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A.K. BURNS

A.K. Burns on the queer body, slipping between forms, American fetishes, and becoming a cyborg.

by Legacy Russell Oct 23, 2013



Video still from *Touch Parade (crush)*, 2011. All images courtesy of the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts.

A.K. Burns is a New York-based, multidisciplinary artist employing a vivid combination of sculpture, video and more in an exploration of the gendered body as rooted in queer and feminist politics. With Burns's prolific practice, the work produced therein is best spoken for in the voice of the artist. That said, on the occasion of Burns's most recent solo show—a powerful exhibition on view at Callicoon Fine Arts, aptly dubbed *Ending with a Fugue*—we sat down to discuss creative beginnings, the culture of American fetish, and the new media currency of the cyborg-as-geopolitic.

Legacy Russell Let's talk about your genesis as an artist. Where would you say you began? And what are some strands of those beginnings that still manifest within your current practice?

A.K. Burns I would blame my grandmother. She's a painter, and when I was younger she would take me for the day to hang out and we'd paint together. I would pretty much copy whatever she did. If she was working with watercolors she'd give me fancy watercolor paper and watercolors in the tubes. Or she'd give me real canvas and acrylics to work with, so she never treated my production as different because I was a kid. My mother influenced my political leanings. She is an articulate and highly opinionated hippie. I was raised with the idea that being American meant the right to question authority. Therefore, being an artist and being politically engaged have always been part of who I am or would be.

It never really occurred to me to do anything but be an artist until I was in undergrad and struck with survival anxiety. So, I detoured into graphic design. After undergrad, I started a small design studio working for arts and publishing clients. This held my interest for about four years before I became entirely fed-up with sitting at a computer everyday. By then I was co-organizing an artist-run gallery space in Oakland, where I lived at the time. I put on a solo show of my artwork in early 2003—video, performance and sculpture—and then promptly moved to New York where I met K8 Hardy, Emily Roysdon, Ginger Brooks Takahashi and the extended LTTR family.

LTTR built a community based in collaboration, political attitude, new language, feminist aesthetics, and queer sex. These things are still very present in my work. Co-founding a political project like Working Artists & the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.), or creating a publication like *RANDY*, or a video like *Community Action Center* (2010)—made with A.L. Steiner—emerged from these ecstatic collaborative roots. It's these body politics that have evolved to inform my solo practice.

LR In a sentence or two, how would you describe your practice to someone who may never have seen your work?

AB Well, I'm not medium-specific. The medium and form emerge by following impulses, interests and questions. It's the shape of my personal relationship to cultural phenomena, like porn or most recently (in this new solo show, *Ending with a Fugue*) ideas about nature and the natural. The consistent part is the space from which I make; the trans-feminist experience I spoke about above. I'm interested in how technology, language, labor, and economy fabricate our perception of and relationship to bodies.

LR You are both artist and cultural producer, toeing the line between the two with working in the studio, but also producing programs and projects out in the world, such as your participation in LTTR, the making of your and A.L. Steiner's film *Community Action Center*, and, as well, your publication, *RANDY*. Can you address your interest in taking on these different facets of creative practice?

AB I'm as interested in organizing events and publications that reflect on other people's practices as I am in making my own work. I don't think I would enjoy doing one thing full time. One is overly socially and organizationally demanding, the other requires a solitude and has a lot of internal demands that I need but want breaks from. Artists cull from the world in various ways, and for me, there is a strong feedback that happens between collaboration, solo work, teaching, and organizing. Mostly, I'm just interested in various types of stimulation and exchange.

LR Can you talk about the origins of your 2011 piece *Touch Parade*? Where does ritual come into contact with sex? Does fetishism act as a foil for constructions of the queer corpus?

AB *Touch parade* (2011) is comprised of five looped videos. I re-perform 'covers' or memes of a series of fetish videos found on YouTube. The monitors are hung on freestanding mini-walls in the gallery so the viewer can wander between the images, possibly aware of their body movement in relation to these displays of touch. The room is filled with a palpitating murmur from the five videos running simultaneously. I wanted to create a series of haptic images that promote looking through the body. I started that work during my MFA thesis and then it sat on the back burner for almost two years while larger collaborations such as *W.A.G.E.*, *RANDY*, *Community Action Center* and *The Brown Bear* consumed me. It started by receiving an email from a friend with a link to a fetish video on YouTube. I think it was a leather daddy smoking a cigar. Sucking away at the phallus. It was hot, incredibly simple yet an entirely complex cultural phenomenon (YouTube was only 3 years old at the time). I was already a year and a half into making *Community Action Center* (which took three years to complete) and this opened another avenue of socio-sexual issues I wanted to explore through my solo practice.



Installation view of *Ending With a Fugue*, Callicoon Fine Arts, 2013. Photo by Chris Austin.

