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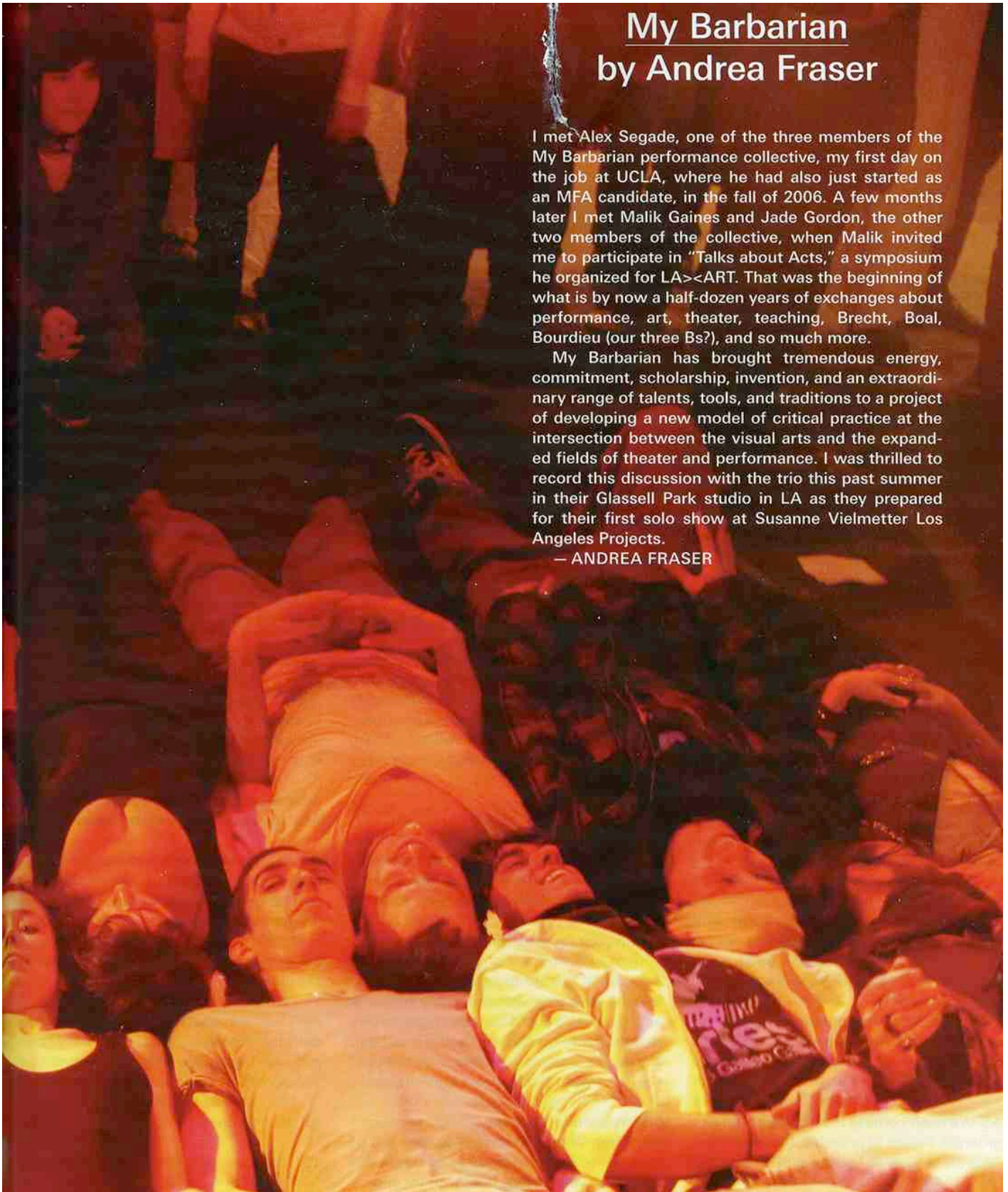
By Andrea Fraser
Fall 2013

My Barbarian by Andrea Fraser

I met Alex Segade, one of the three members of the My Barbarian performance collective, my first day on the job at UCLA, where he had also just started as an MFA candidate, in the fall of 2006. A few months later I met Malik Gaines and Jade Gordon, the other two members of the collective, when Malik invited me to participate in "Talks about Acts," a symposium he organized for LA><ART. That was the beginning of what is by now a half-dozen years of exchanges about performance, art, theater, teaching, Brecht, Boal, Bourdieu (our three Bs?), and so much more.

