

Jess Barbagallo, "Morgan Bassichis", *Artforum*, Summer 2022, <https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/202206/morgan-bassichis-88641>

ARTFORUM



Morgan Bassichis, *Pitchy #2*, 2020, video, color, sound, 5 minutes 30 seconds.

Morgan Bassichis

BRIDGET DONAHUE

Political cabaret wunderkind Morgan Bassichis lives and works in that liminal realm of the pedestrian surreal, as evidenced by their first solo gallery exhibition, "Questions to Ask Beforehand," which opened at Bridget Donahue in Manhattan's Chinatown. A live performer by trade, Bassichis infused the gallery with levity, creating a show that hovered somewhere between an archival display of queer sociality and a pitch for an unrealized musical about millennial ambivalence. The airy installation re-created those familiar sites of waiting: a therapist's office, a spare performance space replete with a modest standing piano, and a cozy, den-like bay. In that comfy area, the visitor could sprawl out on one of three multicolored cushions designed by fellow artist Sam Roeck and take in *March is for Marches: May and November*, a 2019 sound piece with

video captioning that Bassichis made in collaboration with cellist Ethan Philbrick. From this piece, I was able to glean fragments of a story about the longing for men to sit down and enjoy the preparations of a formal supper, among other esoteric musings. Sonically, the vibes were comfortingly reminiscent of an Arthur Russell album. Atop a pair of speakers flanking the projection were a variety of stacked paperbacks, both pulpy and educational, culled from the Lesbian Herstory Archives, including *The Lesbian Path* (1980), *Different Daughters* (1996), and *Lesbian Health Matters!* (1980). Each pile was crowned by a piece of smooth driftwood. This subtle evocation of the rustic brought to mind the setting of an artist residency: cloistered, often woodsy, philosophical, and communal (at least when it's successful).

Back-to-back television screens played a selection of short video works, *Pitchy #1–4* and *In the Bathroom*, all 2020. *Pitchy* (shot by and featuring Max Silver, with captioning by Isaac Silber) captures Bassichis in a variety of environs—a park, a wooden shed (or maybe a sauna), a bright-blue bathroom, and a hotel suite—while conversing with a flummoxed off-screen interlocutor who can't quite understand his subject's associative and improvisationally sung responses: "I would love it if this interview could just be like question, answer. . . ." The title is a double entendre; the multipart chat appears to be a pitch from Bassichis for a play with an indeterminate plot, starring the eagerly "clueless" artist who teases us with cryptic yet comically familiar ideas: "In the show, we have to become our own daddy." Evading critique, they gleefully sing: "Work? Process? Work? Process? The same. The same."

Bassichis is an endlessly quotable writer, as evidenced by *The Odd Years*, the book they published in 2020. That delightful tome featured reproductions of neurotic to-do lists Bassichis made between 2017 and 2019, the originals of which were—*ta-da!*—cleanly displayed, community-board style, inside a presentation case lined with cork. APOLOGIZE TO BOYFRIEND FOR THE DIGESTIVE SYSTEM MY ANCESTORS GAVE ME and BE A PERSON WHO SENDS EFFORTLESS BIRTHDAY PRESENTS read some of the reminders Bassichis penned to themselves in red Sharpie. The artist builds on the self-flagellating comedy of these notes by printing a series of twelve different pamphlets, made in collaboration with interdisciplinary artist DonChristian Jones. The brightly colored literature was free for the taking and one could peruse it while lounging on the fake therapist's-office furniture. A speaker tucked into a plant from this *mise-en-scène* quietly recited lines from the "Questions to Ask" series—"Questions to Ask Before Beginning a New Friendship," "Questions to Ask Before Meeting a New Group of People," "Questions to Ask Before Having Sex with Someone," and so forth—cleverly affirming the paranoid delusion that even the trees have ears.

Sequestered on account of Covid, I was able to listen to a reading of these pamphlets via Instagram Live. The videographer of this performance was shaking with laughter as Bassichis, outfitted in a chic black shift, both sang and recited to an appreciative crowd seated around a piano. While being deeply entertained by the proceedings—"Why do I find it so erotic when straight men say 'he/him?'" quipped Bassichis—I couldn't help but wonder about the artist's endgame, and what might lie in store in this sweet place of confession, tenderness, and comedy they've built for themselves and, luckily, for us.

Johanna Fateman, “Goings On About Town: Morgan Bassichis”, *The New Yorker*, April 18, 2022,
<https://www.newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town/art/morgan-bassichis-2022>

THE NEW YORKER

ART

Morgan Bassichis

This gifted New York performance artist’s first solo gallery show is a spare but inviting installation of videos, handwritten to-do lists, and colorful pamphlets offering a series of “Questions to Ask Before” such potentially nerve-racking situations as “Beginning a New Friendship” and “Spending Time with a Niece.” Bassichis—whose approach blends queer cabaret with an informal style of motivational speaking, laced with commiseration and self-doubt—has a gentle charisma and a preternatural ability to spin any experience into a song. One video finds the artist in the tub, accompanied by an electronic keyboard, extolling the limitless uses of the bathroom as a creative space. In the video series “Pitchy,” unrelenting stream of consciousness becomes a new genre of musical theatre. A piano and an empty “stage,” in the form of a carpet, establish a mood of absence—and of anticipation. On April 22, at 7:30, Bassichis, with their light touch and multilayered humor, goes live, performing their new piece “Questions to Ask Beforehand.” (Reservations, via bridgetdonahue.nyc, are required.)

—*Johanna Fateman*

Mar. 25-May. 14

 Donahue
99 Bowery
Downtown

646-896-1368

[Website](#)



Jillian Steinhauer, "What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries Right Now: Morgan Bassichis", *The New York Times*, April 6, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/new-york-art-galleries.html>

The New York Times

What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries Right Now



Give this article



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By **John Vincler**, **Blake Gopnik**, **Will Heinrich** and **Jillian Steinhauer**

April 6, 2022

Want to see new art this weekend? Start in Chelsea with Jordan Belson's landscape collages. Then head to Brooklyn to check out Susan Meiselas's landmark photographs of carnival strippers, from 1976. And don't miss Pier Paolo Calzolari's conceptual paintings and [Morgan Bassichis's coy performance videos](#).

Newly Reviewed

CHINATOWN

Morgan Bassichis

Through May 14. Bridget Donahue, 99 Bowery, 2nd floor, Manhattan. 646-896-1368; bridgetdonahue.nyc.



View of Morgan Bassichis's "Questions to Ask Beforehand" at Bridget Donahue.
Morgan Bassichis and Bridget Donahue; Dario Lasagni

The comedic performer **Morgan Bassichis** is probably best known for shows that are a kind of queer, lefty, Jewish love child of cabaret and stand-up comedy. But the artist, who uses the pronouns they/them, has also made videos, albums and books, elements of which are featured in "Questions to Ask Beforehand," their first solo exhibition (accompanied by a few live performances).

