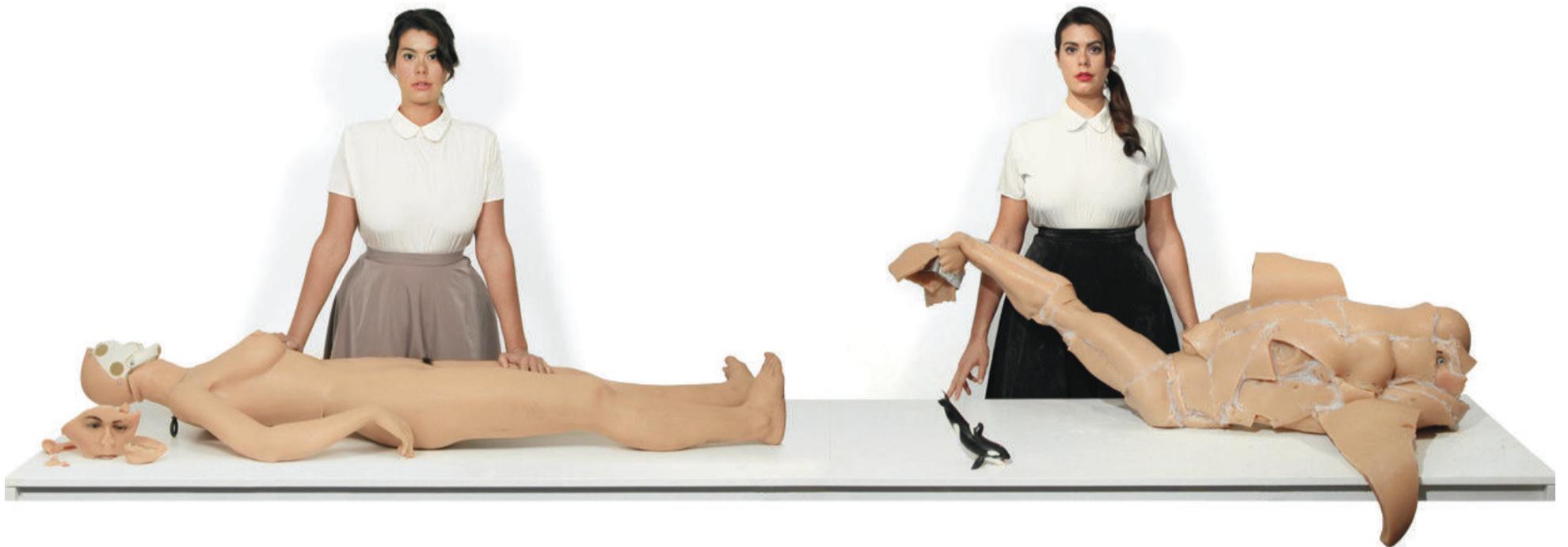




**PERFORMANCE ART FACTION**

# Reawakening the Innate Political Potential of our Bodies



## Amber Hawk Swanson

This September, ]performance s p a c e [ will throw open the doors of a new venue in Poplar, East London. Along with this timely re-opening, co-directors Bean and Benjamin Sebastian are excited to announce the launch of their 2014/15 curatorial project Performance Art Faction. Forging the project's trajectory are two initial projects: An evening of artists talks and interventions entitled Gender: A Soapbox Session, and ]ps[ Occupation, a duet of Artists in Residence, working alongside each other. Here, Sebastian introduces the two inaugural projects by reflecting on the words of Kate Bornstein and the thoughts and practices of invited artists; Amber Hawk Swanson, Kris Grey, Hugh O'Donnell, Fabiola Paz and Victoria Gray.

**"Let's stop pretending that we have all the answers, because when it comes to gender, none of us is fucking omniscient."**

**— Kate Bornstein, Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation.**

I have been thinking a lot about the above quote by American gender theorist (author, playwright and performance artist), Kate Bornstein (B. 1948) and cannot think of a more fitting point of de-

parture to contextualise Gender: A Soapbox Session and the ]ps[ Occupations. Bornstein, having been assigned male at birth by U.S. State sanctioned Medical Industries and later completing sex reassignment surgery in 1986, recounts in their own words; "I don't call myself a woman, and I know I'm not a man". Within these two quotes, Bornstein eloquently pronounces that when it comes to gender; personal experience, agency and debate are collectively as close as we get to common ground. Gender: A Soapbox Session proposes to convene amidst this not-so-common ground and brings together three artists of varying genders, sex and sexualities (of which they, and only they, shall self-identify as, or not, if they so choose) in an attempt to further enquire into the pitfalls and glorious potentials of difference. With humour and intensity, Amber

Hawk Swanson presents us with our first problematic; a collapse and confusion of ideas surrounding advocacy, agency and representation. In The "Feminism Project", Hawk Swanson quotes snippets of interviews from a variety of women on their original responses to the topic of feminism.

