

MANDATORY JOY

Lindsey Whittle realizes loud objects and events that emphatically function in multiple manners. Clothes become caverns become ceremonies become connections. Whittle's work is a walking Wonderland replete with make-believe dress up attire and wide-open invitations for participation. In museums and galleries; in public libraries, public transit systems, and public sidewalks; on the backs of twiggly fashion models, rambunctious art students, a cappella choirs, and the artist's family members, a fête unfurls past the studio and adjoining exhibition opportunities into a day to day practice of commutes to work, wedding anniversaries, interpersonal care among networks of friends, and textured practicalities of living. Whatever is to take place within the auspices of her fanciful environments (and more and more, that 'whatever' becomes nearly everything), the happenings must contend with her wild panoply of abstractly biomorphic forms, vibrating hues, and permuting arrangements as their contextual frame.

Likewise, Whittle defies whatever restrictive mores may have organized the spaces her work comes to occupy. She—with her ilk, collaborators, and tribe of rebels with whom she perambulates through art worlds and other worlds beyond them—proceed in spite of prior constraints. Hers is a social practice, undoubtedly, but not one that persists in the historic tendency toward socially engaged work to present itself with aesthetic passivity. Her activities don't fall into line with the relational aesthetics of late twentieth-century Conceptualism that sought to neutralize authorial dispositions toward form and presentation. Rather, Whittle mandates her personal taste as a precondition of whatever conviviality might transpire therein.

For those weary of the disappearance games of (often male, often white) artists playing at being absented gods, or for those who care to see what happens to participatory work when read inclusive of the artist's aesthetic and formal decision-making, Whittle erects a vibrantly festooned bandstand in place of the sleekly, presumptuously silent platform glorified by artists who came before her who construed their own choices as strictly utilitarian. The force of Whittle's visual pileup distinguishes her from the hulk of relational aesthetics, predominantly defined by the look and feel of self-sacrificial functionality. Her practice strikes at the hubris of a presumed neutral positionality, particularly when the behavior of those aesthetics is continuous with those of the institutions that house them. Her strategies are not oppositional or even critical per se; rather, she incites a positivistic politics, one of optimism and alterity, tangibility and embodiment. In Whittle's dreamspace, the author didn't die as Barthes posited; she time-traveled, multiplied paradoxically, became many voices in a chorus—a 'too many' hydra cacophony, a multi-player POV.

The rhetoric of Whittle's work drives at collaboration and choice with a keen interest in crowd-sourced creativity. The colors of this work conjure birthday parties and biohazard warnings in equal measure—a raving, frenetic excitement formalized in soft sculpture meteorites and super-heroic active-wear striped in bright hues matched to the manic pitch of community efforts and

consumerism colliding. In Whittle's world walk crystal children conditioned by cable television and Reaganomics' overproduction and deregulation. Glinting as though through a fracturing prism, imprints of the '80s and '90s dance behind a vocabulary of polymorphic abstractions: here, the New Romantic nightlife of Leigh Bowery and the club kids; there, the maximalism of too-big-to-fail art markets; here, the advent of the Supermodel (Campbell, Crawford, Evangelista, etc.); there, blithely digested, po-mo trappings *a la Magiciens de la Terre*; and still elsewhere, the somersaulting, knees-over-elbows shift toward virtual user participation in Web 2.0 sensibilities. Incommensurate though these forces may seem, and unconscious though their influence may be, these cultural touchstones are portents of the instinctive algebra of Whittle's practice. The gregarious aesthetics of this work is 'one in every color,' a crowding of all the Crayons, an always-expanding smorgasbord of every possible neon-colored sweet-sour flavor of snow cone that can be thought up and then splashed into taste-everything-at-once rainbows.

It will be egalitarian as long as it's all exuberant.

We are left to consider the neediness, the demand, and the intense desire to share that is mobilized by Whittle's interactive artworks. This opalescent sturm und drang is always strung amongst rooms and bodies as a proposition to connect multiple objects and their subjects and their objects. Such a configuration is a risky confession: Whittle's platform, her entire aesthetic universe, has been rendered in modes of contingency, assemblage, and interdependency—admitting its inherent partialness. This work is always made to be fragmented and incomplete, needing activation and occupation by additional forces of play.

