

# Queer Eyes

DAVID VELASCO ON A. K. BURNS AND A. L. STEINER'S *COMMUNITY ACTION CENTER*

*The little cretin shepardess was now ruined for normal love and she ran amok among the other freaks, inflaming them.*

—Jack Smith, "Normal Love," 1963

**SOME FEMININE PRODUCTS:** Makeup, paint, and brushes. Floggers and Boston creams. Joints. Bananas that bleed when stabbed. Bloody pinkies poked through magazine pages and punctured beer cans held in taut tighty-whiteys. Watermelons split by samurai swords. Adult babies sprung from clay wombs.

FEMININE PRODUCTS says the sign, hoisted atop a stretched canvas above a slew of art supplies. It is both the literal and the conceptual establishing shot for A. K. Burns and A. L. Steiner's sixty-nine-minute "socio-sexual video" *Community Action Center*, 2010, which premiered in June at Taxter & Spengemann's booth at Liste 15 in Basel. What follows is indeed a "feminine product," but it is also a feminist evacuation of the term. The sign is a joke, but it's also serious—funny because it's true—a wry attitudinal kick-start to the work's flaming sense and sensibility.

And what a sensation it is. *CAC*, as its cropped, punning title suggests, is a veritable graveyard of prostheses—phalli chopped, skewered, braided, cracked, peeled, crushed, punctured, axed, bitten off. Is it perverse to find all this sexy? To call *CAC* porn, as its authors sometimes do, is to admit that titillation is its purpose. But if it is a porno, it certainly isn't a conventional one. Except for a brief bathtub musing by poet Eileen Myles, and Justin Bond's reading of Jack Smith's prose poem "Normal Love" in the video's orgiastic prelude, there is no talking. Narrative, when there is any, is parodic. Lighting is mostly natural. "Literal sex was incidental to creative sexual activity," Burns and Steiner note, and to be sure, *CAC* excels at delivering sex sans teleology. The witchy "pizza boy" episode with Gloria Maxxximo and Kasimir Solaj, to name one of the video's seventeen or so scenes, is as much *Un Chien Andalou* as it is *Nights in Black Leather*. Pony and Stargëizer's erotic embroidery climaxes with a large feather being sewn onto the latter's face. There are few explicit orgasms—two in the penultimate episode—and only a single pop shot, though it's a gushy one. (Jokes on the proverbial money shot, however, abound.) "From conception to final edit," the artists note, the video took three years to make. There is no straight "fucking."

There are many desires motivating the cameras, held by Burns and Steiner shooting simultaneously, except,



A. K. Burns and A. L. Steiner, *Community Action Center*, 2010, color video, 69 minutes. Production stills. From left: Rhys Ernst and Mai Khunt. Pony.

presumably, when one of the artists is working *within* the frame, whipping or vamping or being fisted. The video responds to a perceived hole in the history of womyn-centered porn—porn being, due to whatever series of unfortunate historical accidents, a genre still almost exclusively dominated by the prerogatives of male desire. *CAC* is a work of, by, and about womyn and queers (the video is dedicated to an apotheosis—"the queerest of the queers"), and as such, it is filled mostly with bodies that read as female, some bodies that read as male, and a few glam androgynous bodies that read ambiguously. *CAC* is also a singular achievement, a thrilling, generous representation of a community of friends, lovers, and intimates. It is critique and satire and the thing itself. It is the question and its answer.

The video, recorded with various borrowed and rented cameras, often has a shrill sort of clarity, like the first gasp of cold air after a puff of Ventolin. If I could freeze one moment from *CAC*'s sexual "events," it would be Pony's ejaculation of an egg into a brook, the crushing of the egg's shell, and the subsequent visual discharge: shots of a split papaya, an octopus, steaming artichokes. (Metonymy lubricates the work's editorial impasses.) I also love the fraught butch-femme cruising scene between Max Hardhand and Stargëizer, Rhys Ernst and Mai Khunt's riveting make-out session, Juggz's T&A car wash.

These are just preferences, and, more exclusively, *my* preferences. But then, *preferences* are both what the video best describes and what it most fervently elicits, a form of taste that, on some base level, resists cultivation. (Preferences can be discovered or nourished or even managed, but they can't be improved.) Indeed,

to have a properly "critical" response to *CAC* would mean suspending one's sexual response, and this would only jettison the work's most valuable contributions and, in a way, engage the work in bad faith. This is not to insulate the video from analysis but simply to acknowledge that the most productive explorations of the work will likely be organized, like the community it represents, around visceral sympathies and stimulations, rejections and revulsions. My responses won't be yours or anyone else's. (Maybe somebody lucky else's.)

Could we call all this "sex which is not one"? Particularly in the queerest scenes, one is reminded of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's epiphanic bemusement that gender of object-choice turned out, in the twentieth century, to be the defining dimension of the term "sexual orientation." The video plunders queer theory, third-wave feminism, lesbian separatism, and gay-male Crisco Disco lucubrations, offering not a reconciliation of their differences but rather a site for their promiscuous entanglements. It's porn with an agenda, and in a perfect world we'd play it in schools as a recruitment tool. (To complaints of cliquishness: *The Big Bang* was cliquish too.) "It is an action movie," the artists add, winkingly. And in this sense it is meant to turn you on, to spark contagious identifications and disidentifications that might extend the reach of this roving "center." Like Smith's "cretin shepardess" and his saints and cupids and angels inspired to gang-fuck throughout heaven, we're all ruined for normal love. Burns and Steiner find this conundrum cause for celebration. It is this optimistic engagement with the possibilities for sexual reorientation that makes *CAC* both art and something wilder. □

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