

Pulling the Plug

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Edgar Arceneaux, *Until, Until, Until...*, 2015. Performance view, Three-Legged Dog, New York, November, 2015. Frank Lawson. Photo: Paula Court.

IN 1981, Tony Award-winning actor/singer/dancer Ben Vereen accepted an invitation to perform as part of Ronald Reagan's All-Star Inaugural Gala. Also slated to entertain the newly elected Republican and his supporters were Frank Sinatra, Charlton Heston, Debbie Boone, Donnie and Marie Osmond, and Johnny Carson, the show's master of ceremonies. Knowing the event would be broadcast to millions of viewers, Vereen decided to address the troubled history of black performers in America with a tribute to Bert Williams, one of the great vaudevillians (and subject of a forthcoming program at MoMA), a legendary comedian about whom Booker T. Washington once said, "He has done more for our race than I have."

On the night of the gala, Vereen took to the stage as Williams would have had to: a black man in black face. He sang and danced with great cheer to the song "Waiting for the Robert E. Lee," but when he finished, his tone and demeanor shifted. "You're so gracious to allow this," he told the audience and offered to buy them a drink in gratitude. When Vereen-as-Williams tried to make good on his gesture, the audience watched as he was denied bar service because of the color of his skin. The performance ended with Vereen singing Williams's plaintive "Nobody," while sadly wiping the blackface makeup from his skin.

Although the live audience watched Vereen's performance from beginning to end, the network edited it for broadcast so that viewers at home saw only his first troublesome number. On air, the show abruptly cut after Vereen thanked the audience for their graciousness to Marie Osmond white-belted Stevie Wonder's "For Once in My Life." His politically charged ending was scrubbed from the record, and was followed by a career-implosion attack on his appearance in blackface to celebrate America's new conservative regime. "Ben Vereen: Disgrace to the Race," read the headline in *The Chicago Defender*.

Artist Edgar Arceneaux's smart and chilling *Until, Until, Until...*, which won Performa 15's Malcolm McLaren Award, might best be described as a critical reenactment of Vereen's full number, a performance that attempts to right, and to rewrite, this historical wrong. Arceneaux entwines the televised footage from the inaugural gala with a live performance by the remarkable Frank Lawson as Ben Vereen, while also injecting his own presence into the piece, appearing onstage to give Lawson direction and oversee the show. With his team of collaborators, Arceneaux scripts new dialogue and adds the show-stopping number "Nobody But Ronnie," in which Lawson and Jess Dugger (as Marie Osmond) sing lines like, "Is

this your brain on drugs? / No! / This is your brain on Ron!" As well, Arceneaux loops and remixes the gala's TV footage, projecting it as the backdrop, so that *Until, Until, Until...* has something of a séance about it—Lawson channeling Vereen channeling Williams, surrounded by electric phantoms.

It's never easy to dissuade an audience from the belief that history is a thing of the past, and Arceneaux is wise not to tie up Vereen's story too neatly. "We haven't quite figured out how to end the play," he tells us in the show's final beat. We believe him, of course, because stories like Vereen's—of the toxic mediation of racial inequalities in America—are still ongoing.



Wunderbaum, *Looking for Paul*, 2015. Performance view, New York Live Arts, New York, November 2015. Photo: Steven A. Gunther.

In the Dutch theater group Wunderbaum's *Looking for Paul*, which I caught early last month at New York Live Arts, re-creation is both an act of satire and a bid of for artistic survival. This witty if unsatisfying performance takes as its center the controversy surrounding Paul McCarthy's *Tannenbaum*, 2001, his notorious public sculpture more commonly known as "The Butt Plug Gnome," which stands in Rotterdam's Eendrachtsplein Square. A bronze Santa holding a bell in one hand and a butt plug in the other, *Tannenbaum*—like so many pieces in McCarthy's Butt Plug oeuvre—has been called vulgar and offensive by its detractors, while supporters have argued that it's a lighthearted jab at art and capitalism, both of which apparently stand ready to fuck you in the ass.

