

From:

Imagining Otherwise: Performance Art as Queer Time and Space

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What is the time of the alternative and when will it come? How does the subversive cycle around into the dominant? How does the dominant continually situate itself as alternative? How do you get from here to somewhere else? Or, to cite the Streets: "Let's push things forward / That ain't a bag it's a shipment / This ain't a track it's a movement."ⁱ

The young cop looked at me and said: "So, it's a kind of alternative universe." I nodded and smiled. Never a truer word was uttered.ⁱⁱ

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Elena Knox (*lull*) in *lapdog*

Performing her solo show at the Old Fitzroy Hotel in Sydney's Woolloomooloo, Knox (known as *lull*) wrote, directed, performed and produced *lapdog*—a critique of the gendered and sexualized neoliberal subject rewarded for being ultra efficient and super flexible within the casual workforce.ⁱⁱⁱ Neoliberalism refers to the 'repudiation of Keynesian welfare state economics and the ascendance of the Chicago School of political economy' characterized by a radically free market and economic deregulation achieved through policies that support maximum competition and free trade.^{iv} A neoliberal mode of governance employs techniques and procedures in which the state produces supposedly rational, autonomous, responsabilized subjects, forms of citizenship and behavior, and a new organization of the social through self-regulation rather than repression or punishment.^v Citizens are encouraged to take responsibility for their own behaviours, practices and well-being and to absorb the costs and consequences of their own choices and actions. Thus the irony of Knox as sole performer (one-woman-band) should not be lost; she becomes the flexible neoliberal subject of her own critique in order that the 'show go on' in a climate of limited funding for solo performance art.^{vi}



Fusing cabaret with poetry and physical performance, Knox's postmodern style is self-reflexive, incorporating intertextuality, pastiche, fragmentation, and non-linear narrative refusing resolution. *lapdog* is structured around fourteen songs written and composed by Knox that she performs cabaret style. Writing about cabaret as cultural history, Román argues that cabaret performance constitutes a gendered genre and practice, and a contested space that throughout its history has showcased the woman singer.^{vii} Román's focus is on the ways in which cabaret performance preserves and sustains the American songbook, but Knox's performance suggests a genre of cabaret without such ties of obligation. Knox writes her own lyrics and composes her own songs—these acting as a counter-discourse to dominant narratives about class, ethnicity and gendered and sexual life. Cabaret is not simply a genre or site of performance but also as a mode of performance, characterized by fluidity and improvisation, intimacy and contact, immediacy and spectacle—a mode that confuses distinctions between performer and spectator.^{viii} Throughout her performance, Knox regularly addresses the audience, making jokes, responding to audience comments, and involving spectators within the action of the world she creates. Vogel suggests that 'the promise of a live performance organizes cabaret as a social space, and the performing has always already begun before the billed performers make an entrance'.^{ix} Since *lapdog's* venue is a theatre beneath a local pub with two bars and a bistro, patrons are encouraged to partake in the hotel's services before and after the show. Lauren Berlant and Michael

Warner's concept of queer world making which 'has required the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property or to the nation' is realized throughout Knox's performance by her direct address to the audience, her improvised responses to their comments, her movement beyond the stage and into the amphitheatre, and her general performance style.^x Understanding performance art of this kind as a queer time and space provides an opportunity to reconceptualize alternative forms of relation both personal and political. Warner argues that these intimacies do bear a necessary relation to a counterpublic—that is, a counterpublic 'enables a horizon of opinion and exchange; its exchanges remain distinct from authority and can have a critical relation to power; its extent is in principle because it is not based on a precise demography but mediated by print, theater, diffuse networks of talk, commerce, and the like.'^{xi} Knox uses performance art, and the mode of cabaret, combined with physical theatre, to create and develop a counterpublic that critiques the demands of neoliberal heteronormative culture.

In her program bill, Knox defines the word lapdog: '*noun*: a dog small and tame enough to be held in the lap; *informal*: one eager to do another's bidding, especially in order to maintain a position of privilege or favor', thus drawing attention to the performative—how a worker must 'act' (in both senses of the word) to maintain ongoing employment in a casualized workforce.^{xii} Knox's adopted persona, Dolly, is a Barbie doll that breaks free from her hot-pink Mattel Inc. box, expecting to enjoy the pleasures of the heteronormative social script that promises an endless wardrobe, boutique props, with matching campervan, a pony, and Ken.^{xiii} Creating a counter-discourse to the narrative of heteronormative and capitalist success implicit in Mattel's line of accessories, Knox's lyrics to, 'Dollhouse', offer an alternative take on the good life:

