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2020-05-10 · On Art

# Out of the Blue Left Field



I got a lion in my pocket, and baby it's ready to roar.

Prince, '1999'.

2 videos by COMMANDO & John Sanborn



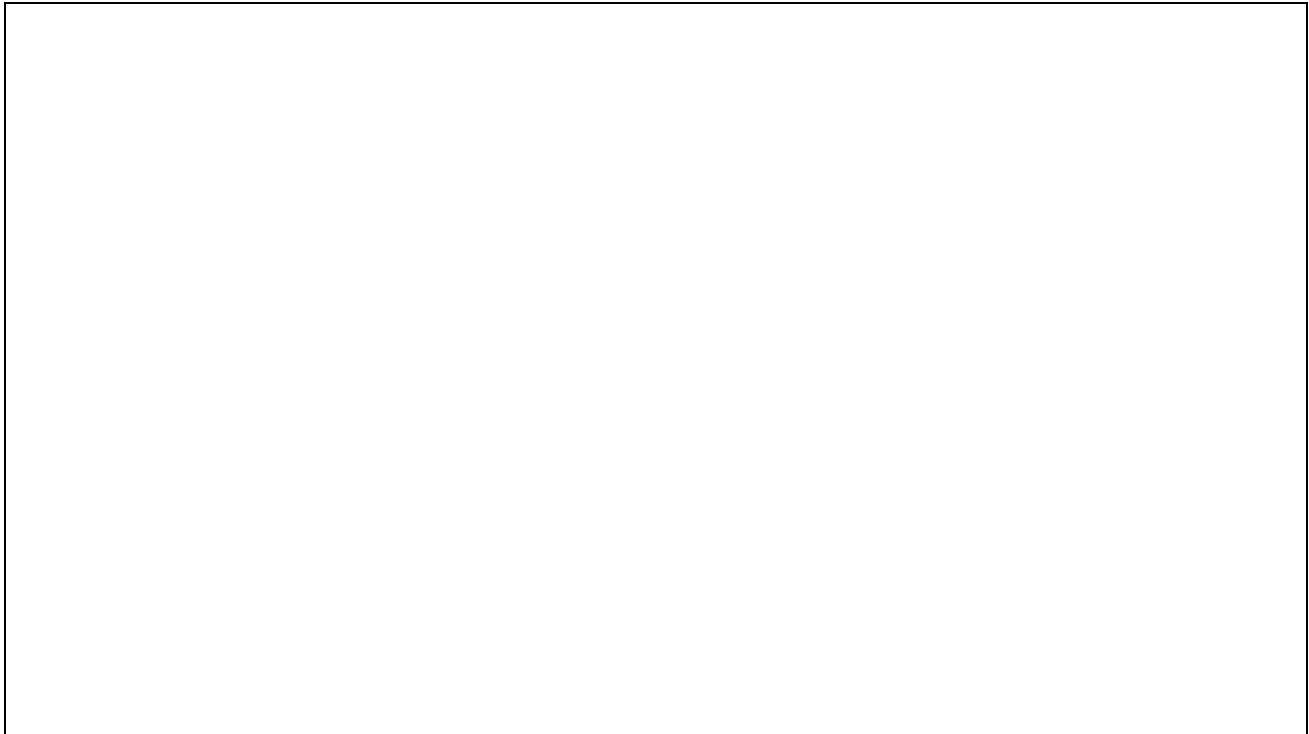
The mediatization of the challenge to what attempts to endure within American culture has grown exponentially across the nation during its protean confinement protocol (incarnated by a Kentucky woman who cut a hole in her face mask so she could breathe more easily). At least this is how it appears when social graces, let alone distancing, have been put on hold.

This occurs at a time when cultural venues remain closed, from museums to movie theaters, when streaming stands for 24-hour shots of comfort. Does resistance stand a chance? Resistance to a defiantly staged political incompetence and to the 'all I do is win-win-win' scenarios of narratives that wouldn't dare go another way. As in the shift of corruption, a Cronenberg-like hidden horror that fed from the body politic, now gloatingly rampant in a manner that invites a pressing return to Roberto Esposito's writings on immunity. Yet NYC's

Times Square has a Trump Death Clock, adding the number of Covid-19 victims, a cypher for government inaction, eerily recalling Alan Moore's *Doomsday Clock* from his *Watchmen*. That time piece from the eighties has been reset to November 2020.

