusal of the expected. In the other room is *Soliloquy* (2018), an installation by Indonesian collective *Tromarama* composed of lamps linked to binary code that commands them to light up whenever a Twitter user posts something with the hashtag "kinship."

On the subway ride to Petzel, I reread Didion's essay and couldn't help but smile, sometimes laugh—"Was anyone ever so young?," she writes of her first days in town. When I look back at a decade in New York—the galleries where I never missed a show, the galleries I loved and closed, the museum exhibitions that formed me and the ones I accidentally skipped (and sometimes still pretend I didn't)—what comes through is the works of artists that stayed with me. I discovered new artists at galleries I've been to before: José Manuel Mesías at Lubov (brought by Apartamento, Havana), Maria Montero at Simon Preston (hosting *Sé* from São Paulo, where Montero is the director, a brave and conscious reflection of how different ways to participate in art can collide). And some of my favorite pieces were by artists I already knew, like Filipovic's work, which I haven't seen in years though I thought about it often, only to encounter a small drawing of a toucan, complicating what I thought I remembered from other shows of hers. At Simone Subal, two pieces by Frank Heath, whose work I've seen at the gallery before: *Fixed Window* (2011), a 38-minute sound piece in which a man calls numerous businesses recounting how overnight someone replaced all his windows with stone slates, is accompanied by a sculpture of a stone slate encased in glass. On the phone, he tries to explain what happened. "That's strange, very strange," a woman at a glass repair shop says. "I believe you," she confirms. "Numbers Station for The Pony Express" (2018) are two photographs of slates sent through the US Postal System laser-etched with information in Morse code about the stations of The Pony Express, a relay horseback mail-delivery system between Missouri (it originated in Heath's hometown) and California, which lasted only a year, between 1860–61. The sculptural objects are postmarked to the defunct Pony Express stations. The two works are related: both involve sending something—an object, an idea, a call for help—out into the world, knowing it's bound to be lost.

Didion's essay begins with the line, "It is easy to see the beginning of things, and harder to see the ends." I reviewed the first iteration of *Condo*, in London in 2016, and I was wrong about so many

things then. Then it was new. Now, like the condominiums it was named after, this project pops up everywhere, in cities where rents are rising, where it's ever harder to keep going. Then, I thought that to be meaningful, *Condo* had to make connections and form shows that cohere; I thought it was in desperate need of a curator. Now I see—introspection—the meaning is in looking (back) at a place and seeing it for all it has to offer.



Amy Sherlock, 'What's Behind the Voluptuous Horror of Kembra Pfahler?'

Frieze, 26 June 2019

The provocative New York performance artist talks about her influences – from surfing to Jack Smith

Amy Sherlock: When did you know you wanted to be an artist?

Kembra Pfahler: I grew up in the 1960s in Hermosa Beach, California – a golden South Bay surfer city. My father, Freddy Pfahler, was a legendary surfer who was in Bruce Brown documentaries, including *The Endless Summer* (1966) and *Slippery When Wet* (1958). It was an idyllic time, when surfing was our American Renaissance and the lights of consciousness were being turned on. There was so much ritual, mythology and non-traditional religious custom in my life – like getting up at 5am with my father to watch the tide.

AS What did your mother do?

KP My mother, Judy Ball, is also an artistic person. She had me when she was just 18 years old. Every night, she would sit on my bed and take my hand and say: 'I love you. You're an artist. You're going to grow up to be a very creative woman.' Like many people, I experienced a lot of violence and chaos in my life as well as all that love but, underlyingly, I was a lucky kid growing up in that era right on the beach.

My earliest influence was probably the SS Dominator, which was shipwrecked in Palos Verdes in 1961. All of the surf kids were obsessed with it and, every day, we would pedal our bicycles down there. To the right of the shipwreck was Malibu. In our child consciousness, it was heaven – bigger waves, more interesting people, a scarier life.

AS So, you were on the beach every day?

KP Yes, we were always just in bikinis. We'd put on our clothes to go see films, but we didn't wear shoes – kids from the beach never wore shoes. I remember the sticky floors on my bare feet, my face hot and sunburnt, going into Grauman's Chinese Theatre in L.A. to see a film – it was my idea of heaven on earth.

When my parents divorced, my stepfather, Larry Ball, moved in with us. He was a poet from Detroit and his record collection included Parliament Funkadelic and Bootsy Collins, his books were mind-bendingly interesting and he had pillowcases filled with marijuana. It was part of the culture at the time for young kids to take the same drugs as their parents, for all of us to be in a state of obliteration, driving towards higher consciousness.

My childhood is a source of inspiration that still lifts my spirits. I meditate saying the names of those places – Dominator, Redondo, Hermosa, Pacific Palisades, Malibu – and I feel the warmth in my heart.

AS Why did you move to New York?

KP I kept getting thrown out of school. I was a teenage goth, I dyed my hair from a young age and I liked the dark women of horror. My aunt was a casting director for horror movies – she had worked with Kathryn Bigelow and Stephen King – and one of her best friends, an English lady called Rita, said to me: 'Kembra, why don't you come over to my house and draw.' So, I did that for a couple of years and prepared my drawing portfolio for New York's School of Visual Arts. I was accepted when I was in 11th grade: I didn't even finish high school.

AS When did you start doing performance rather than drawing?

KP The performance came about because I was living in apartments that had literally nothing in them. I had my body to work with and that was it.

AS Who were your teachers?

KP Mary Heilmann, Lorraine O'Grady – in fact, I was in a performance this year with Lorraine, Laurie Anderson and Anohni at The Kitchen in New York called *She Who Saw Beautiful Things*. It was dedicated to the late Japanese trans performer Dr Julia, who played with Anohni and the Johnsons. And, in 2008, my work was shown alongside Mary Heilmann's at the Whitney Biennial. I've been



incredibly lucky to work with some of my favourite teachers and artists. I didn't care for Joseph Kosuth, though. He once screamed at me: 'Kembra, what are you?' At first, I turned away, because his words really hurt me. Then I looked him in the eye and said: 'I'm an availabilist. I make the best use of what's available.' Sometimes, anger can point you in a direction, and that's what happened to me that day. I invented availabilism because he enraged me.

AS A lot of your work now is about gender politics. Did anyone specific shape your thinking around that?

KP My first husband, Samoa Moriki. When I first saw him, he was dancing on the bar at the Pyramid Club in the East Village. We were married and worked together for 21 years. He was from Hiroshima and adored Japanese theatre: Butoh, Noh and playwrights like Yukio Mishima. But he especially loved extreme outside performances, in which people would dive from the sky into pools of water: physically courageous, beautiful acts. Samoa appeared at one of the first Wigstock drag festivals with Lady Bunny and collaborated with the great performance artist Tanya Ransom, who sadly died of AIDS. Ransom was queer but had a child with a woman called Paula Swede. At the time, many of us were gender fluid and simply didn't talk about it: the language was only just being born. Later, important people like Ron Athey, Bruce LaBruce and Vaginal Creme Davis would articulate it.

AS In 1990, you formed a band with Samoa called The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black. What's the story behind the name?

KP I loved all of Karen Black's films: she was somehow beautiful yet ugly, and her consciousness was so expanded. One day, Mike Kuchar, the underground filmmaker, said to me: 'Oh, Kembra: your work looks voluptuously horrific.' And that's how the name started. Karen Black actually came to the band's first L.A. performance, in 1991, and introduced us saying: 'I'm not sure if this is meant to be an insult or an homage: does voluptuous

mean I'm curvy or fat?' Then she took my hand and said: 'You're an artist and this is a creative project.' She never sued me; she just let me be an artist.

AS Recently, you've been working on a project called Future Feminism.

KP Anohni, Johanna Constantine, CocoRosie and myself launched Future Feminism in 2014. It stemmed from a desire to speak with one another about our practices without a sense of hierarchy. We do not make decisions based on a majority: we continue our discussions until we reach a consensus. It takes much longer and changes your perception of time. It's been one of the greatest yet most difficult experiments of my life.

Tragically, Ashley Mead, an incredible artist and one of our interns on the 2014 'Future Feminism' exhibition, was murdered by her boyfriend shortly after the show. She was only in her early 20s and had a daughter.

AS Oh my God: that's horrendous.

KP Our 2017 exhibition in Aarhus was focused on sharing Ashley's story: we wanted to create a narrative about her life that wasn't entirely tragic. Ashley was one of the young people in the group who kept us all together, reminded us of our priorities. She was a great influence on me – even though I was 53 at the time – because she taught me about patience, sacrifice and open-mindedness; she taught me about sharing, love and joy. She was the foundation for Future Feminism.

Johanna made a sculpture in which Ashley's beautiful body – which had been brutally dismembered – was, symbolically, put back together. The local people helped us build a boat where we held a moonlit ceremony for Ashley. We wanted to celebrate her life rather than focus on the tragedy.

AS Your work has always been very collaborative.

KP I do feel the need for community and I believe the greatest changes are wrought through



open-mindedness and grassroots activism – the principles of which are still the most vital to me. Important as it is to collaborate and meet others, though, I still spend a great deal of time isolating myself, instinctively protecting this painful humanity. But I learned the value of contrarianism from Lydia Lunch. So, when I crave retreat, I remind myself to go out.

AS Can you say a bit more about why Lydia Lunch has been so significant?

KP Risk, sacrifice, generosity, articulation, humour. Food rather than deprivation. She taught us all how to eat when she spoke about the need to feed. Lydia is a curvaceous lady, not an anorexic Californian like me. I never really learnt how to take care of myself: Lydia talking about food helped a lot.

AS You were in *Shadows in the City* (1991) with legendary performance artist Jack Smith. How was that experience?

KP That was his last film. He was a beautiful individual, kind and gentle. I felt that, when he looked at me, he raised my consciousness. It was like having the lights turned on. He took my face in his hands and said: 'Creature, creature, creature ...'

AS Your work has always been very collaborative.

KP I do feel the need for community and I believe the greatest changes are wrought through open-mindedness and grassroots activism – the principles of which are still the most vital to me. Important as it is to collaborate and meet others, though, I still spend a great deal of time isolating myself, instinctively protecting this painful humanity. But I learned the value of contrarianism from Lydia Lunch. So, when I crave retreat, I remind myself to go out.

AS Can you say a bit more about why Lydia Lunch has been so significant?

KP Risk, sacrifice, generosity, articulation, humour. Food rather than deprivation. She taught us all how to eat when she spoke about the need to feed. Lydia is a curvaceous lady, not an anorexic Californian like me. I never really learnt how to take care of myself: Lydia talking about food helped a lot.

AS You were in *Shadows in the City* (1991) with legendary performance artist Jack Smith. How was that experience?

KP That was his last film. He was a beautiful individual, kind and gentle. I felt that, when he looked at me, he raised my consciousness. It was like

having the lights turned on. He took my face in his hands and said: 'Creature, creature, creature ...'

AS Do you feel we're living in a more permissive age now?

KP There's a very thin veil of freedom and truth over what is currently known as democracy. I would love to invent a different vocabulary for what exists now, but I can't articulate it today.

Kembra Pfahler's solo exhibition 'Rebel Without a Cock' is on show at Emalin, London, UK until 20 July 2019.



'Rebel Without a Cock'

Tank Magazine, June 2019

At the centre of Kembra Pfahler's *Rebel Without a Cock* is a glittering, head-high phallus made in collaboration with Urs Fischer and Spencer Sweeney. The floor is painted in Pfahler's signature "Tile Red" (which also adorns every surface of her New York apartment) and the surrounding walls are adorned with a series of prints styled after Playboy cartoonist LeRoy Neiman's Femlin characters, first created as a visual accompaniment to the magazine's "Party Jokes" column.

These are icons of the pornographic excess and sleazy glamour mass-produced in post-war America, as well as the sexual counterculture that blossomed in 1970s New York, but the appeal of these references for Pfahler is also that she can make them mean what she wants or even leave them playfully meaningless. "The character in this Femlin series is me as I've been since the early eighties," she bluntly insists in the exhibition catalogue. Pfahler is not stepping outside of herself to enact an alter-ego, nor is she straightforwardly mocking the markers of male fantasy. The works displayed here are as much expressions of her own aesthetic universe as they are performance props. She is playing dress-up, but not make-believe.

Pfahler grew up in North Hollywood with a pro-surfer father before moving to New York City in 1979 to study art. On arrival, she began to stage performances on a near weekly basis on the Lower East Side circuit – covering her body in house-paint and hanging upside down on crosses – and started the death-punk metal band *The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black*. Since then, she has lived her life as a radical experiment in creativity and open-ended collaboration, following a dual philosophy of availability – using whatever materials come to hand – and anti-naturalism – the pursuit of an aesthetic of total artificiality. In Pfahler's world, everything is fair game for artistic manipulation. In 1992, she had her vagina sewn shut for Richard Kern's *Sewing Circle*.

As much as Pfahler's practice is rooted in this legendary history of downtown New York, it is also an articulation of a singular, synthetic vision. When asked to explain why she does what she does, Pfahler often gives the simple response that she is expressing her DIY interpretation of beauty. This is the kind of beauty that is found not in an airbrushed Playboy editorial, but in the crudely drawn, hypersexualised pixie lurking a few pages on in a jokes column. Both of these versions of pornographic beauty are fabricated, but the latter delights in the fact. If the erotic appeal of a smoothed-over full-page Playboy spread is that it is somehow realer than life, the pull of the Femlin is that it could never be anything other than made-up.

Pfahler's restaging of the Femlin illustrations pulls them even further away from reality. Her own aesthetic codes – body paint, big hair, brick-red settings – are brought into play, and elaborate stage lighting heightens the aesthetic of unnatural amateurism. There is also a comic absurdity to the experience of looking through the images, a fact viewers are reminded of every time the shimmering *Disco Cock* flickers into their peripheral vision.

It's easy to explain away Pfahler's work as an exercise in shock and transgression, but the real pleasure of her work is in the tension and ambiguity. The weird thing about desire – which is also the queer thing and the utopian thing – is that we can want something without knowing why, or even what it is. Pfahler knows this. Here, the meaningless excitement of sex is a way of ushering the unknown into existence, of entertaining the impossibility of another world.



'In Conversation: Spencer Sweeney & Kembra Pfahler'

Gagosian Quarterly, 19 March 2019

KEMBRA PFAHLER How are you doing, Spencer? Are these all paintings you did in your new studio?

SPENCER SWEENEY Yes. They're all self-portraits. That was the idea. I would be in a certain mood and have a certain idea, and I would get started on a self-portrait. So stylistically, I ended up with some pretty divergent works. But then that became something that was important to me, to push that further and create this variety of expressions. I thought that would be a strength.

KP They're so alive to me. Maybe it's just that I'm imbuing colors with different meanings, but there's such lightness in them—like they could take off, in a way. Do you think you can compare painting to playing music or doing your performative types of works? Because you have a performance life too, and a music life, and there's spontaneity and a lot of experimentation with the music projects you do.

SS Yes, I think there is a significant similarity. There's a level of sensitivity that you have to have to approach painting, and also playing music, or writing music, or something like cooking. I think it takes a similar head space and sensitivity.

At Headz [a weekly salon co-hosted by Sweeney, Urs Fischer, and Brendan Dugan at Sweeney's studio in 2017–18]—there was a lot going on with music there. You had this synergy, where there were people experimenting with different materials and making visual works, and then at the same time there were musicians who were free to practice pure improvisational music. It was one of those situations where the whole was greater than the parts, because the energy between the people experimenting with visual works and the improvisational music created a new idea or a new experience in a way.

We were talking about similarities between playing music and painting. Some of the paintings in this show have a more minimal approach, and that is because it just seemed at the time to be what would make the most successful works. It reminds me of a quote by Miles Davis: "It's not the notes

you play, it's the notes you don't play." And sometimes when you make a mark, the first mark you make is the one you want to keep. But it's a strange thing, because it can really work either way. Sometimes you want to keep the first mark; at other times you just want to go over it and over it until it piles up.

KP And if you're listening to your work, it tells you what it wants to be.

SS That's the thing, if you're listening, right.

KP You're such a generous community builder, and you have such an intense private practice too. How is that for you, being solitary and then being with a large group of people? Do you need a lot of isolation to create a show like this one?

SS I need a little bit of both, I think. With Headz, there were so many people and it was every week—I loved it and at the same time it started to really wear on me. And when that ended I holed up in the studio and started cranking through this situation, and then I started to go crazy in there because of the solitude, you know? You go crazy either way, so you have to balance it out.

KP These works are incredible, Spencer—they're giving me the spine-tinglers. This one, especially. It's like an epic Civil War painting. I'm reminded of Cold Mountain, that film about the Civil War. It was shot in Eastern Europe and has scenes of a soldier wandering around these big mountains—that's what this makes me think of.

SS People have an interesting read on that one, you know [laughs]. I hadn't heard Civil War epic yet, but I'm glad to hear that.

KP This one has a lot of emotion in it.

SS Yes, this one I called Suffering Bastard.

KP Suffering Bastard, that's an intense title. [laughter] I mean, there's a lot of suffering that has to go into making paintings like this.

SS Yes, it's kind of insane. I keep trying to figure out how to shake it, and maybe I'll get there someday.

KP Is drawing a big part of your practice? Is that something you do on a daily basis?

SS Yes, I probably do draw every day.

KP Do you? Or doodle?

SS Yes. I'm a doodler. I'm always drawing. I used to get into trouble for drawing because I couldn't stop. That was in high school, I guess.

KP Can I ask you about your performance practice? There are a couple of inspirations that you've spoken about before that are really interesting to me—the Eastern European folks. There was the one person that you studied—

SS Oh, Jerzy Grotowski, yes. He wrote a magnificent book called *Towards a Poor Theater*, and it's loaded with some very valuable philosophical gems. Especially if you're working on performance—he really gets down to the mechanics of the whole thing and has a wonderful, astute, visionary take on it all. He's a genius.

KP Did you have a good experience in school? I've found it incredible to work with students at Columbia [University's School of the Arts]. It's a really intense time, I think, to be a young person in school. Did you have a school experience that you enjoyed?

SS Yes, I did. Now, with tuitions being what they are, there is so much pressure. It's kind of like: Figure out what the hell you're going to do and pour \$200,000 into it, and whoosh, that's it, that's your life; it better be it! That's a pretty tough situation, really.

KP Yes, that's true. It's almost surreal to see students going through the machinations of being in university in 2018. "Is there a future for us, and what's up with life," you know? I don't think anyone

has an answer to what the future will be, because it's changing so rapidly.

SS Nobody ever really does, is the thing; there's always that uncertainty. Although I was reading a book called *The Order of Time*, by Carlo Rovelli. He's a great writer. He breaks down theories of quantum physics in a way that makes it possible to process them. And he writes that the whole notion of past, present, and future, the whole notion of time, is a distortion, and it's there because we can't see the workings of the universe down to the smallest parts that exist. If we were able to see everything that was going on around us, then time would cease to exist for us; we would no longer need this whole concept of past, present, and future if we were able to see things in their true state.

KP Thich Nhat Hanh talks about that as well.

SS Yes.

KP And mostly about remaining in the present.

SS That reminds me of a quote by Hilma af Klimt that I heard the other day: "Stay inspired and forget what you're doing." That has a certain disregard for time—for the past, for the present, or the future. All you need to do is stay inspired and forget about the rest.

I had a great amount of anxiety when it came time to finish the works for this show, and I was driving myself crazy. And then I just had to forget it. I had to get myself into a head space where I was like, there actually is no time, I just have to do what I do and not think about the rest.

KP The reason I spoke about the paintings seeming so airy and ethereal is because I've seen you do a lot with thicker paint in your other exhibitions.

SS Yes, sometimes the application gets really thick and aggressive, and sometimes it stays lighter. These are more gestural.

KP It's really a vulnerable thing to do a self-

portrait, also. To do a self-portrait is like doing a solo performative gesture, in a way.

SS At times it's kind of a painful thing to do. But it helped me out too, because there were things to think about, and it appealed to my sense of humor on a lot of levels as well—you know, playing with this idea of narcissism and things like that [laughs].

KP Studying ourselves and our own reservoir, our own history, our own experiences, will forever be an abundant source of content and information. You'll never run out of ideas.

Spence, you were saying earlier that you had to edit your paintings when it came time to install them; you had to select which ones to show. Was that a film-like process at all? Because your background is in film—I mean, you have a pretty diverse background; it's very interdisciplinary.

SS Well, I think the most important part of my education, aside from art school and drawing and painting classes, was that I grew up on the revival movie house scene. I would hang out at the different cinemas, and that was a great education. I was turned on to so many wild films and ideas. But as far as editing goes, I don't know, I really don't picture it as being a filmic process for myself.

KP There is a lot of diversity in this room too.

SS A lot of different things have happened that lead me to different styles of art making and making pictures. That whole mindset that you can't do something is completely against what creativity is all about. When I was in art school, it was popular to say that painting was dead. This was in the mid-1990s or so, and it was all about new media. If it wasn't new media, then it was considered a dead art. I just thought, this is so counterproductive; you're naming a mode of work to be no longer legitimate because you've found a new legitimacy. What? [laughs]



'Kembra Pfahler On 30 Years of the Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black'

Dangerous Minds, 07 February 2019

On February 15, Marc Almond, the Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black, Sateen, Hercules & Love Affair, and DJs Matthew Pernicano and Danny Lethal will perform at the Globe Theatre in downtown Los Angeles. This absolutely mental, once-in-a-lifetime bill will celebrate the second anniversary of Sex Cells, the LA club run by Danny Fuentes of Lethal Amounts.

Because I am so eager to see this show, and because the life of a Dangerous Minds contributor is high adventure, last Sunday I found myself speaking with Karen Black's leader, the formidable interdisciplinary artist Kembra Pfahler, by phone, after she got out of band rehearsal in NYC. My condensed and edited take on our wide-ranging conversation follows. If I'd noted every time Kembra made me laugh with a deadpan line, the transcript would be twice as long.

Kembra Pfahler: My guitarist is Samoa, he founded the band with me; he's the original Karen Black guitarist, Samoa from Hiroshima, Japan. And then Michael Wildwood is our drummer, and he played with D Generation and Chrome Locust, and Gyda Gash is our bass player, she plays with Judas Priestess and Sabbathwitch. I just came from band practice, and I am one of those folks that really enjoys going to band practice. Doing artwork and music isn't like work, and being busy is just such a luxury. It's been very pleasant preparing for this show we get to honorably do with Marc Almond. We're so excited!

We played with Marc Almond at the Meltdown Festival that was curated by Ahnoni in 2011. That was a great show with Marc Almond and a lot of other incredible artists. And I have an art gallery that represents me in London now, which is called Emalin, and I had an art exhibit there, and Marc Almond, thankfully, came to it. He's friends with one of my collaborators called Scott Ewalt.

I'm not a religious person, but I did think I had died and gone to heaven. When artists that you have loved your whole life come to, for some strange reason, see the work that you're doing, it's one of the truly best things about doing artwork. I'm very much looking forward to this concert.

DM: Can you tell me what you have planned for the show? I'm sure you want to keep some stuff a surprise, but is the disco dick in the pictures going to be part of the set?

KP: You know, the Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black has always made a lot of props and costumes, and I never really just buy things. I'm not much of a consumer. I'm an availabilist, so I usually make the best use of what's available, and we are going to have a lot of props and costumes in this show that I make myself, and I have art partners in Los Angeles, collaborators. We're going to have a big grand finale sculpture that's going to be my Black Statue of Liberty holding the pentagram. That's a huge pentagram sculpture. I made that with a friend of mine called Brandon Micah Rowe.

That sculpture lives on the West Coast, and it comes out when I go to the beach and go surfing. I usually take the Black Statue of Liberty with me, 'cause it's a great photo opportunity on the beach. And the last time I was photographing the Black Statue of Liberty—'cause of course I have several—I took this Black Statue of Liberty in a truck and drove down to Sunset Beach, right at the end of Sunset Boulevard and Pacific Coast Highway, and I just have a great memory of almost drowning with the Black Statue of Liberty. It was very much like reenacting Planet of the Apes. That was the impetus for the Statue of Liberty; I've always loved the last scene in Planet of the Apes where Charlton Heston realizes that the future is just a disastrous, anti-utopian, dead planet. Kind of similar to what's happening to us now.

DM: [laughs] Yeah, it's uncomfortably close to the present situation.

KP: To me, it's very close. I mean, film has always been very prophetic, to me. Orson Welles always talks about magic, and historical revisionism, and truth, and the ways that film can actually inform you of the truth in politics, mythological truth, cultural truths. And I've always learned the most just by watching films. That's why I named the band Karen Black, because I was so educated by the films of Karen Black. I know that sounds sort of wonky, but what I'm getting at is I love listening to Orson Welles speak about magic and truth and film as a way to articulate that truth.

DM: Are you thinking about F for Fake?

KP: I'm thinking about the little tricks and happy accidents that occur in film that are what Orson Welles spoke to. I mean, Kenneth Anger talked about magic and film constantly, and light, and Orson Welles just had a different articulation of the same side of the coin.

I grew up in Santa Monica, so I always loved Kenneth Anger; I was always happy that I lived near the Camera Obscura on Ocean Avenue and Santa Monica Boulevard. I thought, I don't fit in with any of these other Californians, but Kenneth Anger was here at the Camera Obscura. I can't be doing everything wrong.

I was born and raised in Los Angeles, and my family was in the film business, and I left for New York because I wasn't accepted by my family and the community, because I was interested in music, and it wasn't fashionable to be a goth or be into punk when I was in high school. So I moved to New York. But no one was going to New York when I first moved there. I really just moved to New York to be as contrary as possible, and I knew no one would follow me at the time.

DM: You moved to New York in '79 or thereabouts, right?

KP: Yeah, I did.

DM: I think the LA, probably, that you were leaving was more, I don't know, provincial. . . I can imagine the appeal that New York would have had in 1979.

KP: Well, also, the thing was that I really wanted to be an artist, and I got accepted to School of Visual Arts when I was in 11th grade at Santa Monica High School. That's why, really. The Los Angeles that I was familiar with wasn't provincial at all. I mean, there's been generations and generations of weird Los Angeles. My grandparents met on the baseball field: my grandmother was playing softball, my grandfather played baseball, and my father ended up being a surfer, and I've always had exposure to a really incredible kind of lifestyle that I think people mostly just dream about. Like, Beach Boys songs at Hollywood Park race track in the morning and surfing in the afternoon. If you think about being born into this time when the Beach Boys and the Stones and the Beatles are playing, and then Parliament-Funkadelic's playing, and then. . . just the most incredible exposure to music and art and nature, surfing even, surf culture. I mean, when most people are born in countries where they can't even eat dirt for breakfast, I was born in the most incredible place, that I'll never forget.

It's such a huge part of my work, I named my interdisciplinary music and art class at Columbia University "The Queen's Necklace." Because when I was a child, I used to meditate on all the beach cities. Starting from Zuma Beach, I would meditate on the cities by saying: [chants] "Zuma, Malibu, Topanga, Pacific Palisades, Santa Monica, Venice, Torrance, Palos Verdes". . . I'd say all of the cities that represented the Santa Monica Bay area. That was in my field of vision, that was what I saw every day. All those piers, all those waves, and all of the mythology that I grew up with was all about beach culture.

So Los Angeles, I feel closer to writers like John Fante than anyone else. Do you have books in your library that you've had your entire adult life that you would say represent your thinking, more so than any other books? Do you have your favorite,

favorite books? One or two books that always are with you.

DM: Oh my God, I'd have to think about it.

KP: I do. I mention that because one of them is *Ask the Dust*. Another one is David J. Skal's *Cultural History of Horror*.

DM: What's that?

KP: It's a great book that talks about the horror film genre being quite prophetic, and it's kind of what I was trying to speak about, as far as how film and horror kind of teach us about the future. That's one book, and also Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*, Volume 1 and 2 is important to me. Do you know that book?

DM: I do not. Is it like a case study?

KP: It's a case study of men's relationship to women during World War II and pre-World War II. It's about men's relationships to the women in their lives, in Germany, particularly.

Los Angeles is a such a magical, beautiful city. It is in my DNA and it will never leave, and no matter what changes occur in Los Angeles, it represents something that's very personal for me. I don't really even talk about it that much, but I love it there. My parents live in Hawaii now, and they're coming to this show in Los Angeles.

DM: Where in the Valley did you grow up?

KP: North Hollywood. The land of crystal meth.

DM: [laughs] Yeah.

KP: And how old are you, Oliver?

DM: About 40.

KP: You're almost two decades younger than I am, so you missed things in the Valley like, there was a place when I was in high school called the Sugar

Shack. It was a dance club. Joan Jett used to go there, the Runaways would go there.

DM: Did you go there? Did you go to the Valley to hang out?

KP: I didn't, actually, no. I was in seventh or sixth grade, and I was too much of a child to do anything like hitchhike to the Valley at the time. There's a picture of me as a child on my Instagram, and I was very young-looking when I was that age, and I was very shy. So I had friends who would hitchhike to the Valley to the Sugar Shack, but I didn't do that, no. I was too afraid.

DM: Was hitchhiking a big means of getting around then, still?

KP: Yes, it was. And that's also one of the reasons that I moved to New York, because when I hitchhiked on Sunset Boulevard, I remember we used to hitchhike up Chautauqua, and all the surfer kids would say, "Don't go with the guy from Mission: Impossible! He's a lurker." So you used to get molested a lot in cars, as children. I can remember getting constantly picked up by, like, "I am a Hollywood movie producer"—I mean, it was just, like, out of a horror film. And I thought to myself, I can't wait to move to a city where I can see the streets and count the grid. New York was always something that, you know, you can see where the trouble is. In Los Angeles, I always felt like it was such a darker city, because you'd be driven into the hills, and you got murdered up in the hills. I grew up as a child, you know, Charles Manson had lived in Topanga; that's where I was from. So it was a very dark, dark city. Los Angeles, astrologically, is a Scorpio town. New York represented, to me, something understandable. That's also why I left. And I knew that no one would follow me at the time. I don't know why everyone ended up coming to New York.

Marc Almond was such an early bird accessing and paying homage to those Motown hits. I was just watching some of Marc Almond's videos, and even "Tainted Love," as pop as that is, it's so scandalous, him singing to a small, young black child. It's



Photo by Richard Kern, courtesy of Kembra Pfahler

just incredible. It'd be illegal today. And it's so charming and innocent and lovely, as it should be. But it represents an incredible shift in the culture, that's for sure. An incredible conservatism—that really points out an incredible conservatism that's prevalent in our culture today.

DM: Can you talk about that, because I feel like you might have a lot of insight into that. I'm sure people, if you asked them, would think social attitudes have become more permissive in all kinds of ways. But it's actually a much safer, tamer, more controlled culture than it was even in the early eighties.

KP: My opinion in a nutshell is essentially: people have become more afraid to come out and interact with one another, and I feel like people still feel like they're participating in culture, even if they're alone in their rooms, because of access to technology. There's a word that I use called "appligence," which is "application-driven intelligence." Essentially, we're getting most of our definitions. . . our history is being transcribed by people, essentially, that just know how to write code, and we're taking that interpretation as truth. That's what I was saying about Orson Welles speaking about how film can be an honest source of history, can be a truthful source of history, when, in fact, that history is being honestly transcribed. Unfortunately, there's so much historical revisionism that I think a lot of folks in the culture, if they read something or see something in film, they take that to be a sort of truth.

