

LIA GANGITANO
ANSWERED OUR
QUESTIONS
FOLLOWING
HER LECTURE AT
SHATTUCK ANNEX
ON OCTOBER 14,
2013.



[STUDIO] IS THE
DOCUMENT OF
PORTLAND STATE
UNIVERSITY'S
MFA STUDIO
VISITING ARTIST
LECTURE SERIES.

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In 2001, LIA GANGITANO founded PARTICIPANT INC, a not-for-profit art space on the Lower East Side of New York, presenting exhibitions by Virgil Marti, Charles Atlas, Kathie Burkhart, and Renée Green, among others. A former curator of Thread Waxing Space, NY, she is the editor of *Dead Flowers* (2010) and the forthcoming anthology *The Alternative to What? Thread Waxing Space and the '90s*. As associate curator for the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, she co-curated "Dress Codes" (1993) and "Boston School" (1995), and edited the publications *New Histories* (with Steven Nelson, ICA Boston, 1997) and *Boston School* (ICA Boston, 1995). She has contributed to publications including *The Sharpest Point: Animation at the End of Cinema*, *Whitney Biennial 2006-Day for Night* and *2012 Whitney Biennial*. She also has served as a Curatorial Advisor for P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center.

NEXT

EDITION OF [STUDIO]
Amanda Ross Ho • November 6, 2013

LECTURE
Sergei Tcherepnin • November 20, 2013
Shattuck Annex



[STUDIO] is a series of broadsides published by Portland State University MFA Studio students in connection with the MFA Studio lecture series.

The new PSU MFA Studio Lecture Series brings together artists from a variety of disciplines to explore the subjects of their own work before a live audience. Lectures and related events are held throughout the year, most often at 1914 SW Park Avenue in Shattuck Annex on Wednesday nights at 7pm.

PSU's two-year, full-residency MFA in Contemporary Art Practice/Studio degree program is dedicated to interdisciplinary exploration through the experience of making. Students are supported in a range of production disciplines, from the traditional to the emerging, as they consider the multiple ways art can live in and beyond the studio.

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INTERVIEW WITH LIA GANGITANO

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[STUDIO]: Can you describe a project or experience you've had that you felt was successful?

LG: Sure, the Charles Atlas project that was in our first exhibition space comes to mind. Charles had been working in theatrical settings doing live video and really wanted to continue that using both analogue and digital mixing tools and some imagery and sound he had collected. But then he was really inspired by our storefront space. He wanted to do street portraiture but in video—to have the spontaneity of the street with the formality of working with sitters for portraits in the gallery.

This was our first season of Participant, so I should talk a little bit about how that functioned. When I started the organization, I wanted to stress a depth of involvement in artists' projects. But it was a pretty vague mission. I would call it an artist-driven curatorial platform, but certainly in the beginning I had no idea what that meant. So what Charlie proposed was almost like a gift in that the project completely redefined what an exhibition could be.

One would enter the upper-level of the gallery and be confronted with a highly manipulated video image and then off to the side were two small monitors with live camera feeds. The manipulated sound would seem to change when you figured out that what you were looking at was occurring simultaneously below you on the lower level. You began to realize that you were looking at something that was being made as you watched it.

My job was to book the appointments, make sure people showed up, navigate drop-in visitors who might want to sit for a portrait—not typical curator stuff. There were lots of strangers who booked appointments and we tried to make sure the experience was interesting for them. But also the cast of characters that Charlie drew to the project was an instant inter-generational community. Yvonne Rainer sat for a portrait, Merce Cunningham. People from the performance scene, drag scene, dance scene all converged in this very generous, spontaneous performance that went on for three weeks.

The experience of working on that project and meeting all these people from different communities directly instigated other projects. I wanted to do more live-format exhibitions. I didn't want to go back to hanging stuff on the wall or having artists show something they had already made. It was pushing me to invite artists to make their dream project that could never happen in a different context. It also solidified a sense of trust in an audience's ability to engage with something they might not have seen before.

As a result we began inviting artists to make a film in the gallery or to stage a play. We worked with actors, ensembles and teams of producers. The scarcity of resources did not prohibit us from instigating projects that people felt had some sort of value or changed their ideas of about what an exhibition could or is supposed to be.

“So it literalized this concept of an artist-driven program in that each proposal really led to the next step and shaped the identity of the organization.

More than any curatorial choices or the taste of any individual, it really was the artists taking leaps and risks that led to what happened next.

[S]: The consortium work that you've been doing—have you been involved with that long enough to see some benefits? And if so, what are they?

