

KEMBRA PFAHLER

Selected Press

032c

How to Survive with Kembra Pfahler

JUNE 12, 2024 | VITTORIA DE FRANCHIS

East Village performance queen, pioneering feminist, and fashion muse **Kembra Pfahler** has expanded the boundaries of performance art through provocative interventions at CBGB's in the 1980s and CIRCA's worldwide screens today.



Founder of the glam punk rock band *The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black* and co-initiator of Future Feminism, Pfahler left Los Angeles in the late 70s to "learn to be herself" in New York and eventually became an icon of counterculture. On a sunny afternoon, we sat together at London's Nicoletta Fiorucci Foundation, where she was residing during her 12-week project for CIRCA, *The Manual of Action*, and talked about life philosophies, beauty, nudity, feminism, modeling, and the future.



VITTORIA DE FRANCHIS: *The Manual of Action* is one of the first projects you did in the 80s after moving to New York from Hermosa Beach. It is now being presented as a 12-week course by CIRCA online and on worldwide screens. What is the project's genesis?

KEMBRA PFAHLER: When I moved to New York in 1979, I went to the School of Visual Arts. There, I had two fantastic teachers: Mary Heilmann and Lorraine O'Grady, who taught Surrealism and Dada. It was the first time in my life that I started to learn about art history and methodologies from other generations. In that period, I started being involved with an alternative gallery called ABC No Rio, a space basically given to us to curate. I met my first husband, Samoa [Moriki], and we started curating, doing performances or actions at the gallery. I always wrote about my live performances and drew pictures of them which I started calling "nonfiction illustrations." That was the start of *The Manual of Action*, a way to document and understand what I was doing. It wasn't a directive text or a manifesto. *The Manual of Action* was a way to figure out what my vocabulary was, it was the start of a new language.

VDF: You eventually started teaching your philosophies around "Availabism" – making the best use of what's available – in worldwide art spaces and educational institutions such as Columbia University. Did you envision *The Manual of Action* as a practice that could also help other artists?

KP: I started teaching because other people started asking me to, especially young artists in need of support on how to build things or how to resource things like free art materials and where to work. I shared what I thought was missing in art schools – how to tangibly and psychologically prepare for an artist's life, since they never really tell you what to expect after graduation. I always suggested never to complain or worry about what you don't have and to work towards what you can have. That's availabism. I showed my students the possibilities of how to survive in a difficult city like New York, how to curate performances, how to do bookings in nightclubs or galleries, and how to do proposals for museums. I shared what helped me the most when I started being an artist. In the 80s, I was very lucky to meet people like Jack Smith and Mike Kuchar, who encouraged me to continue doing what I was doing, as there weren't many people doing such extreme work. When I teach, I feel like I am continuing the legacy of support I had and helping other artists find their way.



VDF: Over the past four decades, you have been part of and led various collective projects, such as *Transgression Cinema*, *The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black*, and *Future Feminism*. How did your community come together?

KP: When I was in Los Angeles, I was part of the first wave of LA punk rock, which you can learn about in *The Decline of Western Civilization* by Penelope Spheeris. During that time, I witnessed extreme performances by artists such as Diamanda Galás or Johanna Went which really empowered me. When I moved to New York, I began trying to make a living through performances, inspired by the bold acts of incredible women in unconventional venues. I was still young and people were not inviting me to perform in galleries or museums and so I started to approach punk rock clubs as CBGB or The Peppermint Lounge. When asked what I wanted to do, I'd simply say, "I have no idea. Just give me a night, and I'll create something." We had to create our own scene; there wasn't already one we could just become part of. My community became the people I worked with: Samoa, with whom I founded *The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black*, Valerie Caris, a painter from Massachusetts, Gordon Kurtti who died of AIDS at 27, Jack [Water] and Peter [Cramer] from the P.O.O.L. dance company, Nick Zedd... Not everyone liked what I was doing. I remember Jonas Mekas telling me, "Why are you making yourself so ugly?" And I'd reply, "What are you talking about? I'm not ugly; this is a costume, and it's beautiful." I always had a feeling that what I was doing was very beautiful.

VDF: You grew up in Southern California, where Hollywood's stereotypes, especially concerning the female body, heavily influence aesthetic standards. What brought you to suggest a different kind of beauty through your work?

KP: I wanted to present my own idea of beauty as I didn't resonate with the one that was being pushed around me. It took many years for people to understand what I was doing. At a certain point in the 90s, I got an invitation to model for Calvin Klein in my regular look with my daytime makeup. Before that, everyone used to tell me to keep my hair blonde and not wear that crazy punk rock makeup and make myself look more normal and attractive, as a young female "should look." Luckily, I had met other people in LA who were trying to do things differently and didn't care. One of them was Kenneth Anger who was from Santa Monica. I always knew there was a place for my work. It never really mattered if I was popular or not, what I cared about was to exist the way I wanted to.



ELEPHANT

ARTIST-LED ART COVERAGE

ISSUE 49 2024



KEMBRA
AGE / SEX /
LOCATION

BY ORLANDO ESTRADA

SPECIAL ANNUAL
ISSUE



Attempts to introduce Kembra Pfahler in words usually fall short of any kind of meaningful or tidy summation of her decades-long career. Best known for her unmistakable nude-with-total-body-make-up-look that she developed as front woman of the rock band The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black—and perhaps most infamously known for having her vulva stitched closed in the 1992 film *Sewing Circle* directed by Richard Kern—Pfahler is the enigmatic anti-hero of American performance art.

Earlier this year, in a collaboration with the reigning king of gothic chic and long time friend, Rick Owens, Pfahler released a capsule collection via the Canadian online retail platform SSENSE. Featuring logos and iconography of her rock band, TVHKB, as well as prints from her ongoing live butt-printing performance, the collection incorporates the boundary-crushing values that so often manifest throughout everything she does.

The ability of any individual to span cultural platforms, artistic media and creative worlds seamlessly and with rigour is rare. Defying categorisation, the death-metal singer / model / experimental filmmaker / actress has been a defining force since emerging out of the New York 1980s Lower East Side scene. In her anti-domestic, and unrenovated tenement apartment, painted ox-blood red—including the floors and ceilings—Pfahler lives immersed in a time capsule of her feminine horror universe 24/7.

Sometimes referred to as Karen Black Headquarters, it is this apartment doubling as a primary working space that Pfahler chose as a setting to shoot this photo story for *Elephant* and where we had a chance to interview her with questions about age, sex and location.

Orlando Estrada

Orlando Estrada: As time passes, we as humans all go through the four gates of life—birth, initiation, elderhood and death. What stage of life would you say you're moving through currently?

