Goddess Clap Back: Hip Hop Feminism in Art

CUE 2012/13

Damali Abrams
Michelle Marie Charles
Irvin Climaco Morazan
Myla Dalbesio
Lainie Love Dalby
Oasa DuVerney
Sean Paul Gallegos
Prince Harvey
Princess Hijab
Lauren Kelley
Kalup Linzy
Narcissister
Rashaad Newsome
Noelle Lorraine Williams
Hank Willis Thomas

CURATED BY
KATIE CERCONE

JULY 11 - AUGUST 10, 2013

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Goddess Clap Back: Hip Hop Feminism in Art

By Katie Cercone

Is hip hop the castle or the rainbow? - DARLENE VINICKY[1]

Goddess Clap Back: Hip Hop Feminism in Art is a group exhibition highlighting Hip Hop Feminism as an emerging motif of contemporary artists working with performance, photography, video, collage, sculpture, and sound.

Hip Hop Feminism, as coined by Joan Morgan (*When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*, 1999) is a Feminism for those "brave enough to fuck with the grays." Hip Hop Feminists move beyond a simple critique of misogyny in Rap and embrace the vitality of race, gender, class, urbanism, and youth culture as a critical matrix that we can use to make sense of the world and change power relations.[2] Claiming a kaleidoscopic, worldwide following across affiliations of race, age, nationality, and class, hip-hop is a vital source of popular pedagogy linking political, economic, and social justice to cultural crossover.

Hip Hop Feminists deconstruct, magnify and challenge the animalistic and hypersexual "loose" image of the black woman that has developed over the past two centuries and still exists as a trope in hip-hop—an image which contributes to the exploitation, abuse, and objectification of the black female body. Hip-hop feminists challenge the gangsta-pimp-ho trinity of commercial rap in which Rick Ross thinks date rape is just another rhyme. They challenge a media in which *The Onion* still feels the need to call 9-year-old Academy-Award nominated Quvenzhané Wallis the C-word for laughs during the Oscars and then front that it's not a race thing. As Dr. Safiya

U. Noble wrote in *Bitch Magazine*, if you Google "black girls," all roads still lead to demeaning, pornographic terms and depictions.

The selected works in the exhibition highlight the way in which hip-hop's mainstream appeal stems from a historical situation in America that dates back to auction blocks and minstrel stages in which "the visual production of blacks as shiny commodities" caused African diasporic subjects to inhabit a representational space at once hypervisible and unseen.[4] It is a bold manifestation of the necessity of Transnational Feminist discourse, identifying hip-hop as a powerful strain of the ultra-global extralinguistic conditions that bell hooks' characterizes as a sociocultural climate in which consumers are primed to let "prejudices and xenophobia go and happily 'eat the other.'"[5]

Goddess Clap Back interrogates the sex fetish of cooked commercial rap as a product of the West's puritanical roots and the way in which Hip Hop Culture and its proto-genres are the outgrowth of African Diasporic cosmologies that uphold a notion of cosmic oneness which defies Western dualities such as nature/culture, mind/body, spiritual/secular, male/female, intellect/intuition and dark/light. It identifies Hip Hop Culture as the apex of insurrectionary knowledge concerning the legacy of racism in the United States so much that this history is largely an oral one which has pushed its way through music while other outlets for its expression were blocked.[6] *Goddess Clap Back* explores the way in which visual artists have contested, revised, appropriated and celebrated this radical black musical tradition.

Why the Goddess? Why now? Why a white artist-curator with her own suspicious history of something like racial mimicry? And more importantly—does linking hip-hop to a distant Afrimerican cosmological frame erase the origins of the genre as a multiracial American folk practice, particularly with its Nuyorican and Caribbean influences, and very much alive and well OG pedagogues who serve as distinguished faculty at NYU and Cornell University, or teach in public schools and community centers? Myriad problematics emerged as I began to curate and write about this. I wanted to avoid throwing a bunch of black artists in a white box, and invoking hip-hop as another ghettocentric frame. When I see a cultural miracle in the glint of a $22k grill, I just might be on some wh*te b*atch shit!? Hank Willis Thomas's 2006 photo *Black Power* (from the *Branded Series*) seems to suggest similar, albeit complex associations.

Goddess Clap Back comes out of an interdisciplinary inquiry into the spirituality of hip-hop cross-pollinated with my embodied knowledge as a yoga instructor. Yoga and hip-hop are two of our most prominent contemporary expressions of Earth and Sky awareness, both deal

in consciousness and earth-based wisdom. Fred Moten's "Your ass is in what you sing"[7] recalls the fundamental importance of the lower triangle of the chakras—root, sex and solar plexus—a tripartite of energetic centers that roots us to the earth so that we can be a transmitter for spiritual vibrations of the upper folds (music of the spheres, cosmic elders, Gods and Goddesses). Without embodied anatomy—the flat feet and mobile hips we find in yoga and African-based dance styles pull energy up from the earth—the opening of the third eyes is useless and frenzied.

