

Mary Ann Aitken
Derf Backderf
Cara Benedetto
Christi Birchfield
dadpranks
Kevin Jerome Everson
Ben Hall
Jae Jarrell
Harris Johnson
Jimmy Kuehnle
d.a. levy
Michelangelo Lovelace Sr.
Dylan Spaysky
Carmen Winant



On View
JUNE 12 –
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2015

HOW TO REMAIN HUMAN

INTRODUCTION

ROSE BOUTHILLIER &
MEGAN LYKINS REICH

...

& everyday i sit here
trying to become one of you
after another
trying on those high school dreams
for size
it doesnt work
you dont fit me
as a poet i try to learn
how to remain human
despite technology
& there is no one to learn from
i am still too young to
be quiet & contemplative

...

-d.a. levy, excerpt from "SUBURBAN
MONASTERY DEATH POEM," 1968

How to Remain Human is both a question and a proposition. The question points to all that de-humanizes, the challenges and breakages that divide people and make the way forward unclear. The proposition suggests that there are ways to re-imagine, practice, and hold on to our humanity.

This exhibition is MOCA Cleveland's second iteration of a bi-annual series featuring artists connected to Cleveland and the surrounding region, including neighboring cities in Ohio, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. These shows bring together emerging and established artists, some with deep histories in the region, others

who have arrived from elsewhere. The goal is to reflect critically on contemporary art that comes out of, or passes through, particular places, here or nearby. We say particular as opposed to certain, because we are not working from a strict definition or geographical boundary. "The region" is equal parts geo-political, social, and psychological. It regularly shifts and transforms. *Realization is Better than Anticipation* (2013) was MOCA Cleveland's first exhibition built from this vantage point, and it generated a topology for ongoing inquiry.

How to Remain Human continues the conversation with 14 artists working across a variety of media, including painting, sculpture, film and video, performance, fashion design, sound, and architectural installation. They share a need to make, in order to question, clarify, or understand life. They explore various ways of acting in and experiencing the world, examining how we can go on, relate, and be.

d.a. levy is a key figure in the exhibition. He was truly all-in, an artist who lived and breathed his work. The show's title is drawn from his "SUBURBAN MONASTERY DEATH POEM," an epic work that brings to life a range of his desires and frustrations with the world at that time. He battled, protested, resisted, and ultimately insisted on other ways to live and make. levy was a pillar of

Cleveland's underground literature and art scene in the 1960s, centered around the University Circle/East Cleveland area. He worked tirelessly, publishing original manuscripts and several alternative newspapers, along with making prints, paintings, and collages. Ardent and aching, his work expresses a passionate love/hate relationship with Cleveland. In the reactionary climate of the 60s, levy's anti-establishment sentiments, disheveled appearance, unconventional lifestyle, and talk of drugs made him an easy target for the authorities. Repeated arrests and ongoing harassment left levy exhausted and paranoid. On November 24, 1968, he committed suicide at the age of 26. Perhaps because his work did not fully mature, his words retains a youthful rawness, a way of using words searchingly.

Cara Benedetto also use words in an intimate, feeling out (and up) way. Her texts and performance-based events use language to confound communication and subvert power structures. Often, she will take up vernacular and structures from romance novels, fundraisers, and advertisements. She then shifts, mutates, and destabilizes these forms. For her participation in this exhibition, Benedetto produced *Prelude Her patron*, a private event at the Museum modeled on a traditional preview party with a soft S/m theme. The artist directed all aspects of the project, from designing the invitations and writing the press release, to providing special napkins and lip balm for guests. Rather than doing a disservice to the BDSM community with "a hack portrayal or tourism into their world," Benedetto seeks to "draw a parallel to exploits in current academia, specific to the institution of MFA, where all art students are treated as masochists and contracts are unclear." *Prelude* brought an element of vulnerability and the unknown into the Museum, asking staff, guests, artists, and the institution to question, explore, and feel the boundaries of their relations.