My Barbarian has brought tremendous energy, commitment, scholarship, invention, and an extraordinary range of talents, tools, and traditions to a project of developing a new model of critical practice at the intersection between the visual arts and the expanded fields of theater and performance. I was thrilled to record this discussion with the trio this past summer in their Glassell Park studio in LA as they prepared for their first solo show at Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.

— ANDREA FRASER



ANDREA FRASER Since this conversation is going to press, my first question is: What do you think about the press you've gotten so far? A lot of it seems to focus on "excess," "antics," "kitsch," and "camp"—with "hints of intriguing conceptual issues." Sorry to throw this at you!

ALEXANDRO SEGADE Some of my favorite writing has used what we do and extended it to other conversations, like Shannon Jackson's essay "Just-in-Time" for *The Drama Review* or José Muñoz's book *Cruising Utopia*. I also like Hilton Als's weird write-up of us in the *New Yorker*. He's like a carnival barker speaking about some sideshow—he calls us "whippersnappers." Unfortunately the term *kitsch* gets used a lot, but everything else on that list I'm okay with.

JADE GORDON Camp is okay; kitsch is not. Kitsch is sort of like garbage. (laughter)

MALIK GAINES Camp relates to theatrical conventions that are critical and also pleasurable. Kitsch is a misinterpretation of our work.

AF A lot of what's been written about you in the context of art journalism also seems to emphasize the theatrical aspects of your work—maybe because these strike art writers as the most novel in the context of what they are seeing in the art world. The three of you each have different backgrounds in theater, yet *My Barbarian* now exists primarily in the visual art field, both physically and discursively. How do you think the theater practices and discourses that inform your work function in an art context?

MG Those terms get picked up on because our strategies are somewhat transgressive in the gallery space since they refer to fun and entertainment. In theater you have a *play* and in art you have a *work*, right?

JG We had a set of theatrical techniques and tools that we could work with as a medium. At least for me, this was my set of skills.

AS We're all coming from different backgrounds. I went to art school, as you know, Andrea, since you were my professor.

AF Yes, you got an MFA in visual art, after having gotten a BA as an English major, and Malik, you got a PhD in theater—

MG Theater & Performance Studies

actually, at UCLA. I did writing at CalArts before that.

AS And Jade got an MA in Applied Theater at USC.

AF Applied Theater?

JG Theater for social change, with an emphasis on Augusto Boal. It's not community theater, but theater in the community, where participants are non-actors using theater for political and social change.

MG But we don't use those techniques in a way that is conventional or always legible in theater itself. The art space allows us to change topics, strategies, and genres with each specific project. We can respond to the architecture of a place, or its location, or a specific audience. Those are features of performance art more than theater.

AS Before *My Barbarian* got started we worked on theater projects together. We didn't exactly have a context; we came from a space that resembled the underground and worked in provisional, DIY venues. We still present work in places that aren't always contiguous with the visual arts, but the art world offered us an opportunity to experiment with the audience in a way that's totally different from theatrical and performance venues, where the audience has a very specific role. Getting people out of their seats is difficult. People are—

JG —passive.

AS But our first audiences were rock-venue audiences, which are not seated or passive but are actively talking back to you.

AF So your first incarnation was as a band?

AS We did theater together before we had a name, and then we started *My Barbarian* as a band. We could construct performances fairly quickly and actually get paid a little to go on stage, which was the opposite of what theater was offering us.

JG We wouldn't have to pay to produce anything. We could have a guaranteed 45 minutes to an hour on stage to figure out what we were doing. It was an incongruous space, not always unwelcoming. The question was: What doesn't belong here? That helped form what we do, because we were always allowed to transgress in the rock club.

AF So, how were you different from other rock bands?

AS For one thing, there were three lead singers, which was tricky.

JG Two of whom didn't play instruments.

AS We also were heavily invested in narrative, so we were always telling stories.

MG And there were costumes.

JG We required specific attention. We would stop and wait, or we'd try to battle with the clinking of glasses—

AS —and we had crazy music influences. Our models included musicals from the golden age of Broadway, mixed in with psychedelic rock and new wave dance music.

AF So you weren't really a rock band.

AS We were an art band.

