

ARTFORUM



John Waters, *Twelve Assholes and a Dirty Foot*, 1996, thirteen C-prints, wood, velvet curtain, 1' 10" x 11' 7" x 6 3/4".

Garbage Man

By: Sam McKinniss
October 2018

GORE VIDAL, the author, once said that people should never turn down the opportunity to have sex or be on television. Having seen television recently, I doubt he meant to equate the pleasures of sex with the experience of being on TV; rather, I suspect, he was trying to suggest that America is a land of opportunity, and that it would thus be un-American and potentially rude for a citizen of this country to turn down one opportunity or the other. I'm not sure. Many people might assume that the act of appearing on television validates lived experience in a manner similar to the way that intercourse can be life-affirming, or that no other media genre, aside from pornography, substantiates human life quite as efficiently as talk shows, news programs, documentaries, or reality TV, what with their unsubtle characterizations and narrative constructions of divulgence, discovery, and revelation, of conflict and climax, of resolution. Conclusions are drawn, quite often, predictably, to include a moral in the end. Representation matters, I guess, in that it's probably fun to see your literal self represented on some show. But then again, maybe not. As David Hockney once told the art critic Martin Gayford, "CNN likes to think it is showing you reality, whereas you might argue it's simply showing you crappy art." I like having sex. In regard to that activity, I prefer John Waters's oft-repeated advice much more than I do Vidal's: "If you go home with somebody, and they don't have books, don't fuck 'em."



Still of John Waters appearing on the TV show *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, ca. 1990.

Sometime during the early 1990s, Waters was featured at home (a manse replete with stacks of crowded bookshelves) on an episode of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, a TV program that used to offer viewers a good gawk at just how extremely well a few people lived in those days. Waters was somewhat hard to take seriously on that show—that is, as an opulent person of supposed extraordinary wealth—but I believe he may have been aware of the situation’s absurdity. During one brief vignette, Waters refuses to answer a phone call his assistant says is from Mother Teresa. A little later we see him enjoying himself at Club Charles, a local Baltimore dive bar.



John Waters, *Polyester*, 1981, 35 mm, color, sound, 86 minutes. Francine Fishpaw (Divine) and Todd Tomorrow (Tab Hunter).

On the topic of Baltimore, he tells *Lifestyles*: “I live here because I’m inspired here by it, it’s home sweet home. I wish everybody stayed home, where they grew up. Think about how great America would be. You’d go to Indiana to be on David Letterman . . . It’d be much more fun, instead of just going to two cities.”

YEARS EARLIER, in 1982, Waters was a guest for the first time on *Late Night with David Letterman*, along with his longtime muse, the rotund drag queen known as Divine. The show was taped in New York. Divine sings a song (“Born to Be Cheap”) before the three of them chat. Waters and Divine were promoting their fifth feature-length film together, 1981’s *Polyester*. Six years later, in 1988, they would celebrate the release of a bona fide crossover hit, *Hairspray*. It was their final collaboration. Three weeks after the film’s national premiere, Divine would be dead of a heart attack.



David Letterman interviewing John Waters and Divine on *Late Night with David Letterman*, March 18, 1982.

Letterman asks Waters how he discovered Divine:

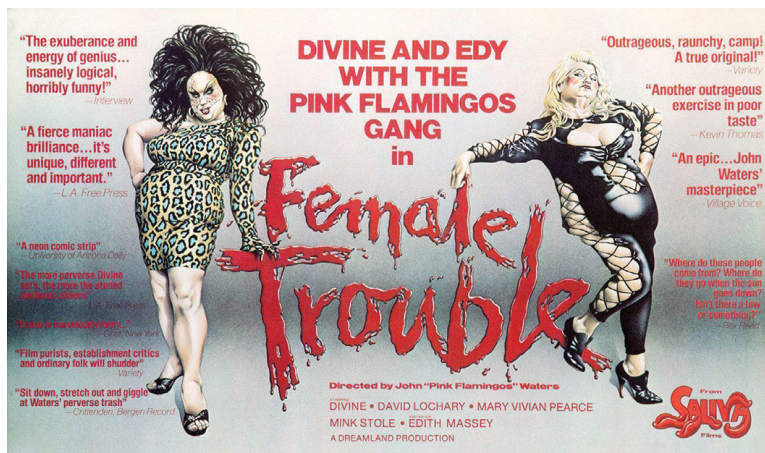
"I first saw Divine and I just thought: 'raw beauty.' We lived in the same neighborhood, and because to me beauty is looks that you can never forget, and I've walked down the street with Divine and seen car accidents happen." Divine: "Then you know you look good."