It's a tricky transition. Bassichis's work turns so much on the energy of human interaction, I found the gallery a little lonely. But four videos provide good grounding. In one, filmed in a bathtub, Bassichis sings rousingly about how "you can do anything in the bathroom"; in the others, from a series called "Pitchy" (2020), the artist answers an interviewer's questions with coy, chanted improvisations, repeating phrases until they gain an incantatory power. Bassichis is masterly at creating a feeling that's simultaneously conspiratorial and uncomfortable, like when someone tells a joke, and you're not sure you totally get it, but you laugh anyway.

Bassichis's persona is a fool who's actually a wise man (I think). In the titular installation, a set of pamphlets lists questions to ponder in advance of different situations. One for joining an organization reads, "Are we sure history will look favorably on us?" along with, "I forget, we *are* or we are *not* anarchists?"

I relate to the anxiety that drives such inquiries, and I admire Bassichis's ability to turn it into art. What I get from their work, in addition to much-needed laughter, are ideas for how to critically, caringly and creatively approach the daunting world. *JILLIAN STEINHAUER*

Cassie Packard, "Your Concise New York Art Guide for April 2022", Hyperallergic, March 29, 2022,
<https://hyperallergic.com/718410/your-concise-new-york-art-guide-for-april-2022/>

HYPERALLERGIC

Art

Your Concise New York Art Guide for April 2022

Your list of must-see, fun, insightful, and very New York art events this month, including Morgan Bassichis, Kazuko Miyamoto, Frida Orupabo, and more.



by Cassie Packard
2 days ago



This month, bodies are everywhere — even when they're not. Exhibitions across New York City delicately dissect the omnipresence of the body in abstract and virtual space, address corporeality's constructed or collaged nature, explore the political potential of bodies in dialogue, and revel in the sheer absurdity of moving through the world in one of these things. Take care out there and enjoy.

Morgan Bassichis: Questions to Ask Beforehand



Morgan Bassichis, "Pitchy #3" (2020), single channel video (color, sound), commissioned by the Renaissance Society for Renaissance TV. Filmed by and featuring Max Silver. Captioning by Isaac Silber. 4:27 (© Morgan Bassichis, courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, NYC)

When: through April 23 (Performance dates: April 1, 8, 14, 22 at 7:30pm)

Where: Bridget Donahue (99 Bowery, 2nd Floor, Chinatown, Manhattan)

“Why were you so curt in your appointment reminder text?” comes a whisper from the hidden speaker in a potted plant by an analyst’s couch. Comedic musical performer and obsessive list-maker Morgan Bassichis brings their subversive hilarity into a solo show context with offerings spanning videos (“My father told me one day I’d grow up and have a line of saunas,” Bassichis informs us), informational pamphlets (“Questions to Ask Before Visiting Marfa”), and to-do lists (“To do: Silent meals (conversation is peer pressure)”). The show will also feature a live solo performance, “Questions to Ask Beforehand,” directed by Tina Satter.

Andrea K. Scott, “Best Art of 2020,” *The New Yorker*, 2020.

THE NEW YORKER

ART

Morgan Bassichis



Illustration by Ohni Lisle

@morgankindof
[Website](#)



If your nighttime routine now includes insomnia, Bassichis wants you to know that you’re not alone. Since March, this irresistibly charismatic New York-based performer—whose sui-generis style blends cabaret panache and standup shtick with grace notes of klezmer—has been posting comforting “quarantunes” on Instagram, including the lullaby “I know it’s weird to go to bed now.” Like the full-length performances that have earned Bassichis a loyal following from Fire Island to the Whitney Museum, the intimate clip is funny, strange, exquisitely sung, and unexpectedly moving. Onstage, Bassichis often repeats simple lyrics—“I know you’re scared, I’m scared too”—until they accrue the power of incantations. The quarantunes have that same magic, along with some good advice for bad times: “I’ll tell you the secret. Take a shower.”

—*Andrea K. Scott*

Mary Cantrell, “Walking into the unknown: Ballroom Marfa artists in residence share thoughts on their processes, making music and cultivating authenticity in their work”, *The Big Bend Sentinel*, December 15, 2021.

**CULTURE**

Walking into the unknown: Ballroom Marfa artists in residence share thoughts on their processes, making music and cultivating authenticity in their work

BY MARY CANTRELL

DECEMBER 15, 2021 151 PM

MARFA — Three Ballroom Marfa artists in residence — Morgan Bassichis, EJ Hill and Jeffrey Michael Austin — are songwriting, recording music and soaking in the high desert remoteness (and the Chinati Hot Springs) before their brief trip comes to an end and they return to New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, respectively. Each brings something unique to the conversation about making music in an art world context, and all three intend to continue their love affair with the Big Bend by returning to put on more art happenings, whether it be installations, performances, or a combination of the two.

New York-based performer Bassichis arrives in Marfa after cultivating a relationship with Ballroom Marfa Curator Daisy Nam. Bassichis is a comedian, storyteller and musician. Their primary studio space while in Marfa is the room adjacent to the bar at the Capri, complete with a commanding Steinway grand piano and lush textiles. The space was the site of a collaborative performance between Bassichis, their musical collaborator DonChristian Jones and fellow Ballroom artists in residence Hill and Austin on Wednesday evening.

“It’s cozy, it’s relaxed. My stuff can be a little cabaret, so somehow performing for people sitting around lounging seems fitting,” Bassichis said.

It’s Bassichis’ first time to Marfa and though their residency is nearly over, they hope to return to Marfa again to put on additional performances. Bassichis said getting to know a city, its environment and its people, always infuses their work.

“The places where I’m making work and the pianos that I’m using always inform the songs that I’m writing. I’m excited to see what kind of songs emerge here,” said Bassichis.

Rapper, singer/songwriter, visual artist and collaborator Jones joined Bassichis in town to record new songs at the Marfa Recording Studio. The recordings will likely appear in Bassichis’ upcoming spring show at Bridget Donahue Gallery in New York.

Bassichis has previously published a book of weekly to-do lists titled *The Odd Years*, made during the Trump administration. The next iteration will be a series of lists titled *Questions to ask Beforehand*. The list “Questions to ask before going to Marfa” poses humorous quandaries of “This is for someone else not me: But who is Donald Judd?” and “Can you get lyme disease from snakes?”



Ballroom Marfa artist in residence and performer Morgan Bassichis at the Capri where they have been utilizing the piano to create and rehearse new work. Photo by Daisy Nam.

Humor has always been an element that helps Bassichis feel grounded in their work. The concept of showing people a good time as being a sufficient offering has also stuck with them.

“It’s like a compass for me and my work. If I’m making myself laugh, I’m going in the right direction,” said Bassichis. “Humor really, you can’t force it or fake it. It’s either there or not. So it acts like a North Star for me.”