Elsewhere in *How to Remain Human*, artists are using disparate mediums to look closely at people and communities. Derf Backderf's renowned comix and graphic novels give honest, unapologetic voice to Midwest living. *How to Remain Human* features a sampling of hand-drawn pages from his forthcoming book *Trashed*, which chronicle Derf's wild garbage-collecting experiences. The exploits serve as subtle metaphors for broader sociopolitical and existential conditions: bar brawls (class); trash collecting blues (culture); government bureaucracy (democracy's failings); foreclosed properties (capitalism's failings), unsuccessful come-ons (sexual rejection), used condom hunts in a civic baseball field (sexual fulfillment), trips to the cemetery, lots of dead animals, and Marv's (the curmudgeonly city dog catcher) passing (mortality). The ultimate symbol is, of course, all the garbage. Page after page, Derf portrays the relentless gluttony of consumer culture.

Speaking to the significance of place, Michelangelo Lovelace Sr.'s figurative paintings depict Cleveland's urban fabric, combining environmental, social, and political experiences into vibrant expressions. According to Lovelace, art saved him from an uncertain future, and it continues to offer him a platform for self-preservation and expression. Works like *These Urban City Streets* (2013) represent inner city neighborhoods that bustle with life, depicting community parties and people going about their errands. Lovelace also reflects on themes of social justice-- violence, inequality, criminal lifestyles, and racial conflict--often hinting at personal struggles and redemption.

Deeply informed by his upbringing in Northeast Ohio, Kevin Jerome Everson focuses on the performance of identity and the rituals of labor. His African American subjects perform simple, obligatory, or repetitive actions for the camera: high school athletes running football drills, magicians doing sleights of hand, young men watching a fireworks display, an old

man blowing out birthday candles. Studying and re-imagining the quotidian activities of real life, Everson creates deliberate vignettes that combine fiction and realism. These poetic montages speak to practice, effort, futility, mortality, and reward.

Similar themes resonate with Ben Hall's complex sculpture and audio installations. Concerned with politics, identity, social interaction, and the histories held by objects, his works are mash ups with a multitude of references. Hall created three new works for *How to Remain Human*. His large structure, *The Drill* (2015) brings together elements as diverse as the transparent backpacks used in the Detroit Public School system (which here act as cactus terrariums); stickers with the face of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American man who was beaten to death in 1982 by auto workers in Highland Park, a suburb of Detroit; pins featuring Larry Doby and Ozzie Virgil, two Black Major league baseball players that integrated the Cleveland Indians and Detroit Tigers, respectively; and didactic references to Goldman Sachs, the Adidas slogan, and Monopoly. As Hall states, the sculpture represents a microcosm of his "understanding of humanness in America right now," an experience that still breaks apart along race and class lines, where individuals must find their own ways to salvage and reconstruct in a culture of violence and control.

How to Remain Human also emphasizes our physical engagement with the world through works that examine or evoke the body. Carmen Winant's massive wall collage *A World Without Men* (2015) is constructed from images of women found in magazines dating from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. Much of the material for the collage is gathered from *Playboy* or *WE* magazine and books on puberty, charting shifting representations of women over time, for different audiences. While the title calls back to Feminist Separatist movements of the 1970s, the images are clearly under the influence of the "male gaze." It may be a world

without men, yet they are very much present.

Jae Jarrell's radical fashions use the body as a vessel for protest, resistance, and identity. In 1968, Jae, her husband Wadsworth Jarrell, and fellow artists Jeff Donaldson, Barbara Jones-Hogu, and Gerald Williams founded the collective AFRICOBRA (which stands for African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists). The group formed in response to a lack of positive representation of African and African American people in media and the arts. Their goal was to produce works that conveyed the pride, power, history, and energy of their communities. As a fashion designer, Jae expressed those ideals through clothing. Incorporating diverse elements such as brick walls, graffiti, colorful bandoliers, jazz, Scrabble, and African shields, Jae's work is a celebration of life and individuality, with a strident "Look good, feel powerful" message.

How to Remain Human also features work with a strong sense of vulnerability and introspection. Christi Birchfield's large textile sculptures possess intense bodily references. Starting with black canvas, Birchfield applies gestural lines of bleach paste, folds the fabric in half, and runs it through a printing press. Next, she uses a utility knife to cut out areas of un-bleached fabric. These flat, lacelike shapes are conjoined, layered, stretched, and affixed to the ceiling, wall, and floor. Forming webs of linear forms that resemble hanging skin and skeletal systems, they evoke the fragile body and its transience.