Certainly Whittle's activities rile up many of the problematics that populate all *gesamtkunstwerk* (that is, totalizing, immersive works of arts, syntheses of many art forms). All-consuming (or porous, or encroaching) gestures like these risk suspending an audience's agency without notice as the artist's will overtakes their every sense. The wish that such power relations were circumnavigated through the ecumenical appearances of art-as-social platform seems to me misplaced, in part because it is fashioned to be hardly a wish at all. Rather than subdue aesthetic assertions or avoid the explosive feelings they might induce, the cacophonous, even Fauvist ruckus of Whittle's formalism and palette and piled-on compositional proclivities exclaim bodies as sites of contention.

Participants who enter Whittle's environments, perform her shapeshifting wearables, and present their own creative materials upon her platform will be in constant conversation with confluences of art history, pop culture, and haute couture: Lynda Benglis and Polly Apfelbaum's Day-Glo post-minimalism, Rei Kawakubo's Dress to Body garments, Saturday morning cartoons (and breakfast cereal and the squishy rec room furniture from which these saccharine images are consumed), Power Rangers and performance artists like Nick Cave and Mark Jeffrey, her husband Clint Basinger's comic books, Jeremy Scott costuming Katy Perry, Katamari Damacy, kaiju, and cosplayers. Her frequent collaborator Sky Cubacub of Rebirth Garments along with other pop fashion glitterati like BCALLA, Walter Van Beirendonck, Mondo Guerra, and cartoon designer-for-the-superheroes-and-stars Edna Mode are other stripes in the technicolor banner

for otherness and outliers under which this party ensues. Whittle's is a post-modern playpen fueled by weirdly offbeat aspirations toward hope, harmony, and a pursuit of joy.

Along with the delight, curiosity, exuberance, and pleasure that pervade Whittle's projects, they are also fables about the conjunction of multiple bodies and the ways they must decide how they will interact. More than the connectivity and multiplicity that Whittle's art performs, she has persistently (for over a decade) incorporated *choice* into the very fabrics (literal, figurative) that condition her work. Audiences are *de facto* participants onto which a demand is placed to choose their own adventure.

In earlier projects, when one shirt-shaped object had three more arm holes than any single wearer would need, her work called to mind the sort of costume changes needed by super heroes to fully realize their spangled spandex alter-egos. Spun from a couturier's metaphysics that aims at the dissolution of discrete identities and seeks a wearable art form that emphasizes the social over the individual, Whittle follows on histories tethered between burgeoning forms of conceptual sculpture and garment construction. Lygia Clark's Relational Objects of the sixties segued from the oblique geometric abstractions that dominated her earlier paintings and sculptures into a series of experimental devices that hold multiple bodies in a connection intended to be therapeutic and revelatory. While Clark explored these dialogical possibilities in Brazil, Detroit's dandy James Lee Byars was working across several continents (his nomadism its own exploration into modes of connectivity) making suits, dresses, and eventually more expansive fabric objects like the 1969 Pink Silk Airplane, a textile sculpture crafted to accommodate one hundred wearers at once.

In the decades intervening, garment, sculpture, installation art, and performance are hybridized into radically interdisciplinary efforts, both life-affirming and challenging in the force of their feminist content: 1980 saw Lorraine O'Grady's first performance as Mme. Bourgeoise Noire in a handsy gown made from layers and layers of white gloves; Beverly Semmes' massive *Red Dress*, 1992, fills the room in which it's presented with plush velvet; the body extension sculptures Rebecca Horn has made from the 1970s onward. Along with the mainstreaming of deconstructed garment designs (not only Comme des Garçons offers jackets and jumpers that appear to be barely hanging together by a few stitches—even H&M will do that for you) and the popularization of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and other TV sensations that celebrate transformation and mutability in identity, feminist art pioneered points of confluence among art, design, craft, and theater that are remixed in Whittle's oeuvre.

Whittle has made shapeshifting shells that dancers improvised into various configurations; a memorable pair of acidic green pants whose scale would overwhelm even the tallest of wearers; a dazzling sequined interpretation of Mother Teresa's blue and white veil exaggerated into a speedster's stripe down the length of a gallery floor; an effusive cloud of polyester fibers; multi-headed choir robes; walking mountains of fluorescent Velcro; undulating, additive paper garments-cum-environments of such enormous whimsy and ferocity that would garner Hayao Miyazaki's compliments, and every sort of component that is wearable for really no other reason

than that it is worn, eschewing any legitimization that accompanies upheld social tropes in the mainstream.