In his extensive anthropological studies of Africa, particularly what in the West we call "possession dance," Robert Farris Thompson alludes to blackness as a transcendental state of being. My interest in identifying the spectacularized female iconographies of hip-hop as contemporary archetypal images of the Goddess belies my California Consciousness and the widespread interest in the Divine Feminine characterizing my crew of (suburban) California. As Jay Z says, "[hip-hop] brought the suburbs to the hood."[8] Brain surgeon Leonard Shlain, also from California, contends that archetypal images of the Goddess appeal to the non-verbal right brain, which is responsible for the comprehension of the language of cries, gestures, touching, and body stance that we see in hip-hop. Shlain's theory is that the shift from matriarchal to patriarchal authority within Western society corresponded to the introduction of written language and the subsequent cultural shift from right-brain to left-brain dominated thinking and comprehension. His point is that modern advancements in technology particularly the mass mediated nature of global internet culture are leading toward a shift in gendered power relationships cross-culturally.[9]

I think that particularly when we dissect the misogyny that carries the sail of commercial rap, there's a thin line between reverence and fear that harkens back to matriarchal periods when women's swelling bellies and breasts were so worshipped and revered for their procreative powers that some men literally castrated themselves in an effort to bleed and be closer to the Goddess (not yet understanding the role they played in the creation of life). Male fear and sense of inferiority fed the shift into Patriarchal religion and the domination of "the dark continent"—women, people of color, gays, whole nations, and Mother Nature. As Jaqueline Rose contends, "Dictators demand not only obedience, but also love. Freedom may not be sexy, but fear is wholly determined by sex."[10]

Lauren Kelley, whose animated video work deals directly with representation and the black female body, pointed out during the course of my research how reverence for the Black female body—in the real, not the spectacular—must be a governing principle of any Hip Hop Feminist

project. This means being careful not to engage the consumption of blackness as a false claim to radicalism or the spiritual, or to confuse white alienation and heterosexual anxieties with black cool.[11] When bell hooks calls rap a "perfect paradigm of colonialism" and Jayna Brown articulates how black expressive forms have been historically "miscoded as signatures for a timed and timeless past and…used as the source by which the modern (white) body could re-member itself,"[12] I want to talk about hip-hop as a landmark moment of miscegenation in American popular culture. I want to talk about hip-hop as a contemporary mulatto text with infinitely complex, two-toned, reciprocal, and multiple meanings scripting the ruptures of post-modern self/other identifications.

Hip-hop—in its myriad forms and respective anti-forms—is sacred medicine upending institutionalized racism's spectacles of violence and pleasure that have been perpetrated under a rubric of paternalism and property. Hip-hop is ancestor worship of an incipient warrior culture within an eroding white patriarchal capitalist milieu that disrespects women out of fear and awe. Enter Sean Paul Gallegos's *Weapons of Mass Consumption* (2012). A Bronx-born artist of Native American heritage refashions designer brand name kicks as sacred objects. Or Irvin Climaco Morazan's donning of his massive Ghettoblaster headdress. Documenting a performance practice based loosely on Shamanism, Morazan's video recounts a recent work where the artist, as Ghettoblaster, conducted the engines of an all-female biker gang in a parking lot of San Antonio, Texas. If you question how *bling* and shamanism coincide, take a trip to South America where, as Morazan recalls, you're very likely to find the village shaman living in a hut filled with an assortment of glittering, tinsel-like, weather-eroded commercial rubbish. Not to mention that archetypal images of the Goddess—Black Warrior Goddess Kali and the West African Goddess Oshun (she who rules love and the arts, especially dance) in particular—are often depicted adorned by gold chains. In the work of both Gallegos and Morazan, we see the hip-hop aesthetic incorporated into a modern day, earth-based wisdom vernacular.

Rashaad Newsome is perhaps one of the most important artists of the moment. His early work with queer ball culture and recent fusion of hip-hop and heraldry continue to probe and expand the horizons of black expressive rhetoric. Commenting on the multitudinous forms of black corporeal expression from the gender non-conformant, Mom-dominated "houses" of ball culture to the queer elegance of the hip-hop nation, Newsome's work denies the primacy of the heterosexual/patriarchal family model constantly invoked as an index for the overall health of

the nation. Newsome's focus on the aesthetic of hip-hop is expressive of the utilitarian nature of African Art: dance that initiates adulthood, a mask that channels spirit, clothing that conveys status, a drum that talks.[13]

BoomBoxBoy, aka Prince Harvey, is among artists like Rashaad Newsome who are asserting a queer presence in their critical embrace of popular media. Harvey's ongoing street performance BoomBoxBoy is equal parts Radio Raheem and Rappin' Rockin Barbie (Mattel © circa 1992). Prince Harvey strips down to his underwear and dons the BoomBoxBoy chains as a type of drag, meanwhile using the platform to talk about what it means to be a black male, as well as get people clapping and vocalizing. His approach is one that curtails hip-hop's associations with misogyny and unrestricted male heterosexual privilege with Aquarian-age swagger.

In featured artist Noelle Lorraine Williams's photograph from her series *Hijack |The Birth of Mala* (2012), I read Missy Elliot refashioned as a contemporary Goddess Archetype of sorts. In a powerful visual that simultaneously challenges and reappropriates the embodied female MC, in Williams's words, this series is about "desire, fear, sisterhood, change and protecting the heart and womb." Likewise, Oasa DuVerney's recent 4-channel video *The MYLFworks Projects* (2013) features the artist as a fictional character known as the MYLF: a domestic caretaker straddling the roles of mother and sex worker.

Damali Abrams, also working in video, has covered topics in her work ranging from the prison industrial complex to love. You may know her for her DIY rap flow *Baby It Couldn't Have Been You That I Feared* (2010), addressing the deranged barrage of media depicting black males as worthless losers—too fatherless, too broke, or too incarcerated to partner the hordes of successful black women. In her recent video, Abrams follows up her media mish mash *Baby It Couldn't Have Been You That I Feared* with *What Would We Do Baby Without Us* (2012), a spoken-word piece incorporating rap songs that talk about love performed in alternating verses as a duet with Jesse Gammage.

