CHARMING RIDICULOUS WERNER

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Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz's video *Charming for the Revolution* (2009) opens with a shot of an empty dirt field on a sunny summer day. A row of green trees and a couple of large housing complexes line the horizon. Shrubs around the base of a metal structure—later revealed to be an electrical transmission tower—make up the bottom right corner of the image. Soon, a person slowly and tentatively emerges from behind the shrubs, swaggers onto the field, kicks a previously unnoticeable blue plastic bag full of garbage, and takes a position squarely in the center of the frame. The camera quickly and jerkily reframes to close in on the scowling performer—clad in a black leather jacket, light-colored dress shirt opened at the neck to reveal an undershirt, and plaid dress pants—as he pulls out some pieces of paper from the jacket's inside pocket. Staring down the camera, the rebellious figure declaims a manifesto about the politics of being and becoming housewives. "We housewives," the rebel slowly and deliberately announces, "they make us work for free. But in return, we don't get anything for free." A housewife, we learn, is not married to her husband but to that "straight white guy called the economy." Faced with such an unfortunate marriage, as the rebel dramatically proclaims, "The only thing to do is to ask for a divorce! And a huge settlement."

The disgruntled housewife in a leather jacket is soon contrasted with another unexpected rebel in this barren landscape: a dandy in a beige three-piece suit walking a turtle on a leash amidst a mess of garbage. This surrealist image stages the classic gesture of the Baudelairean dandy and, with it, the resistant modernist figure of leisure as a counterpoint to the hardworking contemporary housewife. Toward the end of the ten-minute video, dandy and housewife merge for a moment to form a third figure, a bird-dandy (or dandy-bird) that is shown spouting the now familiar anti-marriage and housewife-liberation rhetoric to the pelicans in a zoo. Asking for a divorce from the economy, we could surmise, entails not simply severing oneself from the temporality of work and the restrictions of privacy so as to exercise "the freedom to be public." Becoming housewife necessitates a bodily transformation as well, not just in terms of gender or sexual identity (becoming housewife is not a drag performance); one must also become animal or—even better—become ridiculous.

Charming was originally made for a festival focusing on the work of American underground artist Jack Smith.[1] By linking the video to Smith's work, one can account for some of the piece's idiosyncratic details. For instance, the performer Werner Hirsch, who embodies *Charming*'s three characters, approximates Smith's mannered delivery of text in the performances documented in Smith's film *Midnight at the Plaster Foundation* (circa 1971) and Birgit Hein's *Jack Smith (Kino 74)* (1974). Furthermore, particular lines

("It's free, but you have to pay fifty cents"), costume details (the dandy's feathered hat), and props (the garbage and the small pieces of paper with text), as well as the zoo location and some camera movements, are obvious homages to these two earlier works. Moreover, one can find antecedents for Boudry and Lorenz's ridiculous critique of domestic labor relations in Smith's own brand of funny, odd, and gender-creative (yet thoroughly serious and politically radical) critique. In Hein's *Kino 74* film, for instance, Smith, donning a pith helmet, passes out art-fair brochures to apes and camels in the course of an explicit attack on the commercial constraints on art production and exhibition. When I describe Boudry and Lorenz's queer critique as "ridiculous" therefore, I do so in order to invoke the Ridiculous theater, performance, and film movement that was initiated in the 1960s in New York by artists such as Smith, Ronald Tavel, Charles Ludlam, and John Vaccaro.[2] A ridiculous critique is not merely unreasonable and hilarious. It also questions rigidities of identity (gender, sexual, racial, and human) and displays a belief in process, style, and fabulation over product, virtuosity, and truth.

This queer tradition of the ridiculous provides but one possible background for Boudry and Lorenz's video. Their own work provides another.[3] Indeed, a queer-feminist rethinking of the politics of housework informs Boudry and Lorenz's video *Normal Work* (2007), another piece featuring the considerable talents of Hirsch. In *Normal Work*—the title references Smith's seminal film project *Normal Love* (1963–1965)—Hirsch embodies Hannah Cullwick, the Victorian maid whose erotic games of dominance and submission with her master and boss, Arthur Munby, were documented in diaries and a striking series of staged photos. Hirsch stars as well in Boudry and Lorenz's video *N.O. Body* (2008), performing the role of Annie Jones-Elliott, a late nineteenth-century bearded woman who appeared internationally in freak shows and later surfaced as a possible patient in one of German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld's books. A rebel housewife, a dandy, a dandy-bird, a Victorian maid, and a bearded woman: Hirsch's presence and style of self-presentation in these three Boudry and Lorenz videos speaks for itself in terms of its importance to their artistic collaboration. For this reason, and also because I've long been a fan of Hirsch's charming and ridiculous work, I'd like to provide some background information on this mysterious figure who has been involved in some of the most interesting and provocative gender performances in Berlin over the past decade. Moreover, a closer consideration of Hirsch's performance work could help to elucidate some of the aesthetic and theoretical strategies of Boudry and Lorenz's video practice.

