

Cat Calendar

text by Marc Siegel, 2005

I remember being about ten years old when I told my mom and dad that I thought Stubby, our dog, and Stella, my grandmother, had the same cute eyes and facial expressions. Upon hearing her mother-in-law being compared to a dog, my mom laughed with satisfaction, while my dad looked on in embarrassment. For me, of course, the whole thing was really quite innocent. I just thought I was comparing what I took to be an incredibly sweet and adorable animal to my equally beloved and highly-valued grandmother. I was by no means insulting Stella. For, at the time, I would have considered nothing more valuable or rich in possibility than to be like Stubby. This memory comes back to me as I think about Antonia Baehr and Antonija Livingstone's wonderfully strange Cat Calendar, in which drag performance is used to explore a fascinating new space of becoming that exists somewhere between youth and old age, woman and man, human and animal. A creamy white curtain with flowers and vertical blue stripes parts to reveal a domestic scene of uncanny familiarity. Two old men are sitting at a kitchen table listening to a table-top radio and eating snacks. Iacob (Livingstone) shakes slightly as he cuts a small piece of fruit with an overly large knife. Fritz (Baehr) eats something--nuts or seeds perhaps--out of a small bowl and then begins knitting. With slow, tentative gestures and only occasional glances at each other, the two manage to convey wordlessly that kind of intimacy that exists between two people who have lived in close proximity for years. After a long while, Fritz pulls a string that is connected to the curtain and quickly draws it to a close. The two old men reappear at the front of the small stage, bow happily, and join the audience in applause. They thereby signal that this opening scene of naturalistic domesticity is itself a self-conscious performance. But, of what? Cat Calendar is certainly a drag performance in the sense that the young female performers are both dressed like old men and act like them. Indeed, part of what's fascinating about the performance is the women's unusual decision to impersonate old men in the first place, as well as their skill and loving precision in doing so. But their aim here is not to present a fully convincing illusion of gender or sexual impersonation. If this isn't clear from the beginning of the piece, it becomes so later when Baehr or Livingstone turns determinedly toward the audience, as if into a mirror, in order to reposition her slightly loosened, glued-on facial hair. It is something other than gender transgression that disturbs the harmony of the naturalistic opening scene. This is after all a naturalism that recalls kitschy oil paintings or grandmotherly embroidery; such scenes of domestic tranquility always seem to harbor a latent violence. In this case, Iacob and Fritz do have the potential weapons: a large knife and knitting needles. But there's also Iacob's odd twitching tongue and unruly mane of hair and Fritz's quivering fingers and cat-like left eye. There's something animalistic about these two that threatens to erupt and disturb the studied restraint of their age and gender impersonation. Drag is simply the starting point for a performance about intimacy and exhibitionism, about bodily functions and voyeurism. The very gestures and postures that Baehr and Livingstone invented to signify old age shift subtly into the register of the animalistic. At one point, a bemused Iacob hobbles over to a cat litter, opens his pants, and pisses. Fritz follows shortly thereafter to investigate and then proceeds to pace back and forth for a long time, as if pondering the situation. Though these two are acutely aware of each other, they nevertheless remain intrigued with and surprised by the other's at times unexpected

actions. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the moment when Iacob gives Fritz a youthful orange baseball cap and sunglasses and then proceeds to position and reposition his body on the table as if it were on display. Eventually, Iacob takes off Fritz's pants, wipes his ass, turns his body around for the audience's consideration and applause, and then violently fucks him. This scene, like much of *Cat Calendar*, is alternately funny, sexy, disturbing, and fascinating. Watching *Cat Calendar* is like staring at a queer kind of diorama in a zoo or natural history museum. It's easy to lose oneself in the rich details and, thereby, lose track of time. These characters do live according to a different calendar after all. While watching Baehr and Livingstone perform old men (old cats? old drag kings?), it's easy to start fantasizing along with them, about what it would be like to move like that, feel like that, look like that. Their performance makes such transformative possibilities seem tantalizing.