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CRITICAL STAGES
EDITED BY PATRICK ANDERSON

Barbara Browning and Ariel Osterweis

DANCING SOCIAL

Editor's Note: For this issue of Critical Stages, Ari Osterweis and Barbara Browning consider the multiple publics at play in the work of artist-performer Narcissister.

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ARIEL OSTERWEIS: I think we ought to begin with the conclusion: we both want to *be* Narcissister. With a bit more grit, time at the gym, vaginal accoutrements, and mistrust of academic discourse, we could come close—very close. We linger here in cyberspace, flirting with live/mediated performance, but mainly writing about it instead of just getting up (like Narcissister), going to the club, and pulling evening dresses out of orifices in a mode both dismissive of and desperate for academic contextualization.

Perhaps this is a good moment to shift to the beginning. I met Narcissister at the Ailey School in the 1990s. Because she had gone to college (and a fancy one at that: Brown) and I had dropped out of high school to dance, I thought of her as sensible and intelligent. We were reintroduced by choreographer Trajal Harrell, who recommended my *academic services* when Narcissister sought a *theorist*. ("Oh my goodness," I said, "it's *you* and you are now so artfully pulling things out of orifices and saying things with your body that I can barely muster in the space of an entire dissertation!" "I'm so happy that you are giving me these readings and meeting with me to talk about theory," she replied. "I will pay you!") This all plays perfectly (if melancholically) into my underacknowledged stripper envy, for strippers have a way of getting to the point more directly than the concert dancer.

Our readers will note the first person singular, my own failingly artful attempt at self-reflexively taking on the gal-in-the-mirror narcissism that shall thematize this thread. To confess to this might be a mistake, but to continue otherwise would be to betray both the matter at hand and the fact of our own (albeit relational) narcissistic correspondence habit.

I think this brings me to one central question: What is Narcissister doing that we do not (or cannot) do? Why do we love her so? I have heard you frame her masturbatory video/photographic performance "Self-Gratifier" in terms of "taking care of oneself"; you also note that images of black women in U.S. culture are not sanctioned within tropes of being-taken-care-of (by a man/woman/lover). And as someone who has begun to write both for her and about her, I have been thinking about her simultaneous disavowal of and reliance upon the disciplining effects of dance technique. It seems to me that in Narcissister's dance, there's some serious *selfing* going on; and this *selfing*—while commenting on the artificiality of our ubiquitous commodity fetishism—is both feminist and DIY in method and tone: she makes all her own sets and costumes.

On that note, I am compelled to reflect upon two binaries that Narcissister's work troubles: namely, public–private and internal–external. By public–private, I'm provisionally thinking about both the forum of our discussion—this column about "dancing social"—as well as her persona's locales in alternating spheres of the artistic, domestic, celebrity, personal, and professional, as well as the making-public of her masks, which she will soon offer for sale. In terms of internality and externality, I am thinking of body parts and the abject. Narcissister is so easy to theorize in some regard; she is what I call a ready-made artist for performance studies fodder, playing with all the expected, studied tropes we like to throw around. So I'm trying to think of aspects or angles of her work that are unexpected or perhaps private themselves.

BARBARA BROWNING: You mentioned to me that you and she have been working on a manifesto. Manifestos are manifest—i.e., explicit. Which in regard to Narcissister is always ironic, because what seems to be overly explicit is usually covering up something else, and what seems to be discreet is the real obscenity. There's another chiasmus in her work: it tells you that the first person is never really about "me" and the second person is never really "you."

So here *we* are in a public–private correspondence about Narcissister—ostensibly two performance scholars engaging in an epistolary dialogue about a performance

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practitioner with whom both of us are engaged in relationships that might be characterized as scholarly but in which our "scholarship" can be construed as part of her performance. Anna Fisher recently presented an excellent paper at NYU on parasitic feminist strategies.[1] So parasite–host would be another interesting chiasmus to think about specifically in relation to our work with her. Effectively, you gave me your Narcissister parasite. Or introduced me as parasite to your Narcissister host. Either way, or both: thank you.