Kembra Pfahler: I'd say I'm in a constant state of passing through the last three—initiation, elderhood and death. Life right now in 2023 seems to pose daily initiations or challenges. Even at age 62, I feel like I'm always being tested and learning new things. It's not a malevolent examination but a constant state of shock and wonder. Sometimes I need to re-learn the simplest things: how I engage with my peers, or how I speak with my siblings when we're not on the same page concerning the care of our elderly parents. I'm also the leader of a band that does theatrical music, but utilises very traditional ways of practising the music we perform and record, and I've learned to accept each very different way that the musicians in my band operate. I've had to be so mutable all of these years. So I very much feel as if life is a constant sort of initiation. It's my desire to always grow through these tests, despite the discomfort that comes along with this process. One of my band members told me about the word "liminal", and learning about "liminality" has helped me stop judging my process. For me, a "liminal phase" is the process of gathering, collecting and distilling the poetry, visuals, idiosyncrasies, accidents and discussions that take place while a new piece is being born, and finding what it communicates in this world. These new pieces must be bereft of "Appligence" or "Yesterbation". I made up the word "Appligence" because I couldn't find a word that specifically describes knowledge collaged

from bits floating around on the internet. "Appligence" is the sort of intelligence that's born of random deep-diving or complete trust in the apps that are downloaded onto our devices and then forever become quasi-truths. Sometimes when I'm listening to people speak, it sounds like a combination of the quotes and words of the day on the internet—it's like a constant slap in the face. "Yesterbation" is the romantic obsession with the past and constantly referencing it rather than forging ahead towards an uncomfortable newness that's lacking in the majority of public opinion. There's so much terror of the unknown right now. There's terror of imperfection and failure, but it's a necessary risk connected to growth.

"Elderhood and death" seems like a quote written on a metal plaque above a hallucinatory medieval doorway in the human mind. I've started to think seriously about the death of my mother and father, as well as my own passing. Not morbidly, it's simply just what time it is currently. It started when I turned 50 years old—these issues pop up constantly now that I'm moving towards the end of my fourth decade as a full-time artist. I'd say life is certainly like a Rubik's cube; it feels like a challenging puzzle and the riches of the experiences offered to me are always resting in the palm of my hand. The desire to fix or win is never as important as just using my brain and my heart to exercise all of the polemic, beautiful, complex, mundane and sometimes doltish qualities humans possess.

OE: You've used The Statue of Liberty in multiple works. Historically, the concept of liberty is associated with revolt, violence and the toppling of authority. Since the rise of far-right conservatism in the US, the concept of "freedom" has become associated with a much less sexy ideology. How do we make freedom sexy again?

KP: I always considered the Statue of Liberty to be a really beautiful sculpture. I do, however, think she should be painted pitch black. I love black so much because I see all of the colours in the spectrum in black. I see that in the black night sky as well—I always have.

I arrived in New York in 1979 and I remember going downtown with my mother and taking a water taxi that drove around the Great Lady. It was such an epic feeling to get so close to the monument. I imagined what it was like floating over from Europe in an intoxicated pirate ship filled with hungry European rejects. Can you imagine the tears that fell seeing her on the way to her new home next to Ellis Island? I wish Ellis Island were rebuilt by Walt Disney and that all of the new immigrants coming to the United States could go on rides and get soft-swirl ice-cream, hotdogs, and have a gentler welcome to their new home. Xenophobia is not sexy. The rise of the far right has escalated and eclipsed any benevolent ideology that existed in the United States in the past few years. The Constitution itself seems like fiction or sci-fi rather than a set of tools that perpetuate democracy. Freedom is now associated with a less sexy ideology because people take it for granted. Ask someone who's done time in prison, or anyone who's had to leave their country of origin, about the concept of freedom and sexiness; they must feel like there's nothing sexier than having choices. It was pointed out to me that the Statue of Liberty has chains around her feet that can only be seen from an aerial viewpoint, the shackles representing her as a metaphor for formerly enslaved people. Now she's free in the New York harbour. We'd only be able to make freedom sexy again if we had a complete spiritual revolution. Freedom is an elusive veil.

OE: Before social media made it easier for artists to reach a global audience, there used to be an informal tradition of artists reacting to traumatic historic events with creative actions staged for the public. How did you see the COVID-19 pandemic affect the artistic scene in New York City?

KP: The pandemic pushed a majority of artists who were financially unstable out of the city and only allowed a very small group of us to survive and work here. I remember the first year of the Pando when everyone fled New York City in abject fear. I got calls daily from people demanding to know how things were; they all felt so guilty. There was also a huge blush of financial confusion among many of my friends before they figured out how to receive unemployment benefits. During that time, I kept getting the most bizarre job offers from magazines and publications to speak about the scene here because there was a morbid belief that if enough people died and things returned to the 1979 disaster zone that was New York then, the city would somehow be interesting again. COVID-19 was like a disease war. It divided and separated you depending on which spiritual principles you lived by and your net worth. It created a more vitriolic class system. In some ways, it democratized being an artist, which is somehow lovely. The art world got a lot smaller and it's also been wrung out like a dishcloth. You see older legendary art dealers without a gallery, you see blue-chip artists who've lost everything because they went out of fashion, you see new artists blow up and pop, which is always like watching a bloody train wreck. One day they've got the eyes of the world on them, the next they've got nothing. So the extremism of New York has become even more magnified through the pandemic. One of my least favourite things to do is to analyse the city. I was born in Los Angeles and came here in 1979 because literally everyone told me not to come to New York. The city was a disaster area back then. How New York has changed mostly is that people are really not as afraid of New York anymore. Too many people have come here only seeking fame and not contributing to the culture. Hollywood is the disease, not COVID-19. New Yorkers can handle any plague that hits us, but ostentation and celebrity is a sickness. Hopefully this will be out of fashion soon. Everybody's an artist now. I stopped being an artist during the pandemic. I don't really like doing anything that's easy.

OE: Every avant-garde art movement from the turn of the twentieth century tried to dislodge the place of beauty in art. What do you think is beautiful?

KP: I'm not sure if art movements have a desire to dislodge the place of beauty in art as much as release a certain idea of beauty from captivity. Inspiration should be called 'outspiration'. When there's only one direction that beauty takes, it becomes predictable, and what's most beautiful in artwork or music or fashion is things that are a surprise. I think most new movements or even non-movements in art change our perception more than anything. What we may have thought was ugly is simply a misinterpretation. There's a difference between moving towards something that's dangerous and moving towards things that are just not popular. Vanity is the enemy of interpretation. Our future is insatiable. In the future, it will be a felony to break someone's heart. We'll be able to have somebody else's dreams at night. Real angels will rent space in our chandeliers and light fixtures; they'll be a brand of outsiders we never expected. Black bubblegum will be chewable without turning our teeth black.

In the last several months we've all been witnesses of war, hunger, sickness, pain and illness that's truly inexplicable. For some, it has vacuumed our bank accounts. Some people have had gains the size of Nebraska and sit in tiny little protective pods brooding and waiting to lose what they've finally got. The planet is so fraught with beauty, and its riches are coveted so strongly. It's a terrific contradiction. Sharing is beautiful.







Installation view: *Capital Improvements*, Emalin, London, 16 November–21 December 2016

Kembra Pfahler revisits 'The Manual of Action' for CIRCA

Artist Kembra Pfahler will lead a series of classes in person and online, with a short film streamed from Piccadilly Circus in London, as well as in Berlin, Milan and Seoul, over three months until 30 June 2024



(Image credit: Courtesy of the artist)

Kembra Pfahler, the transgressive performance artist and frontwoman of punk outfit The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black, was still in the earliest phase of an idiosyncratic career when she debuted *The Manual of Action*, at ABC No Rio on New York's Lower East Side in the 1980s. 'It's essentially a document, I call it nonfiction illustration – it's got drawings and performances and writings about each decade of the artwork I've done,' she explains today, clarifying the work's various forms. 'I'm 62 now, so it's been four decades, and essentially it's a directive and a reminder, a way I can share with others my vocabulary of images.'