A discussion of Hirsch demands that one account as well for Antonia Baehr, the artist who forged Werner out of her very flesh. Baehr was trained in film and media with Valie Export at the Hochschule der Künste Berlin, now Universität der Künste Berlin (Berlin University of the Arts), and in performance with Lin Hixson at the Art Institute of Chicago. Since 2000, she has been based in Berlin and has made a name for herself in a number of interrelated arts and subcultural scenes. In addition to working as a choreographer, director, performer, and filmmaker throughout Europe, Baehr has also been active as an organizer in Berlin's non-institutional arts scene. In this capacity, she co-organized (among many other events) the experimental music and performance series Labor Sonor from 2001–2003 at KuLe, one of the only remaining squatted houses in the heavily gentrified neighborhood Berlin-Mitte. Baehr's work is distinguished by a series of significant collaborations with other Berlin-based artists. In addition to Boudry and Lorenz, she has collaborated regularly with performer William Wheeler, filmmaker Isabell Spengler, performer and director Lindy Annis, and choreographer Eszter Salamon, among others.[4] Most recently, Baehr has toured extensively and received well-deserved international acclaim for a performance called *Lachen – Rire – Laugh* (2008), a fascinating solo piece in which she performs compositions for laughter based on scores that she solicited from family and friends. In addition to her own work, Baehr has also forged the identities of other performers in whose guise she sometimes appears, including the gender-neutral dandy-musician Henri Fleur (aspects of whom are evident in the dandy figure in *Charming*) and the horse whisperer Werner Hirsch. Although not all of Baehr's work thematizes gender as a performance, the pieces that do are marked by such rigor, perversity, and formal inventiveness that they exceed the parameters of conventional drag parody—of the king and queen variety—and imagine

new means of bringing together gender and sex, voice and body, and animal and human.[5] Baehr and Wheeler's performance *Georgia on my Mind/Country Bubble* (2001–2002) provides a useful example of both the intimacy of Baehr's collaborative practice and the implication of her formal innovations for gender performance. The piece, which was performed in a club context as well as in more standard performance spaces, featured Wheeler as a kind of shy wallflower in country drag playing the theremin and Baehr as an ebullient, buxom blonde gal—à la Dolly Parton but with more meat on her bones. (The cardboard set by Stefan Pente featured a large, colorful rendering of Parton's face). Baehr bantered with the audience and sang country songs, but she herself never produced the sounds that seemed to emerge from her mouth. Instead, Wheeler supplied Baehr's voice through the dramatic movement of his hands and arms "on" the theremin. The performance thus demanded a precise choreography of communication and exchange between the two performers. The absurdity of the situation made the piece hilarious, but their mutual dependence on each other also lent it a great sense of intimacy.

Already in *Georgia on My Mind*, we notice an important aspect of Baehr's work, one that she exploits continually in her performances for different effects: the disjunction between voice and body. In one of Baehr's earliest Werner Hirsch vehicles, the 2002 performance *Reden über Frauen* (Talking about Women), Hirsch appears onstage wearing a fake mustache, but otherwise clad almost identically to *Charming*'s rebellious housewife. In this case, however, Hirsch's scowl and slouching posture recall images of Rainer Werner Fassbinder. He takes a seat at a table alongside a dapperly dressed, drag-king dandy and each king picks up an earbud attached to a cassette recorder, visible on the table between them, and sits in silence listening to a prerecorded tape. They proceed to have a disjointed conversation about the objectification, significance, and insignificance of women by or for men. Their speech is limited only to a repetition of what they hear on the tape. As the approximately fourteen-minute performance progresses, it becomes evident that the quotes, which reference films and filmmaking practices, are the words of male filmmakers. Indeed, Hirsch's texts derive solely from Fassbinder and Pedro Almodóvar, whereas his discussant speaks the words of other male directors including Jean-Luc Godard and Roman Polanski. Their conversation is stilted, marked by pauses while they wait for the phrases on the tape, an awkwardness that both lends a bit of humor to the whole and invites spectators to reflect on the performance's distinct and disjunctive audio and visual components. *Reden über Frauen* in this way seems less a send-up of potential misogyny than a kind of drag-king analysis of the constituents of gender relations.

Of course, a disjunction between voice and body marks conventional, parodic drag performance as well. When drag performers synchronize their lips and bodily movements to the words and rhythms of prerecorded songs, they typically do so in order to impersonate a beloved diva or divo. Such lip-synching drag performers attempt to bring voice and body together to form a newly integral whole, no matter how shocking, funny, or incongruous it may appear to be. This complete(d) drag image is easily (and enjoyably) compared and contrasted with the image of the diva/divo to which it refers. On occasion, Baehr's drag performances also situate themselves in relation to the images of known stars, celebrities, and cultural figures (Parton and Fassbinder in the previous examples). But rather than presenting a coherent image of her beloved icon or gender role model, Baehr makes visible instead the discontinuity among the various components that contribute to the specific gender images under investigation. Not only does voice, for instance, often fail to match body, but it sometimes takes flight from gender and sexual expression altogether, so as to foreground the specific rhythms, dynamics, and aesthetics of sound.[6] Baehr's performances, whether as Hirsch, Fleur, or Baehr herself, do tend to be funny and—thanks to her loving embrace of the figures she embodies—charming. As a result of her unique, investigative approach to gender performance, however, they also become something else: strangely serious and analytical. I'd like to suggest that Baehr's charming analytics of gender presentation not only distinguishes her work from conventional drag performance but also goes far toward explaining her appeal for Boudry and Lorenz. Each of their three collaborations can be

