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Between Certain Death and a Possible Future¹

Blacklips Performance Cult's Post-Apocalyptic Queer Futurity

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Borrowing its title from Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore's anthology about the experience of growing up with the AIDS crisis, the following text provides a glimpse into New York City's experimental drag scene and late-night culture in the early 1990s. It introduces the work of Blacklips Performance Cult, a group founded by ANOHNI, Johanna Constantine, and Psychotic Eve in 1992, and presents their gory, monster camp plays as a form of worldmaking in response to the cosmic grief of mass queer death in the wake of the epidemic that decimated the East Village arts community in the preceding decade.



Howie Pyro and Kabuki Starshine in *Frankenstein*, 1993. Photo: Marti Wilkerson

¹ The title of this essay is borrowed from the anthology *Between Certain Death and a Possible Future: Queer Writing on Growing Up with the AIDS Crisis*, edited by Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2021)

The day before Halloween, I had the chance to spend an evening with Blacklips Performance Cult, an experimental theatre troupe I hadn't known before. As part of the *Modern Mondays* series, The Museum of Modern Art screened a video of their 1993 play *Frankenstein*.² Later, I learned that it was one of around 150 shows the group – comprised of 13 artists³ in their early twenties – staged during its three-year lifespan between 1992 and 1995 at the Pyramid, a legendary nightclub in New York City's East Village. During this short time, they performed a brand new surreal, gory psychodrama almost every Monday night at 1 am, turning the dive bar, that had been a hub for a new generation of drag artists since its opening in 1981 on Avenue A, into the hotbed of trans punk theatricality, apocalyptic aesthetics, and queer history. This essay is intended to offer a taste of Blacklips' dark, monster camp universe, also to those who are not familiar with New York's late-night culture and queer underground that, at the peak of the AIDS crisis, was haunted by grief and death. Through their work and some of my adventures in the city's archives, museums and gay bars over the past few months, I would like to draw upon the importance of trans-generational knowledge sharing and the necessity of history in queer worldmaking.

Blacklips was co-founded by the now world-famous visual artist, musician and playwright ANOHNI with performance artists Johanna Constantine and Psychotic Eve. ANOHNI, alongside photographer and former group member Marti Wilkerson, started processing the troupe's archive during the Covid-19 pandemic. The fruit of their work over the past few years is the beautiful and heavy album *Blacklips: Her Life and Her Many, Many Deaths*. The book came out in March 2023 and it was preceded by an exhibition series, curated by ANOHNI, that explored Blacklips' legacy in the Lower East Side gallery, Participant Inc. The screening was followed by a talk with the artists and Lia Gangitano, the aforementioned gallery's founder/director, who wrote the book's introductory essay. The noisy and sometimes hard-to-understand, at once funny and moving footage, paired with the subsequent discussion – that was so bizarre and felt like we were still in a Blacklips play – prompted me to dive deeper into the group's otherworldly herstory populated by “post-everything gender mutants.”⁴

The 64-minute video, containing many close-ups, is more of a hint at how Blacklips artists interpreted Mary Shelley's novel. It begins with the dream of Mary, performed by the piece's author, Wilkerson (aka Lost Forever in Blacklips). The dream is about a scientist, Victor

² 19 January 1993. Written by Lost Forever.

³ Blacklips core-members included ANOHNI, Johanna Constantine, Psychotic Eve, Hattie Hathaway, Sissy Fitt, James F. Murphy, Kabuki Starshine, Lily of the Valley, Filloyd, Lost Forever, Dr. Clark Render, Ebony Jett, and Lulu. Pearls, Herr Klunch, Mouse, Jake, Hellena Handbasket became core-participants later. Holly Ramos, Shecky, Ron Bloodsucker, Howie Pyro, the Stiffs, RuPaul, and many others made occasional “guest appearances.”

⁴ Benjamin Titera with ANOHNI, “Bloodbags and Beauty at the End of the Millennium,” in *Blacklips: Her Life and Her Many, Many Deaths*, Anthology Editions, 2023. p. 16.