Taking aim at the complexity of love relationships, abrasive media depictions and definitive socio-economic inequalities that still face black women, *MYLF Works*, *Baby* and *Hijack* revamp a promising modus operandi in hip-hop, namely, the creation of a space in which Black women speak freely about sex, race and class. With criticism of some of the rougher (more sexual, more materialistic, and more crass) female lyricists still the aim of a host of conservative gatekeepers, feminists and pushers of respectability politics alike, Hip Hop Feminism very much follows in the

duplicitous shadow realms of the Blues women. As outlined by Angela Davis, "Denial of sexual agency was in an important respect the denial of freedom for working class black women… women's blues provided a cultural space for a community-building among working-class black women… it was a space in which the coercions of bourgeois notions of sexual purity and 'true womanhood' were absent."[18]

By this same token when we talk about the historical minstrel—burlesque trajectory of the black/white dancing body, sex and class become the unspoken binding agents. In her work *Mae West, Marilyn, Madonna and Me* (2009) artist and new-age minister Lainie Love Dalby dons oodles of bling and raps in a white room while eating marshmallows with two well-oiled black muscle men poised at her side, feeding her and lifting her body. Dalby's saccharine hyperbole is delivered without the usual dose of cultural amnesia. Her video bespeaks the way in which performers like Mae West and Madonna bravely broke taboos around race and sex in a nation where historically (good) white women weren't allowed to move their hips, but were still raped accordingly.

Friends and colleagues of the artist known as Narcissister, Lainie and I both participated as a "Sister" in Narcissister's 2010 production at The Kitchen. Trained as a professional dancer at the Alvin Ailey School, Narcissister's performance work explores black female subjectivity in a manner referring to the loaded historical trajectory of American burlesque, and as of late, is making a case for radical self-love as a political act. In her recent solo show *Narcissister is You* (Envoy Enterprises, 2013), Narcissister effectively diffused the ubiquitous identity markers anchoring her work by projecting a three-channel video installation in which men and women of all ages, sizes, and pigments don the Narcissister mask and do their thang.

Also tapping into the self-love referendum is the much-celebrated artist Kalup Linzy, in at least one of whom's videos Narcissister has appeared. An artist whose previous work adopted the music video meme and consistent marriage of food and sex associated with hip-hop; a pairing which traces through Bessie Smith *Need a Little Sugar in My Bowl* to Lil Wayne *Lollipop* (the latter being the name of a super gay vignette that Linzy produced in 2006), Linzy's latest work is a power ballad for the romantically challenged. Of feature length, *Romantic Loner* (2013), shot in the headlands of Northern California, is a deep, soul-searching gesture fusing the formal strictures of art making with the effusive qualities of religious repent, self-help and music as spiritual communion with God.

As viewers in a marketplace where the gangsta ethos and the naked female object saturates most of hip-hop's texts[19] can we use hip-hop to do more than productively revel in the crises of late modernity? Theorist Kismet Nuñez has called out Nicki Minaj as Esu, the African God of interpretation and the connector of the people to their African past. Citing her chameleon-like maneuverability and two-faced depiction of black feminist (and queer) possibility, Nuñez writes Minaj as "diasporic black, as radical, and as speculative." Connecting back to Farris Thompson's trajectory (possession dance—embodying spirit—the sign becomes real) I think that in a feminist reading, Minaj embodies Esu the trickster—guardian and inspirer of interpretation and transformation, "ultimate master of potentiality" with "the force to make all things happen and multiply" lies a potent source of shifts in consciousness.[20]

In her 2012 video *Explicit and Deleted* (2012), Michelle Marie Charles takes an alternate tack. Playing alternating scenes as male and female rappers, Charles caricatures the pink-haired monolith as a "FUCKING FREE BROAD!" that's alone at the top, cocaine-speed and certified Queen, make that KING, as if asking why Nicki? Why only one (female MC)? Bracketed by a cast of multiracial cohorts, Charles wades through years of misogynist hip-hop rhymes as she caresses an assortment of lumps, bumps and bottles with handmade idealic MTV-scapes as a backdrop.

A holistic, transcendental, interdisciplinary and supafresh approach to the art of African-diasporic expressive form is nothing new. Sanford Biggers, for one, made a concerted effort to connect the hip-hop ethos to the spiritual in his seminal works *Mandala of the B-Bodhisattva* (2000) and mythical dreamcoat *Ghettobird Tunic* (2003). Another clear precedent to much of the work in Goddess Clap Back is the New Orleans-based outsider artist-preacher Sister Gertrude Morgan whose "Holiness and Sanctity Movement" was an African American faith that taught music, song, and dance as a formal communion with God in the 60s and 70s.

So Clap back, yo.

And If ya still thank Hip Hop Feminists ain't got fierce bars like no doubt
let the drum tease your bum and eat my muthafuckin heart out

Katie Cercone was born 1984 in Santa Rosa, CA. She has shown her performative video sculpture throughout the United States and abroad. She is also a yoga instructor, adjunct faculty at the School of Visual Art, and has published critical writing in B*itch Magazine, REVOLT Magazine, Utne Reader, Women's Art Journal* and *N.Paradoxa*. Cercone is a founding member of the queer transnational feminist collective Go! Push Pops.

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17. Safiya U. Noble, "Missed Connections: What Search Engines Say About Women" Bitch Magazine, Spring 2002
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Noelle Lorraine Williams (in collaboration with Stafford Woods)

Hijacked: The Birth of Mala, 2006-2007. Digital print. Courtesy of the artist.

