Artist and SVA Alumnus Kembra Pfahler on D.I.Y. and Building Community

The multidisciplinary artist and musician talks about her open-ended practice and her time at the School of Visual Arts

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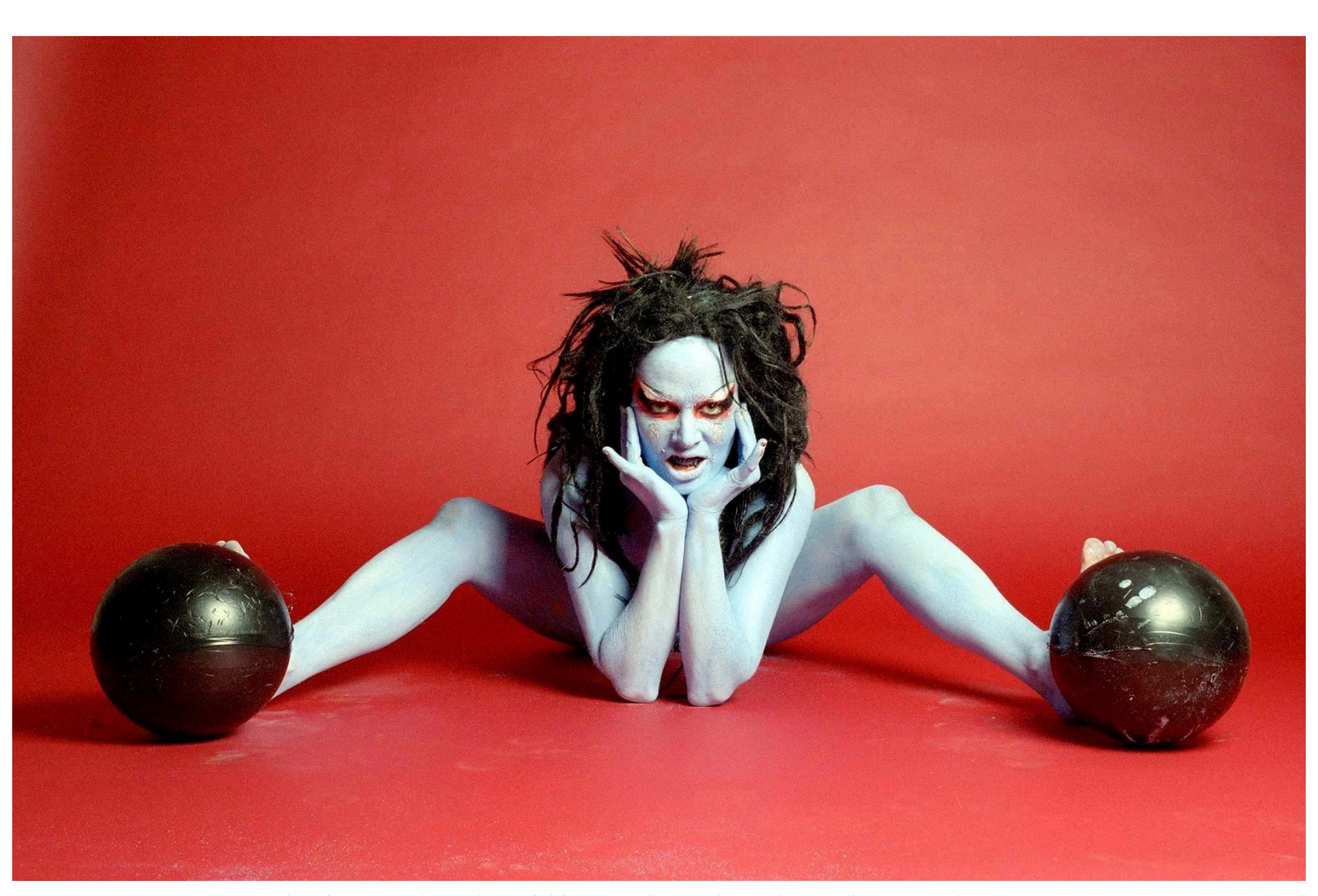
by Greg Herbowy