Frankenstein, played by ANOHNI (in her Blacklips persona called Fiona Blue), “whose use of excessive knowledge became addictive to the point of mindlessness.” It is a story of a monster coming to life. The creature (Frankenstein) is played by the punk rocker Howie Pyro and later in the play his Bride is brought to life by the beautiful make-up artist, Kabuki Starshine. In the meantime, two insomniac junkies storm into the scientist’s laboratory and shoot up on *Sister Morphine*, sung by Sissy Fitt. When they see the green-headed Frankenstein rising to life with a bloody open wound on his forehead they start screaming, which scares the monster and makes him run away. Then Johanna Constantine (in the play, Elizabeth), who is one of the two junkies, asks the scientist how they will find the valium in the mayhem (caused by them), to which Victor obnoxiously responds, “Is that all you have to say to me, you chloral hydrate whore?” and kills her. Speaking of death, by the end of the show, all the characters die – like in most Blacklips plays. The main part of the piece is the torture of Frankenstein. Throughout his journey, the monster gets tormented in various ways, they burn him with cigarettes, they bully him, and they humiliate him in the outside world. The final scene, although the same as the original, brings an unexpected twist to what has been a rather funny show until that point. The story’s last two survivors, the scientist and the monster, are in the North Pole and when ANOHNI (as Fiona Blue, as Dr. Frankenstein) starts to sing the final song in her subtle yet unwavering voice, by the end of which both of them freeze to death, people start crying in the audience – not only in the Pyramid, but also at MoMA.

ANOHNI sang many of her eerily beautiful ballads, such as *Cripple and the Starfish*, *Rapture*, and *Blue Angel* which she later performed worldwide, for the first time in these performances. In an interview, she says that her goal was “to make everyone who was drunk or on Special K in the club cry in three minutes” to see if she could “get them to have a really intense emotional experience that sort of disoriented them, in an environment where you’re not supposed to have anything but cynical or guarded expressions of emotion.”⁵ But ANOHNI wasn’t the only one with a particular singing talent, and this is evidenced – together with the video documentation of the shows – also in the music album *Blacklips Bar: Androgyns and Deviants – Industrial Romance for Bruised and Battered Angels, 1992-1995*,⁶ which was released with the book last March. Besides the virtuosic numbers of the young artists who were just stretching their wings in these plays, I was mesmerised also by their intentionally “bad acting,” the dramatic, exaggerated gestures and the DIY costumes made of garbage and glued together with electric tape, that can be clearly seen in the videos and the photos, too. It is also hard not to notice, as it creates an interesting contrast with the sheer professionalism of certain performative and visual elements – like, for example, the surrealistic make-up – that the actors pass a single microphone to each other and they often read their lines from a piece of paper. This was partly because they staged a new play every week, always written

⁵ Charlotte Gush, “Inside the East Village’s surreal 90s ‘performance cult’,” *i-D*, <https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/ake59k/black-lips-anohni-interview> (last accessed 12 January 2024).

⁶ See: <https://anthologyrecordings.bandcamp.com/album/blacklips-bar-androgyns-and-deviants-industrial-romance-for-bruised-and-battered-angels-1992-1995> (last accessed 17 January 2024).

by a different member, and the performers often saw the script for the first time the afternoon before the show.

Art is about being fake but art is a lie that tells the truth (...) The shows have allowed me to escape my daily troubles and Blackclippers are plagued with troubles and the demons inside others... I walk to the Pyramid in drag and people scream at me in the street... so when I get in front of a paying audience⁷ it feels like I'm taking a bubble bath... but we all have our separate moments to cleanse ourselves in the spotlight.⁸ (Kabuki Starshine)