LG: The consortium that you're referring to, "Common Practice," is fairly new. This is a consortium of several small scale nonprofit spaces in New York that got together to think about advocacy issues, everything from insurance to fundraising to the fact that when you look at listings in a magazine or a newspaper, where do you find us? There are galleries and museums but New York doesn't have a "section" for us. I don't know that this is a terrible crisis but it sort of points to the fact that people don't really understand what it means to be a small-scale

art space. Most of us feel that we're being evaluated with criteria that don't really apply to us.

For me, it's already provided ways to think about talking to funders that aren't apologetic, like, "oh, only 10,000 people came to our space in a year. But well, actually that's a lot of people to come and see this really weird art." It's asserting that the experience is valid because of the level of collaboration and support we can give to artists, which is really different from working in large-scale institutions. I know for a fact, for example, that I will pay an artist a better fee than PS1, even though their budget is exponentially larger.

There's a lot of variety in the consortium: Artist's Space and White Columns are forty years old. The Kitchen has a significantly larger budget than the rest of us. We're like the middle child. The younger organizations are Triple Canopy and Light Industries. At this point it's dealing with issues of ethics, ethos, legibility... really core basics of who we are, what the value of our work is? And it's nice to have a group of colleagues to sit around and talk to about that kind of stuff. I'm usually thinking, how do I pay the rent? It's helpful to have another side of things in addition to the janitorial concerns.

[S]: I'm wondering how you feel about the idea that the curatorial process is an artistic practice? Do you see yourself as an artist? Or perhaps, do you view Participant as one large art piece?

LG: It's funny, in this group, Common Practice, which we were just talking about, Light Industry, one of the members, was invited to curate the film portion of the Whitney Biennial and Triple Canopy has been invited to put together a series of programs at PS1. I don't mean to say that we're outsourcing our content to larger institutions but I do feel that they want to assimilate the curatorial work of these small organizations in a way that treats us like artists. And I think all of us feel that's not what we are: we're curators, we're organizers, we're programmers. We don't aspire to be artists.

One of the ways I try to distinguish our program from a commercial gallery or from a traditional curatorial model is the way that we open the program up: most of what we do are solo shows. I very rarely curate a group exhibition. It's not really my role. But Participant introduces new ideas and learns about artists by regularly inviting artists to curate shows. For ten years standing, those projects have reenergized the group show format. Artists redelivered the group show as something I felt was useful or interesting again. And that's because artists would take liberties in their selection, installation, and presentation that I myself would not feel were appropriate. So I respect that difference, and the ways in which I learn from artists.

Jonathan Berger is a good example. Part of his practice is organizing exhibitions as well as making his own stuff. We did a project that was based on the work of Stuart Sherman, a performance artist who did covert, quiet, public "spectacles." ... The themes that Jonathan Berger drew from had to do with artists who create their own language or fictitious reality. The exhibition included contemporary artists like Carol Bove, but also Harry Houdini and Andy Kauffman and Eileen Grey (who shockingly had a Reena Spaulings-esque fictitious gallery in Paris). So artists have inspired and affected the programming and provided me with access to things that I wouldn't have thought I could do within the context of Participant. And it's been super gratifying.

[S]: Are you reading or looking at anything in particular right now?

LG: I have a new teaching job at Bard Center for Curatorial Studies so most of what I'm reading now is about exhibitions and different exhibition models. Our next class is on Helen Molesworth. We're going to be looking at her 80's show, which is pretty interesting. I'm reading something that she wrote before, how to install an exhibition as a feminist. It was written for the MoMA women's show and so it's sort of a different type of focus for me. I'm really trying to see what people set forth as curatorial goals and how they're manifested in exhibitions. I also have a strong interest in "periodizations," so her view of the 1980's is interesting to me. I've been working on this book about the 90's, and it seems relevant to think about how people interpret different time periods. ▀

[STUDIO]

RESPONDS TO LIA GANGITANO

01



"Twentieth Spectacle (Health & Fitness)" is a photograph of a performance I created after researching the work of an artist mentioned by Lia during her lecture. Stuart Sherman, a performance artist in New York City during the late eighties and early nineties, is best known for his series of "spectacles" in which he would show up at random locations such as parks, sidewalks and apartments and set up a small portable table on which he would place various inanimate objects. Sherman would then proceed to bring these objects to life for very brief, ephemeral performances. He created nineteen spectacles before his death in 2001. I was inspired to start from where he left off.

04



*Genesis BREYER P-ORRIDGE

05

WHEN LIA VISITED MY STUDIO I asked if we could sit on my floor and look at pictures, posters and videos. We quickly found our shared histories and passions: as a teen in 90's NYC, I frequented a gay leather bar where Lia worked door. During the day I was studying film and art at Hunter while at night I was studying gender and queer theory in the gay bars and discos of Manhattan.

Talking to Lia made me realize I've been performing in drag since I was a child. My drag can be connected or totally separate from my visual art. It's all what you make of it. Out of my notes on our shared memories I organized the first poem I've written since I was a Manhattan teen.