So the shift, I think, is because of appligence, application-driven intelligence. I'm no one to articulate any kind of collective. . . I can't articulate what the collective zeitgeist is about. I can't. But if you think about things in terms of, like, changing the world one show, one song, or one poem at a time, that, to me, is the definition of what do-it-yourself, grassroots politics is about. It's where you assemble your community, you assemble your band, you assemble your group of friends, you assemble your block, your street, your city, your state. You start with a very small, grassroots activism, which is

to me the only way I've ever seen political change occur. The French Revolution, the wall that they built was 100 feet long and 20 stories high; they changed France, you know? A small group of activists changed France. I do believe in do-it-yourself, grassroots politics, or the ability of do-it-yourself consciousness to activate change, to create change. I still feel very strongly about that.

Now, with technology, we have a different kind of do-it-yourself philosophy, where, since in the last couple decades, all of the record companies, as you know, have eroded, thankfully we can all start our own businesses, and we can all activate our own lives by just doing things ourselves. The only difficulty with this do-it-yourselfness that's occurring now, is that it's do-it-yourself, but it's almost so completely solitary we are forgetting how to interact with one another in person.

One word that I love so much, I do believe in liminality, I feel like we're in a liminal phase right now. We're gathering our ingredients, we're filling the recipes that we're going to need to enact a new system. There's a big change occurring, and you can't describe what the change is because it's happening. But I think the word "liminal" really describes it a lot more positively. It's a necessary place to be. It's necessary to gather new ingredients, and it's necessary to also fail. Because without failure, we can't get to the other side, and I think that's what keeps people indoors, is this fear of being imperfect.

We did "Future Feminism" in 2014, and doing this show about future feminism changed all of our lives completely, because we got into so much trouble trying to make an art exhibit where we all spoke about feminism as people that were in bands and people that were doing theatrical performance. So we weren't academic feminists; we were coming from a theatrical, musical background. This was 2014, and we got hate mail from all of our friends. The folks in Los Angeles saw that we wrote "The Future Is Female" in our last tenet—which also was horribly derided by all of our underground community. They all hated it. They said, "How can

you say 'the future is female'? The future is like Close Encounters of the Third Kind. We can't name our sex, we can't name anything. We are other than sex." So they were very angry that we said "The Future Is Female," and then a year later, all the merchandising came out, and all of the folks in show business that are hungry for content came out and made T-shirts and said "Oh, this is a great time to love women! Let's get in on this. This is great. We're gonna make a fortune on those Margaret Atwood movies now. Trans is in." I mean, we've spent the last several decades getting our heads bashed in, getting fag-bashed, getting bashed constantly, dying of AIDS, everything, and after the year 2014, there was a really big shift. And I think that doing the "Future Feminism" show, I think there was a large shift after the show. But it changed our lives completely. It was necessary for us to do it, and it was a wonderful experience, but we really, really were blistered by that experience.

It's not from reactionaries, it's not from right-wing people that you were getting shit.

It was from the underground culture. That's why it hurt so much. It was from our friends. But one thing that's always important to do: we have to look at ourselves and question the underground as much as we question the authorities around us, as well.

It's been interesting to see the way everyone is so desperate for content. I feel like the interest in black culture or indigenous culture or females is only going to last as long as they're able to make money on it in film and books and fashion. Once that idea becomes sour, they're gonna have to find something else that's popular. And usually, I think larger corporations look towards artists for those new ideas. I can't tell you how many times I've had a publicist call me and say—I remember Rose McGowan's publicist called me and said, "Rose McGowan wants to do something in art. Can you put her in Karen Black costume?" This was before the Me Too movement. "She's trying to reinvent herself, can you put her in a costume?" And I just hung up the phone. I just hung up. You know, of

course, I would have loved to have spoken to that person directly. I mean, I've never had a manager or a publicist or anything like that my entire adult life, really.

And so then comes along the feminist movement, and I think that Lydia Lunch has been talking about the same things that all of us have been talking about since the eighties.

DM: I know Richard Kern did the Sewing Circle film, but had you known him a long time before that?

KP: I had, yes. I've always been a fan of Richard's films, and I was an early fan of Lydia Lunch's. I met Richard a little bit later, but I've always really admired his work a great deal. At the time I was photographed by Richard, my look wasn't perceived to be beautiful. Like, I was emaciated with black hair. That's around the time that Richard Kern made the book called New York Girls. Richard was someone that really lifted my spirits, he's always been a really good friend, and I've always loved what he did. We've remained friends all these years. He just taught a class, he taught "Music and Sound" at Columbia University a few weeks ago, for my class that I was having. Oh, he's a really generous spirit, and he's a total original, too. There's been so many people that emulated Richard; I always thought Terry Richardson was just being, like, a poor man's Richard Kern.

So Richard is thriving, he's still doing tons of work, he's always photographing, and he just came over and shot us, thankfully, for this show. And Richard's not like anyone that I know. He's not a covetous artist, he's extremely generous with giving us pictures when we need. People aren't like Richard. Most artists get very, very covetous. There's other photographers I've worked with that would insist, I would have to pay them \$200 or \$300 to use a photo they took of me in my costume. Isn't that terrible? Covetousness isn't really in my vocabulary, and Richard's been so generous, and really cool. We hadn't taken pictures together in a little bit. So it was really nice that he took those pictures for us.

pictures when we need. People aren't like Richard. Most artists get very, very covetous. There's other photographers I've worked with that would insist, I would have to pay them \$200 or \$300 to use a photo they took of me in my costume. Isn't that terrible? Covetousness isn't really in my vocabulary, and Richard's been so generous, and really cool. We hadn't taken pictures together in a little bit. So it was really nice that he took those pictures for us. But Richard is still doing incredible work, and he's one of the only extreme artists who made it out of the Me Too situation without defiling any women.

DM: No, I don't know of any scandals touching him.

KP: Nope, nope, nope. I'm glad that a lot of people are getting their just deserts, a lot of people that caused harm are finally going to have to start to change.

DM: Does the band have to reassemble now? Is everybody scattered?

KP: No, of course not. We're always together, the band is always together, it's just that I've gotten more women involved in the band lately. I travel a lot because of the art projects that I do, and being from Emalin gallery, I get to have shows in other countries, and a lot of times the whole band can't go on tour because it's costly. I prefer to play with bass, guitar, and drums—I prefer to play with my full band, rather than just with backing tracks. There's nothing like playing music with folks. And there's nothing like group singing, as well, I love choral singing, I love singing with the women. There's groups of Girls of Karen Black in a lot of cities around the world now. There's Girls of Karen Black in Russia, and in Hawaii, and in California. At this show in Los Angeles, a wonderful artist named Karen Lofgren is in the show, and Matthew Tyler Oyer, and we're taking a dancer from New York City called Christian Music; she's kind of the lead dancer, Christian Music is the lead Girl of Karen Black. And some of the women that I've worked with have been in the band for 30 years.

DM: So how does one become a Girl of Karen Black?

KP:Um. . . by having similar hobbies. You know how "real recognizes real"? I think we recognize one another, not to sound corny. We have similar interests, that's all, the women. And usually the women, or folk, the people that I work with, we're interested in horror, we're interested in rock 'n' roll music—although I grew up listening to Parliament-Funkadelic and Santa Esmeralda as well. My stepdad used to be the contract lawyer for Parliament-Funkadelic when I was a child, and so I listened to that music all through my childhood. It was really inspiring, and I got to see a lot of shows, and those shows were incredibly theatrical! And then I grew up to see a lot of, of course, KISS, and I used to love all the Larry LeGaspi costumes. LeGaspi's finally getting a lot of notoriety, the designer for the KISS costumes. Rick Owens, the wonderful designer who is a friend of mine—I love Rick Owens' work very much—his last collection is about Larry LeGaspi, the designer of the KISS costumes.

I always loved costume. My mother, Judy Ball, used to dress us up wearing flower heads, wearing really simple, strange costumes. A lot of the things I do in Karen Black are gestures that my mother had created for me when I was a child.

DM: Parliament-Funkadelic, I don't really hear it in the music, but that makes a lot of sense with the stage show.

KP: Oh, no, we don't sound like Parliament. I'm not a funk player. I mean, I play indigenous music, I play classic rock, because it's like verse-chorus-verse-chorus-guitar solo-verse-chorus-out. It's music where performance can live in the guitar solo. I like really simple classic rock, you know?

In the early nineties and late eighties in New York, there wasn't that much theatrical, queer, decorated, classic rock. We started our band at a time when there was emo and kind of like, what I guess would be sort of like palatable alternative rock? And grunge. So we were just making a contrarian



Photo by Richard Kern, courtesy of Kembra Pfahler

response to that. And everyone used to call us “fags,” and they all used to call us “queer,” and “drag queens,” and “ugly,” of course, “ugly.”

DM: This was the enlightened hardcore scene.

KP: Yes, the enlightened hardcore scene. Of course, people like John Joseph from Cro-Mags always loved us.

DM: Really!

KP: Of course, yeah. John Joseph has been a really big supporter of Karen Black. The really hardcore people, the folks from Fugazi were always really supportive of us. But there was a demograph that always... we were very unpopular for a long time because people used to say that doing performance and music, you know, we weren't making “real music.”

Most of our support came from the kind of queer culture that was Ron Athey, Vaginal Creme Davis, really, really extreme queer punk. Bruce LaBruce.

DM: The Anti-Naturalists came out when I was in high school, and I listened to it a lot in my bedroom. And on the cover, probably because the size of a CD cover is so small compared to vinyl, your shoes, I thought, were these incredible space-age future shoes, and it wasn't until I saw that DisinfoTV segment that I realized you were wearing bowling balls. Are you still doing that?

KP: Yeah. I feel like, Oliver, all those images that you saw on all the albums, those are like pieces of the vocabulary of images that I created. I just did the bowling ball piece for Love Magazine, for the guys from that band Jesus and Mary Chain? They came and filmed. They're great guys, they've got a camera collection in their film company, and they did a whole piece where they filmed me walking on the bowling balls, and I did sort of an elaboration of that piece. It initially comes from a Hans Baldung etching where they used to tie stones to women's feet. So the bowling ball piece is something I've done essentially my whole life, and I haven't

haven't stopped doing it. It takes on different forms, but all of these performance gestures, they're like a kind of vocabulary to me.

DM: It's almost like you're talking about a palette of colors, right?

KP: I think so. In my class that I teach at Columbia, “The Queen's Necklace,” I'm talking about having a vocabulary of images to the kids that I'm speaking to. And my vocabulary is kind of like immaterial performance gestures. I mean, they do become material, because they end up being sculptures that people look at later, but it's not exactly a popular genre. Even though I think people think that it's popular, but it's not that popular.

We have an interdisciplinary class they hired me for. The students hired me there because they didn't like the old performance teacher, because the old performance teacher was only talking about the two performance people that are historicized: Carolee Schneemann and Chris Burden. Those are the only ones they're talking about in college. For me, performance was about the Screemers! Diamanda Galás! The Cramps! Al's Bar! Henry Rollins! Lydia Lunch! Bruce Brown surfing films! Karen Black Trilogy of Terror! Andy Kaufman! [laughs] Performance was always so broad to me, and to me, performance essentially represented something that wasn't necessarily entertainment, it was a little more thought-provoking, and you just went a little bit deeper. It meant a little bit more than just regular entertainment. And for me, performance has meant, and Karen Black has meant, I'm willing to sacrifice comforts and willing to sacrifice a lot of things to do this work, because it's not that popular. But it's been a really great life being able to do this Karen Black work, it's been a really great life.

DM: What's the story with the photo I've seen of you onstage holding a sign that says “BE NICE I AM RELATED TO JAWBREAKER”?

KP: My brother Adam is the drummer in a band called Jawbreaker, and he invited us to play at Riot Fest this year.

When we used to go on tour in the late nineties, we used to go on tour all across the United States, and we would play in a lot of places where there were just punk kids, and it was really kinda the first time I think anyone had seen performance art like we were doing. I made a conscious decision not to go to Europe or Japan, where they would be nicer to us. I went to places where they would hate us 'cause I thought that's what you were supposed to do. Mind you, I grew up loving the Sex Pistols; the first shows they did [in the U.S.] were in Texas. So I thought, as an artist, that's what you were supposed to do. You were supposed to go where they didn't want you. So that's what we did: we went to Sioux City, we went all over Texas, we went to every state in the United States, and my brother's band, Jawbreaker, they're a do-it-yourself punk band, they traveled all around the United States as well. And often, they would be playing in places that we would play, but we were the only band that were performative at the time.

So I would say to the crowd that was about to kill me, “Please be nice to me. I'm Adam's sister.”

And then the kids wouldn't kill me. They'd go, “Oh, okay. Wait a minute, we know Jawbreaker, we love Jawbreaker. Oh, okay. What are you guys doing? Oh, okay. You make props?”

I'd say, “Yes. I'm Adam's older sister. Please don't kill me.” 'Cause it was at a time when performance just wasn't popular in music. People didn't even wear makeup onstage. Just wasn't happening at that moment. But we know that the glitter rock people wore makeup, we know that the punk kids always wore lots of makeup. But traveling around in Texas and all these places, a lot of people were still in the closet with their sexualities and stuff? You know, it's probably dangerous to come out in certain states, of course. Certain states still like hanging—they're secessionists, or whatever! [laughs]

DM: So you got some pretty extreme reactions in the South, it sounds like?

KP: Well, what would happen to us—you know, I was friends with GG Allin, who, to me, was someone who knew how to get arrested very well. I got to see a lot of GG's shows, and I actually got to sing on his album, and I saw GG, and GG would say, you know, “Intentionally get arrested!” I think that, thankfully, it's never been our intention to get arrested? So what would happen to us was that usually the police would come, and then they would see us, and then they would end up staying for the show.

DM: Oh, well, that's kind of sweet.

KP: It's fuckin' lucky.

DM: But do you feel like you won them over in any way?

KP: I feel like it was my intent not to get arrested, knock on wood. I don't want to go to jail. I don't want to. I don't want that to be a part of our mythology. I'm terrified of jail, terrified. Don't want to go.

We don't do anything adult-sexual. Our nudity isn't about adult sexuality, although I have been in Penthouse, and Playboy has supported a lot of my projects, before their demise, before Hugh Hefner died. He supported one of my shows that I did about Giverny, when I went to Claude Monet's garden? In Giverny, and I got to pose all around Giverny garden.

DM: Oh, I didn't know about that!

KP: Yeah, it's a beautiful piece. It's called “Giverny,” and I got to be in my Karen Black costume in Claude Monet's impressionist garden. [The video for] “Bring Back the Night” [from the shelved TVHKB album Home of the Brave] was shot at the Claude Monet garden. It is like the anti-Star Is Born song. “Oh have you heard... the night's turned silver, too many stars in the sky, no star left to guide me”—I thought if the black sky was covered in stars, we couldn't see the black sky. “Put the black back back in the night, it's too bright too bright to see.”



If you consider Aleister Crowley's "Every man and every woman is a star," or Warhol's "Everyone's a star for 15 minutes," or now the idea that everyone is famous because of YouTube. . . my thought was there's too many stars. A star is not born. The show must not go on. You know, a contrary gesture.

DM: That's amazing. I have to look that up.

KP: Oliver, you might like these images very much. It was the same sort of—it's our intent not to get arrested. You know that you do certain things, you're going to get arrested, right? When I shove the crucifix in my vagina or butthole, that's often quite revolting. And I did that at the Geffen Museum a couple of years ago, but because we're in body paint, and it's decorative, and it's very. . . the feeling and the motive behind it is that it's art, and it's a gesture. So hopefully that intent comes through. But that's pretty much the grossest thing that we do, is with the cross. But to me, my interest in film: like, with film and comedy, playing it straight is the funniest thing to me. The scene in *The Exorcist* where she's shoving the crucifix in her vagina was probably the funniest thing I've ever seen in my life. [much laughter]

DM: Yeah, it is pretty funny.

KP: You can't tell me that's not funny! Especially when Christian people are such perverts, and molesting all these kids anyway.

So that gesture is really about—you know, I went to the Virginia McMartin School as a child.

DM: No kidding! The famous McMartin case.

KP: Yeah, that's my childhood. So me shoving the cross in my butt and vagina is just taking the piss out of that whole thing. I have to! How could you not?

DM: That's fascinating. I had no idea.

KP: Yeah, I went there. There was no child molestation in my history with Virginia McMartin. It was a

witch hunt that happened in Manhattan and Hermosa Beach. There was no child pornography, there was no Satanism, it was a witch hunt created by an alcoholic woman who was having some kind of difficulty in her marriage.

You know, that's the spirit of the time. It's funny, like, that's sort of totally prevalent in our culture right now, as far as being guilty until proven innocent rather than innocent until proven guilty. So that hasn't changed very much.

OH,



KEMBRA!



Photography by JACK PIERSON

A downtown NYC legend who moved from L.A. in the early 1980s, KEMBRA PFAHLER fronts a death punk metal band in blue body paint and a bouffant black wig, and makes her own art by the tenet of "Availabilism" to use whatever's around. Here, she talks to JEFFREY DEITCH about her inspirations, from beach culture to Japanese Noh theater, and her main impetus: a different paradigm of female beauty.



Jeffrey Deitch I'd like to talk first about your artistic formation. People think of you as the ultimate downtown New Yorker, but you surprised me once by telling me you're a Southern California girl—and, shockingly, a natural blonde. Tell us about the transformation from California blonde to one of the people who shaped the New York downtown underground.

Kembra Pfahler Oddly enough, where I grew up resembles the Lower East Side a great deal. I was born in Hermosa beach California, the South Bay, but spent most of my childhood in Santa Monica, Malibu, Northern California for a couple of years... Where I spent most of my time was below 14th Street on San Vicente Boulevard. So I always had a reference to being below 14th Street there.

I never went to Hollywood or the Valley; I was a real small town beach person who just stayed in one little area. There was a lot to learn there, though. Great artists like Kenneth Anger spent time on the West Side... Nikki de St. Phalle, Christopher Isherwood, Don Bacardi—all sorts of wonderful extreme artists spent time in the Santa Monica Canyon... The Dogtown scene was all around me; they surfed and skated the pools around my school. In Malibu, there was an incredible nest of fantastic artists that used to enchant me, and I dreamt of growing up to be an artist. Being a goth trapped in a Southern California girl body, doing artwork was like a way to reinvent myself, to really express myself freely. I always enjoyed drawing, making things with my hands, creating new objects, little sculptures. Being creative was just part of my DNA, and being exposed to all these other artists around me, I started becoming aware of a historical trajectory and applying that knowledge to what I did. When I was asked by older people what I was doing, I would say, "I am experimenting. I am an artist."

JD When did you first start experimenting with performance?

KP When I was doing performance at the time, I didn't know it was performance. We used to call them "hijinx." I would hang upside down on street posts, and I would always involve my family, in the spirit of availability. I wanted to infuse drag life with meaning and significance. But as far as the creation of a persona, I don't think I consciously did that. It just sort of happened.

JD Were you already starting to go beyond a conventional goth aesthetic and find your unique look?

KP Yeah. People used to think it was terrifying and terribly ugly at the time. But in 1977, punk

hadn't come to L.A. beach kids yet. I was part of the first wave of Los Angeles punk.

JD So your formation started in L.A.?

KP Beach and surf culture, films and artists from the area, were very important influences. Even after I moved, I went back as much as I could. It's impossible to erase L.A. from you—it's the fabric of what you're made of. But as I grew up, I started getting very bored there. I never finished 12th grade in Santa Monica...

JD ... and you moved to New York and enrolled at SVA (School of Visual Arts). What year is this?

KP '79.

JD Oh, that's prime time! I would say that's the beginning of the more "public" phase of downtown culture—when it started to get international attention. Did you live on the Lower East Side?

KP I did. I lived on Avenue D, which was hardcore then. But I felt there was a similarity to the warmth that the beach people had in Santa Monica, Venice, Malibu. I was really embraced by the Puerto Rican and Dominican folks of the neighborhood. One of my best friends was El Coco De Alba—"the talking coconut"—who was a 70-year-old poet. Keith Haring was also there; he was a couple of years older than I was, and he used to tease my outfits. The Living Theater was open on 4th Street, the Millennium Film Archives... I got to meet and be in films with all of these wonderful filmmakers—Jack Smith, Jonas Mekas. Around '80-'81, I started doing performances. I was doing performances almost once a week.

JD Really, where?

KP Everywhere. Danceteria, CBGB, ABC No Rio, I did the Pyramid a lot of times... Everywhere. And my performances were very rough and unentertaining. I did this one performance where I came out and painted a backdrop red and black. I had a swing, hung in the middle of the stage. I had candles strapped to my toes that were burning, and I read poetry. My first step was creating a vocabulary of images, setting up a community, and I often used sound in a very found way. Around 1990, I decided I wanted to start making soundtracks with my own music for my performances. Samoa and I had met around 1983—he was my first boyfriend, and we had gotten married. In 1990, we started the band. After getting a glimpse of what the art world was like, I didn't want to be in it. I wanted to go on tour with







my band, I wanted to travel, and that's what I did for the following decade.

^{JD} So the '90s is really the decade of the Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black...

^{KP} And touring constantly. We played everywhere. I made posters for every show we did, I still have them. Samoa and I, we'd be out in the middle of the night doing our own wheat-pasting. We always stayed underground. Record companies solicited us and had us to their offices—they would say silly things to me like, "You're too ugly in that topless costume, you should put a shirt on, take that black stuff off of your teeth, and really work that cute angle." And that would be the end of that discussion.

^{JD} So by that time, you had created the Kembra character that we know today?

^{KP} Yeah. Well, that costume was born in the early '80s. The name "Voluptuous Horror" was invented by filmmaker Mike Kuchar. He said to me, "Oh Kembra, your costume looks voluptuously horrific."

^{JD} How did the costume come about?

^{KP} Initially I turned to body paint because I felt very shy. Samoa is from Hiroshima, so from him I learned about Japanese Noh theater. I loved the ghost face with the eyebrows that went all the way up and the black teeth. So we could say that was the original inspiration.

^{JD} Well that's fascinating, I didn't know.

^{KP} Yeah. I had traveled to Hiroshima with Samoa—we visited family there, and I got married in a Japanese ceremony. Samoa and I did wonderful work together. We didn't always have the same doma style. We had different art studios and we lived very independently. It was a very positive relationship for us to have as young people, as artists. And thankfully, I didn't have to walk the path of heteronormativity and have a baby. I think that the best thing that I've ever done in my whole life, aside from being an artist, is to not have a child. A lot of other people that I knew, they all were making families and moving to the country and stuff. But the Lower East Side wasn't a place I ever wanted to leave. I never had this idea that there was a better place for me to be than exactly where I was.

^{JD} So tell me about the development of the distinctive visual vocabulary of Voluptuous Horror and Karen Black, and of Kembra Pfahler as a performance artist. One could say you're a walking painting, or a walking sculpture.

^{KP} It's a uniform. I don't feel that it's a character of any sort. I'm not another person when I'm in that costume, and I really enjoy seeing other girls that are in my band wearing the same Karen Black outfit—the essence of their personality always emerges, surprisingly. I like the idea of us making our own costumes rather than being styled—I think you can always tell when you see a performer in something that they made themselves. There's something about the energy. Over the years, the costume has gotten more refined, the wigs have gotten bigger and more teased, and the eyes have gotten a little more elegant because I've learned more about makeup. When I first started out I was using house paint on my body, I didn't know about body paints.

^{JD} From the histories of costume, performance art or painting, are there any precedents or references you drew inspiration from?

^{KP} I guess I did body paint for similar reasons that people use body paints in other cultures: preparing for an important ceremony. It became part of the practice, and it was important for me to transform from top to bottom. It couldn't be minimal transformation, it had to be total. Everything.

I've learned an awful lot about painting and the history of costume, but I can't say that I am necessarily trying to evoke certain parallels. Perhaps some of it came naturally. For example, Kenneth Anger used a lot of body paint in his work... As I said, the teeth came from Japanese horror films, Noh and Kabuki theater... But ultimately, the costume is driven by beauty aesthetic—it's what I consider a different paradigm of female beauty. That was the impetus for it. Some people in fashion share my opinions about what I think is beautiful, and that's what led me to work with some wonderful designers, like Rick Owens in particular, and photographers, like Richard Kern. When I was younger, people would always chase me down the street and scream at me, and tell me how ugly I was, because I drew my eyebrows on with a sharpie marker. And all of a sudden, I would grab the attention of the fashion community.

There are many different forms of misogyny in the world, and one of the reasons that I like working in fashion so much is because as an artist, I always felt like people wouldn't take me seriously if I was too glamorous or too interesting-looking, so I always liked to look as beautiful as possible. To be able to have an academic life wearing lipstick, to not have to disguise my femininity but to pay homage to it, revel in it, and feel good about it... It's a big "Fuck you" to the establishment.







JD So we talked about the '90s being the decade of the Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black. What happened next?

KP In 2000, the Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black took a little break. Samoa and I decided to go our separate ways and divorce. We remained friends, and are still friends to this day. Around the same time, I met Colin de Land from American Fine Arts Company, who invited me to do a show at his gallery. It opened in 2002 and was titled "Availablism and Anti-Naturalism: A Feminine Experiment." It was the first proper show I had in the well-respected art world of New York City. I met you shortly thereafter, and I was in the first Deitch Projects Art Parade. I got to do the Whitney Biennial in 2008. I did a show that was very important to me called "Future Feminism." Now, I work with Emalin, a young gallery based in London. When I met Leopold [Thun], he said, "Kembra, I want to work with you for the rest of your life," and I said, "Sounds good to me."

JD What are you working on right now?

KP I essentially run my own record company—I'm the president of my own label for the Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black. I feel like I have to make a book or something. I just haven't had time to sit down and stare in the rearview mirror, because I've been so busy making new work and stuff, but I think it'd be fun to share my stories with everybody, talk about the people and things that mattered to me. I've gotten to do so many delicious projects—it was like taking a ride on all of the "D rides" at Disneyland! So my suggestion for all the young artists out there would be, don't wait in line. Skip to the front of the line. It takes audacity, tenacity and courage to be an artist, more than anything else. **K**



Ira Lupa, 'Kembra Pfahler: fearless, shocking and in fashion'

Dazed, 28 July 2017

We go deep with the art legend – who appears in the new Helmut Lang campaign – on sacrificing everything for her work, the Aids crisis and having her vagina sewn shut.

A black bushy wig with a crooked bow. Thigh-high laced vinyl boots. A naked body covered in red paint, heavily glittered eyes, teeth blackened after an old Japanese tradition practiced by wives and geishas. The woman on stage looks like a mixture of B-movie hellcat and Femlin, a mischievous character ripped from the pages of Playboy. She's horrendous, and at the same time horribly seductive.

She's joined onstage by half a dozen lookalikes. These "coven-meets-vaudeville" ladies dance to old rock riffs, roar their verses, and never smile. Eventually, they spread their legs and lay on top of each other so they build a 'wall of vagina' – an emphatic, living, breathing monument.

This is a Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black show, the theatrical punk band headed by New York City art legend Kembra Pfahler.

Pfahler is a real 'anti-diva', with a long shock list. By the mid-90s, she had already founded TVHKB, made love to the rubber octopus in Nick Zedd's movie *War Is Menstrual Envy* and had her vagina sewn shut for Richard Kern's *Sewing Circle*. Over this period, she polished her instantly recognisable artistic language, and coined the philosophy of availabilism. Now her hardcore output is acknowledged by highbrow art institutions like MoMA and the Whitney Museum, and she's modelled for Calvin Klein, Rick Owens, Rodarte and Marc Jacobs. For a person involved in butt print painting and running *The Punk Ladies of Wrestling* federation, her forays into fashion almost seem like a prank – and now she features in the rebirth of Helmut Lang.

"I was perceived as ugly my whole life, it's only since I started being embraced by the modelling fashion world that my bone structure started signifying something more fuckable – less horrific," says Pfahler. "My ugliness got transformed by way of homage and perception. It has helped, having

that – rather than getting beaten up or chased down the street, people ask what size sharpie-marker I use for my eyebrows."

In 2014, together with artists Anohni, Johanna Constantine, CocoRosie's Bianca and Sierra Casady, Pfahler launched *Future Feminism* – a 13-day performance festival in NYC looking at "13 Tenets of Future Feminism", the group's political and ethical thoughts on the solutions to global problems. This month, the artists bring the exhibition to Aarhus, Denmark. Engraved on pink onyx crystal, tenet #1 says: "The subjugation of women and Earth is one and the same".

Kembra Pfahler's work is not always easy to understand or digest, and she admits it. Perhaps the best way to get the message is to see her live performances, unabashedly ironic and pagan, yet conscious and meticulously controlled, mocking the generally accepted notions of female beauty, targeting the cultural exploitation of women's bodies. "She takes it and spits it back out with venomous power and force," says Kayla Guthrie, an NYC-based artist and a graduate from Pfahler's own Performance Art 101 class. "It's extreme but not abject," continues Guthrie. "It brings up complex reactions of disgust, pain, fear, delight and enjoyment all at once. It draws on all these subconscious brews of power and sexuality in our minds, bodies and emotions, and rolls them into a blasphemous image that is incredibly pure and focused, both very angry and very joyful."

To discuss Pfahler's eccentric life and career, and why being an artist still matters, we sat down in her East Village apartment. The famous place is fully painted in red – just like her body during the shows – and in the living room there are giant performance props of dicks and inverted crosses. A sure sign that Kembra's work is what she truly is – if anyone ever doubted it.

Kembra Pfahler: Hope you're not allergic to cats. Say hi to this beauty, her name is Nina. She's very affectionate, because she has only three legs.

Kembra Pfahler: Hope you're not allergic to cats. Say hi to this beauty, her name is Nina. She's very affectionate, because she has only three legs.

I.L: Hi Nina. What happened to her?

Kembra Pfahler: She was just born like that. I'm not an obsessed cat person, but this one was abandoned on Avenue D so I took her. But she's so cute, right? She likes you!

I.L: I'm not surprised you're that charitable. From the students of your Performance Art 101 class, I've heard you are very giving – as a mentor, an artist and a person.

Kembra Pfahler: I'm really giving in my art. I can give it, say, my own health. It took me months to recover from previous *Future Feminism* shows as it caused problems with my back. I went really in-depth for *Future Feminism* so it depleted me, in a lot of aspects. It took a year to pay back money for all the tech people. It really tired me out.

I.L: Do you feel like it was worth it?

Kembra Pfahler: Absolutely. One hundred per cent.

I.L: Lots of artists tend to be quite careless about their health, are you like that?

Kembra Pfahler: I'm 55 years old now. I can't complain about too many health things and I don't follow a strict food programme. I ate for years like I was on tour with the band. A donut, a bagel, some greens. But I was never fanatical about health or food because largely my body luckily did what I wanted it to do. It followed my commands. I trained as a gymnast for years when I was young and was planning on going to the Olympics before I broke my elbow, and the course of my life shifted. The first person I loved more than any friend, Gordon Kurtti, died of Aids in the 80s and seeing the horror he and others endured always eclipsed my own health issues. I can't stand going to the doctors, really. Although I don't respond to holistic treatments. I need anti-natural cures and am a believer

in antibiotics. Especially after being on the road for so long, I could never really afford to be sick and to lose dates. I hope this wellness continues. I don't take it for granted.

I.L: You speak openly about the things most people are secretive about. I saw the video where you're gradually taking off your clothes and revealing everything about your problems with health, food, drug addictions and getting older.

Kembra Pfahler: Getting older is awesome. Especially being a woman – people start to take you more seriously. They shouldn't, but they do. If you're doing something for 20 years, people start to take you more seriously. They don't question your integrity that much. And I've been doing my artwork for almost four decades, without ever stopping.

I.L: Have you ever questioned why it was always important for you to keep going?