JG We were masquerading as an art band. We even created alter-ego groups occasionally. German Toothbrush, with an umlaut over both the o's was our avant-garde—

AF Tööthbrush!

AS —hippie, progressive band. Maybe because there are three of us and we are kind of prolific, we were too hyper to even be one band.

JG We would get frustrated if we had to play the same songs three shows in a row.

AS At a certain point we became really interested in extending past the five-minute comfort zone for a song into these longer pieces—

JG —and added dialogue and scenes and set pieces.

AS Then we wanted to create situations with the audience. We did our very first gay marriage piece for the Baghdad School of the Performing Arts in 2003.

AF What is that?

JG That's another alter-ego group.

AS That was at the beginning of the second Iraq War. We tried to get the audience to look at it as a ritual they could participate in. Then it became clear that we needed more flexibility. In an art



*Alexandro Segade, Jade Gordon, Malik Gaines in Universal Declaration of Infatigable Anxiety Situations Reflected in the Creative Impulse, 2013, video, 29 minutes.
Courtesy of the artists and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.*

context you actually have more space to decide how things are going to be set up.

AF So, after the club setting you found the gallery context?

AS 2004–2005 was the transition.

MG A few curators saw us perform as a band and knew that we really wanted to do site-specific things, so they started inviting us to develop projects.

AF It occurred to me when you were talking about audience that in some ways the theater context failed its own radical experiments from the '60s and '70s. The visual art context became a place where those experiments could develop and move forward.

JG Absolutely.

MG It hasn't been the case that doors are flung open for us to do radical theater in art museums—we've struggled with that too—but what you just described was our thinking at the time.

JG The doors weren't flung open for us to do radical theater in any theater spaces either.

AF I'm sure the doors weren't really flung open for you anywhere. More like cracked open, right?

MG But we think of ourselves as artists; I don't think of myself as an actor.

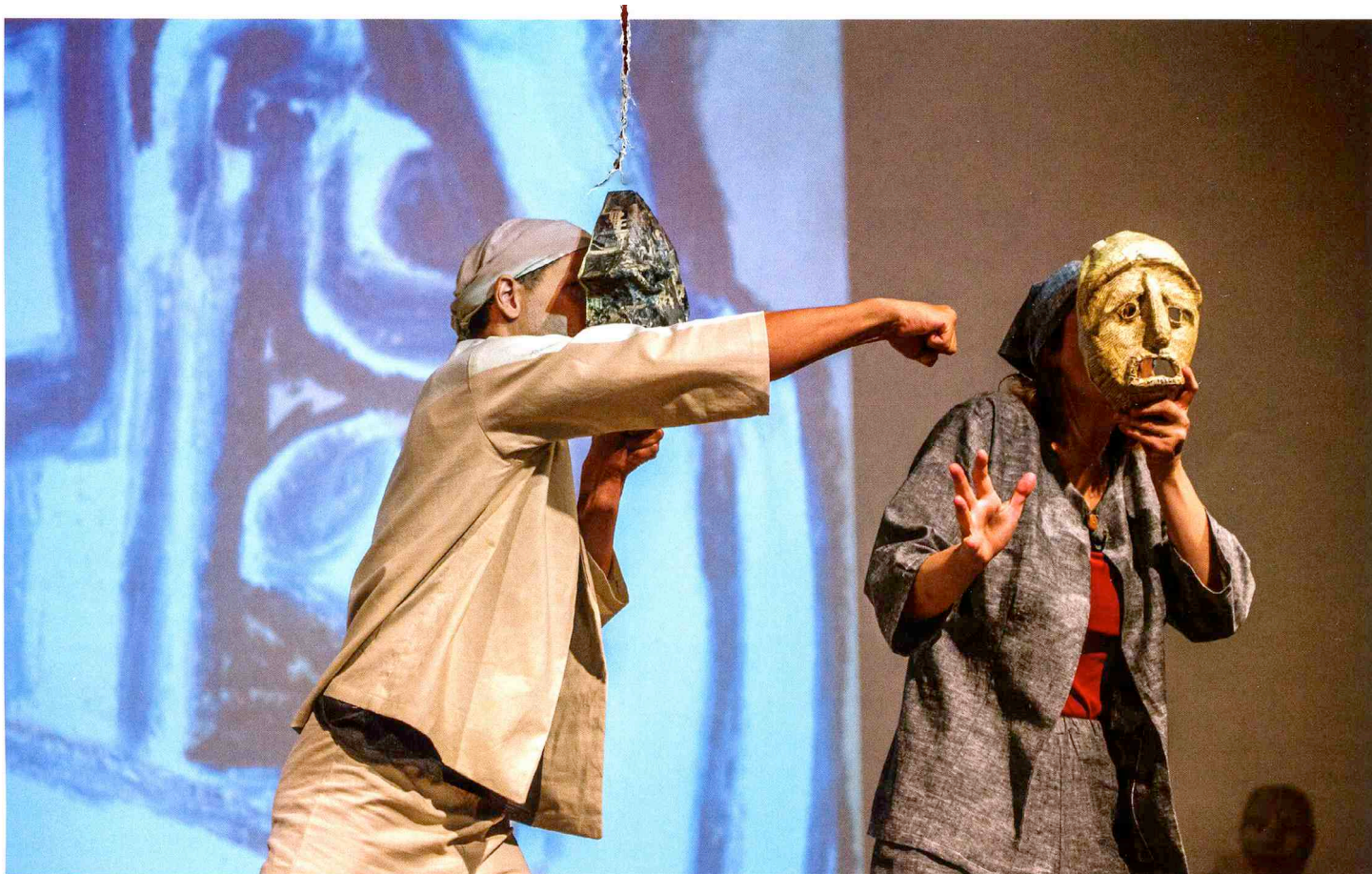
AF And yet, reading through your own material as well as your press, much of the emphasis does seem to be on theater, with many references to Boal and the Theater of the Oppressed, and to Brecht in particular. You're reimagining Brecht's play *The Mother* now for a show at Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects. So theater does seem to be very defining. What does that mean in combination with the statement "We're artists"?