Richard Kern and Kembra Pfahler, *Kembra with Bowling Balls*, 1995, color c-print.
CREDIT: RICHARD KERN/KEMBRA PFAHLER/EMALIN, LONDON

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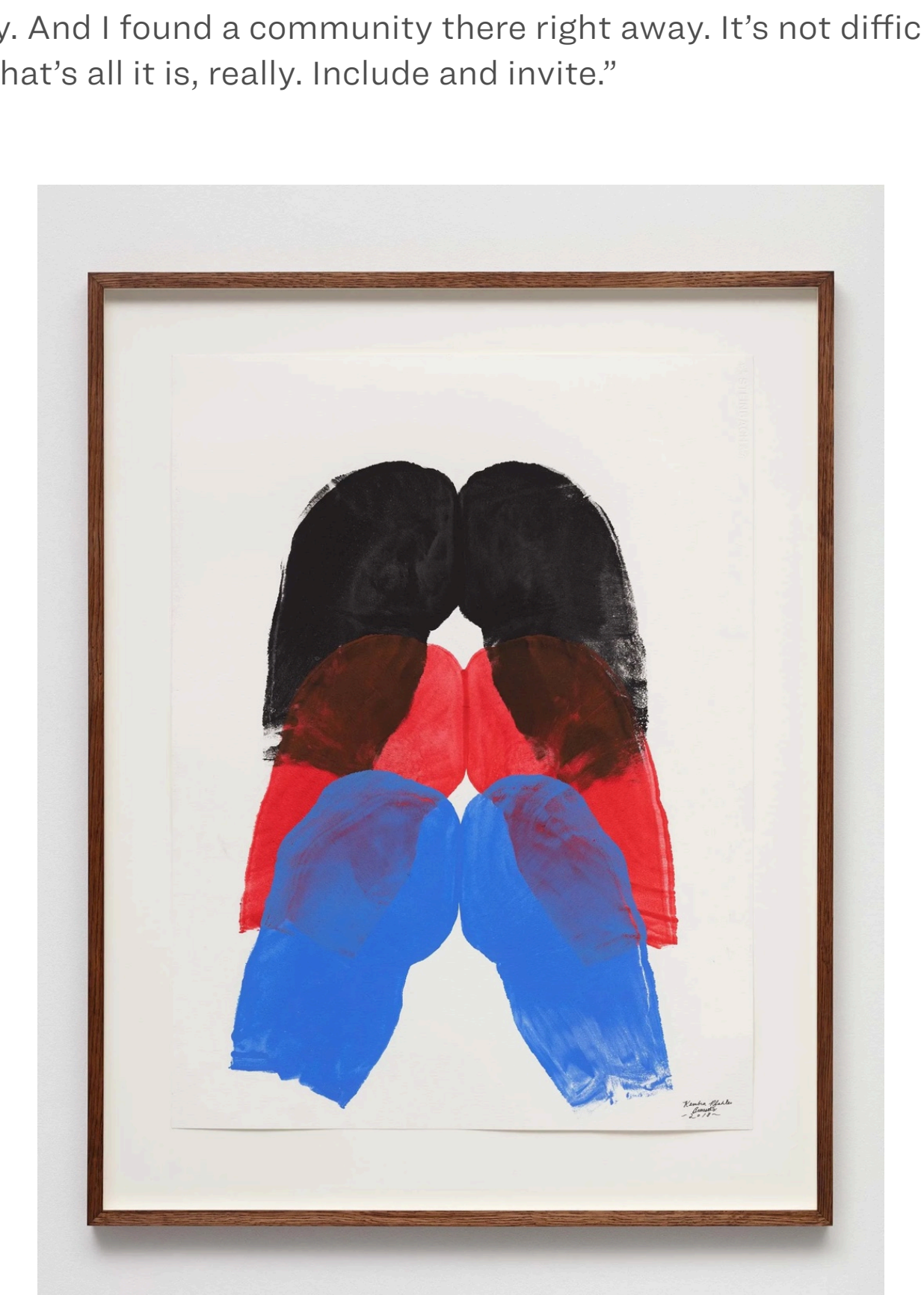
“It's hard work to be a full-time artist for all of your life,” says **Kembra Pfahler** (1982 **Fine Arts**), and, by her own admission, she has not made it easy on herself. Pfahler was still a student at SVA when she coined the term “availabism”—meaning the use of whatever is readily at hand, whether household objects or one's own body, as creative material—and it continues to be the guiding principle of her sprawling, DIY, commercially indifferent practice.

