A.K. BURNS

Shabby but Thriving
The natural world is riddled with murky distinctions between creature and environment, which have captivated artists at least since the Surrealists. Think of the Phasmatoidea, commonly known as stick insects, which trudge along tree branches, or the reef stonefish, a brilliantly hued fish that embeds itself in coral, bearing dorsal-fin spines that brim with toxic venom. In nature, insects approximate worms, snakes. Two beings can appear related, even porous, so that it becomes difficult to know where one ends and another begins. Such real-world flickers between a living thing and its context give way to discussions of abstraction, appropriation, simulation, and symbiosis. So, too, the unsettling effect of an object with shaky boundaries gives way to fantasies of omnipotence on the one hand and obliteration on the other. Indeed, writing about this slippery slope in 1935, the French psychoanalyst Roger Caillios, in his famous “Minicry and Legendary Psychoaesthesia,” went so far as to say that a true lack of distinction between self and surroundings was the ultimate definition of psychosis.

The scenes that make up Living Room are numerous and varied. Children in an unfixed dream state channel a number of characters, sometimes portraying occupants of dwarf planets (celestial bodies that the International Astronomical Union excludes from its roster of official planets), and at other times imitating the fish and flies they find in their environment, causing, observing, and then assuming the gestures of distress. A parallel scene depicts a person with a backpack and prosthetic pregnancy belly heaving fragments of a demolished couch through doorways and down a stairwell in a protracted descent, intercut with footage of a figure in military uniform bearing Chelsea Manning’s name, carrying a heavy load down the same stairway. In an interpretation of Jacques-Louis David’s famous painting The Death of Marat (1793), two patients commiserate in the bathroom, one on the toilet, one in the tub, and riff on phrases, at one point passing possible names for a queer party back and forth. Beneath all this, dancers in the basement, its stairwells (partially renovated and bearing relics of previous eras), and all manner of found and constructed interiors. It uses the entire building as a stage and as a metaphorical body—that is to say, the performers themselves are bodies within a larger body.

During World War I, this blurred boundary between a being and its context was mobilized to develop military camouflage—a way to jam signals, meld frequencies, and disrupt the perception of space within the context of combat. Individual units were absorbed within a field in which distinctions between near and far, marginal and central, became confused. Through obliterative camouflage, a soldier could be rendered as a series of fragmented forms receding into the environment. The body could better protect itself by integrating with its surroundings—it was also better able to prey on others. Yet, beyond the predator/prey paradigm, such tactics of display and decoy call attention to the ways in which individual bodies are themselves only ever part of a larger fabric—social, sexual, political, material, architectural, affectual. There is no self without an/other.
protest signs—"No," "Her," "Or bust," and "Again"—which align in new linguistic combinations as the dancers change positions. The building, at once a hermetic ecosystem and protagonist in the narrative of Living Room, frames, supports, and limits these performers as they use their bodies to labor and leisure, choreograph and organize, bathe and subsist within its vital architectural interior.20 Furniture and props act as both benign objects and political subjects, until the distinction between these ostensibly binary states becomes fleeting and unstable.11

In addition to these props—which appear in the video as well as in the installation surrounding it—Burns’s exhibition is riddled with lures and bait, objects made to resemble prey and placed at the end of a fishing line to entice fish to bite. Single pennies, punctured once or twice, dangle from hooks on the walls. A penny is, of course, a token of a much larger system of value, distribution, and currency. Introduced in 1864, the penny was the first American coin that no longer bore the insignia E pluribus unum ("Out of many, one"); the result of a fierce national debate about the terms by which “the many” could relate to one another or even be considered “one.” Now, amid shifting political and social terrain,12 we find ourselves once again negotiating these terms. Our very survival as individuals, as well as collective entities, depends on forging coalitions of support in an increasingly hostile context.