understood as an analytics of a particular mode of and discourse about gender and sexual (re)presentation. As mentioned above, *Charming* investigates both female domestic labor and ridiculous gender performance. *Normal Work*, meanwhile, analyzes the production of images of class, racial, and gender difference. Finally, *N.O. Body* ridicules, refuses, and simultaneously studies the scientific production of knowledge about transgender bodies. One might even argue that Boudry and Lorenz view the figure of Hirsch himself through the lens of their queer-feminist analysis. They try out his resilience in bourgeois and working-class Victorian England, in turn-of-the-century United States and Europe, and in present-day lesbian subcultures.[7] They make Hirsch's formal critique of gender presentation speak to a rich array of historical and theoretical references. In *Charming*, they even make Hirsch speak the political possibilities of their shared artistic project. Perhaps it is Boudry, Lorenz, and Baehr that we hear together, collectively, in Hirsch's voice when he proclaims in *Charming*, "An army of housewives cannot lose!"

1 "LIVE FILM! JACK SMITH! Five Flaming Days in a Rented World," which took place in Berlin from Oct. 28 until Nov. 1, 2009, was curated by Susanne Sachsse, Stefanie Schulte Strathaus, and Marc Siegel and produced by Arsenal – Institut für Film und Video Kunst, e.V. and HAU/Hebbel am Ufer.

2 Many key texts of this movement are collected in the German-language publication by Diedrich Diederichsen et al., eds., *Golden Years: Materialien und Positionen zu Queerer Subkultur und Avantgarde zwischen 1959 und 1974* (Graz, 2006).

3 Since I am mainly concerned with singling out Hirsch's role in Boudry and Lorenz's collaborative work, I only mention the most obvious connections between Charming and the artists's other videos. If one were to provide a more thorough analysis of the queer-feminist politics in their work, one would do well to consider their prolific body of theoretical writing as well. See, for instance, Pauline Boudry, Brigitta Kuster, and Renate Lorenz, eds., *Reproduktionskonten fälschen!* (Berlin, 1999); Renate Lorenz and Brigitta Kuster, *Sexuell arbeiten: Eine queere Perspektive auf Arbeit und prekäres Leben* (Berlin, 2007); Renate Lorenz, ed., *Normal Love, Precarious Sex, Precarious Love* (Berlin, 2007), Renate Lorenz, *Aufwändige Durchquerungen: Subjektivität als sexuelle Arbeit* (Bielefeld, 2009) and finally: Renate Lorenz: *Queer Art: A Freak Theory* (Bielefeld 2011).

4 For more information on Baehr's work and her collaborations (including a fascinating manifesto), see her production company's website: make up productions, http://www.make-up-productions.net (accessed Dec. 10, 2010).

5 I will only discuss two performances here. If I were to extend this Hirschian analysis, I would also address two other relevant pieces in which Hirsch/Baehr used drag to explore a space of becoming between man and woman, human and animal. In a 2003 club performance, Baehr appeared as Alfred Hitchcock and performed the entire trailer to the film *The Birds* (1963) before stripping out of her male attire to become an odd kind of black camisole-clad dominatrix-bird herself. In *Cat Calendar* (2004), a sixty-minute collaboration with Antonija Livingstone, the two women appear as old men or old drag kings or old cats in an unusual domestic setting that resembles a diorama in a natural history museum. For a brief review of this performance, see my text: Marc Siegel, "Cat Calendar," make up productions, http://www.make-up-productions.net/home/PRODUCTIONS/CAT%20CALENDAR/text/ (accessed Dec. 10, 2010).

6 This is perhaps most evident in Baehr's highly controlled performances of laughter (*Lachen – Rire – Laugh*), excerpts of which are heard in Boudry and Lorenz's *N.O. Body*. Additionally, the song "Der Tonangeber und die tanzenden Tonabnehmer" (and performance thereof) by Baehr's collaborative project, the feminist band Larry Peacock, seems to directly reconceptualize the gendered and sexed body as a sound-producing medium. The song title can be translated as "The Sound-Giver (or Sound-Braggart) and the Dancing Sound-Receivers." For more on Larry Peacock, see make up productions, http://www.make-up-productions.net (accessed Dec. 10, 2010).

7 The historical present in *Normal Work* is marked by Del LaGrace Volcano's photographs of leather dykes. In *N.O. Body*, Zoe Leonard's photographs of a preserved head of a bearded woman provide a contemporary reference point for the video's depiction of the nineteenth-century freak-show performer Annie Jones-Elliott.

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