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Stages: Queers, Punks, and the Utopian Performative

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Stages: *Queers, Punks, and the Utopian Performative*

You can't tell who was and who wasn't in a band. We did not like poseurs but we liked to pose for pictures. Because we knew there was something about the night that would be remembered even if we couldn't remember it. We were young and naive in a way that seems to be a lost art. We were snotty and compassionate and deliberate and reckless but we knew exactly what we were doing. We were ghosts then and we are ghosts now. We will haunt your malls and catwalks forever. Ha Ha.

—Exene Cervenka (in Jocoy, Moore, & Cervenka, 2002, p. 270)

Utopian Performatives

How does one stage utopia? Which is to say, how do we enact utopia? As I present work at various universities and conferences from a book I am writing, to be titled *Cruising Utopia: the Performance and Politics of Queer Futurity*, some form of that question is almost always articulated. It is one of those good questions that help writers clarify their arguments, to propel their thinking forward. One thing I have learned from this question is that utopia is an ideal, something that should mobilize us, push us forward. Utopia is not prescriptive, it renders potential blueprints of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility, not a fixed schema. It is productive to think about utopia as flux, a temporal disorganization, as a moment when the here and the now is transcended by a then and a there that could be and indeed should be.

But on some level, utopia is about a politics of emotion; it is central to what Ernst Bloch called a “principle of hope” (Bloch, 1959/1986).¹ It is my belief that minoritarian subjects are cast as hopeless in a world without utopia. This is not to say that hope is the only modality of emotional recognition that structures belonging; sometimes shame, disgust, hate, and other “negative” emotions bind people together—certainly punk rock’s rejection of normative feelings stands as the most significant example of the emotional work of negative affect. But in this instance, I dwell on hope because I wish to think about futurity; and hope, I argue, is the emotional modality that permits us to access futurity, par excellence.

Queers, for example, especially those who do not choose to be biologically reproductive, a people without children, are, within dominant culture, people without a future. They are cast as people who are developmentally stalled, forsaken, who do not have the complete life promised by heterosexual temporality (Edelman, 2004). This reminds one of the way in which worried parents deal with wild queer children, how they sometimes protect themselves from the fact of queerness by making it a “stage,” a developmental hiccup, a moment of misalignment that will, hopefully, correct itself, or be corrected by savage pseudoscience and coercive religion, sometimes masquerading as psychology. In this essay, I want to consider the idea of queerness as “a stage” that rescues that phrase from delusional parents and others who attempt to manage and contain the potentiality which is queer youth. In this essay I want to enact a utopian performative change in the signification of the phrase “it is only a ‘stage’” deployed in the name of the queer child. More specifically, in this case, the queer wild child of punk subculture. I will enact this change through a reading of visual artist Kevin McCarty’s representations of illuminated stages at gay bars and independent rock clubs, and through a more general reading of punk rock’s ethos as conjured and connoted by McCarty’s images and my readings of them. I will argue that the artist’s work indexes a punk/queer utopian scene that I read for its utopian potentiality and also, furthermore, that the work itself is a photographic instance of the utopian performative.²

This argument is not aligned with many of the dominant performance theories that held sway during the early nineties, like Peggy Phelan’s axiom that the ontology of performance was disappearance and that performance itself represented a unique mode of representation without reproduction. Instead, a materialist current

influences this analysis. For example I see this project working in tandem with a book like Miranda Joseph's *Against the Romance of Community*. In that book, Joseph offers an important critique of Phelan's version of the performance's power:

In order to claim that performance resists exchange value, or equivalence, and thereby approaches the unrepresentable Real itself, Phelan discounts the work of the audience; their productive consumption of the work, their act of witness is for her the memory of something presented by somebody else. (2002, p. 64)

This then suggests that performance's temporality is not one of simple presence but instead of futurity. In Joseph's lucid critique we see that performance is the kernel of a potentiality that is transmitted to audiences and witnesses and that the real force of performance is its ability to generate a modality of knowing and recognition among audiences and groups that facilitates modes of belonging, especially minoritarian belonging. If we consider performance under such a lens, we can see the temporality of what I will describe as a utopian performativity, which is to say a manifestation of a "doing" that is in the horizon, a mode of possibility. Performance, seen as utopian performativity, is imbued with a sense of potentiality. Giorgio Agamben has outlined the temporality of the philosophical concept of potentiality by following a line of thought that begins with Aristotle. Agamben underscores a distinction made by Aristotle between potentiality and possibility (1999). Possibilities exist, or more nearly, they exist within a logical real, the possible, which is within the present and is linked to presence. Potentialities are different insofar as while they are present they do not exist in present things. Thus potentialities have a temporality that is not in the present but, more nearly, in the horizon, which we can understand as futurity. Potentiality is and is not presence and its ontology cannot be reduced to presentness. Agamben reads this notion of potentiality alongside Jacques Derrida's notion of the trace. It is something like a trace or potential that exists or lingers after a performance. At performance's end, if it is situated historically and materially, it is never just the duration of the event. Reading for potentiality is scouting for a "not here" or "not now" in the performance that suggests a futurity.

