

PERFORMANCE

## LIVE AFTER DEATH

May 07, 2019 • Jess Barbagallo on Anohni's *SHE WHO SAW BEAUTIFUL THINGS*



Anohni, *SHE WHO SAW BEAUTIFUL THINGS*, 2019. Performance view, The Kitchen, New York, April 20, 2019. Photo: Paula Court.

**IN THE LOBBY OF THE KITCHEN**, a small black table offers tiny plastic cups of clear alcohol—wine or liquor I can't be sure, and I don't actually know the color of absinthe, but it seems like an appropriately gothic choice for this event—a staging of Anohni's *SHE WHO SAW BEAUTIFUL THINGS*, advertised as “a two-act surrealist and absurdist drama containing music, painting, video and performance.” I imagine the preshow drink

as ritualistically endowed with a kind of ceremonial magic useful for conjuring up the past. A merch table offers, among other staples, vinyls of Anohni's music, which I first encountered in 2005 when she produced under the moniker Antony and the Johnsons. My then-girlfriend made me a mix CD featuring the song "Cripple and the Starfish," originally released in 1996, anticipating that I might be one of those gender deviants who could—and would, eventually—remove to regenerate. As the lyrics go: "Watch! I'll even cut off my finger! / It will grow back like a Starfish!" Pure maudlin ecstasy, the words made no sense then, and the puzzle only thickened for me as happiness and hurt marry in the song's subsequent verses.

I never really knew what a Johnson was. Today I understand the reference as an homage to Marsha P. Johnson, the now-deceased trans activist, Hot Peaches performer, and patron saint of a generation of queers and transfolk who would follow her.

Overwhelmed by the minor gala nature of the proceedings, only later do I recognize my feeling of estrangement as more akin to being on the periphery of someone else's grief, reformulated as art. I note a large white screen and three platforms. Two sculptures frame the playing space—stage left a white buck at ease and stage right a fountain. I clock who I recognize and who I do not—it's a visual arts crowd, I suppose. There's an errant child seated directly in front of me, some eccentrics house center, a cross section of queers in the know who make things, scattered and serious. Another eye might see the audience as concentric circles of sympathy, the radiant center being the late Dr. Julia Yasuda, an original member of The Johnsons performance group who passed away in 2018, and muse, collaborator and friend to Anohni. For those who attended the group's mid-'90s performances at The Pyramid Club, this is a different show and it is an honor to bear witness to the reunion.



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A marquee artist surrounded by other name artists—in this case, Laurie Anderson, Lorraine O’Grady, and Charles Atlas to name a few—can be a recipe for disappointment, highlighting the tension between theater and performance art as distinct modalities for time-based live artworks. Theater is often cast as the dork uncle for punk kids getting to the heart of the matter (authenticity?) in bars and clubs. But there is a shared DNA, and I find a work most exquisite when these tactics braid, bleed, and bend to each other. Rather than faithfully cohering to the strictures of genre, “She Who Saw Beautiful Things” achieves a remarkable parataxis through carefully sequenced conversational vignettes and arranged tableaux; non sequitur obscures the piece’s steady march toward collective transfiguration.

The “plot synopsis” provided in a hand-drawn zine-esque program is sandwiched between a math theorem, a shopping list, a line of text in Japanese, and a short poem. The program

works as a mind map in which the user can make choices about where they wish to go. This is play as installation; it installs itself in parts of the mind perhaps gone dormant, or in vulnerable organs that atrophy and rebel with age. Anohni writes in the handout:

*A hermaphrodite searches for her parents at the end of the world. Her search takes her through the corridors of tenements, hospitals, prisons and insane asylums. She encounters a fury of characters along the way, including Crumbs the Prostitute, the Lump and a Deer Monster. Defiled, the hermaphrodite murders her father. The Horse of the Apocalypse drives fire across the sky. Finally the hermaphrodite is shot in the back while she's running across the courtyard of a concentration camp, and dies in the arms of an old transsexual. Blood and sorrow transform her into the Weeping Vaginal Christ.*

It's a succinct summation of what unfolds as a bizarro pageant of interconnecting cabaret acts, like Strindberg's *Dream Play* on acid delivered with a precision drip to the medulla. I deliberately attribute a conceptual metamorphosis to the piece at large rather than to "the hermaphrodite" I attempt to follow through these Stations of the (Inverted) Cross. Steinian landscape subsumes traditional notions of protagonist as interstitial articulations of sexed bodies are brought to the foreground, delivering twilight dispatches to the misguided world which has "weirded" them. Our first narrator, Charlie (Charles Atlas), opens the piece with a cool vengeance-as-cautionary tale:

