

BOMB

Holy and Profane: Marianna Ellenberg Interviewed by
Wendy Vogel

Nineteenth-century female hysteria and contemporary digital culture on stage.





India Salvor Menezes and Maxwell Cosmo Cramer. *Pawel & Ebola* by Marianna Ellenberg. Photo by Thana Brick.

Marianna Ellenberg calls pop culture her “medicine,” but over the past few years, I’ve found the magic salve to be our extended talks about the feminist stakes of visual culture. Ellenberg is game to discuss almost anything—from the 1977 Japanese horror film *Hausu* to Jill Soloway’s adaptation of *I Love Dick*, from family histories to art history. This analytical approach informs her performances, videos, and films, which focus on gendered expectations of women, consumerism, and the stigma of mental illness. But make no mistake, Ellenberg isn’t a realist—in her densely structured productions, she skewers language to put it back together again.

Ellenberg’s new theatrical production, *Pawel & Ebola*, looks back to nineteenth-century French depictions of hysterics to land us squarely in the present. Here, global capitalism has yielded human rights abuses, exploitation of labor, and the same age-old misogyny and religious wars. Co-directed by Greg Zuccolo, and starring India Salvor Menezes and Maxwell Cosmo Cramer, *Pawel & Ebola*

debuts at The Kitchen, February 22–24.

—Wendy Vogel

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Your new play, *Pawel & Ebola*, centers around the quasi-incestuous relationship between twins who are the product of an affair between the nineteenth-century French psychiatrist Jean-Martin Charcot and one of his hysterical patients. In reading the play, I was struck that the real drama is the splintered relationship between the mother (Genevieve) and daughter (Ebola).

Marianna Ellenberg

The Charcot figure is really a jumping-off point for the play. What I was interested in was this image of the hysterical woman that's been perpetuated throughout Western culture—the feminine being associated with the Other; with wildness; and with a pre-language, pre-social craziness. The first theory that spoke to me in college was by Julia Kristeva, and that got me inspired to create performance work. At the Salpêtrière clinic in the nineteenth century, Charcot documented and staged these reenactments of hysterical episodes for an audience. It creates such a strong visual image to which I really wanted to respond. But a lot of my work is indirectly about my own family roots and family history—mothers, daughters, sisters, brothers. The play combines the narrative of Charcot and the institutionalized misogyny within the history of medicine with this idea of hysteria and trauma within my own family. In the way that I'm staging the play, Mother and Ebola are about the same age. They're mother-daughter, and sisters as well.

For most of the plays and films that I've been making over the past eight years, I've worked with young people in their twenties. In the first live-action videos I created, I worked with fifteen-year-old teenagers. There's a motif of coming-of-age. In this play, the daughter, Ebola, has to deal with second-generation trauma. Her mother, Genevieve, is based on one of Charcot's three famous patients. I have this myth that they have an affair and Charcot banishes Genevieve and the twins from the Salpêtrière clinic, and the family runs off to New England. The daughter is trying to find herself, while her father is absent and her brother has kept her and her mother both locked up separately in this

shut-down mental-health clinic. Ebola doesn't have much access to the outside world, except for what the brother has created. Other than this familial idea of the hysterical woman, she doesn't have many options of how to be. But when she finally is exposed to the outside world through these two cult leaders who come to kidnap her, she starts getting her wits about her. She starts coming into her own and realizing she's more than just a list of symptoms.



India Salvor Menezes and Maxwell Cosmo Cramer. *Pawel & Ebola* by Marianna Ellenberg. Photo by Thana Brick.

WV

In this play and your 2015 play, *The Harmers* (co-conceived with David Zuckerberg), hysteria and female excess are expressed through language. This seems to go against a trend in recent feminist art of privileging the silent body as a site of knowledge. I'm interested in the contemporary art world's fascination with dance, especially slow-moving dance that focuses on intuitive movements of the body, but it also seems open for critique at this moment.

ME

My dad is a psychiatrist, and I've always been obsessed with what he did. Language, growing up for me, was always up for grabs. There was mental health discourse used as colloquial discourse in our home, which was overlaid with Yiddishisms from my dad growing up as a postwar German Jewish refugee. Already there's this odd, immigrant approach to language—an overlapping of religion, pop culture, and analytical terms. And because my father's office was in our apartment growing up, all these things were in the same space.

In an earlier project of mine, *The Psychotropic Alphabet*, I made parodies of medical ads for psychotropic drugs. That was the first piece where I started breaking down language. The confluence of commerce, medicine, and mental health is so bizarre in our culture. It seemed like discourses that should be kept separate were all coming together, just like the conversations growing up that should have been kept separate got merged. When I started working with actors later on, this kind of language play became part of my work. The artists that inspire me are Yvonne Rainer, or even bits of some Joan Jonas pieces from the '70s. And very campy films.