Later, Letterman asks Waters about his point of view as a filmmaker. Waters says, "I find humor in all the things that are terrible about America and things that people have anxiety about. . . . There's a lot of crime in my films. In *Female Trouble*, Divine plays a person that wants to get the electric chair because she wants crime so much that that's like getting the Academy Award in her profession."

Despite having never won an Academy Award, Waters is probably America's most beloved living auteur. It has been necessary for him to learn how to appear on television. We know this not only because we've seen him do it countless times, but because he's a celebrity, and celebrities are supposed to appear on-screen as part of their role in society. However, the remarkable thing about Waters—whose much-acclaimed film work is shockingly depraved, and whose signature look is decidedly, perfectly odd—is the sizable cadre of off-putting, nontelegenic, and yet unforgettably wonderful performers he's thrust into the spotlight. They appear before his camera as truly weird but inspired iconoclasts, known collectively as "the Dreamlanders," with Divine utmost among them. Waters hired the Dreamlanders from within his own local friend network to act out deplorable plotlines against God and country, all shot on location within the ugly confines of Baltimore, a city slightly south of the Mason-Dixon Line and far, far away from New York or Los Angeles.

A common theme emerges across several films, something to do with the outsider's will to fame or notoriety by way of perversion. Waters's most unpalatable protagonists do not have time for victimhood, though they do often suffer. Indeed, we see his characters endure indignity after indignity. Even so, each player relishes his or her freakish identity at levels of self-acceptance so illogical—so commercially unviable—that they become comical and charismatic and thus worthy of love anyway. We see actors such as Divine, Edith Massey, or Ricki Lake making giant spectacles of themselves, working hard to prove their innate beauty and star power, to finally earn our lasting adoration.

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Poster for John Waters's *Female Trouble*, 1974.

In *Female Trouble* (1974), an early Waters masterpiece, Divine plays Dawn Davenport, an abjectly dissatisfied teenage-rape survivor who runs away from home and grows up to become a single mother, getting by as a stripper-burglar-prostitute. One day, she's discovered by Donald and Donna Dasher, a cultish couple of high-fashion hairstylists played by fellow Dreamlanders David Lochary and Mary Vivian Pearce. The Dashers welcome Dawn into their employ as a model, molding her bold appearance into ever more audacious looks and encouraging her illegal behavior as part of a diabolical effort to prove their theory that "crime is beauty." They succeed: Dawn's face is mutilated in an acid attack, and a star is born, freshly disfigured. One Dasher

photo shoot has Dawn ravenously pantomiming criminal activities. “These photos will be art! Hard-core art!” the Dashers exclaim.



Still from John Waters's *Female Trouble*, 1974, 16 mm, color, sound, 97 minutes. Dawn Davenport (Divine).



Still from John Waters's *Female Trouble*, 1974, 16 mm, color, sound, 97 minutes. Dawn Davenport (Divine).



Still from John Waters's *Female Trouble*, 1974, 16 mm, color, sound, 97 minutes. Defense Lawyer (Seymour Avigdor) and Dawn Davenport (Divine).



Still from John Waters's *Female Trouble*, 1974, 16 mm, color, sound, 97 minutes. Dawn Davenport (Divine).