Nameless reader we'll call "you"—let me explain. Ari told me about Narcissister's work, which I didn't know. I looked at some of her videos on the Web. For one, called "Man/Woman," she played both a hypermasculine *dude* (flannel work shirt open to expose prosthetic chest muscles, jeans bulging with prosthetic schlong) and the hyperfemme, equally plastic *dream girl* that emerges from the pages of his porn. That one ends in a complex choreography in which Narcissister ravenously and ecstatically fucks her prosthetic self. But another, "Every-Woman," shows a reverse strip tease in which Narcissister's "real" breasts are exposed. And the second I saw them, I thought, "I know her! I saw her reperform 'Luminosity' in the Marina Abramović show at MoMA!" I remembered very clearly the angelic, indeed luminous, unadorned face of that performer, whose beauty would certainly fall under the clichéd descriptor "natural." Her face of course was obscured by Narcissister's mask. But I remembered very clearly those breasts. And that's when I had a small revelation, which I later wrote to her: breasts are like eyes.

Sometime later I was looking for an image for the cover of my forthcoming novel. My editor came up with one that Ari adamantly disliked, and she suggested an image of Narcissister. I thought this was genius. It wasn't precisely illustrative of what the novel was about, and yet the image—from "Self-Gratifier"—touched on a lot of things in the book, from the profound (racial and sexual ambiguity, inability to connect in affective relationships) to the banal (exercise equipment). I wrote to Narcissister and asked if I might use the image. The actual negotiation would go on to include the photographer; but for her part, Narcissister responded warmly and generously. The only thing she shyly suggested I might offer her in turn would be a short scholarly piece of writing about her work. Of course, that request was more of an offering than a request: I had a ton of things to say. Her work seemed to be in dialogue with several female conceptual artists I'd long been thinking about—particularly Sophie Calle. I won't go too far into that here, but what I loved about their work included its masturbatory quality: the way it thematized women taking care of themselves (I like that, a lot) and also (perhaps ironically) engaging other people in that process. Effectively, in this exchange (ostensibly of a performance piece for a work of scholarship), my writing became part of her performance, and her performance became part of my writing. And Ari, it seems to me like your work with her has also operated along these lines.

I'm tempted to say that it goes beyond *barter* into the realm of the *gift* (I could go on about this, but for the feel-good version I'd indicate Lewis Hyde, and for the more hard-core—though to me even more pleasurable—version I'd indicate Marcel Mauss via David Graeber). Or we could go back to parasite–host. In a good way.

AO: The *gift*. Let's take the Maussian route, shall we? In performance studies, it can be taboo to reenter foundational anthropological and sociological theory, for we are pressured to fetishize the "new," the avant-garde, the "radical." (Given where I'm headed with this segment, I ought not to use "taboo" and "fetishize" so semicolloquially, or perhaps it's appropriate to blur the anthropological and the colloquial here.) In any case, much of this foundational theory has been dismissed or avoided by performance scholars, largely

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because of its seeming incompatibility with newer queer and feminist theory, but also because of our field's preoccupation with psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and/or discourse from visual art. I've tried, to no avail, to think of Narcissister's work in terms of camp and drag. Despite her seemingly novel approach and avant-garde tendencies, she can be fairly comfortably "read" by Mauss's "gift," Simmel's "secret," Bakhtin's "carnivalesque," and Taussig's (and others') theorization of taboo and transgression.

