

A PRODUCT OF HIS TIME The Performance Acts of Chris Bors

Cheryl Katz

MTV spawned an entire generation that is impervious to shock and has an attention span the length of a music video. These children of the 1980s are males who came of age in a transsexual world where the ladies' man was dying, literally, and the evolved man was still a decade unborn. Or they are women who knew nothing of inequality and saw no reason not to be mother, breadwinner, lover, and wife all in one. They were raised on Madonna, Twisted Sister, and Culture Club, and occupied the bulk of their days playing video games and buying Orange Julius drinks at shopping malls. As they grew older, many responded by declaring themselves alternative. Grunge culture and the Seattle sound of Nirvana and Soundgarden seemed like the anthem for Generation X, but this so-called alternative culture was co-opted by the mainstream and became one of the first casualties of a new world where nothing is immune to marketing. Automobile manufacturers and retirement planners wanted to know about this elusive group; a generation of consumers that has spent more time on the couch than in the throes of politics or social revolution, all of their motivation and preoccupation swirling around in a vast eddy of the self. It is this world of in-your-face commercialization and media-saturated culture that that the Williamsburg, Brooklyn, conceptual artist Chris Bors ponders in his work.

As an adolescent, according to the artist, he was nourished on a steady diet of the four food groups: Slayer concerts, The World Wrestling Federation, Warner Brothers cartoons, and Colecovision, spending his early years in Ithaca, New York, developing his future artistic aesthetic by watching four hours of television a day, wrestling, and publishing an underground high school newspaper. The 1980s as a whole didn't leave much for posterity, but the "me decade" bequeathed a legacy of self-reinvention and gave us a Teflon generation blessed or cursed with an exaggerated sense of its own importance. It blurred the line between reality and fantasy to the point of irrelevancy, leaving behind a residue of unprecedented apathy toward—well—everything. For many of those who grew up in the eighties, nothing is permanent, nothing is precious, nothing is absolute. It's all just cross advertising.

Not surprisingly, the art that has emerged from this generation is as polished and concise as a Nike commercial, and takes pride in its entertainment value. Bors and

his peers instinctually understand that art need not be austere or uncomfortable to yield impact, and like the work of founding father Mike Kelley, it originates from an autobiographical impulse, but is liberal in its use of fiction. Bors is a painter, sculptor, and photographer, but much of his recent work is performative video, possibly the defining art form of his generation. Performative work is qualified by the presence of a contrived reality, but to some, it is the elixir of self-transformation. In the self-portraits of Nikki S. Lee and David Henry Brown, Jr. [see *PAJ* 66], metamorphosis is as simple as posing next to a stranger in a scene from a niche outside of their own. Their photos forge a false familiarity and mock our *National Enquirer* credo of seeing is believing. In the video work of artist Guy Richards Smit, the yearning to leave the confines of one's own emotional prison is even more overt. His alter ego, the typical loser, dreams of attention and acceptance, but beneath his comedic escapades is a cold lonely caste system of social haves and have-nots. The traits that classify all of this work are subtler in Bors's videos. He is both in front of and behind the camera, but there is an invisible, yet almost tangible resistance to this association.

The impetus for his video *The Tourist* (2002) came shortly after Bors's December 2000 marriage to Cypriot painter Ketta Ioannidou. He was surprised to learn about the U.S. involvement under Nixon and Kissinger in 1974 in the Turkish occupation of Cyprus, and the anti-U. S. sentiment that still exists there today. He was also shocked to discover that neither *Gilligan's Island* nor *The Brady Bunch* was shown on television in Cyprus during his wife's youth. In *The Tourist*, Bors is dressed in shorts, a tee shirt that reads "Cyprus-Venus Island" and a baseball cap adorned with a map of Cyprus. He is earnestly singing the American national anthem in a cavernous, ancient outdoor Greco-Roman theatre in Cyprus, the Kourio. He sings as if in front of a large crowd, but when the camera pulls back, it is revealed that the seats of the theatre are empty and the only sound of human life is chirping crickets. This final scene pays homage to the Warner Brother's cartoon, *Baton Bunny*, in which Bugs furiously conducts an orchestra to the sole audience of one terribly persistent and annoying fly.