In its latest guise, *The Manual of Action* is a big screen-cum-workshop-led project organised in collaboration with the Cultural Institute of Radical Contemporary Arts (CIRCA). Over three months, through 30 June 2024, Pfahler will lead a series of classes in person and online; each week a new class is introduced with a short film streamed from Piccadilly Circus in London, as well as in Berlin, Milan and Seoul, daily at 20:24 local time.

On screen, Pfahler appears dressed in her Karen Black get-up of full body paint, big bushy wig and shiny vinyl boots – other times, wearing a Rick Owens for SSENSE dress printed with her own 'sit in' design – scribbling the class titles on a red chalk board. Watching the first short premiere in London last week she says, 'was one of the strangest, most wonderful days of my life. It was so contrary to anything on the screens in Piccadilly'.

First introduced to Josef O'Connor, the founder and artistic director of CIRCA, by filmmaker Angel Rose in summer 2023, the artist has been overwhelmed by the platform's support and speaks warmly of the partnership, which follows similar activations with Ai Weiwei and Marina Abramović. 'I'm very proud to be able to participate.'



(Image credit: Courtesy of the artist)

'It was everything that I wanted it to be, which doesn't always happen,' she observes, reflecting on the initial shoot that took place at Carroll Gardens in New York. While the films serve as invitations – to partake; to expand one's notion of beauty – the workshops are for fans, artists and more casual parties to explore their own potential and reclaim a sense of agency.

At its core an educational offering, the nucleus of the project is 'availabism', the concept of making the best use of what's available, which Pfahler initially conceived at college and has subsequently employed across



(Image credit: Courtesy of the artist)

her practice. It's this philosophy that she aims to pass on with each of the 12 classes, amongst them 'Classism, Liminality', and perhaps most crucially, 'Volcano'. 'It speaks to taking action and showing up,' the artist notes of the fifth class. 'That is very important right now. Since the pandemic, we've culturally imploded, existing in a very isolated fashion. So "Volcano" represents participating and showing up.'

Informed by her own experiences of the arts education system, Pfahler is wholly sincere about fostering a more democratic creative framework and her role as a teacher. 'I'm a high school dropout. I flew to New York the day I was supposed to graduate to attend the School of Visual Arts in the Lower East Side; Mary Heilmann, Joseph Kosuth, Lorraine O'Grady, were my professors,' she shares. 'Besides two of the women professors, it was very painful and destructive and I thought, when I get older, I want to share things in a different way – a different kind of art practice, resources, ideas about forming community. That's when I started to utilise availabism.'

Invariably shaped by Pfahler's distinctive feminist perspective (notably, 2024 also marks a decade of Future Feminism, the programme she first established with Anohni, Bianca and Sierra Cassidy of CocoRosie, and Johanna Constantine for a show at The Hole in New York; comprised of 13 tenets, it remains a vital component of the artist's daily practice and life philosophy) she is keen that those participating in The Manual of Action will arrive at a similarly forward-looking disposition. 'I want people to have a sense of hope, about the present and the future. Not to sound like a Hallmark card, but I want people to take away some really pragmatic steps so they can accomplish what they want to accomplish. The bottom line is change and hope.'

– Zoe Whitfield

DAZED

The transgressive 90s film where Kembra Pfahler fucks an octopus

Part of the Cinema of Transgression movement, Nick Zedd's *War is Menstrual Envy* aims to shock by presenting the human body in radically unconventional ways



War is Menstrual Envy (1992) dir. Nick Zedd

Within the first ten minutes of its runtime, it becomes clear that Nick Zedd aimed to do more than entertain with his beautifully illogical 1992 film *War is Menstrual Envy*. Full of the black humour and shock value that are signature features of the Cinema of Transgression movement, the film focuses on blood, self-mutilation and the vulnerability of the human body.

The film's title sequence features a naked man sitting cross-legged and carving "WAR?" into his chest with a razor blade. It's a visceral representation of the film's title, which plays with the idea of "womb envy", a term coined by neo-Freudian psychiatrist Karen Horney. Womb envy is the theory that cis men spill blood through violence, as they are subconsciously jealous that cis women expel blood naturally.

Set in a post-apocalyptic future, *War is Menstrual Envy* juxtaposes unusual and conventional characters. A shape-shifting neon alien woman with Amy Winehouse-esque winged liner stands alongside uniformed men, bejewelled drag queens, innocent babies and tattooed biker boys. Themes of motherhood, violence, sex, bloodshed, gender and queerness are explored through nonsensical scenes that focus on the human body being presented in radically unconventional ways.

FRIEZE

Meet Me in New York: Kembra Pfahler

The legendary NYC performance artist—showing at Frieze New York with Emalin—reflects on “anti-naturalism” and “Availablism,” and takes an axe to the wall of her apartment

IN FRIEZE NEW YORK | 04 MAY 24



“I moved to New York in 1979 to change the world,” says Kembra Pfahler from her NYC apartment studio, painted entirely blood red—walls, floors, ceiling, even bathtub.

Pfahler was an unmistakable figure on the 1980s East Village experimental performance scene: Marina Abramović meets The Cramps, but Pfahler’s practice spans music, film, photography and sculpture as well as performance. As fierce and uncompromising as ever, Pfahler’s confrontational feminist persona is inseparable from her oeuvre, whether in rock shows as *The Voluptuous Horror Of Karen Black* or in her “Cinema of Transgression.”

Pfahler was an unmistakable figure on the 1980s East Village experimental performance scene: Marina Abramović meets The Cramps, but Pfahler’s practice spans music, film, photography and sculpture as well as performance. As fierce and uncompromising as ever, Pfahler’s confrontational feminist persona is inseparable from her oeuvre, whether in rock shows as *The Voluptuous Horror Of Karen Black* or in her “Cinema of Transgression.”

In this intriguing snapshot of Pfahler’s everyday life, she explains “anti-naturalism” as “a way for me to describe how I interact with urban beauty,” and her practice of “Availablism”—using whatever materials or impulses are at hand—which in this case involves her taking an axe to the walls of her apartment.

“Harsh times require harsh voices,” says Pfahler. But creativity and beauty, too.

Kembra Pfahler is showing at Frieze New York 2024 with [Emalin](#) (stand C05)

Read more about [Kembra Pfahler here](#)

[Frieze](#), May 2024

THE BEATING HEART OF KEMBRA PFAHLER

By WHITNEY MALLET

Between my boyfriend Isaiah Davis and I, we have three Kembra Pfahler-gifted wearables: two pairs of pants, one black and one red, each with "Karen Black" screen-printed down the right leg, plus a tee with an image of Pfahler's vagina sewn shut from the 1992 film *Sewing Circle*. Evident in this modest inventory are important motifs from Pfahler's artistic vocabulary: the campy horror movie actress from whom Pfahler's band takes its name: *The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black*; the colour black, with which Pfahler paints her teeth for every music performance; the color red, which covers every wall of her East Village apartment; hardcore antinaturalist reclamations of the human body; availabilism, a term she's coined for artistic practice making the most of what's available; and, above all, an extreme spirit of generosity.