And in the cracks between the MoMA on-line courses, Alex Garland's *Devs* and Michael Jordan's *The Last Dance*, that make us feel clever and long for shoes, a number of short dangerous works manage to reach us.

Media artist John Sanborn had started the year with flourish, a collaboration with SF music & performance group The Residents, who performed their *God in 3 Persons* at the MoMA last January. Then came the virus. Sanborn had already worked with the performance ensemble 'The Living Earth Show' for *TASSEL*, a short video dance piece. Its members had another project existing within that community, a queer core band with 'a revolving set of queer and trans lead singers' as Lynn 'I can't take my eyes off you' Breedlove puts it. The band, 'COMMANDO' was set to release its first record and go on tour. John Sanborn, who was preparing an exhibition, saw the dates pushed back to end of 2020, and out of postponement came two music videos that explain what it means for someone to matter, to leave a legacy, whether posthumous or already mythified, of power and color. Portraits of a time when individuals gave shape to their destiny.



The first video, *THE SHOCK OF GARY FISHER* (feat. Dutchboy) with words and performance by Juba Kalamka, celebrates artist and diarist Gary Fisher, who died of AIDS at age 32, inevitably emanates nostalgia, standstill, and courage. Sanborn relies on the singing and speaking close-up of Kalamka as it soars through a constellation of recited lines and words, of found and original footage, celebrating what he wants to do to 'it' (kiss/lick/suck), and 'it' provides an aesthetics for a rigid and disciplined eighties and nineties gay masculinity, never far removed from Foucault's biopolitics.

The second piece, 'Prince', is a tribute by Lynn Breedlove that covers the icon's career from *Controversy* to *Sign o' the Times*. It counts among one of Sanborn's most immediately moving collaborations (like Dern's Spahn telling Pitt's Booth 'you touched me' in the last Tarantino) since *Perfect Lives*, with Robert Ashley, a ghostly presence in

Breedlove's reciting of her blithe and effortless connection to a dyke history and the ascent of Prince with his *'femdykes on stage, his spittin' image, a girl version of him'* and how *'we were coming through anyway, led by the most fearless, least fucks-giving motherfucker on the planet with all the moves and a voice that could go from girl to boy in a second. if he wasn't intimidated, neither were we.'*

Prince emerges as the coming of a more fluid gender definition, which the performer is adept at conveying throughout his own narrative.

Both videos point to what an extraordinary social laboratory America had been during those Reagan–Clinton decades. They also point to John Sanborn's easeful prowess in creating a clear kinship between two songs from one band, while his formal mastery manages to bring all the differences to the foreground.

Stephen Sarrazin  
Tokyo May 2020

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John Sanborn

Watch on

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## Interview with John Sanborn

**1- The year had started well enough, with your collaboration with the Residents at MoMA, then we got confirmation about something big down the line, and then the virus started to strike. Are any of your 2020 projects still scheduled to happen?**

I thought after the MoMA shows with The Residents that 2020 would be simpler than 2018–2019 and that I needed to reload on ideas and creation of new works. But the virus has jolted the framework of expectations considerably. My joint show with Agnès Guillaume ([www.agnesguillaume.com](http://www.agnesguillaume.com)) at 836m in San Francisco is still on track to open in October, but date is TBD as how and when we “reopen” the US is in flux. The show will feature 4 works, 2 by Agnès and 2 by me. Each of us has chosen an existing project based on their compatibility – as

the core of our connection as artists fueled the idea to show together. And each of us will create and premiere a new work, again in “conversation” with each other. I have seen Agnès’ new work and it is stunningly simple and direct. I am in progress on mine, called “And in Conclusion” – a 22 channel comedy about the cycles of a single life and all of humanity. You know, end of the world stuff. I am also scheduled to add 3 new songs to “God in 3 Persons” and perform the whole work in SF also this fall.