Both Mauss and Simmel stage their theories based on the concept of the third party, especially in relation to the question of economy. Mauss writes:

> The *taonga* and all goods termed strictly personal possess a *hau*, a spiritual power. You give me one of them, and I pass it on to a third party; he gives another to me in turn, because he is impelled to do so by the *hau* my present possesses. I, for my part, am obliged to give you that thing because I must return to you what is in reality the effect of the *hau* of your *taonga.*[2]

In differentiating the *kula* ring and/as gift exchange from commodity exchange, Mauss points to both the aggression of the gift (as in the obligation of reciprocity) as well as the third party awaiting temporary possession of the gift (or *kula*). There are many aspects of gift exchange that apply to Narcissister, but for the sake of time and space, I would like to gesture to her imminent project of selling masks with accompanying manifestos. With these transactions, Narcissister will certify others to become Narcissister, as long as they enter into the contract of payment as exchange. And as these purchasers become part of a culture of exchange by purchasing a mask, the commandment to "be Narcissister" (in the manifestos) becomes a kind of "reciprocity." Narcissister's photo page now includes multiple Narcissisters wearing masks, under the rubric "Narcissister is you!"

We might also claim that Narcissister's staged performances are a kind of a gift—or that we (you and I, Barbara) engage with her in a giftlike relationship of exchange—but what I find interesting is that her work continually comments on commodity culture (especially the many modes through which femininity is fetishized and sold) through channels that have more in common with gift exchange culture. Of course, all this is deliciously complicated by the fact that she performs in multiple performance contexts for varying degrees of pay. By combining burlesque with modern dance and circus-type acts—and by performing everywhere from television (*America's Got Talent*) to The Box (an expensive cabaret/burlesque club in New York City, London, and Los Angeles) to the Abrons Art Center—she confuses seemingly strict distinctions between commercial and experimental performance (and thus between commodities and gifts).

Perhaps even richer for Narcissister's work is Georg Simmel, in particular his focus on the "third party"[3] implicated in the *secret*. I find that the secret operates for Narcissister in multiple ways, the most obvious being the concealment of her face and vagina in an otherwise explicit show. Barbara, you noted that "what seems to be overly explicit is usually covering up something else, and what seems to be discreet is the real obscenity." With the proliferation of Narcissisters made possible by the purchasing of the mask, Narcissister (*our* Narcissister) exposes some of her secrets (through the manifesto) while, paradoxically, creating a secret society. Consider, for instance, this:

> The sociological character of the individual elements of the secret society, corresponding with this centralized subordination, is their individualization. In

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> case the society does not have promotion of the interests of its individual members as its immediate purpose, and, so to speak, does not go outside of itself, but rather uses its members as means to externally located ends and activities—in such case the secret society in turn manifests a heightened degree of self-abnegation, of leveling of individuality, which is already an incident of the social state in general, and with which the secret *society* outweighs the above-emphasized individualizing and differentiating character of the *secrecy*. This begins with the secret orders of the nature peoples, whose appearance and activities are almost always in connection with use of disguises, so that an expert immediately infers that wherever we find the use of disguises (*Masken*) among nature peoples, they at least indicate a probability of the existence of secret orders. It is, to be sure, a part of the essence of the secret order that its members conceal themselves, as such.[4]

BB: When I mentioned Mauss, I was really just pointing to Narcissister's relationship to performance scholarship, which seems to me to differ from collaboration in the typical dramaturgical or critical exchange and to move into a realm of "take this ball and run with it," which I like. Keep it moving. When I said "Mauss via Graeber," I meant that I'm interested in a more utopian reading of the gift than the mere obligation to reciprocate. Graeber says that that's a reductive reading of Mauss, and I think he's right. Mauss gives you reason to consider another possibility: that objects themselves want to circulate (the politicized expression of this is that wealth wants to circulate). The fetish (as magical, eroticized, or commodified object) is animate—it moves (or moves you). When people are objectified (exoticized, eroticized, commodified), it's often in the context of performance. Ari, you've heard me talk about Marx's invocation of dance when he's trying to explain how commodity fetishes perform. Narcissister's performances precisely play on both racial and sexual objectification[5] and of course both Narcissister's mask and her almost impossibly mannequinlike body evoke the S.I.S. Barbie collection[6] even as they manifest her technical abilities as a dancer. You're right that the different venues in which she performs and the different forms of value associated with those venues (artistic/intellectual, monetary, erotic, sentimental) are of interest, but it is also true that in practice she's open to all of these notions of her own value as object/performer. And, too: the mask of course is significant, but the merkin is hilarious, and it's intriguing because it's less theorized. And now I'm back at discretion, and what I said at first about how what seems to be overly explicit in Narcissister's work is usually covering up something else and what seems to be discreet is the real obscenity. You linked this to the triangulation of the secret, and I like that because of the triangle of the pubic (public) hair. So if we're sticking with the pubic, and if I'm going to pun on the phonic/graphic slippage between pubic and public, I also want to slip in pudic—from pudenda, shameful parts—because it implies, again, its opposite. Pudor is modesty. When the Portuguese explorer Pêro Vaz de Caminha landed in Brazil in 1500, he wrote that the indigenous women had "shames" (this was a euphemism for their pudenda): "so naked and uncovered with such innocence that of this they had no shame."[7] This seems to be something like the same joke that Narcissister is going for, playing on a history of racial exoticization/eroticization. It's simultaneously very sweet and entirely horrific if you think about it.

