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INTRODUCTION

Several weeks into the spring of 2020, museums and cultural organizations around the world faced what felt like insurmountable restrictions—on spending, on movement, on opening their doors—and began to grapple with a continually shifting, ambiguous idea of what the next few months, or even years, of programming might look like. Zoom's relentlessly present squares, and the twinge of despair they inevitably elicited, were the one constant feature of our transformed lives, as the virtual platform took on a new, outsized role in working, socializing, and participating in most forms of cultural production—at least the kinds that we used to have to leave home to experience.

A more exciting development of this period was the immediate possibility of collaborating across vast distances. As two queer institutions on opposite coasts, the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art and ONE Archives at the University of Southern California Libraries have previously partnered on exhibitions and the loans of objects. But now, unconstrained by geography and air travel, we were free to imagine a new mode of performance programming that we were excited to experience ourselves. While we couldn't exactly surmount the new *de facto* hegemony of corporate meeting software, which was almost certainly designed with anything but artistic performance in mind, we could invite artists to think through it as a medium, a set of creative constraints, a tool to use and misuse.

Throughout the course of eight months, our institutions co-hosted seven online performances and screenings over Zoom, with artists based in New York, Los Angeles, the Bay Area, London, Michigan, and Virginia. Most were one-time convenings, always held as a meeting and never as a webinar (despite the first format's somewhat messier aesthetic, a mutual awareness between attendees and performers was critical, we felt, to a sense of intimacy). Apart and together, we peered into Brontez Purnell's shower and the beloved, closed gay bar Julius'. We watched Candy Pain's fist exit the frame of one video square and enter another (a feat of Zoom illusionism that would have drawn audible gasps, had we been able to hear one another). Audiences were able to call into Lukaza Branfman and HH Hiassen's *Support Wetness* hotline, which focused on the analog and the aural, or book one-on-one

visits with Kat Perlak to process their queer heartbreak. Projects by our performance fellows pushed these models further: Anh Vo's performance, held in an empty theater, manifested through conversation and recollection alone, while shawné michaelain holloway guided participants through an experimental love letter, only accessible after 12am, wherever in the world you were.

Queer artists—queer folks in general—have always held space for one another, online as well as off. Before the advent of the commercial internet, people remotely seeking intimacy connected via newsletters, zines, and voicemail boxes; before social media behemoths shaped and factionalized our daily lives, queer encounters online (for those fortunate enough to have privacy and access) required unchoreographed experimentation. In the late 1990s and early aughts, my own time absorbed in a computer screen held the possibility for thrill, an escape from cis-hetero normativity: The limits of who you could be, how you could desire, and what you could share seemed to fall away. I had since forgotten that feeling, but despite the radically different context of this moment, through these performances I could almost touch it again.

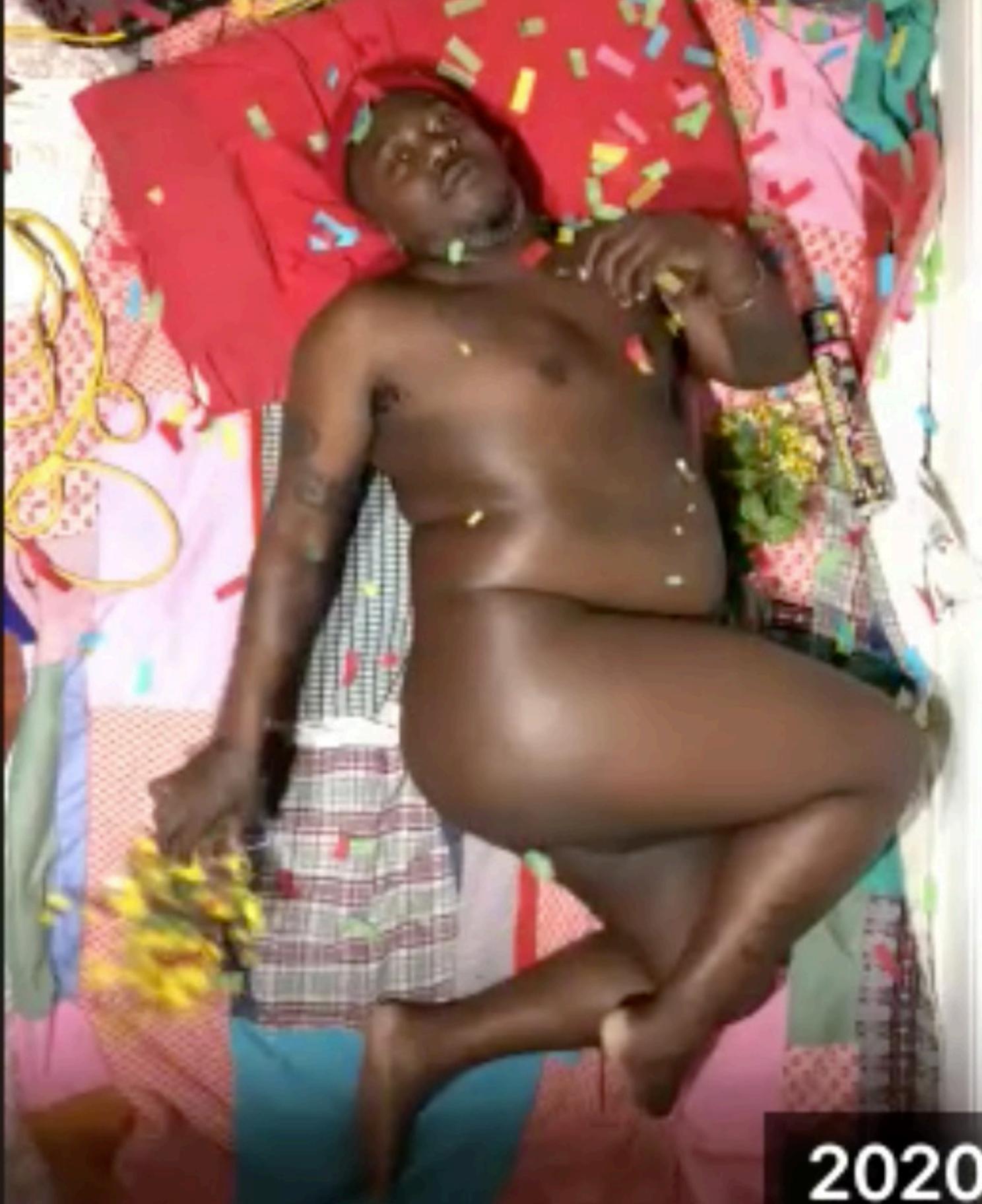
Stamatina Gregory
Chief Curator and Director of Programs
Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art

