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Slocum, Amy Marie, “Marianne Vitale” *Flaunt*, January 8, 2016

FLAUNT



Exhibition view, “The Missing Book of Spurs,” (2013)

“We’re distilling our own moonshine in bronze-casted douche bags”^{*}—Where the contemporary artist Marianne Vitale sits across from her 2013 interview with the New York Observer

Marianne Vitale, the New York-based animator, sculptor, filmmaker, and performance artist, received her BFA in Film from the School of Visual Arts, New York in 1995. She has exhibited consistently since 2006, debuting her film “Patron,” in 2010 at the Whitney Biennial, and her show *What I Need to Do is Lighten the Fuck up About a Lot of Shit* to rave reviews at Zach Feuer Gallery in New York in 2012.

What I Need to Do is Lighten the Fuck up About a Lot of Shit, exists in seven components: “Barns,” “Outhouses,” “Burned Bridges,” “Markers,” “False Fronts,” “Cold Cuts,” and “Torpedoes.” “Burned Bridges” are reproductions of covered bridges from across the U.S. After meticulously reproducing the structures, Vitale then set the bridges on fire. The charred remains were exhibited on blocks in a large, white-walled space at Zach Feuer.

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Although there is sometimes an element of snideness to Vitale's work, the overarching feeling is one of playfulness, and a "sense of being"*.1 welcomed into a very good inside joke. In her most recent show at Zach Feuer, *Nine Worthies*, she presented repurposed "common crossings," railroad apparatus that prevent the wheel of a train from dropping into a gap. The large steel structures are propped upright, resembling totemic gods from an extinct civilization.

Exhibition view, "Nine Worthies," (2014).

Vitale responded to our queries over email from her studio in New York.

Is profanity interesting?

Of course profanity is interesting. It's one of the most complex parts of language. Although it's hard to know the iterations of swear words, literature has clearly shown the importance of profanity and obscenity as cultural vernacular. The development of swear words and their usage is also something to look at. The common usage and connotations of a lot of these words have remained almost static. Take the teenage hymn of "I don't give a fuck." Today's use of the phrase mirrors that of its earliest traces in 18th century literature. These types of vernacular are similar to dialect and also distinct. The use of "fuck" as an adjective or adverb can be replaced with "bloody." And that seems to say that the swear words one uses and the way in which they're applied has to do with place, class, and politics. For example, think of all the insults and phrases that incessantly recall how misogynistic, homophobic, and anti-Semitic Western culture is but are completely permissible and unnoticed. Obscene words and phrases in all languages tend to show parts of culture that are seriously guarded.

"Asked about that uncomfortable moment, Ms. Vitale parroted our question back to the room.".2*

What's important about beauty? The sublime is important but only as important as your investment in it. More specifically, it's your re-investment in the concept that's important. Of course beauty is extremely vague and always unclear, but maybe value is the more unambiguous way to think of it. Derivative value is not exclusively in the domain of the beautiful, and I think that distinction is important. Beauty as a concept in art, philosophy, and thought is often limited. Complimentary concepts—such as the abject—and everything in between them is what influences value. It's one of the most fetishized concepts in the

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world, but Western culture seems to have a very unilateral understanding of beauty and what's important about it.

If shock value was a tool, what type of tool would it be?

Shock value, like humor can be low-lying fruit if used carelessly. It can be cheap. On the other hand, shock value and humor can be an incredible tool in terms of cutting straight to the point, no bullshit. Although there is an endless litany of conventional approaches to generate meaning, one could argue that any approach—if applied with great care—can generate just as successful of a response as another. Shock value and humor can be phenomenally efficient ways to circumvent any defense or suspicion an audience would have. It's hard to say what shock value is generally, but I think of it as a tool to concisely address an idea. Think of Mike Kelley, or Paul McCarthy and how they have used shock value and humor. In my mind, they are two of the best examples of successful shock value and humor avoiding tired and dry scholastic approaches to incredibly intellectual ideas.

It is often said that your work is performance-based, what constitutes a performance in your opinion—or to put it another way—when is a piece of art not a performance?

Defining work by medium can only be so helpful and often counterproductive. In terms of performance, it's hard to deny the importance of having a word to describe the incredible rupture that early performance art made in the canon of art history. The place that fluxus and proto-conceptualism occupy is immensely important to the history of performance, but the word “performance” isn't. I think the idea of performativity is much more important.

It seems like an incessant query people have. What is painting? What is photography? What is new performance? What is contemporary? I appreciate the sentiment and welcome that kind of recounting, but I'm suspicious of the way those questions frame artwork in such a hermetic space. Art should be more fluid and understood both in the context of art history but more importantly in the context of culture.

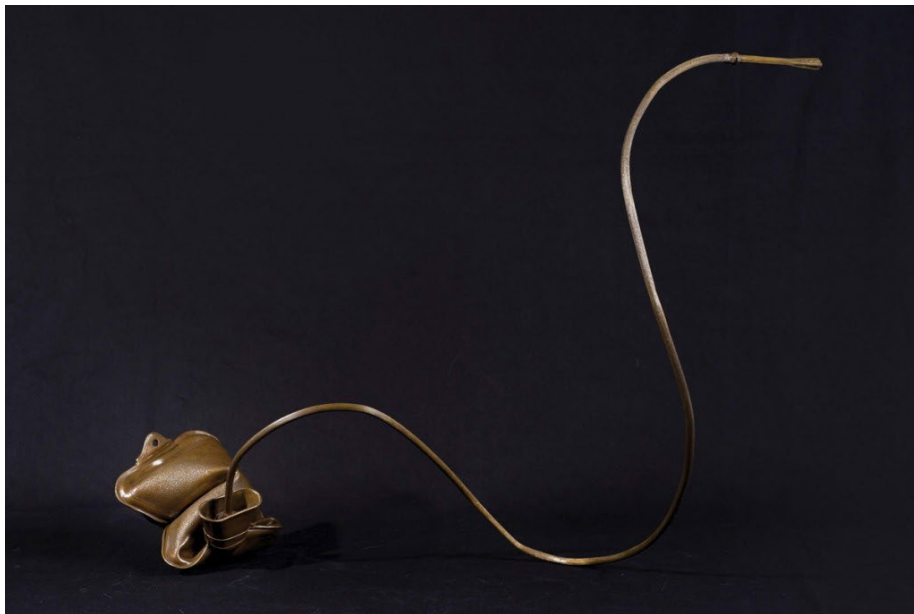


Exhibition view, “Alligators,” (2015).

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I think the term performance is helpful in understanding different art practices and methods they employ, but the answer to “is it performance or not” isn’t particularly urgent to me. Vito Acconci, undoubtedly a totem of performance art, put it best, “I stopped doing so-called ‘performance’ because I got too used to it. And also because I hated the word, but couldn’t find a better, more appropriate, more specific word.”



“Douche Bag 9,” (2013). Bronze. Dimensions vary.

* Lescaze, Z. “Wild Wild West: Marianne Vitale’s ‘The Missing Book of Spurs’ Hits Performa,” New York Observer, November 2013.

*.1 “The Sense Of Being Stared At,” Sasquatch Chronicles, November 2015.

*.2 Lescaze, Z. New York Observer, November 2013. † Original question read: Is beauty important?