Pfahler grew up in coastal Southern California with an artistic mother, a surfer father, and, after her parents' split, a lawyer stepfather whose clientele included musicians like Bootsy Collins and Parliament-Funkadelic. In 1983, just a few years after moving to New York City, she organized “The Extremist Show”—a nine-day event at the collectively run **ABC No Rio** arts space that combined outré performances with paintings, writings, and other works by herself and others, including her close friend and classmate, the late **Gordon Kurtti** (1981 Fine Arts). The show was emblematic of her now-decades-long career, a welcoming but unyielding rebellion against conventional ideas of beauty, morality, gender, and sexuality that freely mixes performance and music with drawings, paintings, and sculpture.

For all her individuality, Pfahler is also a collaborator and peer who peppers her conversation with tributes to her friends and forebears. In the '80s and '90s, she was an integral performer in the Cinema of Transgression, a loosely affiliated group of filmmakers that made no-budget, taboo-busting work. In 1990, she and her then-husband, Samoa Moriki, founded the **Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black**, a combination punk band and troupe named for the cult actress, one of Pfahler's favorites. The act spent several years playing unsuspecting venues throughout the U.S. and established Pfahler's reputation as a singular frontwoman, her presence made unshakably alien with blackened teeth, full body paint, and massive wigs. And in 2014, Pfahler, with fellow artists and musicians Anohni, CocoRosie, and Johanna Constantine, co-curated **“Future Feminism”** at the Hole gallery on Manhattan's Bowery. In addition to an exhibition, the event included a 13-night performance and lecture series featuring artists like Laurie Anderson, Kiki Smith, and one of Pfahler's former SVA teachers, Lorraine O'Grady.

Last December, Pfahler met with the ***Visual Arts Journal*** at a diner near her Lower East Side home to talk about her early days in New York, her influences, and her advice for younger artists. Her past year had been a typically busy one: She was working with an editor to finalize **a monograph of her work**, to be published by Rizzoli next year. She and Moriki were rehearsing and raising money for their band's next album. (Earlier this year, the pair launched **a Patreon account**, offering concert footage, interviews, and other exclusive behind-the-scenes materials.) In September, Pfahler—who has been a muse and model for designers like Rick Owens and Helmut Lang—traveled to Paris Fashion Week as a guest of Valentino creative director Alessandro Michele. Last spring, she spent three months in London for a residency with the art platform CIRCA (Cultural Institute of Radical Contemporary Arts), producing **“The Manual of Action,”** a 12-week program of videos and performances illustrating her creative philosophies and intended to inspire others to pursue their own individual artistic paths.

“I think [CIRCA founder] Josef O'Connor liked that I have a lot of community going on,” she says. “Not a lot of people work the way I do. I don't have a team; I don't have a publicist. I have a lot of community. And I found a community there right away. It's not difficult—it happens when you invite. That's all it is, really. Include and invite.”