This year Pfahler turned 61. She also opened *On The Record, Off The Record: Sound Off*, her third solo exhibition with Emalin gallery in London, which saw the space dotted with six-foot-tall discs resembling analog LPs. Previously in the Shoreditch space she'd mounted *Rebel Without a Cock* (2019), which centered on a giant disco-mirrored phallus made in collaboration with Urs Fischer and Spencer Sweeney, and *Capital Improvements* (2016), which featured the official Karen Black flag, red-and-white striped with an icon of a bat with breasts. At the end of a stifling summer, just as the cool breeze of fall was beginning to blow through New York City, we had a midnight kiki with Pfahler at our Chelsea apartment, where the conversation centered around ideas of creative community, leather, and poetry.

KEMBRA PFAHLER: Hello, Isaiah Davis. Hello, Whitney Mallett. Thank you for inviting me to this incredible space.

ISAIAH DAVIS: Welcome, Kembra Pfahler!

WHITNEY MALLET: The Chelsea Hotel is only a few blocks away from our home.

KEMBRA: Yes! And your building has a very similar architectural vernacular too. It seems to be from the same era.

WHITNEY: Very gothic. We're really excited to have moved here to Chelsea, it's such a fantasy. You're a longtime East Village person, but you were saying you lived in Chelsea for a stint at the London Terrace complex, just a few blocks from The Chelsea Hotel. When was that?

KEMBRA: London Terrace was 2000 to 2003. Chelsea has that spirit of being at the epicenter of community in a way. It's interesting to see the list of people who have actually lived there since the turn of the century. Just vast amounts of artists. I did work with [longtime Chelsea Hotel resident] Susanne Bartsch around that time. I would do appearances with her at her clubs. That was always a good time. One of my best friends was Walter Cassidy, who was living here at The Chelsea. And there's a guitar store nearby that I used to go to all the time. The handful of visits that I've made to The Chelsea have all been vastly different. The first time was in the early 80s to see this wonderful poet, Herbert Huncke, who's no longer with us physically. And he shared his space with an artist called Vali, the Witch of Positano.

I've had experiences in rooms here that I couldn't believe existed.

When Rick Owens and Michèle Lamy had a party here, I'd never seen the incredible space that they were using. They'd transformed it into a very minimal dinner

Buffalo Zine, October 2022



area. I thought it was from another world. And then I did a couple movies with Bruce LaBruce, the filmmaker from Canada, one was called *The Misandrists* [2017]. And Zaldy was the designer on these. So, I remember going to Zaldy's place at The Chelsea for fittings. And for some reason I thought that a scene in that movie *Liquid Sky* [1982] happened at The Chelsea. A spaceship lands on an apartment's roof terrace.

ISAIAH: Did you find out if it was at The Chelsea?

KEMBRA: I couldn't get to the bottom of that. It still remains a mystery.

WHITNEY: Well, now that we're talking about movies. I wanted to know which films you first saw starring the actress Karen Black and how she became this inspiration of yours?

KEMBRA: So the first summer I was in New York, in '79, I saw a whole wave of Karen Black films, and I'd grown up with all her films in Los Angeles, watching them on late night TV. Then I started at the School of Visual Arts right after that. For some reason she was always part of my visual memory. I have always loved watching her films, like *Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* [1982] and *Day of the Locust* [1975], which was an incredibly inspiring film; it's all about a side of Los Angeles that I moved away from, the Los Angeles that Kenneth Anger writes about in *Hollywood Babylon* [1959]. And so, when Samoa Moriki and I were coming up with names for our band, we had this friend Mike Kuchar who used to describe our performances as "voluptuously horrific," and I said, "What do you think about The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black?" Then we actually met Karen Black! She introduced the first Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black show in Los Angeles. The first time we ever went back to L.A. to play, she got on stage and said, "I don't know if this is supposed to be an insult or an homage, but I'm going to take it as an homage." The name was never intended to have any mean-spiritedness to this great artist, and I would've never continued to use it unless it was benevolently embraced. After we played, she said to us, "I think you are all artists." I feel like she really got us. She was also a great songwriter. She wrote many of the songs for *Nashville* [1975], and I've always loved her music.

WHITNEY: I fell in love with her in *Five Easy Pieces* [1970]. She has a wonderful face. Truly one of a kind.

KEMBRA: She's not a typical presence in film, and she's one of the most beautiful presences I've ever seen on film.

WHITNEY: Growing up in Los Angeles, did you have any early models for community there?

KEMBRA: Yeah, I guess the surf community. I grew up on the beach, and the music community was really large in Los Angeles, but I wasn't really a part of that music scene, because I was a teenager and I didn't start my band until I moved to New York. What about you, Isaiah? And what about you, Whitney? What places were you growing up in?

WHITNEY: I'm from Canada. I mostly grew up in Calgary. I went to punk shows and I wrote for a weekly alternative music magazine as a teenager, but there wasn't a lot of art going on in Calgary. Then I moved to Montreal and there was just all this space, former warehouses and factory buildings. Everything was cheap. I found more of my people there.

KEMBRA: What about you, Isaiah? Can I ask where your community was?

ISAIAH: I'm originally from the Bronx, born and raised. My mother's side is still there. My father is still there. We're Bronx people. But with the exception of a few, most of the people I grew up with weren't really into the same things that I was into. It's majority working class people, so it's all about getting a dollar. Passion doesn't translate well, unless that passion is making money for you.

KEMBRA: Wow.

ISAIAH: I was reflecting a couple of days ago. My earliest memories are in Castle Hill, part of the neighborhood was privately-owned homes. Another part





was sprawling project buildings. The layout was almost brutalist in style. Wings of the building jutting out and stuff like that. But then another side of it was this industrial place where you have salt and sanitation and transit facilities. Nearby there's the water, and it kind of smells of low tide, high tide. You know that smell? It's a lot of sensory things that I think influence who I am now. Maybe I could say my community wasn't in people, but it was in the actual essence of the place, which I feel helped me have an art language.

KEMBRA: You both are part of my community, and I have a funny sense of time with you because I can't remember not knowing you both for some reason. But certain people, it feels like I could have known them 40 years ago or 10 years. I first met Whitney at this gallery at 182 Avenue C, run by [Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black member] Caroline Mills and Miles Pflanz, where we were both working and showing exhibitions. And then I met Isaiah around the time he had his solo show at Participant Inc., *I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream*. That title is so emotionally powerful for me.

ISAIAH: The title is a reference to this science fiction story by Harlan Ellison. It's about a post-apocalyptic world with this sentient supercomputer that tortures humans.

WHITNEY: What made you attracted to the title for your show?

ISAIAH: Certain people are born into bondage. Trying to navigate the world being poor. You have seven dollars in your bank account. You want to buy a sandwich, but the sandwich is eight dollars, and you get an overdraft fee of 30 dollars. By the time you get paid, that 30 dollar penalty has turned into 60. Like what are you supposed to do, because you can't really move? Certain situations, I imagine bare feet on a wood floor, and someone driving a nail into them. Someone restricting your movements. The material of human flesh and the nail piercing the wood. That's the same as "I have no mouth, and I must scream."