They were not particularly interested in acting and pretending, or in convincing, naturalistic drama – although Kabuki Starshine once forced an opaque egg membrane over her cornea just because she wanted to look blind.⁹ The script provided a loose structure to each member for doing what they really wanted – in ANOHNI's case, it was singing.¹⁰ The characters in the shows were, at best, in line with the archetypes the members had already represented. ANOHNI calls the technique, relying on the performer's agency, "auto-performance."¹¹ This was not the only inspiration they drew from the filmmaker and performance artist Jack Smiths who had died of AIDS by the time they came to the city, but also in finding treasure in things that others considered rubbish. They worked from what they found and what was available to them, and it resulted in a kind of heavy beauty camp that "was only legible to those who had lived it, and who felt it. To everyone else, the look appeared to be an impenetrable and repellent armor."¹² Blacklips Performance Cult's weekly worldbuilding rhymes with what José Esteban Muñoz calls disidentification. Disidentificationary performances, according to Muñoz, deconstruct majoritarian culture and use its pieces as raw material to make new worlds in an attempt to empower minority identities and identifications and, through offering alternative views of reality that have been unthinkable by the dominant culture, they establish the groundwork for potential oppositional counterpublics.¹³

But what were the Blackclippers surrounded by in the early 1990s?

⁷ ANOHNI recalled at MoMA that each member earned ca. \$5 a week from Blacklips performances. ANOHNI and Marti Wilkerson in conversation with Lia Gangitano, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 30 October 2023.

⁸ Robert O'Haire, "Interview with the Blacklips Performance Cult in 1994 for Juicy Magazine," formerly accessed on Blacklips Performance Cult Online Archive.

⁹ Titera with ANOHNI, p. 18.

¹⁰ ANOHNI and Marti Wilkerson in conversation with Lia Gangitano.

¹¹ Titera with ANOHNI, pp. 18-19.

¹² Ibid, p. 19.

¹³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, University of Minnesota Press 1999, p. 196.

The renowned “East Village scene,” in the history of which this generation wrote the last chapter before the neighbourhood’s gentrification began, was a fluid, multi-directional and informally structured cultural movement, gathering artists living and working in the cheap apartments in downtown Manhattan. Besides affordable housing, a number of factors played a part in the formation of this multidisciplinary, close-knit community who made the years between the late 1970s to the early 1990s one of the most creative and vibrant periods in the history of New York City. From the presence of European émigrés and post-Vietnam War disillusionment, to the fear of nuclear war. Aware of the failures of modernist revolutions, East Village artists were critical not only of American values but also of artistic conventions and genre boundaries. Instead of galleries and institutions, they congregated in clubs, where not only art, theatre, punk rock, graffiti, disco and activism intersected, but the lines between art and everyday life were also blurred. Fashion and dressing up played a particular role, too, because it allowed for the creation of new identities and alter egos, through which one could bypass normative social and gender roles.

The AIDS crisis has undoubtedly had a serious impact on the scene, too. The first article about a rare, rapidly fatal type of cancer that mostly affected gay men, appeared in the *New York Times* as early as 1981.¹⁴ But the virus that these cases have later been described as the complications of, due to presidential ignorance, spread so quickly that, by the end of the decade, AIDS decimated the East Village artist community. It must have been an incomprehensible trauma to witness whole circles of friends die from a long mysterious illness. At the same time, this loss provoked infinitely profound and poignant responses in the arts and brought even more attention to the importance of togetherness and presence. Like-minded artists, such as Klaus Nomi, the new wave opera singer with *black lips*, or Ethyl Eichelberger, experimental theatre maker and drag artist, had died from AIDS one after another. By the time *Blacklips* came, a large part of the East Village scene had vanished into a rapidly fading memory. Jack Smith’s estate was stuffed into trash bags in a friend’s basement and a few original David Wojnarowicz photographs were laying on the sidewalk, waiting to be picked up by an alert passer-by.¹⁵

Arriving in New York City, ANOHNI and her friends found themselves in a post-apocalyptic landscape where anxiety arose not only from the absence of the previous generation but also from climate change that began to penetrate the public consciousness in the early 1990s. Not to mention the sickening hatred and violence emanating toward them from the conservative, Christian right that used AIDS (and abortion) for the pejorative social representation of the queer and the arts community. Back then, being queer, in the eyes of the dominant culture was equivalent to being a

¹⁴ Lawrence K. Altman, “Rare Cancer in 41 Homosexuals,” *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/07/03/us/rare-cancer-seen-in-41-homosexuals.html> (last accessed 17 January 2024).

