Regressional Aesthetics: The Performances of Bryan Zanisnik
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Bryan Zanisnik's performances plumb the murky depths of the suburban adolescent unconscious. In them, the artist becomes the screen onto which we can collectively project our repressed psychosexual nightmares and fantasies. Over the past five years, Zanisnik has subjected himself to performative indignities such as having his head shaved and his hair taped to his father's head (*Unshaved Coiffure and Root,* 2010), smearing his half-naked body with peanut butter in front of a punk club crowd (*Hollow Man Levitate,* 2009), slow-dancing with his father while shoved inside a chest of drawers (*The Itinerant Chiffonier,* 2009), and standing motionless on an obsolete vibrating abdominal exercise machine belt for hours amid a heap of household junk (*The Valley of Ben Hinnom,* 2012). Such protracted, often uncomfortable actions test the limits of Zanisnik's slight physique and follow in the tradition of durational performance art. Yet these sculptural, *tableaux vivant*-like works distinguish themselves from the abject and masochistic performances of Marina Abramović and the Viennese Actionists, such as Hermann Nitsch. In scenarios leaning toward the grotesque, these artists used the "body as medium" to mirror the extremes of human experience, such as the animal sacrifices and sadomasochism of Nitsch's ritualistic "Orgiastic Mysteries Theatre," or Abramović's lengthy works for which she endures all matter of self-inflicted pain.

Zanisnik, by contrast, traffics in absurd humor rather than the deadly serious. And instead of functioning as set pieces for purely symbolic psychic dynamics, his performances reflect his own personal history—including the frequent appearance of his parents, a schoolteacher and businessman from suburban New Jersey. It is this charged familial dynamic surrounding his beta male, performative persona that allows Zanisnik, in redrawing the shaky boundary between art and everyday life, to articulate a regressional aesthetic.

Artists have long adopted an adolescent posture to critically examine American mass culture. In 1981, art historian Howard Singerman penned an essay for the California-based *REAL LIFE* magazine exploring the artist-as-adolescent phenomenon in recent performances by Chris Burden and Mike Kelley, who focused on science fiction, war toys and B movies.[1] As opposed to the 'childlike' modern artist, whose alienation from the world was justified as an extension of the Romantic myth of pure artistic genius, Singerman explained that the artist-as-adolescent is a thoroughly postmodern and democratic construction. The adolescent exhibits an "insistence on the self that is obsessive, willful and indistinguished," one that vacillates between childhood and adulthood. A slave to its impulses, the adolescent lacks both the distinction and restraint of adult society and the charming naïveté of childhood. In this sense, it is an avatar for conspicuous consumption and the desire for instant gratification in contemporary society.

The adolescent categorization certainly applies to Mike Kelley's prolific *oeuvre*. Detroit-

[1] Howard Singerman, "The Artist as Adolescent," in *Real Life Magazine: Selected Writing and Projects 1979-1994*, ed. Thomas Lawson and Susan Morgan (New York: Primary Information, 2007), 99-104.

born Kelley worked as a rebellious iconoclast, rejecting both his early 1970s academic training in abstract painting at the University of Michigan and the concurrent dominant trends in minimal and conceptual art. Eschewing stylized gestural motifs, post-industrial sculptural processes and austere conceptual aesthetics, Kelley incorporated "feminized" craft objects and "low-brow" figuration into his works, from rock n' roll graphics to comics and outsider iconography. He also reconsidered the relationships between aesthetic indoctrination, trauma theory, and repressed memory, deconstructing masculine gender stereotypes in a way that owed much to feminist concerns. In this way, Kelley was not so unlike his artistic peers Michael Smith and Paul McCarthy, who were also working in video and performance in the 1980s and 1990s. Since 1975, Smith has intermittently performed as the regressive character Baby Ikki, a mute 18-month-old clad in a diaper, bonnet and sunglasses who exhibits the energy, desire for attention and lack of moral compass characteristic of that developmental stage. McCarthy, meanwhile, produced disturbing, scatological videos as masked characters making a mess with ketchup and mayonnaise. Both men were indebted to transgressive public performances by feminist artists of the '70s like Eleanor Antin, Adrian Piper and Martha Wilson. These women created challenging male and female personae who "acted out" in public spaces, expressing the degree to which society self-polices gender roles in the public sphere.

A generation removed from these artists, Zanisnik's works reflect an era that sees even more cultural fragmentation, depoliticization and loss of grand narratives than the "schizophrenic" culture Fredric Jameson diagnosed over 20 years ago.[2] The seamless pastiches of Michael Smith's pathetic male character "Mike," who becomes the protagonist of mock infomercials and rock videos, exemplifies Jameson's postmodernism of reification via the need for constant self-reinvention. By contrast, Zanisnik's videos radically splice together competing narratives. In *Preserve* (2009), the artist's father is shown in a two-channel video giving tours of a natural history museum and his home; both the audio and video are remixed through rapid cuts, disorienting the viewer in time and space. Zanisnik's live performances, on the other hand, reference more closely the temporal structure of trauma, in which the victim pathologically relives a moment of humiliation, violence or abuse. In performance, Zanisnik does not so much adopt a pathetic male character as exaggerate his own physical inadequacies and failures to live up to the strapping male ideal.