KEMBRA: It just reflects greed so much. In your show, Isaiah, you had these paintings sewed under vinyl, and the detail and abstraction in them was just strangely emotional. Painting doesn't have sound, but I feel like with certain paintings, I can hear the scream.

Greed is something that I feel is so painful. I feel it physically in my human body, the presence in my stomach. I want to replace greed with poetry.

I've not had a lot of poetry in my life, but I just went to Hawaii to visit my parents, and my father is 80 years old now. Every time I see him, he's always reading Yeats, "The Second Coming." It's nice to hear him talk about poetry in the morning. Thankfully I was able to spend some nice time with my mom and dad this summer. They actually got Covid for the first time right before my art exhibition opened in London in July. So I wasn't able to go to London to be there to open my show, that was a new experience. I had to change the way I worked on a show. I had a lot of intense transitions during COVID and now I feel like I've made it to the other side. Does that make sense? It's been an intense time.

WHITNEY: It has been. I mean it made me change a lot. I think it forced you to just face yourself, in a way.

KEMBRA: I've been listening to this song by Little Richard. [Singing] *You better jump back. Jump back. Heeby jeebie.* It's such a great song.

WHITNEY: Do you have a favorite karaoke song?

KEMBRA: [Singing] *Oh anger. Anger is my middle name. Oh anger. Anger is my middle name.*

ISAIAH: Who sings that one?

KEMBRA: Let me show you. This is one of my favorite rock artists called Thor. They're from Canada. Here they're performing in 1984. I'm not nostalgic. I'm not a *yesterbater*. But I think I should cover this song. They might be inspiring to you, Isaiah, for the leather costuming.

WHITNEY: Oh you still have to try on these leather shorts Isaiah's customizing for you!
[Kembra wriggles into a pair of leather shorts right there in the room].
KEMBRA: I don't know if I can squeeze it.
ISAIAH: No, just keep going.
KEMBRA: Will I break it?
ISAIAH: Nope.
KEMBRA: Okay, I can do it.
ISAIAH: There you go, nice and tight. Do they feel comfortable on the waist?

KEMBRA: Super comfortable. [Turns around in the mirror.] Dang, they're incredible. I feel confident in my tush and I don't often. These are freaking awesome. Thank you, Isaiah. I feel so fortunate to have something leather made by you. You know the photos for this article were taken by Stephen Harwick.

WHITNEY: Who's that? Do I know him?

ISAIAH: The Bound Leather guy.

WHITNEY: Oh, we have his book around here somewhere that you two are both in, *By The Skin Of My Teeth*. How was the shoot?

KEMBRA: It was kind of humorous to roll into The Chelsea Hotel with this very large record. You'll see in some of the photos Sorat Mae Anderson and I posed with this human-scale Karen Black record.

And those records are the main sculptures in my show that opened at Emalin Gallery in London this summer. It's part three of *On The Record, Off The Record*. The big records that I made, I've used them before. The records were props for performance pieces, the first versions of *On The Record, Off The Record* were at Participant in Manhattan [2021] and at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn [2022]. And "on the record / off the record" refers to a door being open or closed essentially, what you're seeing versus what you're not seeing, what you're able to say and not able to say. I'm always only able to do anything that I do with a very large army of community. For the shoot, Tony Tulve and Clara Rae Natkin, they are two community members who did our make up as they often do. Sorat's partner Christian he made the yellow bows in our hair out of a waterproof vinyl fireman costume. The bows always have to be just exactly as I love them. And Samoa Moriki, who is the guitarist and cofounder of The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black, he helped us that day too. He actually repainted the record that we used with this newly invented black paint which is supposedly blacker than any other black. Vantablack it's called. That night I'd forgotten my boots, so Sorat and I decided to share the one boot that fit us both.

WHITNEY: Sorat is your studiomate too. How did you two first meet?

KEMBRA: We initially met when they were working – and I'm using Sorat's vernacular – as a "gallerina" in Manhattan. We became friends, and almost a decade ago, they started doing Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black shows with me. They also helped envision one of my favorite exhibitions, *Giverny* [2012], which was at a gallery called the Hole in Manhattan. So that is also part of our family tree. Sorat lives in this building in the East Village and they had the idea to turn this space in the basement into an art studio and a community space. Sorat invited me to come in and do my artwork there, so for the past few months, preparing for my show at Emalin, I had a little more legroom. It's a gift, it's a community space that I'm not paying money for. It's such an incredibly profound, generous gesture.

WHITNEY: That's beautiful. These relationships are at the heart of everything you do.

KEMBRA: They are the heart that is beating and keeping everything alive, that's for sure.



ARTFORUM

KEMBRA PFAHLER

Putting it on the record

By Jennifer Krasinski ☒



Kembra Pfahler. Photo: Jean Toir.

I first heard about the work of performer, musician and artist Kembra Pfahler in the early '90s when a friend told me she'd seen a Richard Kern film—Sewing Circle (1992)—that documented Pfahler getting her vagina sewn shut. I recall her gesture making me feel sad and a little sick, yet I mostly felt deep admiration for the extremity of her self-possession. Here she was taking on rape culture (among other violences), prohibiting the penetration of her body by means of needle and thread, the classic tools of “woman’s work.” Perhaps best known for her death rock project the Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black, which she co-founded in the '80s with artist Samoa Moriki, Pfahler has continued to create a body of unabashedly feminist and transgressive work with her body at its center, all the while redefining beauty as that which expresses one’s self purely as oneself. Pfahler will perform her latest piece, On the Record, Off the Record: Volume Two, on June 17 and 18 at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn. Her show is the first in the series HERETICS, curated by Jane Ursula Harris, which presents live commissions by artists working at the intersection of performance art and music.

Art Forum, June 2022

IN THE '80s, my mom had a clothing store near Topanga Canyon/Malibu with Roswitha Newman, Randy Newman’s wife, a woman named Sandy Kaufman, and another woman, Helen, who was married to the singer of the Zombies. My mom had that store for many, many years, and it supported the heck out of many, many, many, many of my art projects. She used to make costumes for me when I was a kid, and later I wore one of her costumes in the Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black. She informed a lot of my design sense, although I’m the exact opposite of her. She has blond hair, and we fight a lot because, you know, that’s what moms and daughters do.

Even before I hit puberty, I felt subjugated by my gender. I really hated being told what to wear, how to look, how I could look better if I was thinner. I hated when people offered their opinions about my appearance. When I was at Santa Monica High School, I dressed in suits, cut all my hair off, dyed it black. There were four punk women in the whole school—and we just got the shit kicked out of us. By the eleventh grade, I’d gotten accepted into the School of Visual Arts in New York and I thought, “well, since I got accepted into SVA, I don’t even need to graduate.” So I didn’t, I just moved to New York.



Kembra Pfahler. Photo: Jean Toir.