Kembra Pfahler: Because in our country, the United States of America, we don't have any mythological and cultural history. We never had any ritual or cultural celebration aside from surfing in California. I don't know where my grandparents came from, I don't know what my background is. I don't really know the language of my people generations away. You know what I mean? I'm coming from Los Angeles and my blood is a mixture of many. I guess I'm European, I don't know. But I know I am a surfer. My parents are surfers. The atmosphere around us was just one thing: surfing. Growing up with my hippie parents gave me an opportunity to invent my own cultural identity, my own mythology. I had an opportunity to create myself any way that I wanted to and I was encouraged to do so by my parents. I think I was born with a very heavy heart. I always escaped through imagination and always had desire to make things more beautiful. I felt it was frightening and ugly out there.

I.L: Why do you think such things as art and being artistic still matter in such politically anxious times?

Kembra Pfahler: My definition of art is creating moments of surprising beauty, and happiness. I don't find that anywhere else. When art is pointing out the direction towards the truth, when art is good and strong, it tells us about what our future is going to be. It creates a prophecy, in a way. Artists are supposed to be visionaries of the culture, to see things differently and share those stories with the community. So art matters as long as human beings all matter. I think it's one of the only things that human beings do that's of any value. Everything else seems to be driven towards destruction. Human beings are crazy about killing things. I mean, we've done enough damage to destroy the planet Earth in only 200 years. Comparatively, it took billions of years to make the planet. So I think art matters because art is not destruction, it's not war. It's one of the nicest things that human beings can contribute. It's also just pleasurable to make art, right? And to share it.

I.L: Tell me more about your Performance Art 101 classes. What's the main thing you're trying to teach your students?

Kembra Pfahler: I don't feel like I'm a teacher, more of just an art facilitator and friend. What I'm teaching and what I'm doing with the people in my class is not my own work. On the first day, I tell everyone, 'Today you've graduated and I give everyone an A+. Take away all of your feelings of stress around finishing this class. You've done perfectly well and you have the courage for showing up.' So we graduate on the first day. We do everything the opposite way to how they do in a regular school. We're irregular, contrarian. I tell everyone, 'We're here to make your work better and to learn about your vocabulary of images.' I show them how to set the temperature for getting better with their work. Being an artist, you have to create an atmosphere from which your best work comes out. If you're writing – it's how to do your best writing. Maybe you also have to have your studio set up in a proper way. So that's what we do at Performance Art 101. It's called 101 because it's really the basics of how to set up your studio, your work day. How every day we wake up and do writing projects, drawing projects, so it's very busy.

I.L: Are you into that black-and-white vision that some people are real artists and others aren't? To your mind, can everyone be an artist or no?

Kembra Pfahler: They totally can. But if they want to spend all day and all night being an artist, that's another thing. I think it's more like discipline. Do you want to work 24 hours a day on your art? Do you want to sacrifice? For many people, it's also important to have a life. I never had a life except for art life. My art always came between me and my personal relationships. I was married once for 18 years successfully so I had some good relationships, but my art always caused a bit of tension.

I.L: Samoa Moriki, your ex-husband and co-founder of the Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black, is an artist too. You'll even be curating his upcoming painting show at the Howl gallery in NYC. So his art wasn't such a big thing in your relationships as yours?

Kembra Pfahler: His art was important too. When we were young, what I did was upsetting to him, I think. My art was a little aggressive at that time and I think it was difficult. I was in Penthouse with my vagina sewn shut, you know. So we had to take a break for a little while, and we did it in 2000 and we stopped doing The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black too. Samoa has been the most important artistic relationship to me. He's my ex-husband now but he's an important friend.

I.L: So even artists can't handle such things sometimes.

Kembra Pfahler: For the most part, they definitely can't handle that.

I.L: What would you advise female artists in their relationships with men?

Kembra Pfahler: Just talk about things. And have clarity in what you're doing. If you're doing something that involves nudity and your body, don't act impiously. Just think, will you love that work in ten years? Why are you doing it? Is it a destructive



impulse or is it an impulse you're ready to live with forever? Do you think it's beautiful? Can you show this to your parents? Can you talk about this during Christmas at the table?

I.L: Through the description of your parents it seems like they should have understood.

Kembra Pfahler: I had no desire to be secretive about my work so I would be talking about my sewn vagina at the Thanksgiving table. They understood because they tried to understand. And I know that it was difficult for my parents. But with my artwork, I was out of the closet for my whole life. An extra suggestion to young female artists is, don't be secretive. Because they will always find out. You can't be secretive about your identity. Unless you're in the situation where you'll be thrown in jail and will never be able to come out, there's no reason to be secretive. In America, we have these kind of freedoms, so I didn't want to create a fictitious character and not let my parents see my work. I wanted to be very open about it and I am glad I was.

I.L: So you don't regret any of the things in art you've done.

Kembra Pfahler: None of them. But some of the people that worked with me did. They had revisionism when they wanted to change their mind about their participation, to take their name and image out of Karen Black or any of my work because they got into relationships where their boyfriends didn't like me. In some cases their men were even jealous of the band and my visibility. So stupid. Now I'm very careful to choose people that I work with. I will only work with people with whom we've talked about everything we're going to do. I ask them the same thing I told you: 'Can you handle this ten years from now?' I would not regret anything, but when some of my collaborators did, it was very painful. I've learned it the hard way.

I.L: Those women who left you, how did they end up?

Kembra Pfahler: One of them died. The other one is sitting at home with children.

I.L: Have you ever wanted to have a family life too?

Kembra Pfahler: Yes, I wanted to have family. I don't have biological children but I have young kids in the band whom I can help, for whom I can be a mother too. I was trying to have a child with Colin de Land, he had a gallery called American Fine Arts. But he died of cancer. Life and death walk closely... I know this pretty well since I'm from the country where there is an ongoing war crisis. There is a war here in America too – Aids, cancer, poverty, political tensions to some point. I feel like the amount of tragedy is practically the same everywhere. My experience with Aids and death is not unusual. In the 80s, half of New York City had just died out. It was like a plague. So terrifying.

I.L: I can imagine how terrifying it was, since nobody knew the disease well.

Kembra Pfahler: Yes, nobody even knew what Aids was. I remember I wasn't allowed to go and visit my friends in the hospital room, because the hospital was too afraid to have visitors. Everybody wore those biohazard protection suits. I feel like I have a trauma from that time similar to the one people have after the hell of war. I'm a veteran.

I.L: If there's hell, is there heaven? Did this lead you to some more religious outlook on life?

Kembra Pfahler: Well, no. I think there's an energy in the afterlife, and when everything shatters, you leave some energy and it travels here or there. Me, personally, I think I'll just leave. And I hope to leave something behind. I'm not worried. Oh my God, I've looked in the mirror now and I see I haven't brushed my hair in 20 years... So, yes, to tell you the truth, I can't express my feelings towards heaven and hell in words. If I begin talking about it, it would just sound ridiculous. I feel that it's something I have to keep close to my heart and usually if I meet people in person, they can identify my belief system by just being around me. And I definitely have this belief system.

I.L: How can one use the ideas in availabilism in everyday life?

Kembra Pfahler: Make the best use of what's available. Use what is available around you. You don't have to suffer with your work. If you're a filmmaker, you don't need to raise ten million dollars to make a film. You should not be a prisoner of your medium, it can really waste your time. There is a lot of material available.

I.L: Yeah, everybody has this photographer friend who thinks he would take better pictures...

Kembra Pfahler: ...if his camera is better. Bullshit! I believe good artwork consists of nice ideas and content, not of technique really. Some people would not agree with this attitude, I know.

I.L: And a lot of us also know a person who's very talented but always has doubts that really stop him from going. For example, I have a friend who could be better than Ron Athey some day but often he destroys everything he's done as he detests exposing his work. Not that art has to be a career necessarily, of course.

Kembra Pfahler: It's kind of nihilism on his part, yes? Well, right, art really has nothing to do with career. Art is art. So all the outsides shouldn't matter, you know. A real artist, he just works. That's it. He just has to work, there's no question about it. He'll have good days and bad days. Good months and bad months. But it doesn't serve him personally to be hopeless. The only person who gets hurt if he doesn't work is himself. The world doesn't care. But his soul will care. It's not good for an artist to not work. An artist has to work. I have never felt like this in my whole life so I don't really understand that kind of attitude. I never had doubts. Isn't that weird?

I.L: Good for you, so many people have them.

Kembra Pfahler: Doubt is the greatest enemy of an artist. The only thing you need to be an artist is courage and audacity. You don't even need talent.

Let's check 'audacity' in the dictionary. It means shamelessness, boldness or daring, especially with confidence and arrogance. So any artists who have doubts just hurt themselves. And it's not fun to hurt yourself. It's kind of boring. And sometimes, a disregard for your own safety says 'I want to remain safe', actually. Male artists are lucky they have women. A lot of times women are the ones that have to be cheerleaders, getting that energy and confidence out of him. Because we are so strong and we can help you, and you, and 20 other people too and still be OK.

Steve Appleford, 'Warhol, Nico, a naked handstand, a crucifix:

The Broad kicks off 'Happenings' with songs and shocks'

The Los Angeles Times, 28 June 2017

Kembra Pfahler is in the Broad museum offices and library carefully smearing white paint onto a black crucifix. She stands in a dark Chinese tunic, preparing for an hour of live songs and transgressive performance art, closing a night dedicated to the legacy of Andy Warhol and his Teutonic superstar, singer and fashion model Nico.

"I was really inspired by Nico. I love her music, I love her delivery, I love her personality," says Pfahler, known for boundary-shattering work with her group the Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black. She's still hours away from her confrontational collision of rock 'n' roll, body paint, nudity, big hair and religious symbols.

"I do performance under the auspices of available-ism — making best use of what's available, which is our bodies and our costumes," she says.

It's Saturday, the first of this year's "Summer Happenings" at the Broad. Curators have gathered a small crowd of musicians and artists who share a connection with (or at least admiration for) the Warhol tradition. Now in its second year, the series uses live performance to connect audiences with the contemporary art collection on the museum walls.

Nico, born Christa Päffgen in Cologne, Germany, entered the 1960s Warhol scene at his New York workspace the Factory, where she appeared in experimental films and famously sang on the first Velvet Underground album in 1967. She enjoyed a solo career singing dark but critically respected songs until her death in 1988. On this Saturday, live sets by Pfahler and intersex performance artist Vaginal Davis unfold in the Oculus Hall, with Jenny Hval on an outdoor stage and Tiny Vipers (a.k.a. Jesy Fortino) singing amid a pair of Warhol Campbell's soup can paintings, a large Elvis Presley silkscreen and other Pop art in a third-floor gallery. A screening of the 1972 experimental film "The Inner Scar" delivers Nico herself wandering a barren landscape.

The events, strictly limited to ages 21 and older, are specific to the museum, says Ed Patuto, the Broad's director of audience engagement. "There is this back and forth between the performers and the art that is free-flowing," he says. "We want this to be a different kind of experience than you would have at a club or at a festival."

Brandon Stosuy co-curated the Nico night with Bradford Nordeen.

"Ideally, you wouldn't see this lineup in any other space, because it wouldn't make sense anywhere else," Stosuy says.

The next event, on July 29, will center on the work of Japanese artist Takashi Murakami. Co-curated by Stosuy and Ryu Takahashi, the night will look for connections to Murakami's fusion of traditional Japanese culture with frenzied pop culture. Among the performers will be Cibo Matto's Miho Hatori and Los Angeles singer-songwriter Devendra Banhart. "We were trying to find ways to pull from music that sounds like what Murakami's work looks like," Stosuy says.

As Pfahler is painting her cross, watching closely is Nao Bustamante, whose video art installation in the lobby is swaddled in colorful knitting that she calls "feminist fiber art on steroids." Her weeping face fills the screen. The image echoes 1966 film footage of Nico crying in "Chelsea Girls," directed by Warhol and Paul Morrissey.

Bustamante calls the night's collection of artists "inspired" and credits the museum for bold programming: "A space can be daring once or twice, but the Broad has been daring 30 times. It keeps running with it. It's exciting."

Moments later, Davis sweeps into the room, standing 6-foot-5 in a golden robe, her wig removed and bald head shiny with sweat. "Oh, hi, Kembra!" she says excitedly. "I had no idea there would be so many people!"

Davis lives in Berlin but grew up in Los Angeles. The Broad performance is her first here in five years. Warhol twice photographed Davis in the '80s with a Polaroid camera, once at the old Retail Slut clothing store in Los Angeles and again at a costume party in Manhattan. Davis dressed as painter Frida Kahlo, wearing a fake mustache and a Cabbage Patch doll in her hair.

"Andy took a Polaroid of me. He said, 'Who are you supposed to be?'" Davis recalls with a laugh. "I may not have known his whole canon then, because I was just a child, but I knew that he was a famous artist. In those days, I didn't really consider myself a performance artist yet. I was just doing what I felt like organically."

Davis says she admired Warhol's gatherings for the way they mixed things up, "so there's debutantes and someone just released from prison," she says. "If it's just all models or actors or rich people, it's so boring." Also this evening, Hval begins a set with "Lorna," a dreamy track from her album last year, with a band of costumed players that includes synthesizers and a tuba. Nico, Hval says, was an indirect but meaningful influence.

Jenny Hval performing Saturday in an evening titled "Warhol Icon," focused on Warhol Factory superstar Nico. "I don't sound like her, for sure, but I've listened a lot to her albums with John Cale. They're amazing," says Hval, her hair cut short and dyed a deep blue. She notes "the combination of acoustic instruments and eeriness, the drones in the songs. ... It's a beautiful place to be as a listener. It's like being inside a painting or drawing."

Hval flew her band in from Oslo five days early to rehearse new, previously unheard material. She has been part of Warhol-themed nights before, adjusting her usual club shows for the sometimes intimidating gallery environment.

"We take a room, and we try and find out what that room is about," Hval says. "I think of performances as a trail of thought. If you start by asking a

question, it's going to inform the rest of the stuff I perform, and maybe I'll change lyrics or improvise, and maybe things will happen that make me think about the material in new ways."

The night's three hours of live art ends with Pfahler, by now painted yellow and wearing a black fright wig accented by a pink bow. She stands center stage with two women flanking her in identical wigs, one with skin painted green, the other painted red. Each wears a smock with a big "K" sewn to the chest — presumably for "Kembra," though standing together the smocks read a more provocative "KKK."

"They got really mad at me today because I didn't know what I was going to do," she tells the full room to laughs from the crowd. "But it wasn't because I was being lazy. It's because I'm tortured and sick and rundown from working, just like you."

To a pre-recorded track, the three women sing songs and slowly disrobe. As she prepares to sing "Ghost Boyfriend," Pfahler says: "When the solo happens, I'll take my underwear off and I'll try to stand on my head. I know you're sick of seeing that. I'm sorry."

Soon, Pfahler is nude onstage except for yellow body paint and laced thigh-high boots. She does a handstand with her back to the audience, legs spread, as the two women place the freshly painted white crucifix on a certain part of her body, once again challenging some onlookers not to be offended.

The performance is not exactly what Nico would do, but Pfahler still draws a connection to Warhol, closing an evening that is by turns meditative, personal and uncompromising.



Performance artist Kembra Pfahler backstage during the first of the Broad museum's "Summer Happening" series. (Steve Appleford)

Jacopo Miliani, 'Kembra Pfahler | CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS, Emalin, London'

ATP Diary, 29 November 2016

La stanza è già piena di persone.

In realtà, ci sono due stanze comunicanti. La prima è una piccola sala concerto, con un palco alto, ma di piccole dimensioni, illuminato da una forte luce bianca.

Lo scenario è una bandiera a strisce bianche e rosse con uno strano logo. Al lato dello stage, c'è un pannello con dei porta kleenex. Parallelamente, si trova una stanza completamente dipinta di rosso amaranto. Al suo interno ci sono dei mobili, un libreria, una lampada, una scrivania e un letto... tutto rosso amaranto. Ci sono anche degli oggetti dai vari colori, dei dischi raffiguranti stelle a cinque punte, dei poster, dei dipinti, un video, delle tazze serigrafate e alcune bambole nude dalla pelle rosso amaranto e dai capelli voluminosi. E' la riproduzione dell'appartamento di New York di Kembra Pfahler abitata da lavori di amici, colleghi, artisti: Bruce LaBruce, Katrina Del Mar, Mike Diana, Laure Leber, Relic Stones from Future Feminism, Richard Kern, Samoa, Scott Ewalt, e Shove Mink AKA Croshame.

L'appartamento rosso amaranto, esiste davvero, ma non si sa ancora per quanto. Kembra ha sempre detto di no alle richieste di "Capital Improvements", ovvero le ripetute offerte di miglioramento edilizio da parte del padrone di casa al fine di aumentare l'affitto. Questa strategia è diffusa a New York nelle aree in preda alla gentrificazione, dove molti pur di sentirsi parte di un "qualcosa" sono disposti a sottostare a logiche di mercato assurde. Kembra ha combattuto per 30 anni in questa casa con l'ottimismo e la responsabilità di poter cambiare il mondo. Adesso vuole condividere tutto con la gente di Londra, una città che sta sempre più perdendo la propria identità in favore di un "razismo finanziario" e della globalizzazione. Kembra è consapevole che qui troverà molti amici inglesi in grado di recepire i suoi messaggi e di poter diffondere una visione alternativa che possa sfruttare tutto quello che è a nostra disposizione ("Availabism is a term I developed which makes the best use of what is available." KP)

Lo scenario richiama forse un ipotetico film dell'orrore... bambole, dischi pentastellati, corpi nudi e pittura come sangue, ma in realtà mi sento molto più tranquillo qui dentro che fuori. Se si

varca di nuovo la soglia d'entrata, ci troviamo nella perfetta Shoreditch, dove ogni luce è un'insegna di un locale trendy, dove si mischiano gli odori di diversi ristoranti etnici, e i negozi vendono colori acrilici per aspiranti artisti. Un tempo non si andava a Shoreditch perché non era un posto tranquillo, adesso ci si va per essere parte di quel "qualcosa" che ci ha reso tutti troppo tranquilli.

Ritorno dentro la sala concerto, dove le persone si affollano sotto il palco riempiendo sempre di più tutto lo spazio disponibile. C'è molta attesa e guardandosi intorno si ha la sensazione di trovarsi fuori dal tempo oltre che fuori dallo spazio. Tra il pubblico ci sono volti conosciuti come Princess Julia e Marc Almond, insieme a tanti ballerini sudati della Londra notturna che hanno reso celebre Shoreditch per poi ricevere un avviso di sfratto. Ci sono i new kids travestiti con trucchi appariscenti, membri della nuova generazione nostalgica delle dancefloors. Ci sono i vecchi studenti del corso di Queer Theory del Goldsmith in mezzo ai darkettoni, ai nuovi-vecchi punk, ai rockabilly. Ovviamente siamo in una galleria e tra la folla ci sono amici e facce conosciute di curatori e artisti che non mancano mai all'opening di una nuova mostra.

Gli sguardi del pubblico non fanno che incrociarsi perché l'attesa sembra non terminare, ma non sono sguardi stanchi, c'è invece voglia di sentirsi parte di un gruppo e di trovarsi tutti nello stesso luogo, allo stesso momento. Siamo tutti "followers" reali anche se c'è sempre chi non resiste a guardare il cellulare.

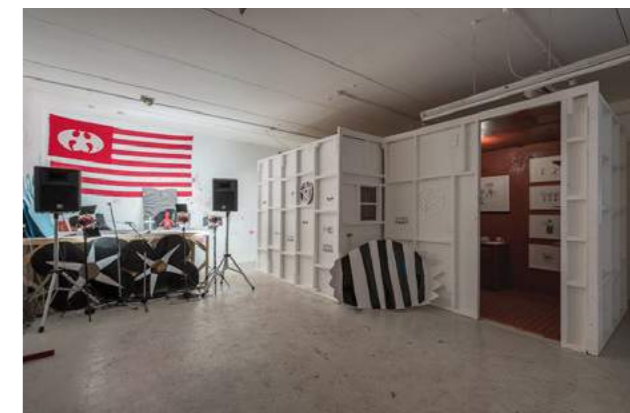
Sul palco sale Milovan Farronato: pelle gialla, stivali fino alla coscia, denti neri, trucco e parrucca voluminosa. Si presenta e ci dice che la performance inizierà a breve e che nel mentre ci sarà un go-go dancer. Inizia la musica e Bobby sale sul palco: pelle blu, stivali fino alla coscia, denti neri, trucco e parrucca voluminosa. Bobby fa una danza che è un po' go-go boy, un po' drag queen, un po' cabaret, un po' punk. A poco a poco tutte le performers con la parrucca, gli stivali, i denti neri e la pelle di diversi colori si aggirano tra il palco e il pubblico sporcando chi gli sta attorno. Matilde, Phoebe, Angel Rose, Josefina, Laura, Stefani sotto

la luce dei riflettori mostrano la potenza del corpo travestito e l'imbarazzo del puro divertimento. L'attesa continua, alcune persone se ne vanno e si pensa che alla fine il "miglioramento del capitale" non accadrà mai. Non resta che andare a vedere cosa accade nel backstage. Qui le "Kembras" colorate si riposano, bevono, parlano con gli altri. Dicono che Kembra le ha truccate e poi si è andata a preparare dicendo a loro di salire sul palco e fare qualcosa, lei poi arriverà.

Tutti di nuovo dentro è arrivata Kembra. Con lei salgono sul palco le Kembras, non c'è molto spazio, le loro parrucche arrivano fino al soffitto, è bellissimo. Parte la prima canzone. Subito dopo Kembra chiede a tutti di scendere dal palco perché ha bisogno di spazio per un'azione più performativa: "Performance is not entertainment". C'è bisogno di aiuto e quindi sotto il mantra "artists helping artists" c'è un cambio di scena. Mentre Phoebe prende il microfono e ci racconta come ha conosciuto Kembra pochi giorni fa al concerto di Genesis P-Orridge, qualcuno aiuta la star a legarsi ai piedi con lo scotch due sfere nere. Kembra risorge dal pavimento, è instabile in piedi sulle sfere e canta lanciando messaggi forti da una posizione fragile. E' poi il momento dei BUTT PRINTS: Kembra con l'aiuto dei suoi performer si colora il culo e lo immortalava sulla carta bianca. Si pulisce con i kleenex della scenografia e successivamente sulle note della colonna sonora di Blade Runner canta una canzone da lei composta in cui ci spiega la sua intima e struggente affezione per il film. Kembra si toglie la parrucca e rivela i suoi lunghi capelli lisci.

Adesso c'è il grand finale....tutti di nuovo sul palco, disposti su due file per reggere e muovere due pezzi di cartone a forma di onde. Dopo che Stefani ha acceso tutte le candele sul cappello di Kembra, è il momento di intonare My Heart Will Go On. Anche tra quel pubblico così diverso e alternativo sembrano tutti conoscere le parole di Celine Dion. Ed ecco l'ultima prova, Kembra fa la spaccata a testa in giù e il climax lo si raggiunge posizionando una croce di polistirolo...

I cerchi pentastellati sono finiti ovunque... è magia!



The biography of the iconic New York artist Kembra Pfahler is as wide-ranging as it is productive. It includes formative years spent in LA's punk scene, a decade-long 'day-job' as a video dominatrix, stints modelling for *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, and *Hustler*, she's been a muse and model for a diverse range of designers, including Calvin Klein, Rick Owens, and Marc Jacobs (in whose fall/winter campaign she's currently starring). She founded a wrestling federation, The Punk Ladies of Wrestling, and is the cofounder of Future Feminism, a movement merging artistic practices and activism aimed at uniting the multiple factions of feminism.

Kembra's accomplished all that in addition to her primary role as an acclaimed visual and performance artist whose work is collected by some of the world's most important museums, including MoMA, The Whitney, and the Bozar Museum in Brussels. Perhaps the best way to

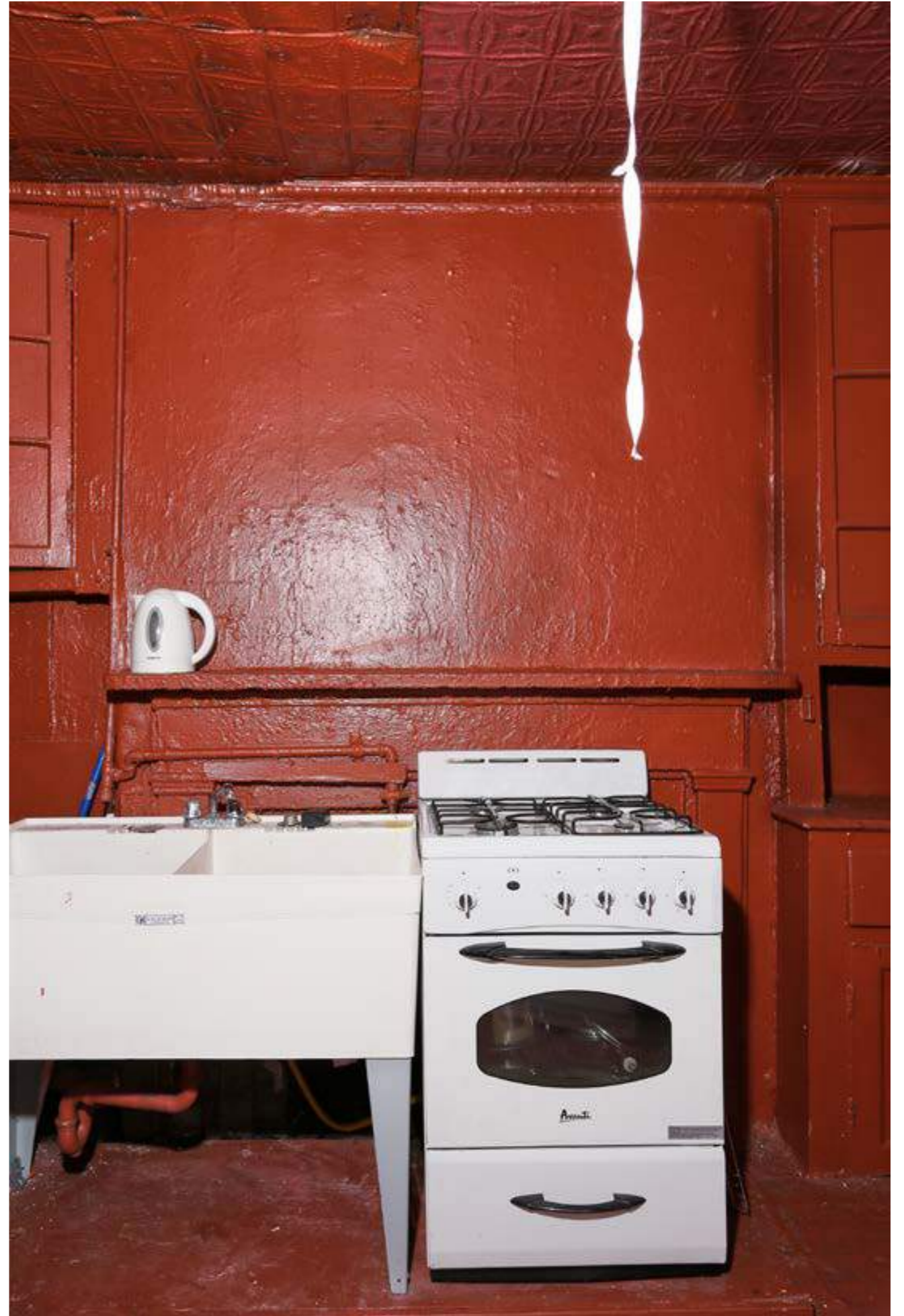
KEMBRA PFAHLER

INTERVIEW BY MICHAEL BULLOCK
PHOTOGRAPHY BY VINCENT DILIO

experience her world is to see her live. Her horror movie-inspired, nudist, punk band, *The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black*, blurs lines between ritual, performance art, and vaudeville, using irreverence, humour and in-your-face sexuality to destroy tired clichés of femininity. If Kembra's life and career defy conventions, so does her home. Her East Village apartment is painted floor-to-ceiling in 'tile-red', and is organized by three philosophies: minimalism, avalibilism, and wabi-sabi. The result is rare: it has the zen and rigour of a Buddhist monk's cell, yet it's cloaked in a veneer of witchery. In person, Kembra's open, funny, and generous. As we talk she work's on drawings for her next gallery show, 'Capital Improvements', where, this November, she'll recreate her entire apartment in London at Emalin Gallery, making a convincing case that there need be no boundaries between art and life.

apartamento - New York City





I heard a rumour that you have slaves paint the walls in here for you?

I don't really have any slaves, but Mike Diana was living with me for a while. One time he started repainting the kitchen California Gold, which is the worst possible colour in the rainbow of wall-paint colours. I screamed at him so much that he was painting the kitchen gold frozen with terror, big hot tears rolling down his cheeks. Maybe that was the story Scott Ewalt was recounting.

So it wasn't a formal dominatrix situation?

No. I made S&M films for a good 10 years with a film company called Gotham Gold. That was my day job. I would make these films so that I could use their studio to make my own films. *Mistress Kimbra's Island of Hell*, stuff like that. I didn't use the rules of S&M. I really had fun doing it.

Scott also said you made your slaves read to you from Sammy Davis Jr's biography.

Guilty as charged. That was also for a video.

Why that biography?

I just had it. You've got to fill up an hour—I had to come up with something. I thought, 'Is that sexy? I don't know—yes. It's really sexy'. Sammy Davis was so funny.

Why do you paint everything one colour?

I like minimalism. I don't have any artwork in my house. I don't put anything on the walls at all because it distracts me from getting new ideas.

What about inspirational images related to current projects?

No. I don't do pin-up boards at all. If people give me artwork they're mostly meditational objects. I have very little. We use the big upside-down cross in Karen Black performances. I hang upside down on it. It's a prop and a piece of furniture.

What's the philosophy you follow when making things?

It's called 'availabism', which is making the best use of what's available. A lot of my supplies come from Materials for the Arts, a resource of reuse. It's been a part of my life since 1983. Many of my decisions are based on what's available.

Why are your bookshelves empty?

I have an obsession with empty bookshelves. I find them to be one of the most beautiful objects. It represents a new beginning. I dismantled my library about 10 years ago by sharing my books with younger people in my family. Since then I have kept only a few books that I've had since I was a teenager: David J Skal's *The Monster Show*, Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*, and Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*. Those books I actually sleep with because I'm always reading them.

Why are the covers all black? Because you don't want visual distraction?

Yes. I spray-paint them black. Every day I think, 'How do I make my lifestyle more minimal?' If I'm going to include objects in the house that might be visually distracting, I spray them black. I call it expanding on minimalism.

Why not red?

If they've written songs about painting things black then that is reason enough for me. It's also a political gesture. Black should be honoured as a spiritual colour, as one of the greatest colours in the palette, and as a powerful positive force in one's life—blackness and darkness. Black has always been one of my favourite colours to be wrapped in. Black and this Tile Red that I live with.

You call it Tile Red? How did you pick this shade?

It's actually what the exteriors of most tenement buildings in the Lower East Side are painted. I've just always loved brick—not fire-engine red, not Chinese red, not a red that has blue in it. There's something cosy about the exteriors of the Lower East Side, and I love bricks as well. If I could have this apartment all bricked, I would. I can see clearly when I'm surrounded by Tile Red. It has something to do with my DNA. It doesn't make me depressed or negative, it's not a dreary feeling.

Or aggressive?

Not at all. If I ever feel violent, I have my rock band. I put my aggression into singing. I also have a wrestling federation, called Punk Ladies of Wrestling. That's a great way to get out your aggression.

I bet. When did you move into this apartment?
In the mid '80s.



Did you paint it this colour right away?

Yes. I've also painted it black, and once I experimented with a pale yellow.

When you changed the colour you painted everything, like it is now?

Yes. Because we're shooting in here all the time. I've had art studios too, at different times during my tenure here in New York. But I don't have an art studio currently, so I'm doing everything in this front room.