¹⁵ ANOHNI told both stories at MoMA after the screening. It was performance artist and writer Penny Arcade who rushed into Jaffa Café one night and told ANOHNI that she had been struggling to save the late Jack Smith’s estate, of which she indeed took care of for a long time. The alert passer-by who found an original Wojnarowicz on the street was ANOHNI. ANOHNI and Marti Wilkerson in conversation with Lia Gangitano, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 30 October 2023.

monster. It was also not uncommon that horror movies or newspaper articles portrayed gay men as a group of predatory, vampiric creatures, who recruit their allies by transforming “normal” human beings through an exchange of bodily fluids.¹⁶ But instead of rejecting the role of the monster that society offered them, Blacklips took it to the extreme. Their performances gave birth to nonconformist, counter-hegemonic, and empowering queer monsters who were happy to be outsiders. “The plays were almost like group therapy, a group of marginalized people exorcising the hatred society wanted them to internalize and throwing it back at the world.”¹⁷ If they were not about monsters, they retold horror stories like Jack the Ripper or the Manson killing spree, with bloody scenes and spectacular massacres that rarely had any survivors. Once the performers threatened the audience that they would set the club on fire, another time they threw raw meat at them.¹⁸ According to Benjamin Titera, the author of the book’s main essay, these were “a reminder Blacklips was not merely spectacle or ornamentation, but reality thrown in your face”¹⁹ and this is also how they earned their trademark tagline, “Bloodbags and Beauty.”²⁰



Johanna Constantine in *13 Ways to Die*, 1995. Photo: Art L'Hommedieu

¹⁶ Harry Morgan Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (dissertation), University of Southern California, California, 1996, p. 222-223.

¹⁷ Amelia Abraham, “The story of radical East Village art gang Blacklips, as told by ANOHNI,” *Dazed*, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/58426/1/blacklips-anohni-radical-east-village-90s-art-collective> (last accessed 17 January 2024).

¹⁸ The play where the performers threw meat at the audience was *Charlie’s Angels*, a retelling of the Manson killings, a series of murders perpetrated by the Manson family within a few days in the summer of 1969 in Los Angeles, California. 22 March 1993. Written by Psychotic Eve.

¹⁹ Benjamin Titera, *Blacklips Performance Cult: Bloodbags and Beauty at the End of the Millennium* (MA Thesis), The New School for Social Research, New York, p. 65.

²⁰ Titera, p. 11.

Today we would give less significance to it, but in the early 1990s, calling themselves a cult rather than a troupe could also be regarded as subversive. It was a member named Flloyd who began calling Blacklips a cult, first as a joke, after American television had broadcast the deadly siege of an armed religious sect called the Branch Davidians in Waco by Texas law enforcement on April 28, 1993. They soon realised that the word suggested a threat in the public mind, and thus, it could offer them symbolic defence: being a member of a cult was a way of survival, a response to a world where, for most of them, there was no obvious way forward. They were not searching for stardom or escape. They were doing it for themselves and each other, explains ANOHNI.²¹