IN HONOR OF LIA, QUEERS, AND 90'S NYC:

HIV changed everything,
9/11 changed everything,
NYC moved to Brooklyn,
New music/art, pushed/explored.

Pork at Mother's,
It's ok you are only nineteen,
Lia Gangitano is working the door,
Just wear/own lots of leather/makeup.

Performance contests at The Cock,
Back room culture is in vogue again,
"He shot an egg out of his ass for \$100!"
You can still buy... in East Village bodegas.

Bath salts party weekly in Brooklyn,
Do your own thing, Build your own theater,
Document everything, Keep everything,
Conceptual record that doesn't exist reviewed by Rolling Stone.

I love the boxes full of fabrics you have,
Drag worth studying: Taboo/Vaginal Davis,
Make up your own history, Make it all true,
I'm excited for you to turn your studio into a theater.

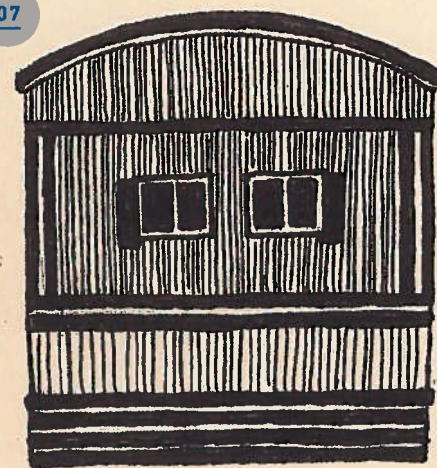
06

AS FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR OF NEW YORK'S PARTICIPANT, INC., LIA GANGITANO HAS SPENT THE PAST DECADE TIRELESSLY PRESENTING CHALLENGING VISUAL ARTS PROGRAMMING.

Her talk was a sobering reminder of what similar sized institutions here in Portland face. It is easy to undervalue and misjudge the challenges that exist for these institutions to keep their doors open. Artists and arts administrators alike can relate to Lia's story of accepting a grant that cost more to administer than was awarded just to help build the institution's resume and become competitive for larger, more sustaining opportunities.

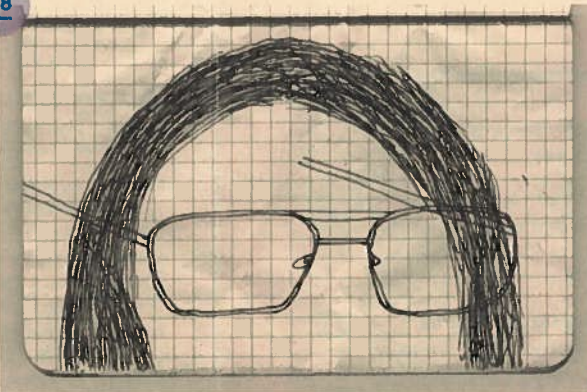
When a venue opens the door and charges admission for any kind of arts performance, all kinds of expectations show up alongside that ticket price. Never mind the fact that, in a majority of instances, door money goes directly to the artist. The people at the ticket booth, those producing the show, running tech and cleaning up after are often pulling money out of their own pockets above and well beyond the price of a ticket just to make that event possible. Lia's lecture made me want to purchase memberships from all the small arts institutions that make Portland the vibrant arts community it is. I won't name any because all are important and, besides, you know who you are because you see me there.

07



"FINDING ABJECT BEAUTY IN ONE'S ECONOMIC CONDITION SEEMS MORE A NECESSITY THAN A DELIBERATE GLAMORIZING OF POVERTY..."

08



02

glas!
"the underground does not emulate the past..."
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the specific movement piece.
"The scarcity of resources did not prohibit us from making something of value."
different value" london
@ BARD
lowrth?
install an
botton like
do you think artists have a duty to society?

03

In her lecture, Lia Gangitano returned often to the idea of poverty as a driving force behind underground and alternative art scenes.

She talked about the aesthetics and styles that have developed out of economic conditions beyond the artists' control, how groups of artists have huddled together in shared poverty and desire for artistic experimentation and the pride they have taken in staying poor to reject the mainstream.

I have always been staunchly middle class. Through family and my own financial management I have the resources to know that I will always have a nest egg to pull from when times get tough. I don't feel abnormally privileged though: I went to public school, still work retail in my 30s and have mounds of student loan and credit card debt like any good American.

I myself have rejected aspects of mainstream culture over and over again—being a shy, dorky teenager will do that to you. So I understand that part. But I also know that every angry, jealous rejection was accompanied by the sting of knowing I would never be let in.

I will never be as poor or as outside of the mainstream as the artists Lia Gangitano talked about. I can absolutely understand wanting to make art because of or about or in response to the parts of the world that won't let you in. But I don't think I'll ever understand being proud of being left out.