

# Art in America

Feb 1, 2018

## The Practical Precariat

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A scene from season three, episode four of "The Chris Gethard Show," 2015–.Courtesy TruTV. Photo A. Bisdale.

IN RECENT YEARS, advertisements encouraging participation in the gig economy have become ubiquitous. Perhaps the most notorious examples are for Fiverr, a global online marketplace where freelancers offer to perform tasks for as little as five dollars a pop. The ad copy on one sounds like it was written by blue-collar comedian Jeff Foxworthy, if he'd been abducted and brainwashed by neoliberal tech evangelists: "You eat a coffee for lunch. You follow through on your follow through. Sleep deprivation is your drug of choice. You might be a doer." For a member of the art-world precariat—the overeducated, underemployed social class riddled with anxiety about a lack of financial stability—it's enough to prompt a minor meltdown.

Public reactions to these viruslike ads from the “creative class” they explicitly target have taken various forms, but are generally disparaging. Writer Jia Tolentino called out Fiverr and ride-share company Lyft for exploiting “the American obsession with self-reliance, which makes it more acceptable to applaud an individual for working himself to death than to argue that an individual working himself to death is evidence of a flawed economic system.”<sup>1</sup> Brooklyn-based comedians Eric Allan Schwartz and Steven Phillips-Horst have co-opted and skewered the branding strategies of startups like Fiverr, WeWork, and Blue Apron in flyers and trailers for their savvy “artjacent” monthly night Talk Hole. The promo materials for their March 2017 show were virtually indistinguishable from a Fiverr ad, except that the text over Horst’s portrait read: “Find a mirror. Stare at yourself. Harder. Now talk to yourself. In an Australian accent.” While these barbed responses are necessary—and often cathartic—there is a prescient group of artists born in the early to mid-1980s who were “doers” well before that term became as bankrupt as “disruptors” or “creatives.”

Think of them as a kind of practical precariat: people capable of nimbly and constructively responding to radical changes in economics, information systems, and culture because they have always existed in a state of flux. They saw their parents’ generation destroy the housing market and the education system. They’ve adapted to virtually every cell phone model and social media platform. In 2003, they watched detachedly as the US televised an invasion of Iraq—the second in their lifetime. As art institutions began to adopt the labor values of Silicon Valley, these artists developed a parallel reality where peer networks of mutual aid stand in as de facto institutions. They’ve eschewed the empty promises of individual economic freedom extolled by the gig economy because those promises are, ironically enough, based on anachronistic, libertarian ideas about artistic sovereignty. Even more interesting, they seem to have stopped fretting about elitist distinctions between fine artist, commercial artist, and hobbyist.

Instead of competing against their peers for the occasional, unreliable adjunct teaching position in a prestigious MFA program, these artists are more than happy to teach community art classes to teens, amateurs, and seniors. Theirs is a generative, post-institutional-critique approach to art that can be seen as a realistic, but flexible, survival toolkit—a DIY punk-rock ethos minus the guilt-soaked punk fundamentalism. If an institution wants to provide support through a grant, an exhibition, or a residency, of course these artists will take advantage of it. But instead of sitting around bemoaning dwindling fiscal resources, they’ve developed their own systems to support the artists who in turn support them, formal institutions be damned.

IN 2010, INSTITUTIONAL support seemed wholly improbable for Oakland-based artist, writer, musician, dancer, and filmmaker Brontez Purnell. So, in an old warehouse space in West Oakland, with collaborator Sophia Wang, he founded an institution of his own: the Brontez Purnell Dance Company. It offered free movement classes to anyone who showed up, be they amateur or professional, aiming to create an experimental, interdisciplinary dance company that combined counterculture subversion with free-jazz improvisation. This ad hoc movement community, initially operating outside of any mainstream model,

has since performed at the Berkeley Art Museum, New York Live Arts, SOMArts, and the Montreal Pop Festival.

As art education becomes prohibitively expensive, the Brontez Purnell Dance Company exemplifies an organic and necessary community initiative that fosters skill-sharing among diverse groups of artists. For Purnell, it's a natural extension of zine culture, which he has participated in since he was a teenager in rural Alabama. Purnell has been in the Bay Area for about fifteen years; upon arrival, he settled in a punk house with twenty-two roommates and released the first issue of *Fag School*, his ongoing, cult-classic zine, selling issues for just \$3. He started touring the country with his band, the Younger Lovers, and as a dancer and occasional guitarist for the electroclash group Gravy Train!!!! The more creative avenues he pursued with support from various communities, he told me, the greater the sense of achievement he felt.<sup>2</sup> Surrounded by peers and collaborators, Purnell was enfranchised to pursue writing, choreography, and filmmaking.