I begin this writing then by readjusting my opening question "How do we stage utopia?" by suggesting that utopia is a stage. Not merely a temporal stage, like a phase, by also a spatial one. Sir Thomas More initially positioned Utopia as a place, an island, and later that formulation was amended to become a temporal coordinate. Utopia became a time that is not here yet, a certain futurity, a could be, a should be. Utopia, according to Bloch, a philosopher associated, to some degree, with the Frankfurt School, is a time and a place that is "not-yet-here." Bloch, along with other Frankfurt School thinkers like Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, contended that that utopia is primarily a critique of the here and now, it is an insistence that there is, as they put it, "something missing in the here and the now." Capitalism, for instance, would have us think that it is a natural order, an inevitability, the way things would be. The "should be" of utopia, its indeterminacy and its deployment of hope, stand against capitalism's ever expanding and exhausting force field of how things "are and will be." Utopian performativity suggests another modality of doing and being that is in process, unfinished. It is to be deciphered by noting what Bloch has called the *anticipatory illumination* that radiates from certain works of art (Bloch, 1974/1996).

Also pivotal to my formulation is the work of the previously discussed Italian philosopher Agamben. I have outlined his emphasis on potentiality and his privileging of this concept over that of possibility. Furthermore, the notion of the utopian performative that I am attempting to outline in this essay is a notion that is inspired by Agamben's notion of a "means without an end." For Agamben, politics is disabled by a certain emphasis on "ends," which is to say politics depends on a performative doing, a perpetual becoming. Performances that display and illuminate their "means" are, like punk, a modality of performance that is aesthetically and politically linked to populism and amateurism. The performative work of "means," in the sense I am using it, is to interrupt aesthetics and politics that aspire toward totality. This too is one of the ways in which I want to resist the Hegelian shell game of absence and presence, appearance and disappearance, that dominates previous performance theories. An emphasis on means as opposed to ends is innately utopian insofar as utopia can never be prescriptive of futurity. Utopia is an idealist mode of critique that reminds us that there is something

missing, that the present and presence (and its opposite number, absence) is not enough.

Two years ago, I spent a sabbatical in Los Angeles. I grew up listening to X, the Germs, Gun Club, and other bands that made up the LA punk scene of the eighties. I lived in the LA punk scene via my semisubcultural existence in suburban Miami; this was possible through a grungy alternative record store located in a strip mall, called Yesterday and Today Records; a few punk and new wave clubs like Flynn's on the Beach and Club Fire and Ice; and issues of *Creem*, a magazine that covered the edgier rock scene but could still be purchased in a Miami supermarket. Through my deep friendships with other disaffected Cuban queer teens who rejected both Cuban exile culture and local mainstream gringo popular culture, and through what I'll call the utopian critique function of punk rock, I was able to imagine a time and a place that was not yet there, a place where I tried to live. LA and its scene helped my pro-toqueer self, the queer child in me, imagine a stage, both temporal and physical, where I could be myself or, more nearly imagine a self that was in process, a self that has always been in the process of becoming.

While in Los Angeles, I started hanging out with an artist, Kevin McCarty, with whom I shared an interest in punk and post-punk music, subculture, and utopia. Our friendship has endured various mutations, moments of volatility and great fun, and our mutual neuroses have fueled our queer intimacy. Our friendship is ultimately based on convergent worldviews in relation to politics and aesthetics. On a recent studio visit I saw a series of works that helped me organize and substantiate my thinking about the time, space, and utopian function of punk in relation to queer subcultural becomings. Writing about living artists helps one further debunk the false principle of the critic's objectivity. Queer intimacies underwrite much of the critical work I do. Yet I reject the phrase "advocacy criticism" and instead embrace the idea of the performative collaboration between artist and writer.