*Let me train you on a cruel line.*

*You never thought I existed. But I do. After death.*

*Let me bathe in my digital record of your Iris, Iris, Iris.*

*See how I turn, like a vomiting cat?*

*Like a curl of yellow acid, towards you?*

Slinky and feral, the enigmatic cat functions as transfemme metonym; later we will hear Marsha, Girl (Connie Girl, stunning in her placidity) recount in an interview, culled from the 1972 anthology *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation*:



*MONARCH VOICE: Isn't it dangerous sometimes when someone thinks you're a woman and then they find out you're a man?*

*MARSHA, GIRL: Yes it is. You can lose your life; I've almost lost my life five times. I think I'm like a cat.*



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If there is a Christ to be found here, in the face of such blunt non-metaphorical violence, she is as splintered and strangely anonymous as the Eucharist received in communion. The religious undertones are less than opaque. In an early dialogue, two figures called Wendy and Crumbs the Prostitute sit next to each other in simple black chairs, opining over the aforementioned “inverted cross” just behind them. Wendy, played by the otherworldly Michael Cavadias in nitrous-laced vocal inflections, laments: “I wonder if a Christian will come soon to turn it the right way round again.” Wendy is full of such off-kilter one-liners, and the audience generally receives them with a stoic sobriety. But what is the appropriate

response when Wendy buoyantly remarks, after Crumbs is infected with AIDS by a mosquito she renames Monarch Butterfly: “What a sleigh ride! I hope Goddess sends me a sign when it is time for me to kill myself”? These jokes numbly hang in the air like a sitcom being staged in a gallery-*cum*-morgue, complete with Anderson on keys to perform the autopsy. Iconic in her short ruffled hair and white jacket, Anderson sings a song, later intoning as a docent holds a mic to her mouth: “I take and take and take and take and take and take and take.” Funny and smartly stupid; there is no intelligence great enough to bring back the dead, but there is acerbic wit to keep the dying company.

I’m still troubled by what I cannot remember. In the first act, I know I saw a body on the floor and I know I saw blood rain down upon them. And in the second act, I saw this figure on the floor again, but I do not know if it was the same person or if another body had taken its place, the figure serving as a nod toward the dying dreamer who receives vision and visitation, and if I myself might be the dying dreamer, as dying is inherent in living. In between, I know Marsha, Girl told me a story about STAR House—the shelter for trans sex workers and LGBT street youth founded by Johnson and Sylvia Rivera of the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries—and that I was touched by Marsha’s empathy for a lesbian tenant who kept having her methadone stolen from her. I was moved again in act two, when a mother-figure called Lost Forever (Marti Wilkerson) tells her child (or everyone’s child), Bloodsnow (Eliza Douglas), to approach her father, to whom she has not spoken in years. In a work that could be accused of excessive crypticism, this scene of the genderqueer child confronting a parent is simple and familiar:

*FATHER: What do you want me to say?*

*BLOODSNOW: Feminine one. I could learn from you. Your arrival promises good luck for our family. I will always protect you, and treasure you.*

But Bloodsnow is murdered for her admission. While chronologically ambiguous, these anecdotes of queer life, from STAR House to the Beckettian apocalyptic world of Bloodsnow, are focused through a collective attempt to survive transmisogyny—disparate, yet full of kinship.



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In a way, *SHE WHO SAW BEAUTIFUL THINGS* is an indescribable work, and encapsulating it is like trying to write a book report on a Kathy Acker novel. This production feels heavily indebted to Acker's signature melding of obscenity and feminist autofiction immediacy. Certain vignettes and textures seared themselves inside me, particularly an eloquent cross made by Lorraine O'Grady near the top of the second act. The octogenarian comes onstage in her blazer, beautiful and tiny with age. She's playing a character named LI-A and I don't know why that name. On the night I attended, she turns to a kind assistant before mounting a staircase, loudly whispering, "Now?" And perhaps not hearing the assistant's affirmative she asks again, "Now?" It is breathtaking, the way she takes her time up the stairs, heavy with a full life's gravitas. As she crosses the stage, she says: "I have a swelling under back of my ribs. It's my 'hump.'" I think the hump she is referring to is her heart, the weight of which certainly performs a toll.

*Anohni's SHE WHO SAW BEAUTIFUL THINGS was performed at the Kitchen in New York City on April 19, 20, and 22. "Love," an exhibition of Anohni works in painting, drawing, photography, sculpture, and video, is on view through May 11.*

— Jess Barbagallo

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