However several shows, projects and trips have been either cancelled or shifted to 2021 or 2022. This was at first a shock, but has given me time to explore sideways projects and work intensely on future ideas.

**2- You recently did an another collaboration, this time with the queercore band COMMANDO, doing 2 videos with them. How did that come about? Do you have a history with them, did they reach out to you?**

COMMANDO is an offshoot of the The Living Earth Show, a duo of Andy Meyerson, percussion; and Travis Andrews, guitar. I had worked with them several times in the past, most notably on “Tassel” a dance/music/video with music by Anna Meredith. I have an idea for a big sound/video work that I want them involved in, called “Beats Me”. We’d been discussing it and I schedule a video chat with Andy just when things got shut down. COMMANDO’s first record was about to be released but their supporting tour got cancelled – including a gig at the Kennedy Center in DC. So Andy said “we’ll do your project if you do 2 videos for 2 of our songs”. Humm, OK. I knew about COMMANDO

and had seen some of their songs at a show last year, and understood that this was a queer thrash group. I met Lynn Breedlove and got him to sign a book of his poetry (which includes the words to “Prince”) so I knew what I was getting into. I told Andy to send me the tunes and I loved them.

### **3- Did they express any concerns, or give guidelines (given your orientation) before you started working on the videos?**

I am the patriarchy no doubt, but I would resign from that toxic club if I could. I am an old, straight white guy and that ain’t going to change, but what I can and will do is collaborate with communities that are “not me” and work with artists as people who have something to say. The Living Earth Show duo are mixed, one gay and one straight, but I asked the musicians and the performers directly if there were any caveats, but of course being an artist supersedes everything else.

### **4- We belong to a generation which lost friends and close ones to AIDS. You’d directed a seminal piece, Untitled, with choreographer Bill T. Jones, about the loss of his collaborator and partner Arnie Zane. What was different this time, in wanting to convey a sense of loss?**

The echoes of HIV AIDS are there in both songs. A virus that kills is a threat we all face, but AIDS was a “gay” cancer, as “The Shock of Gary Fisher” says. The reminder that we’ve fucked this up once before, in a manner that let thousands die, was there from our first conversation. Gary Fisher, the poet, who was unpublished at the time of his death

from AIDS is now seen as a major influence on gay black men who write, and Prince represented (and reminds us) that race, color or sexuality don't stop us all from dancing. In fact the healing power of each of the artists quoted in the songs was an essential element I wanted to highlight. We don't often take the time to acknowledge how music, art or words can bind us together, and Lynn's interpretation of Prince as a queer icon, urging him and his friends to be who they are, is part of what permits everyone to appreciate that work. The words Juba puts together tell a similar story about reaching into the past to deal with the present, and how the "shock" of Gary Fisher resonate today.

**5- Given the social distancing recommendations, did the performers shoot/record themselves and send you the material, to which you added your own footage and postproduction ideas?**

These songs were done quickly and within the Covid protocols. Usually I'd have the performers to my studio and we'd record lip sync performances. But at a distance we started with video chats about each writer's intentions and how the music for each was developed. Words first, music second. I asked them both to record in portrait and landscape orientation, but the portrait mode, obviously done with a phone, prevailed. Their intensity and directness, different in tone, allowed for an intimacy which was unexpected. With Juba, he did 3 first takes, kind of subdued. I asked for more and he responded with much more effervescent takes, with sunglasses a la Issac Hayes, and that was inspiring. Lynn's takes were so intimate and confessional that I was moved to create a sense of "home movies" with "Prince". And then he started to send me pictures – dozens and dozens of images

of his life, his friends, his community.

With each song I had only a small idea of what I would do, the work proceeded like an improvisation, hooked on the words and their power. Phrase by phrase and beat by beat I either created or found images to build out THEIR worlds as expressed by the song. I dressed myself in their clothes, walked around their neighborhoods and mentally transported myself into why they needed to speak. With Juba- the world of sex workers, HIV counseling, and blackness opened up and invited me in. The slippery wordplay became a puzzle to hint at, but not explain. With Lynn, the images of his shrine to Prince let me know how deeply this love song would affect people, and how sadness about an event, can cause us all to cry.