As an artist, Bassichis has learned to value what comes naturally to them and tries not to get lost in ideas of what a performance should be. They said when those preconceived notions start to cloud their vision it’s important to go with what simply feels good.

“There is a spiritual, maybe mystical, certainly emotional process of walking into the unknown. A residency is a perfect example,” said Bassichis. “I have ideas of what I would want to make, but who knows what will come out. It’s the same thing when you’re writing a new song or writing a joke, you don’t know the answer yet.”

School plays and musicals are lasting influences for Bassichis, who grew up studying the piano. Recordings of female vocalists were often present in their home as a child and have continued to be the variety of music Bassichis gravitates towards.

Bassichis said they have found it productive to exist in more of an art than music industry context throughout their creative career.

“The space of experimentation, collaboration and improvisation, all were really compelling and exciting to me. I think it has been really important for me and allowed me to experiment with different forms over time,” said Bassichis.

During Bassichis’ time as an honorary Marfan they also co-hosted an online annual Hanukkah fundraiser on behalf of the organization Jewish Voice for Peace, which raised over \$40,000 for the Adalah Justice Project. Bassichis performed for the live stream at the Capri surrounded by a multitude of partially melted candles, jokingly informing the audience they were performing from a castle.

LA-based EJ Hill and Chicago-based Jeffrey Michael Austin are back in Marfa for the artist residency after spending some time in town in 2020 during the pandemic. The two have been friends for over a decade and have collaborated on projects involving musical improvisation in the past, but have primarily focused on their institutional, visual art careers — until now.

“Our first trip to Marfa kind of marked the first time that we’ve ever actually sat down to write songs together, rather than just noodle around on instruments,” said Austin.

The duo spent 10 days at Marfa Recording Studio last December and emerged with one fully recorded track, an abundance of song ideas and a feeling of momentum. That February, they met back up in Loveland, Colorado, where they completed a five-track EP, *I Want It Too*, under the band name Daisy Days.

Hill referred to the seven-week stretch as a frantic musical production fever. Like in the TV show “Music in High Places,” which ran on MTV in the early 2000s and featured musicians performing in remote areas, Hill said being in Marfa has allowed him to go to a space of deeper contemplation.

“Coming back here and then also going to Loveland, Colorado, earlier this year, kind of felt like me chasing this childhood dream of being the musician who goes off into this paired-down, wide open space to be inspired and to connect,” said Hill.

The musical element of Daisy Days symbolizes a return to Hill and Austin’s love of music, but because the two are multidisciplinary artists (or “multi-material,” a term Hill is playing around with) the intent is for more visual elements to be incorporated. The idea behind their lasting partnership with Ballroom is to one day host a more fully-realized music and visual art project.

“The musical element is just one layer of what we think will manifest over time. We may host physical art exhibitions, installations, live performances and probably all of those things kind of coexisting in some way in physical space,” said Austin.

As of late they've been focusing on an upcoming performance taking place in Los Angeles in February, which, with the exception of their performance this past Wednesday night at the Capri, will be their only other official live performance. They're referring to the experience as a sort of "sonic studio visit."

When prompted by Ballroom to dream up ideas for merchandise, Hill and Austin came up with the atypical idea to make plush terry robes people could wear while listening to the album, creating a multi-sensory experience. They're considering a laundry list of questions about how to expand the project into a full on art-directed encounter.

"What are the optimal conditions for listening? When are we listening to it? What are we wearing? What type of fabric? Is it soft? Is it velvet? Is it something a little more substantial? Like creating the entire universe of what Daisy Days is or could be on every level," Hill said.

"Again, thinking about how can we play with and queer and complicate these traditional music industry avenues in a way that makes them feel more aligned with our artful approach," said Austin.

The pair conjures up images of pastel colors, clouds, lightness and airiness in association with the music they are creating. Their songs are tender and touch on themes of love and relationships. "Sad sexy" is their preferred genre of choice.

"Am I gonna cry right now or am I getting turned on?" Austin laughs.

Hill said the music also creates the space for them to love themselves in ways they may not have in the past.

“Owning the attentiveness, owning the sweetness, and finally coming to a point in life where there’s a little less pressure each day to be some hardass macho a-hole. To just be femme and sweet,” said Hill.

Thomas J. Lax, “Top Ten Highlights of 2020,” *Artforum*, 2020.

ARTFORUM

THOMAS J. LAX’S TOP TEN HIGHLIGHTS OF 2020

Thomas J. Lax is curator of Media and Performance at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. They are currently working on the exhibition “Just Above Midtown: 1974 to the Present” with Linda Goode Bryant.



Morgan Bassichis performing *Quarantunes* on Instagram, March 20, 2020.

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MORGAN BASSICHIS, *QUARANTUNES*

Bassichis’s musical videos, the first released soon after lockdown began, broke through a soundscape otherwise filled with sirens and silence. Each of Bassichis’s new looks and electronic-piano refrains offered a spell, lullaby, or protest song—a soundtrack against isolation and state terror we could sing, cry, or scream along to.

Madeline Weisburg, “20 best Art Books of 2020”, *The Brooklyn Rail*, 2020.

BROOKLYN RAIL

Morgan Bassichis’s *The Odd Years*

(Wendy’s Subway, 2020)

