

Zackary Drucker on documenting your life in your work



October 23, 2017 - Zackary Drucker is an independent artist, cultural producer, and trans woman who breaks down the way we think about gender, sexuality, and seeing. She has performed and exhibited her work internationally in museums, galleries, and film festivals including the Whitney Biennial 2014, MoMA PS1, Hammer Museum, Art Gallery of Ontario, MCA San Diego, and SF MoMA, among others. Drucker is an Emmy-nominated Producer for the docu-series [This Is Me](#), as well as a Producer on Golden Globe and Emmy-winning [Transparent](#).

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2115 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Film](#), [Inspiration](#), [Beginnings](#), [Identity](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#).

Do you think it was always your path to be an artist?

Yeah, I think so. I always think of the foundation for my art practice as starting at a really young age. When I was four years old, maybe even younger, I would dive into this chest of dress-up clothes that my mother had in the basement and my parents would take Polaroids of me. This is something trans folks have done since the inception of photography. Imagining themselves outside the constraints of their everyday reality. Oftentimes when I'm speaking about my work I start there, with that experience of feeling validated, of creating something that doesn't exist in the real world. Then, as a young teenager I found my way to photography again. In high school there was a dark room and since I was bullied a lot in high school, that proved to be a really safe space. Again, I always just had a deep investment in creating a world outside of this bleak childhood existence.

So the work you were making, even as a teenager, was itself a document of your journey as a person? Or the artmaking helped provide an entry point into your journey?

Yeah. It's an artistic tradition in the oldest sense—the desire to record one's story or the story of one's people and community. Before the internet, before social media, before all these platforms where young people can now invent themselves, things were pretty analog. The arena of creative expression and finding my way to the art world in New York was a revelation for me. Another thing that was formative for me, especially when I was younger, was discovering independent film and all of the new wave and avant-garde directors—[Godard](#), [Antonioni](#), [Fellini](#), [Truffaut](#), [Bergman](#). I watched every kind of auteur filmmaker's films.



Zackary Drucker & Rhys Ernst, Relationship #35, 2008-2013, C-print, 16x24in.

You have created work in a wide variety of formats—photography, performance, filmmaking. Did everything kind of grow out of your photographic practice?

I think that photography was the first stop and then performance was the next. They oftentimes co-mingle and meet. I had always been photographing myself and the people around me and also writing things, so performance offered the opportunity to layer another level of imagination on top of that. You're creating an image but also creating an auditory experience or sensory experience and that's usually about leading participants and viewers through a sort of experience.

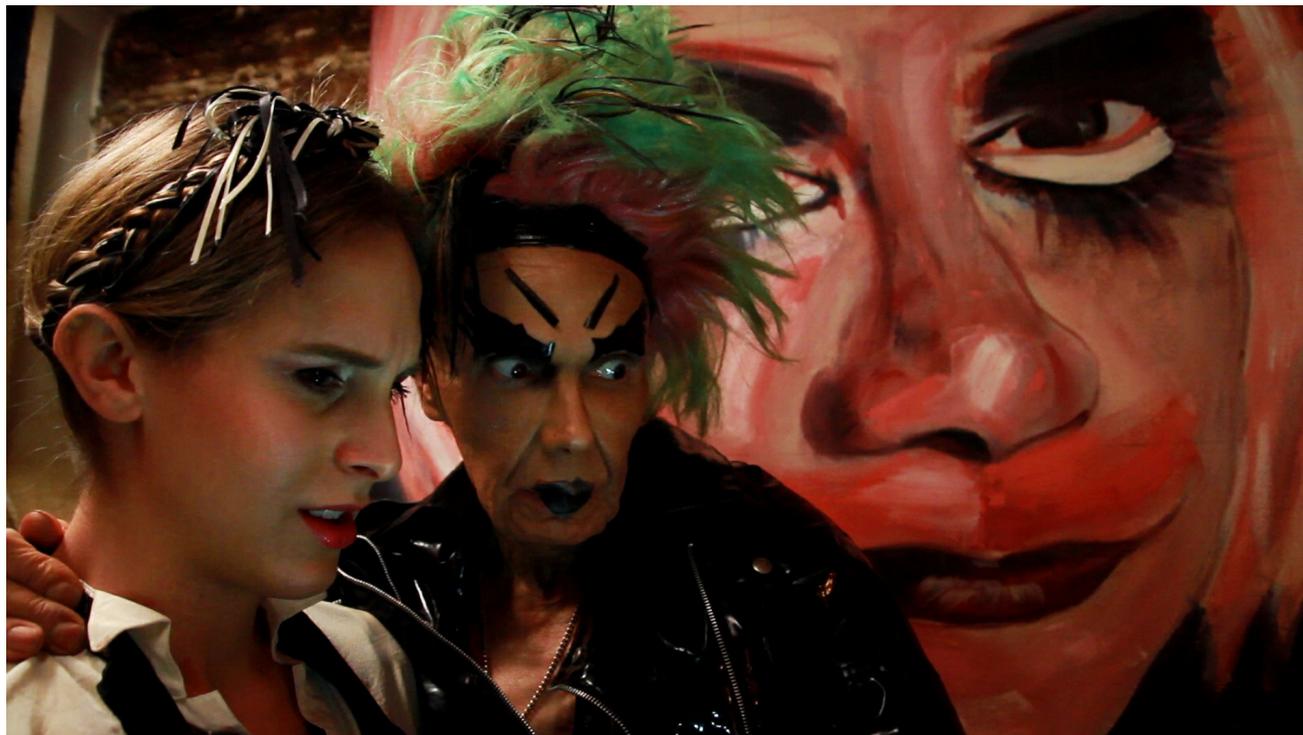
So much of your work approaches—from a wide variety of angles—your own experience as a trans woman. Even just a few years ago the dialogue around this kind of work, specifically the way we now speak about trans-related issues, would have been very different.