To me, at that age, at that time, New York meant freedom. It meant gender equality. It wasn't as racially segregated as Los Angeles was. And I felt—*I feel*—that what is very indigenous to this city is developing your chosen family. I live on the Lower East Side, and during Black Lives Matter, there was so much violence on Second Street and Avenue C. There were murders on Third Street and Avenue C. There was so much bloodshed. And I kept telling everybody what was happening. It was so insane because nobody believed me, you know? They were just like, “you’re exaggerating.” I mean, I saw a young kid surrounded by cops, all pointing guns at his face. He was standing there, crying, with guns pointed at his face. It was a fucking nightmare.

On the Record, *Off the Record* basically arose from me wanting to tell my stories, which is what I do in my performances and artworks. I did the first version at Participant Inc. on my birthday, and the second version I’m doing at Pioneer Works. The idea came from experiencing life in the '80s and just being an “IRL person.” I don’t use my computer very often and I’m very suspicious of what’s happening on the internet, although I know it’s a cool tool too. And I’m very suspicious of what’s on the record and what’s left off the record, because I feel what’s on the record is usually bullshit—hold on. Not to go off-topic, but I want to put this in here: When I was working on the “[Future Feminism](#)” show in 2014, I had an intern who came to work with me. Her name was Ashley Mead. She was an amazing woman, and she worked harder than any of us. After the show, she went back to Colorado where she was from, and she had a baby with a man who murdered her. He killed her, chopped up, and—oh, God, it was. . . It was a case of domestic abuse that turned violent, that ended her life violently. And I think of her in this moment of the revocation of women’s rights, and . . . God, it’s all so appalling. Just knowing how many women have been killed, how many have died getting illegal abortions—just knowing what people suffer just to live, you know?

We never know who is going to change the world. I have faith in all people. I really do. So however the world changes, bring it on. I’m here to help by doing what I can. I’m not quite sure what’s going to happen, but I think we have to redesign the world together, not separately, with complete consensus, and complete consensus takes a long time. It’s not a hurried process. I’ve been in Hawaii with my parents for a while, and I’ve been reading William Butler Yeats with my father. Poetry is a big part of his life. We were just reading Yeats’s “[The Second Coming](#)”—“the centre cannot hold.” The center is definitely not holding, and I guess what I also want to say is that during times of pain, during times of change and despair, share your poems and your ideas with one another. Do it, and do it IRL as well as on the computer, because our future is going to need us to show up and suit up at some point.

AnOther



50 Questions With Performance Art Provocateur Kembra Pfahler

The radical artist spills on everything from the first artwork she ever created to the best piece of advice she's ever been given and her first, seminal encounter with punk.

JUNE 13, 2022

TEXT Emily Dinsdale

LEAD IMAGE Kembra Pfahler, 2022 Photography by Jean Tair

Kembra Pfahler is pure punk rock. As one of the art world's most transgressive and electrifying figures, sewing her vagina closed in Richard Kern's short film *Sewing Circle* [1992] and making love to a rubber octopus in Nick Zedd's movie *War Is Menstrual Envy* [1992] are just a few of the memorable moments from her oeuvre of feminist, radical artworks.

Born in Los Angeles in 1961, Pfahler was soon drawn inexorably to the east coast, where she became an eminent and unsettling figure in New York's febrile art scene in the 1980s and where she still resides today.

She describes herself as an "anti-naturalist". Her striking theatrical appearance and her dedication to the extremities of artificiality have caught the attention of the fashion world. Aside from being the acknowledged muse of [Rick Owens](#), she's also modelled for [Calvin Klein](#), [Rodarte](#), [Helmut Lang](#) and [Marc Jacobs](#). But her love of the "total transformation" of costume reaches an apotheosis with her band, The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black. Founded by Pfahler and Samoa Moriki in 1990, TVHKB are cut unforgettable figures in their signature wigs, body paint, blackened teeth, and thigh-high stiletto boots - part horror B-movie, part deviant geishas.

Her upcoming performance artwork, *On The Record Off The Record*, will take place at Brooklyn's [Pioneer Works](#) ahead of a series of much-anticipated new recordings by TVHKB. The show - which promises to be as spectacular and which Pfahler describes as one of her proudest career moments - features a monumental sculpture of a black vinyl record

rotating on the stage and responding sonically to the band's movements as they "amplify cracks, heart beats, pokes and swishes".

Below, Kembra Pfahler answers questions on everything from the first artwork she ever created to the best piece of advice she's ever been given and her first, seminal encounter with punk.



Sewing Circle, 1992 (Film still)

1. Where are you at the moment?

At home in NYC.

2. What are your plans for the rest of the day?

Try to change the world.

3. Please could you introduce your upcoming *On the Record/Off the Record*?

My next performance piece is curated by Jane Ursula Harris. I've been working on it for at least a decade. I'm really excited and I feel very honored that Dustin [Yellin] and Gabriel [Florenz] invited me to participate in doing something at this incredible, unusual art space in Red Hook. I don't have any expectations of how the audience will feel, but I hope they have a good experience coming to see my work and that's all I ever hope for.

4. Who is TVHKB?

TVHKB are The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black, founded by myself and Samoa [Moriki] in 1990.

5. Could you tell us about your next record?

Our next record is being recorded with Gabriel Florenz at Pioneer Works in their recording studio. We're recording a single hopefully this week and we have two new songs - *Hole With a Heartbeat* and *Free*.

The songs are uplifting to human beings' hearts and to all living things' hearts, hopefully. That's the thing that motivated me to start making music, because when I started being an

artist when I was young I found it very difficult always being alone in my studio, so having the band was formed out of a desire to create music for our visual works and our performance works.

6. When you were a kid what did you want to do when you were grown up?

What I'm doing now.

7. What aspirations did your parents have for you?

What I'm doing now.

8. What role does music play in your work?

All music is a soundtrack to my life.

9. Who would play you in a movie of your life?

I would like no film about me ... My performance isn't show business although it's sometimes funny and gimmickish and entertaining. 'Vanity is the enemy of interpretation.'

10. If there was one though, who would you want to direct it?

Roberto Rossellini.



Kembra Pfahler Courtesy of Dazed

11. What song would you like to be played at your funeral?

Free by Deniece Williams.

12. What's your most important creative ritual?

Sewing my vagina shut.

11. What song would you like to be played at your funeral?

Free by Deniece Williams.

12. What's your most important creative ritual?

Sewing my vagina shut.

13. What's your biggest regret?

Sewing my vagina shut.

14. What makes you laugh most?

Sewing my vagina shut.

15. What's the last picture on your camera roll?

A picture of the drawing I did last night.

16. What's the most embarrassing picture on your camera roll?

My sewn vagina.

17. What qualities first drew you to Samoa Moriki?

I was drawn to Samoa because he was the most genius, glamorous, intelligent person I'd ever met in real life.

18. What is the secret of a good collaboration?

Patience and honesty.

19. What's the career moment you're most proud of?

What's happening now ... getting to do a performance at Pioneer Works with my band at aged 60. Getting to do an art performance with [Emalin](#) at the age of 60. Just getting to still be here when I lost most of my friends in the 80s from Aids and there are so few of my demographic left. I'm just here in their honour.

20. Do you suffer from stage fright before a performance?

I do, I think that's common. Your tummy does backward flips, but it doesn't really deter me from going on stage.