MG My father is a conceptual artist [Charles Gaines] and when I was very young, he told me that the idea is to introduce content and form that aren't already recognized as art and make them

art. That might be why I'm comfortable using things that have been connected to theater and calling them art. That gesture is much more a part of art than theater.

AS I was never convinced that I had to choose. One of the first criticisms we got was, "Your work is too theatrical." We were like, "Well, we all come from the theater so we don't think of that as pejorative." Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" essay—which is taught to every single undergrad art student—actually provides a helpful framework. Fried sees theater as a promiscuous, impure space that lies between the arts. But then you have the opposite view among theater people, who think theater is the mother of the arts. Theater may be a more productive concept within the art realm than within the theater realm. It's also connected to entertainment in a different way.

AF Entertainment may be an even more challenging term in an art context than in theater. How should art people engage



Performance view from My Barbarian's version of The Mother, adapted from the play by Bertolt Brecht, at Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, July 13, 2013. Courtesy of the artists and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.

with what is entertaining in what you do? Which leads to the larger question of the criteria by which you want My Barbarian to be evaluated: Is it pushing the art or theater envelope and moving the practice forward? Is it its social or political impact? Or is it on the basis of—

AS —the success of our spectacle?

JG Brecht said that in order for didactic theater to be effective, it had to be entertaining.

AF Actually, I see you very much in the tradition of '80s performance art, which has been erased from art history to a large extent.

MG Laurie Anderson?

AF And Ann Magnuson, Eric Bogosian, John Kelly, and the NEA four—Karen Finley, Holly Hughes, Tim Miller, John Fleck. All of the stage and cabaret-based work was considered a part of the field of art performance in New York in the '80s.

MG Right.

AF I'm shocked when I hear people saying, "There was no performance in the '80s." Hello!? The NEA Four? The most famous performance artists in the history of the United States!

AS Generationally that is the performance we saw first.

MG There are a few specific gatekeepers right now in terms of big institutions. Cabaret-oriented pop performance doesn't conform to the post-minimalist experience they prefer. I listened to Laurie Anderson's record *Big Science* as a kid all the time. I imagine there were gay men of that generation who would have been our mentors, but didn't live through the AIDS epidemic and weren't able to rise to prominence in a way that we would recognize now or know about. Of course, we were also interested in Eleanor Antin, Lorraine O'Grady, Carolee Schneemann, Adrian Piper, but that more theatrical work was very important to us.

AS We were definitely thinking about those '80s artists. Particularly Ann Magnuson, in my case.

AF Then Magnuson and Bogosian started working in film and TV. It's actually not that that history disappeared; it got split off from visual art history and became more associated with performance studies instead. It is really unfortunate that much of the connection was lost in the process.