Furthermore, the “cult status” brings to mind the radicalism of the queercore movement in Toronto in the 1980s that found its way also into the art communities of Los Angeles and San Francisco, where ANOHNI and Johanna Constantine spent their teenage years. At the time of writing this text, the exhibition *Copy Machine Manifestos: Artists Who Make Zines* is on view at the Brooklyn Museum (until 31 March 2024), with a whole section dedicated to the movement. Among the presented works is, for example, Scott Treleaven’s occult queer punk video *This Is the Salvation Army* (2002) which tells the story of three gay friends in the 1990s, who recruit followers through a zine called *The Salvation Army* to spark a revolution against the heteronormative majority and the bourgeois gay scene. Queercore – and, although not directly but to a certain extent, Blacklips’ obscure camp sensibility, too – responds to the emergence of a less radical, assimilationist trend within the gay scene that Lisa Duggan has later described as “homonormativity.” This trend breaks with the countercultural rhetoric of the queer community and doesn’t automatically distance itself from the dominant ideology and its hierarchical and competitive ideals. It also involves a new strain of gay moralism that, partially as a reaction to HIV and AIDS, expresses disapproval, for example, of “promiscuity” and the so-called “gay lifestyle,” and advocates for gay and lesbian marriage.²² The works of Canadian artist and filmmaker Bruce LaBruce – who started the movement in the mid-1980s by launching the J.D.s zine with G.B. Jones, and thus, also featured in the exhibition – comment on this prudery. Most of his works combine gay porn with terrorist chic and radical aesthetics, but he has two films – which I saw earlier, not at the exhibition – that draw inspiration from 1970s B-movie slasher and gore flicks, both telling the story of a gay zombie, who is infinitely lonely. Similarly to Blacklips’ *Frankenstein*, these monsters are outcasts, but, according to LaBruce, the society that rejects them is so sick that, for him, these creatures represent hope and a more authentic way of being.²³

²¹ Sahir Ahmed, “Avenue A’s Surreal Performance Cult,” *Office Magazine*, <https://officemagazine.net/avenue-surreal-performance-cult> (last accessed 17 January 2024).

²² Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, Boston 2003, p. 44.

²³ See, Gyula Muskovics, *A person who functions normally in a sick society is himself sick* (Manuscript, 2020), https://gyulamuskovics.com/files/gyula%20muskovics_cruising_docx.pdf (last accessed 17 January 2024).

Blacklips plays brought into the world a multitude of monsters to offer a more realistic view on the present by challenging the false beliefs and binary dichotomies society is still being ruled by. Their horrific and often hysterical drag personas undermined not only the categories of gender but also that of human, non-human, living, and dead. While they ended up every Monday night as a pile of dead bodies on the stage of the Pyramid in front of a few people in the audience – although, some of those people drove two hours from Upstate New York to see the show that ended at 3 am – the discourse around identity as a social construct, and in particular, the role of clothing in the expression of gender and sexuality, started to emerge also on the more institutional levels of the art world.

One of the first major exhibitions in the US to deal with drag and cross-dressing was *Dress Codes* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston in 1993 and it was co-curated by Gangitano. This was, for example, the first major institutional appearance of Vaginal Davis, then based in Los Angeles, who Muñoz described in his previously mentioned book about “disidentification” as the progenitor of “terrorist drag,” referring to Davis’ uncompromising queer punk aesthetics.²⁴ *Patina du Prey's Memorial Dress* by Hunter Reynolds was also created for this exhibition. Reynolds, then living in New York and HIV+ since 1988, silk-screened the names of thousands of people who had died of AIDS onto a black ball gown. The artist, wearing this dress as Patina du Prey in Japanese-style make-up with a teardrop under her eye, performed a turning dervish dance on a rotating podium for five hours every day. Later, he performed the piece in different cities around the world, including New York, The Hague, and Berlin. Patina du Prey, his drag persona, who had been around already before the Boston show, kept appearing in various contexts, on the street, in galleries and in nightclubs, and, as time went on, acquired more and more dresses. Whenever the *Memorial Dress* was exhibited, next to the living sculpture visitors could write the names of their friends and relatives who had died of AIDS in a notebook and Reynolds would later add them to the list on the dress. In 1996 he published a book, too, with the names and the heartbreaking messages collected over the years. Although less eccentric, Reynolds’ work is similarly dark and melancholic as Blacklips’ performances. While browsing his papers and ephemera at Fales Library – housing the largest archive of New York’s downtown arts community at New York University – Reynolds’ work seemed relevant also because, similarly to Blacklips, he was trying to fill the empty space in the wake of AIDS, to maintain a kind of continuity in the city’s suddenly disrupted queer history.

