

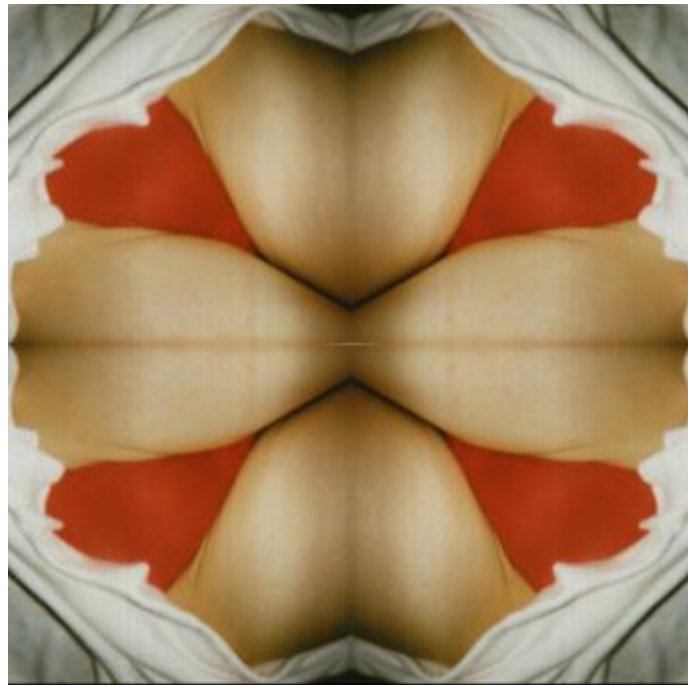
HYPERALLERGIC

INTERVIEWS

“This Is a Revolutionary Moment”: Genesis Breyer P-Orridge on Intersectionality in Art

In an interview with Genesis Breyer P-Orridge, s/he attempts to define intersectionality and its tenuous position in the art world.

By Zachary Small



Genesis Breyer P-Orridge, “My Funny Valentine” (2013), Expanded Polaroid, C-print mounted on Plexi, 48 x 47.5 inches, edition of 3 (image courtesy the artists and INVISIBLE-EXPORTS)

Intersectionality is a powerful reminder of our connectedness, but it has arguably lost some of its weight due to overexposure. Many art critics have

coopted the word as a lazy syllable for identity politics, vaguely encompassing discussions of race, gender, sexuality, and feminism. Intersectionality can seem like another big word meant to hide the art world's ugly essentialism — an impulse to sort artists into epithetic categories.

But essentialism be damned. *The Intersectional Self* at the 8th Floor Gallery shows that this big word is more than an empty container. Intersectionality has the power to unite people, if we let it — if we can appreciate its nuance. In this exhibition, Genesis Breyer P-Orridge invokes intersectionality to destroy the body politic. As the founder of pandrogyny, P-Orridge seeks the collapse of all senses of identity into one self, one total humanity. (Accordingly, P-Orridge speaks with the pronoun “we,” not in the royal sense, but in the sense of unity with his/her departed partner in pandrogyny, Lady Jaye. P-Orridge also prefers the pronouns s/he and h/er to further demonstrate that bond.)

Pandrogyny manifests itself in the artist's work as simultaneously humorous and visceral. As the founder of hardcore industrial music, there will always be something inherently confrontational in P-Orridge's work, if also political. For example, “My Funny Valentine,” on view at the 8th Floor Gallery's exhibition, is a kaleidoscopic image of hearts made out of an ambiguous assortment of body parts. Are we looking up someone's skirt? Are these pieces of flesh from someone's backside?

Through h/er work, P-Orridge puckishly calls for an end to gender as a construct, and so, h/er participation in *The Intersectional Self* feels apt. I spoke to P-Orridge and the broader world.

* * *



Genesis Breyer P-Orridge, "Mousetrap" (2016), cigar press, tampons, menstrual blood, resin, brass, 24.75 x 15 x 5.25 inches (image courtesy Invisible Exports)

Zachary Small: *How would you define intersectionality? Do you ascribe to that phrase? Is pandrogyny intersectional?*

Genesis Breyer P-Orridge: To be honest, we are not 100% sure. But pandrogyny is a wide-ranging and contemporary concept. It's outside the gender gap. Our view is that society's real issue is with evolution. Historical (we prefer to say ahistorical) progressions in the human species have led us to this moment where we either mutate or disintegrate. Our war has always been with binary systems. What do you think the intersectional self is?

ZS: *I think intersectionality is also a relatively new concept in the same way pandrogyny is. And therefore, I think it is still being defined and redefined. But generally, I'd say it is identity at the cross-sections of socio-economic and political status, race, ethnicity, gender, and sex. It can be many other things as well.*



Genesis Breyer P-Orridge, "Gender is a Drag" (2011), mixed media, 14 x 11 inches

GBPO: Okay, so both intersectionality and pandrogyny address the problematic issues of the body, identity, and socioeconomics. How do they interact and what do they mean? For us, it's also a spiritual issue, which is something contemporary art avoids. The origin of art goes back to prehistoric times when people didn't know if the sun would come back the next day. Our idea of consciousness was still primitive, and there was a terrible fear of the darkness. That fear gradually gripped civilization, which required control. And there was a long period of about 3,000 years when everyone linked their individuality with the idea of perpetuating groups. It was about submission: submission to individuals in order to survive. But we are past there! The problem is that some people still want to maintain

control. And while our environment has become more sophisticated and complex, our attitudes and social behaviors have been left behind. Now is the moment when we must regather our thoughts and say that it's imperative to reintegrate ourselves with our minds. Why are we here? What do we want to do? How can our experiences and physical life rationalize the material world?