Whether in the texture, the characters, or just the mood of it, cartoons always play a vital role in all of Bors's art. He draws inspiration from RAW magazine artists KAZ, Mark Beyer, and Gary Panter, the latter best known for creating the sets for the television show *Pee Wee's Playhouse*. This thin layer of humor is the icing that prohibits his work from being burdened with political and sociological theory, and casts a shadow of superficiality over what could otherwise be misconstrued as a serious work of art.

The Tourist was shot prior to September 11, 2001, but even if it is exhibited with this disclaimer, it will be viewed through the bifocal of patriotism and fear that now permeates and, perhaps, blinds this country. *The Tourist*, the video, hints at the arrogance inherent in our proliferation of "America" abroad and our ignorance of the cultures we appropriate. But, the tourist, the character, isn't an ugly American shattering the glass door of a balcony in a hotel in Barcelona (which Bors admits he

did in 1993), he is a man peacefully reveling in his own civic pride. Bors neither condemns this tourist or his actions, and by denying him an audience, he suggests neither pity nor vindication. The camera is objective and the artist's performance devoid of political assertions. The recital is so focused and personal that it is almost as if it were captured coincidentally. Photographs of the performance, and of the theatre, juxtaposing its ancient beauty and its desolation, accompany the video. The photos are artworks unto themselves, but they are also evocative of snapshots one might take while on vacation, and thus add another stratum of reality to the video. Bors rarely exhibits in a single medium, but each element of his work is integrally connected, his signature not being found in theme or form, but in a wry sense of humor. The challenge for him and other young artists today is to establish a logo when there is no visual or tangible identity to the work. They must sell a persona that is so flexible, yet so connected to the work, that all forms become acceptable and well received.

Bors's earlier work revolved around relationships and sexuality, and the regressive, dysfunctional male. It is ripe with derision, but yielding in its sympathy for man's tortured plight. *Modern Day Caveman* (1998) was an installation at the Islip Art Museum's Carriage House Space in the summer of 1998. Bors lived there for nine days, dressed in caveman attire, not shaving, showering or speaking to museum visitors for the duration of the twenty-four hour a day performance. He survived on takeout ribs, Budweiser, and Marlboro cigarettes, watched a continuous bootleg video of a PJ Harvey concert, and drew erotic portraits of her on the walls of his cave. He also drew former Whitney Museum of American Art curator Thelma Golden, who was slated to curate the upcoming Whitney Biennial, and a depiction of the museum itself as well. In *Time Out New York*, Bill Arning called the piece "goofy . . . but . . . irresistible"¹. The performance was edited down to a six-minute video and reprised for five days later in the fall of 1998 in a tiny window space at the School of Visual Arts.

This structure is not new. Ben Vautier is known for his fifteen-day stint in the window of London's Gallery One, while Chris Burden took it to the extreme with his *Bed Piece* of twenty-two days. Bors's performance is full of the type of self-promotion raised to an art form by Martin Kippenberger in his day, and taken at face level, *Modern Day Caveman* travels the same path as Rob Becker's *Defending the Caveman*, seen in recent years on Broadway. Well equipped with all the amenities of modern life: stereo, television, telephone, and refrigerator, man's basic instincts haven't changed so much. They'd still prefer to sit around all day, unbathed, scratching themselves and looking at naked women. But nothing in Bors's work is one-dimensional.