**6- In recent years you have done relatively few short pieces, like *I don't Care*, or *Tassel*, which are very different from what you did with *COMMANDO*. I was reminded more of something that you did over 20 years ago or so, *Sitting on Top of the World*, which was also announcing the idea of doing post production at home... do you see a link between those works?**

I am deeply influenced by music as overt illustrative metaphor, as structure, and in how I layer and post-produce my work. Sometimes it's obvious when I am making a "song" but the format and intensions of popular music and the construction of a pop song are very powerful. You just cannot escape verse, chorus, verse. So my distortions and offbeat interpretations of music and specifically songs, is threaded through almost all of my work, including installations.

Songs are story types we all attach ourselves to, and respond to. We “sing” our lives as greatest hits, and condense complex ideas into couplets that rhyme. And the “improvisational” nature of many of my works, which can start with a single trigger, are realized via the digital tools I can control. In some ways what I do is because I can do it, but over the course of time I have my thematic processes, as well as my iconic images – to be used and reused to service whatever the idea. “Perfect Lives” is based on a song, which is nested inside the opera.

**7- You mention your idea of ‘not me’, but again you have worked with LGBTQ artists throughout your career. The sexual orientation would be an argument for ‘exclusion’, yet there is the culture/creative/political community, which you would all be a part of. Do you feel that this issue of orientation has made boundaries softer or stronger, likewise with complicity?**

If we allow ourselves to be burdened by a person’s attributes to the exclusion of knowing who they are as people, we are doomed. That is not to say that identity does not include those attributes but our speaking to elements of our common humanity has long been my objective.

Can I work with anyone about anything – yes, I can. And I relish going outside myself, entering into and embracing communities and perspectives I cannot by myself feel or understand. I am very deliberate in stepping outside my comfort zone whenever possible because that’s where people that have great value but whose voices are not often heard, exist.

I feel like an outsider even though I am officially not. I don't know what "world" beyond the OSWG one I belong to – not really an "artist" in the traditional sense; not really a filmmaker, not at all a musician– just doing what I need to do. And so interacting with and involving myself with the issues that connect us (and specifically me to "not me") has been my muse.

**8- You were one of the first video artists to actually make music videos for MTV, working with record companies, getting budgets... are you still interested in that form? do you ever watch current music videos?**

Yes, these 2 new works are music/videos as was "ACT III", which served as a promotion for Philip Glass' album on CBS records and was played on MTV along with the dozens of other projects I did back then. I knew 2 artists who "invented" MTV; Nam June Paik and Michael Nesmith, and worked with them both as their experiments bore fruit. I love the short form of the pop song – it's a perfect vehicle, but current music videos (outside of KPop) feel less like experiments and more like attempts to sell. When I did music videos the selling of the form was as important as the selling of the song. If I do see anything interesting it's on YouTube and it's usually an artist who commands enough respect to short circuit the burden of sales.

If you know of anyone who wants me to do a video with them, put us in touch. I am inspired by all manner of tunes.

## **9- What was COMMANDO's reaction to your work, and how are they using it now?**

COMMANDO loved the finished works, with very positive and emotional responses from Juba and Lynn.

COMMANDO have posted them but are holding off heavy promotion for a bit to see if they can perform live before "releasing" them and the album. On my youtube channel they have over 1200 views.

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## **Interview with COMMANDO**

### **Lynn Breedlove**

1- Could you tell us what is COMMANDO? A band, a collective, activists, all of these? When was it formed and where are you based?

LB: we are a band from sf, and also a project of The Living Earth Show, which is Andy, Travis, and Van and all kinds of featured guests, music, word, dance and visual artists. Andy approached me about 3 years ago and said, "i want to start a band with a revolving set of queer and trans lead singers, including you. we already have done these shows with these performers. Want in?" and i said ok cool. So we scouted around and got more singers and then with this core group made our first record and did shows over the last couple years.

