On choosing to be an artist

Visual artist Ryan McNamara discusses the importance of his early influences, why curiosity is something you can't be taught, and his "lingering feelings of illegitimacy."

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As told to Thora Siemsen, 3215 words.

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Your work has been described as a "blend of image and object making, dance and performance, choreography and participation." Could we walk through the history of how your practice evolved to include all of these parts?

I don't really know how to do anything, which frees me to do everything. If I was good at woodworking, I'd probably do a lot of woodworking. Instead I just have ideas. I think, "Well, how can I do that?" Rather than, "Where do I take my woodworking skills next?" I know how to do some stuff, but my skill set is amorphous. Not the kinds of things you can list on a resume. Claire Bishop once said that my talent was intervention. On spaces and situations, I think she meant, not people. Although I think I could be pretty good at that, too.

It's nice that no one's expecting anything from me and it's not like I have this intense auction market. My rent is cheap so I can pay it most of the time, so that's great. But there's not this external push to make another painting or something, because no one's making that much money off of me. There's a freedom to that.

How would you describe the types of materials you gravitate towards when you make objects?

I've made lots of performances, and performances are very much not ephemeral in my life. I have a studio full of stuff. I love the *stuff* of it, the props and costumes. A lot of times I'm making armature for that. Taking these objects that have such history for me and treating them as raw materials.

For instance, lots of Lycra. That's a constant. Right now I'm just making these little dolls for no reason. Well, I have a show coming up so I'm making them for that, but formally I don't see a connection to my other work. But I guess I like dressing them. I love costumes, and to make stuff that looks like bodies. It's kind of the same no matter the medium. There's bodies and Lycra in the performances and bodies and Lycra in the objects. I'm simple.

For your 2010 performance at MOMA PS1, "Make Ryan a Dancer," dancers were invited to train you publicly. What do you like about the mode of developing in public?

A major motivation behind the piece was that I knew the audience would hold me to it. I'd always wanted to take dance classes, but I just didn't. There's obviously more exciting, conceptual reasons why I did that piece. Stuff about the history of de-skilling in the art world, and about the relationship between theatricality and the visual arts. But if I say that I'm going to do a piece where I'm at the museum every day taking dance classes, I'm going to commit in a way that I wouldn't otherwise.

I realized the piece was mostly for the staff there, because they were the ones who actually saw the development. They shared my triumphs and failures. When you see a dance performance the stage is filled with these amazing, virtuosic bodies, so it's easy to disconnect from the wonder of that leg doing that move because you don't have anything to compare it to. But next to me you think, "Wow, that person's leg is way up there, and that other person's leg is way down there."

David Hallberg taught me ballet, and we were doing a warm-up where you flex and point your toes over and over. He looked at my feet and asked, "Why don't your toes go down more?" I'm like, "Because most people's toes are like mine! You're the exception." But when does he see such a pedestrian foot being pointed?

For your performance, "Battleground," you spoke about being informed by reading about the Hadron particle collider. How often does what you're reading filter into your performances?

I'm constantly asking myself, "Am I doing work right now? Should I feel guilty that I'm reading this? Should I feel guilty that I'm watching this in the middle of the day?" My relationship with my work ethic is complicated. Is what I'm doing work, or an excuse? I'm a voracious consumer, so I'm trying to be easier on myself.

But this also brings up a problem I encounter when I do studio visits at schools. Sometimes I talk to a student and I get a sense that they just aren't curious about the world. There's no teaching that. Without curiosity about the world, what are you going to make next?

Curiosity is the one requirement. I have noticed this getting harder as I get older because you can get stuck in certain habits. It's also about being jaded. I find myself thinking, "What is going to surprise me?" So much is going to surprise you.

The Hadron collider is kind of a silly metaphor, a little too easy. The theater directly below the Guggenheim rotunda has a round walkway for audience members to get to their seats, but it actually leads right onto the stage, creating a circular path around the seats. I imagined performers circling the audience, and it reminded me of diagrams of the particles speeding up through the circular collider. I loved that this huge multinational construction was created to solve the mystery of what would happen when tiny particles collide. There was a fear that perhaps the world may end.

The piece was about conflict, and the performers accelerated throughout the performance and focused on the drama of the collisions. But it wasn't really *about* the Hadron collider. That was just a feeling. If anything, it was about politics in 2016.

We both grew up in Arizona. Growing up there, what did you tell yourself about the lengths you would go to in order to make it to and in New York City?