Wunderbaum frames sculpture through the eyes of Inez van Dam, a bookseller who cannot escape the sight of *Tannenbaum*. From her apartment, from her shop, every window on her world overlooks The Butt Plug Gnome, and the imposition of McCarthy's vision is, she believes, ruining her quality of life. Having been commissioned to create a piece for LA's Redcat Theater, Wunderbaum decides to take the outraged Inez and her story to Los Angeles and stage a public debate with McCarthy. When that doesn't materialize, the troupe scrambles to create a show, weighing their commitment to Inez's cause against their admiration for the artist, or at least for his success. "If you like his work," Inez asks them in a moment of exasperation, "what am I doing here then?"

For most of the play, the performers read over their email correspondences, sent to one another during the making of the piece we're now watching (an unfortunate choice that drains a certain liveliness from this production). We listen as they bicker over possible actions and texts, as well as discuss the uncertain fate of arts funding in Holland, which threatens to go "the American way" (i.e. public money will be cut, and an artist's survival will depend more on popularity and market sales). In the final act, Wunderbaum's members resign themselves to a piece that weaves McCarthy's *Houseboat Party*, 2005, with Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The result is requisitely nude and crude, though not at all obscene. Edible turds are pulled from a toilet, then licked and savored; cheap condiments and comfort foods are spilled and thrown and sat on; a man masturbates by thrusting himself into a bale of hay. Wunderbaum's is a weirdo sendup that cuts both ways. Watching everyone dumbly splish around onstage, one begins to wonder if this performance appears calculated and absurd because McCarthy is inimitable, or because he is overrated.

Looking for Paul doesn't take the artist to task, but it does offer a rare opportunity to flex ambivalence about his work. The Daffy Pornographic of McCarthy has always been ingenious for the way it baits and deflects criticism, and by burning daddy's house down as he does over and over again, he has built one of the most successful blue-chip brands in the art world. Is The Butt Plug Gnome art or a cheap bid for notoriety? Is McCarthy's a vision born of total artistic freedom or a strategy for continued success? Whether opposed or in favor—whether art-world insider or disgruntled outsider—in the end, it seems, we all take McCarthy whatever way we want.



Walid Raad, *Scratching on things I could disavow: Walkthrough*, 2007–. Performance view, Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 5, 2015. Raad performing with *Translator's introduction: Pension arts in Dubai*, 2012. Photo: Julieta Cervantes.

Unequivocally a bid for survival is Artist Pension Trust® (APT), a retirement fund that offers artists from around the world “long-term financial security and international exposure... based on a unique tailor-made financial model.” APT asks its two-thousand-odd participating artists to donate twenty works of art over a twenty-year period, which are then held in trust. As Lebanese artist Walid Raad explains at the outset of his fiercely intelligent and riveting performance/lecture *Scratching on things I could disavow: Walkthrough*, 2007–, APT then secures the shared investment of these artists by way of basic risk management, understanding that some years an artist will be hot, while in others the market may go cold. “I read somewhere that the lifespan of a contemporary artist is forty months,” Raad says. “This means that for forty months you sell well, and then for months, years, or even decades after, you are lucky to sell anything at all.” Against this depressing statistic, APT bolsters an artist’s longevity with market-stoking strategies under the rubric “APT: Intelligence,” an arm that pays curators to advise investors in the purchase of artworks and, as well, to promote APT’s collection by organizing exhibitions. As Raad reveals more of APT’s insurance schemes, it becomes clear that no work of art is immune from the suspicion that its value is rigged—its content, its narrative, suspect.

Walkthrough is performed by Raad as part of *Scratching on things I could disavow*, 2007–, his ongoing project tracing the appearance and participation of Arab countries in the international art market, which comprises one half of his current retrospective at MoMA. Yet what begins as a straightforward lecture—didactic, logical—slowly spins over an hour to fray any firm lines between fact and fiction. In the second section of his talk, Raad stands before his installation *_Section 88ACT XXXI: Views from outer to inner compartments*, 2015, a life-sized architectural outline of open doorways and the perspective lines they frame, while cross-faded images of empty museum galleries are projected above. He speaks about the building of museums in the Middle East, in Qatar and Abu Dhabi specifically, as the means to diversify its economy. As Raad talks, however, one begins to notice slips in his story—not the natural contractions of narrative, but rather eruptions, intrusions of a new force: that of, perhaps, myth.