GRAD- UATION

LIVE ACTION BEDROOM
PERFORMANCE BY
BRONTEZ PURNELL

BRONTEZ PURNELL

My performance for *Remote Intimacies* was originally fashioned as my graduate thesis for my Conceptual Art Practice MFA at UC Berkeley (hence the name *Graduation*). There's something about doing performance work based around the bedroom that feels so worn-in that it's almost anti-conceptual. But in a year of lockdowns, what choice does one really have but a bedroom performance? In truth, I was secretly stoked to be given "permission" to do a performance that would otherwise just label me a slut. In a non-COVID year, "video bedroom performance" so easily reads as "sex camming," inspiring visions of jerking off on Chat Roulette with random people in Russia. Not that I'm "above" that, but still, like... ew. The whole time I was making this piece, I would brag, "MY ONLYFANS CONTENT ONLY PLAYS IN MUSEUMS! YOU BROKE HOES COULD NEVA..."



2020

Being a sucker for wussy, emo, white-boy shit, I was secretly thrilled to make a bedroom (performance) mixtape. I listened to “Boyfriendship” by Noise Addict over and over and over again. I kept thinking about the kind of fever dreams that bedrooms inspire. A lot of my favorite indie music is basically bedroom demos. The genre inspires this very literal intimacy with the work.

Earlier in summer 2020, I had turned down another project that was more or less a performance around therapy through TV. I was to play something like a virtual boyfriend to random theater people who needed advice about their life; I was to lie in bed with them, via webcam, and tell them that they really were a good person, and things of that nature. I would often have to repeat to myself, over and over again, “I am a professional, virtual boyfriend,” cause like, it sounded like something that like, probably started in Japan or something?

In *Graduation* I combined rejected pieces of my book *100 Boyfriends*, my COVID humanitarian relief effort of giving free sex cam shows to men in closeted countries (I performed the naked, ceiling cam part of *Graduation* in front of a mirror), my past history as a sex worker doing shower shows, my spiritual and literal graduation from UC Berkeley, and my constant investigation of art that pushes and pulls on the concept of exposure from a place of safety and intimacy. I mean, though I am certainly exposed in the performance, who could truly hurt me from the safety of my home?

BRONTEZ PURNELL is a writer, musician, dancer, filmmaker, and performance artist. He is the author of a graphic novel, a novella, a children's book, and the novel *Since I Laid My Burden Down*. Recipient of a 2018 Whiting Award for Fiction, he was named one of the 32 Black Male Writers for Our Time by *T: New York Times Style Magazine* in 2018. Purnell is also the frontman for the band the Younger Lovers, the co-founder of the experimental dance group the Brontez Purnell Dance Company, the creator of the renowned cult zine *Fag School*, and the director of several short films, music videos, and, most recently, the documentary *Unstoppable Feat: Dances of Ed Mock* (2018). Born in Tiana, Alabama, he's lived in Oakland, California, for over a decade.

ALL IMAGES

Brontez Purnell, *Graduation*, 2020. Virtual performance documentation from Zoom. Commissioned by The Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art (New York, NY) and ONE Archives at the University of Southern California Libraries (Los Angeles, CA) for *Remote Intimacies*. Courtesy the artist and Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art.