Television and magazines were so important, because they showed me there was a life outside. I loved getting these dispatches from alluring and intelligent faraway lands. My mom would let me order one magazine if I filled out the Publishers Clearing House contest and I got *Interview Magazine*, just because it was physically large. At the time it was still a very local downtown New York magazine. They would talk about the hotspots and the hot young things on the scene that weren't celebrities anywhere above 14th Street. The magazine assumed that you knew who these very creative and glamorous and queer people were. I had zero knowledge of that, but I was thirsty for it.

Also, talk shows like *Geraldo* would feature club kids a few times a year. There was so little queer representation in any media, and then I would turn on the TV after school and completely unexpectedly see these amazingly extreme queer bodies. I mean, I assumed that they were all gay, but they didn't really discuss sexuality. It was just about living your fabulous life. All queer messages pointed to New York and art. I think a lot of queer people turn to the arts because they hope that other queer people will be there when they arrive.

You studied photography as an undergrad in Arizona as well as part of your MFA studies at Hunter College. How do you see your photography background play into your sense of what makes a strong image?

Photography permeates everything I do. I think I imagine things first as a picture. And of course the history of photography's fight for legitimacy, and its contribution to the evolution of postmodern and conceptual art informs how I work.

So far, no one but myself has accused me of this, but I often feel like a carpetbagger in other fields. If I loved experiencing something as an audience member, I'll want to experience

it as a maker. So I have lingering feelings of illegitimacy. But even though I'm an amateur I never approach it as something to deskill. I try to see a lot of different kinds of work. I want it to be the best version of it that I can make, and I want to do the work of learning about the form from the inside-out. I hope that coming at it the way I do can bring something new to the field.

Because of my background, my performances are often more about the image being created than the technique. For example, the angle at which a foot is traditionally supposed to be doesn't matter so much to me, even if I find that concern beautiful. Even people within the field who are rejecting that tradition are still burdened by it. I just want it to look like the image in my head. Even when I'm making a balls-out capital "D" Dance, I'm still seeing it through the lens of visual art history.

What about the influence of music videos you grew up watching?

Music videos were so jarringly unlike the rest of life. All day at school I was surrounded by really mean basic kids, and then I would go home, turn on the TV, and watch these super sexy, super cool people with intense charisma throw image after image at me.

And then you'd go listen to the music and have these images in your head, and you could carry them around with you. It's completely nuts that in the past century we were able to take this form called music and make it something you could carry around with you all the time, as a soundtrack to your life. Your life and the music you listen to and the images brought by the music video would never match up, but walking around you could listen to the music and aim for those images, and the friction between them felt good.

I really feel like this disparity between real life and music videos should have made all of us insane. Maybe it did. There was just such a disconnect between what I was watching for eight hours a day, and the four hours in which I was actually living my life. Because life is so shitty and music videos aren't.

You've talked about your reference points for New York before moving here, including *Paris Is Burning*, and seeing the club kids on talk shows. What vestiges of that era did you find upon arrival, or how quickly did your context shift?

In between watching club kids on *Geraldo* in Arizona and moving to New York, Michael Alig chopped Angel Melendez up and threw him in the Hudson River, so that put a damper on the scene. And now that I've lived in New York for over 15 years I'm pretty sure it was never as fun as it was in my 11-year-old brain. Also, when I moved downtown I realized that I'd had a very different life experience than the people in *Paris Is Burning*. But in the view from Arizona I just saw glamorous queer people that I wanted to be around.

I actually assisted a friend of mine on a photo shoot with Octavia St. Laurent, who is one of the legends featured in *Paris Is Burning*. She had us over for dinner twice and completely lived up to everything I had imagined her to be. She told us that she wanted to cook us pheasant. And I was like, "Shit. How do I tell her I'm a vegetarian? Octavia St. Laurent wants to cook *me* pheasant." So between the opulent menu and the fact that she was famous and glamorous, I was convinced that I was going to a very fancy apartment.

But no one took care of her. No one gave her the due that she deserved. This person who loomed so large in my brain died in poverty just a few years after I had dinner with her. We all know who she is. Every motherfucker quotes her. But there wasn't any mechanism to pay her for what she gave us? That was such an eye-opener for me. I'm sort of embarrassed that I hadn't realized that before. Of course that's how it is. That's how this shitty world is.

You previously volunteered and worked in social services for gay and lesbian senior citizens. How do you see your work now as being of service to queer elders?