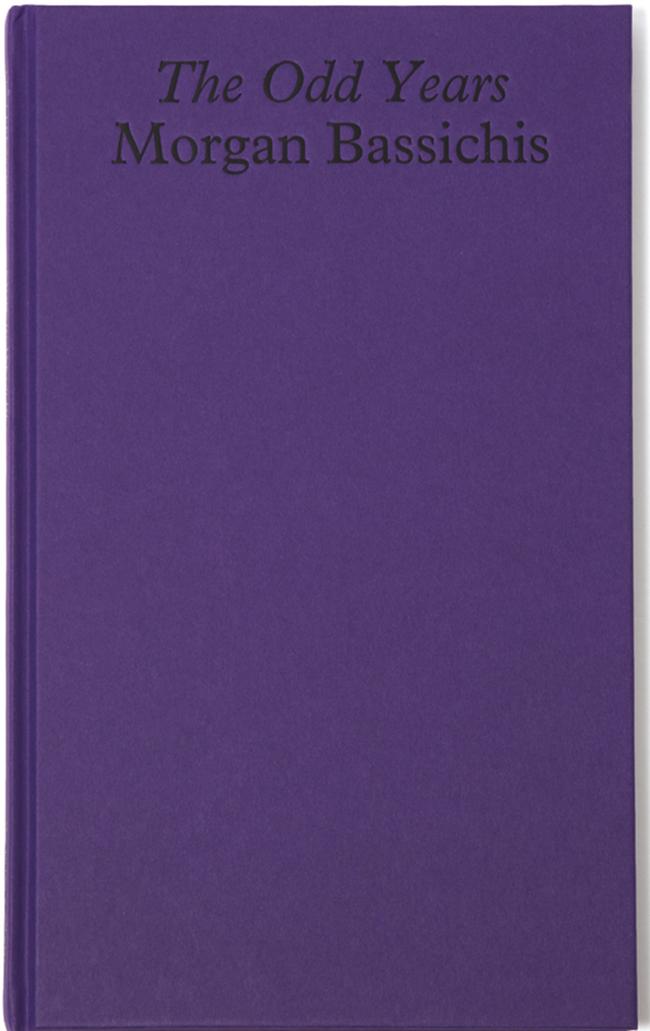
One thing to know about Morgan Bassichis is that the performer and activist could make it fulltime as a comedian. And as a singer, too. I first saw Bassichis perform as part of a residency at Recess in 2017 and was instantly charmed by the warmth, wit, charisma, winking naïveté, and multi-hyphenate panache that has earned the artist a devoted fan club, of which I count myself a member. Reading *The Odd Years*, one feels as captivated as watching the artist live. The book amasses Bassichis’s weekly to-do lists from 2017 and 2019, a project that began during the year in residence at Recess. The lists, in essence, are working notes for comedic routines (“Study ‘The Witches of Eastwick’ for political strategy”; “Look up Chanukkah prayers so I can wow people”; “Find out if stealing from Dean & DeLuca is activism”) but their meanderings on topics both profound and mundane, including abolitionist politics, queer life, Judaism, digestion, deodorant, Pret a Manger, and bone broth are also surprisingly touching. *—Madeline Weisburg*

Gregg Bordowitz, "Best books of 2020," *Artforum*, 2020.

ARTFORUM

BOOKS

MORGAN BASSICHIS'S *THE ODD YEARS*



The Odd Years (Wendy's Subway), by **Morgan Bassichis**, is among my favorite books of the year. Is it poetry, comedy, a book of to-do lists? Yes! It is also a historically important artist's book that I place in a lineage with Ed Ruscha's *A Few Palm Trees* (1971), Lawrence Weiner's *Works* (1977), Martha Rosler's *Service: A Trilogy on Colonization* (1978), and Glenn Ligon's *A People on the Cover* (2015), as well as canonical pieces of Conceptual art such as Lee Lozano's language pieces and Hanne Darboven's calendars, marked with her distinctive spirals. *The Odd Years* is a collection of weekly to-do lists scrawled on found pieces of paper or on the title and index pages of books. Each list is beautifully scanned and all are bound together in one purple hardcover volume. A Conceptual art book for our time, *The Odd Years* combines Conceptualism's protocols with the anxiety of the absurdly demanding—punishing, grinding, perplexing—daily preoccupations of our era, when everything necessary is marginal and the marginal find no time or support for daily self-care. Add to that the ridiculous proposition of what it means to be a singular *self* at this moment, when the “I” is an intersection of many selves caught up in a collective revolution. Meditate with this book to find your own answers. Make it your daily psalter and compass. The artist takes seriously a maxim drawn from the Kabbalistic text *Zohar: The Book of Splendor*: “Everything aspires.”

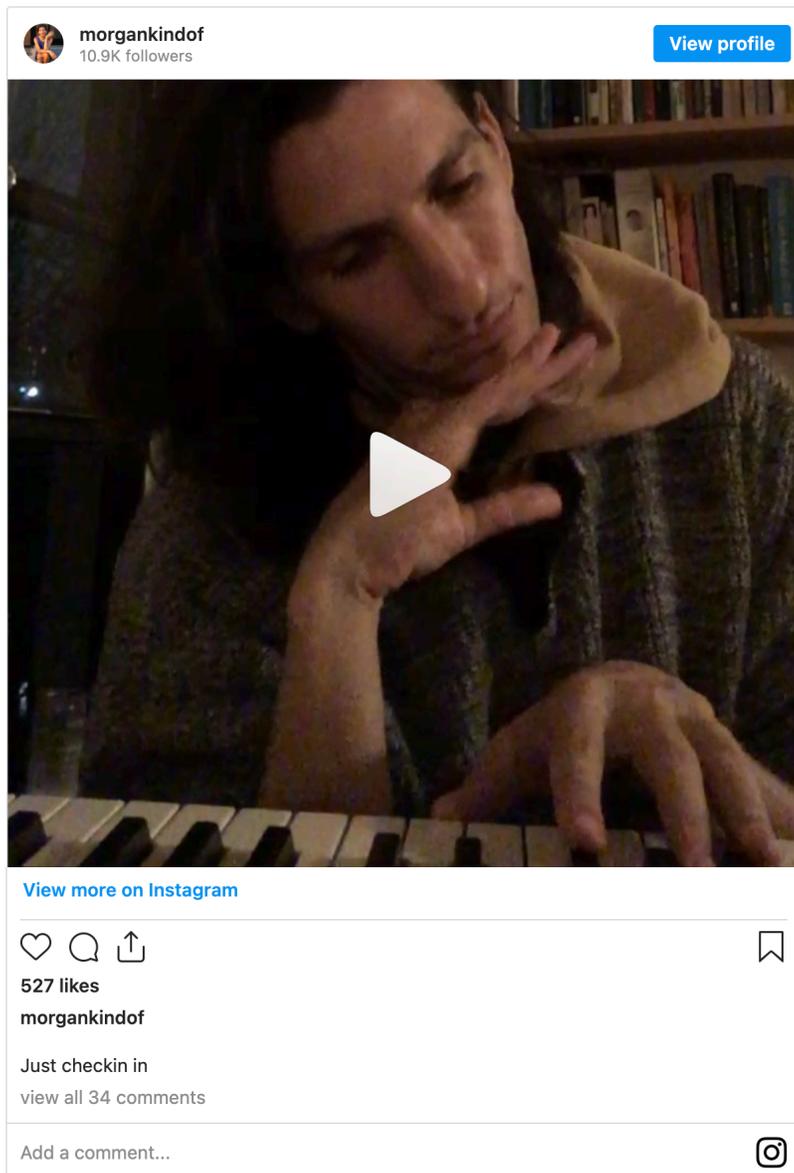
Will Heinrich, "Five Artists to Follow on Instagram Now," *The New York Times*, April 29, 2020.

The New York Times

Five Artists to Follow on Instagram Now

Photographs that capture our image-saturated times, biting cartoons and unusual regional architecture: Here are some of the Instagram accounts brightening our art critic's daily feed.

Morgan Bassichis (@morgankindof)



morgankindof
10.9K followers

[View profile](#)

[View more on Instagram](#)

527 likes
morgankindof

Just checkin in
[view all 34 comments](#)

Add a comment...