2- Could members, which I understand are also all involved individual practices, tell us what they do out of COMMANDO?

LB: I'm a singer songwriter

3- John explained the process of making the work under covid-19 protocols, asking you to record yourselves. In the Gary Fisher piece, it all appears to be 'indoor', a close-up of Juba, while in Prince, Lynn is inside and out (apologies if I'm mistaken here). Did you discuss among yourselves what you would be sending John?

LB: John asked me for some lip synchs on my phone to the Prince piece. i sent him a few, and even though he asked for a solid background so he could get a green screen effect like he did for Juba's (which he did first), i ignored that request! except for one take against a dark background, all my takes were done in my house and my hood. it's allowed to ride your bike here, so i shot myself riding. then he said to send him photos. i sent him 70 shots of photos i had in an old chest full of paper photos from my entire life. he kept saying send me one for this line, who's this person? it was a sweet collaboration, and took a lot of trust on both our parts, which is what i do with bands all the time, but working with video artists, photographers, or recording engineers it's often a person you don't know, and that's really exciting to me, the sense of intimacy and trust with a stranger is like a one night stand- naked, but ok let's do this! i love what he did with the images and how he asked about the context of each and was mindful of the privacy of the woman i was specifically talking about (i got everyone else's permission to use their images, but i couldn't find her to ask.) John is a consummate professional and i feel super blessed to have got to work with him.

4- How did you connect with John? Were any of you familiar with his

video and installation works?

LB: Andy knew him. I didn't know what a genius he was or about all the brilliant work he had done with so many of my musical heroes until he showed me some of his pieces and i looked him up.

5- What place does Gary Fisher occupy now in American literature? Have you shared the video with literary communities, in the US and abroad? Would you want the video to be sent to various media art festivals (likewise for Prince)?

Pass

6- One hears a number of things in the Gary Fisher video, and bringing up musical references is always a sensitive issue, of thinking what is there and not there. Beyond Bad Brains or Death Grip (which again may not be there at all and speaks to my lack of awareness of a more recent American scene), what does inform your sound?

Pass

7- I recall arriving in NYC on the day of Prince's passing. I took a cab from the airport to Chinatown, to stay at a friend's place. The driver didn't have the radio on. But as I got off, every other car had Prince blasting out of their windows, street musicians were all playing Prince. And of course I just knew. I remembered the first record I bought and the last concert tour I saw (which would have been around the time of *Cream*). Is your 'Prince' looking at him through the prism of a specific period/era of his output? Did he continue, for you, to be the

incarnation of all you express?

LB: of course the piece i wrote is about the 80s. i wrote it when he died, but the piece is about how when you first meet someone, whether it's a lover or a musician whose work you experience, you remember that first time, those early years, what you fell in love with them. Prince, Bowie, and Freddy Mercury when we were young were all saying, it's ok to be queer and punk, and rebels. we had no real role models at that time that were rockers. so that's what he always meant to me, how he encouraged us: express yourself, your sexuality, your gender, through music. be fearless. and i ended up deeply influenced by him. i don't think i realized how deeply until he died.

8- America encountered AIDS during the Reagan years, and Covid-19 with Trump. How do you believe culture is now reacting, around you, to the targeting of social minorities?

LB: One of the things my friends said when Trump came to power was, "this will be an era of great art."

the 80s were a moment of great art, even as queer artists were dying all around us: Sylvester, Mapplethorpe, Haring, Nureyev. the same mainstream approach of, "i'm young healthy, white, straight, middle class, or i don't have to worry about dying, so fuck you, eliminate the weak and the hated, thin the herd, because it wont be my family, echoes Reagan's callously deliberate silence, which we heard as "just die already." it's cruel and bigoted. a health or economic crisis, whether it's war, a pandemic, a depression, or any combination

thereof, tends to reveal assholes, in this case more white supremacy than homophobia, but same idea. like searching out stains with a black light, you suddenly realize, ew gross! but they've been there all along.

