

MATERIALS

ALL NIGHT CHECK: Beautiful Young Ladies to Perform for You

Angela Sweigart-Gallagher and Melissa C. Thompson

Inspired by the writing on a historical brothel coin, *ALL NIGHT CHECK: Beautiful Young Ladies Perform for You* was created and performed by Victoria P. Lantz, Angela Sweigart-Gallagher, and Melissa C. Thompson under the auspices of the Wandering Uterus Project. *ALL NIGHT CHECK* is an interactive performance experience that delves into the nature of sexual display, personal agency, and the gendered expectations of desire.

Alternately lively, comic, and sexually disappointing, *ALL NIGHT CHECK* seeks to explore the ways in which women and feminine-presenting people are increasingly assumed to be willing to become the objects of male fantasy—regardless of their own particular set of wants—and perform men’s desires before them. This issue has gained a special urgency in a digital age in which our online presence and ways of virtual connection blur with our lives in “meat space,” from the clichéd assumption that a woman Internet dating will be happy to text nude selfies to strangers “sliding into DMs” on Twitter. *ALL NIGHT CHECK* creates a space to confront, play with, and talk back to this phenomenon (and our audience) with a wink, a nudge, and a little bit of bite.

Through close descriptions of audience encounters, photos, and audience feedback in the form of reviews, overheard comments, and customer surveys or ballots, we use the following pages to explore how audience members have engaged with and responded to the piece in its different incarnations.

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ALL NIGHT CHECK: Beautiful Young Ladies to Perform for You

PerformASTR, Baltimore, MD November 2015

We workshopped *ALL NIGHT CHECK* at the annual American Society for Theatre and Research conference as part of the PerformASTR series.

Due to a series of unfortunate events, Melissa and Vicky were not able to attend. These exigencies led us to redevelop our original idea for the piece into a performance installation that could be managed by a solo performer. The installation involved the creation of two “booths” in which audience members interact with a selection of supposedly naughty videos we have loaded onto computers. The concept is akin to the pre-Internet pornography booths in adult stores that proliferate along state highways, catering to lonely truckers and travellers.

Angie served as a live hostess and cleaner.



"Here's a cocktail and a number. I'll call you up as soon as your booth is ready . . ."



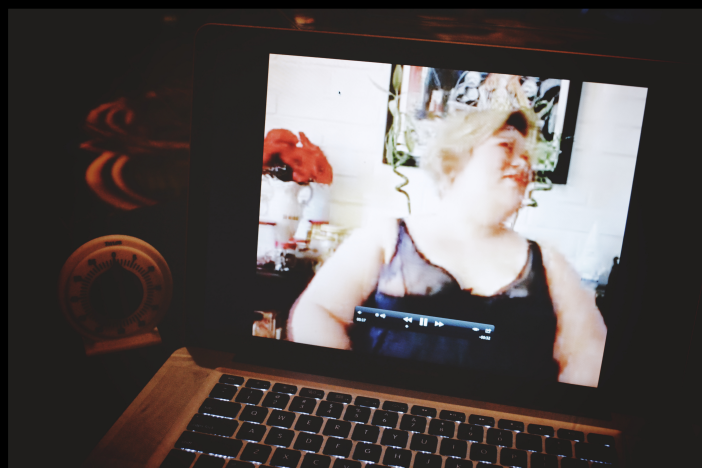
"Right this way. Your booth awaits!"



All photos from PerformASTR courtesy of Kristin Hunt.

Calling someone's number and escorting them to the booth was always a delightful moment. Even if they had dabbled with the pornographic colouring book pages I left on each cocktail table or let me flirt with them while I gave them a glass of pink Moscato, once I called their number they jumped to take their turn in the booth. One trio of audience members hooted quietly as the first friend's number was called, and then they returned to their conversation. Clearly, despite the late start time and the cocktail, this small gesture toward performed sexual interest was as rowdy as this academic crowd was going to get, but I appreciated the gesture.