Rashaad Newsome

SWAG: Dance of the Succubus, 2011. Single-channel video with sound, 3:55 min. Copyright of the artist. Courtesy of Marlborough Chelsea, New York.

Narcissister

Self-Gratifier [performance]
Courtesy of the artist. Photograph courtesy of Kristy Leibowitz.

Hank Willis Thomas

Black Power [from the series Branded], 2008. Lightjet print, 16" x 20". Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Lainie Love Dalby
(as Diamond Lil)

Diamond Lil Portrait, 2008
Metallic print, 12" x 18".
Courtesy of the artist.

Kalup Linzy

Chewing Gum (Jada) from Sweetberry Sonnet Remix, 2008.
Digital video, 2:48 min.
Courtesy of the artist.

Lauren Kelley

Aviary View, 2013
Single-channel video
Courtesy of the artist.

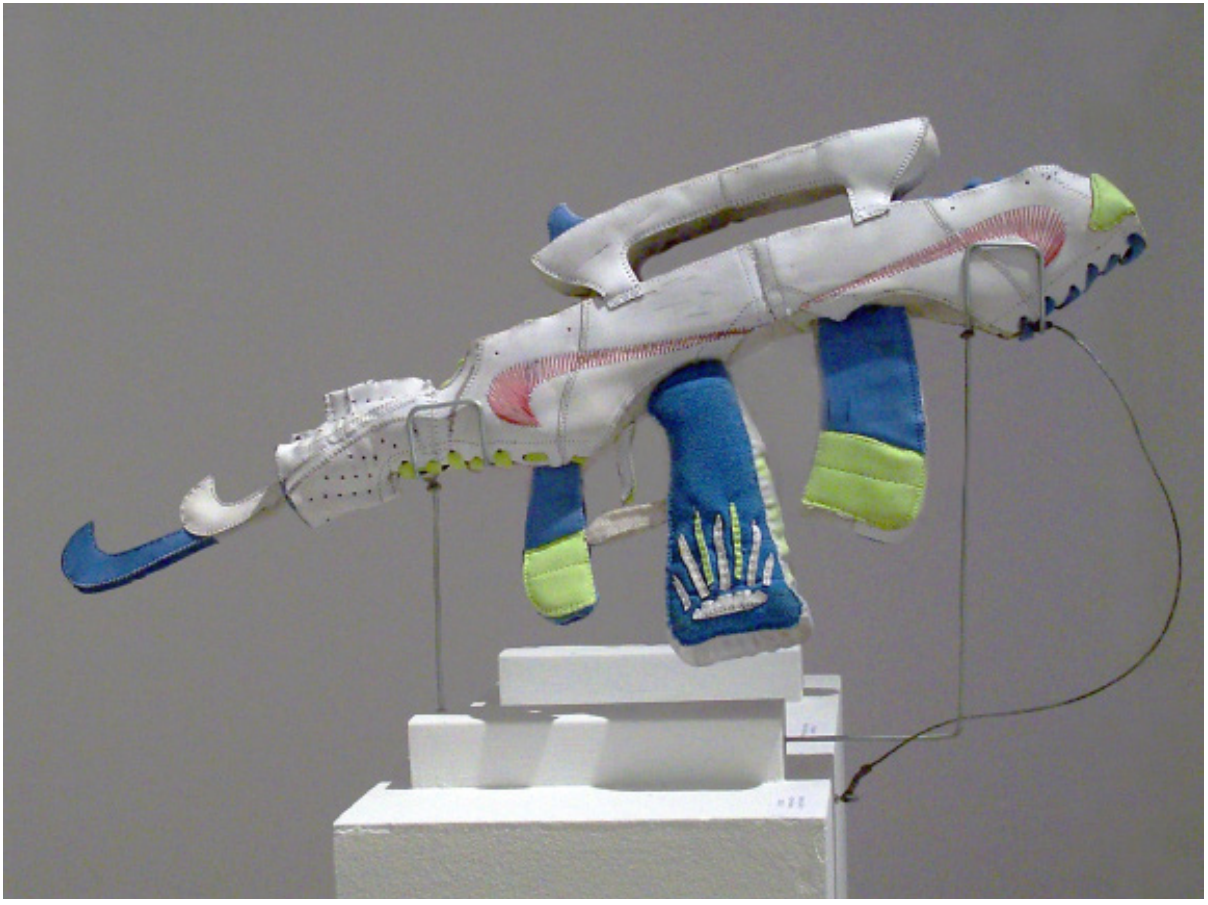

ITALIAN SWIMMERS
DOLCE & GABBANA
ITALIAN SWIMMERS
DOLCE & GABBANA

Princess Hijab

Dolche, 2009
Poster with black marker pen on the Paris Metro.
Courtesy of the artist.
Photograph courtesy of A. Bréanta

Damali Abrams

Baby It Couldn't Have Been You That I Feared, 2010. 9:47 min video [still]
Courtesy of the artist