The reason I am drawing attention to these less obvious connections is that Gangitano and Titera have already named a number of queer artists and experimental theatre makers – such as The Cockettes or Hot Peaches – whose family tree Blacklips could be placed in. I also wanted to offer a few glimpses into the wider context that surrounded them. But the best place to find their “ancestors” (and peers) is certainly the Pyramid, or the nearby Club 57. In addition to Ethyl Eichelberger and Klaus Nomi, whom I mentioned earlier, Blacklips’ lineage might also include

²⁴ Muñoz, pp. 93-115.

Nomi's friend, Joey Arias, from the new wave band Strange Party, as well as Gerard Little aka Mr. Fashion, who made ball gowns out of garbage bags, dancer and avant-garde costume designer Shawn McQuate aka AMMO, the Dancenoise performance artist duo, painter and drag performer Tabboo!, performance artist John Kelly, and queercore artist Dean Johnson. All of these people were defining characters in the East Village club scene in the 1980s. Queens who grew up in the Pyramid include the now famous RuPaul and Lady Bunny, too. But we must also mention Brian Butterick aka Hattie Hathaway, the co-founder and the manager of the club, who gave the group the Monday night slots and eventually became a core-member in Blacklips. A few years ago, in a panel accompanying the exhibition *Club 57: Film, Performance, and Art in the East Village 1978-1983* at MoMA, Butterick used the term "deconstructivist drag" to describe the gender performances of the artists whose legacy Blacklips continued. According to Butterick, the East Village drag community stood in stark contrast to what drag had become in Manhattan by then, referring to the queens who were parodying women in the male-only gay bars of the West Village.²⁵



Johanna Constantine wearing the *Toast Dress*. Photo: Paul Brissman

²⁵ *Gender Play: Social Spheres and Art in 1980s New York*, Panel discussion with Brian Butterick aka Hattie Hathaway, Peter Cramer, Rafael Sánchez, and Jack Water, moderated by Sur Rodney (Sur). The discussion was part of the conference *Performing Difference: Gender in the 1980s Downtown Scene*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 22 March 2018. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/embed/VPce1srfTwU> (last accessed 17 January 2024).

Wigstock, the annual “gathering” of the East Village drag scene, also grew out of the Pyramid and was held near the club in Tompkins Square Park from 1984 until the mid-1990s. Then the conservative Giuliani administration banned it from the park and it moved to the Hudson River, and thus lost its grassroots activist appeal. Blacklips first met Leigh Bowery at Wigstock. The performance artist, a fixture in London’s New Romantic club scene, was invited to perform there in 1993 and Blacklips hosted the afterparty that year. Bowery liked their show – the restaging of their earlier piece *Jack the Ripper* – so much that they even considered working together in the future.²⁶ However, as the British artist died of AIDS shortly afterwards, instead of performing together, what Blacklips could do was a Leigh Bowery memorial. Wigstock, a year earlier, was held not long after gay liberation, AIDS and transgender activist Marsha P. Johnson was found dead in the Hudson River on June 6, 1992. Initially, the New York City Police Department ruled it as a suicide but since then, following controversy and protest, the case has been re-opened as a possible murder.²⁷ A few days after the incident, ANOHNI, with Johanna Constantine and Psychotic Eve, marched down Christopher Street in a wedding veil and held a small ceremony on the pier where Johnson’s body was pulled out of the water. Two months later at Wigstock, expressing her feelings about what was happening around them, she appeared with a wire halo on her head, wearing a home-made T-shirt with the sentence “My Cock Is Riddled With Maggots” written on it, while handing out flyers with a drawing of a transsexual mutant with bulletproof tits screaming “I Will Murder You,” and the date and time of Blacklips’s next show – that, by the way, nobody attended.²⁸ Later, they staged the play *The Ascension of Marsha P. Johnson*,²⁹ and ANOHNI commemorates the activist also with the name of her more music oriented formation following Blacklips, The Johnsons.

