

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

*Christine Shan Shan Hou, "Selected Secrets from a Disillusioned Generation,"  
Hyperallergic, November 16, 2013.*

## **Selected Secrets from a Disillusioned Generation**

by [Christine Shan Shan Hou](#) on November 16, 2013



*Jack Smith, "Irrational Landlordism of Bagdad (a.k.a. Material Landlordism of Bagdad, a.k.a. The Secret of the Brassiere Factory)," Cologne Art Fair, Germany, October 26–31, 1977 (© Jack Smith Archive, courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels)*

What is most important to us — as writers, thinkers, makers, and believers in the arts? What happens when the world we live in no longer feels like the one we knew? In a culture of disappointment, what do we need to continue making work? To continue believing in the work that we make?

I thought about these questions after seeing [Rituals of Rented Island: Object Theater, Loft Performance, and The New Psychodrama—Manhattan, 1970–1980](#), currently on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Curated by Jay Sanders, the exhibition focuses on twenty artists and artist-collaborations active during this decade, when the

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high of Sixties progressivism was brought low by the Watergate scandal, racial tensions, high crime, rampant inflation, a poor economy, and the near-bankruptcy of New York City.



*Michael Smith, "Busman's Holiday Retreat Revue," performance at The Performing Garage, May 1981 (courtesy the artist, photo by Kevin Noble) (click to enlarge)*

They range from dance and theater pioneers, like Yvonne Rainer and Babette Mangolte, Robert Wilson, and Richard Forman/Ontological-Hysteric Theater, as well as more esoteric figures who have slipped under the radar, like Jill Kroesen, Sylvia Palacios-Whitman, Julia Heyward, and Jared Bark, to artists more commonly associated with the visual arts, like Jack Smith, Mike Kelley, and Michael Smith.

These disparate artists were connected by overlapping social circles and a shared milieu of cheap, gritty SoHo studios and lofts, where small realities and fictions blurred with disillusioned psyches, resulting in performances that were estranged and quotidian and at times awkwardly dull. It is safe to say that most of the work in *Rituals...* requires a certain level of endurance on the audience's part.

One of the first pieces we encounter is Mike Kelley's "The Parasite Lily" (1980), a solo

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performance about a man in a troubled, symbiotic relationship with a plant. Documentation from The Kitchen performance features photographs (Kelley did not allow the piece to be videotaped), props and a vitrine displaying the script, script notes, and The Kitchen press release, among other ephemera.

In one of his photocopied notebook pages Kelley wrote: "it feeds on my pulse/ The inner winds cause/ it's sway/ we share sad/ I care for it..." and further down the page: "I pluck a flower/ and it dies/ this flower plucks/ me and lives." The show was actually billed as a "comedy" due to its non-linear narrative structure, but "The Parasite Lily" speaks more to loneliness and desperation, which now feel further intensified in light of Kelley's unexpected death in 2012.

"WE SHARE SAD/ I CARE FOR IT..." These words particularly stuck with me while viewing the rest of the show, as if each artist were responsible for nursing his or her own emotional wounds from this era.



*Ericka Beckman, still from "We Imitate; We Break Up" (1978), Super 8 film, color, sound, 28 min  
(courtesy the artist) (click to enlarge)*

Ericka Beckman's Super 8 films, which were shot during staged performances in loft studios, adapt the repetitive and nonsensical structure of a nursery rhyme. In "We

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"Imitate; We Break up" (1978), a pair of marionette legs plays with a youthful Beckman and then starts chasing her like a nightmare come to life. The gallery also features reconstructed props from the performance — a white door and a flat house composed of simple geometrical shapes and colors — evoking a minimalist children's playhouse.

In Jack Smith's *The Secret of Rented Island* (1976–77), from which the exhibition takes its name, the artist restaged Henrik Ibsen's 1882 play *Ghosts*, but with the characters played by stuffed animals. The original performances started around midnight and lasted up to five hours. Here, we are presented with a 90-minute slideshow of dark and grainy images along with Smith's pre-recorded voice interpreting Ibsen's dialogue. Although the work feels defiantly apolitical in its subject matter, *The Secret of Rented Island* speaks to the process of creating a performance: an inherently subversive act due to its ephemeral nature and outward rejection of market values. Performance is about being *inand with* your body in present space and time — more specifically, space and time that have yet to be commoditized.

It is also the hardest art form to convey — to the point of near absence — within a museum context (this says more about the difficulties of curating than the curator's efforts). The main flaw of the exhibition, however, doesn't proceed from the difficulties involved with adequately exhibiting ephemeral art, but from the glaring absence of artists of color. The Downtown performance scene at the time was something larger and richer than the clique of white artists featured in this exhibition. Tehching Hsieh, Tseng Kwong Chi (although better known for his photography), Adrian Piper, and Sun Ra to name a few, are artists who may not have been part of the social scene at the center of *Rituals...* but their presence was just as instrumental in shaping experimental performance at that time. While the form of performance is represented as new and experimental, the homogeneity of racial identity in *Rituals...* feels stifling. We need new narratives beyond the struggling, white artist.

Live art that defies traditional narrative structure is further explored in the psychodramas of artists such as Theodora Skipitares, Yvonne Rainer, and Babette Mangolte, who

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created haunting performances that feel like carefully scripted movement diaries. In Skipitares's "Skysaver" (1980), the artist navigates an elaborate installation made up of lights, a sound-and-video projection, model airplanes, a mechanical puppet, and a bleating, papier-mache lamb, among other objects. This action weaves an abstract story based on Skipitares's experiences of teaching art to mentally ill patients. Here, a video documentation of the 26-minute solo is accompanied by the wall-sized installation, a poster for the performance and a cue sheet.

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*Theodora Skipitares, "Skysaver," performance at Galerie ak, Frankfurt, November 8–16, 1980  
(courtesy the artist, photo by Christian Hanussek)*

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The most memorable piece in the show is the re-presentation of Yvonne Rainer's "This is the story of a woman who..." The film, shot by Babette Mangolte, depicts a slow and ambiguous dance between two lovers (Rainer and John Erdman) struggling to communicate with each other. In one part of the film, Rainer places her hands, slowly and purposefully, along Erdman's back, a concrete gesture that becomes painfully ambivalent within the frame of Mangolte's camerawork and Rainer's poetic text fragments.

Mangolte, who also documented other dance works by Rainer, conceived of the installation, selected the film excerpts from the performance (projected in large scale on the opposite gallery wall) and curated the vitrine of archival materials — photographs, script pages and notes.

She also includes her own written commentary, enlivening the work with new interpretations. On one thin slip of paper she writes: "In this condition she faces the impossibility to continue intimacy and equally intolerable, the necessity to part." The final photograph in the vitrine is particularly striking: A still from the dance *Trio A* (1973). In the image, Rainer's arms are open with a slight bend at the elbows and one foot about to step in front of the other — a moment of transition made permanent. Something stirs inside of me when I see this picture; Rainer beckons me to follow her, a pied piper of sorts. There is something intimate and slightly voyeuristic about perusing the items in the vitrine, like discovering a diary of a former lover tucked away in an old drawer. In an exhibition where the actual works of art themselves happened a long time ago, Mangolte's installation of paper relics comes the closest to capturing the process in which the work was created, while also creating a new context in which to experience it, one that feels less secretive, and more open to the present.

[Rituals of Rented Island: Object Theater, Loft Performance, and The New Psychodrama—Manhattan, 1970–1980](#) continues at the Whitney Museum (945 Madison Avenue, Upper East Side, Manhattan) until February 2, 2014.