Sean Paul Gallegos

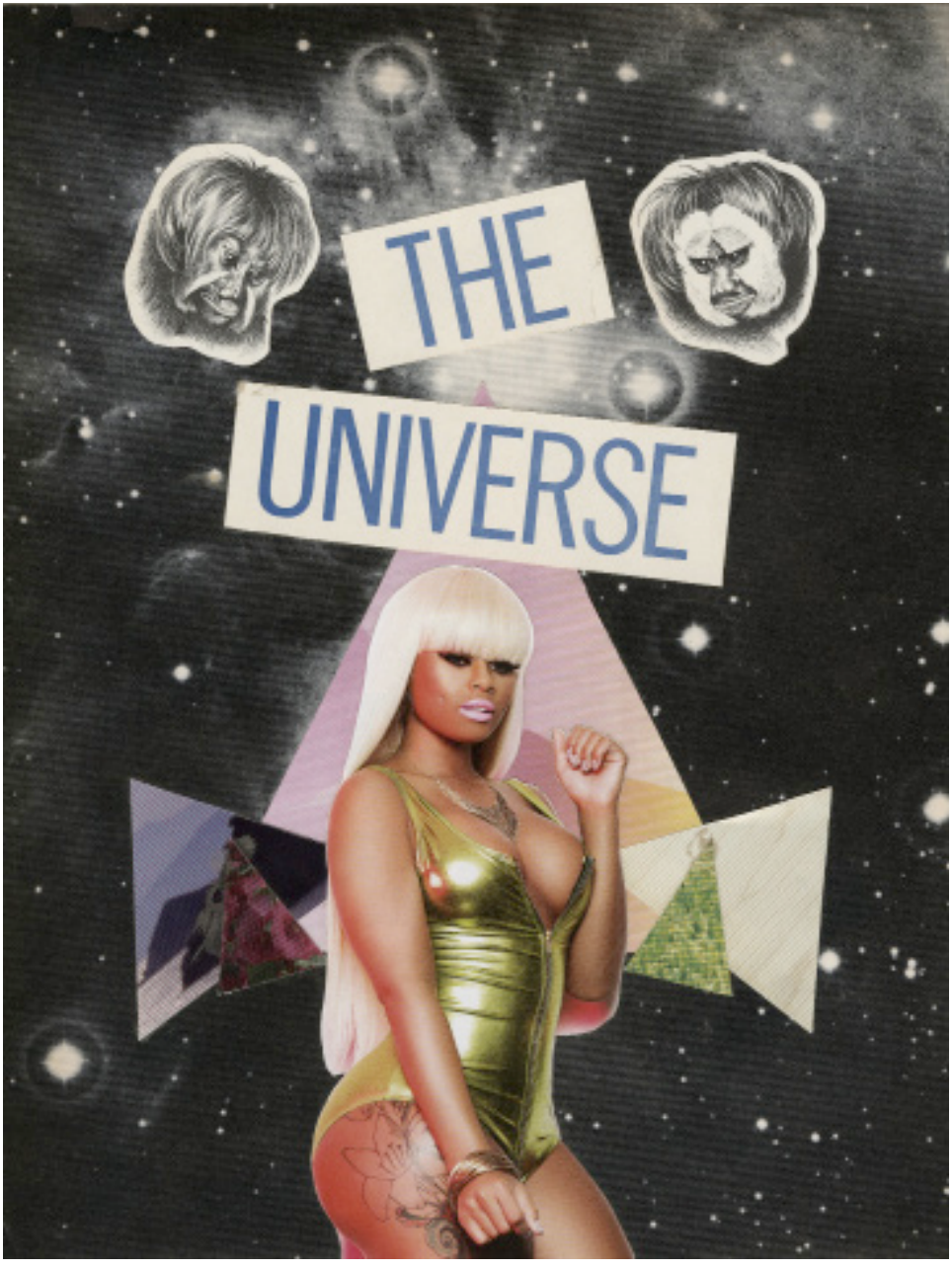
Weapon of Mass Consumption: AK-47, 2012
Nike Air Force 1 sneakers, laces, thread; 11" x 24" x 2.5"

Irvin Climaco Morazan

His Return, 2012
Twilight Performance at
Untitled Art fair, Miami.
Color photograph, 20" x 30"

Oasa DuVerney

MYLFworks Revenge, 2013
HD video [still]
Courtesy of the artist



Myla Dalbesio

Further Than Reality, 2012
Collected images from Time-Life and *ASIS* Magazine
8.5" x 10.75"
Courtesy of the artist

Michelle Marie Charles

Explicit and Deleted, 2012
Video, 4:12min [still]
Courtesy of the artist

Prince Harvey

Prince Harvey as BoomBoxBoy, 2013
New York, NY
Photograph courtesy of Vito Fun

By Cat Kron

The album cover for 2 Live Crew's rap LP, *As Nasty As They Wanna Be*, shows four black women on the beach. Their backs to the camera, their profiles obscured by loose hair, the women's most noticeable features are their asses, revealed by thong bathing-bottoms. Under the triangles of the women's legs the members of 2 Live Crew sprout fully formed. They beam at the viewer from the hillside below, their black shirts offsetting multiple gold chains. The composition strikes one as though the women's asses are their faces, as if, in a curious perspectival reverse they are holding up the back row in a class picture shot from behind, with 2 Live Crew sitting up front.

While nothing new in terms of salacious album covers, this cover and its album sparked an unusual level of debate when released in 1989. Featuring tracks like "The Fuck Shop" and "Big Black Dick Almighty," *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* was designed to shock, and it succeeded. In 1990, a Florida federal district judge ruled to ban the record on grounds of obscenity. The Crew was Miami-based, and Judge Jose Gonzalez's ruling seemed to be making a statement (by making an example of the group) regarding what cultural values Gonzalez wanted his state to be known for. Shortly after the ruling, three band members were arrested while performing at a Florida strip club. They were later acquitted.