Modern Day Caveman is about a culture, or more specifically an age, without social or interpersonal boundaries and with an unquenchable thirst for voyeurism. A lack of intimacy brought on by an unyielding fixation on the self propels us toward a futile and somewhat pathetic attempt to forge relationships between our lives and the lives of strangers around us. Our entire economy thrives on a dangerous



Top, left: *Tourist*, 2000, video still. Right: *Modern Day Caveman*, 1998, installation-performance.
Bottom, left and right: *I Win!*, 1999, video. Photos: Courtesy of the Artist.



obsession with celebrity that goes beyond the harmless idolatry of the 50s. In *Man and His Symbols*, Carl Jung wrote that if you create the visual image enough times, it becomes blurred with the actual object and become a part of your reality². The cavemen drew images of sacrifice and fertility rites. The *Modern Day Caveman* draws PJ Harvey and Thelma Golden. Today, this behavior is termed dysfunctional or maladapted, but Bors reveals it as epidemic, existential loneliness and it appears in the guise of indulgence in a number of his works.

Acceptable responses to receiving a Dear John letter include a short period of isolation, a rebound relationship, or a night of cavorting and carousing on the town. Dressing in fuzzy yellow sleeper pajamas and a Mexican professional wrestling mask, sitting in a kiddie pool filled with water, and reading aloud seventy-six letters outlining the course of your relationship while making a line on your bare chest as you finish each letter doesn't make it on to this list. *Love Letter Kiddie Pool* (1998) was a four and a half-hour private performance, documented by video, and a series of kiddie pool paintings: literal scenes of love and loss painted on the inside of plastic gesso treated kiddie pools. *For Someone Special* is a kitschy painting of two love struck chipmunks in an image appropriated from a Hallmark Greeting card. *I Before, 2 After* is about three of Bors's ex-girlfriends that shaved their heads, one before he met her and the others during the relationship. He used his own hair to form the shape of a heart on this mixed media painting.

Despite its adolescent facade, *Love Letter Kiddie Pool* could be compared to the work of tell-all YBA Tracey Emin or New York cult poet, Anita Liberty. It lacks the harsh edge, but it is no less relentless in its validation and support of its victim. Everything in this piece reeks of scaring and permanence. At the end of the performance, Bors ritually cleanses his body of the past, but the marks don't completely fade. The kiddie pool paintings are the baggage: the relics that stay in our mental garages and attics until we pull them out for a teary-eyed day of reminiscence. Like *The Tourist*, *Love Letter Kiddie Pool* is an amalgam of truth and fiction. In May of 1994, Bors's girlfriend of almost three years broke up with him by sending a Dear John birthday card, but we'd like to think he had recovered from this blow by 1998 when he made this video. The wrestling mask is an autobiographical item, and this particular mask covers the entire face and has devil-like horns attached to its side. Paired with the fuzzy pajamas, it creates a wonderful image of the archetypal angel/devil. The horns indicate that the character had some culpability in the relationship's demise, while simultaneously, by concealing his identity, the mask exonerates the artist.

Love Letter Kiddie Pool is a hilarious, self-indulgent exorcism of personal demons. *Beat Down* (1997) is a droll depiction of Catholic guilt in which Bors is beaten about the face by a boxing nun puppet in a continuous, never-ending loop featuring sound effects sampled from Bruce Lee's *Enter the Dragon*. He reacts to the punches with the numbness of a prisoner who has grown accustomed to being mistreated, although the artist himself is clearly controlling the puppet. On the surface, both of these videos are about self-worth and loss, but on a deeper level, they are a commentary on changing social and professional norms.

In the 1980s it was acceptable to flaunt the so-called type A personality and the 1990s welcomed anyone who was working through issues, but so far the twenty-first century is all about gloss. The man's man is making a comeback. The current has shifted in the art world as well, so whereas it used to be hip to be starving but sensitive, today's emerging artist has to appear as successful and confident as a young dot com-er. It is this dichotomy that is at the center of much of Bors's recent video work.