Do you find it difficult to have no separation between studio and home?

As an availabist, I have to make the best use

No.

It's a Japanese philosophy, the art of imperfection. It's about loving things as they are. Meaning, it's the crack in the cup that makes it beautiful. The effect of entropy on objects is beautiful. These walls have incredible personality, a life to them that Sheetrock and a white paint can't have. Some people prefer brand-newness. I like brand-newness, too. But it would be like war to incorporate modernity into this environment.

What was your house like growing up?

Funny you ask, because one of my meditations is visualising each room in my childhood



of what is available. If I practise what I preach I'm not going to complain about what I have and don't have. I don't have cancer. It's 2016 in New York City and I have an apartment. That's all, end of that conversation.

What are you working on right now?

This November I'm doing a show in London at a gallery called Emalin. I have this wonderful gallerist called Leopold Thun. Leo loved my apartment and wanted me to share my lifestyle with people. So for my show I'm going to recreate this place. I'm painting the gallery Tile Red and bringing as many objects as I can from this apartment. Wabi-sabi; do you know what that is?

home. I love my mother's taste; it was passed on to me, and we're very similar. It was a Spanish-style home on two lots in Hermosa Beach. We had white carpeting with pink and red-checked wall curtains, low to the ground, black-lacquered Japanese furniture. Houndstooth black- and white-checked couches and chairs. My room was pink and light pink with animal découpage wall hangings that my mother made: lions, giraffes, tigers, and zebras.

It sounds very 'decorated'.

Yes! I loved my mother's taste; it had a severeness, and it was extremely opposed to the beach aesthetic.

Does your mom appreciate the way you live?

She thinks it's too dark, but overall she appreciates my aesthetic. I have presented my family with some pretty severe imagery over the years, like my sewn-up vagina piece, my band called The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black, lots of nudity, and many extreme, transgressive performances. My mother and stepfather thankfully never rebuffed my choices and always showed up to see my work. It wasn't easy for them in the '80s, when it wasn't popular to be a performance artist, when it wasn't popular to look death metal. They still supported me.

That's so great. And your dad?

My real father, the surfer Freddy Pfahler, stopped talking to me, and he still won't talk to me because of my aesthetic. He was from the '50s and '60s.

Strange. I understand surfing in that early time period to be a bit outsider, like a countercultural lifestyle?

When my dad was surfing it wasn't a cultural position. He started surfing before surfing was commoditised. Surfing was just part of life. There wasn't Billabong, Sex Wax, or surf competitions. Surf culture got co-opted by corporations. My dad wasn't part of that, he's very stoic. My work is hardcore; if it offends him, then it's done its job.

I love the Cookie Mueller quote that you use, 'If you show your vagina in public, you've ruined your life and career forever'. You said you were happy to get that over with immediately. I'm being facetious when I use Cookie's quote because nudity has never harmed me. In fact, it has been a way to reclaim my body and take my power back as a female.

Reclaim it from who?

Growing up in Malibu, I always felt lesser than others. People would always say, 'You'd be so much prettier if you dyed your hair blonde and lost more weight'. Really? Can we talk about something else, rather than my waist size? It just gets to be tiresome. That's California's culture, constantly obsessed with appearance. It didn't destroy me too much. It was just annoying. For whatever happened to me when I was younger, thankfully my parents and my stepfather and my friends supported my art adventures, and I stuck with it. Now I get to be 55 years old. It's a privilege.

The Wikipedia entry on The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black says that your band 'relishes destroying notions of female beauty rooted in purity and innocence'.

I've always preferred the black-haired beauties from horror films: Barbara Steele, Karen Black, Lily Munster, Carroll Borland. They were awesome looking and had a severe, angular, hard beauty. I craved their look. I made myself look like them.

You weren't naturally in that category?

No, I looked like an Irish mutt. I've been working on my look my entire life. I've always wanted to be more exotic looking, and I learned how to do that a long time ago by tailoring and cutting my forehead back. I've changed my face a little bit. I draw my face on, essentially; it's a work of graphic art, my face. I created it myself.

Is there a separation between the performance character and who you are?

I don't think so. People always ask, 'How did you create this character you play in The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black?' I don't know what they're talking about, the character in my band is simply me wearing a costume. That's it.

Do you do these little rituals around holidays? Around Christmas time, I bet you wear a red sweater or stand underneath mistletoe? Getting dressed up in that costume prepares me to have more fun in that ceremony. It's an extreme transformation as a way to deliver the ideas and messages.

For you the performance is a ceremony?

Yes, totally. Definitely a ceremony, a ritual.

Would you consider it witchcraft?

I'm not an occultist. I don't practise group religions on any level, with anyone. What I do comes naturally for me, and luckily my upbringing and my ethics and morality were shaped by some really nice people. The first wave of punk rockers from Los Angeles instilled values in me that have helped me my entire life: make original work, never steal other people's ideas, be respectful. I have an alternative-culture morality. I didn't grow up with religion, and I have always felt within the realm of the occult women were treated as ceremonial objects rather than individuals. I've never wanted to be lying on a table with



people standing around me, with hoods on or something.

So instead you chose to be the master of your own ceremonies?

If I were an occultist for sure I wouldn't be talking about it in any form whatsoever, because also you have to realise that for anyone involved in magical ceremony, silence is a virtue. I would never talk about any of my magic. Magic should be personal. Occultists have acted like predators towards me since I was very little.

Because your look held an ideal for them?

That, and because my mom gave me a funny name. They would be like, 'Oh, Kembra, you're such an unusual little person. You're going to grow up to be this or that'. Ever since I was a little kid, people always wanted me to join their witchcraft covens. Los Angeles is the land of cults, whether it's Agape, Scientology, or the Unarius Academy of Science. California quackery.

Kembra's your birth name? What does it mean?

Yes. It's a hippie name that my mom made up. It means nothing.

Have you met others?

I don't personally know any, but I've searched my name on Wikipedia and found that there are other Kembras.

How do you begin to formulate your ceremonies?

I set the temperature probably like anyone else does, if they're making art. You know that feeling you have when you're about to pick out a wonderful outfit, and you just know it's right. It's the same feeling. What I do in my life is create a climate that allows me to be visited by my artistic muse. Your mood, if you're open to it, tells you what it wants you to be. Sometimes I just sit in a state of complete stillness and pause and wait for my ideas to come through me. Or when decorating my apartment—constantly redecorating and repainting is a huge part of my artistic practice. If I'm getting ready for a new show, I'll repaint the walls Tile Red, scrub all the windows, and move all the objects from one side of the house to the other. I'll spend eight hours a day in here excavating and re-acclimating myself to the paper, getting all my materials

ready like I'm preparing for battle. I gather all my fetishes, all my war instruments together, polishing my guns, as it were.

So that's what you're doing now as you get ready for London?

Yes. I'm excited; I've been exhibiting for 16 years in New York City and around different galleries, but I'm no longer part of that gallery system.

Your last show here was 'Future Feminism'?

That was Anohni, CocoRosie, Johanna Constantine, and me. 'Future Feminism' changed my life forever. How we created that piece set a new paradigm for how I work today. We went away together on many retreats and spent 10 hours a day discussing our politics and ethics, trying to develop something we felt we could create as a group—something that reflected how we felt about the spirit of our times. We wanted to coauthor a piece. What we came up with was 'Future Feminism'.

That's how you wrote the 13 Tenets of Future Feminism?

Yes. It was our first attempt at using language to describe how we felt, rather than making visuals or performances. We decided to use clear and simple language to describe our politics. We etched each tenet onto pink onyx crystal. Those sculptures are among the most beautiful things I've ever seen. All the decisions we made about them were made as a group. It was never a majority decision, it was always consensus. The 13th tenet—the future is female—wasn't met with any positivity. We were ostracised for that, people accused us of being sexist and racist. They thought we were advocating a female separateness. But since 'Future Feminism', I've seen people all over the world embrace the idea that the future is female.

You injected that forgotten phrase from the '70s back into culture. It's become a popular T-shirt.

But in 2014 we were completely ostracised for it. Our community turned on us. There were hate letters, friend breakups, the show made me physically ill because of the duress we were under. After the show was over the people that had attacked us abandoned the discussion and went on to attack other people. Kenneth Anger once said that when you try to have political discourse using clear, simple language you invite a pecking order, like





chickens pecking at each other's heads. That's what it felt like. Although I'm no worse for wear because of it. In fact, it made me commit to being a future feminist.

I never would have imagined that response. I thought that show was important. It was useful to see a clear contemporary vision that defined what feminism is right now.

I wanted to publish a book of all the hate mail. Anohni and I were left to clean up the mess afterwards. It was painful. Anohni's new body of work is an album called Hopelessness, where she's also continuing to activate the principles behind 'Future Feminism'. That show turned me into more of a sharing type of person, where I do more service—I started teaching performance classes after that show, but, man, it was really painful. I've never experienced such malice.

Can you sum up their critique?

They thought we wanted to change feminism or say that this is how feminism should be in the future. We were saying that we will have no future without feminism. We were proposing that all feminists pull together to start problem solving outwardly rather than inwardly. Recognising that in the world we're living in, the current systems are broken and we can't sustain ourselves the way things currently are. Do you think we can?

I'm optimistic. I'm hopeful that the many divisions we're experiencing mean we are on the cusp of new, hopefully better possibilities. We're finally having mainstream conversations about race, gender, sexual identity, police brutality, and income inequality—dialogues that have been suppressed for the past few decades. These conversations could lead to a better understanding, but right now it looks pretty dark.

Exactly. Everyone feels very vulnerable because these issues are in flux and they're used to the systems as they were.

This moment is the baby boomers' last stand, and they are freaking out. It is like a death rattle. I agree. I've seen a death rattle. Have you?

No.

A death rattle is the most violent death you'll ever see. It's like a horror film. People go kicking and screaming for their very last breath,

their eyes turn yellow, their fingers scrape the walls, loud screams, soul coughing. It's a real thing. It's not easy to watch. I think culturally that is what we're observing now.

It's the death rattle of the white capitalist, heteronormative, patriarchal baby-boomer worldview.

Things have exploded, and we don't know how the pieces will fall into place. I guess the fear of the unknown is what can paralyse people. There's this word on people's lips, the liminal phase, it's a beautiful word.

I've never heard that term.

I'll look it up for you. I learned this word from the young people that I work with in the performance class I teach. Liminal: of or relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process, occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or a threshold.

Liminality is a Latin word which means a threshold. It is the quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stages of a ritual when participants no longer hold their preritual status. But they've begun the transition into a status they'll have when the ritual is complete. I feel the sense of liminality. Not to sound too metaphorical or wishy-washy, but I feel we're at the threshold of a new phase.



F U T U R E

*An
Interview
with*

K E M B R A
P F A H L E R

*Photographed
by*

R I C K
O W E N S

*Words
by
Büşra Erkara*

F E M I N I S M



Kembra Pfahler

Posing for her close friend Rick Owens in his Paris apartment, performance artist, punk-rock goddess and actress Kembra Pfahler speaks about her career, the fate of feminism and our impending doom.

Kembra Pfahler is the quintessential East Village legend: an actress, rock star, and performance artist who has been creating electrifying art since the early 1980s.

Pfahler grew up in Hermosa Beach, California, and came to New York in 1979 to study at the School of Visual Arts (SVA). There she invented "Availabilism", her own art movement that uses objects that are immediately available to the artist in performance and other art forms. From the early 80s until the 90s, she created performance art in the Lower East Side and acted in Super 8 films, including *Cinema of Transgression* pioneer Nick Zedd's post-apocalyptic feature, *War Is Menstrual Envy*.

In 1989, Pfahler started her death rock band, The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black, with her then husband, Samoa Muriiki, taking a hiatus from the New York art scene and touring the U.S. until the early 2000s. Her Karen Black costume (she is the front woman, but she almost always has other "Girls of Karen Black" on the stage), now well known, involves vivid body paint, muted lips, layered raven black wigs and pitch-black teeth. "The band allowed me to squeeze in all the strange images I'd been working on for all these years, what I now call my "manual of action," my own vocabulary of images," Pfahler said in a 2015 interview, "... the sewn vagina; the egg piece; all of the costumes, like Abra Kedavour; the flowing anal bead shirt; the shark piece; the upside down Crucifix piece, where I hang upside down on the cross; the wall of vagina; the howling ball piece." If the artist can list most of her work off the cuff, it's only because she is incredibly well versed in the performances themselves, and is in complete control of their messages. As with most works of art, words don't do them justice, so in addition to these recurring acts - sometimes taking place during guitar or drum solos in TVHOKB shows - Pfahler has been drawing and cataloguing her performances from the start.

Pfahler's work questions what it means to be a woman in an unabashedly patriarchal society. Things have got "extreme" once or twice - most famously, in a 1992 project with Richard Kern, where Kembra Pfahler sewed her vagina shut or, more accurately, got someone to sew it shut for her, while she wore nothing but a "Young Republicans" t-shirt. (For the record, she says it didn't hurt.) The more recent pages of her extensive résumé include a 2008 Whitney Biennial installation and residence, as well as *Future Feminism* - arguably the most talked about show in the history of the acclaimed down-





town gallery, The Hole – which Pfahler created alongside Sierra and Bianca Cassidy of Coco Rosie, Anohni (a.k.a. Antony Hegarty of Antony and the Johnsons), and Johanna Constantine.

Now 54, Kembra Pfahler still works every day. Her studio and apartment in the Lower East Side, which she moved to in the 1980s (long before there was a front door or working heating system – and later, managed by a “real slumlord”), is painted tile red; half fairytale, half soporific, like a desert. She is in a tenants’ association with the three other artists in the building. Every time new management came in and tried to kick them out, the association pushed back. They have no intention of changing this successful strategy any time soon.

She doesn’t buy clothes – other than “undies and shoes” – but she will ask the price of a disfigured 20-inch Bratz doll (for art purposes) at the San Elias Botànica, where we make a quick stop to pick up some charcoal before going to her studio in late January. A month later, she is to be photographed in Paris by her longtime friend and collaborator Rick Owens, to whom she has been a muse since the early 2000s.

In her studio, our discussion takes us through the origins of her Karen Black costume (seen in these pages), grassroots politics, and how to stop the impending apocalypse.

Originally you’re from California and you went to art school in New York so how did you get interested in Austrian artists and writers?

People from California really have no culture aside from being from California. Growing up, surfing and music were the most important aspects of my culture. But my father is from Austria and I think when you are younger, you want to research your history a little bit – and that’s what I did. I found out about Vienna Action Group, Rudolph Schwarzkogler, and the extremeness of the performance imagery. I’m not so interested in that now; it was just part of my early education. I think everyone has their own early education that they gravitate towards, something that just happens naturally. You don’t know why, but you feel like it’s a part of your destiny, and you put the time in to learn about yourself.





Your most recognised outfit, with the body paint, layers of wigs and black teeth, has been described as having a "monster" or "mother devil" aesthetic. Would you call the Karen Black costume a persona?

It isn't a character at all – it's just me in extreme drag. It's not an alter ego, it's my band costume. And it embodies what I think is beautiful. I'm wearing that look to attract my kind to me; for the same reason anyone wears their gang colors – so that real can recognise real.

You teach a class called Performance Art 101, which meets every week. What's it like in the class?

I started it two years ago and I teach Availabilism, Anti-Naturalism, Gothetics, and *Future Feminism*. Since I started, I've been able to teach it at many places, like San Diego, CalArts and many of the art schools of New York, where I'm a visiting artist. I basically teach the philosophy that I put into practice. It's all taught with what's available now. I teach the class in my apartment sometimes, or in one of the galleries I'm associated with. So I haven't had to build a school yet – an actual school. But I decided I'm going to start a school of my own here, primarily just with other women – and I'll start to work on a syllabus. I'll barely be around for another 20 years, so when I leave, I could leave some of this writing behind.

When you first came into the New York art scene in the 80s, a lot of artists from your generation had to make use of what was around them – especially with Cinema of Transgression. Would you say Availabilism comes from that era?

No, it doesn't. It's a philosophy that just helps you to produce without financial restrictions. Availabilism was started because one of my teachers in art school, Joseph Kosuth, asked me what I was. And I thought, "what is he asking? I'm 17-years-old, I don't know what I am." So I decided to invent something to describe my work. I said, "I'm an availabilist, I make the best use of what's available." But all artists, even now, use what's available to them. We have a different kind of vocabulary with what's available now – we have fantastic technology, we have fantastic publishing online, fantastic film resources. So it's just different now.

In the last couple of years, feminism has found itself a new place in pop culture. Do you like the direction in which the discourse around feminism has gone since you put together *Future Feminism* at The Hole?

It's difficult to be an artist and to try to develop some sort of political discourse. When we made *Future Feminism*, we had 13 Tenets. One of the tenets was, "The Future is Female." We got into a lot of trouble in our underground arts community for saying that. But since the male has taken over for so many centuries, we felt that the scales were so imbalanced that we had to begin somewhere, and we thought, "let's balance it with the female for a while." We were so aggressively attacked by our community for having that perspective that some of us in the group, myself included, fell very ill after the show. People thought we were criticising feminism, or not being all-inclusive, but *Future Feminism* is about how we will survive as a race in the future. And our position was that we will soon have no world to live in to make any of our arguments, unless we start taking care of the harm that is being done to the planet.

The show also happened at a crucial moment – it seems like this whole big feminist conversation in entertainment and youth culture followed right after it. I'm thinking Lena Dunham and positive body image, Amy Schumer, Tavi Gevinson, Petra Collins and the *Rookie* people, Taylor Swift and Beyoncé.

It's cool that it's popular even if it's just because people think it's a trend. Celebrities are no better or worse in their opinions than some cool, alternative, not-for-profit martyr who you'd think is a diehard feminist and then turns out to be as stupid as any corporate slogan on a sweater. Whether it's by someone on TV, a singer, a politician or an underground artist, the important thing is that feminist principles are set into action. When people try to reach for more evolved behavior, at a more humane level, it doesn't devalue feminism. If we, here, in this little abject nook of the world think that we know more than others, we are wrong. People will always be just people – it's the longevity and the execution of principles that matters the most. We never know who will change the world.

As with feminism, discussions around the ideas of gender-fluidity seem to have reached the mainstream recently. A lot of people now in their twenties define themselves as "non-binary," and there are an increasing number of non-gender specific designers and clothes. How do you feel about that?

When I was a young girl, my favourite movie was *Close Encounters (of the Third Kind)*, and I always felt like I was a third kind – male, female, third kind. I had this fantasy that my mother had been impregnated by an alien when she was surfing. Because I could never identify with being male or female, I viewed myself, and my being, as "other." I think it's very modern to reach for otherness, and we should be able not to be thought of just in a specific category. But the reality is that we do have our biology: we have penises, and we have vaginas, and realistically, there are not many of us who physically have both things. I think it will be a fad for a while,



and we'll see what sticks. The important question is: what is the actual message here? What will a non-gendered race of people accomplish? Does it – will it – help stop war? Will it help stop diseases, end hunger? Will it help stop overpopulation, reject commerce, boycott corporations? I'd love to see an army of new, forward-thinking, all-inclusive people. But again, if we have no world to live in, how are these non-binaries even going to exist? To have these problems about gender, we need our planet. I feel more concerned with the bigger picture right now.

Between global warming, terrorism and war – and being so “connected” to news and developments via the Internet, it’s a strange time to live in.

It's very upsetting: war, violence, and terrorism. We should be crying our eyes out; our hearts should be bleeding. That would be the proper way for us to be behaving. What I've come to understand is that war is just about economics and finance. It feeds a monetary system that I don't believe in, and that I don't think is necessary to perpetuate, for us to survive. I don't think we need warmongering finance in order to survive as a race. In the next 60 years, my dream is that we are able to flip the script, and change from an aggressive, male-dominated, power-driven, money-driven politics to a holistic, gentle, indigenous lifestyle, where politics is more grassroots; it's smaller neighbourhoods taking care of themselves. I still believe in democracy, although I've never seen it in my lifetime. I've never seen anything except for a violation of nature, a violation of ethics, a violation of our principles in the Constitution. Culture has hit the bottom. I don't know how much further we can go – aside from everyone actually starving to death.

And I know that sounds comical, but I feel like we have to make artists and women take over the world. Just imagine – the world has been run one way. What's the opposite of how things are being done now? Flip the script.

On the other hand, if you were to listen to Bill Gates or anyone from Silicon Valley, they would say that this is the most advanced that human civilisation has ever been: diseases and violence are at an all time low and technology is improving people's lives.

These perspectives come from isolated lives. Our spiritual and psychic selves haven't caught up with that technology – it's so far ahead of us. It's about the application of technology: when we can start to save species threatened with extinction, and the world that we're destroying – then I will say that technology is a good thing. I wish I could ask Google: “Google, please tell me how I can recycle my plastics, which are contaminating the oceans and killing the species that live there. Please technology, help us to remain here.” I don't know how to save the world. I think art and communication are the beginning, but I'll spend the rest of my life trying to find out.

What are the other issues that you think everyone should be thinking about and acting on?

Sustainability. I wish there were meetings that were held once a week in communities, where we would all get together to think about how we could all improve our neighbourhoods. Because I feel like when you're working with grassroots politics or your own household, it spreads outwards, and people can follow by example. Could we be an example of how a community could be sustainable? I feel like there must be something that we can do with plastics, for example, that is more interesting. Can't we make housing out of plastic? I wish artists were in politics, designing housing, and I wish artists got involved with restructuring what the political system actually looked like. Like redesigning the White House – I think the White House should be turned into a circular building and painted tile red. And we should invite people to come in with housing solutions and sustainable solutions. I want to see a future that includes everyone, that's what I would hope for. We have a right to exist without being millionaires, and that's what it feels like is going away. It feels like we are being eradicated.

If I was to envision a utopian future, I could see us making a decision to stop being so destructive. To no longer participate in war. What would the world be like if we made a conscious decision to say: “I will no longer tolerate violence, war and the destruction of the planet.” How could I start that? I would first start boycotting cars – get rid of them in cities. I feel that we need to make sacrifices and simplify; to be more minimalist. I can't see any other solutions. Women should start to think more broadly, no pun intended. Think more powerfully. Start running the show. Men are very spoiled and greedy in the year 2016, and misogyny is at an all-time high. There has never been so much hate and disrespect towards women; there's at least as much now as there was in the fucking 40s and 50s.

Do you see a way out of it?

Yes, get angry about it! Anger should point you in a direction to take back the power. You shouldn't be passive about these feelings. These feelings should be acknowledged: they exist, they are real. You can't be in denial about reality. We don't have time to be in denial anymore; we have no time left. What if we're only here for 20 more years because we've ruined the entire planet? How do you want to spend those last 20 years? We want to spend it trying to give back, not being slaves. Not being devalued. We just need to take back the power.

There is a woman that I know, whom I respect, whom I know, she's pushed her way out of it and she survived. You know, those women exist. You're looking at one of them. I've survived a lot. And you will survive a lot. So if you see others, you should know that it's possible. I mean, I can't say that I'm 100% happy, but nor would I say that that's the goal, really. We can't be happy all the time, especially when we're making sacrifices. But I'm not in jail. I'm not a slave. I'm free, and so are you. So, in reality, it is being done right now, by the simple fact that we're both sitting here, we're both free. We have freedom. Now. So what are we going to do with it?



Olivia Aylmer, 'The Feminist Provocation of Kembra Pfahler'

AnOther Magazine, 27 July 2016

We celebrate the artistic risk-taking of multi-hyphenate Kembra Pfahler, whose work – whether it disturbs or inspires – never ceases to take freedom of expression to the extreme

Kembra Pfahler is unafraid of making people uncomfortable with her art. In fact, the impulse to unsettle, provoke, and ultimately, make viewers think has long influenced her cross-platform projects since her early days in 1980s downtown New York. Throughout her varied career as a punk rock musician, performance artist, and curator, Pfahler has tried her hand at multiple art forms and left her indelible mark on each one. Whether singing lead in the death punk-metal group *The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black* (VHOKB), originating the “Availablism” performance art movement, or — yes — having her vagina sewn shut while clad in little more than a “Young Republicans” shirt for Richard Kern's short film *Sewing Circle* (1992), Pfahler mines absurdity and darkness as part of her political engagement. Today, we consider this controversial artist's *raison d'être* and the ways in which she has channeled her personal frustrations with society's treatment of women and their bodies into bold, powerful art.

Defining Features

A sense of visceral rawness is perpetually present in Pfahler's appearance, whether she's taking the stage to perform with VHOKB or donning her signature drawn-in eyebrows for art exhibition openings. Over the past few decades, Pfahler has crafted a glamorous persona all her own, one tinged with simultaneous nods to punk rock, haute couture, camp, and the grotesque. Her not-so-alter ego, Karen Black, allows Pfahler to regularly engage in what she has called “an extreme visual presentation,” while also exploring her multifaceted artistic inclinations.

Pfahler treats her body — and often heavily made up face — as the canvas upon which her creative whims can take their fullest shape. Nudity plays a central role in her artistic expression, not as a provocative gimmick but rather as a means to increased vulnerability and confidence in public.

While she draws inspiration from classic black-and-white horror films and German Expressionist aesthetics, it is the nightmarish monster under the bed or the witch casting spells on unsuspecting ex-lovers that more directly inform her look, as opposed to the innocent “final girl” trope. Whether she's clad in little more than red body paint, black leather, or mesh, Pfahler's physical appearance dares viewers not to look away.

Seminal Moments

Born into a free-spirited family (with a famous surfer father) in Hermosa Beach, California in 1961, Pfahler's self-expression was encouraged from a young age. Her move to New York at age eighteen to attend the School of Visual Arts — where she studied under the tutelage of conceptual artists Mary Heilmann and Lorraine O'Grady — along with the debilitating AIDS epidemic that swept through the city and took many of her friends' lives, marked the beginning of her veer into more extreme artistic territory.

While staking her claim within the burgeoning Lower East Side performance art scene, Pfahler formed VHOKB between 1989 and 1990. During their roughly ten years of touring, the band swiftly began to draw attention within the art and music worlds for their subversive spirit. As the founder of the artistic movement known as “Availablism,” based on the notion of using whatever presents itself at any given time, Pfahler practiced what she preached during live performances, using such memorable quotidian objects as bowling balls and cracked eggs.

Beyond her band, Pfahler became a leading fixture within the underground Cinema of Transgression scene in the early 90s. From making a series of low-budget films to infamously appearing in the Richard Kern's vagina sewing scene alongside performance artist Lisa Resurreccion — a move which, as she often jokingly claims, killed her career — Pfahler utilized film as a cathartic medium through which to channel her anger toward society's gendered limitations.

Most recently, the now 54-year-old Pfahler was a founding voice behind *Future Feminism*, an exhibition-cum-performance series that ran at New York City's *The Hole Gallery* in 2014. Pfahler and her diverse list of collaborators, ranging from Sierra and Bianca Casady of *CocoRosie* and Johanna Constantine of *The Blacklips Performance Cult* to Laurie Anderson and Marina Abramovič, developed a radical artistic and feminist manifesto, ending with number 13: “The Future is Female.” For A/W16 she was cast in Marc Jacobs advertising campaign, shot by David Sims and appearing alongside icons including Sissy Spacek and Susan Sarandon — thus proving her cultural relevancy is as powerful today as it ever has been.

She's AnOther Woman Because...

Pfahler's work has originated a new language for beauty rooted in the unexpected — even if her version of beauty includes a nude body covered in red paint, Bride of Frankenstein hair, and an abundance of black eyeliner. Dissatisfied with easy answers, she never stops raising questions or probing the status quo in her uncompromising art and personal style. Indeed, Pfahler appears to be most comfortable when perched on the edge of mainstream acceptance while inviting curious viewers to peer over that edge and directly engage with the world around them. For this reason, we cannot wait to see what this brazen *AnOther Woman* does next, whether she's fighting for women's rights, religious freedom, or the ability to be fully oneself without facing violence or hostility. As Pfahler told *The New York Times' T Magazine* in June 2012, “How do you fight these things? One show or concert at a time, I suppose.”



Kembra Pfahler, Tyler Matthew Oyer, and Alex Reese, 'Antinaturalism'

tir journal, 04 April 2016

TYLER: What did you say about antinaturalism?

KEMBRA: When we are talking about the present state of the world, especially in the urban centers of the western world, there's talk about longevity and the dystopian future, because these urban centers were and are blighted by decay and gentrification. There are little patches of greenery to remind us of actual nature, but largely antinaturalism was born out a desire to find a kind of beauty in urban decay in a post-WWII post-recent war landscape. Our urban centers are informed by WWII because most of the largest suburban housing projects were initiated after WWII. This was a time when large numbers of people left their farms and went to live in major cities. So there are generations of Americans, myself included, who have only known life within the modern urban city context.

Growing up in Los Angeles, what I found to be beautiful wasn't what one would consider "original nature"- I don't consider things being planted nature. I always liked Kazuo Ohno's dances because they addressed apocalyptic themes, he danced toward death. Antinaturalism is a way to find definition of beauty in understanding; if this is all you have, then what is your nature? It is way to find beauty in decaying architecture, especially in the Lower East Side because up until a minute ago it was all gravel and rubble and filth. So is there a way to find beauty in that kind of filth?

This may be a stretch, but there is a movement called *Wabi Sabi* in Japanese culture that I gravitated toward- finding perfection in imperfection. It's a way of creating meaning and justification for beauty in things that are blighted. So I started using the term antinaturalism to describe present conditions of a world that is eradicating most of its natural resources and killing it's species. It's not applauding the murder or reveling in the destruction of our planet, it's a way to call out what is real to me. That's antinaturalism to me.

TYLER: I've been thinking about antinaturalism when I hear Anohni's new song "4 Degrees". She sings about the impending doom and destruction

of the beautiful diversities within nature.

KEMBRA: Even though her work is called *Hopelessness*, there is a desire to preserve. I feel the sadness of environmental destruction everyday. It informs everything that I do.

TYLER: When I think about antinaturalism within your artworks, the thing that comes to mind first is how you alter your appearance for performance. It's extreme in the sense that we don't see people with red, or yellow, or blue or purple skin walking down the street, or with blacked out teeth or with glittering skin.

KEMBRA: It's not drag. I always get confused with that, my character is not coming from that impulse. You're right about antinaturalism applying to my lack of wanting or being able to be real. I can't do acting, I'm too shy. I sometimes don't have a desire to go on stage at all. As a child in Los Angeles I was being trained to be an actor. It made me very sick. I remember being forced to recite *Under Milkwood* by Dylan Thomas and doing it so horribly that I went inside my room for six months afterwards I was so traumatized. It was such a dark piece. The drama teacher at school made me learn it and I was so disturbed by it. It's a conversation with dead people basically- the people who live under this town called Milkwood. I was so upset by it. I realized then that I didn't have what it took to emotionally handle it. The antinaturalist look that I have in *The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black* is a way to come out and be on stage.

TYLER: I think the anti is really important with how you have constructed this term. It reminds me of the act of disidentification. I think your work disidentifies with certain standards of beauty such as the global obsession with the white, blonde bombshell. To be antinatural is to disidentify with standards.

KEMBRA: Disidentify is an interesting word- did you make that up?

TYLER: No, it comes from Jose Esteban Munoz.

He wrote a book called *Disidentifications* with Vaginal Davis on the cover. I feel as queer/feminist people it's important to be anti something and to disidentify with legitimacy. Dominant culture has appealed to science for legitimacy, to make something nature, and to make something right. In some ways gay marriage is a naturalizing of the devastated gay body. Some of us don't want to be naturalized.

KEMBRA: Right!

TYLER: Martin Luther King said if maladjustment means I don't agree with the problematic societal powers then I want to be maladjusted. To desire disidentification and maladjustment is antinatural in a way.