The songs on *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* sound pretty tame now, and the incident is mostly forgotten outside of black media studies, which regard it as a prime example of prejudice in play within recent juridical history. The controversy is notable for what it can tell

us about its context—that at one time the U.S. government felt women needed this kind of protection against The album cover for 2 Live Crew's rap LP, *As Nasty As They Wanna Be*, shows four black women on the beach. Their backs to the camera, their profiles obscured by loose hair, the women's most noticeable features are their asses, revealed by thong bathing-bottoms. Under the triangles of the women's legs the members of 2 Live Crew sprout fully formed. They beam at the viewer from the hillside below, their black shirts offsetting multiple gold chains. The composition strikes one as though the women's asses are their faces, as if, in a curious perspectival reverse they are holding up the back row in a class picture shot from behind, with 2 Live Crew sitting up front.

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The songs on *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* sound pretty tame now, and the incident is mostly forgotten outside of black media studies, which regard it as a prime example of prejudice in play within recent juridical history. The controversy is notable for what it can tell us about its context—that at one time the U.S. government felt women needed this kind of protection against the aggressive sexual attentions of four young black rappers. The ruling took place alongside a slew of statements by politicians in the early 90s, voicing their objection to an explicit new strain of hip-hop which was spreading rapidly. In fact, 2 Live Crew was somewhat dissociated from this trend, which found its apotheosis in mid-90s gangsta rap. The gangsta subgenre developed from 80's hardcore acts like N.W.A., and depicted a male-dominated gang culture to which sex was, if not an afterthought, more of an "in and out" affair than something to obsess over. Quantity of partners had eclipsed qualitative prowess in bed. The first half of the 90s would see a rapid expansion in gangsta's visibility, aided by former N.W.A. member Dr. Dre's release of The Chronic on his newly formed label Death Row Records.

Nevertheless, gangsta rap drove home what critics of hip hop suspected, that women had been marginalized within mainstream hip-hop to sexual accomplices to a male-driven culture. Gangsta's cavalier treatment of black women was embodied by the cover for Snoop Dogg's 1993 album *Doggystyle*, which depicted a pink panty'd rear protruding from a doghouse, with Snoop Dogg sitting astride it. These were the years in which Dan Quayle called Tupac's now revered first album *2pacalypse Now* "a disgrace," the years of Tipper Gore's anti-hip hop campaign. As rap emerged as a mainstream player, it reveled in riling up its detractors. The activist feminist author bell hooks, who had a keen eye for hypocrisy, was one of the first critics to dig deeper into the moral outrage surrounding gangsta rap, which entirely overlooked the important musical work being done amidst the sexism, posturing and "ghettoizing" of hip-hop. Hooks drew a direct line between the rise of gangsta ho's and pimps and the misogynist, exploitive circumstances of greater American life. How convenient, she noted in *Z Magazine*, was this anti-rap agenda, which happened to give politicians the platform to take a moral stand against the threat of young black men.

Our current modus operandi (if such conformity exists) is the opposite of the 1990s' outrage. Legislators and tastemakers alike exhibit a conscientious reticence to question hip-hop and women's role in it. The Republican senator Marco Rubio is lauded as "in touch" for his love of hip-hop. And in a shallow and somewhat blaxpoitative misread, misogyny is now accepted as endemic to the form. While rappers claim to accurately describe poor, urban zones and the prostitutes who populate them, and record labels blame the public's heightened appetite for sexually explicit content, it remains true that no other music genre in recent history has seen such an extreme regression in the depiction of any one demographic. One is left to wonder what could possibly have spurred this, and finds no one instigator, only a cast of enablers operating in tandem with the performers themselves. In her 2008 book *The Hip Hop Wars*, black cultural studies scholar Tricia Rose observed that "black women generally (despite the incredible emphasis in rap on golddiggers, bitches, ho's, chicken-heads, etc.) continue to be profoundly supportive of black men." Meanwhile, as music industry veteran and Industry Ears think tank president Lisa Fager Bediako testified in a 2007 congressional hearing, label executives continued to plead the case for their talents' right to degrading lyrics, while discouraging mention of other topical issues, among them the war in Iraq, critique of former President Bush and the Free Mumia campaign.

White people in general feel a lack of authority to speak for hip-hop at all, and the reasons for this reticence are mostly what one would think. But in addition to white guilt, thinking too hard about hip-hop feels like a bit of a faux pas. The culture itself is predicated on street authenticity, and places a high value on improvised performance exemplified by freestyle battles and dance competitions. Hip-hop does not easily lend itself to the sort of academic analyses which saturate other popular arts—notably film. Attempting to construct such an analysis from outside the culture feels particularly naïve and misguided.

But the view from outside is primary to hip-hop's narrative and critical to understanding its history. It has always been about not acquiescing to pop conventions but rather confronting and flouting these conventions. The genre embodies the persona of the disenfranchised "other" and brings this position front and center, highlighting the systematic inequalities African Americans deal with everyday. For a culture which emerged from the deeply disenfranchised Bronx of the 1970s, steeped from its inception in political consciousness, hip-hop's embrace of misogyny in the twenty year span from *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* to the present can feel less like a contradiction than a calculated about-face.