21. Where would be your dream venue/location to perform?

The Apollo Theater in Harlem.

22. Who would be your dream collaborator (dead or alive)?

Luther Vandross.

23. What scares you?

My cat on the way to the veterinarian.

24. Can you remember the first artwork you ever created?

I stood on my head and cracked an egg on my vagina.

25. What is your most treasured possession?

The clothes and gifts that Rick Owens has gifted me in our friendship.

26. What is on your bedside table?

I don't have a bedside table.

27. How would you describe your personal style?

Making the best use of what's available.

28. Can you remember an occasion when you felt star-struck?

The first time I met Karen Black, the actress who the band is named after.

29. What is the best piece of advice you've ever been given?

Remain calm and do exactly what you want.

30. What book are you reading at the moment?

The Bible. We're having a terrible Christian Right resurgence. In Oklahoma state they've just put out a bounty for people getting abortions. So I'm reading *The Bible* because it's fiction – it's science fiction – and I'm so horrified by what's happening in the United States, I actually went to the corner pharmacy and I bought a *Bible*. My parents are Jewish and they never inflicted their Judaism on me, that was always elective for me. But I love all religious ceremonies, I love ceremonies, I just don't like the morality of religion and I really don't like what's happening in the US ... with all us females like we're property again. It's really horrifying. But we'll keep talking about it and we'll have the courage to change it.



Kembra Pflahler Courtesy of Dazed

31. What's your favourite thing about your neighborhood?

The delicatessen owned by the Yemen.

32. If we came there, where should we go?

To all the delicatessens on the Lower East Side that are owned by Dominicans, Koreans, Puerto Ricans – and ask them what to order.

33. When did you realise you wanted to be an artist?

After going to see the first wave of punk rock in Los Angeles in the 70s. I saw The Screemers and I said, 'That music is very unusual.' I wanted to come out as hard as that,

with as much courage as they had. I want to play as hard as that.' They inspired me. I was inspired by people who took risks when I was in high school, and when I saw music and heard music and performance that I was so utterly surprised by, it really shook me to my core in a very positive way.

34. And if you weren't an artist, what do you think you would be?

I would be a nuclear physicist.

35. What is the last piece of art that moved you?

Emily Barker's clear sculpture [*Kitchen*, 2019] that she put in the Whitney Biennial.

36. What is a constant source of inspiration for you?

Coffee.

37. Do you have a muse?

Marlboro cigarettes.

38. What role does costume play in your work?

It helps to transform from the ground up. I believe in total transformation. It's a liminal process of gathering and collecting costume pieces so that I can tell the story I'm trying to illustrate as articulately as possible. I'm an anti-naturalist. I prefer to tell a story costumed.

39. What role does your body play in your work?

My body is available.

40. Do you believe in ghosts?

Yes.

41. Do you believe in God?

Yes.

42. Do you believe in aliens?

Yes.

43. What is the happiest accident you ever had making art?

When I did *The Wall of Vagina* and the plain yogurt that we splooged in between our legs looked like a river of yeast.

44. In your opinion, what is the greatest artwork ever made?

The Wall of Vagina.

45. How would you like to be remembered?

The Wall of Vagina.

46. Are you an introvert or an extrovert?

I'm both.

47. What is your favourite time of day or night?

All day, all night.

48. Who is your favourite fictional character?

The writer in the book *Ask the Dust* by John Fante. I'm from Los Angeles and that book has remained with me my whole life.

49. What qualities do you look for in friends?

Forgiveness, patience, and humour.

50: What advice would you give to aspiring young artists?

Remain calm and do exactly what you want.

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 availability." 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 Cadwallader, 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 me 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

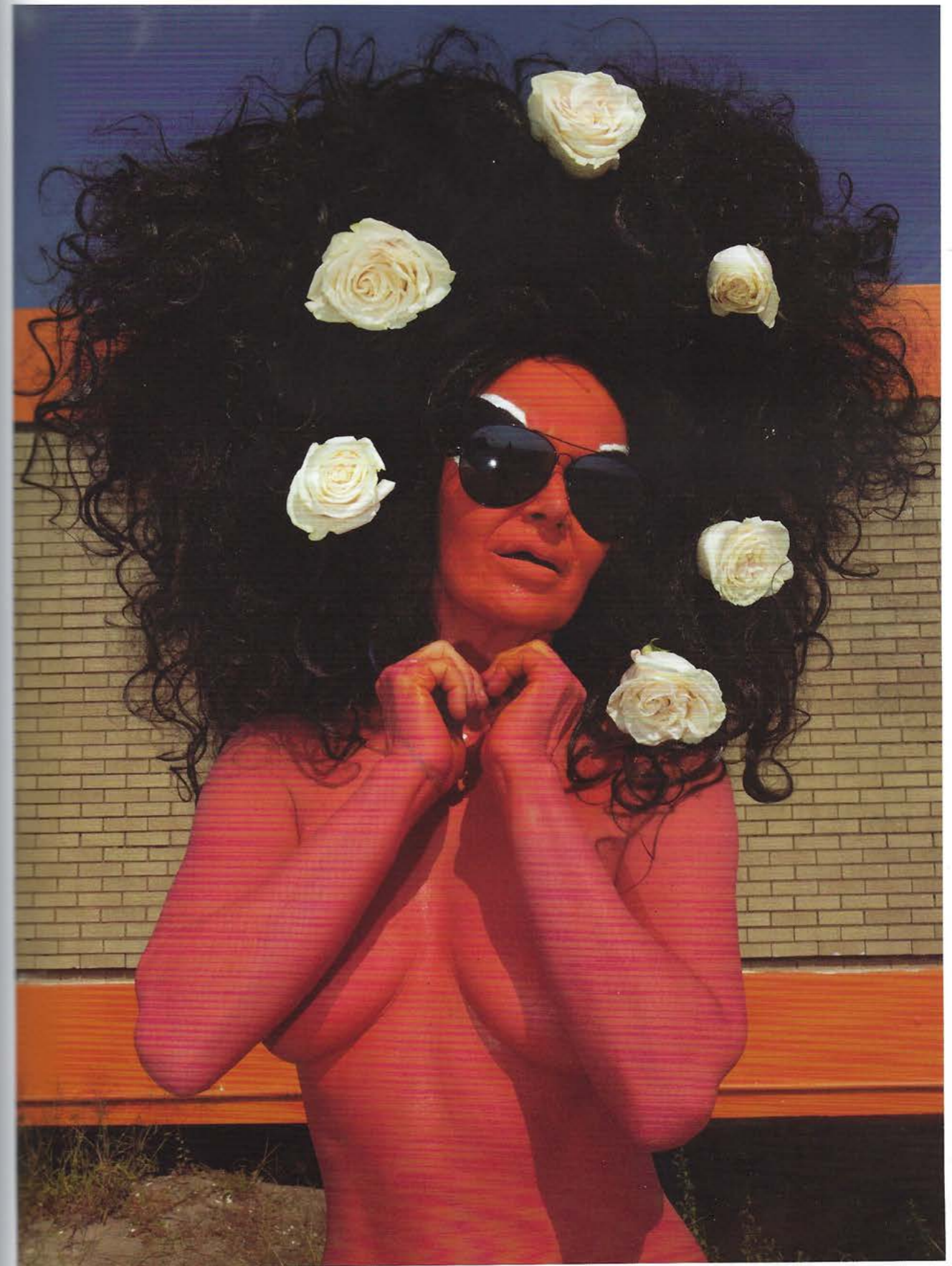
enough material out there. I mean, I'll always talk to young artists, but I feel like with magazines now, I really want to take responsibility for how I'm participating and being complicit in the harm that's being done by corporations, and I feel like the best I can offer the culture is to keep doing 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.