**"Feminism? Um, I think that's probably one of those words for which, everybody has a different definition...? And I've heard a lot of peoples definitions that, are probably different from what it means to me? but I'm still like, yeah,**

**that works too. So I'm not going to give you an exclusive or an exhaustive definition? but for me it's sort of... It's a being aware of the ways in which women have had some of the same experiences throughout history, and you know in a contemporary setting too."**

**— Amber Hawk Swanson (quoting anonymous), transcription from The "Feminism? Project".**

Whose words are these and what do they mean in this re-contextu-

alised situation? Through this appropriation of another's words, Hawk Swanson continues Bornstein's thinking of the infinite positions of gender identification, in a simultaneously glib, ironic and profound manner. Through appropriation, the lightness of humour and the ultra personal performance of sexual (or sexualised) interactions recorded on camera, Hawk Swanson makes us question our own political alignments, enacted within our very private yet always entirely political lives. For we all take part in history, and it shapes us as much as we shape it.





Hugh O'Donnell

**"Puberty scared the shite out of me. I spent so many confined days in the toilet in my parents house yanking and pulling any new traces of pubic hair out of my body..."**

**"As a kid you don't really think too much of gender. Well, you know your mam is your mam and your dad is your dad. You know that you have a cock and if you put it between your legs you can have a fanny like your sister's or your mam. It's very apparent the roles you witness as a kid when you look at your parents. For me the man went to work and the woman stayed at home and had great craic with the kids. Puberty scared the shite out of me. I spent so many confined days in the toilet in my parents house yanking and pulling any new traces of pubic hair out of my body as I could not deal with my body changing. The growth of hair made me feel masculine and more manly. I could not deal with this change and I wonder now, why? I think the deep, deep homosexual feelings I had so young were too deep for me to understand, clarify and justify. I knew I was a bit different but could not articulate it in my young heart and mind. No one in this day and age should have to 'come out'. Coming out for me was a self clarifying, acceptance of myself to embrace my gender (as I am attracted to my own gender) and realise my sexual identity and start to carve my**



Hugh O'Donnell

**path through life..."**

**— Hugh O'Donnell (responding to the question: "Why do you think it is important to interrogate gender roles and sexual identity?").**

As Hugh reminds us here, it is important to think about gender, sex and sexuality at every stage of life – including the naivety of childhood. At what point do children realise they are 'a bit different' and why should this continue to be the narrative for gender (binary) non-conforming young people? As far back as some of the first writings of Freud, there is critical acknowledgement of the polymorphous perversity of infantile sexuality and contemporary medical institutions

(some) now (finally) formally, medically and academically acknowledge the existence of intersexed people (those persons born with ambiguous variations, and/or combinations of genitalia, chromosomal genotype and sexual phenotype other than XY-male and XX-female). Finally, and most importantly, to reiterate the point, each and everybody (person) has the ineffable right to self identify and actualise any embodiment of being they so choose. In their performance *Homage*, artist Kris Grey explores the historical medicalisation and pathologising of gender non-conforming bodies, and the potential ways in which a reclamation and healing of these bodies can be realised through the agency of an individual.



Kris Grey



Kris Grey

**"My chest has long been a sight of trauma and psychic energy. In 2010 when I had my top surgery there were 10 days between the removal and the reveal. During that time, I was bleeding through my bandages but I couldn't open them to see my chest. It was the only time in my memory that there was a part of my adult body I didn't know or couldn't see. I was having dreams in which I would be outside myself watching my chest weep blood. It terrified me. I told no one. After the bandages were off I felt a huge relief in being able to see my new chest. So much of trans\* experience is predicated on medicalization and pathology. In a way I wanted to open my own body to regain a sense of agency at a site of trauma...The way I've**

**acted on my body through the use of hormones and surgeries is a way for me to craft a queer form. But most of that alteration happens without witness and under the rule of medicalisation and pathology. This piece was a way for me to correct that for myself in front of witnesses... I wanted to literally open up wounds that had healed on my body to reactivate the psychic energy stored there. It was important to be able to share that energy with an audience, to have witnesses to this corporeal agency sited on a trans\* body. What I didn't expect is how far-reaching and profound the emotional effects would be on those who are close to me. One of my close friends traveled from Baltimore to be with me during the performance.**

**Because of the status of our relationship during my surgery, we were unable to be there for each other in 2010. Here we had the opportunity to revisit, cleanse, and heal. It was beautiful and profound."**

**— Kris Grey (excerpt from the artfile magazine article; Empowered Vulnerability authored by Alicia DeBrincat).**



Victoria Gray

What strikes me as most interesting and useful amongst these words so far, from the artists making up Gender: A Soapbox Session, is a collective acknowledgement or suggestion that at various points in all of our lives, many of us know so very little about (or feel we have the power to control) much of what – both internally and externally – occurs to our bodies.