Within the Western dynamic of self-versus-other, the other's value was historically perceived in negative terms. The other was made so by his or her relation à propos what was culturally agreed to be powerful, important, and privileged. In practice here in the U.S., the very position of relation to rather than residing within cultural norms has tended to yield this country's most rigorous critical analyses and richest cultural production, as disenfranchised persons exist in a state of constant hyperawareness not shared by the privileged. They are in a prime position to listen critically and to respond. American black women, doubly disenfranchised by gender and race, would seem the ideal candidates to assume the mantle of this alternate cultural production. However, for the past two decades black women have been both highly visible in hip-hop and oddly quiet in the face of its defamatory lyrics and caricatured depictions. One example, useful in its explicitness, is the music video model. These models' presence in current music videos, usually set in strip clubs or in some sort of contemporary poolside harem, is constructed in marked opposition to what the women ostensibly highlight—the culture of black dance and participation in the songs being performed. As Imani Perry noted in *Prophets of the Hood* (2004), "black American dance is discursive in that sexuality is usually combined with humor, and that the

body is used to converse with other moving bodies. Yet the women who appear in these videos usually dance in a two-dimensional fashion… Despite the gyrations of the video models, their uninterested, wet-lipped languor stands in sharp contrast to (for example) the highly sexualized booty dancing of the Deep South." The multiracial women who listen to and participate in hip-hop are not flat or dull. How did women, particularly black and Latina women, become such flat, dully sexual characters within its imagery? Many critics answer that non-white women are simply easy targets for lowest common denominator pop cultural production (which, cynically, skirts Caucasian women as not amply curved to be sexually convincing, as well as better connected in voicing their objections). But to reduce women's role to that of easy targets for corporate patriarchy, forcibly inserted into a male-dominated genre, overlooks their contributions to the culture and deprives male performers of their creative agency by insinuating they are pawns of record label marketing.

In this exhibition, Michelle Marie Charles caricatures some of rap's least nuanced reads of women. Charles's four-minute-long video *Explicit and Deleted* uses performers in drag to recast the gender dynamic. Further complicating the rap video trope, her video ho' interrupts the artist's lilting hook to critique what s/he's doing and how s/he got there. Charles's piece taps into a rekindling of grotesque and unsanctioned imagery in experimental and commercial video alike. Her work can be positioned in relation to that of artist Ryan Trecartin and to Jamaican dance hall videos, both of which are rich in compelling performers but (relatively) poor in capital to float production costs. Employing ironic, buoyantly subversive visual cues (blackface, cross-dressing, hypersexual costuming and post-production vocal pitch manipulation) this style owes as much to carnivalesque African and Caribbean tradition as to music videos. But it follows the MTV format of narrative occurring in tandem with a soundtrack, with performers periodically breaking the narrative arc to face the audience. The artist Kalup Linzy uses this facing strategy as a means of direct connection with his viewer. His use of drag is as confessional and intimate as the long-suffering characters he depicts. Via the piece's synthed beat, the pacing of the artist's *Chewing Gum* (like much of Linzy's work) draws from the familiar cadence of the post-coital rehashings one has with close friends. Hip-hop provides the backbeat for his characters to analyze their experience. *Chewing Gum*'s morning-after stories pick up where mainstream narratives peter out: after the show, after the after-party, after you've taken it to the room…

Rather than subvert notions of gender by a simple flipping, performance artist Narcissister piles on references to male and female, along with exotic dance, pornography, street culture, fashion photography and stagecraft. Her portraits approach male/female characteristics as costume devices from which to cherry-pick. Narcissister, staring blankly from a Barbie-like mask whose plastic tan nearly perfectly matches the artist's own brown skin tone is, while mute, nevertheless fully engaged, sexually powerful and creepy. The persona's creator was formally trained as a modern dancer, and the physicality of her bodily presence erupts from behind assorted masks and faux skins. Narcissister is photographed in various levels of exposure beneath masks and costumes. Her face, though, is always obscured. This device denies the viewer the voyeur's satisfaction that porn expertly provides.

In some ways, pop music has been inching its way towards porn's complete exposure since the turn of the 19th into 20th century, gaining a little ground each decade. Somewhat contrarily, hip-hop's disregard for both pop and "polite" conventions made it an ideal carrier to bring pop's particular American dream to fruition. In the two decades since hooks defended hip-hop's menacing gangsta thread, this thread has been largely displaced by a highly produced, baroque sensibility embodied by artists like Lil Wayne, Gucci Mane and Rick Ross. And this turn brings us, finally, to the culpability of the performers themselves, and the degree to which we as listeners assign it. These artists' hyperbolically derogatory lyrics and overblown videos feed our collective desire for the frank, sometimes comedic display of the explicit, a market previously cornered by pornography. There's something undeniably mesmerizing in the seal-like bodies of video girls as they emerge from the shallow end of the pool in Rick Ross's "Pop That," just as there's something seductive about the compounded hardened/goofy male personas providing their counterpoint. The winking self-awareness in these artists' excessive gestures imparts a pre-apocalyptic "one last party" vibe, while highlighting (by counterpoint) the widening income disparity and limited choices that are the reality for many young black men living in poverty. Perhaps this is why it's so easy to dismiss their complicity in fortifying misogynist stereotypes. Given the state of things, why bother being a "voice for change"? Importantly, the hooks are also infectious.

The same time span that saw the rise of ironic self-awareness in mainstream rap has borne witness to an expansion of alternative identities. Imani Perry's deep South booty dancing has been reimagined as sissy bounce in New Orleans, a hip-hop that is overtly

queer, transgendered and female privileging. Concurrently, as Nicki Minaj makes a path for performers like Azealia Banks in New York (even as the two rappers feud publicly), women rappers have made swift strides both in visibility and as agents of their own identities beyond the so-called Madonna/whore dichotomy that continues to dominate mainstream pop. In this exhibition, Rashaad Newsome incorporates hybrid hip-hop beats into the soundtrack for his video *Rain Has Fallen*. Against a rapped soundtrack, celebrated Vogue dancer Dawn Ebony whips her hair with an intensity usually reserved for one's loins. Her movement is neither the nihilist, vision-obscuring head banging of grunge, nor the coy weave toss of rap videos. It is instead as if the viewer has been made an eyewitness to a private, danced meditation. The Vogue dancer Aaliah Junius Booker appears full-body in Dance of the Succubus, also exhibited here. Newsome's previous Shade series folded the gestural bravado of Vogue into an orchestra of hip-hop dismissal. In this video Booker combines Vogue's ornately stylized gestures with moves taken from contemporary hip-hop and modern dance.