AS We've gone back and forth between those two contexts a lot.

JG Because we are a collaboration, each of us tries new mediums and brings the results into the fold under the My Barbarian umbrella. Working in an art context allows for drawings to become set pieces and masks to become sculptures. It allows for a high level of experimentation and the constant adding of more and more ingredients.

MG Rather than occupying a particular disciplinary space, we all are interested in



Installation view from Universal Declaration of Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in the Creative Impulse at Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, 2013. Courtesy of the artists and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.

ambivalence as a critical mode that allows us to work as a collective rather than as an individual, to disperse past a beginning and an end. Where is the art exactly? Bringing theater into a museum destabilizes, de-centers things, which helps in the effort to raise political questions in a space that concretizes everything. Some people see ambivalence as wishy-washy or having a negative quality, but I see it as doing more than one thing at a time in a place that demands a singular kind of output.

JG Indistinction—more on that later.

AS I think it's actually more challenging to bring art strategies into a theater context. You can bring any form into a gallery space, into a white cube. There are certain things that are really difficult to bring into a theater space because of the expectation and training of the audience. Getting people out of their seats is difficult when the seats are so comfortable.

AF In the past you have made distinctions between audiences and the ways various works create different relationships to

audiences—between a seated theatrical audience and a mobile art audience that may or may not be engaged in a participatory process. Then there are the people you work with in the context of PoLAAT [Post-Living Ante-Action Theater]: they are not audience members, but rather participants who then become performers for other audiences. So there are different strategies, each generating relationships that have different dynamics and implications.

AS That's been the exploration: the question of what various aesthetic choices communicate and what sort of impact they have on different audiences.

AF And that's where site and situational specificity come in.

AS Yeah. We do tend to have a consistent position throughout, which is to ask questions about culture which are relatively difficult for us to answer: How will different approaches effectively get us in contact with different audiences so that we can ask those questions? I've

become less convinced of the idea, for example, that audience participation will automatically have more impact than a well-delivered monologue.

AF That's healthy skepticism! You've been involved in the dialogue about participatory practices, audience experiments, and collective and collaborative process that's been going on within and between the visual art, theater, and performance studies. Do you find yourself questioning the claims made in some of those debates?

AS I'm less convinced that any one mode necessarily has a certain politics. In many ways Brecht and Artaud are at the root of what we do. There is a productive split between them: Brecht calls for an alienated audience that questions the action, while Artaud envisions a type of ritual theater that surrounds the audience and brings them into the experience. This tension has been generative for many who followed after them—Boal and others who have been huge influences on us, as well as visual and performance artists.



Performance view of *Post-Living Ante-Action Theater (PoLAAT): Together Forever?*, 2013, Yaffo 23, Jerusalem.
Courtesy of the artists.

AF Visual artists less so.

MG People in the art world read Rancière's *The Emancipated Spectator* and say, "Oh, Brecht is just deeply flawed!" And you're like, "Have you actually seen Brecht's plays?" Of course they haven't; Brecht is a lot of fun.

AS We work with these things as tools. They shape different kinds of experiences, but I don't think they have inherent politics.

JG Democracy can go completely wrong. I mean, look at what's happening in Egypt.

MG Look at Florida's Stand Your Ground law.

AF Your approach is difficult to locate, which makes it exciting but also challenging. We can locate you in relationship to visual art and theater, which each have specific histories, institutions, rituals, discourses and so forth—although of course there is also a long history of dialogue between them. Perhaps we can also look at the aims of your practice, which as you said, asks critical questions about culture.



Mock-up image of *Post-Living Ante-Action Theater (PoLAAT): Post-Paradise, Sorry Again* for New Museum proposal, 2008. Photo by Alexandro Segade. Courtesy of the artists.

Of course, traditions of critique exist both in visual art history and in theater history. Are you bringing those two traditions together to develop new strategies for how one engages in a critical practice today?

MG The answer is yes. (*laughter*)

JG Good work!

AF Phew!

AS That's why the press just wants to say "they're antic" and "they use kitsch," because the rest of it is hard to deal with.

JG But that difficulty is a part of the practice, the questions make up the content and the form is the form and—

AS —it's a forum.

JG The form is the forum, yeah.

AF If the frame of the project is critical practice, then the project itself is an investigation of how one achieves a critical impact, as well as the more fundamental question of how we define critique itself.