In the dollhouse the windows are small
In the dollhouse the ceilings are low
In the dollhouse you can't move at all
In the dollhouse you can't even breathe^{xiv}

For Dolly (Knox), the heteronormative framework literalized by the dollhouse is suffocating, allowing no room for movement or alternative imaginings. Barbie's creator, American business-woman Ruth Handler, was inspired by her daughter's desire to give her paper cut-out dolls adult roles despite their having infant bodies. Sensing there was

something in this dissatisfaction with the (restricted) infant body and the yearning to play with an adult doll with more figurative agentic power, Handler developed Barbie proto-types in an effort to persuade her husband (co-founder of the Mattel toy company) that an adult-style doll could be a success.^{xv} While traveling in Europe, Handler located a German doll, Bild Lilli—the ultimate working girl who knows what she wants and will use her sexual prowess to achieve it.

While Barbie and her genetic sisters were designed to show young girls that they could take on any role—Barbie amongst other professions holds a pilot's license, operates commercial airliners (whilst also serving as a flight attendant!), is a doctor, astronaut, and races a sports car amongst other professions—Knox's 'Dolly' is stuck in casual contracts undertaking secretarial duties, supermarket and parking station cashier responsibilities, stripping in men's clubs, and playing mediocre music in local bands.^{xvi} Barbie is the ultimate successful 'portfolio worker', that is, she's discursively characterized by her mobility, flexibility, multi-talents, entrepreneurial skills and is represented by Mattel in narratives styling her as an agentic subject, exercising the liberal freedom offered by second wave feminism. The portfolio worker is constituted within discourses of freedom, choice and self-invention.^{xvii} In his astute analysis of the mechanics and effects of neoliberalism, Peter Bansel points out that the collapsing of the concept of choice with that of free choice (carried out by autonomous agents who are rational, responsible subjects) is a powerful fiction.^{xviii} Throughout her performance, Dolly (Knox) reveals a mismatch between the master-narrative of the successful heteronormative neoliberal subject personified in the figure of Barbie with the 'Dolly' whose under-developed skills, limited educational opportunities, and working class background combine to show how facile is the promise both of neoliberal self-fashioning and 'the good life'.

Knox's Dolly exemplifies Halbertstam's theorizing of the productive potential and sign of failure, the figure of the failure as resistant to capitalist frameworks and aligned with queer modes that encourage 'non-conformity, anti-capitalist practices, non-reproductive life styles, negativity', and 'critique'.^{xix} Throughout her performance, Dolly (Knox) develops subversive techniques resisting the politics of consumption, while drawing attention to the heteronormative framework in which she has been explicitly designed to excel. In 'White Trash', Dolly (Knox) sings of seeing replicas of

herself in shop windows—these iterations of her ‘dolly self’ image reminiscent of that other ironic iteration: the structure of the scene within a scene (in this case, within Sam Mendes’s caustic portrayal of American family life in *American Beauty*)^{xx}:

and every time I pass myself in a shop window
i see that scene within a scene within American Beauty
a plastic bag ballerina Balanchine-ing against a brick wall
am I known for my plasticity?
for my ability as landfill?



In her critique of the Brandon archive, Halberstam cites Newitz and Wray who define white trash as ‘white people living in (often rural) poverty’ and ‘a set of stereotypes and myths related to the social behaviors, intelligence, prejudices, and gender roles of poor whites.’^{xxi} In her lyrics, Dolly (Knox) refers to that darkly sublime moment in *American Beauty*—the plastic bag, caught in a lilting eddy of air, that conveys so much of the complexity and irony of the film’s title. Dolly (Knox) is more concerned about her future as landfill, familiar with contemporary environmental politics that will see her recycled and spat out as another plastic object. Knox puns on plasticity revealing to an audience the glitches in her performance; she is unable to master her prop (an electric bass guitar too big and heavy for her) with the finesse we might expect, and in her exotic dancer’s persona so too does she get comically stuck in an awkward backbend, suggesting that she is not the flexible subject required within a neoliberal environment. While Barbie represents Halberstam’s understanding of heteronormative commonsense

which 'leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, [and] hope', Dolly represents queer space and time.^{xxii}

ⁱ J. Halberstam in C. Dinshaw, L. Edelman, R. A. Ferguson, C. Freccero, E. Freeman, J. Halberstam, A. Jagose, C. Nealon, and T. N. Hoang, (2007) 'Theorizing queer temporalities: A roundtable discussion', *GLQ: A Journal of lesbian and gay studies*, vol. 13, no. 2-3, 2007, pp. 194.