If the jagged dry heat of Bronx summers cleared the streets for hip-hop, the culture was incubated in New Orleans' steamy Quarters. The New Orleans-based Sister Gertrude Morgan provides a useful touchstone for the notion of otherness, and for the themes of this exhibition—hip hop, art, and female identity. She is primarily remembered as a self-taught painter of sprawling devotional scenes, but in the 1970s Morgan was also a widely recognized musician in her home city. The measured, insistent beat of her half-sung, half-shouted spirituals (aided by her tambourine) have a contemporary resonance with the staccato, evangelist-like intonations of the contemporary Virginia-born rapper Angel Haze. But while Haze's lyrics and stage persona court controversy outright, with the artist assuming contrary positions as a critical stance, the status of otherness was put upon Morgan. Her paintings and records have received significant attention as outsider or "visionary" practice, terms which do the work a disservice. The notion of visionary though bears some thought as it pertains to minority producers and consumers of culture. To have such "otherworldly" visions necessarily precludes one's agency as a critically engaged spectator in the present, a role bell hooks understands as profoundly powerful. Hooks called for active looking, a practice she advocated for black women watching generic popular films in her 1992 essay "The Oppositional Gaze": "Given the context of class exploitation, and racist and sexist domination, it has only been through resistance, struggle, reading and

looking 'against the grain,' that black women have been able to value our process of looking enough to publicly name it." Thus hooks bestows upon viewership an active participatory status.

Hooks was responding to the experience of cinema-going. But this active engagement can be extended to the female—particularly the black female—reception of hip-hop. An active, critical engagement with any artistic practice demands that one not simply internalize but rather name the motifs and conclusions drawn therein, many of which, in the case of hip-hop, intentionally objectify, reduce and victimize women and gay men. Listening to hip-hop, for black women, is in part an exercise in registering and dismissing, or perhaps enjoying a frisson of objectification one would not acquiesce to in daily life. There is power in this sort of listening, just as there is in appreciating the women in the music videos, whose agencies are consistently compromised, but whose silent bodies are an impressive and luxurious complement to the beats they dance to. You can't fight sex.

Along with the disadvantages of outsider status comes a unique position from which to engage the issues hip-hop presents. For deeply engaged practitioners like Prince Harvey, who performs live in this exhibition as BoomBoxBoy, an outsider's vantage point is a valuable asset. The artist's work in his BoomBoxBoy alter-ego builds upon the role of the observant listener, as in his earlier audio piece *Girls, Girls, Girls (Safety First)*, recorded in Baltimore. Wearing his persona's costume of black hot shorts, gold chain and oversized boom box, Prince Harvey is hassled by passing girls on the street. The artist puts himself in the position of women whose suggestive attire has made them targets for verbal and physical abuse and rape and the accusation that they were "asking for it." In the audio recording, the girls chastise him, implying that he is drawing dangerous attention to himself, then follow and continue to taunt him. "Chill, chill," you can hear him repeat. Broadcasting the entirety of this 40-minute tussle, the artist inverts his passive position into one of agency by refolding his listening role into an expression of his own artistic voice.

A phenomenon of political spectrums is that opposite positions on their peripheries tend to find much on which they agree, as if the axis bends back on itself at a certain point. Commercial hip-hop has in some ways inadvertently aligned itself with the values of reactionary ultraconservatives, for whom black men like Trayvon Martin are a threat in their very presence, and black women unworthy of consideration beyond the bedroom. The most

authentic, confrontational, innovative reaction to the current state of things, and one most in keeping with hip-hop's roots, might thus be to disregard the current conventions of the genre itself: to write lyrics about Iraq, about being gay, or staying in at night, or to address or empathize with what it means to be a black woman. Hip-hop's recent self-reflexive turn predicts such self-separation and self-detachment as the logical next step.

"Fuck it" irony is incredibly appealing because it's incredibly safe, a non-stance in the face of hopelessness. But apocalyptic nihilism is a lifestyle for the young, and hip-hop's more resilient players inevitably have to get back to the project of improving the world at hand. Some of the most innovative young performers have already beaten them to it. In the meantime, the artists exhibited here mine the genre in the fullness of its contradictions, and reveal an eloquent, sincere, forward-thinking and authentic voice.

Writer Cat Kron lives and works in New York. She is a contributor to *Kingsboro Press*, *Art in America*, and *Dis Magazine*, as well as additional independent publications. Her work focuses on late 20th century expanded media. In 2012, she co-organized the performance/installation event I *Feel Like That All the Time* at Know More Games Projects.

The **mentor**, Brian Boucher is online editor at *Art in America* magazine. He has been with the publication for eight years, previously as assistant editor, associate editor, and news editor; before coming to A.i.A., he worked for several years in museum education. Boucher has published dozens of reviews and several feature articles in the print magazine as well as numerous exhibition previews and news items at artinamericamagazine.com. His latest feature article, in the March 2013 issue, is "The Last Testament of Ken Price." He has also written articles and reviews for magazines including *New York* magazine, *Flash Art* and *ArtReview*. He lives in New York.

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