MG Maybe there's a difference between critique, critical questions, and critical practice.

AF As an artist and performer, it's quite clear to me that most of the critical strategies that came down to me in the '80s and informed institutional critique derived, if not from Brecht specifically, then from Berlin Dada. That was the place and time when avant-garde strategies were turned to explicitly political ends. It was also when work on form, representation, discourse, and narrative came to be considered political work, understood as ideology critique and later simply as critique. So the influence of Brecht was always there. Arguably the most important additions to those strategies in the visual arts came in the '70s, with feminism. But at this point in time a post-disciplinary critical practice has become a tradition in itself that exists between fields. The breaking down of disciplinary boundaries has often been framed as a kind of internal or institutional critique, especially when those boundaries are seen as elitist, exclusionary, hierarchical, and so forth. But now that the art world has become a global, multibillion dollar industry that can gobble up anything and everything, do we need to rethink the politics of post-disciplinarity?

AS That's the thing to question: Have you been consumed, subsumed into something that needs you for a certain purpose, like to build an audience on Thursday nights so the institution can actually get funding?

AF Or to "enliven the museum," which is a phrase I hear a lot these days.

JG But is the problem one of exploitation?

AS Our project for the Engagement Party program at the Museum of Contemporary Art here in LA might be an example to consider. It was funded by an endowment to support collective social practice through the museum's education and public programs department. When we did it, it was right after the collapse of the institution. Thinking a lot about your practice, Andrea, and performing a site-specific critique, we did a series of interviews with people who had worked at MOCA through the crisis and had seen their fellow employees get fired. We took those interviews and turned them into scripts for actors to learn and perform at the opening of one of the museum's shows.

AF I can't believe I missed that. Damn!

JG You would have liked it. (*laughter*)

AS We wanted to raise questions in a way that the public could engage with, in the space of the crisis itself, with the people who actually are impacted by it, like, What's happening with the security guard here?

MG When we did it, this was the only functioning funded space within the entire museum that could commission art.

JG And they couldn't actually pay us.

MG So they folded our project into having an opening for a show of works in their collection.

AS That part of the project, where we were expected to help pay for their opening party through our commission, was the gobbling thing. It happens all the time. I remember Danny McDonald from Art Club 2000 saying to Malik, "Remember, they need you more than you need them." That's a potential way of looking at things, but sometimes it's hard to remember that when you are trying to sustain a practice.

AF Your PoLAAT project seems to be very

much about formulating, even codifying, a model of critical practice.

MG It began in 2008, following a lot of work we had made around Bush-era anxieties. I wanted to be hopeful about the possibilities for democracy and participation. We wanted to bring our experiences as a group to larger and larger groups. Times have changed, of course.

AS Yeah, the attempt was to develop with other people the strategies that we had already formulated with our work. It started in the education program of the New Museum. We were playing with the self-reflexivity of institutional critique and the Brechtian impulse toward exposing the apparatus, while embracing critique as a fun, positive, and necessary part of art making.

JG The question was: How do we codify our strategies and then teach them? How do we share them and possibly let them exist in a context other than our own?

AF So they can be practiced by other people?

JG Yeah, some people in Italy used them.

AF How did that work out?

AS They stayed together as a group after we left, but they broke up after a few performances.

MG We modeled these codes after some radical theater projects including The Living Theater, Fassbinder's Anti-Theater, and Boal's Theater of the Oppressed, using our own didactic charts and graphs, while keeping in mind some of the perceived failures of '60s utopian projects: the sense that their radicality was consumed and repurposed, that their revolutions were re-contained. So there's also ambivalence there. But we do actually believe in all of the principles.

AS The five principles are "Estrangement," "Indistinction," "Suspension of Beliefs," "Mandate to Participate," and "Inspirational Critique." They all reflect the conversation we've had across disciplines. "Estrangement" is the first principle that can be connected to the Brechtian alienation effect very easily, but we also wanted to bring camp into that conversation.

JG In camp there's this emotional identification that happens across critical distance.

MG In Brecht, as in most Marxist models, all the issues of gender and sexuality and race get reduced to a subset of class, but if you're looking at queer or feminist performance strategies, they're happening together, in tandem. That's what we want to do with "Estrangement."