Those in power create wars to maintain their opposition. But this is a revolutionary moment, and we cannot revert to the ongoing distractions of a binary system. We need to take back who we are and write the narrative of our own stories. It's about stripping away our inherited archetypes and our distracting issues to look at our solid bodies, our experiences amongst people. Who is writing my story? Who am I submitting myself to? Who am I forcing to submit? What is it that I truly wish to be? That's where the real battle will be: Will we have an evolutionary thrust or stagnation?

ZS: *As recognition of your work has only grown, how do you make sense of your own rise to prominence in a political climate that exceedingly wants to return to binaries?*



Genesis Breyer P-Orridge, "Red Chair Posed" (2008), C-print mounted on Plexiglas, 56.5 x 72 inches, edition of 3 (image courtesy Invisible Exports)

GBPO: We are really depressed, to be honest. We were not surprised about Trump or his cronies. We looked at the situation and thought about the worst that could happen. And it happened. It was instinctive, intuitive. People have been distracted for so long; they've become narcissistic, obsessed with selfie culture, and entitled to information. When we realized that Trump would win the election, we turned to our friends. We grew up in the 1960s. We were part of the psychedelic revolution. We worked with Gay Lib Street Theatre. And we were involved in political action when homosexuality was finally made legal in Britain. We worked with squatter's rights, animal rights. We worked against apartheid. And slowly, we saw common sense winning. People became more tolerant. It felt like a liberal expansion where people were left alone unless they were destructive. Now, it feels like we've returned to postwar austerity — an austerity of ideas and imagination.

We did all this work and for what? To be rejected by these idiots? It's depressing but I guess we must do it again. We are in an amoral conundrum where the people left to fight, the youngest, have yet to wake up. There is an old but very usable saying given to us by a Native American shaman that says, "No attachments. No judgment. No expectations." We must become all things that the current status quo is not: kind, respectful, loyal, and forgiving. We must do what the establishment does not expect us to and be good people.



Genesis Breyer P-Orridge (photo by Drew Wiedemann, courtesy Invisible Exports)

ZS: *Right, because the bureaucracy can only understand so much. It makes me think of the idea of comedy as rebellion, and I sense elements of comedy in your work. Would you agree?*

GBPO: Oh, of course! One of the great disappointments of our career is that no one noticed our dark, sarcastic humor. I'm from Manchester — what can I say? — we are famous for our sarcasm. Looking back at the 1960s, you have the yippies who go to Wall Street and throw money into the pit. It's still talked about because it was such a simple action that jarred everyone's realities. The symbol worked beautifully, humorously. Anyone that wants to evolve a thinking culture must look for ways to avoid overtly aggressive work.

In the 1980s, there was punk and industry. We were so angry and trying to destroy everything. That was the right strategy against Reagan and Thatcher because it helped adjust the culture. But we cannot use that

anymore. They know that. They've diluted it, coopted it with money. It's the same with Hip-Hop. Where is Public Enemy now? Power tries to bribe you. Don't be tricked. Think about what they are used to — anger, rage, demonstrations — do the unexpected. Be kind and thoughtful. Speak with a considered voice and explain how you feel so there is no excuse for them dismissing you. Anyone that wants to evolve a thinking culture today must look for methods that shy away from overt aggression.

ZS: *Do you think the art world has cultivated a thinking culture?*

GBPO: No. What's really depressing for us is how long the art world has followed in the shadow of the Young British Artists. Initially, they were smart, funny, and clever. "We hate art and there it is." But now everyone wants to brand themselves that way. They aren't thinking about content. Art must have a story, comment, some kind of information that you can take away. That's the definition of art: creation.



Genesis Breyer P-Orridge, "Perfecting, undated," mixed media, 14 x 11 inches

ZS: *You've talked about pleasure as a weapon. What does that mean and how do we use it?*

GBPO: When you make art, it's implied in the content. Same with music. As an attitude, I see pleasure as an attempt to create a blank slate each day. One good way to do that is changing your name. That new person is just a name, and then you can say, "Who is this? What are they like? What do they do?" And that's what we did. We invented Genesis. What happened to Neil? [*Laughs.*] Neil is the artist and we are the artwork that Neil made. We still exist but where the fuck is Neil?

ZS: *Where is Neil? Does Neil ever come out?*

GBPO: No, no. God knows where Neil is. We should make a tattoo saying, "Copyright: Neil Andrew Megson."

ZS: *"Have you seen Neil?" Put it on a milk carton.*

GBPO: Put it on my leg! You see, we've created another little comment. It's got humor but it's saying something important. You can deconstruct yourself and become the truth, the author of your own narrative. Once you do that, every day becomes a story. You are free to decide your life.

ZS: *Thinking about these ideas of reaction and resistance for queer people, I wonder what's possible. If the pandrogynous is an intersectionality, a third being, does that also mean there's a third world out there solely for queer people to inhabit?*

GBPO: Oh God, there are infinite worlds. Anyone who's taken acid will tell you that. If you can swallow a piece of paper and the world vanishes ... We live in a moment when there are so many options to demonstrate our own perceptions. We need to give that ability to other people. Imagine humanity like a single living organism, maybe an amoeba. When the amoeba gets damaged — what's the organism do? It marshals its resources together and heals itself. If the human species is one organism, and we

believe it is, then we are all cells of a singular being. If everyone saw themselves as cells of the same organism, there would be no use for fighting. We could already be colonizing space by now! Curing illness! We could be that incredible species that maximized its potential and filled itself with love.

The Intersectional Self *continues at the 8th Floor Gallery (17 W 17th St, Flatiron District, Manhattan) through May 19.*