KEMBRA: I like the idea of born against instead of born again.

TYLER: YAAAA!

KEMBRA: I always felt born against.

There's this teaching from Brian Geyson and William Burroughs cut ups which is: let's look and see what it means then cut it up and find out what it really means. I feel like my entire life I have never looked for the obvious meaning in things. I never trust the obvious; I always gravitate toward finding what something really means. I remember reading *TIME Magazine* as a child and feeling very puzzled by it, thinking this is not true, and without any adults prompting those thoughts of mistrust. My parent's were counterculture hippies but they didn't say to me, "Kembra, everything in the media is a lie". I did hear messages like "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" and books by Terence McKenna were in my house. My father read Terence McKenna. I was allowed to not accept what the media dished out. I remember always thinking, this is not what this means, or this doesn't make sense.

So antinaturalism is a contrary action. To be antinaturalist is to be contrarian.

People have always been very aggressive with noting that I did not behave in a certain fashion. They thought there was something wrong with the way that I expressed myself. This occurred my whole life, until recently.

TYLER: So you were being antinaturalized by others, it was put on you. You were othered.

KEMBRA: Yes. People wanted me to fit into a certain media aesthetic. The people around me always said I needed to lose weight. As you can see I'm rather emaciated. They always wanted me to be blonder. Then people could consider me an actress or something.

Little girls and boys are often criticized if they don't fit into cookie cutter shapes. Little girls more so than little boys because their development is always under observation- like, oh, you're getting to be so pretty, your body is really developing... There's this running commentary that, for me, was unsolicited. Did you have that as well?

TYLER: I did a pretty good job at assimilating. I had physical sensibilities or eccentricities that were scrutinized. I was often othered or bullied for behaving differently than kids around me. But I don't think little boys get the same unsolicited attention to their bodies as little girls.

KEMBRA: Growing up by the beach in Los Angeles, it happened a lot. Beach girls grew up aspiring to be actresses and models. Really, like, bikini models.

ALEX: There's been increasing conversations acknowledging how we interact with little girls. Often the first comment is on their appearance- like aww, you look so pretty or you look so nice today. We don't approach little boys the same way.

KEMBRA: We noticed that when my sister was very young. My sister would say it's not good to always comment on appearances, even when it is positive, because those compliments may not last when they are older. We don't refer to beautiful

women as adorable like we do young girls.

ALEX: It teaches girls to value themselves based on those positive comments.

TYLER: Those become pathologies for identity. It's how many people identify value in the world- self esteem and happiness based on what others tell them.

ALEX: I read an article some weeks back by a self-identified feminist who admitted she needed to unlearn how she spoke to little girls. Even she could identify those problematic tendencies in herself.

KEMBRA: You are absolutely right. That's so true.

TYLER: So you came to New York City in 1979.

KEMBRA: To this neighborhood. To Avenue D and 3rd Street.

TYLER: I'm interested in how you've developed these terms which have become an explicit framework for you to generate all sorts of projects from the band to photographs, sculpture and writing... When you came to New York did you feel an opportunity to antinaturalize yourself? To shed the Los Angeles upbringing? You were performing with Gordon Kurtti. You moved from Malibu to the Lower East Side and were around radical, queer people, punks... how did those experiences manifest terms like antinaturalism?

KEMBRA: Even though I was living in the city around a lot of artists I spent a lot of time alone in my art practice. I think that had more to do with my education more so than anything. I had a couple of friends but I wasn't social. I spent days and weeks and months being extremely studious and solitary. I went to Europe and studied German and Austrian

cultures, and was solitary through all that. I spent most of my time alone until I met Samoa. Gordon was my one friend. I had one good friend. I separated myself from the punk rockers because I felt like I didn't want to join a movement. I felt it was more important for me to go beyond what they were doing... the punk ethic is originality and can be very severe. There was a high standard...

TYLER: There are rules to punk...

KEMBRA: Yes- morals and ethics. I thought if I were to come out and do something it had to be interesting, I did not want to copy what that movement was doing. That would communicate nothing. What gave me the most strength was being very solitary and antisocial. That's what helped me to develop all these languages. It was a sacrifice. It was difficult to spend so much time alone but I think it made me develop a strong sense of intuition. I don't think I would have been able to develop those skills if I were lost in a sea of socializing and partying. Those were the first years.

Samoa was my first boyfriend. We got married in the mid 1980's. So from the time I was 17-22 I spent with my mouth practically zipped shut and my eyes just peeled open. I was very stoic, and not talkative, quite different than I am now. You know that Bob Dylan song "I was so much older then; I'm younger than that now..." I had a very old soul. I had to unravel the abuse I had encountered growing up in Los Angeles. It took a long time. I unraveled it by way of doing live performance and inventing languages. Doing this work saved my life. I think artwork can do that. Creativity heals things.

TYLER: Solitude and free time can be less depressing when you have a creative practice. There is something to focus on, something to be excited about. You're not as scared to be alone.

KEMBRA: Life can be depressing if you are an artist who doesn't make your work... if you're not getting the work out of you. I performed at ABC No Rio and I met a lot of people, but it was a very studious time for me.



TYLER: What kind of work were you making then?

KEMBRA: What I'm doing now! But without music. I guess my work was a bit more difficult because I was a lot angrier. I'm still angry. But I was even angrier.

TYLER: Bill T. Jones has this nice phrase about artists. He says the best ones have a healthy dose of irate in their guts. I think the people who I respect as thinkers and makers the most can identify with that. I feel people whom I'm understood by can recognize that healthy dose of irate. In graduate school people used to be bothered by how upset I would be by certain phrases or issues or behaviors. They would say "why do you get so angry about art?" I was like how the fuck not!? I don't know any different. When I feel an injustice, I feel it deep. I think those feelings drive me to make art. It's generative.

KEMBRA: I know. How can people not be angry?

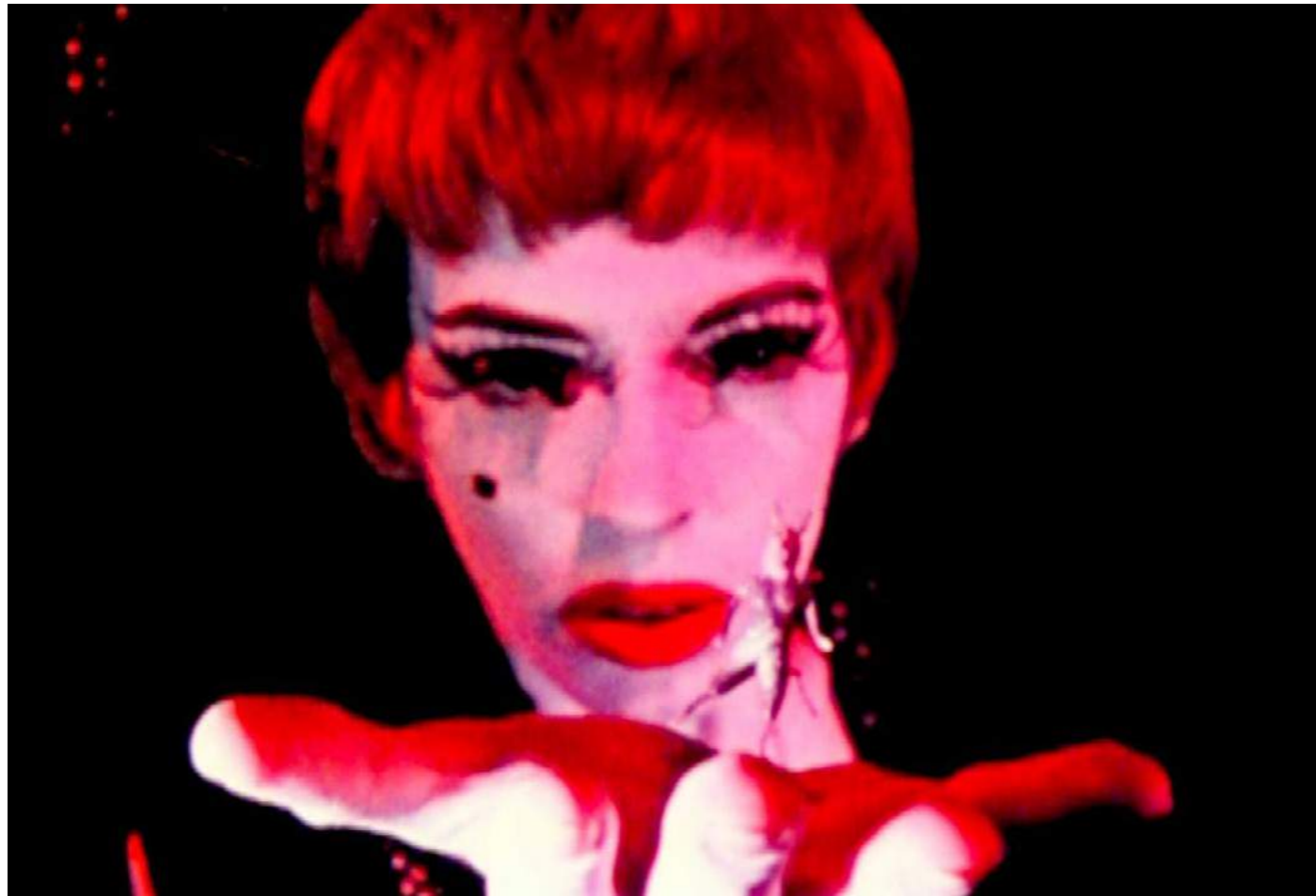
I feel like dark vanilla. I have a vanilla personality that's light and delicious but it's dark. The darkness never goes away.

Anger can point you in a direction. It can be like a compass that points you and help you with making work. I want to say it helps you solve problems but it's not that, because artists aren't mathematicians. We are not scientists. We are redecorating the world with new ideas to help raise consciousness more so than proposing math equations.

TYLER: Yea. I think that anger can propel us to do something. It makes you care.

ALEX: We saw some bad art in the city. There's definitely no anger or any emotion behind what's producing it. It's not raising any consciousness at all.

KEMBRA: Was it abstract art?



Marjorie Cameron in "The Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome" by Kenneth Anger (1954)

TYLER and ALEX: Yea, kind of...

KEMBRA: Abstract art sells well. Is there a big abstract art movement in LA right now?

TYLER: Paintings. Big abstract paintings.

KEMBRA: The new pop abstraction? What is that about? It's about decoration.

TYLER: It's also about art advisors convincing collectors to buy all the same artists.

KEMBRA: Un-angry art, decorations, and art advisors aren't really my world. I don't need a decorator. I don't care about money. You can be beautiful and have a lot of beauty in your life without money. People get angry when they see others can exist and have beauty in their lives without money. You

can have all the money you desire and still not make your life beautiful or your heart beautiful.

There can be humour and anger in abstraction. Like Hilda Klint is interesting to me. There are lots of feeling behind that abstraction. Sue Coe makes strange paintings. It looks like she's beating up the canvas with condoms filled with paint. I don't know if it's possible for there to be a sexuality in abstract art but I find her work very interesting. New abstract works have to have a duplicitous aspect for me to be interested. Like Dan Colen making abstract paintings out of bubble gum. There's humour.

TYLER: And there's critique. Dan makes paintings that look like bird shit or bubble gum and they sell for the same prices as Picasso.

When I think about your term availabism and

antinaturalism, and the moment when you came to New York, I think about Jack Smith. Can you talk about Jack Smith?

KEMBRA: I was in his last movie called "Shadows in the City". He had AIDS and he was very beautiful physically. He was wearing glitter eye makeup and he was so enigmatic. It was by Ari Roussimoff. I was working at a place called Millennium Film Archives. The first ten years of my art practice I made a lot of super8 movies. I was friends with the Kuchar brothers and Jonas Mekas.

TYLER: Where are those films?

KEMBRA: In a box. Some are in museums. I have to transfer them to DVDs. I never deal with my older work because I try to just make new work. I don't like to yesterbate. But I may die soon, I'm 54. So I may only have twenty or thirty years left.

TYLER: Did you see Jack's performances at the Plaster Foundation?

KEMBRA: I didn't go to his house. This person who introduced me to Jack's work was Donald Miller. He was from a band called Borbetamagus, which was a noise project. They were very unentertaining. Donald was taking class at Columbia University with Jack Smith. He told me Jack was the greatest artist of this century. I had just come from Los Angeles. So I started to go see his performances at the Millennium. Those were the ones that he wouldn't show up for. Or he would arrive like seven hours late. So you would be sitting there staring at his set waiting for him to come on stage. It was the craziest shit.

Archives. The first ten years of my art practice I made a lot of super8 movies. I was friends with the Kuchar brothers and Jonas Mekas.

TYLER: Where are those films?

KEMBRA: In a box. Some are in museums. I have to transfer them to DVDs. I never deal with my older work because I try to just make new work. I don't

like to yesterbate. But I may die soon, I'm 54. So I may only have twenty or thirty years left.

TYLER: Did you see Jack's performances at the Plaster Foundation?

KEMBRA: I didn't go to his house. This person who introduced me to Jack's work was Donald Miller. He was from a band called Borbetamagus, which was a noise project. They were very unentertaining. Donald was taking class at Columbia University with Jack Smith. He told me Jack was the greatest artist of this century. I had just come from Los Angeles. So I started to go see his performances at the Millennium. Those were the ones that he wouldn't show up for. Or he would arrive like seven hours late. So you would be sitting there staring at his set waiting for him to come on stage. It was the craziest shit.

I met Jack Smith and he held my face in his hands because he was so tall, and he was looking down on me and said "creature, creature"... he started screaming at me. I think he liked my eye makeup. Then we did the film together.

Jack Smith starved to death. He was not revered or monetized the way he is now. He was very political and addressed art and capitalism in a way that has totally changed and informed the way performance people deal with their work. He's the greatest teacher and the greatest martyr. He had to die in order for us to pay attention to his work. He died because of his work. He put everything he had into his work.

There's a lot to be learned from Jack Smith.

Also, how your work carries on after your death. His art was so absconded by museums and galleries after he passed away in a way that he could never benefit from. The conversations around what's happened to Jack Smith's work helps people think about what their work will be like when they're gone. Especially artists that deal with ephemera and artists who make not money from their art. Or artists who present themselves in

such a difficult fashion that they are not invited to the Art table. Jack Smith wasn't always invited to the Art table. He was always working.

TYLER: And he was difficult.

KEMBRA: Yes. He was difficult around the Warhol people because he didn't love what was popular. He always re edited his films. They were hard to purchase because he was always changing them. I was lucky to have actually met him. I'm glad that he's recognized now but it makes me sad that he can't benefit from it. What systems can we put into place for ourselves that handles our works after we're gone?

Marjorie Cameron, the Kenneth Anger actress who later became Cameron, burnt most of her works. I don't think I'd do that with mine, but I'd rather share my work with my community first instead of it serving rich people, to make rich people richer. The work that I've sacrificed my life to make, I hope that it will benefit people like me rather than rich people. That's just boring, actually. The world is so divided between who has money and who doesn't. And there's shame around not caring about money, and not having it.

KEMBRA: Antinaturalism is applied to my practice as way of defining and seeing nature in what I've got. I always loved science fiction writers like Philip K. Dick and I loved Blade Runner. It was my favorite movie. I do a performance piece where I sing to the music of Vangelis. I've been doing it since the early 1980's. You wanna see it?

TYLER and ALEX: YES!

KEMBRA: Did you ever see "The Wall of Vagina"?

TYLER: Yes, I love that one.

KEMBRA: So to wind this up- I don't think we should stop inventing language. It's fun to invent the language to describe your own work. That's something I encourage in Performance Art 101. Why did people stop inventing their own art

language? We just recycle terms that everyone else uses. Genesis P-Orridge is someone who plays with the English language. The English language in all its simplicity is filled with double, triple entendres. For example, in rhythm and blues songs lyrics like "put a little sugar in my honey bowl" the words have many meanings.

The silence in spending time alone helped me to describe my work by going inward enough to try to figure out my own language. Availabism is more of a shared practice. Antinaturalism, because of the gravity of what it's describing, the tragedy of what it's describing, it's hard to paraphrase exactly what it's about. I'm still learning and figuring out what all these things are about.

Do you ever feel like you don't know what you're doing?

TYLER: Often. When I try to over plan my work it ends up being trite and boring. When I allow myself to get lost in the process and not try to have answers, but continue with the work... that's when the most radical shit happens. It's like jumping off the cliff instead of having a harness and scaling down.

KEMBRA: I feel like you know what you're doing a lot of the time. Sometimes when I am in the middle of things I cannot describe what I am doing. I feel that way about antinaturalism. I am not a philosopher.



'Kembra Pfahler Interview'

Office Magazine, 27 February 2016

On the white-washed walls of a studio garage off Melrose Avenue hang a set of drawings. Rendered with a careful hand, they show a series of women dressed in black thigh-high boots and opera gloves, their otherwise naked bodies painted bright, solid colors and their black hair teased into towering bouffants. The women engage in a variety of curious activities—they execute chorus line kicks, they walk with bowling balls lashed to the undersides of their feet, one smashes paint-filled eggs against her vulva, another leans relaxedly against a massive black phallus. The ringleader of these women, and the illustrator herself, is artist Kembra Pfahler. The drawings, comprising a solo show organized by gallerist Lisa Bowman, depict scenes from Kembra's celebrated performance work, both as an individual and with her campy rock band The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black. In donning the signature boots and body paint seen in the drawings, Kembra channels this Karen Black, a not-so-alter ego she chose for herself after moving to New York, launching headlong into a career of subversive and experimental performance art that would explore themes of feminism, sex, horror, and the body.

Kembra rolls up to the makeshift gallery in a green Toyota Echo, the exterior of which has been "bombed" with a leering happy face by the painter Kenny Scharf. After politely obliging some aging bleached blonde rocker fanboy with a quick photo, we find a quiet café across the street, and in a soothing, thoughtful tone that belies the volatility of her work, Kembra speaks candidly about her life and her art.

On Childhood and California

I was born in Hermosa Beach, California in the '60s, when the South Bay Surfers were in their heyday, and the Beach Boys wrote about a scene of black sunglasses and white T-shirts, Gidget, Marlboro cigarettes, Dewey Weber surfboards and woodie cars. My parents met each other at Mira Costa High School, they were both beach kids. I was conceived on a surfing trip on the way to Rosarito Beach. So I grew up on the beach, in the

water every day. My father was a famous surfer, Freddy Pfahler III, and made Bruce Brown's early surf films, namely *Slippery When Wet*. He ran away and surfed the first big waves in Hawaii.

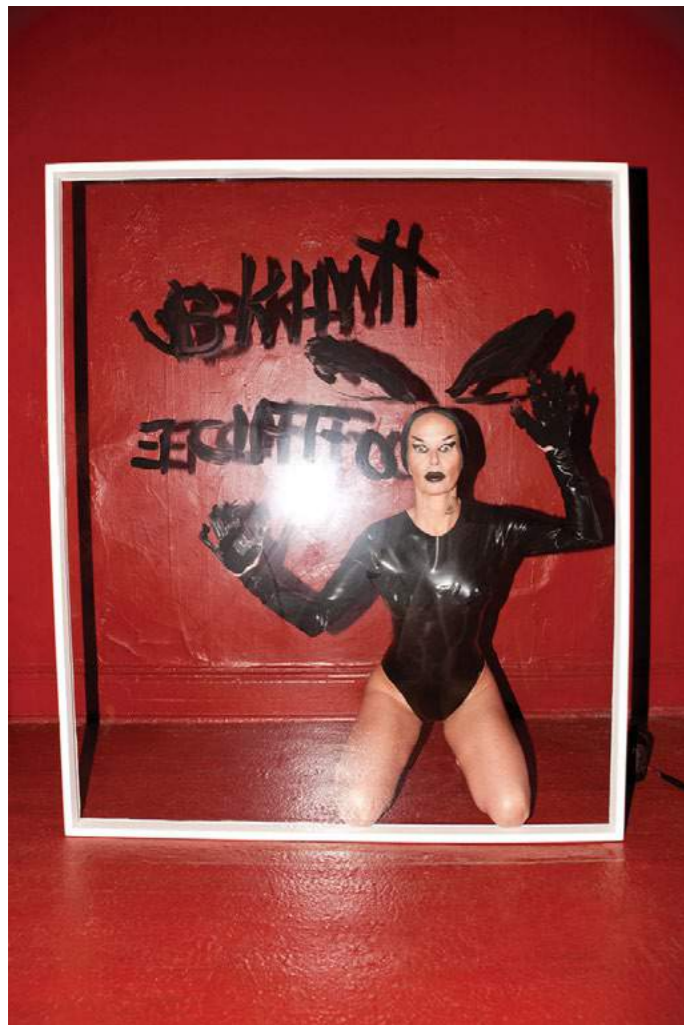
My mother was a beach beauty, she had me when she was young. She was very creative, she made my clothes, I always wore black-and-white houndstooth and saddle shoes, and I had a really severe haircut. The house was red and black and white, on the beach, and my mom was very intelligent, and provocative, and inspiring. She later ran away from Hermosa Beach, making her way up higher, higher north, ultimately to San Francisco. She wanted to learn more about the world, and Mill Valley was more cultured than the South Bay scene. Eventually we landed back in Los Angeles, and my mom remarried kind of a punk rock lawyer.

I had a really interesting, nice artistic childhood, but I don't think my parents knew that I was going to turn out this extreme. I needed to find my own way, and since they were already into so many interesting things, I had to invent my own culture. I did, by way of going to New York and starting Karen Black.

On Arriving in New York

I was terrified. I was very studious, I read a lot. The first summer I was in New York they had a Samuel Z. Arkoff film festival at the Museum of Modern Art, so I went there every day and watched every bad movie, which were actually very good to me, I love movies like *Boxcar Bertha*. Arkoff made these incredible movies with the actress Karen Black as well. So I was there almost every day. I lived in a horror film actor's home on the Upper West Side, a friend of my mom's, he had a haunted house. I lived near a club called Hurrah's, which was an early punk club, started by legendary punk people. Curatorially, they had every major strange punk band and artist performing there, two blocks from my house. But I also had the Met, and the opera house too, so I'd hang out there.





On Her Education

I got accepted to the School of Visual Arts, so I went to school. I just beat the shit out of every day, and worked as hard as I could. When you're a serious artist, and you're young, people don't take you seriously, so it's like being in battle every day. My professors would confront me aggressively. I remember Joseph Kosuth said to me, "Kembra, as a woman you represent half of humanity." I was like, "Are you talking to me? I have no idea who you're talking to." When I was seventeen, I wasn't thinking about gender, or being a woman. So it was very aggressive, and I decided I would have to title myself, and create an identity that had some muscle. So I said "Well, I'm an anti-naturalist, and an availablist. That's what I am." I began writing a kind of manifesto for this -ism, this -ist that I declared myself to be. My professors cultivated in me an ethic that stayed with me my entire life, and I was grateful to learn at SVA through people like Lorraine O'Grady, an amazing performance artist who I still see and work with, and Mary Heilmann, an incredible abstract painter, who's known as the Neil Young of the abstract expressionism world. These women prepared me for a severe art life, I'm really grateful to them and I love their work. It was very positive.

On Her Look

When I was going to Santa Monica High School in 1978 and '79, I had dyed black hair and looked kind of insane with my makeup. It was like I was going to be murdered every day, it was a surf school. Then in New York I guess I looked pretty strange. You know, I just looked as horrible as I could. I don't know why I did that, I just did what I perceived to be beautiful. I had this aesthetic that was kind of contrary to what I was born with, to what my mom was doing. I mean, I didn't want to look like my mom—but I looked exactly like my mom, by the way. Exactly. I mean, ten years later Calvin Klein came knocking and I did a whole modeling thing for them. It's subjective. I wear pounds of makeup, very drag queeny makeup—it's a flavor. People are less mean now, they just see it as "Oh, Kembra likes to wear tons of makeup."

On Kembra vs. Karen

I don't have a bifurcated, separate existence between my daily self and my performance character. I don't need to flip a switch on and off and go into a sort of method acting, character driven persona. It's all sort of like a hand, and each finger is a different medium or métier. I'm just lucky enough that I have a few different ones to access.

Marilyn Monroe, I read, had a bifurcated existence, where she had a difficult time marrying her intellectual, bookish self with her sex kitten self. I've studied this before, and I'm not a method actress, I'm not an entertainer. I do this work because I feel like it, and I want to. The show must not go on. If I don't feel like doing a performance, naked, then I won't. It's entertaining, but it's not entertainment. It's not acting. So I call that being an anti-naturalist. It's more like a comic book character, you know? An extreme visual presentation. All I really have to do in my work is get my costume on and remain still. All of the props and costumes do the work for me, all I have to do is show up to let the artwork do what it wants to do. It's a complete contrast with what a method actor has to put themselves through to channel their work.

When I would read about actresses like Marilyn Monroe I would think, 'I don't want to be anything like that. Look what happened to her, she was miserable.'

On Drawing

I feel like a drawing practice is sort of a softer, easier-to-share version of *The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black* and the live work. It's a meditative process, it's a decorative process. And I draw all of the images not to make souvenirs, but to sketch out the performance, it's a way of excavating and going deeper with the performances. It's also a way of sharing the performances with people, as performance is a very ephemeral act. Working on paper is such an old-timey practice, it's really quaint. I've been doing it a long time, and my drawings got to be in a really nice drawing collection at the Museum of Modern Art.

On Criticism

It is a sensitive process, it's fragile. People's meanness feels like murder. I feel like I'm being stabbed in the eyeballs when people totally misinterpret my work, or say hateful things about my art. It's like being stabbed in your calves with big knives. Of course we train ourselves to become impenetrable to criticism, but at any rate, it's all part of the same machine, and the same beast, and my job is simply to remain as healthy as possible, to show up for the artwork. I'm not always able to do that, but I try.

On Her Home [pictured throughout], the Color Red, and Anger

It's not really something that is calculated. I'm a minimalist, I'm not a collector. I don't have any dust in the house, I usually have under ten books that I cover all in black or white, so you can't see the covers, because I like the palette of the walls to be very simple. I feel like a state of minimalism is a great incubator for new ideas. I have a bed that just gets pulled in and out, because I need to shoot things in my apartment, like films, and photos. I can't stand towels for some reason. I think it comes from being a surfer, I don't need a towel. Or plates. I have a towel, plate, and dish phobia. I just grab a smoothie, I'm not domestic in the house.

I sit around thinking what I could do without. I challenge myself to see what else could I make red. It's very soothing to me, it's kind of womblike, red. It's not blood, and it's not re engine red. Essentially it's very turn-of-the-century Lower East Side, it's the color of the bricks. So it's kind of indigenous to the Lower East Side, to surround yourself with that brick tone. In classical Chinese opera, all the colors are signifiers for emotions in the masks, and red is definitely anger. There's a Thor song called Anger Is My Middle Name, I'm just laughing thinking about that song, it's a great song. I feel like I'm very angry. I'm a friend to my anger though, and being angry points me in a direction to do new stuff.

On Horror

There are lots of horror premises, and monsters, that are born out of what we've done, what we've created. Technology. Frankenstein—the universal horror characters are archetypes for everything that's going on right now. The book *The Monster Show* by David J. Skal, and Val Lewton's *Icons of Grief*, those are two books that have been inspirational to me. I find answers in horror. I also like the classic black-and-white horror films, especially all the shadow films, *Curse of the Cat People*, and all the really high-contrast movies. Those are like a cool drink of water to me, I find them so soothing.

I also spent time in Germany, and learned about German Expressionism, and realized "Oh, Fritz Lang moved to Hollywood? I didn't know that." All the World War II refugees came to LA and started making movies, so German Expressionism informed a lot of the horror that I gravitated towards. *Nosferatu*, all those things. Slasher movies I have to cover my eyes, I mean I like Dario Argento but that's just sheer fashion to me, and humor—it's just funny, it gets to be ridiculous, outrageous, over the top. And then horror can be a sort of panacea, a place to reify violence, and psychosis, and insanity, to watch it on the films and not do it in real life. Work it out in the movie.

Joe Coleman the painter talks about how he would have been a serial killer or whatever had he not been such an extreme painter. Art heals, all creativity heals.

On Props

Why wouldn't I want to stand next to an enormous cock? It's more fun that way.

On the '80s

All through the '80s I was making Super 8 films with like, Jack Smith, Mike Kuchar, Nick Zedd, the Cinema of Transgression, Richard Kern—I was in Jack Smith's last movie that he ever made, called *Shadows in the City*. But the '80s was AIDS. It

started a few years after I was in school. It's a holocaust, the memory of which I still live with. I'm never not upset about AIDS. I cry, and if not outwardly, I think about AIDS every day, I celebrate all my dead friends every day. I realize I'm here just as icing on the cake. I lost everyone in the '80s. It pushed me to do more extreme work, to be as honest as I could. Then *The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black* formed in '89, '90, and we went on tour for about ten years.

On Gratitude, Beauty, and the Ups and Downs

It's a luxury, and a privilege, and a pleasure to be able to do the kind of artwork that you want without going to jail for it. In other cultures the kind of art that I do, you couldn't do. I like art for art's sake, I believe that art makes things more beautiful. I'm interested in making beautiful things—one might perceive hanging upside down on a cross or sewing your vagina shut and these extreme performative gestures as not beautiful, but it's what I perceive to be beautiful. I'm not really interested in art theory or art criticism. In other words, I'm not making art that addresses art history, or addresses an art problem.

I started when I was seventeen years old, I'm fifty-four now. It's hard, I've had to sacrifice a lot, I've lost a lot of husbands, a lot of relationships because of the extreme nature of my work. The best relationship is the one I have with my artwork. But I get to design my own life now. Of course it's a bit difficult sometimes, but I've gotten to do essentially everything that I always wanted to do, my whole life. My motive is pretty mellow. It's not born out of a vengeful desire to conquer and go straight to the top, it's all about fun—my kind of fun, which isn't really a laughing kind of fun. I don't know, when you're an artist everything waxes and wanes, you get popular for a minute, and then people hate your guts because you're bending over the wrong way, and the next day you're in a magazine, the next day you're running from police in five inch high heels.

Brienne Walsh, 'Kembra Pfahler'
BOMB Magazine, 06 November 2015

Kembra Pfahler is a downtown legend: a punk rocker, screen goddess, curator, and performance artist who moved from Los Angeles to the East Village in the early 1980s. Over the course of her time in New York, she's modeled for Calvin Klein, sings lead in the death punk metal band *The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black*, and founded a performance art movement known as "Availabilism," the tenet of which is to use whatever's around at any given time to create performance—as an expression of some ineffable part of oneself. In Kembra's case, she's strapped bowling balls found on the street to her feet, cracked eggs from an otherwise empty fridge on her vulva, and used Grindr to post close-up pictures of her face in blue body paint and a bouffant black wig—which is probably how you recognize her, horny gay men of the East Village. In her most famous performance, which she did for Richard Kern's *Sewing Circle* in 1992, she had her vagina sewn shut by an Asian woman—performance artist Lisa Resurreccion—while wearing nothing but a "Young Republicans" t-shirt. When asked why she did it, she told *DisinfoTV*: "I just told my mother I was very upset." There's a deep rage in Kembra's work at the way the female body is treated by society.

Meeting at her apartment—the interior of which is painted entirely in red—she told me to arrive on time for our interview because she had a packed schedule, so I arrived twenty minutes early. As I was parking my bike outside of her apartment building, I noticed a slight, high cheek-boned woman in sweatpants taking out her keys to enter. I paused. Missing were the characteristic drawn-in eyebrows Kembra sports in public, but the woman had the unmistakable aura of someone very special. We talked for nearly two hours.

