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A.K. Burns and A.L. Steiner, *Community Action Center* (production still), 2010, at Taxter & Spengemann



Ana Mendieta
Untitled (Body Tracks)
1974
Galerie Lelong, New York



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ACTION MOVIE by Kayla Guthrie

A dark-haired witch in metallic body paint and crotchless panties climbs into a dungeon to the sounds of eerie minimal music. The camera jump-cuts demonically as she slicks up a wooden dildo with blood-red paint, her blackened teeth grinning. She stands before an altar, and her eyeballs roll upward as she finger-paints a primal design on the wall, reminiscent of artist Ana Mendieta's classic piece, *Body Tracks* (1974). Suddenly, the doorbell rings: pizza delivery.

It's the mid-point of just one in a series of sex scenes -- funny, arty, astonishing, harrowing, intense -- that make up *Community Action Center* (CAC), the new film installation by A.L. Steiner and A.K. Burns currently on view at Taxter & Spengemann's new space on West 18th Street in Chelsea. The film's soundtrack opens with famed gender-queer performer Justin Bond reading a narrative by Jack Smith, creator of the legendary *Flaming Creatures* (1963). Meanwhile, on screen is a half-clothed, mixed-gender orgy of paint-smearing and fruit-squashing, like a 21st-century update of Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* (1964), or a Paul McCarthy set invaded by giddy flower children.

The liberated vibe is familiar from co-creator A.L. Steiner's photcollage work, such as the wall-sized *Angry, Articulate, Inevitable* (2010) in "Greater New York" at MoMA PS1, an agglomeration of what looks like production stills from some endless lesbian road film. A rising art star known for her relentlessly affirmative take on queer desire, Steiner has been involved with art party band Chicks on Speed and helped found several collective projects, including Ridykeulous, a curatorial group, and the activist group W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy).

Burns, for her part, is a recent Bard MFA who makes blunt, formalist works pairing tough materials with suggestively political titles, like *Fuck Me Boots* (2009): a sculpture of a large stick extending out of a block of poured cement, containing a pair of half-buried shoes. Having exhibited at Larissa Goldston Gallery, and at Leo Koenig in affiliation with Ridykeulous, she's also a W.A.G.E. co-founder and active participant in the collective LTTR.

Their Taxter & Spengemann collaboration is presented in a temporary theater set up behind ruffled black faux-leather curtains, and clocks in at a symbolic 69 minutes. Graphic and dreamlike, CAC is largely free of dialogue -- groans, murmurs and butt-slaps notwithstanding. The artists play up the porn pantomime of nods and smoldering glances, as in one scene where a cross-dressing leather daddy cruises a svelte blue collar femme with a tool belt and a pony tail.

While CAC toys with taboos familiar from mainstream adult movies -- gender reversals, say, or race, age and body size differences -- it



Jack Smith, *Flaming Creatures* (still), 1963



Carolee Schneemann, *Meat Joy* (still) 1964



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retains a convincingly erotic core. This isn't a head game played "about" pornography. It's a steamy, full-on queer skin flick.

CAC seethes with the hidden iconography of the lesbian-feminist underground. It's visible in the cut-and-paste zine esthetic of the exhibition booklet, the onscreen cameo by poet and cult figure Eileen Myles, and the lovingly selected soundtrack, which ranges from neo-New York bands MEN and Light Asylum to all-girl Brit group Electrelane. In a statement, the artists describe the piece as "a small archive of an intergenerational community built on collaboration, friendship, sex and art." It's inclusive, but also clubbish, exclusive.

This sort of esthetic-documentary function has precedents in historical works ranging from Andre Breton's semi-autobiographical novel *Nadja*, to Richard Kern's *You Killed Me First*, starring avatars like David Wojnarowicz and Lung Leg. In addition to their artistic qualities, works like these document a moment and preserve a social history, casting their participants in a heightened fantasy environment that exposes their ideal of real-life personal liberation.

If art is a form of exposure, Burns and Steiner are willing to go all the way. *CAC*'s actors all have official porn-star names, and that is how their credits appear, though insiders might spot the filmmakers themselves in explicit roles: one as "Jacques Strap" (or is that "Pansy Hanks"?) in a torrid make-out and spanking session, and the other as "Juggz" in the closing scene, wearing a sheer black bodysuit and sunglasses, filmed from inside a car through the windshield, which she hoses down and suds up with her gigantic bare breasts.

At the end of the screening on opening night, Steiner jumped to the front of the room and pulled those breasts out of the leather halter top she was wearing, wagging them to raucous applause as she thanked everyone, "for coming."

The project title -- *Community Action Center* -- suggests "action," in a double sense: "gettin' some action," but also as old-fashioned grassroots advocacy. While the artists are offering up their brand of personal liberation for public consumption in the gallery, *CAC*'s status as art seems to come second to its purpose as a beacon to the like-minded. Burns and Steiner affirm their community by re-enacting some radical sex acts that partially define it, exhibiting their sexuality front and center, proudly.

"A.K. Burns and A.L. Steiner, *Community Action Center*," Sept. 18-Oct. 16, 2010, at Taxter & Spengemann, 459 West 18th Street, New York, N.Y. 10011

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