With that stated, I must add that from my side this connection between theory and art feels incredibly one-sided, and not only in the case of McCarty, but also in my work on Carmelita Tropicana, Vaginal Davis, Isaac Julien, and others, because their work and the queer friendships and the intimacies I share with them enable my critical project. Attempting to imagine a convergence between artistic production and critical praxis is, in and of itself, a utopian act in relation to the alienation that often separates theory from practice, a sort of cultural division of labor.

I will discuss a series of photographs that McCarty has titled *The Chameleon Club*. The series is named after a space from the artist's biography that I will soon get to. The series lines up portraits of stages from different club spaces in Los Angeles like Spaceland or Catch One. Spaceland is a bar and music venue in the now hipster section of Los Angeles called Silverlake. Spaceland is where the indie music kids and "not-so-kids" (I position myself within this bracket) go to hear the cutting edge music of the day. Catch One is a predominantly black gay space where lesbian and transgendered people also go. It is a space that is not on the West Hollywood-centered gay map of Los Angeles. McCarty's extraordinary pictures exercise a great deal of formalist mastery that render the stage as monumental. While the space is empty of people, the dark and dramatic lighting is set to make the performance sites look as though they were shot while the club was open and running. After I left LA, Kevin gave me a large print of the Catch One picture. The stage is small but appears large and luminous. The stage itself is black and it rises from a black-and-white checkerboard stage. The black curtains that flank the stage are layered with gleaming silver hubcaps. The hubcaps sparkle through the photographer's gaze and its photographic representation. The back of the stage is illuminated by rows of simple white light strings. They are separated by a world of difference but they nonetheless remind me of the light strings utilized by Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Gonzalez-Torres's light strings symbolized the flickering status of queer lives in an epidemic, but they did not hang in the uniform fashion of the lights in McCarty's imaging of Catch One. I nonetheless look at these images, lighting up the photograph from its deepest point of the picture and offering a warm secondary illumination from their reflection on the actual stage's shiny black floor and I think of that city, Los Angeles, a city, a place I grew to love and this one queer predominantly black space that I had access to.

The only negative critique I have heard of this picture that rests on my wall is from people who have seen it in my apartment and think that it is perhaps too beautiful. The suggestion is that it is too pretty in the face of the adversity that queers of color face on a daily basis. I have presented on this series at different professional conferences and on more than one occasion a gay black man in the audience has recognized the space and approached me afterwards. What I have learned from those encounters is that seeing this space of queer belonging framed by McCarty's meticulous attention makes this space of black queer belonging one that helps us see our connectedness outside of the actual temporality of club life. The utopian performative charge of this image allows one to see the past, the moment before an actual performance, the moment of potentiality; and the viewer gains access to the affective particularity of that moment of hope and potential transformation that is also the temporality of performance.

The stage at Catch One juts out at the audience; it looks like a catwalk and its edges are lit up with small shimmering light bulbs. The catwalk feature makes one think about a queer appropriation of high fashion that my opening quotation from Exene Cervenka refers to. Cervenka's commentary, like McCarty's image of the stage from queer Catch One, calls attention to the way queer and punk subcultures have been informing and haunting the world of mainstream fashion for quite a while. The bluish lighting of Catch One reminds one of a moment in Samuel Delaney's memoir *The Motion of Light in Water*, especially the moment where he describes seeing a mass of gay men having sex under a blue light at the now closed St. Mark's Bath in the East Village. It was during this moment of utopian rapture where he first realized he was not a solitary pervert but part of a vast world of gay men, who fucked, connected, and had actual lives (Delaney, 1988).

The theatricality of the images has much to do with the lighting, which seems to be generated from the stage itself, bottom-up instead of top-down light, giving the effect that the space is glowing with possibility. This recalls Bloch's formulation in regard to certain aesthetic modes, like, for example, what he called the *ornamental*. Bloch privileges the ornamental over the functional. The functional does not let us see anything in it except the use that capitalism has mapped out for it in advance. The ornamental, on the other hand, has an indeterminate use value that challenges the protocols of capitalism and in it one can view Bloch's anticipatory illumination of art. The glow that these photos generate is that anticipatory illumination, that moment of possibility right before an amazing band or performance manifests itself on stage and transforms the world for the performance's duration and, for many of those in attendance, beyond. The best performances don't disappear, but instead linger in our memory, haunt our present, and illuminate our future.