ⁱⁱ *La Clique* in The Famous Speigeltent, unpublished, care of Brett Haylock.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lull's performance artworks have been staged in Australia, New York and Wales. Showcases include Women and Theater Program (New York University), The Magdalena Project (Wales), Centre for Performance Research (UK), Studio (Sydney Opera House), Performance Space (*Living Museum of Fetishized Identities*, La Pocha Nostra), SBW Stables Theatre, Darlinghurst Theatre, Basement, Peats Ridge Festival and Cockatoo Island Festival. She has appeared for Ensemble Theatre, Theatre South and in Jane Campion's *Holy Smoke*. Her works have been broadcast on ABC, published by Vagabond Press, and supported by the Literature, New Media, Theatre and Music Boards of the Australia Council for the Arts. She is currently creating a second solo show, filming digital shorts and recording an album.

^{iv} See Wendy Brown, 'Neo-liberalism and the end of liberal democracy', *Theory and Event*, vol. 7. No. 1, 2003, section 6.

^v Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, eds., *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality with two lectures by and an interview with Michel Foucault*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 48; Wendy Brown, 'Neo-liberalism and the end of liberal democracy', *Theory and Event*, vol. 7. No. 1, 2003, section 1.

^{vi} In her program notes, Elena Knox (Lull) gratefully acknowledges creative development funding from Playworks, the Myer Foundation and bUzz (The Australia Council for the Arts), but this particular production phase was principally funded by Lull and Lean Productions (company of *lapdog's* designer Tom Rivard).

^{vii} David Román, *Performance in America*, p. 179.

^{viii} See Shane Vogel's, 'Where are we now?: Queer World Making and Cabaret Performance', *GLQ*, Vol. 6, no.1, pp. 35.

^{ix} Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, 'Sex in Public', in *Publics and Counterpublics*, New York Zone Books, 2005, pp.187-208.

^x Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, 'Sex in Public', p.199. See also Shane Vogel's, 'Where are we now?'

^{xi} Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, 'Sex in Public' and Michael Warner, 'Public and Private', p.56.

^{xii} Elena Knox (Lull) also generates an alphabetical list of synonyms for lapdog: 'adulator, apple polisher, back scratcher, bootlick, brownnoser, crawler, cringer, doormat, fan, fawner, flatterer, flunky, footlicker, glad-hander, gofer, groupie, handshaker, instrument, lackey, lickspittle, minion, parasite, politician, puppet, slave, sniveler, spaniel, sponger, stooge, toadeater, truckler', *lapdog* program notes.

^{xiii} Designed by architect, Tom Rivard, Dolly's "carton", Dolly Carton, is made of wood and includes built-in lights, motors and sound equipment as well as a retractable disco catwalk. Philophonnic designed and implemented all the electronics, motors and sounds. Tom Rivard and Philophonnic operated Dolly Carton in performance. The overall height when assembled is 2700mm, and with its chimney, about another 2850mm. Barbie has had over forty pets including cats and dogs, horses, a panda, a lion cub, and a zebra. She has owned a wide range of vehicles, including pink convertibles, trailers and jeeps.

^{xiv} Elena Knox, *lapdog*, unpublished.

^{xv} The adult-style Barbie doll released in 1959 was followed by the inaugural child beauty pageants that began in the United States in the 1960s. The beauty pageant stages contradictory discourses about childhood innocence and the construction of the child whose appearance is

sexualized through the clothing she wears, her movements, gestures, facial expressions, the application of make-up and her representation of self through music and dance styles. See K. H. Robinson and C. Davies, 'She's kickin' ass, that's what she's doing': deconstructing childhood innocence in media representations', *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol.23, no.57.npn.

^{xvi} NASCAR Barbie belonged to The National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing, which is the largest sanctioning body of stock cars in the United States.

^{xvii} Peter Bansel, 'Subjects of choice and lifelong learning, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol. 20, no.3, 2007, p.286.

^{xviii} Peter Bansel, 'Subjects of choice and lifelong learning, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol. 20, no.3, 2007, p.286.

^{xix} J. Halberstam, 'Notes on Failure', unpublished paper.

^{xx} Sam Mendes is an English stage and film director. As a stage director, he is probably best known for his 1998 production of *Cabaret*, starring Alan Cumming. As a film director, he is best known for his debut film, *American Beauty*, for which he won an Academy Award for Directing.

^{xxi} J. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Space*, p.28.

^{xxii} J. Jack Halberstam, *Failure*, unpublished.