Peeling back the plastic sheeting, I suggestively pointed out the tissues (should they need them), before cheerfully showing them how to select a video. I set the timer and before I let the curtain fall behind me, I naughtily encouraged them to enjoy themselves. I played up the illicit possibilities even though I knew the videos contained no sexual content beyond their provocative titles. Periodically, I could hear a chuckle from behind the plastic as people clicked on a suggestive title and then discovered its actual content.

PerformASTR

Audience members have very different strategies when they enter the booths. Some quietly peruse the titles and select one at a time, thoughtfully considering each video. Others rush through, skim, and open as many videos as they can in the time allotted.

At ASTR, I approached one woman in the booth after her timer went off and I could see very clearly that she had four or five videos going at once. She noticed me noticing her choices and sheepishly said, “Sorry. I just wanted to see them all.” I turned and said, “Of course you did, you naughty thing. Just this once, I’ll give you one more minute.” I reset the timer and walked away. She turned her attention back to the screen.



The transparency of the booths remains a critical feature of the performance and the way it relates to the audience and the act of spectating. When the audience member enters the booth, they move behind a plastic curtain, a thin, clear barrier, but a barrier nonetheless. They can watch the videos and ignore what lies beyond the plastic, or they can choose to watch me or the other audience members. Inside the booth it feels at once intimate and private—an excellent perch for a voyeur—but it is also very public. The rest of the audience can see them and can watch them watching. Everyone in the space is on display.

The surveys say. . .

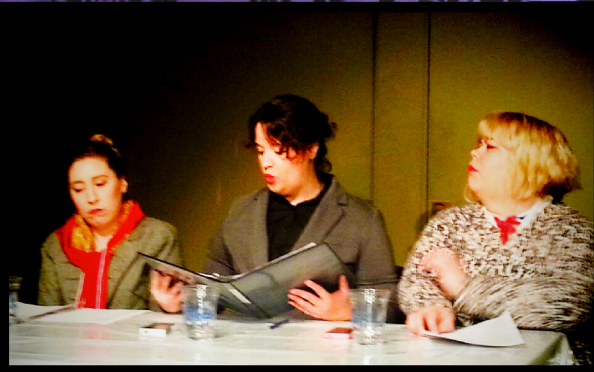
“I was completely satisfied.”

“I wanted even more hot

sex.” “It wasn’t very subtle.”

We wanted audience members to have an opportunity to tell us about their own desires and respond to the performance. We’ve had a number of interesting responses, but most people simply tell us they are “satisfied” or play along with the sexual innuendo. That said, we often get at least one per event in which an audience member complains that we or our videos “aren’t subtle.”

Fair point. Fortunately, we eschewed subtlety long ago. We aim to be about as subtle as an unsolicited dick pic.



ALL NIGHT CHECK: Beautiful Young Ladies to (Theoretically) Perform for You

Festival of Original Theatre
Toronto, February 2016

It is February 2016, and we are performing a brand new version of *ALL NIGHT CHECK: Beautiful Young Ladies to Perform for You* at the Festival of Original Theatre in Toronto. After being accepted to the festival, I was surprised to discover that it was more of an academic conference than a theatre festival—there would be just as many papers as there would be performances, and this makes me nervous about our piece.

The new version goes beyond installation into a performance-installation hybrid, beginning as if Angie, Vicky, and I were three scholars on a panel titled “Showing Skin: The Ethics of Sexy Halloween Costumes.” The text of our “papers” is taken entirely from the lingerie website yandy.com, known for its vast selection of skimpy Halloween attire. The vast majority of this first unit of performance consists of costume names, with each of us taking turns reading our individual lists as if making an academic argument. And of course, as with many spirited academic arguments, it devolves into a passionate fight, interrupting each other and proving each other wrong with more costume lists and details.

While I find the juxtaposition of ham-fistedly “sexy” costumes with a heated, high-stakes academic argument to be hilarious, I am worried about presenting the format to an exclusively academic audience, rather than the general public. I worry that perhaps an academic audience will think the performative paper format is a cliché, or that they will not be able to laugh at themselves.

About 50 percent of the audience warms up, and I’m satisfied with that.