Kembra Pfahler, *Butt Print Brussells III (black, red, blue)*, 2018, acrylic body paint on Steinbach paper.
CREDIT: KEMBRA PFAHLER/EMALIN, LONDON

It sounds like your childhood was pretty bohemian. Do you remember how you found your way to transgressive or underground art? What made you decide to go to SVA?
I had to go to this school that was basically just surfers and the 1 percent. I was very angry there and very, very, very bored. I had such intense dyslexia that I couldn't find any of my classrooms or lockers, or remember the combinations on my locks. I wasn't given the tools that I have now to deal with dyslexia and I got punished for it. I drew and painted all the time, but that seemed like it was a bad thing to do. I just thought, “Man, I don't know what I'm gonna do.”

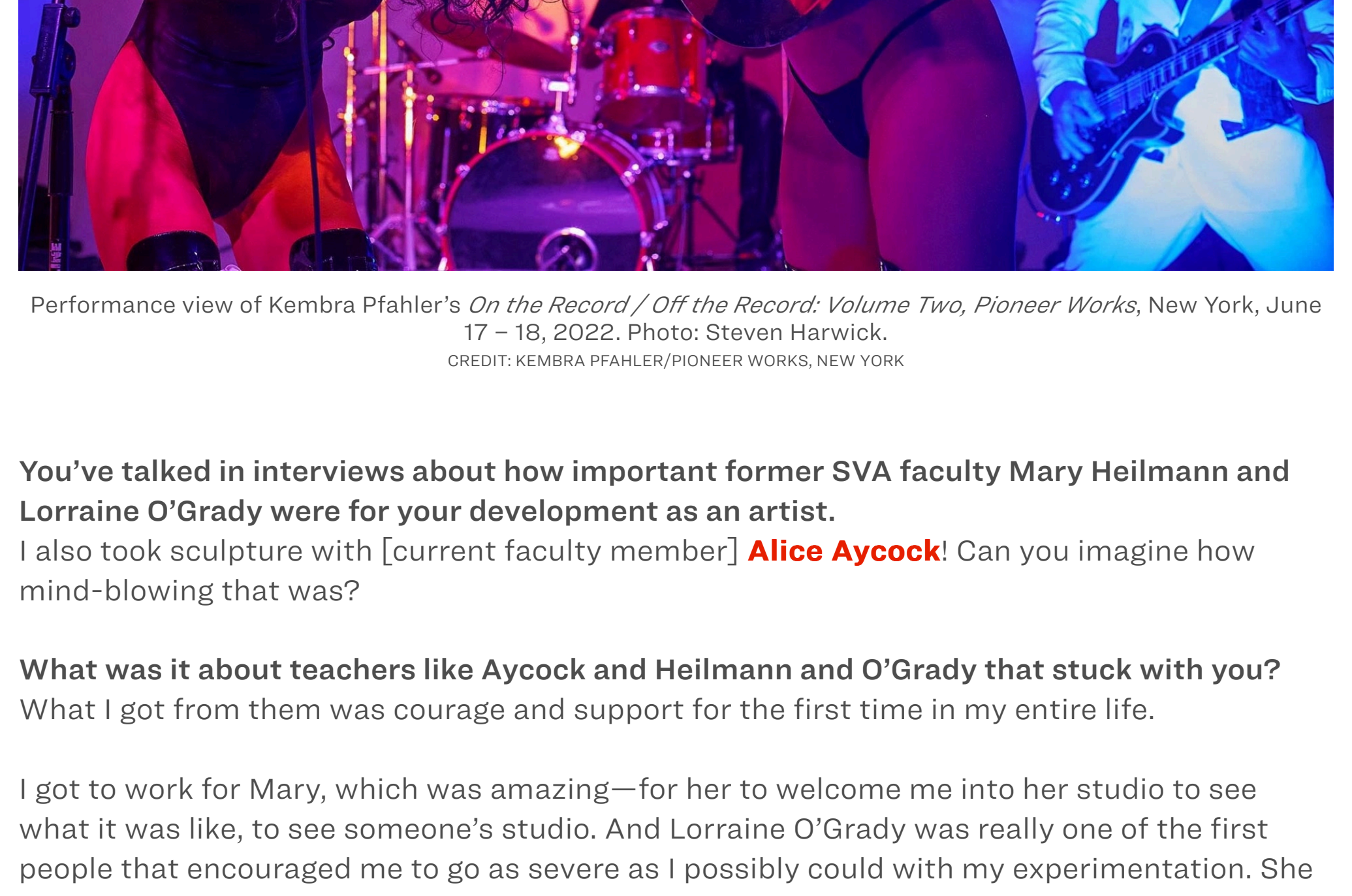
This was in the '70s, the first wave of Los Angeles punk, so I was able to go out and see performances by Diamanda Galas or Johanna Went. X was around, Exene Cervenka and John Doe, they were always doing concerts in Venice. It was so stimulating. L.A. punk fashion was so different from New York's. New York was all about women being very femme—they would wear black straight dresses, high heels—and I hated the idea of being sexualized. I thought it was creepy.