In the film's climax, Dawn performs a nightclub act produced by the Dashers at a sold-out Baltimore theater. She shakes, shimmies, and somersaults her way through a trampoline routine in a skintight white jumpsuit, her hair shaved and teased into a super-tall Mohawk. She climbs into a tiny playpen filled with dead fish and masturbates with one before hurling it at the audience. They go nuts. She produces a handgun from somewhere and waves it around wildly. Dawn asks the crowd, "Who wants to be famous? Who wants to die for art?" Some guy says he does, so she shoots him dead. Pandemonium ensues. Eventually, she is apprehended by the police and sentenced to death: "I'd like to thank all the wonderful people that made this great moment in my life come true." Dawn's last words are famous. "All the fans who died so fashionably," she rasps, ". . . and especially all those wonderful people who were kind enough to read about me in the newspapers and watch me on television news shows. Without all of you my career would never have gotten this far . . . it is you who I've murdered for and it is you that I will die for. Please remember I love every fucking one of you!"

As ingenious, thrilling, and funny as this must seem to audiences now, it is worth noting that Divine was misunderstood, if not wholly despised, during much of his lifetime. He was fat, after all, which movie-goers have never liked very much (and still don't), as well as queer.



Dennis Rodman, Rockefeller Center, New York, August 21, 1996. Photo: Mitchell Gerber/Corbis/VCG via Getty Images.

"I wanted people to run when they saw Divine, like a horror film," Waters says in *Divine Trash*, a 1998 documentary about their collaborative friendship. "I wanted him to be the Godzilla of drag queens . . . and other drag queens were so square then, they wanted to be Miss America and they wanted to be Donald Trump, basically, that was their values, and they hated Divine." It would be a long time before RuPaul started winning Emmys, or before Kalup Linzy could get a Conceptual art gig on *General Hospital*; it was a long time before Dennis Rodman started signing autographs while wearing a bridal gown.

In light of the staid state of '60s and '70s drag arts, and considering as well the endemic homophobia that would never show a single sign of breaking in this country until roughly 1997—when the second-nicest lady in the world, Ellen DeGeneres, came out as a lesbian to the first-nicest lady in the world, Oprah Winfrey—Waters's early efforts to push Divine toward center stage seem even more aggressive, and profoundly daring, given that there was zero indication that either one of them would live to enjoy popular appeal.

Risky, but that's Waters's entire filmic strategy: Turn disadvantage into tactical advantage; hyperbolize the outrageous and move your outsider inside. Push the envelope off a cliff, in other words. In his best movies, Waters abuses mainstream sensibilities so forcibly he ends up warping our fears of the ostracized other into laughably demented milestones of cinematic release. Furthermore, he sees entertainment for what it actually is, a civilizing force as well as a widely accepted form of currency. When Waters spends it, monsters get laughs, audiences line up to fall in love with the monsters, and then the monsters get *paid*. Divine died the night before he was scheduled to tape a lucrative guest appearance on the Fox network sitcom *Married . . . with Children* (1986–97). Now, that's what I call credit in the straight world.

But I digress.

THE BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART has organized a John Waters retrospective, opening this month, titled "Indecent Exposure." Curated by Kristen Hileman, it focuses on his visual-arts projects and is the first-ever major exhibition of his work held in his hometown. Among the more than 160 objects on view will be photographs, sculptures, sound works, and videos, with some pieces dating from before his gallery career, which began in 1995 with an exhibition called "My Little Movies" at Colin de Land's American Fine Arts.



John Waters, *Campaign Button*, 2004, latex paint, steel, plywood, and epoxy on Masonite, 60 x 60".

Campaign Button, a sculpture from 2004, will be back on public display just in time for midterm election season, in case you were wondering. The oversize disc spans sixty inches in diameter, sloganeering in naughty red, white, and blue: HAVE SEX IN A VOTING BOOTH!