With no single correct way to interact with these fabric concoctions, a tacit promise for clothing to cover and protect is suspended. The freedom to dress oneself however one wishes—transgressing beyond the regulated norms of appropriate appearance—comes at a cost. Just watch how the public interacts with eccentrically garbed street people. Ostracization is the most benign of the possible rebuffs administered to the rebellious.

If it is a risky conceit for Whittle to produce conditions in her artistic practice that are always incomplete and in need of activation through collaboration, it is even riskier for those of us involved with this work to accept the onus to act on the choices that are provided us. As silly as it might seem initially, the pressure to pick which sleeve hole to use or whether to put this fluorescent pink patch on one's butt or head are not apolitical maneuvers; they draw attention to how extremely coded and regulated the performances of our own bodies are. To take control of one's body and perform it (and its ancillary accessories) how one wishes is as crazed and frightening as the bleating color-forms in Whittle's work try to tell you it is.

This logic by which Whittle questions the underlying assumptions of a given context and generates alternative ways of behaving may have begun in the space of wearables, but over the past twelve years, this is a structural approach that marks all of her social engagements. Whittle adopts this ethos of open-ended permission in which the context must reorganize itself to accommodate the whims, fancies, and longings of those collaborators involved. This can be seen in work with publications and zines, galleries and exhibitions, and even pedagogy as a faculty member at the Art Academy of Cincinnati.

This was made explicit in 2009 when she launched an online magazine called *Sparklezilla* with fellow artist Dustin Schleibaum. A recurrent motto for the open submission platform has been, quite simply, "Say something. Make something. Read something. Get your sparkle on!" Instructions for craft projects, film reviews, comic book illustrations, poetry, drawings by adults and children, and diaristic personal accounts sit sometimes pleasantly and sometimes awkwardly beside one another—something like Foucault's heterotopia, a social environment predicated on difference rather than any cohesive trait. Whittle's taste for all the different colors in a seemingly endless library of forms sets this idea in motion and anticipates the further differences that will be navigated by the inclusion of others as performers, co-authors, and far from disinterested audiences.

As with the mission of *Sparklezilla*, the structures of Whittle's exhibitions themselves have come to be similarly pluralized—those she organizes in alternative spaces like Pique, an artist-run project space she helps to maintain in Covington, KY, and in her own installations that have been shown around the country. One exhibition may be reworked or changed without public notice several times across its dates, so that the show you see and the one I see at a different time may have little in common. Every convention for how art is shown and, more central to Whittle's concerns, how one chooses to look at it, are questioned at substantial depth, and

myriad possible outcomes proliferated. Key here is that Whittle's impulses are not toward a deconstructive analysis that would isolate constituent elements of a given exhibition context as an object of scrutiny. Instead, hers is an epistemology through accretion: she develops ways of knowing through the addition of more relationships upon more relationships—between this and that neon silhouette, between this tatter paper drawing and the resplendent ball gown to which its been stapled, between this video of fashion selfies and that inspired art student.

What Whittle does to her audience she first does to herself. She has set loose an avid force of extroversion onto her interior imagination. Her assembly line of manipulations—drawing and painting, vector files, laser cutters, hand- and machine-sewing—eagerly process any source material into oblique abstractions to be interlocked, glommed on, woven, and fastened into whatever variation her current users might want. These cultural fragments are processed, worked upon, so that the artist shifts positions in how she relates to her selected motifs—no longer an observer at some vantage, but working in direct contact with iterations of these components of her surroundings. This is the kind of participation that Whittle likewise extends to her audiences.

This essay's excesses, descriptors, the proliferation of conjunctions, the grandiloquence—these words pile and crunch to match the textures of Whittle's highly developed, over-stimulating artistic practice. In games of roleplay, whatever other fantasy Whittle might enact, it is always combined through the "YES AND" of the improviser with the visual and sculptural equivalent of a carnival barker—an eye-catching, attention seeking vocabulary built from only the highest decibels. She actively moves against invisibility in all forms, instead dragging into recognition even those subtleties of place and social contract that would usually fall below the scope of attention. At the core of her work is a presumed altruism—a heroic dithering that insists on preserving space within our culture for individuals to say something and cohere in spite of the multitude of false starts at connectivity that spark and smolder across our social networks, virtual and physical.

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