He has published two books, the semiautobiographical *Johnny Would You Love Me If My Dick Were Bigger* (Rudos and Rubes, 2015) and the novel *Since I Laid My Burden Down* (Feminist Press, 2017). Still, Purnell stays true to his roots; there are more *Fag School* zines in the works. One of his most recent projects, *Unstoppable Feat, The Dances of Ed Mock* (2017), is a documentary film about the San Francisco postmodern choreographer who died in 1986, at the height of the AIDS epidemic. Purnell's acknowledgment of community isn't limited to those around him at any given time; he recognizes the lineage of communities before him that laid foundations for the artist-driven alternative institutions of today. He's at home in these DIY networks of mutual aid and his income doesn't depend on an art-world day job that might get cut without warning. "I trim weed for a living," he volunteered. "It gives me enough income and flexibility to make art, travel, and pay rent."<sup>3</sup> Miami-based artist and filmmaker Jillian Mayer maintains a similarly measured distance from formal institutions. While she has had solo exhibitions at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts in Salt Lake City and the Perez Art Museum Miami (PAMM) and has shown in group shows like the current Prospect<sup>4</sup> in New Orleans and last year's "Past Skin" at MoMA PS1 in New York, she also regularly takes on commercial video projects and dedicates a large portion of her time to Borscht Corp, a nonprofit film collective she cofounded with Lucas Leyva and fellow students at New World School of the Arts in 2004 that provides equipment, screening facilities, and fiscal support to Miami filmmakers.

Mayer's first big exposure came with *I Am Your Grandma*, (2011) a video that went viral when she uploaded it to YouTube. Mayer dons a variety of grotesque masks and cosmetics, singing a stilted jingle over a grimy beat to explain the video's premise: that her song is a greeting for her future unborn grandchild. It currently has just under four million views. A vast online community clicked and shared Mayer's work, much as they had earlier with Ryan Trecartin's *I-Be Area* (2007) or Jayson Musson's "Art Thoughtz" (2010–12). Mayer's success on YouTube helped solidify the idea that video artists could distribute and contextualize their work outside of art institutions.

Providing emerging artists with methods of distribution and a networked community is a central aim of the Borscht Corp. "Local filmmakers created Borscht in response to the lack

of regional infrastructure and support, empowering artists to tell fresh Miami stories,” reads the mission statement on the organization’s home page. Borscht Corp runs a semiannual film festival, and provides mentoring fellowships for young people and the aforementioned support mechanisms to local filmmakers. Mayer and her collaborators identified a void in cultural support and organized laterally to fill it. Since demonstrating proof of concept, they have received fiscal support from sources like Creative Capital and the Knight Foundation, as well as corporate sponsors like La Croix.

In terms of her own art, Mayer is hardly a one-hit wonder. She has created a feedback loop in her practice between objects and digital media, highlighting the waning distinctions between life on- and offline. The sculptures in her “Slumpies” series (2016) are bulky pieces of furniture ergonomically optimized for lounging while looking at a phone. During certain hours of her show at PAMM, viewers could use the sculptures to access Wi-Fi and charge certain models of smartphones. Mayer sells her work through a gallery, but she’s quick to point out the benefits of commercial gigs, like the music video for Arcade Fire that she and Leyva directed last year.

Mayer sees the different areas of her activity as mutually supportive. Her commercial work not only affords her the opportunity to collaborate with, and learn from, others outside of the contemporary art world, it also enables her to purchase new equipment that she can use in her own future projects, while learning technical skills from senior professionals in the field. Moreover, her commercial projects benefit the community she has developed through the work of Borscht Corp. A music video for Arcade Fire today means a more competitive grant application for the nonprofit tomorrow.

New York-based photographer, performance artist, and educator Jaimie Warren embraces all the fun parts of punk—celebratory amateurism, outrageous aesthetics, community support—while ditching its militant aversion to mainstream appeal. She’s obsessed with horror films and other subculture products that still manage to reach mass audiences. Her photo shoots and video productions pay homage to gross-out gore, blasphemous heavy metal iconography, and rock and pop gods like Freddie Mercury and Michael Jackson. Before relocating to New York, Warren cofounded the nonprofit Whoop Dee Doo with artist Matt Roche in Kansas City. It’s a touring live show and workshop series that borrows from public-access television, kids’ shows, and other lowbrow forms of entertainment. Warren and Roche have collaborated with dozens of local artists, underserved youth (through programs with the Boys & Girls Club), and musicians like Peaches and Hunx and his Punx (interestingly, Hunx was previously part of Gravy Train!!!! with Purnell, who played in the band under the name Junx). Whoop Dee Doo pursues a different mission than Borscht Corp or the Brontez Purnell Dance Company, but likewise relies heavily on the spirit of community. It’s social work, but Warren doesn’t necessarily identify it as social practice.