When McCarty displays these images he wants them to be one piece, the two images side by side, adjacent, giving a sense that there is a door between them, joining the space of punk and queer subcultures. Popular culture is the stage where we rehearse our identities. McCarty's work stands as a powerful amendment to this formulation by displaying the actual and metaphorical stages where queers and punks rehearse self. The artist explains his rationale for his objects of study in an autobiographical artist statement:

Located somewhere in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by cow fields, and suburban home developments, situated in between the ruins of downtown Dayton, Ohio, a post industrial wasteland, and Wright Pat Air Force base, sat the Hills and Dales shopping center. In a retail space, in the rear of a strip mall the Chameleon Club opened. One entered what would be the sales floor and made their way back, though a single doorway to the storeroom, which had been converted, into a punk rock club. The only furnishings were a plywood stage at the far end flanked by a PA. The dry walling was incomplete exposing cinder blocks. To the right of the stage was a doorway that led to 1470's, the largest gay bar in Dayton. When you paid admission to the Chameleon Club you could buy drinks at 1470's. The punks would pass back and forth, but no one from 1470's came to the Chameleon Club. With their costumes and their lyrics the kids on the music scene performed their identities at the temporary venue. For the punks geographic location was not relevant as long as there was a stage, a soundman and an audience. Behind the bare cinder blocks of the Chameleon Club one could hear the beats of dance music. The sweating bodies of intoxicated gay men crowded the dance floor only to be revealed through the artificial fog by streaks of red, blue, and green lights circling above their

heads. Here men forgot about the blue-collar oppressive city they called home and imagined a world where they could be free from shame and embarrassment. Neither place was mine. I observed both from the outside. My utopia existed at the doorway on the threshold—neither space at one time and in both simultaneously. (McCarty, 2005, pp. 427–428)

This statement resonates alongside my own autobiography. I was certainly crossing what was for me a metaphorical threshold between the punk world and gay life. Punk made my own suburban quotidian existence radical and experimental. So experimental that I could imagine and eventually act on queer desires. Punk rock style may look apocalyptic, yet its temporality is nonetheless futuristic, letting young punks imagine a time and a place where their desires are not toxic. McCarty talks about a space between these two zones—between the queer of 1470 club and the punk Chameleon Club. In part, he is narrating a stage of in-between-ness, a spatiality that is aligned with a temporality that is on the threshold between identifications, life worlds, and potentialities. The work and the artist's statement resonate beyond my own biography.³

In an early gay and lesbian studies anthology edited by Karla Jay and Allen Young, *Lavender Culture*, there is another report about queer bars in Ohio. In a short piece by John Kelsey titled “The Cleveland Bar Scene in the Forties,” the author reports the fundamental importance of these spaces:

There was, of course, nothing spectacular about Cleveland's gay male bars in the forties, but the point is simply this: they existed. Gay men had places to meet, not only in San Francisco or New York, but in a city easily scoffed at or ignored by sophisticates on either coast. (1994, p. 146)

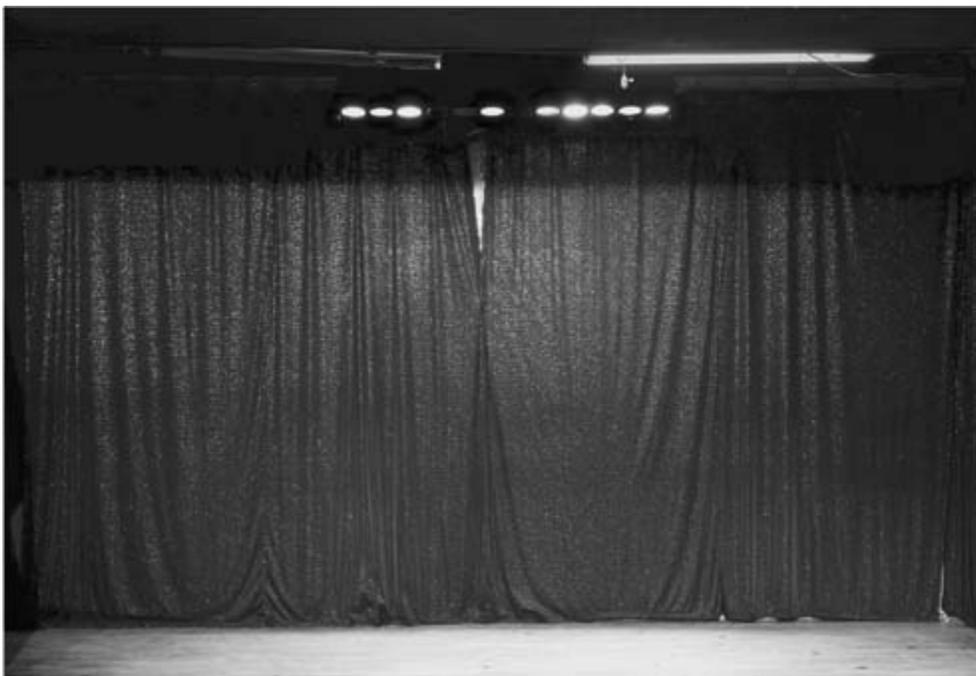
Kelsey's narration of the forties resonates powerfully next to McCarty's artist statement. McCarty's impressions from the nineties, fifty years after Kelsey's moment, would probably still agree with a point Kelsey makes: “The curious combination of exploitation and liberation helped define the mood in gay bars then as it is now, though perhaps both elements were more extreme in those days” (p. 146). The calculus of exploitation and liberation dogs queer culture. Kelsey talks about seeing a few good female impersonators and also states that “If the professional entertainment was bad, the amateurs were unbelievably awful” (pp. 148–149). He characterizes a typical afternoon at the Hide-Out Club Sunday afternoon of amateur performances as a scene where