Kembra Pfahler: I've been out all day, so I have to change the cat litter. You could do a whole *Bomb* issue on *Changing Cat Litter in Your Art Studio 101*.

Brienne Walsh: (laughter) That's probably something they've never done before. [Editor's note: good idea!]

KP Do you have any animals?

BW Yeah, I have a cat, Butters, and she's morbidly obese.

KP (gasp)

BW Yeah, we tried to make her skinny, but she loves to eat. It's like her true joy in life.

KP That's okay. Would you like some coffee? We can make the traditional coffee of the Lower East Side.

BW Would you say that you're from the Lower East Side now, not Los Angeles?

KP When you're from Los Angeles, you are never not from Los Angeles. It's in my DNA, it's something that's indescribable. I think I know more about ocean tides, night tides, and California-style music than I do anything else.

BW What did you look like when you were a teenager in Santa Monica?

KP I had black hair, but before that I had blonde hair and awesome eyebrows. And to this day, my mom, Judy Ball, will still say—like to the entire room—in her grand, beautiful mom way, "My daughter used to have the most beautiful eyebrows, ladies and gentlemen. Look here at this person, her eyebrows were like caterpillars, her hair was as blonde as the...." You know, no matter how old I'll be, I'll always say, "Mom, can you please stop talking about the eyebrows." I chose to be out of the closet with my performance work since I was very young, and I never hid what I did from my mother. Her courage to endure extreme, transgressive imagery before it was popular is admirable. She came to all my shows in the '80s, in this neighborhood.

BW Why did you shave your eyebrows? Did you just like it better?





BW Why did you shave your eyebrows? Did you just like it better?

KP It gave me a larger palate to work with, and I like extreme transformation. That, and I met and married Samoa Muriki [her ex-husband] when I was a teenager. I was so young. He was buying food at Key Food on Avenue A, and I saw him through the window. He was wearing a Mickey Mouse t-shirt and it was love at first sight. He's from Hiroshima, Japan, and it was from him that I learned a lot about Japanese Noe Theater and extreme street theater, and Butoh. One of Butoh's characteristics is black teeth and smudged eyebrows. At the time, I just felt that I wanted to. I came to New York in 1979, when people like Lydia Lunch ruled these streets, and The Plasmatics.

BW Why did you come to New York?

KP Why does anyone come to New York? I don't know, the same reason you did. Why did you come?

BW It was easy. I got a job here.

KP It was hard for me.

BW How old were you when you got here?

KP Seventeen.

BW And did you come here for school?

KP I came to go to the School of Visual Arts. I studied under Mary Heilmann and Lorraine O'Grady. They were the most inspirational. Recently, I featured them in a show I was a part of called "Future Feminism," at the Hole. We were able to invite Lorraine to do a night of performance. That was last year—last September—and I'm still recovering from that. It took me a year to physically and mentally recover from that show.

BW Was it a lot of work?

KP It was like stepping onto a battlefield. I lost half my friends for doing work about feminism, and using a kind of language that came to us out of consensus discussions during retreats that Antony [of Antony and the Johnsons], Coco Rosie, Johanna Constantine, and I had. We talked in a circle and had discussions that lasted weeks and days and hours. And we decided that through these discussions, we wanted to have an art exhibit showing stones with thirteen tenets on them, and the thirteenth tenet was "The Future is Female." That caused the most controversy because it was gender specific. It was a decision we made because the scales had been so tilted towards just the male gender. But a lot of our friends are so advanced that they don't want to speak about gender at all, they want to go to the other category, to stage 3, stage 4, stage 5, stage 6, stage 7. Recently, in the medical profession, the little boxes you could check for gender—there used to be four categories—will next year have ten: male, female, trans, LGBT, bisexual, asexual... so there's going to be a lot of development in other sexualities. To me it goes back as far as Rilke's Letters to A Young Poet, when he says in the first letter that sexuality is personal, and everyone's entitled to their own expression of love and sexuality, whatever that may be, and you can't compare or generalize. I'm not an academic feminist. I've been in a death rock band. I wasn't in the art world from 1989-2000, I was on tour across the country doing Karen Black shows where no one wanted them.

BW (laughter)

KP I chose to go across the US rather than Europe because I was appalled by this cliché that "they will like you more in Europe, they like artists more in Europe," so we said, "Let's go to Minnesota, let's go to Oregon, let's go to where we aren't going to be teaching to the already-converted." And we did cross-country Winnebago tours with The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black for over a decade. And before that I made films from '79 to about '89—I made films and did performance in this neighborhood, and grew up with Jonas Mekas, Millennium, Mike Kuchar. Jack Smith lived up the street, and

we had The Living Theater on 4th Street. It's like different decades have been different aspects of my life, as I've gotten to have different kinds of educations. To me, it's just a privilege to even still be walking, because I saw everyone die of AIDS in the '80s, as you did, even as a little girl.

BW Yeah, I remember a little bit, but not so much. I actually have a cousin who survived, and he's still alive, which is interesting. I just went to his wedding. I've never gotten the story from him, what happened, how he survived. But I talked to him while I was down there; he lives in Arizona now.

KP Good news! People don't like to talk about it.

BW I like to talk about it.

KP It's not dinner conversation.

BW It must've been traumatic in the East Village, because I assume so many people were sick here.

KP It was a holocaust. So when people are having art problems now, and they wake up in the morning and they're worried that they don't have a gallery to support them, or no one recognizes them, I think to myself, we are not living through an AIDS crisis right now, even though we're still living with AIDS. This isn't Auschwitz. It's a privilege and a luxury to even have the freedom to worry about being in a gallery.

BW Do you feel like artists in New York have less to say than when you first moved here? I was in South Africa last week, and the gallery director was from the Netherlands. He said, "You know what a twenty-year-old artist in Amsterdam has to say? That everything is so easy for them. But a South African artist has so much to say." I don't know if you feel like maybe New York artists have less to talk about—maybe not people who've been here a long time, but younger ones who are just moving here.

KP Well that would be ageist, to presume something lacking in years would have less to say. And

ageism is the same as sexism and racism, and we don't know who's going to save the world. It could be a sixteen-year-old computer-game player. Until laws are created to protect women from harm and until misogyny is eradicated, we will have something to say, every day.

BW That's interesting.

KP It's not interesting, it's a shame. Lorraine O'Grady came to "Future Feminism" and said, "Hey everybody, there's enough room for all kinds of feminists"—you can have your Bull Dagger Feminists, your Academic Criticism Feminists, your Vagina Power Feminists, your Death Metal Feminists, your Feminine Feminists, your Men Feminists, your Grandma Feminists. There's room for all Feminists. Feminisms. A lot of people didn't want to work with "Future Feminism" because they thought the name itself was specifically addressing feminism, like we were trying to mess with the future of feminism. But we were just talking about the future of the world being thought of through a feminist lens.

BW Why do you think the name "Future Feminism" offended so many people? I mean, for me obviously, that doesn't offend me in any way or wouldn't make me angry, but I'm not personally involved.

KP It's not fascism, we weren't inflicting our opinions on others. We were saying we need to create a circle because we love it here, and the other systems don't seem to be working, meaning why is it 85 degrees during Christmas, and 104 degrees in Stromboli, Italy, for the first time in history? Let's figure out a way to think how indigenous people think, generationally, like six or seven generations ahead. Is what we're doing now going to harm or help the proliferation of our peoples in seven or eight generations? And now because of imminent domain in this neighborhood, money comes first, and commerce comes before we think about what harm may come. Just think about this block, 2nd St. We're living on a landfill, which is one of the reasons the buildings are so low. During Sandy, we got flooded all the way up to Avenue C, like literally cars underwater. The Lower East Side isn't high

because it can't endure the weight. And legally, those laws were implemented to protect this part of the terrain of the city, correct me if I'm wrong. But now they're building high and hard instead of slow and low.

Anyway, it's a new day. Like Claudia Cardinale in that movie *Once Upon a Time in the West*, you know she moves to the West and beats up everyone and gets raped, then what does she do?

BW I love her, she's the most beautiful! (laughter) I don't know, what does she do?

KP She takes a bath, she changes her clothes, and she gets out and goes fighting.

BW That's a good strategy, I like that. (laughter)

KP She goes fighting and she continues to fight. And that is the difference between— It's almost nine.

BW Oh yeah, do you have to leave?

KP No, I don't have to leave, but I don't want to get too off-track. But let me just end by saying that having a tenants group in the Lower East Side has been the happiest, best accomplishment in my life—or one of them. We've been in a tenants group for over twenty-five years. I fought my whole life to be in the Lower East Side. And I'm proud of my friends for just fighting so hard and not giving up. It's been a great adventure and I'm happy about that. I'm sorry I'm talking so much.

BW No! You're supposed to. You can ask me questions now.

KP Oh, let's get some candy. I have frozen M&Ms!

BW I guess one thing I'm interested in, as a writer, is how you survive financially, just because you make so little money, and it seems like one makes less and less money doing creative things. And I was wondering how much that has ever been a concern of yours, or if you've always been able to

support yourself with your art.

KP Here's what do you when you need money: go get a job.

BW Yeah, that's true. What kinds of jobs have you had?

KP Lots of jobs. I mean Georges Bataille was a librarian. I don't believe in old art systems where you're not an artist if you also have to work. You know, Bukowski worked in a post office.

BW I love Bukowski.

KP Me too. As women, as artists, you just do what is estimable. You want some M&Ms?

BW Yeah, I love sugar.

KP As an artist in New York City, it's so tenuous the way we live. When I first moved here all the punk rockers worked at the Strand bookstore. It was hard, but I got a lot of books and read all the time.

BW What do you like about teaching?

KP I'm not really teaching. I'm just sort of sharing my Availabilism, making the best use of what's available.

BW What does that entail? Where do you look for Availability?

KP You don't look for Availabilism, it finds you. Do you know French at all?

BW Not really.

KP I know one word, which is *poubelle*. It means "to find," which came from Edgar Oliver originally. When an artist is paying attention, they can find discarded or found stuff to use and those things find them. And I remember when I first moved here I found bowling balls in the street, and I later ended up tying them to my feet and using them in my performance.

BW Oh, you found them on the street? That's funny.

KP One time someone asked me about the first performance I ever did, which was when I came home and looked around and there was nothing in the house except an egg. There wasn't anything to use, I didn't have a guitar, I had an egg. (laughter) So I stood on my head and cracked an egg over it. (laughter) I started doing live performance when I was a teenager in the '80s, and for ten years I did super-8 films and performance work. I liked doing things in nightclubs, like the Pyramid and Danceteria and Palladium, and all those cool places of the Lower East Side... ABC No Rio as well. But I didn't love the art world. I decided in 1989 to start a classic rock band. Not an art band sound-wise, but a classic rock band, so I could slide the imagery into the consciousness of the viewer a little easier. This was The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black, which I founded with Samoa, who's also a painter.

The band allowed me to squeeze in all the strange images I'd been working on for all these years, what I now call my "manual of action," my own vocabulary of images: the sewn vagina; the egg piece; all of the costumes, like Abra Kedavour; the flowing anal bead shirt; the shark piece; the upside down Crucifix piece, where I hang upside down on the cross; the wall of vagina; the bowling ball piece. For the most part, the performances happened during the guitar solo, and were over before you knew what happened. I didn't participate in the art world again until American Fine Arts asked me to work with them. And after Colin de Land passed away sadly, then with Jeffrey Deitch.

BW Do you still play with the band?

KP Actually, the band is still very busy. I now have a dream [team]: Samoa on guitar, Michael Wildwood on drums, and Gyda Gash on bass. We have traveled to many places together, and Michael and I have done some really extreme performances together, like Michael playing drums while I did live butt printing, for example.

BW [laughter]

KP Anyhow... I'm having a show on November 20th in Los Angeles for all the Bomb readers who are looking at this. It's at a special little space on the backside of Melrose, [called] the Lisa Bowman Gallery. Anyways, can I listen to you some more? I feel like I'm so blabby.

BW No, you're so amazing!

KP I'm not amazing. When you do artwork for a long time, sometimes you have moments where people think you're okay, and you're liked. And then other times people don't give a shit if you're breathing. It ebbs and flows like the tides. I'm just psyched that people are interested in Performance Art 101, the class I'm teaching at Pioneer Works. I'm psyched that people are still interested in looking up and finding out about tenants' rights. I'm psyched that people are coming back to classic rock, bass, drums, live music. This battle is not over, it's just starting. And I'm not saying that in a mystical way, I'm saying that in the most practical way.

BW What battle do you mean?

KP The battle of trying to save the world, one show, one performance, one movie, one conversation at a time. It's beautiful here and we are lucky to be here.

BW In New York, you mean?

KP In the world. You're married, you must get to go places.

BW I was just in South Africa. I went on safari, it was so fun.

KP What were you doing in South Africa?

BW I was on a press trip. I wrote an article on the art scene in Cape Town for Art in America.

KP Cape Town with the white people or the black people?

BW Both. It was interesting talking about race there because they were so open about it, and acknowledged that they had a very dark history. It's a country in the beginning stages of coming to terms with what it's done, and trying to change.

KP It's an atrocity for someone to think that racism has gotten better. It has not gotten better. You haven't come out of the house if you think racism has changed at all. Shame on you, it's gotten worse. In New York it's gotten worse.

BW It's gotten way worse in New York. We live in totally segregated communities.

KP Look at prisons, and how many black people are in there, how many Chinese people, how many Korean, Hispanic people. For white people to talk about white privilege, that's a discussion they don't like to have. That's something we talked about in "Future Feminism," because we were all from a specific scene, and we were like, "Gosh, we're all used to wearing body paint and extreme transformation," so we wanted to include in the performances—the thirteen nights—all different ages and races. We wanted to mix it up. It's something that should always be thought of constantly, because if you aren't thinking about it, you're probably racist.

BW I think people think you don't have to think about it consciously, but that ends up allowing people to ignore difference.

KP Kind of like denial.

BW In South Africa there was a black female artist who I went to see. She had cast herself in a bronze cast as Ophelia. And I asked if she was trying, as a black woman, to speak about the exclusion of black women from traditional narratives. And the gallery director told me she doesn't want to deal with race, her race or her being a woman, and that she wants to transcend that. But I thought, you know, you can't really transcend it in some ways.

KP People should be allowed to have their thinking

patterns. Inflicting your own behavioral systems on someone is fascism, but I do, and am inspired by, people willing to sacrifice their art careers, or their commerce, to speak out about the truth. So I think a lot of times people don't take sides, and travel in the middle road because they think it will affect how people perceive them and their careers, and their financials will be damaged. Some people are so destitute they don't want to jeopardize that...

BW They're so afraid of poverty.

KP Which is totally understandable. But if we don't speak out truthfully, then we aren't going to have an art show and cast ourselves as Ophelia, because our freedoms will be gone and we will be in jail, and you won't have an art world to be glamorous in. So I think that's what the thinking is. It's just askew.

Rick Owens, 'In my own fashion: Kembra Pfahler and Rick Owens'
Document, 11 October 2018 [First published S/S 13]

Artist and muse to Rick Owens, Kembra Pfahler sits down with the fashion designer to discuss how she resents art with a capital "A."

With her electric blue body paint and jet-black wigs, Kembra Pfahler is a dynamic force in the New York art scene. While continuing to perform as Karen Black in the band *The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black*, Pfahler has set herself to working on *Future Feminist* art and Hawaiian percussion. Here she talks with fashion king Rick Owens. Heralded by Anna Wintour and *American Vogue* in the early aughts, Owens, an American fashion designer, won the CFDA Perry Ellis Emerging Talent Award in 2002 and now lives in Paris where he works on his own label known for its confluence of grunge and minimalist-sophisticate aesthetics.

Kembra Pfahler—Hi.

Rick Owens—Hi.

Kembra—You look so cute.

Rick—So do you.

Kembra—So they are doing...Someone bought my building and they're doing demolition downstairs. It's like being in World War II, which is kind of interesting. It's kind of fun, but it's really loud so you might hear this chaotic sound.

Rick—Do they start really early in the morning?

Kembra—Yes, they do.

Rick—Is that a problem for you?

Kembra—It really is but I'm just kind of going with the flow, you know? I haven't been staying here a lot. I was in Hawaii for a month. Can you tell? I'm not really tan anymore. My tan is gone.

Rick—You can live at the Y?

Kembra—Hawaii.

Rick—Oh, Hawaii! I thought you said the Y and I was thinking, well isn't that a homeless shelter? Hawaii.

Kembra—I don't even think the Y exists anymore, like the old school stay-at-the-Y type thing. As you know, New York is a boutique city.

Rick—Right.

Kembra—So we just shot all day. It was really pleasant. It was like a glamorous vacation.

Rick—You guys shot in a studio?

Kembra—Yeah.

Rick—Who shot you?

Kembra—Catherine Servel. She was very demure, very quiet, very attentive and sweet.

Rick—Oh, yeah, that's so great. Justinian Kfoury [Servel's agent] actually just came over a couple of hours ago and knocked on my office door but I was taking a nap so I didn't answer it.

Kembra—Is he there for a while?

Rick—I don't know, maybe he left today and that was my last chance to see him before he left, but my nap could just not be interrupted.

Kembra—Yes, I understand. You're on a very intense Oleg Cassini schedule. Very rigorous.

Rick—I am so not.

Kembra—Did you ever read the book by Oleg Cassini?

Rick—I totally did.

Kembra—You did?

Rick—Yeah, and he was such a cocksman. I love that he was such a cocksman.



Kembra—Was he? I didn't get that. I don't remember that part of the book.

Rick—All he talked about was chasing pussy.

Kembra—Really?

Rick—Yeah.

Kembra—I must have blacked that part out. I just remember that he got up everyday at 6:30 to look at fabric.

Rick—Oleg Cassini, am I thinking of a different biography? I think it was called In My Own Fashion.

Kembra—Yes, it was In My Own Fashion by Oleg Cassini.

Rick—Pussy chaser.

Kembra—Really? Well, do you think you ever might write a book like In Your Own Fashion, a Rick Owens book? That would be nice.

Rick—I thought about it. But I thought I would come out so despicable if I was honest. I really would.

Kembra—Really? You are so angelic, what are you talking about?

Rick—Underneath it I'm just petty and just wrong. But it could be really interesting. And if I'm just brutally, brutally honest it would just be a horror book.

Kembra—Can you hear [the construction]?

Rick—Yeah, I totally can. It's really bad! It's concrete. They're drilling through concrete right?

Kembra—I don't know. It's a mess. They're trying to make me move, you know, because I have this beautiful home. As you can see I live in this total luxury of glamour here and they are obviously trying to get me out. But we have a high pain tolerance.

They don't really know that I sewed my vagina shut.

Rick—Yeah, that will slow them down.

Kembra—They probably do now.

Rick—But how long have you lived there?

Kembra—I've lived here since the '80s.

Rick—You've lived there a long time.

Kembra—Yeah. So I'll try to remain focused on discussing important things. One important thing I feel is Ms. Davis [Vaginal Davis] just had an incredible show here.

Rick—Oh! How did that go? I haven't even seen Ms. Davis for a long, long time.

Kembra—She looks beautiful.

Rick—Did you do a project with Vaginal? Was there something you guys did? Was there a collaboration? Or was it just her coming to town?

Kembra—We've been doing work with Lia Gangitano from Participant Gallery, which is one of the last remaining not-for-profit organizations in the city. We've done a lot of performances and friends have been doing shows there lately. So I essentially just did a show for Ms. Davis, not with her.

Rick—I know that Vaginal Davis told me that she liked my clothes; and between Vaginal and I, Vaginal wanted to do something nice for [Gangitano] so we sent her a jacket on behalf of Vaginal, and Lia reciprocated with a beautiful whip sculpture from... You know I can't remember the name of the artist right now but it's a whip that has two handles for two people to use.

Kembra—Oh, yeah, I know that piece. Participant does really beautiful projects for the shows.

Rick—And I have it in my library right now hanging up.

Kembra—Well, Lia has incredible taste.

Rick—Right.

Kembra—So, no, I didn't do anything with Vaginal but it was nice to see her because people can't really come to New York that often anymore. It's so culturally genocided that it's hard for real artists to come to New York. It's like Vaginal used to say, she used to call it the cultural high white snow. She used to call these boutique people the high whites snow, like the Kennedy's.

Rick—She always has a little turn of a phrase doesn't she? What was her show?

Kembra—She did the HAG Gallery. The gallery she had in Los Angeles, which maybe you had an exhibit in as well in the early days, did you?

Rick—I never exhibited, I just was there. I just was a fan.

Kembra—So she kind of redid the HAG but it was so idiosyncratic; she baked bread sculptures. One of Justin Timberlake with a 10-foot cock made out of bread. And they built an illusion so that Ms. Davis would appear dainty and tiny. It was like a circus illusion that you looked inside of a box. Do you remember in Knots Berry Farm they had some sort of illusion room?

Rick—Is it like the distorted mirror?

Kembra—No, it was an illusion room that you looked in and you could become tiny in.

Rick—Dainty Vaginal Davis.

Kembra—Yeah, a tiny and dainty lady. So that was interesting. That was quite a good show and she made wallpaper. And I didn't really get to see her because of the storm Sandy. The blackout happened and we were right in the middle of Sandy, in the Lower East Side.

Rick—How did that affect you?

Kembra—Yeah it was. The government was giving away RCMs, Already Cooked Meals. Essentially it's like space food or astronaut food they were giving out in the projects.

Rick—I would love to eat that all the time. Does it taste good?

Kembra—Well, I collected it but I never opened the packages because it was hermetically sealed. I don't know how astronauts can open these kind of food products. It was so difficult.

Rick—But I've bought these army surplus; they are so beautiful they are in this army green color with beautiful printing and it's in a metal kind of plastic thing.

Kembra—Yes, yes. Aesthetically they are very collectable which is why I got them, but I never ate them. And then they have these foods that are self-heating as well.

Rick—Right.

Kembra—So, I am going to go back to Hawaii. I'm thinking about getting a place there because my parents moved there so I might stay there half of the year. There is beautiful scenery and the water is incredible; I swam everyday. And it's filled with Hawaiian ghosts. There are support groups for seeing certain ghosts around the island. There is a support group if you saw the green-faced lady with the long black hair and no feet. There is a support group for her.

Rick—I've never been to Hawaii. I was actually thinking of it recently because it sounds great. I don't know why, I just assumed that after all this time it would be a big mess.

Kembra—It is a big mess in a way. Because of the depression the tourism has really diminished so everyone is chasing you around the island trying to get you to go on a turtle watching expedition for half price.



So it has a strange dying touristic quality that I find to be kind of interesting actually. It wasn't very chic at all. People don't have a consciousness about culture necessarily, but the Hawaiian culture is so interesting. The native culture and the native mythology are very inspiring. The music, the ukulele, dance and all of the folklore I love. Hawaiian people are very warm.

Rick—Do you remember when The Creatures did that album, that Hawaiian album? Remember The Creatures?

Kembra—Yeah, I totally know what you're talking about.

Rick—And it was a lot of percussion. It was very Hawaii. They were obviously influenced by Hawaii. It was really nice, that album.

Kembra—I know, I love the visuals for that too. My friend Scott Ewald said this recent Karen Black album that we're doing, Fuck Island, is reminiscent because there is a lot of tom-tom drum. There is a lot of that kind of percussion. Karen Black isn't really doing a double-based drum anymore. We're not doing heavy metal; we have more of a tropical sound right now actually.

Rick—But I thought Fuck Island was a show, is it going to be an album now?

Kembra—Yeah, it started out as a song and then that was the show I had at Lia's gallery. And it's the title of the next Karen Black piece. And it's all about cock, too.

Rick—Yes, you sent me the one with little mirrors all over it and I gave it to my pattern maker in Italy for inspiration. I said, "this is the silhouette for the new collection," and they put it up on the wall in their little workroom.

Kembra—That would be wonderful to have kind of wheels or balls at the base of your feet.

Rick—It was just such a fun celebratory image. It just put you in a good mood to look at it. So I thought it was a good spirit.

Kembra—Yeah, that was a collaboration [between] my friend Spencer Sweeney and Urs Fischer. They took my sort-of-papier-mâché cock over to their studio and did the mirrors. Urs Fischer did the mirrors. It became a collaboration. It was fun.

Rick—But then it looks like they [had] shown light on it somewhere, was it used for something?

Kembra—I've been experimenting with day-glo body paint so we actually did the show with the mirror cock in the dark.

Rick—So Fuck Island is the name of the whole album? And it's a show revolving around these cocks?

Kembra—Yeah. Cock. Karen Black has never really been about adult sexuality and I don't even think Fuck Island is necessarily about adult sexuality, but it just has really loathsome song titles like "Magnum Man," "Rebel Without a Cock" and "Soldier Female."

Rick—So cock songs set to a tropical beat.

Kembra—It is really joyful. It's very joyful. And I got around to doing all this cock imagery and stuff because of my Future Feminist Group. I've been so involved with the Future Feminists but I asked the Future Feminists if it was okay to be a dick pig and a feminist at the same time.

Rick—And the answer was?

Kembra—Well, they had to think about it actually.

Rick—That sounds kind of deformed.

Kembra—It is totally. It's the truth. So yeah, Fuck Island was really great to do at Lia's gallery. She was really supportive. We made a choking poster, that's also a name of a song too, "The Choking Poster."

Rick—Oh, that's my favorite one I think. "Choking Poster."

Kembra—I have some to send to you.

Rick—Okay good.

Kembra—So let me think of some important things. When are you coming to New York? Will you have an art exhibit here?

Rick—Well, I'm supposed to do a furniture show. You know those are the shows that I'm doing. I don't really do art, I do furniture.

Kembra—I believe that furniture is art as well.

Rick—I like the idea of it. To tell you the truth, when I first set out I wanted to be a painter but I didn't think I had the intellectual stamina to call myself a painter. Or I didn't think I could really qualify intellectually to call myself a painter so I chickened out and became a designer. And I still kind of feel that way; I can't imagine doing something and just calling it art. I don't know if I have low self-esteem or what. I have to do something functional.

Kembra—That means that what you're doing is in the spirit of what is the decorative arts. And at the turn of the century that was the Decorative Arts movement where a lamp from Tiffany, or a door from Tiffany and decoration was considered art. I just think that the language for now, the vernacular for now, is a bit conservative or it has been for a while. Where you know you had this sort of classicist vision of what art was. I believe that decoration is fine arts.

Rick—All of us deep, deep down inside know that art with a capital A is more heroic than decorative art.

Kembra—Well, I think that my decoration is. I mean, it takes a hero to live like this, I'm sorry.

Rick—I totally agree. I mean as far as I'm concerned you are totally heroic.

Kembra—Extreme decoration is an art. How about this, I'm proposing to the culture and to this discussion for us to remove the capital A from art. Capital letters don't fit anywhere.

Rick—Yeah, I don't know. If I did, I would just be like sour grapes. Is that what they call it? Sour grapes? Bitter grapes?

Kembra—Well, I do understand that like, say, Michelangelo's David... Is that art with a capital A? That sculpture?

Rick—You know that in my head, that is kind of decorative.

Kembra—In my world it's just sexy.

Rick—Do you go to a lot of those art fairs? Like Basel?

Kembra—Honestly, I don't really like going to art galleries or to art fairs or anything like that. That's not where I find my inspiration. I'm not really interested in contemporary art in galleries. I would rather go to the comic book store or walk across the Williamsburg Bridge.

Rick—I love galleries, but a lot of it is just about the glamour and about the money and about big white empty spaces with monuments. And kind of the whole idea about mythologizing these monuments and these big white spaces is just irresistible to me. And it's just so contemplative, it's so corrupt and kind of sinister at the same time. I love going to galleries.

Kembra—No, I do enjoy going to those galleries, but I feel like artists are not creating art for art's sake, or art to communicate with other artists. They are making art for curators and collectors.

Rick—A lot of it is very smarty-pants.

Kembra—Yeah, I'm definitely not theoretical or I don't have an academic interest in art. I like extreme decoration. And in New York what's also very

popular right now is really colorful abstract stuff, and I'm more interested in figurative work. And I don't know if that's popular or not. I guess I should try to go to more galleries maybe. I'm being very close-minded but I don't have time. You know, starting these new movements is really time consuming. We are doing a new Future Feminist movement and it's time consuming.

Rick—When was the last time that you spoke to [performance artist] Ron Athey? I haven't seen Ron in years.

Kembra—Ron Athey was here doing something at Participant. And he did an incredible performance for his 50th birthday that was so beautiful. Lia organized for him to do a performance in a loft down near Canal Street. And he did this piece that was a bloody-blood letting piece. It was so gorgeous, oh my god he looked beautiful. And to celebrate his birthday he did this strange contortion at the end of the performance: after a complete blackout he turned around and put his fist up his own tushy and then started laughing.

Rick—You look so beautiful Kembra.

Kembra—I do? You do, Rick, you look beautiful.

Rick—We're ageing gracefully aren't we?

Kembra—Yeah, I think so. I mean, really I guess it seems like it. I mean, I'm a lot less ugly than other people my age.

Rick—You and Ron should do something together. You should fist fuck Ron.

Kembra—I know that I built this cock and stuff but I don't really like doing that kind of realistic bodywork, it is not for me. It's not in my vocabulary. I'm more of an anti-naturalist.

Rick—Says the women who sewed her vagina shut.

Kembra—Well, there was no penetration in that.

Rick—No, it's still seems kind of invasive.

Kembra—Maybe there is just something too erotic about fisting that is a little too grownup for me. I still like doing things, like my adult sexual things very clandestinely.

Rick—A hug and a kiss.

Kembra—Well, other things too, but maybe a little less publically or something. I never wanted to do fornication or anything in my performance artwork. I think Ron's work is more about that extreme, more provocative and sexually referential stuff. I don't think Karen Black is adult sexual at all.

Rick—Well, it's there but it's not the highlight.

Kembra—So maybe someday Ron and I will do something together but I'm not very good at doing performance. I think I'm just not a very good performance artist. Like I can't do endurance performance, it's like longer than a concert.

Rick—Well, you know what you need? You need a nap.

Kembra—I don't want to do endurance performance. It's not for me.

Rick—Well, I don't blame you.

Kembra—If you were on a game show, Rick Owens, what would be your prediction for the next 10 years for the world?

Rick—Oh, dear! I wouldn't presume to predict anything. I can't even predict exactly what I'm going to do next week. So I'm not a very good predictor.

Kembra—Okay, good answer. I'll have to say the same thing really. I feel like I can't really think farther than my next project. I think that your designs are like your babies in a way.

Rick—They totally are, and that was the only way I know how to communicate with the world and feel like I participated. So I do feel like when I die, I'm not going to regret [it]. I'm going to feel like I made an effort to participate. And I think that's good. And I think I made an effort to participate to add something to the party and I think you are too. I think that's tremendously valuable and I'm kind of proud of that. I'm proud of us both.

Kembra—Yeah, I totally love what you do and I think it's very generous. And I think when you have the kind of attention to detail like that and put it out into the world you have to create a climate for yourself that's protective and maybe a little isolatory in order to have that concentration.

Rick—It is frayed off, I agree.

Kembra—I don't think that's a bad thing at all. I think that you have to have all sorts of boundaries up so that you don't get distracted. I feel that with Karen Black, if I let too much stuff in the eyebrow changes or something in the wig is not right. And it's a constant job to keep things within the Karen Black aesthetic because it can so easily flip and become Siouxsie and the Banshees, The Creatures, Vampira or something that is not specifically Karen Black. So that requires some kind of boundary.

So are you going to be in Paris for the next couple of months? I want to have my Giverny show at the l'Orangerie, the classic antique impressionist museum. I can come whenever I want but I want to come when you're there.

Rick—You know the l'Orangerie is right across the Seine from us.

Kembra—You're kidding.

Rick—No, it's like a three-minute walk.