The thing may seem like a fun and flirty suggestion on how best to express love of country, or else a nod to the *personal is political* crowd, but, actually, this gigantic button is a direct reference to a scene from Waters's *Pecker*. In that 1998 film, a vivaciously enterprising Manhattan art dealer (Lili Taylor) visits Baltimore and discovers a young photographer named Pecker (Edward Furlong). Recognizing talent, she gives him a solo show in New York, introduces him to art-world elites, and immediately sells out his pictures; they are grainy, black-and-white, somewhat feckless or unskilled, but not without humor and charm. He becomes an overnight sensation. He makes the cover of *Artforum* and is offered a show at the Whitney Museum of

American Art. It all proves too good to be true; his life immediately starts falling apart when the sudden pressures of success and media attention begin wreaking havoc on the relationships he enjoyed at home.



Still from John Waters's *Pecker*, 1998, 35 mm, color, sound, 87 minutes. Pecker (Edward Furlong) and Shelley (Christina Ricci).



Still from John Waters's *Pecker*, 1998, 35 mm, color, sound, 87 minutes. Pecker (Edward Furlong).



Still from John Waters's *Pecker*, 1998, 35 mm, color, sound, 87 minutes. Pecker (Edward Furlong).

In an effort to win back his skeptical girlfriend, a salty little laundress named Shelley (Christina Ricci), Pecker follows her into a voting booth, where she's gone to hide from him. She doesn't feel like voting, exactly; she just feels ignored. (Don't we all.) Pecker tells her how much he loves her before launching into a lot of sweet talk about the meanings of art and life. "I don't understand any of that art crap," she says.

"You could if you just opened your eyes. . . . Art is everywhere. . . . Be spontaneous for once in your life."

"Pecker, I'm scared. You mean the almond brown of a stubborn mildew stain could be beautiful?" Shelley loves dirty laundry.

“Yes! Yes, let your mind go and you’ll be free forever: . . . Art, Shelley! Art!”

She gets it, suddenly, so the two of them become horny. They have sex in the booth, much to the horror of the presiding volunteer election official, played by Dreamlander Mink Stole.

Nearly everything in Waters’s visual-art practice makes reference to the movies, just as several of his movies contain scenes with characters rallying around the cause of fine art.



John Waters, . . . *And Your Family Too*, 2009, four C-prints, each 11 × 14”.

Nearly everything in Waters’s visual-art practice makes reference to the movies, just as several of his movies contain scenes with characters rallying around the cause of fine art. It’s reflexive. For instance, there’s a 2009 set of four chromogenic prints: photographs of words arranged as the sentence CONTEMPORARY ART HATES YOU. That’s fine, and probably true, but as is the case with many of his photographs, these portray words displayed on TV screens. Consider that for a moment and you might start feeling like the television hates you, too, and you might not be wrong.



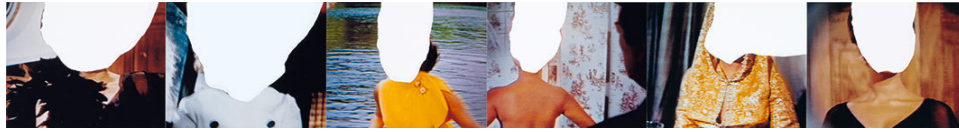
John Waters, *Neurotic*, 2009, four C-prints, each 8 × 10”.

Neurotic, also from 2009, is a set of four black-and-white photographs arranged in a grid; these closely cropped shots show hands holding title cards that read SORROW, ANXIETY, SUFFERING and DISAPPOINTMENT. It seems sad, like a vintage infomercial detailing the symptoms of clinical depression, but I have to laugh at Waters’s severe yet jaunty reedit.



John Waters, *Clarabelle*, 2000, two C-prints, each 8 × 10”.

I do not feel like laughing at *Clarabelle*, 2000, a work consisting of two black-and-white photographs of Howdy Doody's mute clown sidekick from the popular '50s kids' show. Waters's diptych sets us up for a visual punch line, yet because the artist refuses to provide any sort of caption or title beyond a stage name (as, say, a meme might), the heavily made-up clown appears confused and unhappy, at a loss for words. In the image at left, Clarabelle looks dismally off to the side at something or someone outside the frame. In the right-hand image, he stares just as dismally out at the youngsters tuning in, hoping to be entertained, an audience that of course includes the now-adult Waters, snapping back at the clown with his own camera, watching TV at home in Baltimore a half-century later. It's like gazing into an abyss.