WV

Mandra Gora, the fifteen-minute performance staged at David Lewis gallery last fall that was a preview to *Pawel & Ebola*, was essentially a series of incantations. I'm interested in the way that psychoanalysis and religious rituals are incorporated into the amalgamated spirituality/self-help language of *Pawel & Ebola*. Psychoanalysis and religion are types of world-building through language.

ME

The framework of my performances, and even my films, is this play between the colloquial and the religious, the holy and the profane. By creating my own language, it's a way for me to own these terms that entrap women, and also the limitations that I've found in gendered relationships. Creating this world where you jump from a religious term, to a self-help term, to pop culture is a way of finding my own sense of the spiritual-poetic. Over the past few years I've been trying to make sense of my religious upbringing, which I always felt isolated from, as well as this new state of the world, where we are so aware of things like climate change (and species' morality). Doing these pieces, I can locate my own jouissance. Somewhere in there is some kind of peace.



India Salvor Menezes and Maxwell Cosmo Cramer. *Pawel & Ebola* by Marianna Ellenberg. Photo by Thana Brick.

WV

I'm curious about the role of psychoanalysis and incantation as the speech acts

in this powerful new moment we are in with #MeToo, where people are speaking out against systemic sexual abuse and misogyny. How do you think this play relates to the current moment versus when you wrote it about a year ago?

I also wonder how you think about changing definitions of feminism. You and I occupy a similar generational position. I have always thought of my investment in feminism as a tool to deconstruct cultural messages. Now it seems like there's a younger generation that is trying to find themselves through new labels and identifications.

ME

Since 2010, when I started doing my videos with teenage actresses, there's always been a conversation among different generations. In this new piece, the lead actor who plays Ebola is India Salvor Menezes, who is in her twenties. We've been talking about microaggressions and trigger warnings.

The play itself is a hot-button play. The biggest inspiration for my work, perhaps not consciously, is the work of Sarah Kane, whose works tend to explode on the stage. But this very fiery material I've written—for me, it's just my work. I don't think it's that crazy. It's fun!

As for working with young female performers, India now identifies as non-binary, and has inspired me to rethink my own preconceptions. India, along with several of my millennial artist friends, are trying to push buttons and language within their own work. They also do a lot of activism within the queer and trans community. What's been really exciting about the process of working with such a diverse group of actors is that I'm having those conversations. It necessitates conversations across generations. My last piece, *The Harmers*, dealt with a Howard Stern-type character, and why were women of my mother's generation obsessed with him? In this piece, I'm wondering why the hysteric is fetishized by both women and men. Why do we perpetuate this image, and can we get away from it?

Even in rehearsing this play and staging it—in the past year I've been workshopping it with different actors—I've learned so much. This is my biggest project, and I said that I only wanted to get actors who are trained in

experimental theater and can really perform this strange language. It can't be a soap-opera actor doing it or a Hollywood actor. I've met different actors like Modesto "Flako" Jimenez, who's one of the key voices of people of color in downtown theater. Conversations with him, with India, with Deidrea Hamid (another one of my actors), and with Greg (my co-director) are making me grow and expand my position on feminist thinking, but also on gender and race within the art and theater community.



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WV

Pawel runs a kind of digital labor farm in the former mental hospital, which seems to be staffed by foreign workers over whom he is the cruel master. Why do you think it's important to bring in this topic to the play?

ME

This play traverses time, going between images of nineteenth-century hysteria

in France, which depicted mostly white, Christian women, and contemporary digital culture. There's the oppressive man: Pawel, the brother, who keeps his mother and sister locked up. On the other hand, what I see as the major issue today is class and economic oppression. All the laborers are female in the play, and they're kind of a metaphor for issues of contemporary feminism that aren't addressed enough. Especially in American culture, class is always separated from gender and race. As an American consumer, and as someone who is occupying a position in the cultural elite—yet is cash-poor, as an adjunct professor—I do need to buy cheap things from the internet. But I read about laborers in China working fourteen hours a day. That is one of the most pressing problems today, and it is affecting women, too. It's the elephant in the room of digital culture. The body is there being sacrificed so we can have everything quick and easy.

Pawel & Ebola will be performed at The Kitchen in New York City on February 22–24.

Wendy Vogel is a writer and independent curator based in New York. She is a visiting faculty member in the MFA department of painting and printmaking at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her writing appears regularly in a variety of art and culture outlets, including Artforum.com, Art in America, ArtReview, CULTURED, frieze, and MOUSSE.

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