I was curious and critical of how fetish is fetishized (such as Rihanna's music video for her song "S&M"). I became particularly interested in fetishes that utilized simple household goods—the unexpected, and our expectations around sexual content. The fetish gear industry has a certain cache that promotes the specialization and commodification of a particular aesthetic—black, leather, latex. In *Community Action Center*, we explored a similar idea by disallowing any consumer sex toys. All objects that interacted with the body had to be found or made. So I had an interest in both projects with impulse, accessibility and sexual creativity that happens outside the market.

The fact that these 'domestic' libidinal portraits (the fetish videos I remade) evaded the YouTube censors speaks to cultural expectations around expressions of sexuality. How some are accepted and some are rejected. Censorship in this sense becomes a type of assimilation. The fetish videos I was interested in working with create the possibility for an underground within a hyper-publics platform (the internet), because they insist on a unique set of desires.

A queer body often suffers from a cultural fascination with 'otherness', with being fetishized. And as Guy Hocquenghem notes, this is a construct of heteronormative culture. I think this is the foil for constructions of the queer corpus you ask about. And so these fetish videos are an example of self-representation bumping up against a rejection of what's unfamiliar.



A.K. Burns & A.L. Steiner. Video still from
Community Action Center, 2010.

LR You recently were included in the ICP Triennial, which is exciting stuff. I know you gave a talk during the course of programming for this exhibition. I think a big part of your new media practice seems to really blossom when placed within the public realm. Can you speak to this a bit?

AB A prerequisite of *Community Action Center* is that it be viewed in a group setting. This harkens back to porn theaters and how social/public space was part of the porn experience. Also it is a space that was typically male-identified. One of the speculations we had with that project was to make a space for women and trans bodies to watch sexual content together, as well as to counter the way porn is now consumed on the personal computer. I use “the social” like a material. But I wouldn’t call what I do “social practice.” I find that term leads to a lot of corralling of people into having an experience that creates a work that represents the artist or author. I’m more

interested in dialogues than dictating a framework for people to act out in.

On a side note, I don’t think I would call my work “new media” either. I like old media too! But I am interested in the public/private and social complexities offered by current technologies. When considering contemporary bodies you can’t escape becoming cyborgs as a model for understanding our present and future selves.

LR I love this construct of the “cyborg”—from Donna Haraway to Beatriz Preciado—the cyborg as metaphor for modern body-building as it gears away from the sci-fictional and toward “real” space, there are so many veins to explore there. Can you talk a bit more about this, and how it would relate to your understanding of yourself as a “new media” artist? And furthermore—is “cyborg” geopolitical? Is your work part of these histories?

AB I think the cyborg is a now-concept. Bodies will never be the same again. Or they will be more the same than ever. What Google glasses offer isn’t far from implanted devices. Video game addiction and technology withdrawal are increasingly common. So the separation between human and machine or human and ‘other’ is already well integrated into our present sense of being.

Technology offers infinite options to augment and abridge our bodies. Everyone is a tranny—transitioning gender, species, form, color, smell, etc. Athletes use high-tech clothing and drugs to maximize performance and industries are dedicated to artificial tans, nails, hair, tits, etc. This has created a culture of transitioning bodies. So why do we socially accept some forms of trans and not others?

Another principle of Haraway’s manifesto is affinity over identity. And I think this is a crucial shift we are experiencing. It’s not so much that identity politics is over. I really think the conditional declaration, that anything is post-blah blah, is dangerous. “Post” is about the privilege of feeling at ease in one’s body. What was given can be taken away and what should be inherent rarely is. Race, gender, and painting are all still complex power struggles!

So I think affinity offers new constellations for multiple identities. The web is a web. Our digital, psychic, fantasy, and IRL selves are merging and splitting. I guess I’m saying I take this future-present ‘reality’ and body into consideration when I work.

LR Can you talk some about your solo show at Callicoon Fine Arts? What directions will be taken there? New explorations?

AB *Ending with a Fugue* is the coming together of several recent explorations. A fugue is both a state of temporary amnesia and a compositional form in which themes are repeated or imitated by a succession of parts. *Ending with a Fugue* is like death through repetition, constantly forgetting and repeating history, style, image... a metaphor for our current apocalyptic condition. Repetition plays a big part in this show that is made up of a constellation of my process—labor, materials and symbols.

Last spring, I had access to a foundry—a process I had never worked with before. The molten metal is gorgeous and temperamental. And I was seduced by the required uniform, leather chaps. I cast a series of aluminum mono-print reliefs of discarded button-down work-shirts. The foundry is dirty and laborious. I hand-ladled the metal into the sand molds, so each print is a repeat subject made of multiple gestures. Of all the foundry metals, aluminum is the most contemporary and doesn’t occur naturally. The shirts are the uniform of those whose labor depends on their bodies.

This is a dying and shifting economy, when our greatest product is affective and immaterial labor. Blue-collar labor used to be accessible to the middle class, now it's exported and exploited. The shirts are also what I wear and a trope of "artist drag." This fashion speaks to a shift between labor, industry and the creative class.

