

Ann Magnuson on documenting yourself

November 28, 2016 - Ann Magnuson has made a name for herself over the years by quite literally doing a little bit of everything. After arriving in New York City in 1978 with dreams of working in the theater, Magnuson would go on to become a seminal figure in the now legendary downtown art and performance scene happening in NYC during the early '80s. Her professional credits read like a laundry list of creativity—actor, writer, performer, musician, visual artist, performance artist, curator, documentarian. She recently released a new album, *Dream Girl*, and is currently co-organizing a gallery show about Club 57—the iconic Neo-Dada cabaret space that Magnuson ran in the East Village during the 1980s—at the Museum of Modern Art. The show will open in the Spring of 2017.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2554 words.

Tags: [Culture](#), [Music](#), [Art](#), [Beginnings](#), [Inspiration](#), [Independence](#).

You've made a career out of being multi-talented—singing, dancing, acting, making art, cabaret, performance—do you find that all of those things sort of satisfy the same creative urge?

Oh yeah, they're all expressions of the same urge, the same *inside* that needs to get *outside*—that need to express itself. Through all these different forms, you can work out angst in different ways.

There are plenty of people that are just laser focused on doing one thing. I am an actor. I am a dancer. I am a singer. When you sort of do all of these different things, does it confuse people? I would imagine that people in the industry might not know what to do with you if you can actually kind of do everything.

Absolutely. Though I find that the different worlds I occupy didn't ever really connect. Now with the internet, they do connect. But back in the day people in mainstream showbiz—producers, casting directors, whoever I would be beholden to for a job—they had no inkling of what Bongwater was or any of the other stuff I was doing. It was only later that I started being recognized across different genres. Every now and then I'd meet up with somebody who knew what that was and liked it, but I absolutely do think it has stymied others. I definitely think I lost an agent that came to see one of my shows once. It was fine. I was done with him anyway.

You recently released an album, *Dream Girl*, your first in a long time. What was the impetus to do that again?

It's been about two years working on it, on and off. Actually, the impetus was sort of this web series I was planning to do with a local filmmaker that, as it turns out, was not really going anywhere. So I thought, "I'll just take this material—my 'dream' material—and make a record instead." We actually made one pilot episode for the series, but it was so labor intensive that the person I was collaborating with didn't want to make any more unless I found some money. I was like, "Dude, if I knew how to find money, I'd be swimming in my pool in Bel-Air." I'd written this song for it from this dream I'd had. I started being in the studio again, just on my own doing it very DIY and found that I was having a really good time. So I kept doing it, and it got to the point where I amassed enough for a record. I had too much material, actually. There's a long epic spoken-word musical piece that I will spring on the world later that I just couldn't fit on the record. All in all, making a new record was fun, and it was a way for me to find my own voice again without anybody else producing it or imposing their point of view. For me, it felt like a way to get back to simple storytelling. Also, it's just much more fulfilling than going on auditions.

Going back and looking online at your history as a performer, I realized that there was so much stuff I knew nothing about. You have a tremendous body of work.

There's so much that's not even online! I'm not even putting a lot of stuff online because... it's too brutal out there. I don't need the commentary right now. I'm also archiving it all and there's just so much stuff—so much video and so much material to go through that currently unavailable for anyone to see. It always scares me a little bit when I hear people saying, "Oh, I saw this and this online," and I go, "Oh god, what is it?" There are so many things I did never thinking anybody in the world would ever see it except a few people who were in the club or at the theater in that moment. I never thought anyone was listening to Bongwater Records except this small, little community of people. I really felt it was very ephemeral, all of it. Then, when the internet came along and all this stuff starts to crop up on it, it's like...oh, gee.

1. The Sun. Yes the one in the sky; that big ball of exploding hydrogen that sustains us all.
2. Acts of Loving Kindness: people helping people; people rescuing animals; animals rescuing people; interspecies love—especially mother cats who nurse orphan squirrels, ducks and other rejected babies not their own.
3. Music. Especially gospel and classical ("Oh Happy Day" and the ending of Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" really does it for me.)

4. The words of Martin Luther King, Jr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Alan Watts, Desmond Tutu, the Dali Lama, Buddha, Jesus and the Vedas.

5. My crazy dreams

Nowadays everything is being documented at all times, but that wasn't always the case..

Yeah. I think younger people can't conceive of there was this time in history where A) no one could get in touch with you unless you were at home at an appointed time and B) that you didn't have to work like a slave in New York City to live in a postage stamp sized apartment or rent a bed in an apartment with a dozen other people. I'm sure it's like how people my age couldn't fathom what people in the nineteenth century went through... or how people in that century couldn't fathom a time without steam engines. But yes, New York was different then. We lived at a much slower pace in a lot of ways... and you had a lot of mental space. You had the opportunity to do things without any sense of it being seen or worrying about whether or not it would be successful in any way, shape or form. There was a huge freedom because like, "Eh, no one's seeing this anyway. Who cares?"

So much of what happens in the culture of a city gets reflected through its nightlife. Do you have a tremendous archive of stuff from your club days?

I do. I have to figure out what to do with it all. I've been working to help organize this show about Club 57, which is a club I ran in 1979 and 1980, at the Museum of Modern Art. That's opening fall of 2017. Initially, it started as a film series, and then I greatly encouraged them to look at all the stuff that was available and to make a gallery show as well. It's going to be a very extensive show about that particular club and all the people that were creative in it. They found all sorts of... well, we've all collectively found videos and film we didn't even know existed, as well as photographs. It's going to be really exciting. A lot of people who didn't get any attention—or didn't get their due at that time—are going to be highlighted. The greatness of that place was very much a group effort. I want to make sure everyone gets their time in the sun.