male typists in Grandma's cast-off finery would take the stage, forget lyrics, and flee in tears. And stockroom boys would take absolutely dreadful spills during their ballet-tap routines. One I much enjoyed was a short, middle-aged man who would sing part of it in the voice of Nelson Eddy, and part in the voice of Jeanette MacDonald. (Kelsey, 1994, p. 149)

The celebration of an aesthetics of amateurism are reminiscent of punk rock's aesthetics. The performances of amateurism, in both punk and this example of queer performance, signal a refusal of mastery and an insistence on process and becoming. Again, such performances do not disappear but instead remain and, like performatives in J. L. Austin, do things in the future. In the above example, the short squat singer of “Indian Summer” is loved decades after his performance, and that one audience member's testimonial stands as one of the things that remains after the performance. The performance, in its incompleteness, lingers and persists, drawing together the community of interlocutors. Utopian performativity is often fueled by the past. The past, or at least narratives of the past, enable utopian imaginings of another time and place that is not yet here but nonetheless functions as a doing for futurity, a conjuring of both future and past to critique presentness. McCarty's work is fueled by a past recollection from his biography that he takes to another time and place and uses to capture this ideality that is the potentiality of utopian performativity. His stages are lit as though a performance is about to emerge from the realm of potential to actuality. The lure of the work is its performative dimension, which I would describe as a *doing as dwelling*, which is to say that I am particularly interested in the way in which the images dwell in potentiality, aestheticizing that moment, transmitting the power of its ideality. Thus the aesthetic fuels the political imagination.

I am especially partial to the image of La Plaza. The club itself is one of the oldest Latino gay clubs in LA. The place has a sort of *ranchera* or country-western feel to it. Often many of the patrons dress to go with the decor. It is not a very glamorous country-western feel. Instead it is, more nearly, a sort of grungy Mexican cowhands feel. But that is not true of the stage at this humble little bar. The curtains shine with an extravagance that seems out of place with the rest of the locale. As soon as showtime starts, the heavy theatrical lights burst on and illuminate the seemingly beaded curtains. Once the show begins, old-school glamorous transvestites take the stage. The entire spectacle is in Spanish. The hostess glimmers with the same intensity as the curtains. All the performances are standard exercises in lip-syncing. About two-thirds of the songs are Spanish anthems and the rest are English pop songs. When contestants come on stage, they are introduced in relation to the province or village they are from in Mexico. The codes that organize time and space are disrupted in this performance space. The first time I visited the club I felt as though I was in Guadalajara in the 1950s. This spatial and temporal displacement mimetically resonates with the lush photograph of the stage. Again we see potentiality, another vista is offered, and in Los Angeles the site, La Plaza, conjures stories of migratory crossing, legal and illegal, and one sees these bodies, whose life world is always in flux about to belong, on the cusp of materialization.

