

НУСТЕВІА



# THE NONSENSE OF IDENTITY

A DIALOGUE  
NARCISSISTER AND ANNE SHERWOOD PUNDYK

*Brooklyn born artist, Narcissister, exposes her soul and eventually nearly every inch of her body during her burlesque-based performances while hiding her own identity under her signature mask resembling an African American Barbie Doll from the '60s. She creates and performs her own hybrid, technically exacting, conceptually radical routines employing her training in modern dance, fine art, and needlecraft and her work experience as a stylist. She spoke with painter, Anne Sherwood Pundyk, in New York City this fall. ([www.narcissister.com](http://www.narcissister.com))*



Narcissister, Changes, May  
2014, performance © Night  
Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.

**ASP:** What we know about our own genitals—how they look and how they work—is an important component of our identity. For women this information has traditionally been hidden or erased. Your 2011 appearance with Marilyn Manson at the Los Angeles premier of his film, *Born Villain*, wearing a dress with an opening made to show your crotch confronted this cultural fact. How did this piece take shape?

**N:** Marilyn Manson invited me to be his date for the screening. I settled on appearing in the cut out dress wearing two masks: the merkin on my crotch and Narcissister's trademark mask on my face. It was an opportunity to present Narcissister to a large audience and show what is intrinsic to that character.

**ASP:** Your performance was radical especially considering it was for a public audience. I'm sure you know of Austrian artist Valie Export's work, 'Action Pants: Genital Panic' from 1968 where she also went crotchless.

**N:** Of course, and I'm sure her piece made its way into my thoughts in developing my own performance.

**ASP:** I see your piece with Manson as honouring Export's gesture while transforming it. Export was inside a movie theatre wearing crotchless jeans. She walked in front of people in their seats so that they couldn't avoid seeing her genitals. You were outside a movie theatre on the red carpet. It's interesting to compare the two pieces, but what's significant is that both similarly extreme statements about women's public and private identities took place over 40 years apart.

**N:** One significant difference for me is that I was hiding my own pubic hair with the merkin. The mask on my face and the mask on my genitals are both essential. In one of my pieces where I appear to give birth to a Russian doll I wear a merkin that covers my public hair, but my vulva can't be covered because my lips and vagina have to open so wide that, until I modified it, the merkin was always getting in the way. I had to make a special merkin that is like a jock strap because it covers the pubic hair on the front, but there are two thin elastic straps that run around my inner thighs, up the sides of my butt and around my waste to keep it

in place. I always feel so exposed at the moment when I lift my skirt and hover over this little pedestal upon which I gave birth to the Russian doll because for a moment before the doll comes out my labia and whole genital area are completely visible. It is exciting to be so active with my genitals the way the lips open and stretch to produce the doll. I am not just passively revealing myself, while people look between my legs. I am willing to show more of myself for this particular performance because the intensity of the way the lips open and stretch to produce this doll is exciting, shocking and beautiful.

**ASP:** I sense that you are driven to expand the format of burlesque.

**N:** I go further in my work than traditional burlesque does but I do reference certain things like the strip tease. I subvert it by doing it in reverse or instead of striping away the typical dresses, gloves, stockings, panties and bras, I change from an old woman to a ghoul, then become a pregnant woman who turns into man and so on. I love the idea of stripping away layers to get to some essential truth.

**ASP:** The philosopher Jacque Lacan defined ego or identity as: "the super-imposition of various coats borrowed from what I would call the bric-a-brac of a props department". The idea that he roles we learn and acquire are like layered costumes forming our identity mirrors the multiple transformations you make in your performances. How do select and sequence your characters?

**N:** Sometimes my decisions are very practical. For example in the performance I just described called 'Changes,' I embody or portray 13 different characters during the course of the five-minute piece, so the mechanics of switching costumes has to go smoothly. There is also an emotional basis to my selections. I created this work after my mother passed away. I found comfort in the idea that things don't go away permanently; that in life there is a constant process of transformation from one form to another. I begin the piece with a direct reference to my feelings of loss. The first character is a mourner shrouded in a black cloth. Logistically, I knew that the mourner's big

shroud could hide many things underneath it. By continuing with an older woman I could present the life cycle in reverse. The old woman's rubber mask could hide another mask underneath it and if I stooped over to embody the way an old woman might walk I could hide a pregnant belly under her dress. Under the belly I could hide the costume of a man, and under that I could wear something that was very tight on my body so the next character could be a young gymnast in a Lycra bodysuit. Through stripping this away I could arrive at near-nakedness and portray an erotic stripper woman. At the end of the piece I become a totally naked goddess figure representing a spiritual entity beyond the everyday characters. Thinking about my mom having passed away and witnessing her physical transformation from her living form to these inert ashes, an element, inspired me to try to make sense of that process through the portrayal of these characters. The goddess eventually becomes a pearl. I wanted to conclude the piece by bringing it to a broad elemental place.