Bors himself doesn't appear in *I Win!* (1999), recently exhibited in *B Hotel* at the Museum of Modern Art's P. S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in Long Island City. The video consists of clips of eccentric old men in their sixties and seventies dancing and shouting, "I win! I win! Nobody found me! I win!" in what looks like a commercial studio. It would appear to be a spoof of a sweepstakes commercial audition, except that the text suggests a rousing game of hide and seek, and the clips are interspersed with photos of manipulated found objects, including a ceramic beaver statue covered with liquid metal, a stuffed dog coated in what looks like cake frosting and a plastic duck overlaid with human hair.

The background music sounds like a carnival tune, but it is actually swiped from a 1928 Fleischer Brothers cartoon entitled *Koko's Earth Control*, the first cartoon to integrate animation with live actors. *I Win!* could be interpreted as a send up of the ageless male obsession with winning, any trophy, at any cost, even if the prize is soiled and worthless. Or it could be seen through another lens. These men, who are reminiscent of some of Paul McCarthy's more manic characters, are trying to act as wacky as possible to get the job, so the more ludicrous the antics, the more boisterous our laughter. But ultimately, we remember that we aren't privy to what was so funny in the first place and end up with the sort of emptiness one feels after coming off of a chemically-induced high, heavy and dumped upon like a molten beaver. It was all false propaganda and fabricated success.

As Bors's work has matured, it has become more subversive. *The Tourist* points a finger towards an egocentric nation, and *The Patron* (2000) is subversive in its entire conception and execution. Upon receiving an Independent Projects Grant from the non-profit institution Artists' Space in New York, Bors donned a suit and tie, and stood in the lobby of the gallery building at 529 West 20th Street in Chelsea, described by some as an art mall. One by one, as people entered the building to attend openings that evening, Bors handed each of them a crisp, brand new one-dollar bill that he had signed as if it were his own personal work of art. The event was videotaped and later edited using Abba's *Money Money Money* as its soundtrack.

The Patron was completely unsanctioned, and is Bors's most insidious and sophisticated work to date. Most of the audience took the dollar without thought; completely unaware of the video camera or that a performance was taking place. They were jaded New Yorkers accustomed to being solicited, so few even made eye contact with their benefactor. Over the course of about forty-five minutes Bors handed out two hundred and fifty bills, half of the sum of his grant. Many of the

gallery goers were artists, likely future recipients of grants, so Bors made them unknowing conspirators in this satirical protest against the insipid self-degradation inherent in the arts funding process. But, at the end of the video, when the patron walks away from the building and we see the satisfaction in his step, we are left unsure of Bors's perspective. He is clearly as enamored of this character as he is disdainful of him. The whole video has an air of the surreal, as if Bors wants to lose himself in the goodness of this man, without admitting the absurdity of his philanthropy.

In *The Patron*, Bors manages to seamlessly immerse his fantasy in a real setting without allowing the two worlds to touch and taint each other. This is probably the most telling characteristic of the current inclination toward performative work and role-playing. It is evident not only in art, but also in practically every aspect of our culture today. Kippenberger is one of the artists that Bors lists as a strong influence, partially for his varied styles, but mostly for the use of himself in his work. Kippenberger was a somewhat tortured soul, a borderline exhibitionist and antagonist. He was a master of self-promotion and controversy, but beneath all his work was a substratum of self-loathing and cynicism. Some critics have suggested that he used himself in his work because it was easier for him to bear himself in art than in reality. For artists like Bors who were born in the early seventies, there is no need for such a separation, or for a sanctuary from the self, because character is not singular, but regenerative, and ownership of the work is not a prerequisite for having created it. The result is somewhat schizophrenic work unattached to any one point of view, yet still managing to be provocative. Bors's painting, *Pinned Down*, was shown at Ten In One Gallery, in New York, last January in a group show called *Infinite Jest*. It is a cartoon painting of a muscular female mounting her weaker male opponent in a wrestling match. Bors had gotten married two weeks earlier. Maybe he's better off distancing himself from the meaning behind that one.

NOTES

1. Bill Arning, *Time Out New York*, Aug 27–Sept 3, 1998, Issue No. 153.
2. Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols*, New York; Doubleday and Company, Inc. 1964, p. 235.

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