AO: We ought to explain what we mean here by merkin. Vagina wig, period. The merkin appears in pieces such as "Hot Lunch" and "This Masquerade." Often in pop

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culture, "vajazzling" is likened to the merkin, but I would refer to such glued-on pelvic feathers and Swarovski crystals as adornments. A wig is not merely an adornment. While vajazzling's bling is the stuff of fetish, the merkin leaned a bit more toward function. Historically, the merkin was used by prostitutes to create a faux tuft of pubic hair in times of uncontrollable crabs. It was also used by prostitutes and wives in times of disease in order to conceal the symptoms of syphilis. So in addition to the coincidence of (Simmel's) triangulation of the secret and the triangular shape of female pubic hair, we come to find that the merkin is itself an object that conceals, creating the availability of a secret. The merkin is at once an invitation and a barrier that dissuades entry into the vagina. It also brings attention to the vaginal region's very externality—it's not an entirely internal area of the body. Narcissister's humor—whether intentional or otherwise—raises some serious questions about the relationship between sex and disease. As a vaginal wig, the merkin's history is one of inviting the penis into a diseased environment. Are we prepared to refer to such disease as a "secret" "gift," exchanged through a misogynist economy of sex? And in the case of the prostitute, the merkin was used to ensure a wad of cash; herein we discern a connection among sex, disease, and economy. Certainly, we could invoke commodity fetishism, depending on whether or not we are prepared to call the vagina—or the prostitute—an object/commodity. I prefer to see them more as the personification of commodity fetishism at work than as actual commodities.

Returning to Simmel, it's interesting to think of the merkin as a locale of secrecy in the first place, given that "discretion" is central to theorization of the secret. He discusses the idea that the "body is our first 'property'" (and it's significant that "property" is in quotes because of course we don't exactly own ourselves). But then he goes on to refer to the idea of the "invasion of this possession," and we can think of the merkin as an ineffective shield to such invasion.[8] Can we speak of the merkin in terms of discretion when to encounter one is to assume intimacy? I think Simmel would suggest that some of our most intimate relationships are upheld by the dynamics of deliberate secrecy (surely others are not).

Now, as for the eventual sale of the merkins, I find Simmel's distanced "third persons"[9] interesting in terms of performance. How will Narcissister know if "other" Narcissisters will perform according to the rules set out in the manifesto (rules that are currently being drafted)? Keep in mind that the masks will definitely be sold; the merkins too! Will there be a form of witness built into the system? (Is it even a system?) For example, Narcissister and I were thinking of creating an optional public video site where all Narcissisters could post at will. Will this deter or invite "bad"/"failed" Narcissisters?