About a year ago, I finally visited the New York Botanical Garden. While there I was mostly overwhelmed by the hordes taking pictures, not so much the flowers themselves. They captured the flowers and I was captivated by the compulsive social ritual. Spectacle now is for the iPhone—not the eyes—and the garden is another construct of our estranged relationship with the natural. But what is a flower? An inter-sexed, inter-species, pro-creator. It's like a cyborg.

LR How have flowers appeared in your recent work?

AB *The Orchid Show* (2013) is a 13-minute video (exhibited as part of the current show at Callicoon) of the annual orchid show at the NY Botanical Gardens. The audio is a combination of environmental sounds from the garden and a classical composition by Ruth Crawford Seeger, *Kaleidoscopic Changes on an Original Theme, Ending with a Fugue*, for piano, 1924. It's a critical merging of notions of nature, spectacle and beauty. The camera is handheld, often refocusing and lurking around the garden like a creepy voyeur. And the video includes material re-shot from the original footage and inset into the frame. Images of the flowers and cameras become further derived. The final edit is looped and repetitive.



A.K. Burns & A.L. Steiner. Video still from Community Action Center, 2010.

I've also been looking at Mapplethorpe's flowers. Those images that had an immediate commercial success, reproduced en masse on gift cards and calendars that shaped a generation of stylized floral portraiture. His formal strategies create a non-ironic heroic and virile vision of the flower. There is a quote by Mapplethorpe (that I found in a Christie's auction catalogue!), "...Photographing a flower is not much different than photographing a cock. Basically it's the same thing. It's about lighting and composition." If the flower is like a cock, are they just empty signifiers for a striking composition? But Mapplethorpe's cock and flower are loaded with his compositional affect. If affect is manipulation of emotion, he's maximizing desire (and thereby capital).

The show also includes two monolithic sculptures from a new series called, *Barrier Island*. They are door-sized walls of sand and embedded materials. The molds in the foundry were made of resin/sand mix and that got me thinking about the possibility of solid forms

made from sand. And this summer, as always, I visited the landscape of the city beach a lot, and Fire Island in particular. Sand more than dirt acts like a sinkhole for human residue and is uninhabitable by most plant life. Fire Island is an extremely vulnerable, queer utopia and barrier island, constantly on the verge of extinction at the whim of a natural or social disaster. *Barrier Island* (2013), are walls of sand that include pages from the Mapplethorpe flower catalog, molds of running shoe soles and color swaths of various natural supplements from the health food store. I was raised on bee pollen and spirulina, something that was obscure in childhood is now a trend that is driven by ideas of health and what is natural for our bodies that live in extraordinarily unnatural conditions. Likewise, running shoes and exercise gear in general, protects and enhances the body. Exercise is a type of luxury and an industry whose growth coincides with the decline in blue collar (body-centric) labor.

LR And after the show? What's next?

AB I'm making several big transitions. First, I'm shifting away from these large scale collaborations that have occupied a lot of my energies over the past several years. I have moved to the board of W.A.G.E., so I will be involved in it's overall evolution but not in the day-to-day organizing. We just did a live scored screening of *Community Action Center* at The Kitchen that concludes three years of touring that work. And *RANDY* magazine just released its fourth and final issue at the NY Art Book Fair. I will still pursue collaborations, but I want to do more improvisational, one-off, short-term projects. For example I have a series of hollow cement sculptural explorations I made back in 2008 that are intended to be used as feedback-noise instruments. I invited Kamau Patton to work with

me to perform an improvisational noise composition.

There are of course more sculptures in the works that deal with perversions of mold making, something that I have been working on and off with for the past couple of years. But most importantly the closing of those big collaborative projects leaves the opening for me to develop and finish a new large-scale project that has been in the works (slowly) for the last two years. *Negative Space* is a sculptural video installation comprised of about seven looped videos, that I see as non-sequential chapters in a forthcoming feminist sci-fi.



Video still from Touch Parade (wader), 2011.

I don't expect the full seven-channel version to be ready for a couple of years but will be showing versions of smaller installations as the work gets built. I'm calling it "a sci-fi" in the same way that *Community Action Center* is "a porn", wherein the genre is a medium to explode, disorder and question. *Negative Space* is like a fictional documentary in which a surreal collision of past, present and future sets the stage for performance and daily rituals of an intentional community of 'transitional' bodies. Land use, land rights, landscape and concepts of property are also themes in the work and much of it is shot on BLM land in southern Utah that I have been visiting and documenting over the past couple over years. One of the chapters called *Earthship 2014* has been shown at various exhibitions and screenings over the past year as a kind of preview, but won't be shown again until it joins the multi-channel installation. You can expect the first iteration of the installation in late-2014/early-2015.

***Ending with a Fugue* is on display at [Callicoon Fine Arts](#) until October 27. For more on A.K. Burns, visit her [website](#).**

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