Mary Ann Aitken's oil paintings on newspaper have a light, spontaneous quality. The fragile paper--meant to last only for a day--becomes a surface for preserving a moment in time. Aitken's subjects, such as goldfish and flowers, are life forms found in domestic settings, and in capturing their essence, she calls attention to the beauty of the everyday. An extremely private person, Aitken rarely showed her work during her lifetime. A self-portrait included

in *How to Remain Human* depicts the artist in her red painting robe, which she wore in the studio to protect her clothes. Though her face is indistinct, her presence and energy are strongly felt. On the right, loose brush strokes seem to be casually placed, as if Aitken were using the background itself as a palette for mixing colors. This work captures how painting and a dedicated studio practice were integral to Aitken's spirit and sense of self.

Dylan Spasky's sculptures, which take modest, familiar objects as their subjects, are richly tactile. Spasky uses cheap materials and found objects that relate back to domestic settings. He is inspired by the aesthetics of Disney, knickknacks found in suburban homes, children's crafts, and thrift store dollar-bags. The artist's hand is visible in the crude way that these sculptures are assembled. In addition to exploring notions of beauty, value, and preciousness, Spasky's work is very much about the desire to make. They have a sense of impulsiveness: to salvage, tinker, repurpose, and decorate.

Humor and nonsense are used by many artists in the exhibition to playfully puncture life's routines, habits, and anxieties. The largest piece in the show, Jimmy Kuehnle's giant pink inflatable sculpture, *Please, no smash.* (2015) engages MOCA Cleveland's audience, architecture, and neighborhood in an interactive way. It begs visitors to push, press, nuzzle, and otherwise engage with its curious presence and shifting form. Made from hundreds of yards of neon pink PVC fabric, the work hovers above viewers as it slowly inflates and deflates. Its lights flicker and glow according to the time of day, and the form radiates a hot pink glow that is visible from outside the Museum at night. When it's fully expanded, the work's plump body extends into most areas of the Kohl Atrium. As it deflates, the work recoils and draws up against the wall like a folding flower. It appears to move like a living, breathing organism, or a beating heart inside

the Museum. A sculpture-cum-human.

A selection of videos by the Pittsburgh collective dadpranks plays on the Museum's free ground floor. They portray cheap consumer goods isolated in colorful sets, employed in strange ways to carry out bizarre actions. The collective's name is a playful take on the internet phenomenon of parents pranking their children for YouTube "likes." These videos are the result of a collaborative process, where the artists come together for short periods of time with bags full of goodies and a video camera, and riff off of each other's ideas.

Harris Johnson's paintings often use "dumb" humor to tackle anxieties. He addresses the individual's place in the world, as well as the significance (or triviality) of art amidst chaotic, troubling times. *American Ramble* (2015), painted directly on the wall, is a frenetic stream of consciousness that mixes banal chatter and with darker, angrier thoughts on society and hopelessness. A swirling vortex lies at the center of *Black Hole* (2015), sucking in color, energy, faded words, and frowning stick figures. This collapse speaks to the constant worry and existential wondering of humanity: how will everything end? How did everything begin? What, possibly, could it all mean?

Such moments of doubt and personal reflection run through *How to Remain Human*. But the exhibition is ultimately a romantic one, operating under a conviction that art is essential to understanding ourselves and contemporary life. In that regard, artists are vital, and the artists in *How to Remain Human* are particularly generous with their questions and perceptions. Their work is openhanded. It offers and invites, sometimes quietly, other times urgently. One imperative for remaining human: we must ask a lot of one another.

Would everything be too much?



1.

2.



3.



1. Ben Hall, work in progress

2. Jae Jarrell in her studio

3. Christi Birchfeild's studio



4.



5.



6.

4. Jimmy Kuehnle installs at
MOCA Cleveland

5. Easel and unfinished
painting in Michelangelo
Lovelace Sr.'s studio

6. Outfit purchased for Cara
Benedetto's *Prelude Her patron*