Kembra—Really? Oh, that would be fantastic. That would be wonderful. I'm so excited.

Io Tillett Wright, 'The Lowdown | Kembra Pfahler'

T Magazine, 20 June 2012

The artist Kembra Pfahler is best known for getting completely naked and then covering her svelte body in red paint, donning a three-tiered black wig, and speak-singing (sometimes roaring) along to the music of her band the Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black. It should be mentioned that despite what her penchant for public full-frontal might lead you to think, Pfahler is 50. She has been a star on the scene since the 1980s, mishmashing her own brand of punk, haute glam and horror. It is always a great thrill to find her and her band of body-painted troublemakers shaking up the status quo at self-important art events, as she straps bowling balls to her feet or stands on her head while a cohort cracks paint-filled eggs between her legs.

Where have you been recently?

Hmmm. O.K., to the deli on Avenue C, four to five times a day ... to L.A., Berlin, Vienna, Topanga, but I like it everywhere. I haven't been to many museums or galleries lately, I prefer mostly to do sports outdoors. We call it Gothletics â€” a blend of parkour and urban martial arts. I have been to the East River a lot. I get claustrophobic when I am not around water. I almost went to see Little Richard at BB King's last night. I have been a lot of places the last few months, but as they say, "You always take you with you wherever you go." I went to the Life Ball. That was beautiful. It made me remember friends that died in the '80s, and friends that died recently too, of AIDS, and I was glad to participate in this big event. I cry a lot still for all of my dead friends. It never goes away, the grief. I stay out of harm's way to honor the people that had to die so early.

What are you working on right now?

What's been at the forefront of my thoughts is "future feminism." I look around and wonder what I'm doing, what we are doing, as artists in the year 2012. I ask myself, "Am I a feminist? Am I a woman of independence and high esteem? Am I getting sucked into the system of despair that tries to brainwash women into thinking they are this or that?"

I want to perpetuate a positive paradigm of visibility for women, despite what feels like backsliding and a sort of crass alternative greed â€” the greed that makes us isolate, and think about art careers instead of art. The disillusion when creating deformed identities online to make us feel more interesting than we really are. I get to travel sometimes but I am not into being more popular in places like Europe where you are somehow cool if you are from New York. I would rather do concerts in the parking lots of 7-11's across the country than do a show at the Louvre.

Where can I see it â€” and when?

I am working on the Karen Black concert that we will have as a part of the Meltdown Festival in August. Antony [Hegarty] has curated this concert series, and it will be the first symposium of a few of us interested in pushing "future feminism." Antony is a visionary of our culture. I am honored to be a part of this group, with CocoRosie and others. I am preparing a manifesto to articulate the goals of future feminism for London, which takes place during the Olympics. It is an experiment. I am unsure of the outcome. We are committed to this idea although it's untidy and unbrandable at the moment. It is a program of attraction not promotion. The desire to change the world can not be downsized on a cute T-shirt, the revolution is unbrandable. We are a brand of outsiders.

I also have a show at Participant that will open on Sept. 9.

Seen anything amazing lately â€” not your own?

I love what E.V. Day does. She's a very important powerful artist in my life who has taught me a lot and whom I have been lucky enough to collaborate with. We did "Giverny" together. She took me to Claude Monet's garden in France, which gave me drag fever.

Right now I am watching my good friend Carl George and Mary-Jo Shen organize an art show and a book for my best friend Gordon Kurtti, who

died in the '80s of AIDS. Mary-Jo is a fantastic philanthropist, and she has been a very positive influence in my life the past few months. She is Gordon's sister and compiled interviews with all of his friends from back then, so it was very cathartic to get to talk about Gordon, and now to honor him. I have been so grief stricken all of these years. I couldn't say his name in a sentence without crying. Talking with this great woman, and getting to see Gordon's work so beautifully assembled by Carl has lifted my spirits. I made a print for Carl and Mary-Jo ... that will be included in the show.

I see a lot every day. I love Chico, the muralist from the Lower East Side. I am an availablist, so I like just wandering different neighborhoods looking around at how people are living, sort of like a minimalist extreme vacation. I like antinaturalism, finding beauty in odd urban decay, so there's plenty of that if that's your hobby. I like the choking posters in Baskin Robbins. I like going on Grindr to see who's five feet away.

Where are you headed?

Playboy has been a great art friend. The magazine funded my last show at the Hole, and I have done a few events for it. I remember the first thing I did with Playboy, nude as muse in Miami. I was putting on my body paint, and a TV crew asked me why I did what I did. I thought that it was so shameful we live in a world where an 11-year-old Afghan girl lights herself on fire to avoid getting married. As odd as it may seem, standing there in Miami impersonating one of LeRoy Neiman's Femlin characters made me so happy. I was doing exactly what I wanted, what I thought was beautiful, and I didn't want to take that for granted. I am glad Playboy is still supporting extreme artists, as it has in the past. Our culture takes freedom for granted, so I try to remember where we came from.

What â€”™s next on the agenda?

The whole world is changing, and the art world is changing, too. So how we are getting money to do these ambitious projects of ours is a little outside

of the box. I am not writing grants all the time. I am not or going to drinks with collectors after a tidy studio visit. I don't care about N.Y.F.A. or N.Y.S.C.A. or anything like that. It seems like we've had to take aggressive measures to stay alive in this economy, and luckily I got to align myself with a group that hasn't been censorial. I am lucky to have these people interested in me, considering the imagery in my work is somewhat dark vanilla â€” you know, the sewn vagina thing, for example. Playboy has a traveling feminist show, and I am hoping the magazine's interest is piqued about future feminism, which, as I said before, incorporates broader issues than our sisters had to fight for in the '40s, '50s and '60s. Although, with the religious climate still hogging up the consciousness of our country, the older issues are still relevant and should be fought for as well. How do you fight these things? One show or concert at a time, I suppose.

Jane Harris, 'Interview: E.V. Day and Kembra Pfahler'

Time Out New York, 16 April 2012

After years of neglect following World War II, Monet's famous Giverny house and gardens were restored to their former glory in 1980 and reopened to the public. The inspiration for the artist's most iconic paintings, this pastoral landscape along the Seine once again became the living, breathing work of art that Monet cultivated and recorded between 1883 and his death in 1926. But for all its languid, postcard-perfect beauty, its extreme artifice is perhaps its most lasting "impression," as the artist himself suggested when he noted, "People will protest that it's quite unreal, and that I'm out of my mind, but that's just too bad.... Nature won't be summoned to order and won't be kept waiting. It must be caught, well caught." Taking Monet's observation as a call to action, artist E.V. Day, who was awarded the Munn Artists Residency at Giverny by the Versailles Foundation in 2010, invited fellow artist Kembra Pfahler to join her. They collaborated on an arresting series of photographic mise-en-scènes featuring Pfahler as her infamous Karen Black persona posing amid the riotous wisteria, roses and hollyhocks of the Clos Normand flower garden, as well as the weeping willows and quaint bridges of the Japanese water garden. The result, "Giverny," is a stunning installation that brilliantly positions these compelling images within a miniversion of Monet's verdant oasis, replete with stone path, grass, flowers, lily pond and bridge.

J.H.: What was the weirdest part of working on the project for each of you?

E.V. Day: Being at one of the most popular tourist destinations in France when no one else was there. It was so silent and surreal, and sometimes I wondered if the ghost of Claude Monet was hovering over us. The garden is so culturally familiar—from paintings and photographs—you get a mysterious feeling of *déjà vu*.

Kembra Pfahler: The weirdest part of the experience for me was shooting where no one had been photographed alone since someone did a geisha for a flatscreen-TV commercial several years back. Another weird thing was how the trees made

phantom sounds in the wind, like the Matterhorn ride at Disneyland. Weirder still was how a brilliant artist like E.V. could so generously share such a prestigious residency in a world that typically sets women against each other.

J.H.: That's so true. E.V.'s decision was so powerful because it subverts a value system that emphasizes competition, ego, etc., offering up a model of cooperation instead.

Pfahler: It should be a priority to look after one another and perpetuate good ideas, rather than compete for cash prizes. We can't survive on romantic ideals of the artist-as-genius anymore. We need to embrace community and optimism instead, and be more inventive about production financing. It's very Malcolm X—by any means necessary. But with a feminine touch, naturally.

J.E.V., what were your intentions in inviting Kembra to collaborate?

Day: The day I arrived in Giverny, I visited the water-lily pond and had a vision of Kembra in her pink body paint, black patent-leather boots and black wig, walking on the water. She and I had collaborated before on a photo series called "Chanel/Shazam" that involved my sculptures, so it was natural for me to think of her. But the vision of Kembra was also subconscious. Something about the bright colors of the flowers and the foliage contrasting with the dark water brought to mind the graphic quality of Kembra as her Karen Black persona, which as a kind of archetype fulfills some part of me, addressing the darkness that comes with extreme beauty, like Japanese Kabuki.

J.H.: Speaking of which, Kembra, I love your description of the trees making phantom sounds like the Matterhorn ride at Disneyland. It conjures the same fantastical mix of artifice and mysticism that both the garden and your Karen Black persona do. There's an almost creepy synergy in the way the latter's presence activates the landscape in the photos. How much were you directed by E.V. and how much came from you?

Pfahler: I felt like I made an indentation in the garden, like a ding [in a surfboard]. I don't know if I charged anything up, but it certainly charged me up. We had to shoot when the garden was closed to the public, either starting at 5am or at night after the visitors had left, so the schedule was Olympic. I get into a sort of tireless blackout, wearing my costume, and it was easy to do by the reflecting ponds because they are very black—you never think of them as being so black, so hypnotizing. E.V. did have a specific vision about placement because she knew about the history of the reflections in the pools, and how Monet painted the changing light so meticulously. She's not usually a photographer with models per se, and she had a very quiet way about suggesting my movement. I tend to freestyle a lot, striking poses as fast as blinking, so it's a challenge to slow down and let the costume do all of the work. I felt like being angular somehow, arms taught and militaristic, very serious. I like the way that looks when I am in full drag. It's an anticamp stance: So serious it's funny.



Dean Mayo Davies, 'E.V. Day and Kembra Pfahler: GIVERNY'

DAZED, 30 March 2012

The NY-based artist invites the Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black performer to Monet's iconic garden.

Kembra Pfahler is the artist and rock musician known for her alter-ego project The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black; a naked, painted and patent-booted powerbabe with giant hair and deep vocal roar. E.V. Day is the installation artist and sculptor exploring feminism and sexuality, famously exploding couture during one series of work in 1999.

Having collaborated once before, the two creatives unite for GIVERNY, an exhibit at Kathy Grayson's The Hole gallery, featuring Pfahler resplendent in contrast to the surroundings of Monet's famous garden, an immaculate horticultural theme park beyond time where visitors can touch the world of the French impressionist. Unlike the garden, this show is sponsored by Playboy, which Femlin-adoring Kembra is thrilled about. Dazed Digital caught up with the two artists ahead of today's opening in New York.

Dazed Digital: Kembra, can you tell us about your relationship with Playboy? How has Femlin influenced you?

Kembra Pfahler: I've loved Playboy all of my life, they have worked with many important minor to major cultural icons over the decades. Shel Silverstein, Richard Kern, just off the top of my head. It was just serendipity with this show. A couple of years ago Neville Wakefield did a show for Miami during Art Basel, that was called 'Nude as Muse', I met them and told them about the Femlin series I had been working on with Andrew Strasser.

Then last December [Playboy] asked if I could do an event for them and Kathy and I put together a presentation where we showed the Femlin piece and performed live. Kathy Grayson [founder and director of The Hole] is also a girl of Karen Black and features prominently in the Femlin shots – you can see the pictures online at The Hole site. She's really an unusual gallery owner, her vision very far reaching and her enthusiasm with her artists

is courageous and not solely based on commerce and/or social acceptability.

DD: So it was a 'lightbulb moment' in asking them...

Kembra Pfahler: And most importantly we were ready. Artists aren't exactly valued in our culture, we have no ministry of culture and I don't live to please collectors. We are doing this work to have a conversation with other friends and artists in the community and to effect change, to create a new paradigm of visibility to share beauty.

Playboy haven't censored any of our ideas, in fact quite the opposite. It's just like a happy dream come true. To be among women in the magazine that represent one blush of aesthetic and female sexuality is important to me, because the image created by me in the band is not exactly what the general population thinks is pretty girl stuff. We've come up from the underworld to present a new conversation about essentially what is beautiful.

DD: E.V. Day, what drew you to involve Kembra in the project?

E.V. Day: Kembra and I had collaborated once before. When we first met in 2006, she said, "You are E.V. Day, AKA Exploding Couture, right?" referring to my sculpture series. And then she said, "I want to BE Exploding Couture!" Soon after, we made a photo diptych called 'Chanel/Shazam', commissioned by Black Book. I made a suspended sculpture with a vintage Chanel power-suit, which Kembra posed inside of so it appeared that Karen Black was bursting out of the suit, like a superhero that just transitioned into costume.

I realise that the Giverny project with Kembra also involves a historic French icon, so Coco and Monet, but that wasn't really intentional. It was just that on my first visit to the garden upon arriving in Giverny, I had a vision of Kembra inhabiting that space and thought: I need to make this happen. And then three months later, it did!



DD: What do you admire about her?

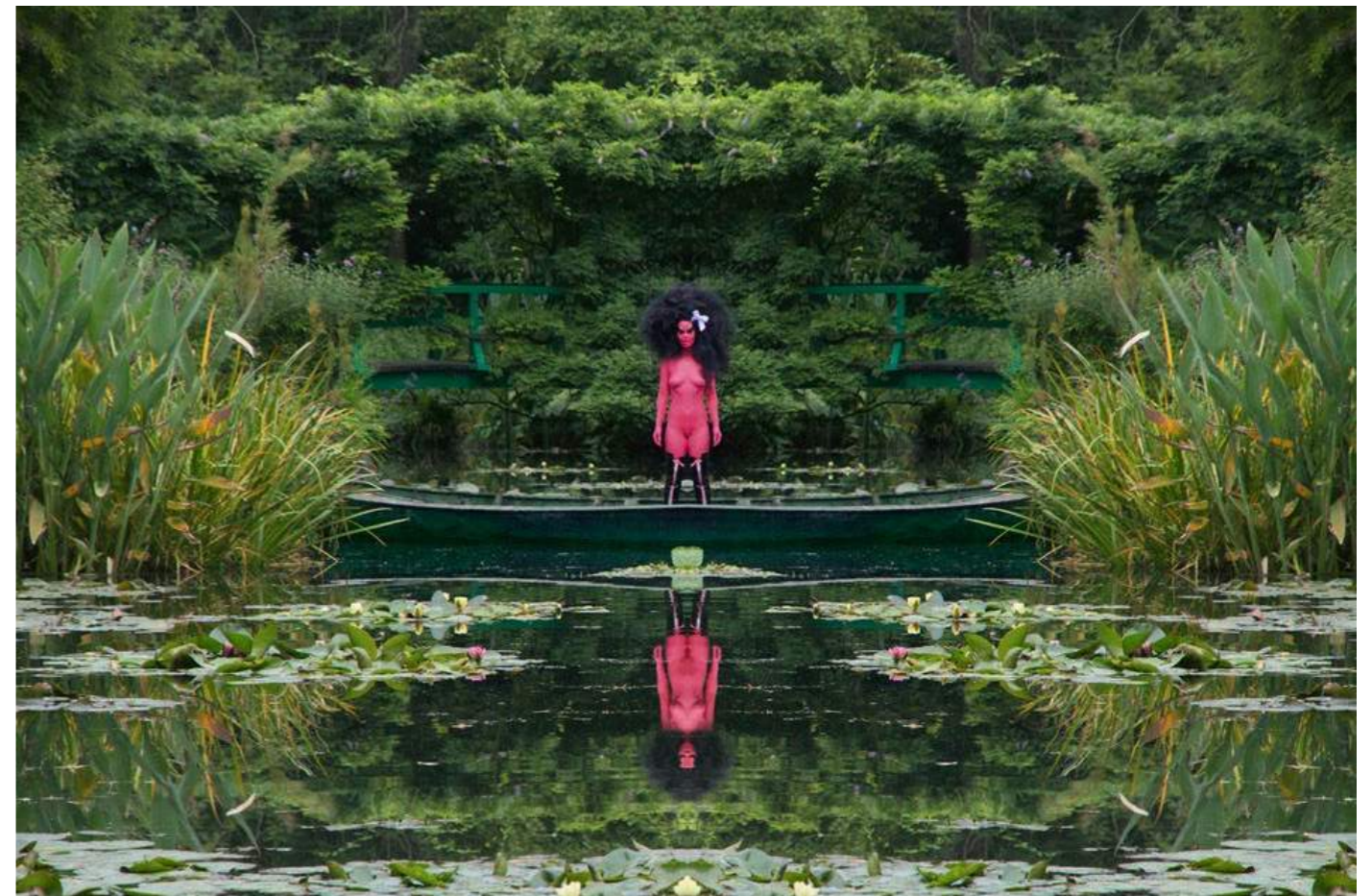
E.V. Day: What I admire about Kembra – and the archetype she created, Karen Black – is that she explores the darkness that comes with extreme beauty, without losing sight of the humour in there, too. Plus, Kembra is about the sweetest person I ever met – except when she's hungry and in the back of a tiny Renault that's lost in Paris traffic.

DD: You shot the series in August, the busiest period at Giverny. How did the public react to the performance?

E.V. Day: That's a funny story. As artist-in-residence, I had 24/7 access to the garden, so we shot after the thousands of tourists had left for the afternoon. We were the only people in Monet's iconic water lily pond, with total privacy, perfect serenity, and then Kembra said she felt so awkward without an audience! So we found some of the gardeners spying on us in the bushes and let them take pictures posing with her. Also, on the way to the garden, Kembra wore a robe over her Karen Black costume, so we turned heads as she strode down Rue Claude Monet! We have a great picture of that in the exhibition as well.

Kembra Pfahler: I find that when your motives are very clear, it sets the tone for how people treat you. The gardeners there were so happy to see the costume juxtaposed with the verdancy of the garden – we got nothing but kindness from those we encountered. It was our intention to spread joy and it was contagious. So we didn't come into any harmful objections from anyone.

GIVERNY by E.V. Day and Kembra Pfahler runs from March 30th – April 24th 2012 at The Hole, 312 Bowery, New York, NY 10012



Jacquelyn Gallo, "'The Wall of Vagina' at (where else?) The Hole'

ArtCritical, 27 June 2011

Just one day after NYC's monumental Gay Pride Parade, the flag shed its cloth and lent its colors to an evening of naked horror. A sizable crowd of sexy misfits gathered Monday night at Bowery's newest venue, The Hole, for a brief yet remarkable piece, *The Wall of Vagina*, a rare performance by The Girls of Karen Black (GOKB).

Prior to the highly anticipated performance, the bare breasted GOKB cavorted under bright scrutiny of the gallery's 7-11-style fluorescent lighting, mingling with guests while painted head to toe in either red, blue or purple and sporting thigh high stiletto boots, a towering red-glittered black bouffant wig and an occasional pair of black undies. In contrast to the typical NYC "whaddya lookin' at!" attitude, these stylish shock monsters welcomed the gaze of curious ogles. One fellow crouched behind a GOKB to take a close up snap of her crack. After the admirer gained her attention from a light tap on the back, she giggled and nodded in approval at the photo as her vanished lips widened, exposing a mouth full of painted-upon crushed black teeth. A blend of Alejandro Jodorowsky and John Waters, the scene was a refreshing mix of sex, camp and horror.

Eventually the lights lowered and the sweaty crowd swiftly gathered towards a platform, constructed specially for the performance. Cell phone cams quickly shot up to catch the unique event (I had a partial-view seat between a Nokia and an iPhone) as the ladies strutted through the audience onto the stage. Photographer, video artist and GOKB member Bijoux Altamirano photographed from below as five ladies (the highest pileup to date) climbed one by one facedown, spread eagle on top of each other, exposing their colored cheeks and shaven cherryless pits to the audience, last one on being the much adored Kembra Pfahler (lead singer of *The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black* from which the GOKB and their newest transgender member, Siobhan Meow, are recruited).

The remaining member on stage leaned over and squirted the crack pile with a turkey baster filled

with thick white cream. Immediately, the arching spurts of goo beautifully married ideas of infection and sexuality, a delicious combo. Pfahler, who prefers the more delineative titles *Anti-naturalist* and *Availabist* to commonly used "performance artist" (rejecting the title, she believes "performance art" should rather be called "_____"), explains a bit of the comical yet purposefully disgusting intention behind "The Wall of Vagina", "It's important to have a different paradigm...we're making fun of female sexuality." And her well orchestrated rejections to standards of feminine beauty and seductiveness resonate even during quiet moments of the act as the women stood still, horrifying, wide-eyed and robotic, conjuring semblance to an army of demonic inflatable sex dolls.

The attentive crowd cheered as the ladies unpiled, knelt down on one knee and raised their hands high in the air, an appropriate bow from so glorious a group. And just like that, they trotted right out the door and the simple and saturated gesture was over. As it was a loosely enforced invite-only event, I assume a good portion of the audience were fans who had a general sense of what to expect, so I was happy to see the brief resplendent horror satisfy their eager expectancy.

After the show, the ladies ventured back in the gallery posing for pictures while straddling one of their own handmade sculptures...real art on art action! The piece, a larger than life black cat, meshed well with the gallery's current exhibition, simply titled "(:)" A colorful playground of inflatable beings and cartoonish sculptures, the first NYC solo show by Miami duo FriendsWithYou provided a nice backdrop to the fun and playful feel of the night as well as setting precedent for what will fill The Hole in the future.

In keeping with its Soho predecessor, the sensational Deitch Projects, The Hole is a charming antidote to the usual hoity-toity gallery vibe. "I want to provide a space for all of us," proprietor Kathy Grayson, a former director of Deitch, tells me, "and that includes the big community of people displaced by Deitch closing and all these great young

artists that are part of my network... I mean to stick by those guys and continue to present great works by them." Pfahler, whose latest album "Fuck Island" will be released this October, described Grayson as, "...heroic and very intelligent, a huge talent." Defibrillators of our time, these ladies are set on shocking the pulse back into Manhattan.

By the end of the night, happy attendees piled onto the streets bearing residual bits of glitter and colorful streaks. The brevity of the actual performance made the mixing and mingling of the unique personas seem as much a part of the event as the actual performance. Personally, my love for the city has always been about these brief, fantastic moments where a varied crowd can come together and pay witness to the joy and horror of it all. Please excuse their beauty.



Performance of "The Wall of Vagina" by the Girls of Karen Black, The Hole, New York, Monday, June 27, 2011. Photo by Rosalie Knox

EMA

LIN

EMA

LIN

Trinie Dalton, 'Kembra Pfahler'
Whitney Biennial, March 2008

Kembra Pfahler: Born 1961 in Hermosa Beach, California; lives in New York, New York. The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black: Formed 1990 in New York, New York, by Kembra Pfahler and Samoa

Kembra Pfahler is the woman behind The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black, a theatrical rock group that links a hideous monster aesthetic to a dark, hysterical feminine archetype. Named in honor of cult horror film heroine Karen Black, Pfahler's band performs heavy-bottomed punk-metal songs amid elaborate hand-constructed sets where she engages an animalistic, fetishistic practice of acting out transgressive physical feats. Pfahler's stage persona has been described as a dominant "lady devil" who relishes destroying notions of female beauty rooted in purity and innocence. Wearing a teased black bouffant wig with blacked-out teeth, black stiletto boots, and black underwear, her nude body painted blue, pink, or yellow, Pfahler heads a team of ladies appointed in similar campy glamour while male band members including her ex-husband, Samoa, maintain masculine rockabilly stylings.

Pfahler and Samoa formed The Voluptuous Horror in 1990 after ten years of making Super 8 horror films and visual and performance art that they felt would benefit from a musical soundtrack, looking to Viennese Actionists Hermann Nitsch, Otto Mühl, and Rudolf Schwarzkogler as original influences. Rebelling against a degraded, polluted world, Pfahler developed an "anti-naturalism" platform on which to promote VHOKB reflecting their desire to reveal the attraction of repulsion. The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black fashion their props and sets from low-tech, readily accessible materials under the rubric of Pfahler's theory of Availablism, creating structural items and costumes such as ladybug and flower head uniforms as visual accompaniments to their songs. For Chopsley (1996), an oversize animal trap controlled by a female band member snaps open and shut on Pfahler as she sings about a "rabid bikini model." In a 2006 performance at New York's Deitch Projects, The Sound of Magic, band members danced with Mylar-covered boards shaped like giant razor

blades and shark heads before a backdrop of starkly striped paintings. Members Pfahler, Samoa, Adam Cardone, Magal, Adam Pfahler, Dave Weston, and Karen Black Girls Bijoux Altamirano, Alice Moy, Anne Hanavan, Jackie Rivera, Laure Leber, and Armen Ra writhe and jump throughout these ritualized ceremonies-cum-rock shows.

KEMBRA PFAHLER

Kembra Pfahler is a rock star, wrestler, fetish film star, Calvin Klein model and mastermind behind the legendary freak show known as *The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black*. By the time I arrived in New York City at the end of 1984, she was already quite well known in East Village hipster circles. Famous even. Part of the landscape you might say. Her strange, often bewildering, and always notorious performances were staged at clubs like 8BC, ABC No Rio and The Pyramid Club, which was across the street from where I then lived, on Seventh Street and Avenue A, so I often saw her shows. Articles appeared about her in underground magazines where she discussed her artistic manifestos of "Availabism" and "Anti-Naturalism" or mentioned that she had not a single fork, knife, spoon, plate or even cup in her apartment.¹⁹ The local artsy video emporium, Kim's Video, rented the unusual art films she'd directed and ones that she'd been in, such as Nick Zedd's *War is Menstrual Envy* and various shorts done with Richard Kern, including the infamous *Sewing Circle*, the one where she has her vagina sewn shut. A few years later, that same store started stocking dozens of almost surrealistic fetish films she seemed to be cranking out weekly. All in all, it was confusing. Observers and admirers of her work were kept guessing. I certainly was. Even though I've long been fascinated with her work, I confess I often left her performances wondering, "Why would someone do that?" Looking back on it, I suppose that was the point!

It's difficult to get across these days just how *odd* Kembra looked back then. No one looked like she did and I mean *no one*. She really stood out walking down the street. Certainly she was foxy but she was homicidal looking, too! I used to think of her as a Black Widow spider because of the fearsome way she presented herself: like the hourglass figure on the back of a Black Widow, if her looks weren't a warning to *stay the fuck away*, I don't know what was! I saw it also in how she went about her performances, calculating every movement, building a web, bit by bit, performance by performance, of an overall experience and visual language. Perhaps she sees herself in this way, too, as she certainly uses a lot of spider imagery.

Despite the fact that we lived in the same neighborhood and have many of the same friends, I'd actually never met Kembra. It wasn't until after Ann Magnuson and I watched her *Wall of Vagina* performance at Anthology Film Archives (an event fêting artist Hermann Nitsch) in open-mouthed astonishment and I was starting to plan the Disinfo.Con that we finally did meet up and we've been great friends ever since.

Kembra's Disinfo.Con performance—a reprise of *The Wall of Vagina* piece—floored everyone present. On a day that is legendary for its weirdness, Kembra took top honors. Watching it from the side of the stage, a highly amused Robert Anton Wilson turned to me and asked "You want me to follow THAT?" and he referred to the piece several times during his speech.

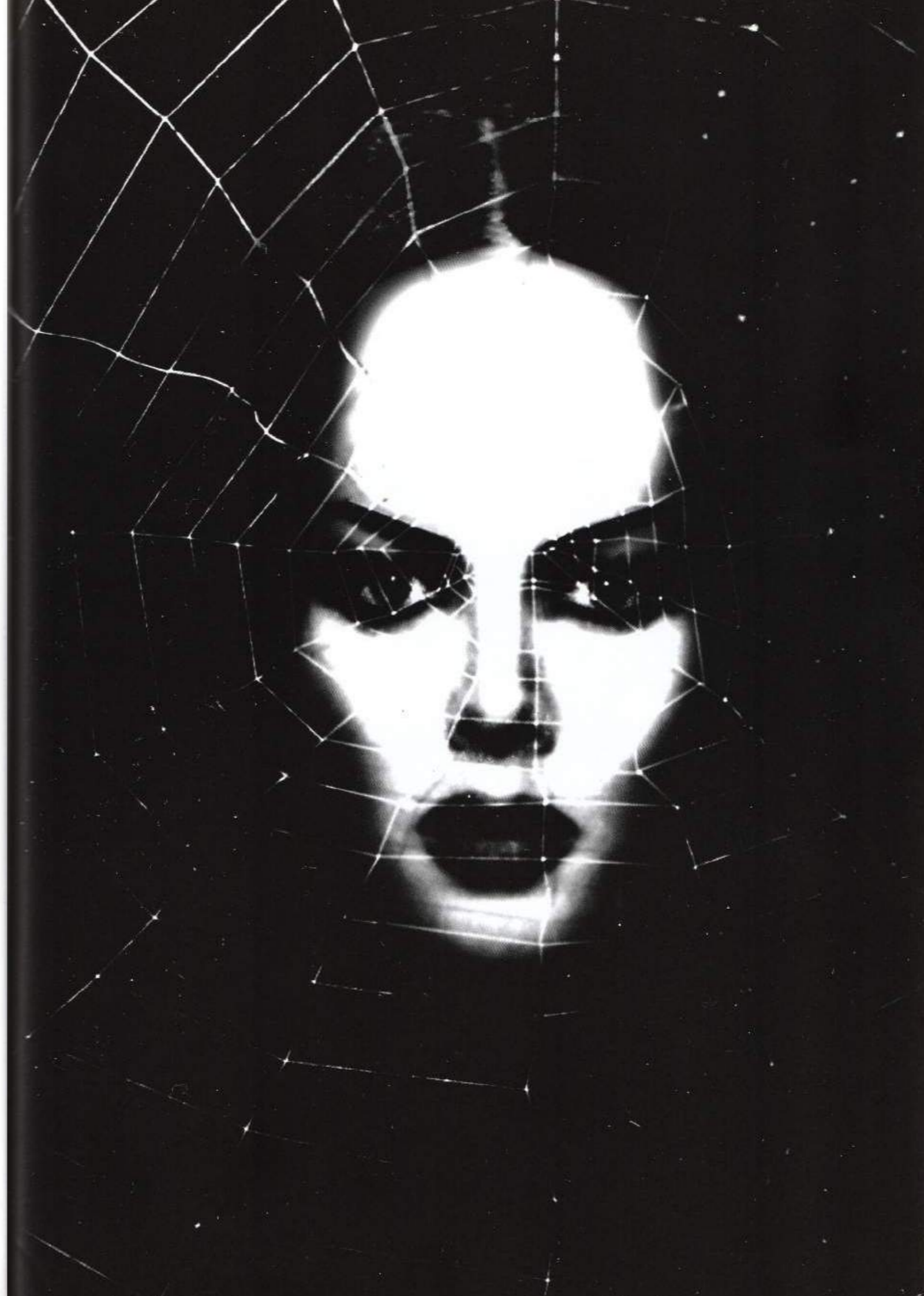
Don't tell anyone, but Kembra's a real sweetheart. She's not at all the homicidal maniac I'd made her out to be. She's actually really nice. Really, *really* nice... which is not to say she couldn't turn homicidal in a heartbeat if a situation warranted it!

When I did the following interview, I went in armed with questions that I hoped would coax out of her the story of how a strange little girl from a Los Angeles beach suburb found happiness and voluptuous horror in the big city.

RM: Was there a significant event or turning point in your childhood?