AS Then "Indistinction" came from looking at Bourdieu. Also, of course, from our own practice as this thing that's hard to locate. There's a joke in there too in the sense that distinction implies a kind of refinement. But as a performance strategy, "Indistinction" allows us to do things that short-circuit each other.

AF Whereas "Estrangement," with the Brechtian connection, evokes a Marxist tradition of ideology critique, "Indistinction," references Bourdieu, who rejected Marxist thinking about class in his own work on social hierarchies and domination. But "Indistinction" also takes me back to the historical avant-gardes and to what Kristeva called the revolution in poetic language: the destruction of the order and hierarchies of signifying structures. That's the Artaudian tradition, right?

MG I think so, except unlike Artaud or someone like Gertrude Stein, we're less likely to break down meaning in order to show its fallaciousness than to foreground its complexity. We would rather say three meaningful, contradictory things at once.

AF Does this notion of simultaneity have a particular history in theater? It's a core strategy in avant-garde traditions identified in the visual arts.

MG Yeah, I was just looking at some of Grotowski's scenic designs and they do everything they can to break up a proscenium view. There might be an actor here, and then an actor over there, and an actor outside—

JG Also Richard Schechner's environmental theater pieces, where it's about creating multiple points of view. The audience was dispersed around the space and depending on where you were in the audience, you would be looking at different things so that people had completely different experiences of the performance.

MG Or in a broader performance context, I think a lot about Nina Simone's strategy in the song "Four Women," in which she embodies all of them.

AS Which makes me think about the

third PoLAAT principle, "Suspension of Beliefs." That one was really hard when earlier this year we worked in Israel, where religion is so important.

MG And in Egypt too, in 2008. We changed the name to "Can You Believe What You See?"

AF Is it a way of engaging specific belief systems that emerge in your process?

JG It's actually more like letting your belief system levitate and float around, suspending it in mid-air so you can walk around it and look at it from above and from below, and maybe also look at other people's belief systems hanging in the air next to you, and ask questions and be critical of your own system.

AS Creating some distance from it, but also being aware of how belief is produced and supported. This is the one where we get very metaphysical in terms of performance. There's a lot of levitation exercises and supporting each other in—

JG —trust circles.

AF Do each of these principles represent specific phases in a workshop with a group?

JG Yes. The final workshop is the final performance, and then the circle widens from the participants in the workshop to the audience.

MG We organize a final recital as a demonstration of the principles, where all the stuff that got generated in the workshops gets connected.

AS At the end the participants of the workshop—

JG —teach the principles—

AS —to the rest of the people who are there, to the audience. "Mandate to Participate" is always a struggle. Everyone finds audience participation to be a nightmarish concept, despite the fact that participation in an art context, particularly in social practice, is always considered positive.

MG We're pretty good at it, though.

AS We got better at figuring how to "play" with a larger group of people. This is where key concepts like *play* or *critique* work with and against each other.

JG On my own, as a Theater of the Oppressed practitioner, I've worked with students or kids or old people who really don't want to do it, so you develop different strategies for mandating audience participation.

AF That's quite a skill set.

MG How does "Inspirational Critique" strike you as one of the experts in the field of institutional critique?

AF I'm ambivalent.

MG So are we.

AF I'm fine with tossing *institutional*—most people understand it too narrowly anyway—but *critique* is actually a much more problematic term in contemporary art discourse. It's seriously overused and yet very difficult to define, so it becomes a politically legitimizing term for all sorts of things that may be quite regressive. So I can relate to qualifying critique as a way to grapple with that. But then at the same time, of course, I'm protective!

MG Right.

AF I would hope also that inspiration is already a component of institutional critique, and that bringing it out could be a productive dialogue. One of the problems with critique is that it's often practiced as a kind of negation that can be about shaming or generating guilt, which just serves to activate defenses.

JG And shut things down rather than open them up.

AF Right. The aspect of institutional critique that should work against that is reflexivity: It's not about pointing at someone and saying, "Shame on you!" It's "Shame on me!" That can be comic, but there's also a pathos there that can be inspirational, like the classical dramatic protagonist who inspires by facing and overcoming—or failing to overcome—various challenges. At the same time, I still value art as an alternative to what Marcuse called an "affirmative culture" that's all about warding off anxiety and bad feeling. Maybe that's why "Inspirational Critique" makes me a little nervous.

AS Mary Kelly told me that critique is by definition inspirational, so the term is redundant.

