



# Hands-On

Molly Lowe's all-too-human creations

BY WENDY VOGEL

"I'VE BEEN THINKING a lot about *Double Dare* and pupu platters," Molly Lowe admits, circling the custom-built stage for her performance *Hands Off*. The New York-based artist describes herself as both "ashamed and proud to be a pretty hardcore surrealist," one trying to update the modernist movement's mandate of radical aesthetic juxtaposition for a 21st-century audience both enthralled and disturbed by technology's effects on the body. In Lowe's weird world, the Surrealists' chance meeting of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table is updated for the age of the meme. Referents like *Double Dare*, a Nickelodeon children's obstacle-course show, and the American-Chinese appetizer tray are just two recurring, circulating icons in her raunchy, funny, sexy vocabulary.

*Hands Off* premiered in New York in November as part of the fifth Performa

biennial, which not coincidentally adopted Surrealism as its historical touchstone. In Lowe's temporary studio at Brooklyn's Pioneer Works, she explains the dramatic action that will unfold on her set. Three actors in full-body vinyl costumes resembling grotesque hands—their heads and each limb a finger, with extra phalanges attached to their backs—enact behaviors of self-destruction in four movements. "I've wanted to make a rotating set for a really long time," Lowe explains, invoking maypoles and carousels as inspiration for the set's circular form. "I like the idea of these ritualistic things, like maypoles, that seem harmonious, and then fucking with them." Her characters, tethered to the stage, are absorbed in individual, selfish acts—watching porn, stealing someone's identity, playing a school-shooting video game, and drinking, all while watching provocative video footage of other hand-creatures. At the

culmination of the performance, the hands gather at the center of the stage for one choreographed, orgiastic sequence before slumping back to their corners to engage with their personalized screens. "Everyone is like a cog on a wheel. They're all unaware of each other, but together, they're making this thing happen. But it's not even a glorious thing," Lowe says. "What are they doing together except consuming and indulging in these emotional attacks on themselves?"

Working with sculpture, video, installation, and performance, Lowe explores, with no small measure of humor, technology and the media's warping of human interactions. Her longest video, *Cycle*, 2012, could be summarized as a wordless, sexualized version of the *Hunger Games* trilogy. Figures in a quasi-apocalyptic landscape engage in game show-style physical challenges, from trying to copulate inside a giant plastic

Still from *Cycle*, 2012. HD video, 20 min.

MOLLY LOWE

suit to skimming across a lake in floating plastic pods. The characters occupy a zone somewhere between cyborg and cartoon: Clad head to toe in nude bodysuits, their faces, butt cracks, nipples, and pubes are scrawled on with a pen.

This masking of a person, transforming him or her from an individual to a type, is crucial to Lowe's narrative project. So, too, is the televisual manufacture of drama like that in competitive reality shows. The artist returns multiple times to the idea of the "cannibalistic cooking show," where, she says, contestants invest their emotional energy into the preparation of food to a frightening degree, to the point where they're "cooking themselves. It's like, 'Here's my heart in a dish. How does it taste?'"

This identification of people with food, which dovetails with sexual fantasy, factors prominently in many of her works. In *Formed*, a seven-minute video created for SculptureCenter's 2013 "Double Life" exhibition, material transformations evoke emotions from sadness to disgust. In one sequence, a glistening fake brain is sliced open, exposing an interior of runny, soft-boiled eggs; in another, a clay mouth opens to reveal broken keyboard keys as teeth. A subsequent video from the same year, *Love*, features figures in lumpy masks exploring the highs and lows of Eros as they clumsily navigate technology. Their

faces transform into bright red, pulsating hearts and brains at the climax.

As a student, Lowe, before turning to video and performance, created absurdist sculptures that engaged in similar material morphings. Heineken bottles turn into geodes; an installation of a computer and desk chair resemble a medieval torture device; aluminum cans become penises. But, Lowe says, the photographic documentation of these



ABOVE:  
Lowe during  
a rehearsal  
for *Hands Off*,  
2013, a work  
commissioned  
for the fifth  
Performa  
biennial and  
shown at Temp  
Art Space  
in New York.

LEFT:  
Still from  
*Cycle*, 2012.





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objects always took precedence over their display. During a summer residency in Maine in 2008, Lowe says, she was encouraged by Liz Magic Laser, among others, to take up video. "They said my sculptures were dying to become animated, because my pictures of them were really theatrical."

Since then most of her work has been in video. The live performance *Hands Off*

marks a new departure. The work engages themes she has obliquely addressed before: technology as magic and the hand as a metonymic stand-in for the body in an age of digital technology. One influence on the performance is a book Lowe has of 19th-century illustrations of disembodied hands demonstrating what were then cutting-edge technologies as well as sleight-of-hand magic. It's not much of

a logical leap from yesterday's feats of manual dexterity to today's touch-screen devices that promise, in Lowe's words, "everything at your fingertips." The book's jumbling together of images appeals to her sense of montage. "It's very much how I edit. I think of it as shuffling," she said, describing a set of "tarot-style cards" with which she creates sketches of scenes.

Lowe's affinity for Surrealism, montage, and even observational comedy is, she grants, a little anachronistic. She resorts neither to the slickness of digital animations nor the obsolete imagery so prevalent in ironic Net art. If anything, her horror-show costumes, absurdist timing, and enthusiasm for utter grossness more closely align with that of her former Columbia professor, Jon Kessler, or even Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy, two other proponents of so-called clusterfuck aesthetics. She also shares with these artists an affinity for the abject. The set for *Hands Off* is, she says, "really bad design because it has the human element. It's not sleek. It's not efficient, I want it to be too close, for it to get under your skin."

She grasps after a "too human" feeling, which she calls a "kind of repulsive thing." When the audience descends to the basement stage of Temp Art Space to view *Hands Off*, their hands are squirted with sanitizer—an act the artist sees as at once violating and cleansing. Humans, in Lowe's world, are part of the embarrassing, sticky real world. She allows for certain messiness in her creative process too. Speaking of *Cycle*, Lowe recalls the editing process as "letting my subconscious run wild, thinking about my confusion of becoming a woman and being in society and reproducing." Lowe's very corporeal productions can be understood as standing against technology's sterile reproductions. **MP**

Documentation  
of sets from  
*Hands Off*, 2013.

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