KP: I grew up in a small surfing town in Southern California and I guess my household was a little *unusual*. My grandmother was kind of the town... *wild woman* and she used to come into my room at night when I was asleep and tell me stories like "Your mother and your aunt went swimming off the Hermosa Beach pier and they were eaten by sharks." They were fantastic and she provided me with the fodder for what was later to become my interest in horror.

All the other kids were swimming and tanning and I used to like to watch horror films, like the Universal horror films. And I always admired the great black-haired ladies of horror like Barbara Steele and Karen Black. Karen Black made some incredible films in the 1970's that I was very inspired by. I felt like when I watched her in her films, I couldn't take my eyes off the screen. She was very strange looking, beautiful and horrifying at the same time. And one movie in particular, *Trilogy of Terror*, was very inspiring to me. I used to spend my days bicycling down to the movie theater where they'd show films and it was



a great escape and it was something that formed the artistic vocabulary that I'm still using today.

My mother was very artistic and very fashionable, and she used to make costumes for me, some of the costumes that I use to this day, like the big flower heads that I use in my band in Karen Black, my mother had actually designed that for me when I was a child... I guess I was very lucky to have a lot of artistic encouragement. My mother would also tell me that I was very special and that I was going to grow up to be a great person.

Later, I found out that in the nursery school that I attended, the Virginia McMartin School, there was a big scandal about child molestation and allegedly the teachers belonged to a satanic cult. It was all over the press for a few years in the United States. I was kind of excited. I thought does this have something to do with my obsession with horror and my darker thoughts, but unfortunately I truly believe that this was just a kind of witch-hunt that was created by the neighbors in the South Bay, but I did attend this nursery school where I was nurtured by alleged child molesters and Satan worshipers! (Laughs).

RM: So unfortunately as a child you were never involved in any satanic abuse?

KP: Yeah. *Unfortunately.*

RM: How did the other kids in Hermosa Beach react to you? My visual image of you as a little girl is of a Wednesday Addams-type character running around in the midst of beach culture. Did people think that you were a freak in your hometown?

KP: No, not really, they didn't, because my father was a very well known surfer and back in those days the surfers were revered as gods almost. My father made a famous surfing film with Bruce Brown called *Slippery When Wet* so every place that I went as a child it was like the red carpet was rolled out which I think might have overblown my ego a little bit

because I really did feel like I was a surf aristocrat somehow. I got to go to special places and I got to travel up and down the coast of California with my father surfing, but no, I wasn't really viewed as a freak. I had a few behavioral disorders, only because I was extremely bored as a child.

But growing up on the beach with this kind of one singular archetype available to me—the sun bathing beauty queen—I just didn't feel like that internally and I didn't resemble anything like a surfer on the outside.

RM: At what point did what would later become your performance art start to germinate in your mind?

KP: I had been hospitalized from a gymnastics accident and I had basically mutilated my elbow so that I couldn't move for months and months on end. I just remember spending a lot of time very isolated and I started having strange thoughts, sort of thoughts of mythological proportion. I thought of ways to manifest these

thoughts as well. I started thinking about making movies and doing performances.

I was pretty much left on my own and I suppose my mind just exploded, thankfully, and I got the itch to move to New York City and reinvent myself. So it happened when I was a teen-ager, like 15 or 16-years old. I was going to a lot of punk rock shows in Los Angeles, seeing bands like The Screamers and The Cramps and more of the theatrical rock bands who were playing in Hollywood. Me and my friends would hitchhike to Hollywood to see these bands and that whole scene was very encouraging of people to express themselves very individualistically. It was one of the first times that I felt like my appearance and my behavior was applauded rather than spat on. I was really nurtured by those people, by those older punk rockers in Los Angeles.

But from an early age, I always strayed from doing what I saw other people doing, like I didn't want to grow up to be in a punk rock band like those that I was seeing. I wanted to reach for something else and that's why I came to New York. I stayed away from music and bands just because I thought that paradigm was so complete and it was so well done by so many others.

RM: Aside from the punk rock, what other kind of influences went into informing your rather singular aesthetic?

KP: I was really deprived of any kind of access to European history when I was growing up so I had this desire to go to Europe, Germany specifically. I stayed in Munich, Bavaria for a while and I also visited Vienna, Austria where I saw for the first time pictures from the Vienna Action Group. They were Rudolph Schwarzkogler pictures; Otto Muehl and Hermann Nitsch, and those were some of the most intense pictures that I'd ever seen in my life. The Vienna Action Group was a group of extreme artists doing strange body mutilations, paintings and performances, in and around Vienna after World War II. Vienna was a very strange city, you know. It was so different, obviously, to what I was exposed to in Los Angeles.

I really identified with Schwarzkogler's body mutilations. They were very well composed and they were extremely violent. They were also very beautiful. The use of the body was very beautiful, I thought.

I really liked their work, I think, because of all of the history that I'd had with the body growing up in Southern California and always having to be so body conscious and always hating that so much. You know like "Oh, when you grow up you know you're going to be so pretty" and "If you just lose five more pounds and dye your hair blond." People were always inflicting their opinions on me as a young girl saying things like "Oh, you're going to be so pretty if you just do this..."

I grew up being extremely, um, *body dismorphic*, I guess you'd say, with these people and their opinions on me about my body and about my appearance. I always hated that so much. I'd get this running commentary in Los Angeles: "Lose five more pounds, you might get to be on TV." I never asked for that kind of input at all, it was just something that was thrown on me and it was so great to see those Schwarzkogler pictures with him wrapped in bandages and just like



Young Kembra, top right, with Virginia McMartin.

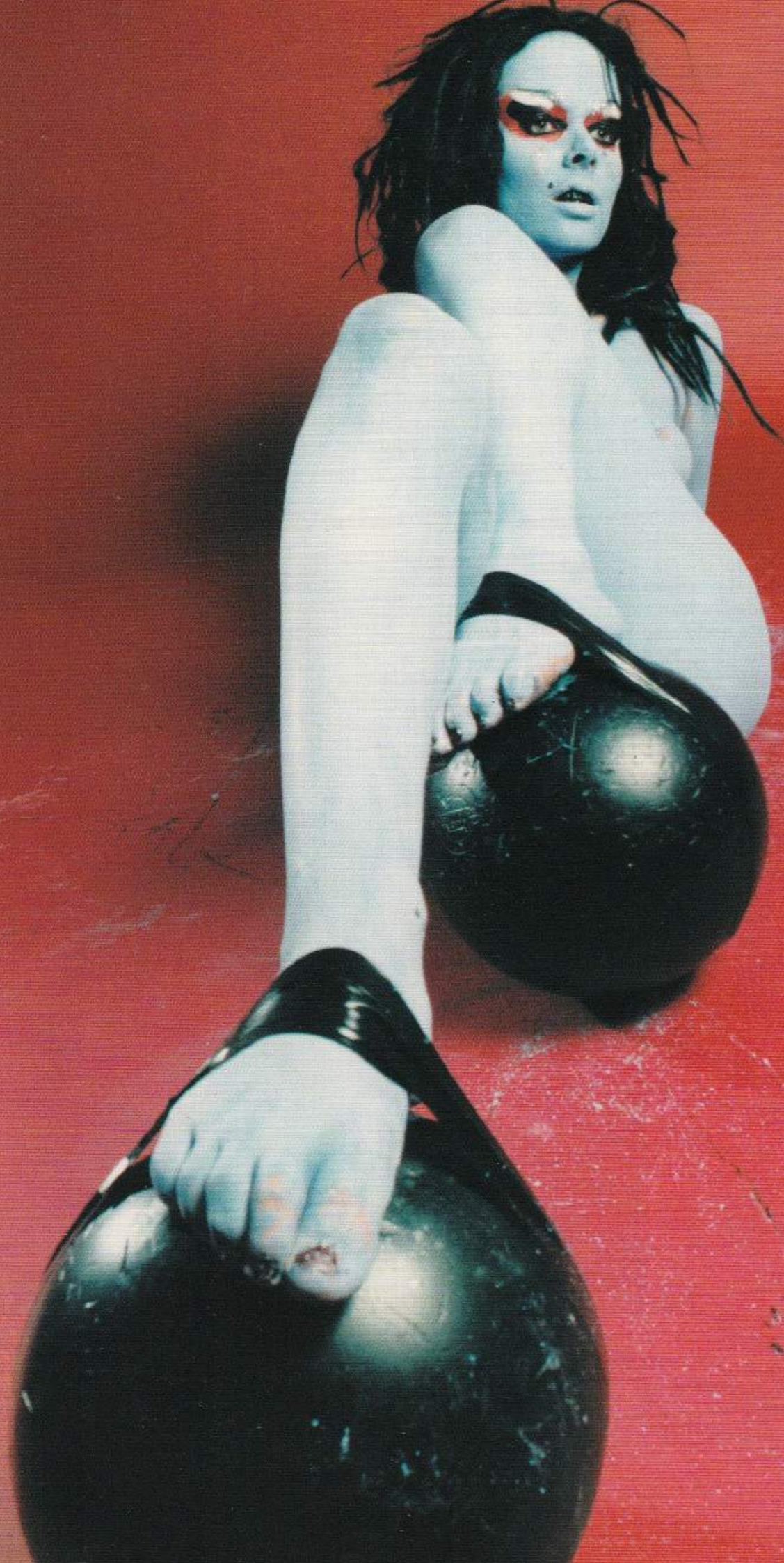
(Preceding page) Photo: Scott Ewalt



Stills from *The Blue Banshee*. Director, Mike Kuchar



¹⁸ This is true to this day. Her apartment is also painted brick red; all of it! Every single surface in the place is brick red. The sink, the floor, the countertops, everything!



doing insane things to his body, turning this kind of pain into a beautiful picture.

I spent about a year in Germany and when I came back I moved to New York and I started some of the first performances then.

RM: When you moved to New York what was it like then?

KP: In 1979, New York City was, of course, a *little bit different* than it is now. The Lower East Side was very rundown. There were a lot of burnt out buildings and it was a very undesirable place to live. I guess that film *Sid & Nancy* had a lot of scenes of people lining up to buy drugs and so forth outside of abandoned buildings. It looked quite different then, than it does now.

There was a community of performers and places to do performances like the Pyramid Club. It was the kind of place that you could go and ask for a booking because you had an outlandish idea and you could do it the following week and show it to your friends.

That kind of place really doesn't exist so much anymore. The city's been extremely renovated and I think a lot of the youth culture just can't afford to come here and live anymore. But back then there were a lot of young people and we were doing shows and running the clubs.

There were also a lot of incredible legends around town too. Jack Smith lived on First Avenue, the great filmmaker, and Quentin Crisp was in the neighborhood. Allen Ginsberg, too. There were a lot of people from like the 60's who still lived here, so it was a really good time to be in New York. I got an apartment for a couple of hundred dollars and that enabled me to be able to do a lot of artwork and shows.

RM: Describe some of your earliest performance art pieces.

KP: I guess the first performance art piece that I did was the egg piece where I stood on my head and had the egg cracked on my vulva. That was one of the first pieces that I ever did. It was at a club called Armageddon, which was on Jane Street on the West Side. There was a raucous, violent crowd there and they were throwing bottles and screaming and yelling. It was really terrifying to be naked in front of this gawking crowd of drunk, artistic types of people. I also started doing a piece where I walk on top of bowling balls. I strap bowling balls to my feet and walk on them. That had come from this drawing that I'd seen in Austria by Hans Bellmer, a drawing of a witch that had been persecuted. They used to torture these people by affixing balls to their feet. I found bowling balls one afternoon walking home and I taped them to my feet in my performance.

I started doing the costume, *Abra Cadaver*, which is the one where I tie the strings to my labia and sort of quack like a duck... that's a good one... I feel like I look sort of like a moth with my arms outstretched attached to my labia like this. (Gestures) That was a real hit and that was a costume that I also brought into Karen Black in the later years.

I also did nude car modeling. I liked to dress up in my monster costume and lie on the hoods of cars. In a strange way, that had the same kind of symmetry that standing on my head with my legs open cracking an egg on my vulva. It made a lot of sense to me, somehow, as far as that being a letter in the alphabet of my artwork and the vocabulary that I was building. The composition is very important to me. Shapes. The lines from different poses that I strike in my performances. All of the things that I took into my band, I was developing in the 80's, in my apartment here, using "Availabism," the movement that I made up which is *making the best use of what is available*.

I was basically doing like one performance a month and we also went to Europe



(Opposite) Photo: Richard Kern

(This page) Stills from *Chopsley: Rabid Bikini Model*



The Egg Piece



around 1985 with a group called the Oroboro Ensemble. That was with Samoa, my partner and collaborator at the time and a violinist. We were in our early 20's and we convinced all these great music halls to hire us and let us come in and do our performance art. We had a great time. We were in London. We went to Spain. I was doing the egg piece at that time, but it was a very raw version of it, a very undressed, unglamorous version of the egg piece that you know...

RM: A raw egg piece?

KP: That's right. (Laughs).

RM: It's funny hearing you describe things that I saw you do back then. I remember thinking "Where is she pulling this from? What dark crevice of her mind would inspire her to crack an egg on her vagina?" And now I know it was because it was *there*. I think I understand you a lot better now...

KP: (Laughs) Well, I'm a staunch minimalist, but also it's really trying to find some kind of beauty and transformation with everyday objects that are just around as well. Yes, the reason I did that piece was because I was employing Availabism — making the best use of what's available— and I was staying in some rotten apartment on the Lower East Side and someone invited me to do a performance piece and I had three minutes to do it. There was an egg in the refrigerator and you know it just seemed like the perfect thing to do to stand on my head and have someone crack an egg on my vulva. *There was really nothing else to do with an egg.* I wanted to make an incredible picture and so that's what I did.

RM: Tell me about meeting Samoa. I take it that the two of you must've really spurred each other on.

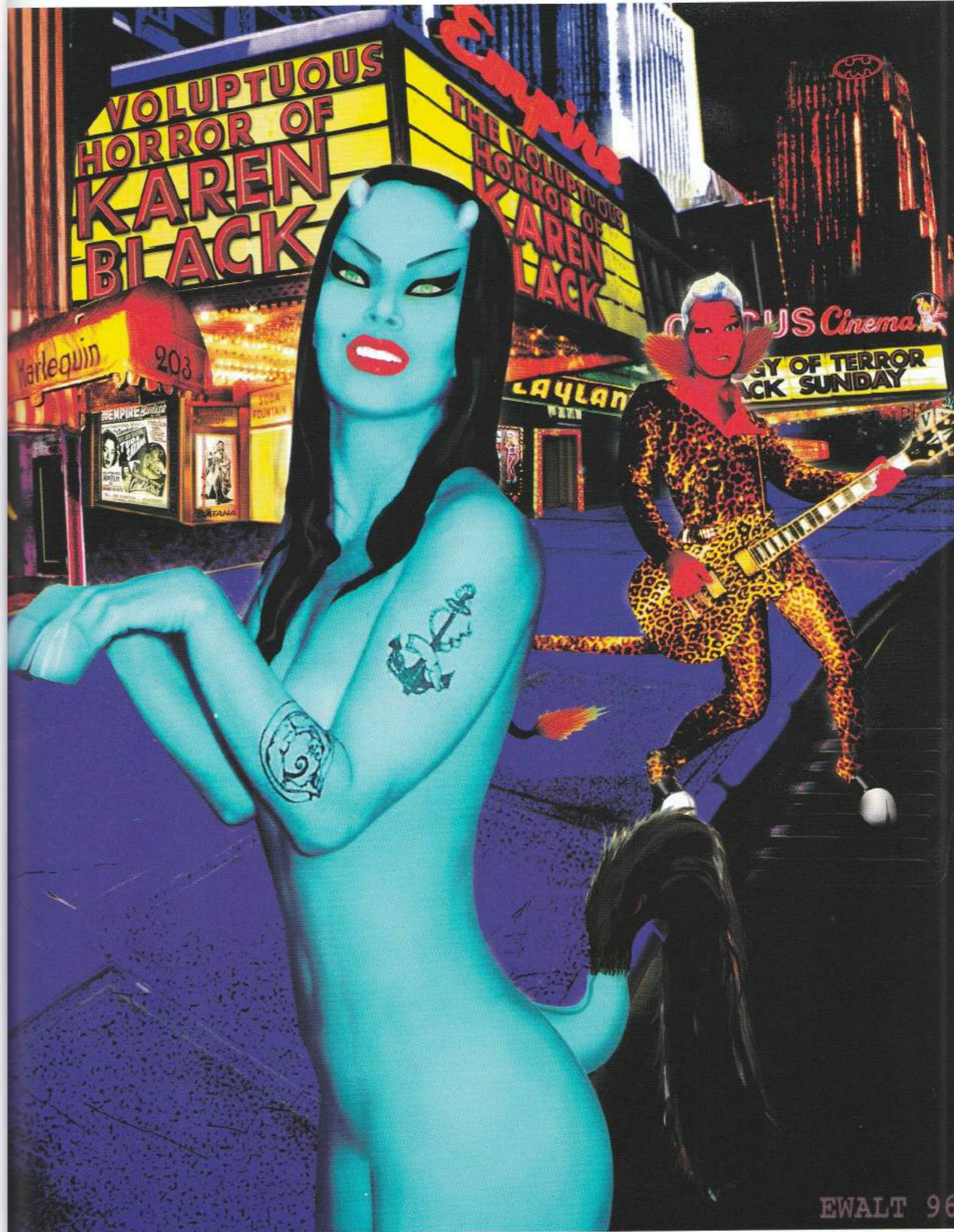
KP: To say the least! Samoa originally came from Hiroshima, Japan and he had a background in theater. He was on television as a young boy. He taught me about Noh plays and about Kabuki. I learned about Japanese literature from him and all of these incredible things. We had such a strange parallel existence going on: he was at home in Hiroshima listening to Grand Funk Railroad and I was home in Southern California painting Kabuki eye make-up, trying to commit Hara-Kiri and doing strange things. I wasn't even aware of why I was coming up with these things. It was a tremendous affirmation to meet Samoa and we started working together when we were in our early 20's doing films and performances on the Lower East Side of New York.

RM: In the 80's there was a very vibrant underground film scene in New York and you were a big part of that. What were the projects that you were working on in film at that time?

KP: We were getting so frustrated that everyone else was always documenting our performances and we never had any footage of our very own artwork, so we wanted to film our own performances and that's how we started making films, just filming the performances that we did. There were people like Bradley Eros and Nick Zedd and Richard Kern on the scene then and I offered my acting skills to other directors during that time. I had people be in my films so I felt

Kembra and Samoa
Photo: Michael Lavine

(Opposite page) Karen Black poster by
Scott Ewalt



EWALT 96

like it was just part of the exchange to offer my services as an actor in their films. I think that I'm a terrible actress and my school of acting I decided to call "Anti-Naturalism," which is the opposite of method acting. With method acting, you're drawing from real experiences and exuding honest emotion. *Anti-Naturalism* was more like having a cartoon character emerge and being essentially totally fake.

RM: It's kind of like drag queen acting?

KP: Dolly Parton is an Anti-Naturalist. Marlon Brando is an Anti-Naturalist, too. I read in his book that he would read lines off of the person in front of him when he was making films. He felt very strongly that you didn't need to be a method actor and that spontaneity and *unnaturalness* was just as provocative and interesting on film if you had the magic. Anyways, film being something so totally artificial, it seemed totally natural to be anti-natural...

RM: What sort of day jobs have you held when you were pursuing your career goals?

KP: For a long time I was very unemployable. I refused to change my appearance and I refused to work a regular job. Mostly I couldn't *get* a regular job because of my appearance. It was not fashionable yet to look like you poured a bottle of black ink on your head with your make-up melting off of your face, it wasn't high fashion yet to do that and I couldn't get a job. But I did procure some extra work from a porno kingpin out in Queens, New York. First I started doing the sets for his porno films in this film studio. They stopped making porno films with film — using regular film— and they started shooting them on video, so they were doing them one after the other. I somehow found myself working in this studio doing the sets and because of my appearance and my make-up and my demeanor they thought that I might be good playing a dominatrix in some fetish films.

And because they did these films so rapidly, there was never a script, but I was quite good at coming up with improvisational skits, so I got hired to be a fetish film star. I had as much interest in doing those films as I as I probably would have had doing another kind of day job. I made up skits like "The Sadistic Hair Salon" where I was a sadistic hairdresser and I'd have to beat up all the guys. I didn't have a problem beating people up. I thought it was very humorous actually. It was more fun than a regular job, that's for sure.

I made like 50 fetish films and got to go to the porno awards ceremony that they have in Las Vegas. Suddenly I found myself in the midst of all these famous porno stars. I was like the 105lb, emaciated wreck from New York who had, by accident, landed herself a table signing autographs at the adult film convention.

And from making those connections with those fetish film people, I was able to make some of my own films. I started to write and direct my own art films, I suppose you could call them, but they were made under the auspices of pornography. The content would be "The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black" or images that were in my performance art but on the box covers they would be described as "hot thrilling girl-on-girl action," things like that, totally unrelated to the actual descriptions of my films. I made *Punk Ladies of Wrestling* or P.L.O.W., which is my wrestling federation. My specialty as a dominatrix in the fetish films was always wrestling and my tactic was the surprise element. I would just take a running jump and throw myself on these poor unsuspecting people!

I was a terrible fetish film star in that I made a lot of boo-boos. I made errors, breaking the rules of Sado-Masochism, which is a very conventional paradigm: the red, the black, a type of heel, the whole vocabulary of S/M, I strayed from.

The film work enabled me to continue with "The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black"



The Wall of Vagina at Disinfo.Con

(Opposite page) Photo: Bruce LaBruce





because essentially we were unsupported by the music industry the entire length of our career. Doing the fetish films sponsored ten tours across the United States.

RM: Take me through the history of "The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black."

KP: "Karen Black" started around 1990 and basically what we wanted to do was score our own performances and our own films, so we decided that we were going to play rock and roll music. We got a band together and started rehearsing every day. Samoa played guitar. I was writing the lyrics and I began singing, which was something I had never done in my films and performances. I was always afraid of the microphone. I was afraid to sing. But around 1990, I had a near death accident where I was savagely beaten up on the Lower East Side. I was taken to this abandoned building down by the FDR Drive. I woke up from this and I found myself recuperating in bed, in this very apartment. I was like a zombie lying in bed and *Trilogy of Terror* came on, the movie with Karen Black in three different stories, and it got me into such a great mood for some reason. I had been so scared to death during this attack that when I recovered from it somehow I had like... you know you've heard people say they've "found their voice" or something? It sounds very cheesy but it's true.

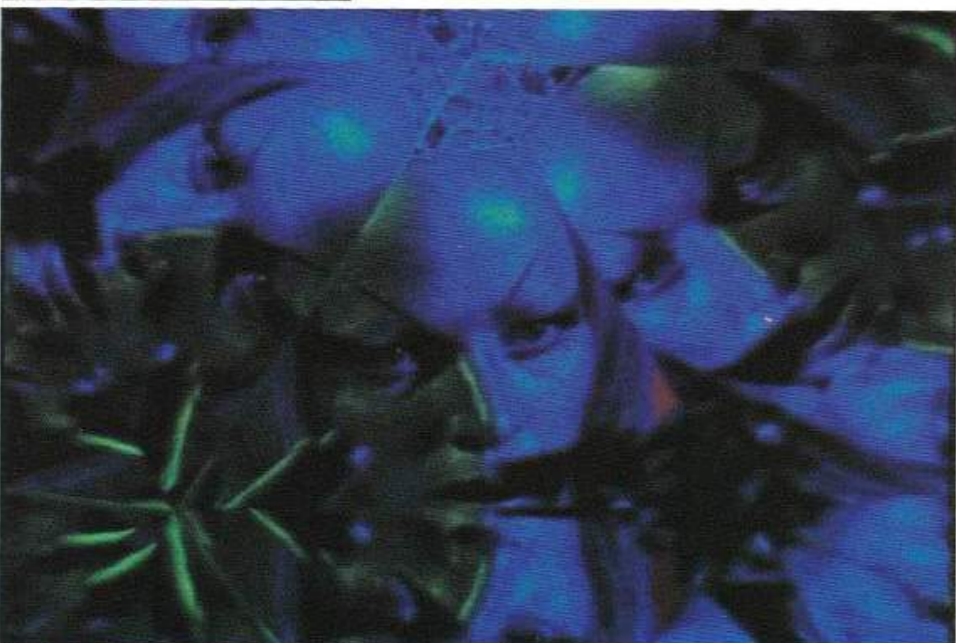
So we decided to combine all of the things that we'd been working on visually with our performance art history and with the costumes that I'd been wearing all of my life since a child and everything sort of merged. We felt like we'd spent ten years doing these strange performances to a very esoteric group of people and we really wanted to make an act that we could take on the road and tour around with.

I went to a classical Chinese opera vocal coach but other than that I didn't really have any vocal training. Being scared to death by this brutal mugging was enough vocal training and I also liked the way my natural voice—or I should say my "anti-natural" voice—sounded. So we started to write songs and each song had a little prop and it had a costume and it had a storyline in it, not unlike the performances that we'd done in the 80's. Everything had a very specific intention. The

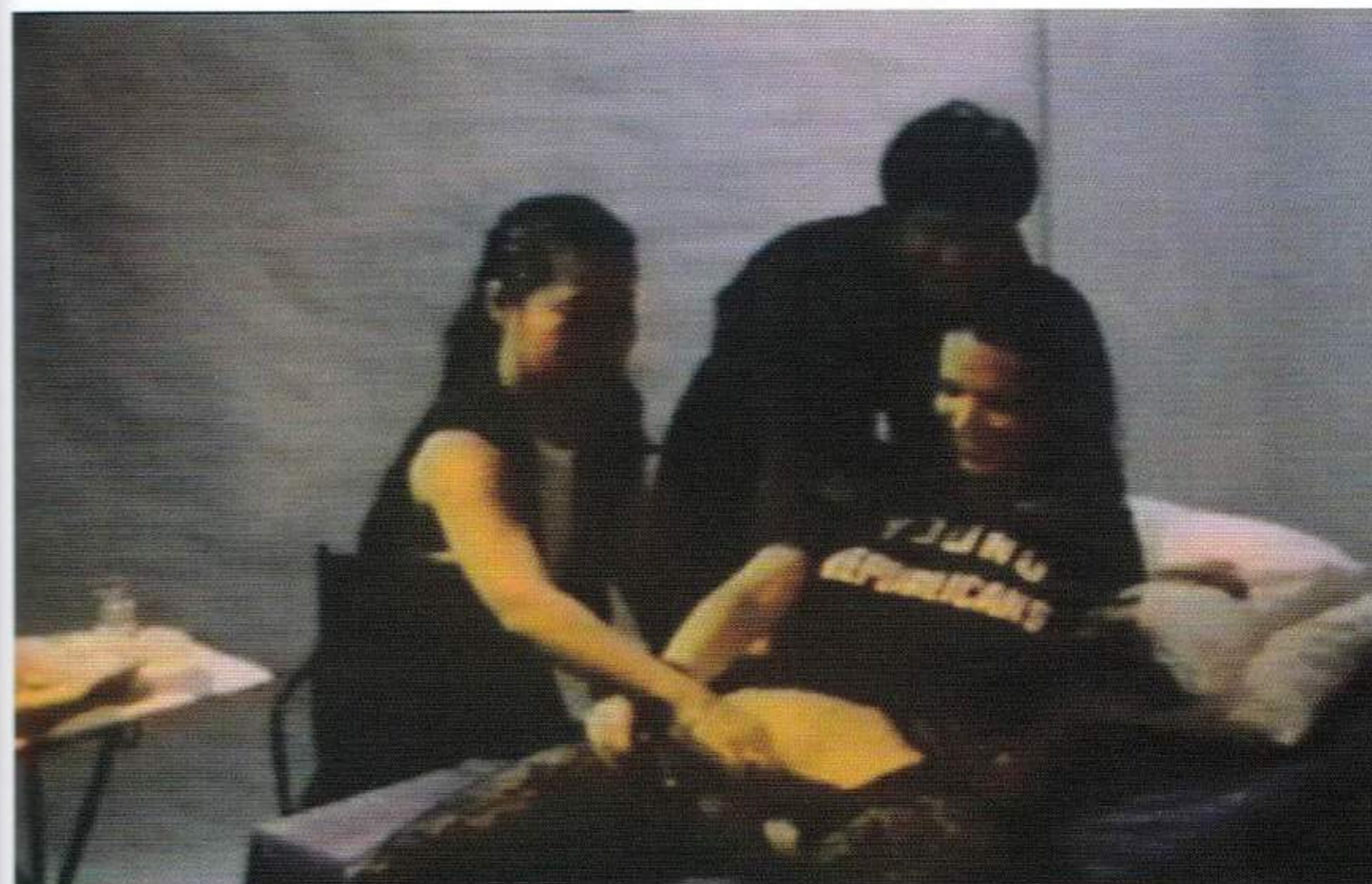
colors were thought out. The props that we used signified something that we were talking about. Even though I'm an Availabist—I make the best use of what's available—there wasn't any randomness, like in a successful magick spell you have specific ingredients that you use to make your point and to make something beautiful.

I always resented that with theatrical rock, everyone would say, "Oh, well what are you going to do? Are you going to swing a dead chicken around? Are you going to swing a rubber chicken?" or "Is there going to be blood," or whatever. There was such a large vocabulary of theatrical rock things that you could do; in "Karen Black" I wanted to stay away from that completely. We wanted to do what we had not seen before.

That was my primary motivation. I wanted to do something that I hadn't seen.



Ferrum 5000. Director, Steve Doughton



Sewing Circle. Director, Richard Kern

SEWING CIRCLE

KP: I made the movie called *Sewing Circle* at a time when I was experiencing a lot of body shame and I was experiencing in my growth as a human being a lot of controversy with other people's feelings about, like, owning my very own body. Like sometimes in love, or something like this, people think that that they own you, that they own your body if they love you. At the time I started doing a lot of extreme body stuff and it was ruining a lot of my personal relationships because everyone was getting so angry with me for like appearing topless in "Karen Black" or exhibiting myself in an extreme fashion and I was so angry about the unacceptance of the loved ones around me that I decided to reclaim my very own body and I sewed my vagina shut.

On the other side of that coin I simply thought that it would look good, which is also basically the sole motivation for why I do things in general. I always thought that to be naked covered in body paint was something that looked very nice.

My mother got very angry with me and she asked me why I sewed my vagina shut and I was trying to imagine what it was like for a mother to have a daughter who does such extreme things to themselves, and I just told my mother that I was very *upset*.





_ CALVIN KLEIN

KP: I was in the Calvin Klein campaign that was called "Heroin Chic" in the press and I thought that was quite funny because basically none of us who were in it were on drugs at all. Well, most of us weren't. (Thinks) *Well I wasn't anyways.* I just happened to be an emaciated wreck.

I got to be on the side of a bus in New York City which I thought was very was ironic because I was always the person for years who people threw rocks at in the neighborhood, who no one would want to get near and all of a sudden I was a high fashion model.

RM: Is it true that the dope dealers on your block named a brand of heroin after you?

KP: Mmm hmm. Yes. Yes, that's true, but it was before that. They named a brand of heroin "Kembra." They did. They did actually, yeah. In the early 80's they named a brand of heroin "Kembra" which I thought was very funny because I used to hear outside of my window, "Kembra's open! Kembra's open!" and that would signify that they were ready to sell the drug, so that was kind of nice.

RM: Quite a compliment!

For information on obtaining the artwork of Kembra Pfahler, contact American Fine Arts Company/Colin De Land Fine Art, 530 West 22nd Street, New York, NY 10011. Phone: +1 212 727 7366

For more information about "The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black," see www.karenblack.com