The fight during the performative academic paper ends because we are interrupted by a speaker blaring “The Stripper” by David Rose and His Orchestra. Of course a performance unit highlighting the expansiveness of the sexualization of women leads into a burlesque number, with the three academics stripping away their stuffy conference gear to reveal the sexy Halloween costumes they are wearing underneath—a sailor, a police officer, and a Girl Scout.

I begin the striptease section, and I hate it. I hate it more than anything else I have ever had to do on stage, and it takes every bit of willpower I have to perform it, and perform it well, without breaking character and running off the stage.

In a performance dealing with the commodification of women’s bodies and the continued expectation for women to perform their sexuality for others on demand, *of course* we need a striptease. The piece demands it, no question. The striptease has three movements. It begins with me, the example of someone happily, enthusiastically engaging in the ritual—including the traditional burlesque units of the strut, the tease, and then the strip—followed by Angie, who fully engages in the strip, but makes it clear she is doing this because it is her job. The final movement of the striptease is Vicky, who is shy and clearly uncomfortable with the notion but goes along with it because she feels pressured to, and she ultimately reveals that she has worn full-coverage, body-shaping Spanx under her sexy Girl Scout costume. Dramaturgically, this unit makes so much sense.

During the “cocktail party” section, I overhear some people talking about the striptease. They talk in a tone of surprise about how each of us had a different approach, and that not all of us seemed comfortable stripping. This confirms to me that the conflict got across, which makes all the discomfort worth it.

Festival of Original Theatre

As I escort my first audience member to her booth, I try to make general and pleasant party talk with her as we cross the room. She is actively scowling, and her responses to me are sarcastic. She seems like she is wants to be anywhere but here, almost as if she is offended that we are putting on a performance, which I find strange for an audience member at an entirely elective event that was advertised as both experimental and interactive. But I keep up the pleasant chat, situate her in her private booth, and explain that she can choose whatever videos she desires. She scoffs at that as if she would never stoop to watch anything we had to offer. Undeterred, I urge her to have fun, set her kitchen timer, and walk away.

I keep an eye on her as I leave, and as soon as I am five feet away from the booth, she grabs the mouse and pushes her face close to the screen with keen interest and an intensity I did not expect. To me, it seems as if she is only allowed to engage with enthusiasm if no one else is watching. So I pay attention to other audience members in this regard. Canadian opera singer Derrick Paul Miller is in the audience, and he laughs and cheers and takes pictures when we invite him to; he engages like he is there to have a good time. In contrast, I see academics approach us (and each other) with world-weary cynicism, only to let loose once they think no one is watching.



Photos of the striptease and Marvin Carlson courtesy of Derrick Paul Miller. All other FOOT photos taken by Melissa C. Thompson.

Festival of Original Theatre



The parting activity is our Satisfaction Survey, in which we give audience members a chance to open up about their desires and confess which specific needs were not met. Before they exit, they are instructed to insert their surveys into a container—in this case, an ice bucket from our hotel that is topped by a glorious plush vulva “pillow.” When I see audience members together at the table, they point at the vulva and make awkward jokes to each other, but when I see people at the table alone, I see them smiling, touching the pillow, and luxuriating in the process of putting their surveys inside.



I would love to spend the entire performance watching people interact with the vulva. The purple velvet and pink satin are lovely, of course, but the best part is the soft, warm canal of red fleece that adjoins it. Ultimately, what the audience writes is far less interesting than how they go about delivering their feedback. These are the true performances. The shuffling of feet, the shifting eyes from the man who clearly wanted to telegraph his reluctance to put his hand inside. The other man whose slow, languorous insertion of the survey lingered creepily. The bravado of the young woman eager to prove she was game. She gathered her survey into a crumple and shoved her fist inside dropping her survey into the pile before withdrawing her hand. Another woman who looked, laughed, and then gazed into the interior to sort out how it was made before placing her survey half in and half out of the opening. Her friend helpfully pushed the survey down into the box.

Festival of Original Theatre



How to take off your clothes for an icon in your field . . .

Step One: Fret slightly. Don't have a major meltdown, but worry a little about whether or not performing a striptease in front of an icon in your field will come back to haunt you in a future job talk, conference presentation, or other professional setting in which most people remain fully clothed.