## **JUBA KALAMKA**

1- Could you tell us what is COMMANDO? a band, a collective, activists, all of these? When was it formed and where are you based?

2- Could members, which I understand are also all involved individual practices, tell us what they do out of COMMANDO?

**Juba Kalamka: I began performing in the late 1970s in Chicago area Black children's theater and have been emceeing emceeing since the late 1980s. I was heavily involved in the early 1990s hip hop scene in Chicago through hosting and co-producing open mikes, recording and performing.**

**I came out as bisexual in 1995 and moved to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1999 and became involved in bisexual activism as a writer and illustrator for Anything That Moves magazine. I recorded with Clubfoot Orchestra bassist Richard Egner and shortly thereafter met Judge Muscat and performed and recorded with Rainbow Flava. In 2000 I cofounded the group Deep Dickollective (D/DC), formed the micro-label sugartruck recordings and began curation of the PeaceOUT Homohop Festival in Oakland California. Deep Dickollective released five albums from 2000-2008 and I ran PeaceOUT for seven years. I had heard of Lynnee's work with Tribe 8 while I was still in Chicago and met him in 2001. We toured together in the spring and fall of 2002 and have participated in**

**numerous overlapping project contexts since then.**

**Concurrently my work in hip hop to this I earned a MFA degree in Poetics and Queer and Activist Performance, became a porn actor and worked in HIV Prevention health, bisexual social advocacy and sex worker activism, which are all a part of my living to this day.**

3- John explained the process of making the work under covid-19 protocols, asking you to record yourselves. In the Gary Fisher piece, it all appears to be 'indoor', a close-up of Juba, while in Prince, Lynn is inside and out (apologies if I'm mistaken here). Did you discuss among yourselves what you would be sending John?

**Juba Kalamka: We had a few discussions with John about what we would be doing. He suggested that there was more he would be able to do with effects and such if we had black backgrounds, and that just happened to work for me as I had a few drapes from performances around and have been wearing solely black clothing for about 2 years or so. I gave Judge the same suggestions for his part. The shooting indoors work for both our time and logistical limitations and it helped to get it done in a timely fashion.**

4- How did you connect with John? were any of you familiar with his video and installation works?

**Juba Kalamka: We hooked up with John through Andy. I have an ex who was a video artist in the 1980s and 1990s so I had some passing familiarity with John through her, but realized I'd seen tons**

**of his work in lots of places since the mid 1980s. I was not familiar with his installation work, but know many of the San Francisco area artists who have worked with him and have collaborated with them on other projects.**

5- What place does Gary Fisher occupy now in American literature? Have you shared the video with literary communities, in the US and abroad? Would you want the video to be sent to various media art festivals (likewise for Prince?)?

**Juba Kalamka: I became familiar with Gary Fisher's work through the scholarship of Robert Reid-Pharr, PhD. The song is title after Pharr's essay of the same name from his collection *Black Gay Man* (NYU Press, 2001). Per the editorial conversation in the collection *Gary In Your Pocket*, Fisher was ambivalent at best and suspicious at worst of the machinery of academic publishing during his lifetime. His activity ran concurrent to that of better known creators such as Essex Hemphill and Marlon Riggs. I've suggested that the texture and subjectivity of his work didn't fit neatly into the set of conceptions and respectability politics that developed around the work of Riggs, Hemphill and other black gay writers of the mid 1980s-mid 1990s. I don't see this as the work of the aforementioned artists but their public. I would hope the videos would get seen by as many eyes as possible.**

6- One hears a number of things in the Gary Fisher video, and bringing up musical references is always a sensitive issue, of thinking what is there and not there. Beyond Bad Brains or Death Grip (which again

may not be there at all and speaks to my lack of awareness of a more recent American scene), what does inform your sound?

**Juba Kalamka:** I could speak to my own lyrical influences as well as some of the musical genesis of the track. I have a mix of influences; 1980–1990s hip hop, 1960s soul music, Gil Scott–Heron, Sweet Honey In The Rock, 1970s U.S. public television, Black Chicago radio, 1980s experimental video art, on and on.