And in 11th grade there was a compassionate truant officer who sensed that I was having a hard time. He transferred me to Santa Monica High School with all As instead of Fs, which is what I really had. And that encouraged me and made me think that I could apply to college, and I applied to SVA.

Where did you live when you first moved to New York?
My mom was friends with a horror actor named Gary. He was in movies with Karen Black. He had a haunted apartment on the Upper West Side, where I stayed. It was terrifying, dark, and covered with tapestries and all the books had matching covers. Oh, *god*.

I had no idea what I was doing my first year here. I was 17 and didn't know anyone. I thought that when you were young, you needed a roommate, so I got one. He was a ballet dancer. So I got to have a buddy my first summer, who hated me, because I would always do things like eat his breakfast. I went to a lot of ballet and hung out at the Lincoln Center every night, throwing rocks and drawing on everything. There was a nightclub on the Upper West Side, Hurrah, where I saw some of the best artwork I'd ever seen.

But I wanted to be around younger people and closer to school. I was a punk-looking kid, with no eyebrows and dyed black hair, the same as I look now, pretty much, but worse. So I moved. First I had an office loft on 14th Street in Union Square, right near where Warhol shot *Empire* [1965]. Then I started living down here, Avenue C, Avenue D. I was the only person that I knew that was like me down here in '79. One person I knew was [artist and musician] Ron Dumas, and we became friends and started a band together.



Performance view of Kembra Pfahler's *On the Record / Off the Record: Volume Two, Pioneer Works*, New York, June 17 – 18, 2022. Photo: Steven Harwick.
CREDIT: KEMBRA PFAHLER/PIONEER WORKS, NEW YORK