Morgan Bassichis always brings the same generous energy to a performance, whether it's a self-reflective stand-up set or leading a crowd in Yiddish protest songs. But nothing I've seen has been quite as charming or perfectly formed as the "quarantunes" that this performance artist has been posting since mid-March. These snippets of song — delivered in tight close-up and accompanied by an electronic keyboard — encompass a full range of pandemic reactions, though always with a comic veneer. One assures some of our more negligent political leaders, "Our grandmothers will eat you alive"; another simply asks, "How was your day?" Altogether they offer quick-action doses of common humanity.

Marissa Brostoff, "Morgan Bassichis' Haunted American Songbook," *The Nation*, May 23, 2019.

THE Nation.

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT THEATER PROTEST

Morgan Bassichis's Haunted American Songbook

The performer's work presents a riotous vision of what an intergenerational left might look like.

By Ari M. Brostoff

MAY 23, 2019



Morgan Bassichis performs *Damned If You Duet*. (Courtesy of Morgan Bassichis)

Sitting at the piano midway through their performance *More Protest Songs*, Morgan Bassichis introduced their next number as “a protest song I would love to see, like, elementary school students do. Preschool? Super young.”

Everyone cracked up. Between verses, Bassichis drew out their fantasy of inspiring a youth insurrection: “A lot of little kids flooding everywhere.... They’re, like, tugging on people’s pants... overturning desks.”

The song itself was just two lines repeated between broken piano chords: “We cast you out / We send you away.” It might have been an incantation meant to expel an evil force, or a message from a community exiling a troublesome member—a children’s council, perhaps, deciding who would be the first to go.

Like much of Bassichis’s work, the power of “We Cast You Out” comes from its shivery mix of political feelings. Bassichis is not the only contemporary artist exploring the nature of everyday existence in such overwhelming times, but they are among the first to plumb the jumbled unconscious of today’s growing left social movements from within. Bassichis is a longtime activist with prison-abolition and Palestine-solidarity groups, whose performances call up the delight, despair, and dizzying contradictions that shape life on the (queer, Jewish) left. They are also a virtuosic improviser, able to free associate across moods from the petty to the oceanic; the thrill of marching in the streets, the relief of getting home to watch TV.

Bassichis—who’s amassed a devoted following in the art world—writes gorgeous, unadorned songs that would be at home in a haunted version of the American songbook. Their performances combine music and comedy to create surreal, unsettling, partly improvised, and very funny cabaret shows.

In *More Protest Songs*, performed and recorded as an album in 2017, they reimagined an old-fashioned genre of musical dissent with strange, dark songs that began their life as lullabies. In *The*

Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions: The Musical, they co-created a theatrical adaptation of Larry Mitchell's 1977 cult classic, an allegory about gay life in a declining empire called Ramrod. *Damned if You Duet*, a variety show Bassichis presented last fall with a series of collaborators, investigated the narcissism of collaboration itself. A Morgan Bassichis performance can feel like a night at the piano bar in the middle of a siege.

It can also feel like children's theater for adults. Onstage, Bassichis, a mesmerizing presence, becomes a maddening, lovable, overgrown kid (and often works with actual young performers). They describe their persona as "delusional, childlike, somehow earnest, totally narcissistic." ("Is it you?" I asked. "Yes and no. A turned-up, distorted version," they said.) *Artforum* called them as a "millennial Candide."

Bassichis could be envisioned making a cameo on *Sesame Street*, with a soulful singing voice that slips, for effect, into a tone reminiscent of Kermit the Frog. They are ungainly—again, perhaps deliberately—like a tall child or, well, a big bird. A running joke in *Damned if You Duet* involved them distractedly taking off items of clothing and putting different ones—stockings and ballet flats but no pants, for instance—back on. At one point they put a sock on the microphone, then asked why.

Bassichis's alter ego can often be found creatively misappropriating leftist political concepts and the current lingua franca of community expectations—boundaries, consent, trust, self-care. At the performance of *Damned if You Duet* that I saw, they announced at one point that there were "too many faces" in the room. "Having a face is a form of uncompensated labor," they said gravely as the stage lights dimmed, "and we're going on strike."

The embattled "we" in Bassichis's songs often seems to be a radical or marginalized community—some version of the collectives that narrate traditional protest songs like "We Shall Overcome" or "We

Shall Not Be Moved,” but usually, here, on the cusp of dissolution. In “The Porn Song,” Bassichis enumerates a list of things an unspecified ensemble has stopped doing—“We don’t eat anymore/ We don’t cook meals/ We don’t go to the library store anymore/ We don’t do those meditations anymore/ There’s no time”—before they get to the punch line that explains why everyone is so busy: “So much porn.” This is a dystopia that even we could fall for.

A theater kid raised by social worker parents in a progressive Boston suburb, Bassichis adopted their mom’s political fervor as well as her musical tastes, which ranged from jazz vocalists like Sarah Vaughn to folk singers like Holly Near. For a decade after college, they worked as an anti-prison organizer and educator in San Francisco. In 2013 they moved to New York, initially intending to give Broadway a shot. “I got my headshot taken like, ‘Alan Cumming, when you’re done in *Cabaret*, here I am,” Bassichis joked. Instead, they found a home among veteran performance artists like Jibz Cameron (known onstage as Dynasty Handbag) and emerging artists like the filmmaker Tourmaline; this spring, their work will be featured in the Whitney Biennial.

Bassichis remains “a real show person,” said Malik Gaines, a founder of the performance troupe My Barbarian and a professor of performance studies at New York University. In *Damned if You Duet*, Gaines joined them for a tribute to George Michael that ended with the two shrieking the Wham! song “Freedom” while leaping around the stage in socks and underwear. “I don’t want your freedom!” they sang, shaking their fists, like queer kids putting on a show in someone’s basement, or protesters who have turned on each other.

The video and performance artist Gregg Bordowitz compared Bassichis’s work to Brecht’s *Lehrstücke*, or learning plays, which created a jarring mix of affects intended to sensitize audiences to the contradictions governing their lives. Leaving a Bassichis show, he added, sometimes brought back memories of heading home from ACT-UP meetings in the 1980s: “energized and enervated; motivated but thoughtful about what steps to take next; preoccupied by how much one *can* do.”

My own fantasy about Bassichis's work also takes place in the '80s: I walked out of *More Protest Songs* with the weird sensation that I already knew the songs, that they were returning to me from my early childhood, as though they had long ago been recorded on a cassette tape that had just been lost, for many years, under a seat in my mom's car.

Last month, Bassichis presented a new performance, *Klezmer for Beginners*, which included both an interpretation of Amy Winehouse's "Back to Black" that highlighted the klezmer roots of its sound, and a group singalong of an old protest song Bassichis described as "'Fuck tha Police' in Yiddish." Like *More Protest Songs* and *Damned if You Duet*—a collaboration with the composer Ethan Philbrick—the show was an attempt, Bassichis explained, "to approach a genre with fresh eyes." It was also another occasion for political and historical reflection, this time responding to the way that "the accusation of anti-Semitism is being used as an intense wedge in social movements," Bassichis said.