It's changing so rapidly. It's been put in motion in a way that I never expected. I was 14 when I discovered the word transgender. I was reading [Kate Bornstein's Gender Outlaw](#) and realized that I was on the trans spectrum. Part of Bornstein's philosophy is to completely free yourself of binary thinking and it feels like that is starting to become real. It is this utopia that we're experiencing now that we all saw on the horizon. We're going to have to keep fighting for it vigorously because it will be hard-won in the end. We're at the beginning of a civil rights movement now, but there is a younger generation that is more fluid and informed and aware, which is amazing. I think the movement is still divided along class lines in many ways—and maybe it always will be—but I have a lot of hope for the kids on the horizon. We're coming up.

You did a very long project with [Mother Flawless Sabrina](#), which is not only beautiful, but important. I love the idea of not only being cognizant of our own history, but also documenting it and conserving it.

Absolutely. Without our history, we are lost. It's about knowing that there's a precedent for your existence and your survival. How else would you know that you exist? I think that we are so much stronger in the world if we understand where we're coming from and the legacies we're a part of. Trans history is so sparsely documented at this point, so it's really challenging. It feels like you're swimming upstream just trying to learn about your predecessors.

When I met Flawless it was a life-changing friendship because I had never thought of myself as possibly living a sustainable life. My paradigm changed when I met her. She's had an incredible life. She's my best friend and has been for so long. I love making work with her. I just love having a reason to spend time with her.



Zackary Drucker & Rhys Ernst, still from *She Gone Rogue*, 2012. HD video, color, sound, 23 minutes

You have a lot of things going on now—making work of your own, serving as a producer, and also facilitating these other people's projects. How does your creative life map out right now? How do you manage all of it?

I wish that I was more capable of carving out more time for creative projects. It's a challenge. It's been a challenge for a while. I don't know if I can give you an answer for that because the truth is that a lot of what I do is just maintaining things, keeping them going. I do take pictures now, but it took me a long time to get back into the habit of taking pictures again after stepping away from it for a while. Lately it's just remembering to pause and document a moment. I also make collages and I write. I've been writing a few more narrative things lately. I also created this short film with my mother, *Southern for Pussy*. I want to continue making films with her. She is a frequent collaborator.

I love that you collaborate with your mom.

I love working with my mother. She's a really incredible performer and she's really sharp with her political commentary. She's an ideal collaborator. I think that creating excuses to collaborate and fostering projects around relationships that you have in your life is a good way to both bond and put something good out into the world.