2020

CANDY PAIN GOES TO

CAMP SMACKDOWN: CANDY PAIN POWERSLAMS
WASHINGTON AND QUARANTINE ISOLATION
BY EMILY COLUCCI

WASHINGTON

MIKKI
YAMASHIRO

Can camp, that feared and revered aesthetic of the marginalized, still happen over Zoom, a platform designed more for uncomfortable business meetings than for absurdist queer performance? Before watching *Candy Pain Goes to Washington*, a performance created by artist Mikki Yamashiro—otherwise known as Candy Pain, professional wrestling's "Sapphic Sweetheart"—I would have said no. However, through the performance, Zoom, with its awkward pauses, technical issues, and glitches, got CRUSHED!

It's not too much of a surprise that a lesbian wrestling sendup of the classic 1939 film *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* would be a camp triumph. Pain takes inspiration from the decadent 1980s and 1990s heyday of the World Wrestling Federation (now World Wrestling Entertainment), a period that pile-drove camp right into the heart of straight Middle American popular culture. But whereas some of WWF/WWE's camp prowess came from its overblown and explosive WrestleMania staging, *Candy Pain Goes to Washington* did more with much less.

1. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.

Using materials available in quarantine, the performance featured quirky handmade props, a supporting character played by a babydoll, an audience of fanatical Troll figurines, and off-key *Rocky* theme song interludes sung by performers. Less pay-per-view and more public access, Yamashiro's DIY performance recalled, at once, the trash aesthetic of *The Adventures of Electra Elf*, produced by Nick Zedd and starring Reverend Jen; the zany farce of John Vaccaro's *Theatre of the Ridiculous*; and “the wondrous anarchy of childhood,” as Jack Halberstam articulates it in *The Queer Art of Failure*.¹

Spanning three screens, including KDYK ringside commentary by Lex Vaughn, *Candy Pain Goes To Washington* followed Pain after her appointment to Congress by a devious senator, played by Amy Von Harrington, who hoped Pain would be a pawn for her ambitious climb to the White House. Though she naively intended “to use my brain muscles and not my arm muscles on the Senate floor,” Pain was tricked by journalists, manipulated by Washington’s crooked games, and expelled on false corruption charges. Proving less sweet than her name implies, Pain took her revenge by challenging the entire Senate floor to a wrestling match.





Pain certainly wasn't the first professional wrestler to infiltrate DC politics. Donald Trump's populist rise to the presidency can be partly understood through his connection with WWE's CEO Vince McMahon, as well as his own appearances in the ring. More recently, Republican "Big Dan" Rodimer, a former professional wrestler, lost a special election for Texas's Sixth Congressional District, but not before making a memorably macho, country twang-filled political ad. "The three dirtiest jobs in the world? Professional wrestling, politician, and bull riding!" barks Rodimer, before mounting a bull.

Thankfully, *Candy Pain Goes to Washington* offered a fictitious counternarrative to this (admittedly masterful) conservative spin on wrestling-inspired camp. Instead, it forcefully restored the style to its origins among the underdogs and the queers.

2. Charles Ludlam, *Ridiculous Theatre: Scourge of Human Folly: The Essays and Opinions of Charles Ludlam*, edited by Steven Samuels (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1992), 50.

By persevering over Beltway corruption, Pain embodied a redemptive political possibility—that you can be a “small-town lez” without money or social capital and still fight for what you believe in. And win!

Beyond national politics, Pain and her fellow performers also turned Zoom's inherent technical snafus into camp theatrics, including Amanda Peters Gillmore's impromptu durational cleaning opening scene (David Lynch's notorious sweeping scene in *Twin Peaks: The Return* clocked in at over a minute less—amateur!) Poking fun at Zoom's bizarro world, *Candy Pain Goes to Washington* constructed a space for performers and audience members to laugh in the face of an uncaring government, and in spite of the pandemic-imposed isolation from our communities. In this, the performance reflected “the reassurance of laughing in a mob; knowing that you are not alone in the labyrinth,” as Charles Ludlam once wrote. “Laugh and you are free.”²

ALL IMAGES:
Mikki Yamashiro, *Candy Pain goes to Washington*, 2020. Virtual documentation from performance Zoom featuring Mikki Yamashiro with Amanda Peters Gilmore, Lex Vaughn, and Amy Von Harrington. Commissioned by The Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art (New York, NY) and ONE Archives at the University of Southern California Libraries (Los Angeles, CA) for *Remote Intimacies*. Courtesy the artist and Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art.

MIKKI YAMASHIRO is a self-taught artist, performer, and professional wrestler based in LA. She is a Libra, and thus contrary by nature. Yamashiro is Professional Wrestling's Sapphic Sweetheart, Candy Pain. There are only two things you need to know about Candy Pain: "She loves to wrestle and she hates men." She is the winner of Future Ladies of Wrestling (F.L.O.W.) Ultimate Multiversal Warrior Belt. Ms. Pain also wrestles with New Orleans's XXXTREME QUEER WRESTLING league, Choke Hole.

EMILY COLUCCI is a writer, curator, and co-founder of Filthy Dreams, a Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant-winning website that analyzes art, culture, and politics with a touch of camp.