Step Two: Make a few pre-show jokes about never working in the field again with your fellow performers to mask your unease and doubts about taking off your clothes in front of an icon in the field.

Step Three: Ruefully remember that time you paid a hefty hunk of change to buy one of his books during graduate school. Momentarily wish you were still in graduate school, or rather, still in your twenties before having a baby transformed your midsection into a pillowy bread bowl. Then, calmly remind yourself that taking off your clothes in front of an icon in your field would be just as ridiculous a notion if your belly did not feature a C-section scar and you had no cellulite.

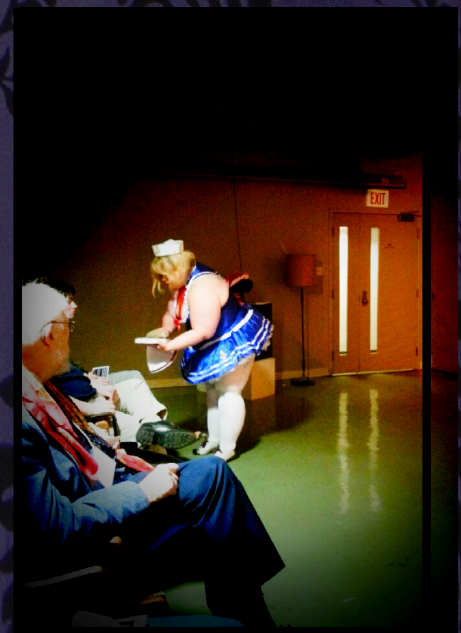
Step Four: Notice how much the icon in your field looks like your husband's grandfather, who was also a historian. Remember that the scarf you are wearing and planned to take off sensuously actually belonged to your husband's grandmother. Blush slightly at the idea of stripping in front of your husband's grandfather.

Step Five: Once the music starts, commit! There's no way to turn back now. So, just go for it. Strut-strut-shimmy-strut-strut-shimmy!

Step Six: He's smiling. So, go ahead and turn him into a prop. Wrap that scarf around his neck seductively as the audience laughs. Wonder silently if they are laughing with you, at you, or because the icon in your field is being such a good sport. Briefly entertain the notion of giving him a lap dance just to hear the audience go wild. Remind yourself that you have not rehearsed a lap dance and just because an icon in your field is now sitting in the front row does not mean you should ham it up.

Step Seven: Strut-strut-shimmy your way around the rest of the front row as you finish unbuttoning your sensible jacket, tossing it aside. Let loose your hair. Conclude by bending down and listening to the satisfying rip of several feet of Velcro as you tear away your trousers to reveal the "sexy" cop costume hidden underneath your conference attire.

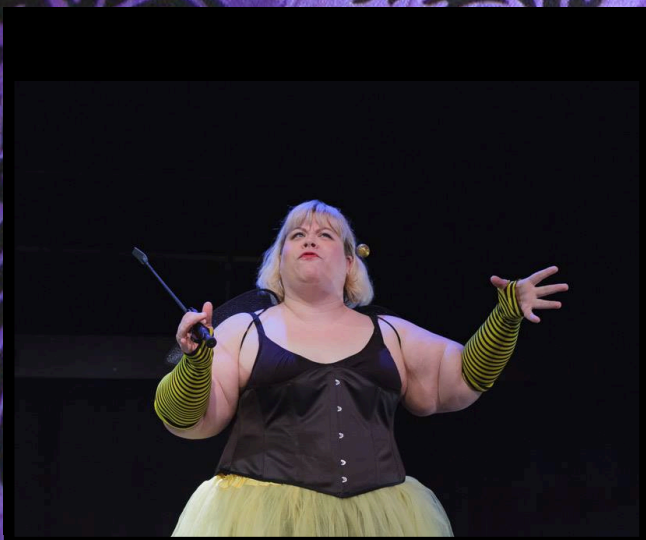
Step Eight: Take up your final pose and wonder to yourself, "I hope someone got a picture because Marvin Carlson looks great in my scarf!"