**“Gary Fisher”** was one of several tracks on the forthcoming **COMMANDO** album that were developed from digital loop-based tracks that I’d created. I sat with Andy, Travis and Van and listened talked and played around with riffs and talked about some of the sample sources. It was really important to me that they didn’t feel like I expected them to stick exactly to the sounds I’d created and do live instrumental version that was the same. I wan’t to hear them and where they wanted to go with it as that would be a true collaboration...and I knew what kind of hitters they were and was grateful to have their talent working with and around my words, so I was really motivated to get out of their way (smile)

**7- pass**

8- America encountered AIDS during the Reagan years, and Covid-19 with Trump. How do you believe culture is now reacting, around you, to the targeting of social minorities?

**Juba Kalamka:** I think there are plenty of divergences and convergences. I think a big difference is the broader context of

**vulnerabilities with COVID-19. You can get COVID-19 from a cough. People's experience of HIV was ( and still is ) contextualized by the public's relationship to how we know the disease is contracted – sex, drug use or sex and drug use. so It then becomes about how one feels about particular sexualities and/or drug use, and how that affects how and when people get access to care, if at all.**

**The cultural and social response to COVID-19 is greatly impacted by social media and the ways people engage and transmit information and ideas with the availability of an internet. The ideas and notions ( good and bad) move way faster, activism moves faster, and the ability for people to organize quickly to advocate and care for the most marginalized is greatly improved.**

**What hasn't changed is people's propensity for looking for someone to blame and how people think doing so will make them safe. People haven't figured out that shit doesn't work now and never has. It's really frustrating for me to see the same dynamics playing out the way they are.**

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**Additional remarks by Andy Meyerson, co-founder of The Living Earth Show**

**1- Could you tell us what is Commando? A band, a collective, activists, all of these? When was it formed and where are you based?**

**COMMANDO is now a multigenerational band of folks who have**

**shaped the last several decades of queer art making, using rock, hip hop, punk, metal, and experimental musics to create something vibrant, vital, and urgent.**

2- Could members, which I understand are also all involved individual practices, tell us what they do out of Commando?

**The Living Earth Show (myself and guitarist Travis Andrews) is a contemporary chamber arts organization. We mostly work in classical music, but our job is first and foremost to facilitate the realization of our collaborators' most ambitious artistic visions, in whatever genre they happen to be working in.**

3- How did you connect with John? Were any of you familiar with his video and installation works?

**We had worked with John before, on his video for our piece "Tassel". He's an amazing artist, and seemed like a natural fit to connect with the songs.**

4- One hears a number of things in the Gary Fisher video, and bringing up musical references is always a sensitive issue, of thinking what is there and not there. Beyond Bad Brains or Death Grip (which again may not be there at all and speaks to my lack of awareness of a more recent American scene), what does inform your sound?

**Limp Bizkit, Korn, and other aspects of sort of noxious late 90s nü metal inform the instrumental partwriting. In its infancy, we started this project as an act of revisionist history: how would the world**

**have been different if that cultural moment that birthed those, and that artistic toolbox, had instead been used to dismantle homophobia, misogyny, racism, and heteropatriarchy?**

5- America encountered AIDS during the Reagan years, and Covid-19 with Trump. How do you believe culture is now reacting, around you, to the targeting of social minorities?

**I'm not exactly sure what is meant by "culture" in this context. Do you mean, like, art? Pop culture? Memes? In SF, like in most everywhere else, Covid-19 disproportionately impacts minority populations. For example, in the Mission district, though Hispanic & Latino/Latinx individuals make up 44.1% of the tested population, they accounted for 95% of the positive cases. This current crisis only seems to highlight these existing failures of our system to provide equitable safety, justice, and support.**

**That said, everyone (and everyone involved in creating and consuming "culture") seems to be struggling, particularly due to the fact that the institutions and infrastructure that support it are in peril. For musicians, the fact that we can't perform live for the foreseeable future means that all of our livelihoods are threatened, making the creation of new work much more difficult.**

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