BB: So, yes, a wig, and the popular understanding is that it originated among seventeenth-century ladies who wanted to conceal that period's version of "the gift that keeps on giving." And in burlesque, it now sometimes serves the comical function of allowing a dancer to appear to be fully naked—seemingly *more* naked than she would appear if she were in fact to fully reveal her depilated sex, since depilation, instead of revealing, seems to make a woman's body appear more like a Barbie body, less "natural," so less exposed, ironically. Narcissister wasn't the first burlesque performer to make this visual joke or provocation, but her very public "date" with Marilyn Manson seemed to take it to a different conceptual place, particularly since it followed on the heels of her *America's Got Talent* appearance. I noticed that the Urban Dictionary entry for "merkin" notes the word's resonance with George W. Bush's pronunciation of "American,"[10] and indeed, Narcissister's dream date reconfigured the doll-play scenario of the All-American girl next door who gets to go out with a rock star, just as her *America's Got Talent*

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performance could be read as a slyly monstrous rejoinder to the suggestion that *A-merka's Got Talent*—and we know how to commodify it.

The fact that in that performance it's her sex that serves to give face—if not voice—to her own marketing is interesting. As is the notion that she would then parley that into a marketing venture (or is it a conceptual art piece?) in which she is selling the mask and/or the merkin. Of course I agree with you that she should mass-market the merkin. If she chooses to go with just the mask, though, it will appear to be out of "discretion," even though this image makes it clear that the mask similarly obscures and reveals the same triangle of sex, disease, and money that the merkin does.

AO: Visuality clearly plays an important role in Narcissister's work, and we are beginning to see how the history of the merkin is also a history of visuality. First of all, the merkin is, as we should always remind ourselves, supplemental, not inherent, to the body. Second, while they are/were typically attached with adhesive, Narcissister constructs hers with a clear elasticized string, creating more of a merkin G-string of sorts. G-strings were first created by strippers, and Narcissister's burlesque plays with stripping a great deal. Does the string make her merkin less of a merkin and more of an undergarment? In any case, what I find most interesting here is that she constructs her own (and all other Narcissisters') merkins! Just like the mask, each one includes elements of preexisting items, paired with her own crafting and artful embellishments. Barbara, you mentioned the "mass-marketing" of her merkins, and what is so alluring is that Narcissister's artful touch precludes mass-marketing, thus limiting the number of people who would have access to the masks or the merkins. That each mask or merkin betrays the proof of a certain degree of handiwork can be seen as a resistance to (what Marx points to as) the abstraction of human labor from the commodity. In other words, we could find ourselves hard pressed to label Narcissister's masks or merkins "commodities" since they are partially handmade objects. Rebecca Schneider picks up on Marx's abstraction when she suggests that "commodities [are] obsessively secreting the social relations of production."[11] So while on the one hand Narcissister comments on objectification, race, and gender by appearing Barbie-like in a mask, she is also precisely resisting a certain kind of objecthood forced upon the commodity (and the human-as-commodity) by insisting upon a practice of feminist craft: we see (or at least ascertain in retrospect) evidence of imperfection, individuality, and handiwork.

BB: I think it's very interesting to specify both the construction of the merkin and its means of production. Narcissister's use of the G-string to attach her merkin (instead of spirit gum) links it explicitly to stripper/burlesque costuming conventions, calling attention to its theatricality (I'm not saying performativity because that implies so much more, all of which would be of interest, but I just want to hold onto performance here in its more limited sense)—even if it's worn out on the town on a "real" date. But even more interesting is the means of production, as you suggest. I was joking when I said "mass-marketing," of course, because it's unlikely that hordes of fashion victims would start running out to get their own; but it is great to think about the crafty construction of it. Realistically, it's more of an Etsy item than something you'd find on an online brand-name fashion retail site. And of course there are feminist ramifications when we consider the handmade object as well as sentimental value (as opposed to both use value and market value) and "labors of love." The fiber arts are especially interesting because they can be very labor intensive to produce and so seem most insistently to defy a logic of efficient labor and mass production—that is, a capitalist strategy for growth, which exponentially increases its power

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when exploitative labor practices are masked by a luxury brand. Narcissister appears to be branding herself, but the underlying practices are obviously throwing a wrench into the works of the process of commodification—and in the processes of sexual and racial objectification. I wanted to ask you about her dance technique. You've noted that it's largely a question of contortionism, with relatively little referencing of the styles in which she trained. Do you think that when she's framed as an "Ailey-trained dancer" this serves the purpose of making viewers consider race, virtuosity, and the fine line between beautiful and grotesque—and also marketability (Ailey as highly recognizable brand)—even if formally her performances don't incorporate Ailey versions of any of these?