A white neon sign that reads “Salvation” hangs over the stage at the Silver Lake Lounge, another predominantly Latino gay club where I have seen rough strippers and messy drag queens perform their crafts. Queer culture, in its music and iconography, often references salvation. One hears the refrain of a famous club anthem, “A DJ Saved My Life Last Night.” There is indeed something about the transformative powers of nightlife that queers and people of color have always clung to. The contrast in Silver Lake Lounge composition is a strong one, a contrast between the idea of salvation and the clear seediness of the actual space. The bright shining ideality of salvation hangs over a space that is dark and not very promising except that the concept literally is writ large on top of the picture—in this visual study the embedded nature of a utopian performativity within subaltern spaces. Sometimes the utopian spectator needs to squint to see the anticipatory illumination promised by utopia, yet at other times, its visibility and (non)presence cannot be denied.

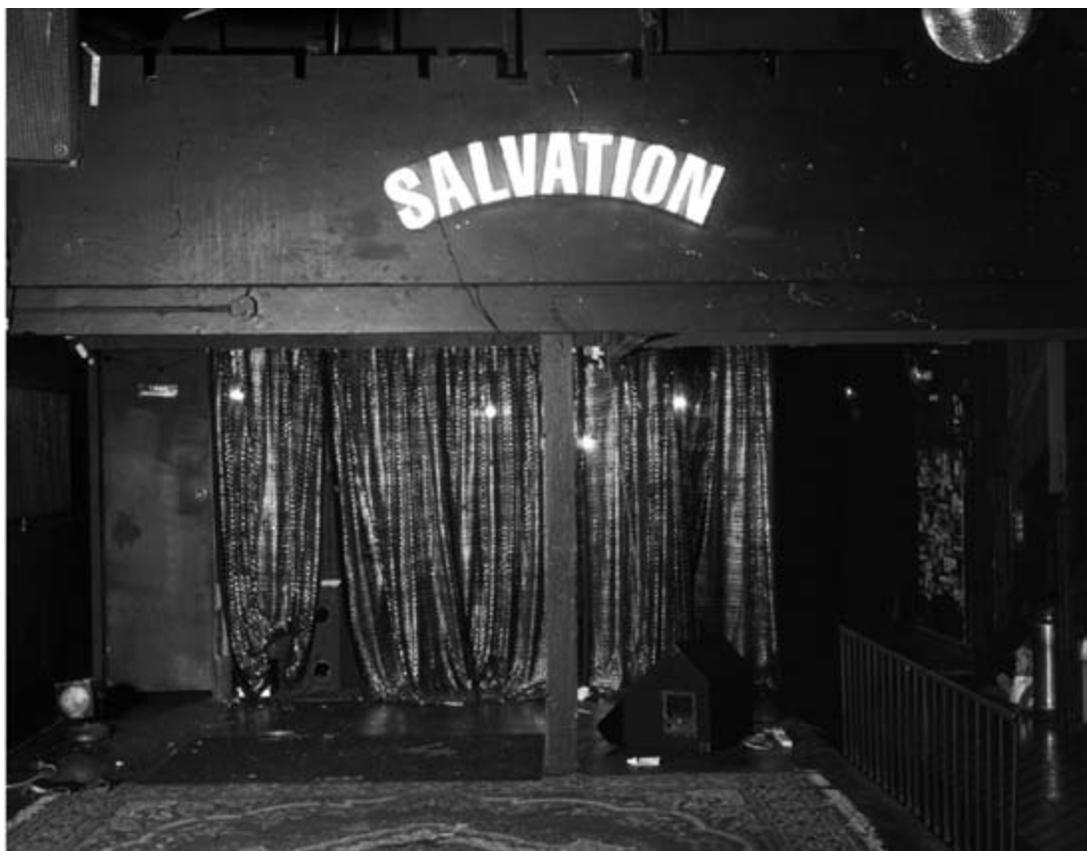


Copyright © Kevin McCarty

The stage from Spaceland is lit a certain deep pink that makes it feel like a band of screaming angry teens will hop on stage and tear it up with their savage guitars. The photograph returns me to my early punk shows.

I remember the potentiality that those scenes of spectatorship promised even before performers showed up on stage. The hum of other men's bodies, bodies that for whatever reason, for that moment, rejected a trajectory that was attuned to the normal. Being at Spaceland makes me feel old. I remember the Cat's Cradle in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and seeing my favorite bands there during the relentless social tedium of graduate school. That's where I started to feel too old to go to shows yet nevertheless felt the show and stage, the transformation of time and space offered by the performance, as forgiving and still permitting me access to this network of queer belongings.