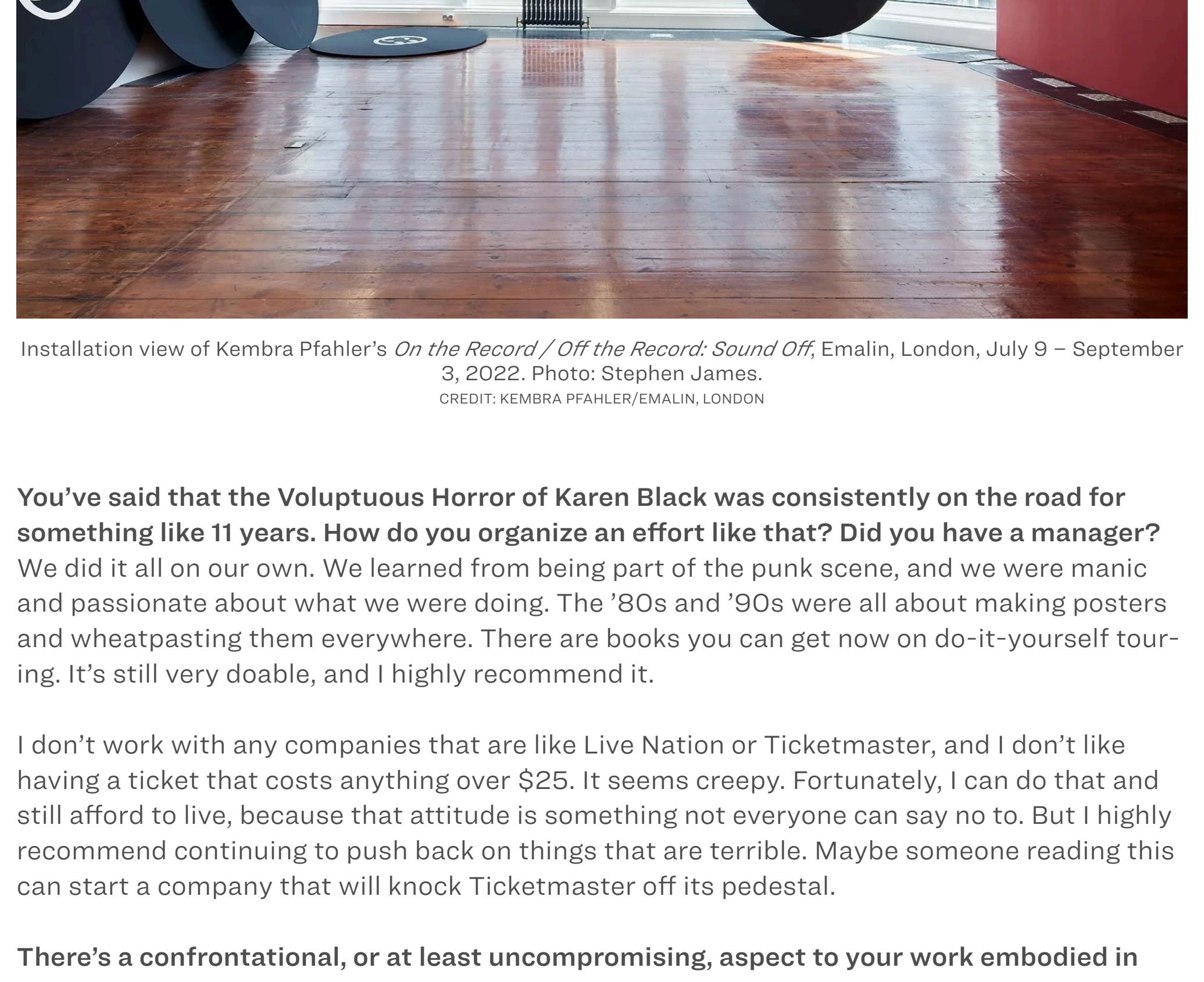
You've talked in interviews about how important former SVA faculty Mary Heilmann and Lorraine O'Grady were for your development as an artist.
I also took sculpture with [current faculty member] **Alice Aycock**! Can you imagine how mind-blowing that was?

What was it about teachers like Aycock and Heilmann and O'Grady that stuck with you?
What I got from them was courage and support for the first time in my entire life.

I got to work for Mary, which was amazing—for her to welcome me into her studio to see what it was like, to see someone's studio. And Lorraine O'Grady was really one of the first people that encouraged me to go as severe as I possibly could with my experimentation. She created an atmosphere that was so supportive and respectful, I felt like I could really try to work toward becoming myself without feeling shame or censorship. And Lorraine did that by explaining the history of art, as well.

Lowell Bodger was another teacher that really lifted me. His prompts were incredible. One of his assignments was to make a work that juxtaposed two things to suggest a narrative. I collected all these broken eggshells from a diner and put red paint on them so it looked like they were bleeding, and brought those in with a big doily and a bowling ball and set them up on the floor. And Lowell said, “This is one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen.” That was the first time I'd ever had the experience where the teacher was like, “Whoa.” It makes me emotional to talk about it, because he's since died.