His performances' sculptural settings, meanwhile, externalize and parody the neurotic subconscious of the token American male on the brink of maturity. Today, the popular press would have one believe that the very concept of "manhood" seems on the brink of collapse. Brash general-interest articles proclaim "The End of Men"[3] or ask "Where Have

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[2] Jameson claims that the postmodern crisis in historicity disrupts one's understanding of temporality, reducing a subject's reading of cultural production as "'heaps of fragments' and in a practice of the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and the aleatory." This aesthetic is likened to Lacan's description of schizophrenia "as a breakdown in the signifying chain, that is, the interlocking syntagmatic series of signifiers which constitutes an utterance of meaning." See *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 25-26.

[3] Hanna Rosin, "The End of Men," *The Atlantic* (July/August 2010), accessed February 20, 2012 <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/07/the-end-of-men/8135/>

All the Good Men Gone?"[4] Below the headlines, the writers give an ambivalent prognosis for the survival of traditional gender roles after 40-plus years of women's liberation and civil rights. In this social climate, Zanisnik's performative alter-ego's defensive and compulsive accumulations of generic sports memorabilia and obsession with body hair — cheap signifiers for the phallus that speak to repressed desires — appear as instinctual as Mike Smith's regression to a pre-verbal state as Baby Ikki in the theoretically inclined '80s. Many of Zanisnik's live performances take place in shabby man caves filled with tokens of heteronormative masculinity amid heaps of domestic wares, symbolizing the claustrophobic and obsessive nature of conspicuous consumption. But Zanisnik's actions, with a knowing nod to his artistic predecessors, speak to an ironic, even queered[5] performance of contemporary masculinity. The very title of Zanisnik's first performance, *He Is Not a Man* (2007), foreshadowed the artist's public humiliation, when he dramatically attempted to recreate his Ukrainian great-grandfather's fight with a wolf. Boxing his childhood bully dressed in a wolf's costume, he collapsed in defeat.

The 2009 addition of Zanisnik's biological parents to his *tableaux*—their slightly wooden performances as parents sometimes give way to actual *parenting*—underscores the Freudian dynamic of his scenarios. Although Zanisnik directed his parents to remain completely immobile during their first live performance (*When I Was a Child I Caught a Fleeting Glimpse,* 2009), their actions have since become more spontaneous. In *The Rise of the Alpha Male: A Cautionary Tale* from 2011, they wandered the audience clipping hair from participants, which would later be taped to Zanisnik's body. Their presence at the performance's conclusion next to Zanisnik, felled yet again after a boxing loss, elicits real sympathy. For the 2010 performance *After Klang and the Excise of Time,* his parents juxtaposed family photos on an overhead projector while Zanisnik ran on an adjacent treadmill. And in *The Valley of Ben Hinnom,* they acted entirely without direction. With their son strapped into an abdominal exercise belt, his head obscured by a tablecloth suspended from the ceiling, the parents rearranged artifacts from their garage. Rather than actors, they seemed at once the makers and guardians of their son's dreams, with all its attendant psychoanalytic implications.

In a recent photo essay for the online magazine *Triple Canopy*, Zanisnik writes on "The American Dream" in New Jersey's Meadowlands — the name of a planned megadevelopment in the area that seems predestined for financial and structural ruin. As the subconscious underbelly of success, Zanisnik claims that "'The American Dream' typically refers to aspirations for happiness and success, but in Freudian terms dreams are the operations of the unconscious. The latter sense of *dream* better suits the

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[4] Kay S. Hymowitz, "Where Have All the Good Men Gone?", *Wall Street Journal* (February 19, 2012), accessed February 21, 2012 <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704409004576146321725889448.html>

[5] As curator David Everitt Howe explains in the press release for Zanisnik's performance *The Rise of the Alpha Male: A Cautionary Tale* (June 4, 2011, Abrons Arts Center): "Bryan Zanisnik re-articulate[s] a fundamental definition of queerness. It's the distinct feeling of being unlike another — of being, acutely, non-normal. As literary critic Eve Sedgwick would claim, queerness stems from a kind of shameful dis-identification."

Meadowlands, since it's a landscape filled with the forgotten and the displaced—that is, everything that needs to be suppressed or removed from view for the 'ego' of Manhattan to keep functioning."[6] This symbiotic tie between the Meadowlands and Manhattan mirrors Zanisnik's own connection with his New Jersey childhood home. The relationship between suburban accumulation and urban efficiency, between sublimated desires and artistic form, between dreaming and waking life, remains at the heart of Zanisnik's regressional aesthetics. It is this swampy toxicity, a metaphor for the sticky adolescent subconscious, to which the artist must undoubtedly return.

[6] Bryan Zanisnik, "Beyond Passaic," *Triple Canopy* 15 (December 1, 2011), accessed February 27, 2012 <http://canopycanopycanopy.com/15/beyond_passaic>