I feel the sense of belonging with even greater intensity when I look at the opulent image of the Parlor Club on Santa Monica Avenue. The tiny stage is clearly overdecorated with its elaborate chandelier and its rich red drapes with golden tassels. I am at the club during my regular visits to Los Angeles since my dear friend and frequent object of study Vaginal Davis hosts her Friday night party Bricktop there. Bricktop's tiny stage often looks like it is about to buckle under Davis's massive frame as she inhabits the stage, perhaps performing some surprisingly delicate flapper dance.³ Of all the spaces McCarty has chosen to depict, this one is most clearly and concretely the space where punk and queerness meet. Indeed, in the pagan church of punk queerness, Davis is both high priestess and black pope. Davis is one of my favorite people in Los Angeles and something of a heroine from my queer coming of age. In her 'zines such as *Fertile LaToya Jackson* and *Shrimp* (a journal dedicated to the sucking of toes), I found an incredible resource for imaging a futurity where my—for lack of a better word—"anti-normativity" could flourish. Through our friendship and queer intimacy we have performed, through a certain sick reappropriation, a reimagined modality of the patronage system. She does her work and I testify to the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*—with my academic credentials and letterhead well in place—that she is a certified art star in the tradition of Dada and Surrealism. I then get to see her work that inspires me to no end. Her Friday night emporium of queer punk vintage retro sleaze is like no other venue I know of. McCarty's picture of the Parlor Room and its stage, with its dense Victorian luster, beautifully captures the ethos of the party. I would summarize that ethos as a use of past decadence to critique the banality of our presentness for the purpose of imaging and enacting an enabling of queer futurity.



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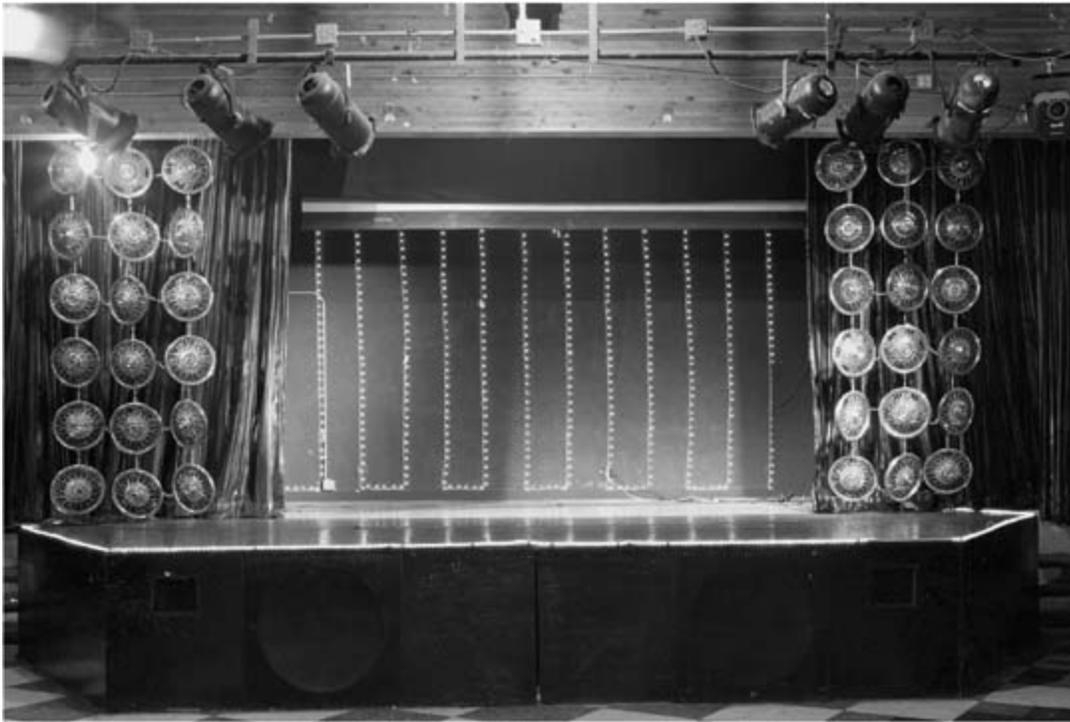
Installed at a gallery, the images of punk clubs are hung next to images of a gay bar's stage. The placement of these images next to each other speaks to subjectivities that travel through the swinging door between both temporal and spatial coordinates. For those of us whose relationship to popular culture is always marked by aesthetic and sexual antagonism, these stages are our actual utopian rehearsal rooms where we work on a self that does not conform to the mandates of cultural logics like late capitalism, heteronormativity and, in some cases, white supremacy.