You had the opportunity to do things without any sense of it being seen or worrying about whether or not it would be successful in any way, shape or form.

You know, there is this whole period of time in which certain people got singled out and really praised. For every one of them, there are a hundred others who were doing things that aren't going to be known because they didn't leave anything behind. Because there are so many people interested now, I think maybe all these people will end up getting a documentary made about them. I was very thrilled that in Cynthia Carr's [book](#) on David Wojnarowicz, Steve Brown, who was a very good friend of mine, got mentioned. He was a filmmaker at the time, and very good friends with David. His is a story that should be told. There are so many stories, so many stories that I hope some very excited academics out there will start hunting down, but many of us... how much longer will the people who knew these people who were forgotten, be around? Then it will all be forgotten. I think about this a lot. I myself have to write a memoir at some point and I plan on getting really specific with a period of time in the early 1980s.

So you were you good about saving things?

Yes. I could launch a pilot episode of *Hipster Hoarders*. For years, I had a lot of it in my apartment. I had a pretty large apartment by New York standards, especially comparatively speaking with today. I'm sure four people live in it now, but it was smaller than the lofts a lot of my friends lived in. So now I have a lot of this stuff organized in my house here, but a whole lot of it is just packed in this empty room in my husband's office—a rather large room. I look at it all, and I think, "Ugh." It's not just papers and documents of stuff that I did, but it's also things... I have a lot of files that just say "Effects of Friends" or "Clippings"—anytime a friend got mentioned in the press, I'd cut it out and put it in there.

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I have tons of videotapes and all these cassette and mix tapes that people made for me. I started saving all the answering machine messages when people started dying of AIDS because I wanted to hold onto them in some way—to their voices. All of this has to be gone through. It's just so daunting a task, every time I'm about to do it I just want to collapse. Thankfully the MoMA show is forcing me to weed through some of it—and they are helping me. They've also been in contact with people from the Club 57 era who have collected a lot of stuff, so we're in touch with them and we're kind of piecing the show together with what everybody has.

But yes, I inherited that trait—the desire to save everything—from my parents who inherited it from their parents because of the Great Depression. Nobody threw anything away. Everything might come in handy eventually. My grandmother had every *Life* Magazine ever published in her attic. I spent hours up there just learning about the world from about 1930 until, well, 1966 or whenever she stopped getting them. The crazy thing was that most of them were just given to her. They didn't have much money and she was the wife of a minister, so when people were done with their magazines, they gave them to her. She never threw anything away, so I've basically done the same thing.

Do you miss performing on a regular basis?

No, I'm kind of tired. I'm 60, which is kind of a shocking admission, but, I'm a bit tired. These days I prefer to perform more infrequently and make it mean more. But I do want to write, and I've made some art. A couple of years ago I had a little art show out in Joshua Tree. Performing live takes a lot of energy, and it's not financially feasible to do it too often, unless you have some proper backing or if you were successful enough in the past that you can draw in enough people to make a tour kind of count. I wouldn't mind doing a little tour, but it would have to have sponsorship, and I'm just tired of the hustle. You know, you have to hustle to get that, and hustle to get this, and it's just...tiring. I just don't want to do anymore hustling. Everybody hustles now on the internet. It's all about getting those clicks, and getting those likes. It's just oh, enough. I'm ready to slither back into the twentieth century, or maybe the nineteenth century. It looks a little more appealing now. There are a lot of books I want to read.

I think a lot of people feel that right now. Still, working on the Club 57 thing is exciting. Documenting that scene is important, it was formative for so many people.

Yes. I think it's going to be a really great thing. I think there'll be a lot of younger people who will, I would hope, be inspired by it. I want to tell people, go find your own empty storefront in some economically depressed city and just create stuff. Maybe even experiment with the idea of *not* documenting it.

That's an interesting concept in times like these. What does it mean to be making things if nobody sees it? Creating for the sake of doing it. Self-documentation is so ubiquitous in our culture now and everything is so goal oriented. Will people see this? Will they 'like' it? It's important to get back, if possible, to the real primitive joys of making things, simply because you need to and it gives you pleasure.

Oh, yeah, I think that's essential. Actually, I was talking to a woman who teaches at UC Santa Barbara who is younger than I am and she said she's constantly trying to get her students to do something and not document it, to get back to sort of the heart of the process—the impulse to create without it being a commodity to sell even if you're not selling it for money. You're selling it for attention. On the one hand, I'm grateful that I saved so much from the old days—and I get sad when I think about how much important work was lost—but it's also hard to create unselfconsciously when you are filming yourself 24/7. Sometimes you need to work without an audience... or without an audience of cell phones.

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My best shows happen when I know there's no documentation. I really am pretty strict about no camera phones because I find it very inhibiting. I won't go to "that place" if someone is filming me or taking my picture. I won't get there if I'm inhibited.

I love the primal ritualistic headspace one is in when there's no sense that anyone will see it or know about it past the moment it happened. The further back you go, of course, there is no documentation. I think about that a lot. The things that were never documented, which are not just up to our imagination. I still think some of the most mind-blowing performances must have been early Baroque operas. Why people don't recreate those? It generally really bugs me when operas are modernized. I mean, can't somebody do Baroque opera exactly the way they used to do it? Wouldn't that be the most avant-garde thing you could ever see? Sometimes the past is truly weirder than anything we could come up with in the present.

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Vocation

Writer, Actress, Singer, Musician, Performer

Fact

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Photo by Rocky Schenck