There was a surge of interest in klezmer in the 1980s, they added, when leftist Jews responded to this kind of weaponization by "looking for forms of Jewishness that were purposefully diasporic and rooted in internationalism." Many of the musicians behind that last klezmer revival—some of whom collaborated on *Klezmer for Beginners*—have remained active as performers and organizers for decades, a living riposte to the commonplace that only younger Jews affiliate with the left.pro

Artists run the risk of dabbling in nostalgia and sentimentality when they make work that explicitly invokes radical movements of the past or imagines those we might see in the future. But the children and older artists who appear in Bassichis's work—whether in person or channeled by Bassichis—simply seem to belong there. Entering Bassichis's world, we encounter a riotous vision of what an intergenerational left might look like—one in which everyone is loopy, but no one is alone.

Jennifer Krasinski, "The Art of Morgan Bassichis", *Artforum*, December 15, 2017.

ARTFORUM

PERFORMANCE

THE BOY IN THE BAND

Jennifer Krasinski on the art of Morgan Bassichis

December 15, 2017



Morgan Bassichis, Live album recording of *More Protest Songs!*, 2017. Performance view, Danspace Project, New York, October 7. Photo: Ian Douglas.

MORGAN BASSICHIS IS A COMPOSER, a comedian, and a cabaret artist (not necessarily in that order). In performance, he plays piano, tells stories, and sings in a voice so honeyed and seductive that audible sighs are sometimes heard coming from the audience at the end of his songs. Lithe as a whippet, with laser beam blue eyes, he carries himself with both the self-deprecation of the comedian, and the self-possession of the diva. “You know I start every day with gratitude,” he zinged at Danspace Project at Saint Mark’s Church in October during a live recording of his forthcoming album, *More Protest Songs!* “I just thank god I don’t have children.” The audience guffawed. “It’s not anything against the children’s community,” he continued, “but I can’t keep my own sheets clean.” He may not want to be a parent, but Bassichis still imagines being a hero to future generations. “Thank god for Morgan,” he hears them saying, “that one conversation we had was *super important.*”

His stage persona also moves through the world in a naïf’s daze. Like a millennial Candide, or a wide-eyed fairy-tale prince, he is a picture of youthful befuddlement, as though pushed from his castle (his safe space) into a reality he can’t make heads or tails of—nor can it make heads or tails of him. A story he tells of seeing the actress Juliana Margulies walking in the East Village: “I see you,” he recalls her saying, and he takes her words as a sign of connection, of validation, a *shared moment*. “I see you,” she repeats, “*get away from my family.*” Later in the Saint Mark’s show, he describes being fired from a job at Veselka after a negligible stint. “Morgan,” his boss explained, “you don’t know how to *do* anything.” “Um,” the performer replied in his most respectful upspeak. “Your language is *super confusing?*”

Language can indeed be super confusing, particularly now when its used both to mediate expression and expedite it all at the same time. Bassichis’s humor takes aim (or at least, takes advantage) of the comic pratfalls inside of YouMe Speak, where entitlement and empathy battle endlessly over boundaries, personal and shared. “These are very like: Take what you like, leave the rest,” Bassichis said to his audience about his songs. Then added: “You don’t like any of them? That’s more about you.”

*Baby I've got something to say to you
You'll have friendships
I think you will
meet one in the meadow grass
but baby there are ticks in that grass...
so just go back inside / go back inside...
and you can get online
you can look at nature online
make friends online*

Language isn't just what we use to entertain ourselves, to explain ourselves, to warn ourselves. For Bassichis, words are magic too. One of his most beautiful songs—a protest song, by his naming—is but two sentences repeated over and over again, a form he returns to throughout his work:

*We cast you out.
We send you away.*



Morgan Bassichis, *The Faggots & Their Friends Between Revolutions The Musical, Pt. I*, 2017. Performance view, New Museum, New York, October 19. Photo: Chloe Foushianes.

At first, the song sounds stalled out, or like a music loop, or a glitch, his bandmates following and following as though just along for the ride. Then over time, the repetition lifts the lines into incantation, mantra. It's exquisitely beautiful, all Bassichis's wishful singing, though it sounds less like a protest, more like a lullaby. (In the words of another classic naïf: *to sleep, perchance to dream*). Midway through his Saint Mark's show, Bassichis asked his mother to read aloud a tepid review of a performance he gave in Portland. She obliged.

I understand the desire for open interpretation when it comes to art, but in this context, the audience could have used, well... some context. I wonder how much more powerful some lyrics such as "we cast you out, we send you away" could have been if he'd taken some time to name our collective baggage.

To be fair to Bassichis, he did name the collective baggage, though during a different song. (*Soda Stream! Capitalism! Police! Borders! Prison System! Fear! Exes!* he demanded, *GET ON THE RUG!*) To be fair to the reviewer, there is little recognizable protest in Bassichis's protest songs. Even when covering Holly Near's iconic "Singing for Our Lives," he sends her up.

We are on so many pills / and we are singing / singing for our lives...

And:

We are having sex in all your bathrooms / and we are singing / singing for our lives...

And then:

We watch you while you're sleeping / and we are singing / singing for our lives...

A joke is a funny thing. It's the means to flog oneself, flay oneself open in front of an audience, and also the means to self-protect against the same. Respect and humor don't necessarily negate one another, but neither are they obvious bedfellows. Why write protest songs that don't appear to protest anything? Why send up the radical voices that came before us? In his luminous and devastating essay on television and American culture *Within the Context of No Context*, the critic George W. S. Trow wrote of his relationship to a history he inherited, uncomfortably, for it did not ring true to his present. He recalled the way his father would come home from work, take off his fedora, and playfully put it on young George's head. In adulthood, Trow found that he could only sport a fedora if it was worn in jest. "A fedora hat worn by me without the necessary protective irony," he explained, "would eat through my head and kill me." Trow later amends his reaction as one fuelled not by embarrassment, but by equal measures of entitlement and feverishness—two conditions that don't neatly settle alongside one another but rather, keep one moving away from what was and in search of what should be, might be.



Morgan Bassichis, Live album recording of *More Protest Songs!*, 2017. Performance view, Danspace Project, New York, October 7. Photo: Ian Douglas.

I think about this as Bassichis introduces another song: “This one’s for after America.”

We have always been on fire
We have always been let down
We have always been an island...
...come get us.