Zackary Drucker, still from *Southern for Pussy*, 2017. HD video, color, sound, 07:13 min



Zackary Drucker, still from *They Answered in Unison*, 2015. HD video, color, sound, 04:43 min

You were a producer on *This Is Me* and you currently serve as a producer on *Transparent*. The role of producer can be both complicated and a little amorphous. It often involves wearing many hats. What has the experience been like for you?

I think by creating work in the art world I learned such a specific set of skills. Now, working in an entirely different cultural arena has given me a completely different set of tools, even though they inform each other in so many ways. I think that no matter where we land on our life path, we bring everything—all of our experiences, all of our elements of mastery—to the next thing that we do. The thing that's incredible about this 21st century lifestyle is that we're able to span genres and try different things.

I feel an acute sense of responsibility, of service, to the trans and gender non-conforming communities and I think that all of us have to use our platforms to create more empathy and understanding in the world. I can't think of a better way of doing that than through television. It was a rare opportunity and I think the reverberations of *Transparent* will be felt for years to come.

It's a genuine cultural phenomenon. It's not only a beautiful show, but it really does reach people in a way that few other things can.

Flawless Sabrina always tells me that I've reached more people in a year than she reached in her lifetime and what she's really saying is that our power to reach people through technology and through digital media has a much broader net than it did 20 years ago. As a kid, my access to counterculture was through the independent video rental store or through the library or through finding community at punk shows. It was about finding the other weirdos in town. Mainstream popular culture was so insidious and awful it was easy to just distance yourself from it and hate it. What we did see back then, or at least what I saw, were talk shows where there were trans people. Then at least you knew that they existed. It wasn't a positive environment for them but looking back on those shows now those trans folks really look like warriors, enduring those kinds of lions den environments just to tell their stories.

Despite having access to the internet, despite our recent cultural gains, despite increased visibility on television, it is still an act of courage to just live your truth and be out in the world. It's actually not easy for anybody that I know. When so much of the world doesn't understand your existence, it's an act of bravery to continue to just be who you are.

When you are often called upon to speak on behalf of the trans community—and when your creative work is always invariably viewed through the prism of your gender identity—does that ever weigh on you?

Yeah, it can be restricting. I think about respectability politics more than anything. I think it is limiting, but it's where we're at culturally. As artists we have to create work for a future audience and that's the more important thing because eventually people will catch up to it. We have to be looking around the corner. We have to be on to the next thing already. With the trans experience, it is something you think about a lot when you're leading up to it or when you're getting ready to make the adjustment, whatever that might mean to you.

Then you do just settle into who you are—usually for a short amount of time—before things are changing again. Nothing ever stops. I think dealing with and navigating respectability, it's a bore usually. It's just not interesting. Everything is basically in reaction to a chaotic administration.



Zackary Drucker, still from *The Skew*, 2015. HD video, color, sound, 11:37 min

It's both fascinating and terrible, particularly for artists, many of whom now suddenly feel like their work is either irrelevant or should suddenly be all about politics.

There's a lot at stake at this point and we're all trying to survive advanced capitalism. I think that's more the point right now, especially when it comes to any kind of pop-cultural medium. You do want to create work that's relevant. We're just experiencing a huge cultural shift and we can't always keep up with it. We have to adjust. The work does change because of the environment and the conditions that we're living in.

I remember the night of the election having this ominous feeling that our consciousness was going to be dominated now. It was this feeling of just, "Oh my god, our minds are going to collectively be dominated by this person now." That being said, you can't build any kind of strong foundation on fear or anger or hate. Whatever people decide to do with these feelings is at their discretion. The best you can do is try and make something meaningful and truthful.

Zackary Drucker's favorite things:

"Hypnotic Tango" by My Mine

Tarot readings with my grandma Flawless Sabrina

Novellas by Torrey Peters

bell hooks

The Origin of Totalitarianism by Hannah Arendt

Listening to my old iPod on shuffle

Patti Smith, PJ Harvey, Nina Simone, Kathleen Hanna

Having conversations with loved ones in my dreams, then writing everything down

Making collages out of vintage porn

Driving

Turmeric

Marijuana

Being respectable

Being abject

Being a human

Listening

Looking into your eyes

Name

Zackary Drucker

Vocation

Artist, Producer

Fact

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Photo by Jaesung Lee