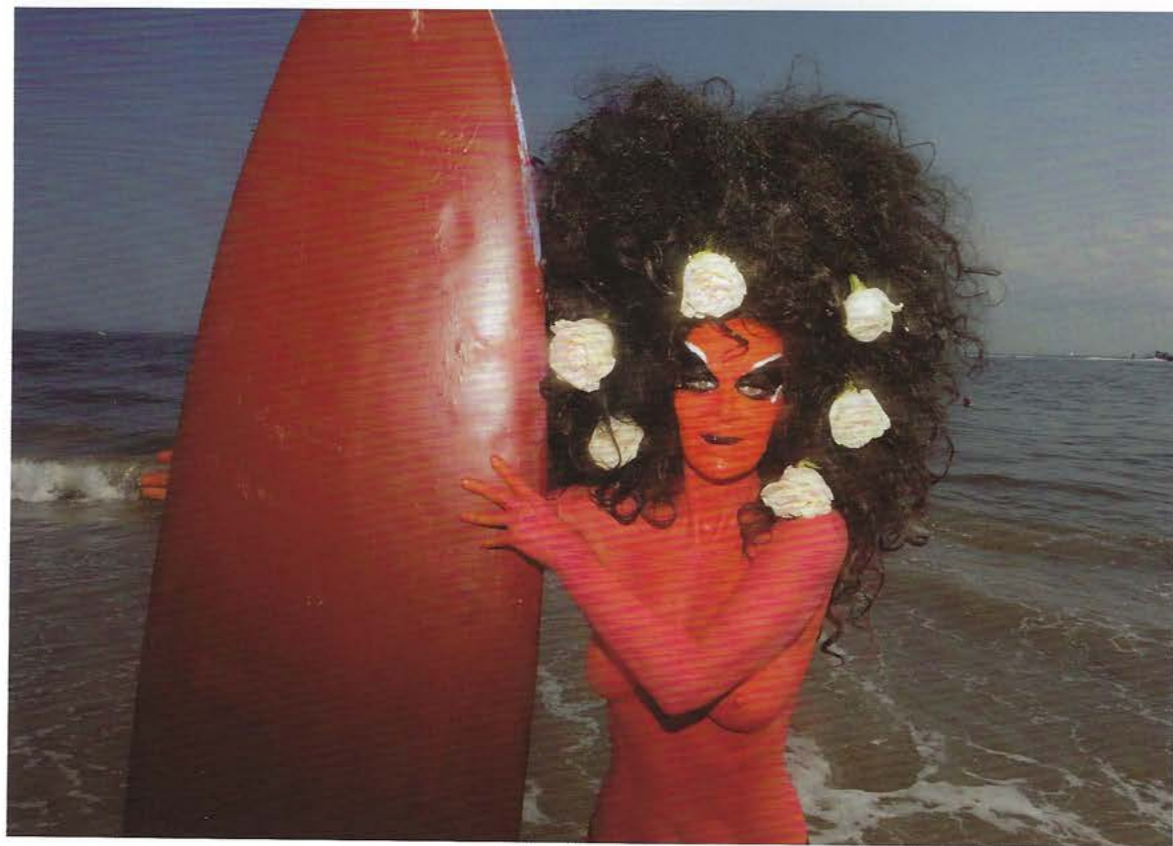
Where did your interest in horror come from?

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

Oyster Magazine, October 2020



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 Black 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.

e-flux

Condo New York



View of Condo New York at Chapter NY, New York (hosting Emalin, London), 2019. (Left) Bruce LaBruce and Kembra Pfahler, *Wall of Vagina II*, 2004/2018. C-print, 50 3/4 x 38 1/8 inches (framed). (Right) Bruce LaBruce and Kembra Pfahler, *Wall of Vagina I*, 2004/2018. C-print, 50 3/4 x 38 1/8 inches (framed). Image courtesy of the artists; Chapter NY, New York and Emalin, London.

Condo, New York

June 27–July 26, 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 title¹. 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. M.)* (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.

Notes

¹All quotes in this review are from Joan Didion, “Goodbye to All That,” in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (New York: FSG, 1968), 225–238. Reprinted in Sarri Botton, ed., *Goodbye to All That: Writers on Loving and Leaving New York* (Seattle: Seal Press, 2013).

Orit Gat is a writer based in London. She is a contributing editor at *The White Review* and *Art Papers*.

Bruce LaBruce and Kembra Pfahler, *Wall of Vagina 11*, 2004/2018. C-print, 50 3/4 x 38 1/8 inches (framed). Image courtesy of the artists; Chapter NY, New York; and Emalin, London.

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 metamorphose 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 Colo 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 spilt 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
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

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




Rebel Without a Cock



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 availabilism – 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*.



Kembra Pfahler, *Classic Glamour*, 2009/2019



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. ●

Kembra Pfahler, *Alice with my Surfboard*, 2009/2019



Rebel Without a Cock is on show at [Emalin](#) until 20 July 2019.

FRIEZE

What's Behind the Voluptuous Horror of Kembra Pfahler?

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



The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black, Capital Improvements, 2016, performance documentation. Courtesy: the artist and Emalin, London

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



Kembra Pfahler, *Classic Glamour*, 2009/2019, c-print. Courtesy: the artist and Emalin, London

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



Karen Black in *Five Easy Pieces*, 1970, film still. Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

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 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..

– Amy Sherlock

Amy Sherlock is a writer and editor based in London, UK



Kembra Pfahler, Urs Fischer, Spencer Sweeney, *Disco Cock*, 2018, mirror on styrofoam, cock: 238 × 61 × 59 cm / balls (each) ø 52cm. Courtesy: the artist and Emalin, London

DOCUMENT

In my own fashion: Kembra Pfahler and Rick Owens



Document, October 2018

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—We were in the darkness. We were in complete darkness.

Rick—I can't imagine. I'm sure there are things that I'm not even considering that happened.

Kembra—Yeah, people's homes were flooded. And people's homes were completely wiped away in Far Rockaway on the beach. So you could imagine, say, like Hermosa Beach had been completely obliterated.

Rick—Right.

Kembra—So the flooding was really bad, and I missed having my basement and house flooded by four blocks because the Lower East Side is on a landfill. I'm used to it, in the '80s when I first moved here the conditions were very dire so to be in complete darkness for a week wasn't that traumatizing.

Rick—And food and water? Was that complicated?

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.

First published in Document Spring/Summer issue 2013.

General Inquiries
info@emalin.co.uk

Leopold Thun
leopold@emalin.co.uk

Angelina Volk
angelina@emalin.co.uk