As the above shows, Blacklips was surrounded by devastation and the raw material for their performances was grief and queer death. Wherever they looked, they saw gaping emptiness and this is why catastrophe and decay permeate the cult’s entire world. But as Titera and Gangitano point out in the book, this absence was generative in their case. Decay and loss could actually propagate new queer life and, besides painful forgetting, within the cracks they found opportunities for radical queer productivity.³⁰ By evoking key figures in queer history in their plays, such as Johnson, Nomi,

²⁶ Titera, pp. 56-58.

²⁷ Marsha P. Johnson was an important advocate for gay rights. She took part in the Stonewall uprising of 1969, was a co-founder of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and the activist group Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), together with Sylvia Rivera. Johnson was also active in New York City’s art scene. She modelled for Andy Warhol and appeared onstage with the drag performance troupe Hot Peaches.

²⁸ Titera with ANOHNI, p. 16.

²⁹ 22 March 1994. Written by ANOHNI.

³⁰ Titera, p. 24.

Smith or Warhol superstars, like Jackie Curtis and Candy Darling, Blacklips sought to bridge the gaps, preserving a legacy that was still within their reach. This suggested, as Gangitano writes, a “new version of post-apocalyptic expectancy” and a wish to counterbalance “the increasingly death embracing apathy of society at large.”³¹ A hope, in the longer term, for a different future, and for finding a family:

“I moved to New York City for a family,” said ANOHNI after the screening at MoMA.

*We didn't just fly toward the bright lights. We fled our families of origin, our towns of origin, our states of origin. You know, in a very practical way. Like we were told that there is no room at the inn for you. There is no room in our family. There is no room in this church for you. There is no job for you in this society. But if you go to New York, there are perverts and late night places and festering corners where you might find joy and community. And we eroticized and we sort of perfumed those dreams that were served to us by our family and our culture. I felt like I was going toward something that I had always wanted. It's amazing that I was hypnotized into not realizing that I was being thrown out of the rest of society. You know... finding my home on the end of an abandoned pier sucking a homeless dick. (...) This was where I belonged, at the end of the world, in a place that no one else wanted. The heterosexual world didn't want this place. It was an unmonetized space and therefore it was safe for someone like me. And I found that to be a paradise and it became my paradigm for a spiritual universe.*³²

A month later, sitting with a guy named Chris in Tompkins Square Park, ANOHNI's words echoed in my head. Earlier that night, we were at The Cock on 2nd Avenue, which celebrated its 25th anniversary. The club, originally on the corner of Avenue A and 12th Street, opened shortly after the AIDS drug cocktail had been approved by the Food and Drug Administration in 1996. To people living with HIV, for the first time since the early 1980s, it meant that they could survive and gay men didn't have to worry anymore that sex would have serious and fatal consequences. Its founder Mario Diaz's mission was to breathe new life into the city's sexual underground at a time when New York nightlife was at a real low point because, by the mid-1990s, the club-kid world had lost its appeal. The bar, with its artsy punk crowd, open seven days a week, was all about sex. A party host at the club, cabaret legend Justin Vivian Bond fondly remembers the big load and tasty dick contests in an oral history – which is in itself a riot – recently published in *Interview Magazine*.³³ Since we got there a bit early and there was barely anyone inside, apart from a couple of guys

³¹ Lia Gangitano, “Toward an AIDS Theater / Toward an Anthropocene Theater: Blacklips Performance Cult,” in *Blacklips: Her Life and Her Many, Many Deaths*, Anthology Editions, 2023. p. 8.

³² ANOHNI and Marti Wilkerson in conversation with Lia Gangitano.