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The empty stage is used in pieces by the generation of queer artists before McCarty. Felix Gonzalez-Torres brought a blue platform into the gallery that was also outlined with light bulbs. Paid go-go dancers, who would appear at odd moments, often wearing Walkmen™, would dance suggestively on the stage. That stage was always one of potentiality, empty one moment and overflowing with sex and movement the next. While that work shares a utopian impulse with McCarty's, the empty stages of Jack Pierson look melancholic and emptied out of possibility. Pierson's images are snapshots of the disappointment that is part of utopia—the hang-over that follows hope. At this moment it seems that queer visual culture needs to nourish our sense of potentiality and not reinforce our feeling of disappointment. If we are to go on, we need a critical modality of hope and not simply dramatization of loss and despair.

The source material for McCarty's images is the past—not a nostalgic past, but a past that helps us feel a certain structure of feelings, a circuit of queer belonging. When I look at his images, I remember the sexually ambiguous punk clubs of my youth where horny drunk punk boys rehearsed their identities, aggressively dancing with each other and later lurching out, intoxicated, to the parking lot together. For many, the mosh pit wasn't simply a closet; it was a utopian subcultural rehearsal space. In an earlier image of McCarty's, a makeshift subculture is shown in a collection of concert tickets pinned to a white wall with pins that resemble those used to mark places on maps. This reminds us of one of Oscar Wilde's best lines from *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*: "Any map of the world that does not include utopia is not worth glancing at" (p. 141). This piece helps us understand the temporality of utopia, the way in which the past is used in the service of mapping a future, a place of possibility and transformation. Heteronormative culture makes queers think both the past and the future do not belong to them. All we are allowed to imagine is barely surviving the present. This mapping of hope and affect on a white wall brings me back to the various shows were I rehearsed and planned a future self, one that is not quite here but always in process, always becoming, emerging in difference.



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I opened with Exene Cervenka's recent writing from the catalog called *We're Desperate: The Punk Rock Photography of Jim Jocoy* (Jocoy, Moore, & Cervenka, 2002). There is a performance shot in that book of Darby Crash, one of punk history's most fucked-up and damaged queer teens. In the recent punk biography *Lexicon Devil: The Fast Times and Short Life of Darby Crash and the Germs*, the late Tomata Du Plenty, lead singer for rival band the Weirdos, describes Darby offstage in relation to his staged self:

Darby was fascinating in a parking lot. I think that's where he was really a star. Watching his behavior in a parking lot, that's what made Darby Crash, that's what made him a legend, certainly not his on-stage performances! Oh, They were so boring! I couldn't sit through a Germs set, please. Torture! But I could certainly sit on the curb with a 40-ounce and listen to him for hours. He was an interesting, interesting boy. (Mullen, Bolles, & Parfrey, 2002, p. 47)

The stage and the parking lot are adjacent in much the same way that there is phantom door between Catch One and Spaceland in McCarty's work. On one asphalt stage in Los Angeles, one queer punk watches another hold forth, and across this country, under a different shape of palm tree, but still in a parking lot, my best friend Tony and I sit in his beige Nissan Sentra and we speculate about this band the Germs and the provocative lyrics to songs like "Sex Boy" and "Richie Dagger's Crimes"—what can they possibly mean, we asked ourselves, almost already knowing. While we sat in that car, my parents worried about where I was and what I was doing with whom, and I know they must have been trying to comfort themselves by letting themselves think that I was merely at a stage. What we were learning in that parking lot as the Germs song "Forming" played was that there was another stage out there for us, both temporal and spatial, one in which potentiality, hope, and the future could be, should be, and would be enacted. Today I write back from that stage that my mother and father hoped I would quickly vacate. Instead, I dwell on and in this stage because I understand it as one brimming with a utopian performativity that is linked to the ideality that is potentiality. This potentiality is always in the horizon and, like performance, never completely disappears but, instead, lingers and serves as a conduit for knowing and feeling each other.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Kevin McCarty for his friendship and pictures.
2. This project is beautifully continued in the artist's current Web site: imnotlikeyou.la. That site documents a youth culture scene in LA inhabited by Latino punks. In this aspect of the artist's project race and ethnicity are examined with the same attentiveness and care as sexuality in the Chameleon Club series.
3. In his dissertation, "When the Little Dawn Was Grey," Shane Vogel discusses Bricktop's life and performance practice and Davis.

JOSÉ ESTEBANMUÑOZ

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- punk
- queer
- utopianism
- temporality
- clubbing
- performativity
- artists

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