Weeks later, at The New Museum, he presented the second part of a musical adaptation-in-progress of *The Faggots & Their Friends Between Revolutions*, a masterwork of radical literary faggotry written by Larry Mitchell in 1977. The book is a fantastical, libidinous fairytale-cum-manifesto that takes place in the land of Ramrod under the leadership of Warren-And-His-Fuckpole, where faggots and their friends (namely, women) live and love and lie in waiting for the next revolution against the culture of men. The top floor of the museum was given to Bassichis as his stage, and he made the space warm and fuzzy and sparkling with white Flokati rugs and pillows decorated with paillettes and microphones on short stands so his performers could reach them while reclining on the floor. A potluck was held before the show, and his audience lined the tables with mac and cheese and pizza and fruit cobbler and salads and other homey dishes. A sign of the times: Guests were asked to sign a waiver releasing the museum of all liability before they could come in and eat.

It could be argued that the entire history of American musical theater has been nothing but one grand, sweeping infiltration of the mainstream by radical faggotry, but the idea that a homo-topic vision of revolution could maybe possibly be a future Broadway smash is nothing less than sublime. “Do you think this is going to be the next *Hamilton*?” Bassichis asked the audience. “Yes!” everyone cheered loudly, because we also know that words are magic.

For about an hour, Bassichis passed the book around the audience, asking people to read passages aloud, then he and fellow marvels DonChristian Jones, sisters Michi and Una Osato, and TM Davy, his musical collaborator, sang and performed songs, some of the lyrics of which were taken from the book.

*When things are loose,
you can tell
the faggots
from the men.*

At one point, Bassichis sat at the feet of a group of elders and elderesses who were in attendance (including Ned Asta, the book's illustrator), all of whom had been members of the commune that inspired *The Faggots & Their Friends*. "What is a commune?" he asked them, and then, more eagerly: "What were Quaaludes like?"

"They made all of your inhibitions go away," one of them chuckled. "You could hump anything."

Bassichis lit up. "WE LOVE YOU!" he exclaimed, "DO YOU HAVE ANY LEFT?!?"



Morgan Bassichis, *The Faggots & Their Friends Between Revolutions The Musical, Pt. I*, 2017. Performance view, New Museum, New York, October 19. Photo: Chloe Foussianes.

The wisdom passed between generations isn't always heavy, though for those who've come of age in the decades after AIDS, there are histories missing, ways of being now disappeared. What is a young artist's responsibility to history, to the revolution, to the radical gesture? In *The Faggots & Their Friends*, Mitchell offered one model:

The faggots cultivate the most obscure and outrageous parts of the past. They cultivate those past events which the men did not want to happen and which, once they did happen, they wanted to forget. These are the parts the faggots love the best. And they love them so much that they tell the old stories over and over and then they act them out and then, as the ultimate tribute, they allow their lives to re-create those obscure parts of the past...And so these parts of the past are never lost. They are imprinted in the bodies of the faggots where the men cannot go.

Where the men cannot go. In the book, the men destroy all that they love and always have. They make unpleasant culture and always have. They are enemies of pleasure. They obliterate women and faggots and queers and anyone else who doesn't serve their limiting vision of an ever-expanding cosmos. Those who believe in the world of men are fearful and small, and to mask their fear and smallness, they become power hoarders. Deciders. Destroyers. Yet there are still places men cannot go, things they cannot own, spirits they cannot obliterate because spirits are energy and energy cannot be obliterated and the spirits were here long before the men took power and they will be here long after the men are gone because there exist those who protect the spirits and will always carry them forward, no matter what form they've taken on.

*We gotta keep each other alive
'cause no one else is
gonna do it.*

The audience sang along to the show's final number, and that moment, that now created by Bassichis and all, was joyful, heartening—not a protest so much as a promise, mapping a path to thrive that bends time so that what lies ahead of us bears the same beauty and ferocity as that which was left behind for us.

—Jennifer Krasinski

Morgan Bassichis performed More Protest Songs! for a live album recording on October 7th at Danspace Project in New York. Part Three of The Faggots & Their Friends Between Revolutions The Musical will be performed on Sunday, December 17th at the New Museum as part of the exhibition, "Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon."

Katherine Brewer Ball, "Morgan Bassichis by Katherine Brewer Ball", *BOMB*, June 22, 2017.

BOMB

Morgan Bassichis by Katherine Brewer Ball

"What's the point of being queer, or an artist, or a radical, if you don't veer?"



Me, But Also Everybody! (Part II), part of *Greater New York*, MoMA PS1, December 10, 2015. Photo by Charles Roussel.

Morgan Bassichis is a comedic storyteller and songstress. I met Morgan through my friend Jibz Cameron (aka Dynasty Handbag), and then again at a protest or a party. The first time I saw Morgan perform I remember laughing so hard my cheeks hurt. I leaned against the brick wall of the Creative Time tenement space, thinking I'd finally found pleasure. Morgan's performances are conversational fairytales that take the audience into the steamy underbelly bathhouses of the self-help and tincture-obsessed mind. Over the past three years, I've become a diehard Bassichian, studying the political activism and irreverence of Morgan's work with care. Yet when I find myself explaining it to my students or friends, my voice tends to trail off, not wanting to fix something that feels ethereal, resistant, and alive. Instead of saying much, I send people Instagram links to Morgan's songs on the *longue durée* of resistance. Or I tell them to watch a Lily Tomlin movie from the '80s.

Katherine Brewer Ball

This week you performed three times. And you performed for the first time with a band.

Morgan Bassichis

Yeah, I've been making music. Last year I had this homework assignment for myself, to put a song in every performance. And that was good, and juicy, because I love music. I find that it's like a lever you pull, and you go to a different floor. Then this past year I started accompanying myself on the piano, which I've been playing since I was a kid. More recently, I pulled together this band, and it was really wild to have other people on stage with me. I never really have that. I'm like, "What are you guys doing here?" But they were so easy to cohabit with.

KBB

When was the first time you performed a song in a piece?

MB

In the series I did at MoMA PS1 for *Greater New York*, each performance had a song. You know, I always think of these things as spells. I love what Suzan-Lori Parks says, “Words are spells,” and I love repetition. And I like to get people to sing together, because it’s just this thing that we all remember how to do. So, I started doing it in the PS1 series and was like, “Oh, I should bring the piano in here.” And then when I was on Fire Island last summer at the BOFFO residency, I wrote a bunch of songs about Fire Island and accompanied myself.

KBB

Yeah, I saw a picture of you performing with a keyboard to men in a pool, floating on noodles.



Fire Island Medium, BOFFO, Fire Island, New York, July 30, 2016. Photo by Faris Al-Shathir.

MB

Yes, that was my musical debut, for naked dudes in a pool! And there was a tornado or something. It was really stormy weather. I thought god was making a joke on me. It was pretty far from my usual environment. I made some joke, like, “You’re supposed to imagine the audience naked, but you guys *are* naked, so I’m imagining you in the pool having diarrhea.” It did not go over well. They were all, “You’re disgusting.” But that worked for me.

KBB

What were the Fire Island songs like?