John Waters, *Sophia Loren Decapitated*, 1998, six torn C-prints, each 8 × 10".

The sensation repeats. In *Sophia Loren Decapitated*, 1998, the artist has torn into six photographs of the actor, voiding all of her remaining entertainment value by removing her head and revealing the projected white light that previously illuminated her face, a glaring blankness hidden just beyond the flimsy impressions of celluloid film. Taking in another photo set, this one featuring five rephotographed images of a vampy Ann-Margret, I play back the lyrics in my head to the singer-actor's signature ballad, "What Am I Supposed to Do?" And I really wonder.

I wonder, frankly, because a lot of Waters's art sucks. Looking at it is a lousy experience that leaves me wanting less of it, more often than not. But Waters must know this. He must be aware of what "bad on purpose" means in a gallery context, as any contemporary art connoisseur would be. His earnest appreciation for "shitty" art is well-documented in essays and interviews. He has expressed enthusiastic admiration for the childish scribbling of Cy Twombly; for the boring, "airport" banality of Fischli & Weiss; and—to offer a more specific example—for Mike Kelley's 1991 painting of a turd, *Wedged Lump*, a work that Waters happens to own, in fact, along with several others by that late master of grandly pathetic doom.

Considering this, Waters's efforts as an artist may best be understood as a kind of detournement. When he cuts up, samples, or repurposes an existing piece of film or TV in order to fashion a new work of art, he does so in acknowledgment of his own coveted status and credibility within the Hollywood sphere. His art projects attempt to reverse our impressions of him as *that guy*; to thwart, retard, or otherwise confound our hardwired cultural expectations of the movies; to antagonize the average viewer's incessant demands for *more entertainment*. As a late-career artist endowed with political intelligence, he is aware that he, the celebrated filmmaker, ought to be the one rerouting these very demands. If his "Little Movies" fail to impress, they nevertheless go to work anyway, doing the little things they can as *spectacular disappointments*. This is Waters's self-consciously contrarian move around the uncanny, recuperative success of his films, films that never fail to amuse, even as they continue to carry out their original mission of offending uptight jerks.



John Waters, *Grace Kelly's Elbows*, 1998, eight C-prints, each 5 × 7".

"I THINK THERE ARE MANY of my pieces that people could look at and go, 'Huh?'" Waters says in a 2004 interview with fellow filmmaker Todd Solondz. "For example, [the 1998 work] *Grace Kelly's Elbows*. Some people might ask, 'Well, why shoot that?' And the reason I did is because I think she has beautiful elbows and nobody has ever mentioned that. Men always look at women and talk about their tits or their asses. Well, women's elbows can be beautiful too."

Don't get him wrong: Waters likes butts sometimes. In *Twelve Assholes and a Dirty Foot*, 1996, we're treated to a dozen close-ups of men exposing their cracks to reveal gaping holes for excited porno consumers. The photo set concludes at far right with, you guessed it, some dude's filthy tootsie. Recalling Courbet's infamously gorgeous *L'origine du monde* (except more like the end of the world), the work comes with its own curtain, a