He recounts how a Gulf resident tries to enter the Guggenheim museum that’s newly built in his country, but cannot for fear he will literally “hit a wall.” Raad claims to read the headline announcing the incident: “Demented Man Disturbs Opening: Claims World Is Flat,” but we know there is no Guggenheim yet in the Middle East. This incident hasn’t happened. “This event has already happened,” Raad assures us, and quickly moves to stand by a scale model of a gallery exhibition. We see the scale is off somehow, we sense something’s wrong, and Raad tells us that as he was preparing this exhibition in Beirut some years ago, he received all of his artworks in miniature. How now? From there, his stories unravel further—he talks of receiving telepathic messages from the future, explains how color can sense disaster and, when threatened, jumps from one work to another to take refuge. “Come closer,” he beckons us to see the disappeared colors throughout several works on paper. In a deft and exhilarating twist, Raad’s lecture becomes a poetic meditation on the consciousness of art objects, which in turn suggests a kind of enlightenment that might stir if art freed itself of human folly.



Suzanne Bocanegra, *Studio Visit*, 2015. Performance view, The Old American Can Factory, Brooklyn, NY, 2015. Suzanne Bocanegra. Photo: Peter Serling.

The objects artist **Suzanne Bocanegra** features in her intimate, exquisite *Studio Visit* aren't infused with consciousness—at least, not yet. Many if not most of the materials she presents during her performance are “pre-art”—not yet used—and as such, they hold idea or memory or both of these forces at once. Bocanegra's project is a rare art event: Conducted in her studio at The Old American Can Factory for one person at a time, it's proof that a great performance can happen anywhere and anyhow an artist tells it to.

Studio Visit is presented in three brief acts in three different rooms. In the first, Bocanegra sits across a table from her audience in the pitch dark, runs through a small slideshow of images—some hers, others from history—and speaks about why the artist's studio has always been a space of interest. In the second act, she disappears into a room in the middle of which all of her studio materials have been organized into a massive, dense installation lit with blinking lights. She explains that she's shopping for objects, and that she'll pull as many from the pile as she can as a swell of classical music plays. Finally, Bocanegra leads her audience to a table in a third room. She sits down and says that she'll speak on twelve of the objects for one minute each—telling the story of each thing and what she remembers about it, why she has it in her studio—after which the performance will end.

During my visit, Bocanegra placed each object beneath an overhead camera so that it loomed over her shoulder, the thing projected large and in close-up as though looked at through a microscope. She showed me a cutout image of a Girl Scout doll. “I was a girl scout for too long,” she sighed, and tried to remember where she'd found it. Then came a scrap from an old quilt made by her former mother-in-law; a glass vial filled with what looked to be salt used in an old performance; a piece of paper with notes taken from a journal she'd found at a flea-market overseas; a tiny doll-sized mattress rescued from the collected materials of an artist who'd died. “But that's not usually how I find my stuff,” she clarified. Just as each story got going, the minute would be up, and Bocanegra would move on. It may be a funny thing to listen to half-finished stories about the bits and scraps an artist saves, but what Bocanegra's *Studio Visit* foregrounds is something audiences don't often get to experience—that moment in the studio when all still hovers in the dazzling realm of possibility.

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Edgar Arceneaux's Until Until Until... was presented as part of Performa 15 at Three-Legged Dog from November 20th to 22nd; Wunderbaum's Looking for Paul was performed at New York Live Arts from November 11th to 14th; Walid Raad's Walkthrough is performed multiple times a week at the Museum of Modern Art through January 31st; Suzanne Bocanegra's Studio Visit will be performed until January 31st in her studio at The Old American Can Factory in Brooklyn.

David J. Roxburgh and Kaelen Wilson-Goldie's reviews of “Walid Raad” at the Museum of Modern Art appear in the January issue of Artforum.