I started doing stuff at ABC No Rio while I was still at SVA, and I remember asking Lowell to come and see this work I was doing on my own, and he didn't like it. He said, “This is rough. Are you sure this is what you want to do?” Because I was trying to find a vocabulary of images to create my own identity, and it was a mess. I think that a lot of times for artists, your first decade is not the easiest.



Installation view of Kembra Pfahler's *On the Record / Off the Record: Sound Off*, Emalin, London, July 9 – September 3, 2022. Photo: Stephen James.
CREDIT: KEMBRA PFAHLER/EMALIN, LONDON

You've said that the Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black was consistently on the road for something like 11 years. How do you organize an effort like that? Did you have a manager?
We did it all on our own. We learned from being part of the punk scene, and we were manic and passionate about what we were doing. The '80s and '90s were all about making posters and wheatpasting them everywhere. There are books you can get now on do-it-yourself touring. It's still very doable, and I highly recommend it.

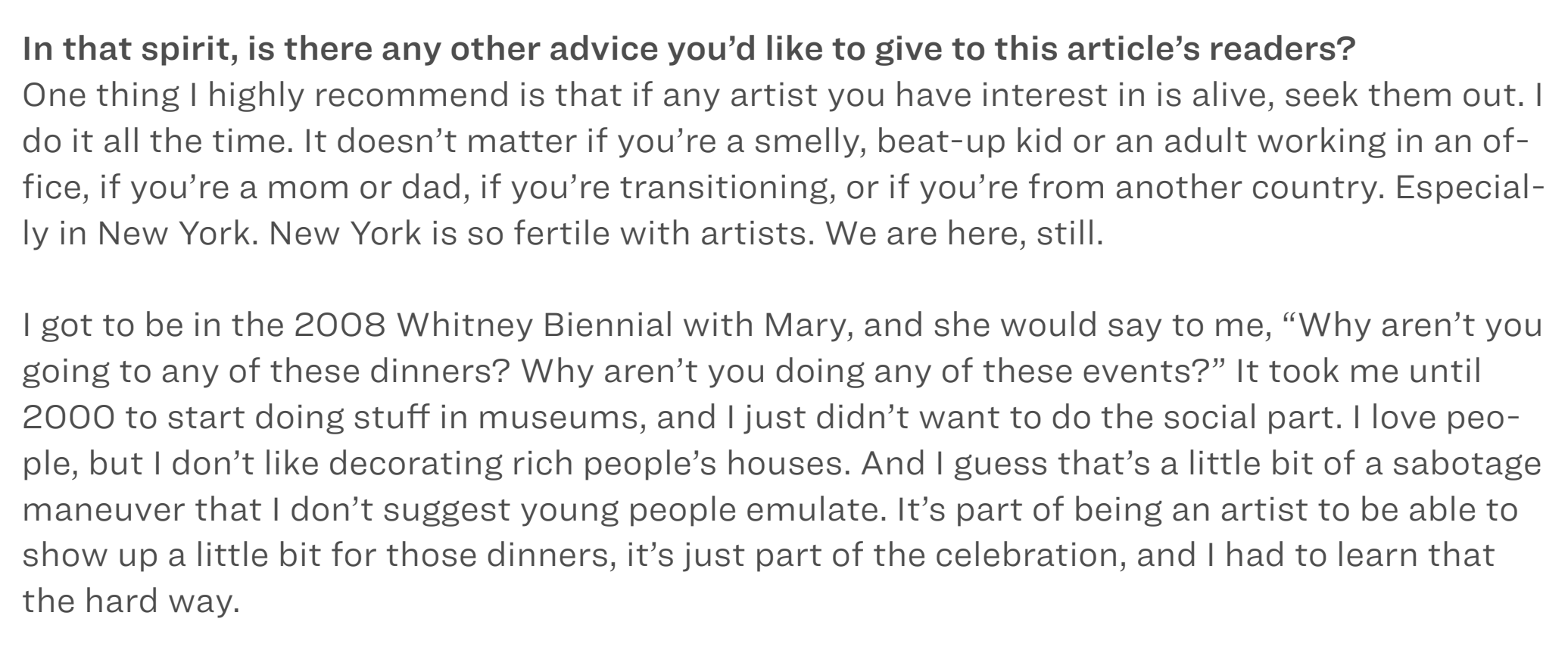
I don't work with any companies that are like Live Nation or Ticketmaster, and I don't like having a ticket that costs anything over $25. It seems creepy. Fortunately, I can do that and still afford to live, because that attitude is something not everyone can say no to. But I highly recommend continuing to push back on things that are terrible. Maybe someone reading this can start a company that will knock Ticketmaster off its pedestal.