A.K. Burns
Shabby but Thriving, 2017
Mixed-medium installation
Courtesy the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts

Post Times (drop open), 2017
Newspaper, glue
Dimensions variable

No Relief, 2017
100% Cotton t-shirt with silkscreen text
Dimensions variable

Lure, 2017
Feathers, fish hook, pennies, plastic or wooden beads, swivels, roofing tar, plastic bottle, fishing line, concrete-hydrocal mix
Dimensions variable

Corporeal Soil, 2017
Topping soil, foil-wrapped hard candy, resin
Dimensions variable

Fly, 2017
Feathers, steel wire, roofing tar
Dimensions variable

Living Room, 2017–ongoing
Wood, metal coils, plastic webbing, underglow
Synced two-channel HD video, sound, color; 36 min

BATHROOM / KIDNEYS
Detox Tub Talks
Marat (economic toxicity): A.L. Steiner
Patient Patient (persistent micro-aggressions): keyon gaskin

BASEMENT / UTERUS
The Movement
HER: Nate Flagg
OR BUST: Arianna Gil
NO: Jahmal B. Golden
AGAIN: NIC Kay
HER: Savannah Knoop
OR BUST: Monica Mirebile
AGAIN: Marbles Jumbo Radio
NO: Tsige Tafesse

Producer: Sara O’Keeffe
Director of Photography: A.K. Burns
Additional Cameras: Eden Batki and Minnie Bennett
Video/Audio Editor: A.K. Burns
Musical + Sound Score: Geo Wyeth
Audio Mix: Mathew Patterson Curry / Quintin Chiappetta
Costume, Props, and Set Design: A.K. Burns
Choreographer (basement scene): NIC Kay
Production Assistants: Diana Lozano, Delfina Martinez-Pandiani, Jessica Robbins, and Saar Shemesh
Lighting: Derek Wright
Tech Assistant: Kate Wiener
Still Photography: Eden Batki, Minnie Bennett, and Lauryn Siegel
Digital Effects: Common Space Studio

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Footnotes in this essay link to image clusters constructed by Burns and follow an associative model in dialogue with the artist’s visual research strategies.
PUBLIC PROGRAMS

BODY POLITIC: FROM RIGHTS TO RESISTANCE
SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 11:30AM–6:30PM
This event features information sessions with lawyers, activists, and grassroots organizers on issues centered around the body: civil disobedience, protest, healthcare, policing, prisons, immigration, and environmental contamination. Each session will focus on resource sharing and modes of resistance, and will include presentations followed by discussion with the audience. Participants include staff from Callen-Lorde Community Health Center, the Center for Constitutional Rights, the Center for Reproductive Rights, the New York Civil Liberties Union, the New York Environmental Law and Justice Project, and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project.

THE QUESTION OF QUANTUM FEMINISM
THURSDAY, MARCH 9, 7PM
This roundtable discussion brings together artists exploring the evolving and expansive topic of quantum feminism, and considers how an understanding of bodies as sensory systems can be a starting point for discussions around ethics and “entangled relations of difference.” Panelists include A.K. Burns, Harry Dodge, Carolyn Lazard, Anicka Yi, and Constantina Zavitsanos.

LISTENING PARTY: POETRY AND RECORD RELEASE FOR LEAVE NO TRACE
THURSDAY, APRIL 20, 7PM
In celebration of A.K. Burns’s Leave No Trace (2016), this record release party includes performances and readings by artists and writers including Justin Allen, Pia Backström, CAConrad, Katherine Hubbard, and Juliana Huxtable. Leave No Trace is an experimental audio project released as a limited edition vinyl with an accompanying poem. The recording consists of two full-length LP tracks that combine ambient environmental recordings, vocalization, sounds generated from various materials, and an old electric guitar. The title references wilderness ethics, pointing to questions around unregulated spaces, bodies, and actions that go unrecorded, and what is natural or naturalized.

THE RESOURCE CENTER
An associated presentation entitled “The Resource Center” is organized by A.K. Burns and Alicia Ritson, Research Fellow. Taking cues from the reading room, the gym, the listening station, and the space of respite, it attends to how the body processes shock, psychic and physical trauma, grief, and rage in the face of political extremism.

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