ALL NIGHT CHECK (Election Edition): Minnesota Fringe Festival

Minneapolis, MN 2016

The *ALL NIGHT CHECK* performed at Minnesota Fringe is the most traditional version we have created. Due to the vast number of performances at Fringe and the quick turnover time between shows, we cannot use what has been thus far the anchor of our performance project—the cam girl booths. However, since we are performing in August 2016, just a short time before the US presidential election, we decide to take on an election format, with three nominees for Madame President of the Brothel of the Future. We keep our lists of sexy Halloween costumes—this time in the form of our individual political platforms—and we keep the striptease, this time making it competitive, using the strip to pander to the audience for votes. The new material that follows is easily recognizable as political satire, with audience participation segments thrown in as a Fringe tradition.



Circle who you vote for your
Madame President of the
Brothel of the Future

Bristol Cannon

Pearl Clutch

Donna Matrix

Write In Candidate

1500 x 100

And the winner is?

As we counted the ballots after the show each night I remember being torn between wanting to win and wanting to lose, but Donna Matrix won every night. Hands-down she got the most audience votes. Of course, we wanted the most qualified candidate to win, dramaturgically speaking, which is why Alexa “won” every night. But the votes were clear; populist politics were a winning ticket in 2016. This audience member gives some additional insight, describing Donna Matrix as “sex posi.”

Minnesota Fringe Festival

Personally, I am used to performing my original work in rather niche market spaces—small arts venues, galleries, universities, etc.—which does not lead to a lot of published reviews of a work while it is running. Minnesota Fringe, however, gets lots of publicity, and as out-of-town artists, we were selected as one of the Fringe’s “Featured Shows,” which meant newspaper reviewers and bloggers showing up. I declared to Angie, Vicky, and Tasi that I would not be reading any reviews until after our run was over and to please not tell me any content. The show is the show, so I thought there was no use reading what people thought about a show we could not change mid-run. However, I was staying with an old friend in Minneapolis, who came home from work one day and let me know that a reviewer called my character something like “the only one I’d like to hang out with at a party.”

When we were constructing our characters, the most important factor for us was that none of them fit into women performing sexuality in a way that held mainstream cultural capital. The three candidates for Madame President all had to be failures in terms of acceptable, non-threatening versions of “sexy” women. As a result, we developed two “major party” candidates: Pearl Clutch, a prim and proper lady concerned with restoring traditional feminine values to the Brothel of the Future, and Bristol Cannon, an authoritarian, law enforcement war hawk like no other—the iron fist without the velvet glove. I was charged with developing the wacky, unelectable third-party candidate Donna Matrix, a Midwestern Domme who was entirely unqualified and just happy to participate.

Each candidate had time to pitch their platform to the audience, and each platform took a different angle to access the notion that men expect women—any woman, not just women with whom they have consenting sexual relationships—to perform their sexuality for the man’s pleasure, without consideration to what the woman herself actually desires, let alone creating space for her fantasies. Bristol Cannon satirized the phallocentrism at the centre of heterosexuality with a game of Twister played on the body of a naked man. Pearl Clutch attacked the constructions within girl-on-girl pornography, the vast majority of which creates scenarios to appeal to the male gaze, not to an actual lesbian or bisexual/pansexual female audience. Bringing up the rear, Donna Matrix pandered to the audience’s need to get *exactly what they want* by proposing “specialist FemDom.”

I delivered my pitch with the fiery-eyed zeal of a snake-handling preacher, acknowledging that the voters can’t just engage in the same fantasies as everyone else because they are “evolved and complicated.” Donna Matrix makes the promise that “under my leadership, the Brothel of the Future will have the most specialized, niche-market, local, hand-crafted, artisanal Dommess ready to discipline you to your most unique, long-bearded, bacon-infused, small-batch bourbon of tastes.”

This gets some great laughs, but all the sections of the show get great laughs, and I think it is clear that my satirical angle on the expectation for women to perform sexuality for men is that women are, first and foremost, fetish dispensers. The idea for my pitch comes from experience trying to date online and having men assume that, by virtue of me being a big woman, I must be into FemDom; of having introductory messages sent to me, not saying hello and introducing themselves, but things like “Are you into high heels?” and “Let’s have a wrestling match” and “I would like you to sit on me.”