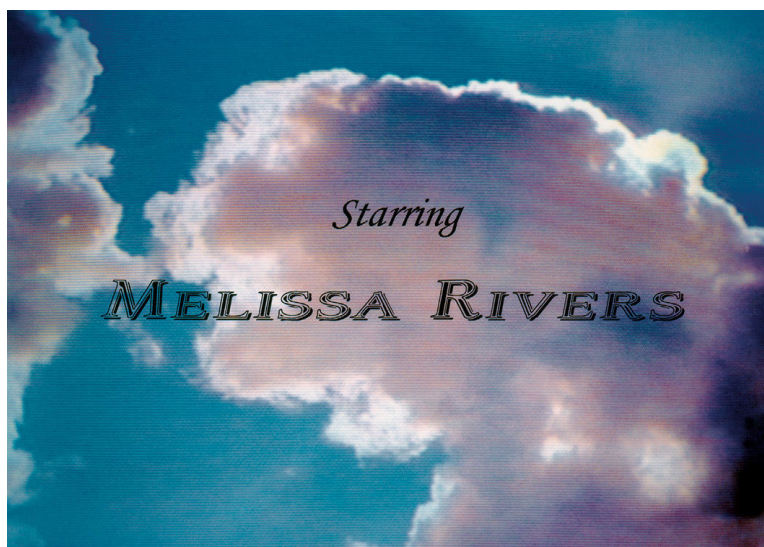
red velvet cinematic shroud embroidered at top with the artist's initials, ready to conceal the work should the censors demand it.

A nice complement to that piece is *Haunted*, 2006, another rephotographed video title. It reads MY ASS IS HAUNTED, snapped from a skin flick starring adult-film star Belladonna. That particular movie was not intended to entice gay male fans, although when frozen in Waters's viewfinder, the disengaged title becomes a cheeky declaration of homosexual longing and loneliness, of mysterious anal-retentiveness.



John Waters, *Haunted*, 2006, C-print, 9 1/4 × 14".

Melissa, 2006, is the most startling image Waters has ever executed (in this vein, at least). It has the indecency, and so the power, to encapsulate an entire life from its beginning and middle all the way to its end. Waters calls our attention to *Tears and Laughter: The Joan and Melissa Rivers Story*, a 1994 made-for-TV movie in which a B-list celebrity daughter and her comedienne mother play themselves, acting out the bathetic true story of their own tragic existence. In Waters's image, a solitary, pitiful phrase—STARRING MELISSA RIVERS—appears adrift in a partly cloudy sky as if floating off to heaven, discorporate and free from desire, nary a mention of Joan anywhere, a reminder that we all leave this world the same way that we enter it, utterly alone, without even your mother.



John Waters, *Melissa*, 2006, C-print, 17 × 24".

Speaking again to Solondz: "Somebody once said that the snottiest thing I ever wrote—which was an artist statement that I tried to have fun with and which was sent out as a press release for one of my shows—was that my work is really about the sadness normal people feel because they're not involved in show business. I didn't mean it to be snotty. But I do believe that every person who isn't in show business is a little depressed

because they're not. People just go to work and come home feeling guilty about not being a movie star. Even though you and I know how depressing it can be to be in show business!"

Truly, we live in the future, where everyone has a legitimate shot at becoming world-famous for fifteen minutes and everyone is depressed.

Truly, we live in the future, where everyone has a legitimate shot at becoming world-famous for fifteen minutes and everyone is depressed. "Fame, in the American context, equals existence itself," wrote the novelist Gary Indiana in a 2004 essay on Waters. "This is a country where the idea of 'being somebody' means that other people know about you. Even the Unabomber needed his fifteen minutes of fame to feel that he really existed." Presumably, to be known about is to be cared for, attended to, a salve for ignominious depression and feelings of worthlessness. But on the other hand, things change when you "make it": To cite the title of Thomas Wolfe's 1940 novel, *you can't go home again*.

But then, maybe you could go back, especially if you never really left in the first place, hell-bent as you were on vexing the neighbors.



John Waters, *Twelve Assholes and a Dirty Foot*, 1996, thirteen C-prints, wood, velvet curtain, 1' 10" x 11' 7" x 6 3/4".

Waters, finally, waxes nostalgic: "I remember when I was about ten years old, I went to the Baltimore Museum of Art and brought home a little Miró print and hung it in my bedroom," he says to Solondz. "And the kids who came over would say, 'Oh, that's ugly!' 'Horrible!' 'That's hideous!' And I was thrilled! I thought, 'Oh my God, art works.'"

"John Waters: Indecent Exposure" is on view at the Baltimore Museum of Art, October 7, 2018–January 6, 2019; travels to the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio, February 2–April 21, 2019.

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