The people close to me would laugh at this question because I think about this all the time. Working at SAGE (Services and Advocacy for LGLBT Elders) at The Center in the West Village was so direct. Someone needed something and I would go get that thing. Of course, like everything, the system in place by which we delivered services was riddled with problems. But at the end of the day, I was on the frontlines. I was the volunteer coordinator, but my desk was the first desk you saw, so people would just walk in with their problems and I would try to help.

I worked there for seven years, and it was a gratifying job. When I started, I had no idea how to enter the professional art world. So I decided to stop pursuing being an artist and work full time in LGBT social services. That lasted for about six months, and then little projects crept back into my life. Then I decided that because I moved to New York to be an artist I should give it a fair shot. So I quit to go to grad school.

Art has these lofty ambitions for critiquing, correcting, and saving the world. Working at SAGE was about going to the 99-cent store and getting cookies for the holiday party, which made a lot of old queer people happy. That was small but concrete. So how do I justify making work now? I've realized that what I can stand behind is the fact that I am role-modeling for others the ability to create your own world and reality, even if on a super small scale and for a brief period of time. There aren't a lot of messages out there telling you to do that.

Obviously I still have to live in this America and this capitalist society, but I can create these pockets of experience where we can get paid to do what we've wanted to do our entire lives. We share these brief moments before we all disperse and have to deal with taxes and the broken 6 train and a shitty childhood. This is the throughline I can make between working at SAGE and being an artist. Building out communities under our own terms. In those brief moments where we get to be in our own skin, in our own universe, it makes us all feel a little more complete.

Collaborating with performers and other artists creates a very specific and deep bond that transcends the actual tasks at hand. Even projects that don't work out the way you wanted them to give birth to this kind of intimacy.

Do you see the art world as a kind place to go through the process of aging?

No, but where is a kind place to age? I've met the best people I've ever met in my life via art. But somehow when all these wonderful people come together, they create a system that is really ruthless and hard. We all think of ourselves as outsiders because none of us want to be citizens of the art world. But we are, we are *it*.

There was a depressing question that I posed to a group of friends once: "Name the people in the art world over the age of 50 that you think are genuinely happy." It's a very short list. And that's from the outside, without even knowing everyone's hidden inner demons. But maybe that's a wonderful thing about the art world, too, that it's a place where unhappy people, aka all people, can be together.

Maybe it's given me space to feel, rather than an occupation that doesn't have room for actual feelings. Maybe the art world is kind to people as they age in that it gives them room to feel shitty. That's great. I've never thought about that before, that this may be a generous thing. I do love that the art world can sometimes employ, and celebrate, people that are unemployable anywhere else.

Last year in a written piece you described your "ghost of teenage past." How often do you consciously check in with him?

It comes up a lot. When I decided to be an artist when I was 16, the idea was really abstract. Pretty much my teenage self is disappointed at me because I'm not best friends with Madonna. God, I had crazy expectations that were not tethered to reality at all. I do make a conscious effort to remind myself of those original motivations, because it's easy to lose sight of them when your practice is pulled into a professional mechanism that doesn't really care about those original impulses.

I do find myself gravitating towards that original passion even more as I get older. I'm really not that different from that teenager. I loved horror and sci-fi movies throughout my childhood and I've noticed that creeping back into my work recently.

It's just crazy the lengths we go to in order to get back in that headspace, where things felt a little less affected by our surroundings. I've had to learn to unlearn. I'm not an emerging artist anymore. There's a definite generation below me. Artist, no qualifier in front of it. Just artist. I'm in it. It's not preparing to be an artist. This is being an artist. It's not preparing for life. This is life.

Ryan McNamara recommends:

My dog Sister

Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman

Busby Berkeley

Richard Avedon

“Follow Me” by Aly-Us

Anita Hill

The Quick and the Dead by Joy Williams

Octavia St. Laurent

Fire Island

Adrian Piper

Robert Gober

Cindy Sherman

Jacolby Satterwhite

Grapefruit by Yoko Ono

Merce Cunningham Events

The Notebook, The Proof, The Third Lie: Three Novels by Agota Kristof

The Performers I work with

What’s Love Got To Do With It (the film)

“It’s Not Right (But It’s Okay) (Thunderpuss 2000 Remix)” - Whitney Houston

Sex by Madonna

Three Women by Robert Altman

George Saunders

The Gaiety (closed NYC male strip club)

Rowan & Martin’s Laugh-In

Nightmare on Elm Street (all of them)

The Beaver Trilogy

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