But then comes the second-hand information that I had been singled out as something like “the only one I’d like to hang out with at a party.” It makes me question what the reviewer expected. Did he really want non-comic, unironic Beautiful Young Ladies to Perform for Him? Was he expecting us to perform sexuality without making it political? Was he expecting to see four pretty ladies who were there only for his pleasure, and not for their own?

Yeah, but are you sex positive?

We had several very supportive audience reviews and were fortunate enough to have garnered a bit of attention for our piece. That said, negative critique focused on questions or issues of being sex-positive versus sex-negative. Gina Musto provided the most articulate version of this argument, but two of our online reviewers (both men, by the way) argued that the piece was not “sex positive.” Of course, it prompts the question, why does a critique of the way women and men are socialized to put a man’s sexual desires first read as sex-negative?

The argument seemed to be that men are pandered to for sexual desires and nothing was said about women’s desires—the women existed only to serve male fantasies. . . . Sex took on a dirty, illicit quality in this piece, making porn, pinups, threesomes, and sub/dom relationships sound perverse.

—Gina Musto, “Day 9: Female Sexuality at the Fringe”

Minnesota Fringe Festival

Write-In Candidates

Circle who you vote for you
Madame President of the
Brothel of the Future

♀ Bristol Cannon

♀ Pearl Clutch

♀ Donna Matrix

♀ #FeelTheBern
Write In Candidate



After every performance, we enjoyed going through the ballots. Of course, many audience members voted for our three candidates, but quite a few others had really interesting write-in candidates. At least two people had write-ins that indicated they were likely Bernie Sanders voters. A few wrote in either their own names or the name of someone from their group.

One of our favourites found positions for all of us within the government and really seemed to match our characters' personalities with the position selected. Clearly, Donna Matrix's Fem/Dom platform suggested she would make a good "minority whip," while Pearl Clutch's restraint and pearl clutching might make her an excellent vice president. Bristol Cannon's fiery rhetoric would likely make her a good Speaker of the House, able to take control of an unruly Congress.

We don't know who Sequoia and Heather are, but we think they were both volunteers on a particularly rowdy night. Regardless, given how well matched the others were for their positions, we think they might indeed make for an excellent party chairman and Madam President respectively.

Circle who you vote for you
Madame President of the
Brothel of the Future:

♀ Bristol Cannon
Speaker of
House

♀ Pearl Clutch
V. P.

♀ Donna Matrix
Minority Whip

♀ Heather
Write In Candidate

Sequoia
Party Chairman



♀ Donna Matrix

♀ the brown one
Write In Candidate

I knew that bringing one of my former students into our Fringe performance carried with it some potential risk. I felt somewhat protective of her throughout the rehearsal and performance process. After all, the show is full of filthy puns and innuendo. The show is decidedly feminist in outlook, which in the post-Gamergate and current doxxing era feels fraught. Plus, we asked Tasi to carry around a giant vulva, interact with a rowdy fringe crowd as she collected their ballots, and end the show by receiving a sceptre made from a flesh coloured dildo on a three-foot-long stick. You know, the usual stuff you ask a former student to do.

Imagine my horror, however, when we looked through the ballots after a performance and found the ballot marked "the brown one." The *brown one*!!? My blood boiled and I reflexively pulled the ballot out of the pile. I could not bring myself to show it to Tasi right away.

As Alexa Funhauser, Tasi had taken on the "safest" role in the show. Alexa was clearly the most professional and polished, the most educated, and the only character in the performance that seemed to understand that the sexual pandering within our platform was deeply demeaning. Tasi identifies as Latinx, but the script had no references to race or ethnicity (which frankly may be considered a failing on our part). Alexa "won" our mock election every night because we wanted to believe that the most qualified and intelligent person should win an election. And, of course, some audience members clearly felt the same. Other write-in ballots included: "Alexa," "the woman with the ballot box," and "business suit woman."

And yet there was one audience member who for all Alexa's qualifications saw her only as "the brown one."

All photos from the 2016 Fringe Festival are courtesy of photographer Matthieu Lindquist. All images of ballots courtesy of Angela Sweigart-Gallagher.