AO: It is curious that Narcissister alternately activates and disavows her Ailey dance training. On one hand, she is always sure to mention in publicity materials that she trained on scholarship at the Ailey school; but on the other hand, the only times she makes reference to such dance technique in her performances is when she makes almost mocking use of movements typically reserved for frenzied, climactic sections of choreography. When I was giving her some choreographic advice in a rehearsal of her hand dance (which she performs in a wedding-banded hand costume), I noticed that she inserted a series of turns from the Horton technique, the kind in which the dancer extends her arms in a vertical overhead parallel position, tracing a circular right-back–left-front circular pattern. The arms and upper body are circling through the air as the entire body is executing traveling turns.

Alvin Ailey choreographed a series of these very turns in his piece "Memoria," an homage to the Horton dancer Joyce Trisler. This type of traveling turn (with arms circling overhead) is a favorite one to use when mocking the Ailey aesthetic, especially because it looks ridiculous when executed haphazardly. It is also the type of movement that those of us who trained at Ailey might use to parody the extreme nature of our training there. In other words, that turn sequence is a typical Ailey sequence, and it seems to me that Narcissister uses it for its citational qualities, to comment on expectations and imperatives of/for black performance to be presentational, outwardly directed, and deliberately kinetic. To dance those turns in a mask is fascinating: we can read the mask as a minstrel "mask," an allusion to European modernism's obsession with African masks, or as a sign of anonymity. I find the latter the most interesting, as Ailey's choreography epitomizes a certain popular black aesthetic linking "body" and "soul" such that we are urged to believe that the dancer in question is baring her soul, offering up her emotion in the service of both the audience's pleasure and a higher spiritual power. Unlike contemporary dancers influenced by the Judson Dance Theater's pedestrianism—after Yvonne Rainer's imperative "No to virtuosity"—you would never find an Ailey dancer pairing Horton turns with a masklike gaze. Certainly, the aesthetic of "cool" infiltrates Ailey's work, but more often we would find these turns operating in relationship to "hot" dance that demands expression of the "self" (or character).

BB: Thank you, that was just what I was wondering about.

ENDNOTES

1. Anna Fisher, "User Be Used: Parasitism in a Digital Age," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory,* forthcoming; Anna Fisher, participation in the panel "Not Not Precarious: Speculative Spaces and Zones of Suspense" at the conference "The Affect Factory: Precarity, Labor, Gender, and Performance," New York University, February 2012.

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2. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies,* trans. W. D. Halls (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 11.

3. Georg Simmel, "The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies," *American Journal of Sociology* 11.4 (1906): 441–98, at 454.

4. Simmel, 494–5.

5. On the "shiny, hard, and brittle surfaces" of racial fetishization, see Tavia Nyong'o, "Racial Kitsch and Black Performance," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 15.2 (2002): 371–91, quote at 377.

6. See, e.g., the Barbie So In Style S.I.S. Trichelle doll at *http://amzn.to/xCo4Tx*.

7. In his 1500 report to King Manuel of the discovery of Brazil, Caminha wrote, "Ali andavam entre eles três ou quatro moças, bem novinhas e gentis, com cabelos muito pretos e compridos pelas costas; e suas vergonhas, tão altas e tão cerradinhas e tão limpas das cabeleiras que, de as nós muito bem olharmos, não se envergonhavam." [Among them walked three or four young women, very young and nice, with long, very black hair hanging down their backs; and their "shames," so high and tight and clean of hair, which we could plainly see, gave them no shame whatsoever.] The letter is published online at *www.aliteratura.kit.net/carta.html* (accessed 9 June 2012). The translation is mine.

8. Simmel, 454.

9. Ibid., 446.

10. See *www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=merkin&defid=620594* (accessed 9 June 2012).

11. Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 80.

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