There's a confrontational, or at least uncompromising, aspect to your work embodied in your self-presentation: the full body paint, the blackened teeth. What sort of reception did you get at your shows?
There wasn't any love at all. But I thought that was important. I knew that if we went to Europe, we would be loved and accepted. I didn't want to go to Europe. I thought, “Why do we as a band want to go where we're wanted?”

That also has to do with being young and is something I wouldn't necessarily suggest to young people today. I wouldn't say, “Go where it's dangerous, where people are going to chase you down the street and throw bottles at you.”

Was it really that antagonistic?
We got pulled over in a couple of states by some really bad people. They were *terrifying*. And that was in the '90s. Now, I wouldn't step into any state unless I knew where I was going and I had community support. I'd be so much more careful, and I was careful back then. None of us drank or used drugs of any kind—I'd fire anyone who did. So we didn't have that extra burden of being in fear because we were intoxicated. Had we had anything on us, we'd be in jail today.

And that's something that I *would* suggest for artists: If you're going to take your show on the road, try to eliminate any distractors that can put you in harm's way. And make sure when you're forming your community that trust is earned, not immediate.



Kembra Pfahler, *The Manual of Action*, 2024, video. © CIRCA.
CREDIT: KEMBRA PFAHLER/CIRCA

In that spirit, is there any other advice you'd like to give to this article's readers?
One thing I highly recommend is that if any artist you have interest in is alive, seek them out. I do it all the time. It doesn't matter if you're a smelly, beat-up kid or an adult working in an office, if you're a mom or dad, if you're transitioning, or if you're from another country. Especially in New York. New York is so fertile with artists. We are here, still.

I got to be in the 2008 Whitney Biennial with Mary, and she would say to me, “Why aren't you going to any of these dinners? Why aren't you doing any of these events?” It took me until 2000 to start doing stuff in museums, and I just didn't want to do the social part. I love people, but I don't like decorating rich people's houses. And I guess that's a little bit of a sabotage maneuver that I don't suggest young people emulate. It's part of being an artist to be able to show up a little bit for those dinners, it's just part of the celebration, and I had to learn that the hard way.

You mentioned Alice Aycock as an inspirational teacher. When she was interviewed for the *Journal*, she talked about how exciting it is to witness a promising student's progress. What do you think it is that draws you to teaching?
One of my friends once sarcastically asked me if I had an addiction to young people. But I'm not ageist and I remember the feeling of being devalued and looked down upon when I was in my serious 20s, when I was always working, and studied a lot harder than I do now. I remember the meanspiritedness of that and will never forget how horrible it felt. Any person from the age of 18 to 30—we don't know if they're the next Roosevelt or Hemingway.

I really believe that we don't know who's going to save the world. It could be the person who is in the cartoon class, the person who is on the computer all day who no one ever talks to, or the person in the sculpture class who's doing really shitty sculpture. We don't know who's going to save the world, and it has to happen. Because it's pretty nice here, right? It's pretty nice.

This conversation has been condensed and edited.

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