**ASP:** You also personalise your transformations in a different way, describing Narcissister in a conversation with the musician, Peaches, as, "a wonton, and gluttonous consumer of things that are not her. She consumes personae, songs, imagery, and claims them as her own". Accumulating or consuming things is another way we define ourselves. I am intrigued by a probing, sifting quality to your movement in your videos and performances. It reminds me of a hungry child who is grasping for things to eat.

**N:** I've never thought of this idea in relation to the specific way that I move and the energy around my dancing and my gestures, but I know these thoughts are very much present in the work. Just before I started the Narcissister project I made a series of collages called 'Starving in a Sea of Objects'. They were images of me consuming and inserting myself into many different kinds of art works. For example I would take a famous painting of a mother nursing her child and I would add a picture of me as the child with my mouth open suckling on the mother. This series came from a deep feeling of hunger and longing. I trained as a dancer at the Alvin Ailey School where I learned to have a strong physicality and attack in the way I move. I developed an

extreme level of physical strength, control and virtuosity. It's a very interesting point: the idea of an intense hunger extending itself to my performances. Indeed, in my work I often put things in my mouth and in my body.

**ASP:** The level of delivery in your performances is really impressive. Your work is courageous and your commitment to quality is evident. To bring your artistry to bear on this point of hunger I have to ask, what are you hungry for?

**N:** (Laughs) Wow, that's a big question! The hunger is for something other than what I am. These are old issues that stem from my insecurities and low self-esteem as a child. I grew up in La Jolla, a beach town in Southern California. I compared myself to the blond, rich girls with their straight hair and even though I am mixed, I stood out as being ethnic. I suffered quite a bit of racism and bullying there. My parents were professors at UC San Diego. They were multicultural and intellectual. They were radicals in their own way and didn't value money or physical appearance. I had a hard time valuing myself until I left for college at Brown University where I was exposed to other ways of being. Perhaps in my work with Narcissister I am healing some of those old wounds; the acts of consumption in my performances are liberating and celebratory. I can enjoy and be proud of who I am now. I am in a position of control; I can decide what my identity is and when and how I want to change it.

**ASP:** There is a duality in the hunger: you consume because you have been deprived and not satisfied but the urge also gives you the power to eat anything you crave. You can own whatever you want by consuming it.

**N:** Yes, that idea resonates for me. The hunger is out of a love and desire for the different ways of being, but it is also feels aggressive. I have an appetite for these blond women or these men, "I can put you on so easily and then I can just tear you away in a second." I wanted to go back to the Lacan quote about identity. I was exposed to Buddhism as a child through my mother but I've just recently started practicing it myself. Pema Chodrun talks about layers of fear and

resentment almost like protective costumes that we've sewn ourselves into. Only we know how to let go, undo the threads and free ourselves. I think about this in the context of my work. Narcissister gives me an amazing opportunity to practice this on a regular basis. At first my body is so radically physically transformed by the layers of costumes that I can't breathe or see well. As I begin to perform, I can't even imagine myself without them. Then with each costume change I start to think about how to be willing or brave enough to shed them.

**ASP:** You've performed on the nationally televised programs *America's got Talent*, are your ambitions to take your message to a larger audience?

**N:** I definitely am interested in reaching as broad an audience as I possibly can. For example, I just participated in the French version of *America's Got Talent*. Finding broader platforms is challenging for me because of the erotic content in my work. It's a shame that some opportunities for larger audiences are not available to me because of that and yet I don't want to compromise my work. Likewise, I don't see how it benefits me to limit my work to the underground performance community or alternately to the entertainment world. My aim is to open myself up to all resources and platforms. That's what feels right and that's what feels radical to me.

**ASP:** I see progress in television shows written by women such as Mindy Kaling or Lena Dunham. In fact, Jennifer Saunders gave you a shout out in her series *AbFab*. Subjects like menstruation and anal sex are making their way into mainstream broadcasts. There is an opening up in the control of the material and in what audiences are allowed to see as more production and broadcast channels are available. This is especially good for sending feminist messages about identity into the mainstream.

**N:** I agree with you that there seems to be an opening around these issues right now and if I can be a part of that I would be grateful and excited.

Anne Sherwood Pundyk is an American painter based in Manhattan and Mattituck, NY, who is currently working on a new body of art called 'The Revolution Will Be Painted'. Alongside her studio work she has long been engaged in collaborative art and writing projects, including last year's *Clitney Perennial* at the Whitney Biennial. She co-edits *Girls Against God* and contributes to *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Art in America* and *ArtUS*. ([www.annepundyk.com](http://www.annepundyk.com))