MG It's a play on words, so it's a little

Brecht and Artaud are at the root of what we do. There is a productive split between them: Brecht calls for an alienated audience that questions the action, while Artaud envisions a type of ritual theater that surrounds the audience and brings them into the experience.

bit hokey no matter what. It also has something to do with live performance. If you've just gotten up and done your monologue, or cried or danced or whatever, it's very different from hanging your paintings on a wall and then having people a week later come talk about them, or from examining the institutional structure of a company, or whatever. Your body is on the line, everything is right there, so how can you still be critical in that space?

JG And nice.

AS And supportive.

AF That brings us to another one of the dividing lines in contemporary art positions. On the one hand, there are practices that emphasize critique and negation and bring a kind of destructive energy to existing structures experienced as bad. On the other hand, there are community-based and social practices that reject the politics of critique to a large extent and are oriented toward creating, affirming, or supporting good structures. You're trying to straddle those two, along with a third tradition, which would be—

AS —Broadway musicals.

MG Weird race performance.

AF Weird race performance and feminist and queer performance or, more broadly, identity-based performance.

MG I didn't want to say it.

AF I know, but do we have better word yet?

MG No. Though maybe identification as a process is more interesting than identity as a fixed state.

AS Part of the hope with this notion of "Inspirational Critique" is that it offers a critique that is mindful of to whom one is speaking and how it's going to be interpreted. This has a lot to do with working in an international context, and even across disciplinary lines. I mean, if you say "That was critical," in one context it can mean it was very good.

MG It was rigorous.

AS But in other contexts—

AF —you're in intensive care. All site- and situation-specific work should be mindful of context and audience. In a previous interview, Malik, you said that theater is social change. You quoted Boal: "Theater is a dress rehearsal for the revolution."

JG A dress rehearsal for reality.

MG I could stand by that.

AF We've located My Barbarian not in an art tradition or theater tradition so much as in a tradition of critical practice, itself defined by the question and ongoing investigation of what constitutes a transformative cultural practice. That's different from what one finds in other arenas of political art or social practice, where those questions are seen as already answered.

MG Right. Of course we can't insist that social change is always positive. Nor is collaboration. But through theatrical forms we can enact social dynamics that are frozen and crystalized in much visual art. I don't know if you can go so far as to talk about our work as rehearsal for revolution, but it's a place where you can envision different scenarios that maybe alter accepted terms.

JG That's pretty much what we're all about, and what Boal's work is about, creating possibilities, scenarios that reflect possibilities. But we're definitely not doing strict Boal.

AS Making work that addresses political questions is not the same thing as activism. It can be informed by activism, and it may also be critical of it. We went to Israel under the cloud of a cultural boycott: we broke the boycott and then we made a piece about the boycott. We wanted to know what the artists who we were working with thought. For us the biggest question was: What good does it do to cut off a conversation?

AF There are different ways of conceptualizing political practice in cultural fields.

One is direct impact on the model of activism rooted in a larger social movement. Another is the model of critical practice, which aims to impact its own cultural field: that's the model of institutional critique. Both could be considered site-specific, but in very different arenas. Then there's art that claims to be political vis-à-vis its subject matter, but we don't buy that, right? And there's a fourth model, which is direct impact in the specific arena of its participants in terms of their active relations—like the process that you're doing with PoLAAT—where it's about very immediate social and interpersonal relationships. But to describe that model as political, it seems to me that one first has to identify what forms of domination are at work in those relationships and what's at stake for participants in changing them. Actually, the same is true of the other models as well.

MG And when we discuss these fields, we also should remember the public spaces where we've worked—the park, the town square, the boardwalk, the National Mall—where many disciplinary terms fall away and content is addressed more broadly. Here politics are experienced more directly, but the work is still very different from activism.

JG When I was studying applied theater, there wasn't space for me to be an artist and a cultural activist. My ego as an artist had no place in cultural activism. I felt like I had to remove myself, like I had to sacrifice aesthetics for the good of the collective. It doesn't leave space for self or play.

AS This is where my impulse toward indistinction comes in. All of these rubrics are fun to parse, but sometimes I feel like I'm playing Dungeons and Dragons, and trying to determine, "Are you a gray-elf or are you a wood-elf? Are you a water wizard or a fire magic user?" It drives me a little bit crazy because there will be, in the end, a work that will be grappled with, and if it's any good, it's actually fighting against all of those terms.