Furthermore, what appears to be proposed through these textual recounts, is that many of us (all of us...?) have a profound requirement to explore life idiosyncratically as autonomous entities, while at the same time attempting to bridge such difference through collective, empathic sharing of our wholly unique experiences. Taking

this affective position as a given, ]ps[ Occupation1 participant, Victoria Gray (artist, erstwhile academic, writer and empath) responds to the question; Why do you think it is important for artists to be afforded time, space, support and resources via artist residencies to develop new work?, with her invocation of 'a quiet theory of loud mobilization'.

**"As an independent artist, unsupported by an institution or gallery, time, space, resources and support are luxuries that my art practice is little able to afford. Despite this lack, art insists on happening, and yet, I feel it is important not to romanticise this financial and institutional**

**precariousness, nor to assume that precarity is political in and of itself. In theory (and there is much of this), a politics of radical precarity is too often posited in the abstract, by those theorists whose social, political and economic status is far from precarious in actual fact. In September 2013, I made a decision to resign from my post within the Higher Education institution as a Senior Lecturer in Performance, the result being that of many losses; a regular salary, access to private healthcare, resources, independent research funding, PhD research funding and arguably, a loss of the social**

**and cultural validation that an institutional title afforded. Despite these losses, resignation became an affirmative and performative action. Paradoxically, my body's absence and removal activated 'a quiet theory of loud mobilization' (Sloterdijk) and actualised my political feeling which had been silenced in relationship to the power of institutions on a macro scale. This experience has affected my body and subjectivity in very concrete ways, both physical and emotional, and has had a profound impact on my art practice and daily life, destabilizing both in ways I have both feared and welcomed. My practice right now is therefore cut loose, at sea, lost – it is**

**trying to understand how not to make work about politics but how to make work politically, how to conceive of affect in performance as a political force which can be felt by the gut, and not just theorised in the abstraction of critical theory. I seek to body forth the emotional, subjective and often abject dimensions of affective experience without fear, since at this time, not using this material is a luxury I cannot afford.'**

— Victoria Gray

Gray's words illustrate the all too familiar 'precarity' felt by most practicing artists and harks back to the words of Kate Bornstein where they declare; 'Let's stop pretending that we have all the answers...', in

an honest decree of openness and vulnerability. In order for any creative individual to produce work of exceptional merit such openness is of course required, an openness that is pluralistically intellectual, emotional, temporal and spatial. Quite often, if not always, this state engenders a complex vulnerability and locates an individual in a position of questioning and unknowing. The ]ps[ Occupations (1: September-November 2014 & 2: January-March 2015) endeavour to nurture these delicate states openness by providing time, space and resources tailored to each artists research and way of being in the world. Paz acknowledges the importance of this and quietly reminds us that to exist is to take risks and that we all share in this risky business of living...



Victoria Gray



Fabiola Paz

"Why support risk or risk taking in our culture? Because we must! Without risk we, society as a whole, would take twice as long to get anywhere. Risk is the foundation of creativity. It conceives possibilities. It is a form of political force as well as a creative one. The personal is also political because it's the thing that gets hurt, injured, touched and thus carries the ability and drive to make things happen. Being in the world is risky, we have to support each other through it. This to me is why artistic residencies are important. They allow artists a window through which to explore and question, take risks, personal ones that in the long run will be shared with others. They offer artists a safe place in which to explore their practices; which in my case is always shared. It is a collection of acts of occupation, of affects, which need housing and rehousing in order to connect. The art will always be there for the artist (who wants to see it). The question is, can the artists afford the means in which to share it. To turn the art into a collective affair."

– Fabiola Paz

The personal is political. We must risk in order to grow. Performance Art Faction draws together a chorus of voices making sure that these timely proclamations are heard. With the single aim of reawakening the innate political potential of ALL our bodies, Performance Art Faction is a call to arms. You have a body. What do you do with it?



Fabiola Paz

What will you do with it now?

*Gender: A Soapbox Session* launches on Thursday the 18th of September at 7pm with artists Amber Hawk Swanson, Kris Grey and Hugh O'Donnell.

[www.amberhawkswanon.com](http://www.amberhawkswanon.com)

[www.kristingrey.com](http://www.kristingrey.com)

[www.platformartsbelfast.com/hugh-odonnell](http://www.platformartsbelfast.com/hugh-odonnell)

Fabiola Paz & Victoria Gray will be in residence for the *[ps] Occupation* for Sept, Oct and Nov 2014. Residency outcomes will be exhibited in the final 2 weeks of Nov 2014.

[www.fabiolapaz.com](http://www.fabiolapaz.com)

[www.victoriagray.co.uk](http://www.victoriagray.co.uk)

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**Amber Hawk Swanson**

**Hugh O'Donnell**

**Kris Grey**

**Fabiola Paz**

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