Warren consistently works with young people. High school students from Brooklyn and the Bronx collaborated on her 2015 exhibition, “Somebody to Love,” at American Medium. As an artist-in-residence at a Williamsburg high school through a program run by the Brooklyn nonprofit NURTUREart, she directed an endearing remake of *Nightmare on Elm Street* starring and produced by the students. It screened in their auditorium at the end of

the school year. In 2015, while teaching a free course for New York City high school students at MoMA, Warren staged a sleepover in the museum where teens ate candy, privately toured the building, and watched *Child's Play* together. Warren's CV qualifies her to teach at any art school, but she is committed to working with teens and seniors. "High school has always been my jam, as have any first-time artists," she said. "They have a sense of humor about making art and allow themselves to have fun."<sup>4</sup>

WHILE COMEDIAN Chris Gethard is not connected to the art world, his community-oriented resourcefulness has much in common with that of the artists discussed here. Like Warren, he embraces both the aesthetic of public-access television and its galvanizing ability to give a community a platform. His talk and variety program, "The Chris Gethard Show," began in 2009 as a monthly live show at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre, then gained a wider audience when it moved to the Manhattan Neighborhood Network on public-access television in 2011 and then the Fusion Network in 2015 before landing on truTV last year. "The Chris Gethard Show" borrows heavily from popular talk-show formats by featuring celebrity guests, a house band, and recurring sketches, but—perhaps irresponsibly—leaves much up to chance with improvised segments (including ones based on calls to a live phone line) and regular invitations to random audience members to join the cast for multiple episodes.

Gethard got his start writing about paranormal activity, and eventually becoming an editorial assistant, for *Weird NJ*, a fanzine about the stranger things in his home state of New Jersey that later turned into a national book series. Readers contributed articles and photos to every issue, shared information about the rumored locations of phenomena featured in the magazine, and, most important, showed up in force for live events hosted by *Weird NJ*.

Like Purnell, Gethard spent his youth attending punk shows that promoted an openness to outsiders' voices. That influence is evident in his unorthodox comedy career. Instead of pursuing a road to success through standup, he directed his energy toward reaching an entirely different audience.

Now Gethard is on cable television, and last year a TV adaptation of his off-Broadway one-man show *Career Suicide* was produced by HBO. His podcast, "Beautiful Stories from Anonymous People," is a hit. Thousands of subscribers listen weekly to his one-hour conversations with unidentified strangers who call in about everything from eating disorders to monitoring shoplifters. Gethard, much like the other artists discussed here, just so happens to be nice. That comes in handy when you depend on a community. His generosity as a host and a storyteller seems like a way of giving back after receiving so much support from his peers. The *AV Club* has called him "a patron saint to outcasts, weirdos, and fuckups of all stripes."<sup>5</sup>

While it has never been easy to figure out a way to survive by pursuing one's art practice, the last several years have seemed particularly demoralizing, as museums and educational institutions cut full-time staff and hire more contractors and adjuncts. In light of that reality, emerging artists would do well to zoom out and consider alternatives to solo-show

fame. Reactive practices tend to lead toward further disenfranchisement by institutions, whereas generative ones create sustainable institutional forms. Mayer and Warren have established small nonprofits. The Brontez Purnell Dance Company seems headed in that direction—even as Purnell maintains artistic independence by having a day job, as artists have for decades. Gethard has achieved a familiar level of indie, and even mainstream, stardom by pursuing collective and participatory work. They all offer aspirant models of community-based, ad hoc institution-building in spite of a lack of larger structural support, ultimately achieving success through what may have initially seemed like unlikely means. Artists continue to employ DIY strategies because they consistently prove useful. But the strategies themselves rarely remain consistent. Agility and inventiveness are necessary tools to survive in an economy that is constantly shifting, usually toward more unfavorable conditions. Artists who fall under the umbrella of the practical precariat intuit this. Furthermore, they realize that resource-sharing and mutual aid foster more tenacious adaptation. In 2018, the DIY disposition works best when pluralized: do-it-ourselves.