³³ Michael Bullock, “An Oral History of The Cock, NYC's Sexiest Sloppiest Gay Bar,” *Interview Magazine*, <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/an-oral-history-of-the-cock-nycs-sexiest-sloppiest-gay-bar> (last accessed 17 January 2024).

standing on the dance floor as if waiting for someone to give them head, we went out for a few more beers in the park.

At one point Chris asked, “Are you on PrEP?” and I said, “I am not.” As a gay man with multiple (and often new) sex partners, I am not on PrEP – the medication that prevents the spread of HIV. It is fine and I am not the only one, but I have come to realise that part of the reason I do not take PrEP is that Hungarian health insurance, unlike many countries around us, does not cover it and so it would cost about a half a month’s salary. Even if you want to get tested for STDs, you can easily end up feeling trapped in a maze, not knowing where to go and whom to ask, let alone that the sexually transmitted diseases division in hospitals and health clinics is usually merged into the dermatology department. For what reason? I have no idea. Nothing shows better than this, however, that sex, and queer sex in particular, is still taboo in Hungary. And, at an institutional-official level, it will remain so, because the ruling Fidesz government has been working for the last thirteen years, with its hypocritical propaganda, to cement a Christian, patriarchal value system that presents the nuclear family as the only option for a healthy life. A few months ago, for instance, the director of the National Museum in Budapest was fired because he failed to put up a sign preventing access to visitors under 18 to the Word Press Photo exhibition that featured one photograph of gay men! This was possible thanks to the so-called “child protection law” that came into force in 2021 in Hungary to ban the “promotion” of gender reassignment and homosexuality to juveniles in schools, cultural institutions or even bookshops. Today, if someone wants to read Oscar Wilde in Hungary, they have to go to a separate section in the bookstore where the “age-restricted” books are kept, wrapped in plastic foil, so it is impossible to open them and let the poisonous content come out. What is this all about if not to disconnect us from our past and, as a consequence, from each other? And what effect will this have on future generations?

With this, I wouldn’t like to diminish the community I am part of and that inspires and gives meaning to my work in Budapest, to which I will soon go back. In fact the underground scene, with its pop-up exhibitions, performances, and illegal raves, has a crucial role in countercultural survival and resistance and for the last couple of years I have been trying to spread the word about this community to as many places as possible.³⁴ But when I saw the video on the giant screen at MoMA – that was, by the way, recorded with a hand-camera ANOHNI bought from her salary as a midnight waitress at Jaffa Café and they documented the plays mostly for themselves and not for the purpose of showing them 30 years later at the Museum of Modern Art – I felt a rare sense of belonging. I felt not only at home, but also being part of a family and a history, among people like me, who are looking for what I am looking for and who see the world as I do. And, undoubtedly, in

³⁴ See, for example, my article “To find a world, maybe you have to have lost one. Maybe you have to be lost,” *CTM Magazine*, <https://www.ctm-festival.de/magazine/to-find-a-world> (last accessed 17 January 2024). The piece introduces Budapest’s underground arts community and experimental electronic music scene and aims to counter the “Western narrative” that focuses mostly on how oppressive the Fidesz government is and less on what artists are actually doing in Hungary.

our history, even though we talk less about it in Hungary, the loss caused by AIDS plays a decisive role.

AIDS is a transgenerational trauma.

Unlike those who came of age in the midst of the epidemic, like the members of Blacklips, I did not grow up with the fear that, just because I am gay, I will die of AIDS. But I did know that many people like me died that way, and so, strangely, I could identify with this death more easily than with many other things society had offered me. Of course, it had something to do with the fact that on TV you could see more stories about gay men in New York than in Hungary, where AIDS never reached such critical proportions as it did in the United States – and this was the case in most Eastern European countries around that time. While the queer rewriting of history back home is my generation's responsibility, Blacklips, and many like-minded visionary artists, thinkers and activists in New York City saw no alternative but to collect the scraps of our community left behind by the mass disaster and try to piece them back together. The outcome, at once living and dead, may seem monstrous, like Dr. Frankenstein's creature, but "between certain death and a possible future," it speaks to me in the present.

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