MB

They were all just about men... well, patricide, really.

KBB

Killing their fathers, wanting their fathers?

MB

Pools full of fathers, I don’t know. But also about ghosts. There are so many ghosts over there. I’ve been thinking a lot about our queer ancestors. You know, how we’re enabled by each other, whether we like to accept that or not. I have a lot of respect for that process of being constituted by those who came before us, even if we diverge. I felt that on Fire Island. I could feel this sense of what’s passed, that ancestry.

KBB

Yeah, there’s a lot of that feeling on Fire Island.

MB

One of the songs I wrote there—“We have always been on fire”—has become a central piece in this series of weird protest songs that I’ve been working on. It was right before the election, and I was just thinking of the abysmal political present, about liberal optimism and liberal outrage. And I just kept thinking about this idea of the long histories of burning that we come from, that it didn’t start now. It was a very generative time out there.

KBB

All those knotty little fingery trees on Fire Island make me think of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. There's something witchy about that place, and the creepy deer trying to kill you with their ticks.

MB

Exactly! It's like a folktale. There's the sunken forest, there are phantom dicks hanging around. It's a real magical place.

KBB

And you did a poster campaign while you were there?

MB

Yeah, a bunch of people got together and made these cardboard posters about imagining a world without police and prisons for a Black Lives Matter national day of action. Most of them were removed immediately, so we did a second batch, plastered the main drag. Fire Island has this vexed relationship with politics. I guess around the time of the Stonewall Riots there was an effort to get people on Fire Island to take a stand, like "Stonewall is happening. You should care about police repression!" But there was this tension between the renters and the owners, which I think we can see in queer politics more generally, between assimilation and rebellion.

KBB

I've been thinking about that essay you co-wrote with Alexander Lee and Dean Spade for *Captive Genders*, called "Building an Abolitionist Trans and Queer Movement with Everything We've Got." You write, "Our ways of living and expressing ourselves break such fundamental rules that systems crash at our feet, close their doors to us, and attempt to wipe us out." I'm curious about the relationship between your writing, activism, and performance, especially in relation to the piece you recently performed at The Duplex, *Protest Songs at the Gay Bar*.



Me, But Also Everybody! (Part II), part of *Greater New York*, MoMA PS1, December 10, 2015. Photo by Charles Roussel.

MB

I'm interested in where politics "belong." And of unleashing the political potential of nonpolitical spaces, and the erotic potential of nonpolitical spaces: the gay bar, the gay beach. Gay bars have always been sites of organizing, kinship, and affiliation—and hospitality. Music to me is so hospitable. Maybe not as a rule, but it feels like an invitation into a shared experience, in the way that comedy is too. They are both an invitation to share something. I try not to do a performance where you just sit there and watch me. I'm not really interested in that kind of dynamic. We already know how to do that. I want people to collaborate and conspire with me, to be implicated, which feels political. I want people to go through an embodied experience in my shows, of going somewhere, risking something, moving through a journey together.

KBB

Your performances do feel risky. And they feel genuine and open, even as you're turning the lens on yourself. For me, it's like my insane fear of ticks, or the ridiculousness with which I think of things like almond butter or therapy. You're talking about yourself, but it feels like this risky opening outward. But, your newer stuff is sexier...

MB

Oh, what do you mean?

KBB

The piano stuff. There's a seduction happening.

MB

Tell me!

KBB

There's this seductive invitation, like, let's all do something together. You're Sarah Jessica Parker in *Hocus Pocus*, beckoning the audience to cast these counter-spells with you.

MB

"Come little children, I'll take you away..." What's sexier than a piano? There's something much more vulnerable and laid bare with music. I don't know anything more vulnerable. You can kind of hide behind a joke. A song is harder to hide behind.

KBB

I can see that.

MB

I'm also playing with earnestness and directness as an affect. If they weren't already, the people I perform for are terrified. What does it mean to acknowledge that the people you're in the room with are scared, and to be scared together? I have a song, "I know you're scared, I'm scared too," over and over. It's a permission to feel. I'm interested in intimacy; the music feels more intimate somehow.

KBB

In your performance for Zoe Leonard's *I Want a President* on the High Line, in October, you didn't give a political speech. Instead, you had everyone sing Natalie Cole's 1991 duet with her dead father, "Unforgettable... With Love." There was a kind of veering off. You don't do the liberal progressive strategy of, "Okay, If we're just out in the streets everyday..."

MB

Yeah, "If we just stick together..."

KBB

"...we'll effect change."

MB

Yeah, "If we just keep using our voices..."

KBB

"...confessing and talking louder about being homosexuals will cure all the ailments of the world."

MB

Yeah, this kind of call to unity and visibility as the prescription for all of our problems. What's the point of being queer, or an artist, or a radical, if you don't veer? What's the point?! How do we keep stretching our radical imagination, the sense of the impossible, and really claim the impossible as our domain? I'm really scared of—and interested in—the unknown. That's my whole interest in stories of the Baba Yaga and folktales.

KBB

Who is the Baba Yaga?

MB

She's this Slavic witch who lives in the middle of the forest, who you go to when you want something. Needless to say, you may not get what you want, but you're gonna get what you need! She's a figure of initiation. She's initiating young people. She says, "You're not so special, I could eat you if I wanted to." I did a performance in which Miss Israel loses her brooch and falls down a hole, then Miss Poland goes down to save her, and they end up in Baba Yaga's fireplace. Drama! Of course they're like, "This is a mistake." Nobody ends up at her dinner table and thinks, "Oh, I should be here."

I thought she was a figure that could be helpful in our conversations about Polish nationalism and Israeli nationalism and American exceptionalism. Nobody is special, basically. Everybody's special, but nobody's special. Nobody is better than anybody else. The task is to learn from her. That's what liberalism is to me: a refusal to really engage with the fundamental forms of violence that created these countries and their living histories. And we need to really turn to it and face it. I think comedy can help us do that. I think music does that.

KBB

I'm also thinking about your to-do lists, and how in one you say: "Ask my hairdresser if she thinks I'm more of a man or a woman, and just stick with that." It feels like you're trying to find both pleasure and reverence in such moments of anxiety or ambivalence.

MB

I have this idea for a Sisyphus kind of thing, where everyone just goes around and around, saying their name and pronouns forever. I have to find levity in myself. I hope that it becomes an invitation for others.

KBB

What is gender if it's not fun and pleasure too? Having to assert yourself against a power structure doesn't feel good.

MB

Yeah, I totally agree. It's so simple to say, but performance is important because it reminds us of instability, and gets us comfortable with instability. So much of my musical interests come from my mother, it's in dialogue with her. Writing songs and making music feels, again, like this thing of reverence for those who came before, and then hospitality for those who are here. I'm really interested in that, you know? I'm interested in trouble and trespassing and discomfort, but also a deep form of respect.