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THE WHO'S THAT GIRL? ISSUE

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AGATHE SNOW Corsican-born artist Agathe Snow moved to Manhattan aged eleven and, like spilled water finds a crack, she quickly discovered New York City's uncharted territories. In the '90s Agathe learned her way with a family of friends, including lifestyle guru Aron the Don, the Irak crew, and artists Dash Snow, Dan Colen, and Ryan McGinley. Agathe's fearlessness and superhuman perception put her at the helm of a way of life that over the last ten years has precipitated several robust careers and what many call the 'downtown New York art scene'. After fanning those flames with inspired communal performances such as *Stamina*, her 24-hour dance marathon in November 2005, and the still-active *Chop Shop* free feasts, Agathe ultimately committed to showing her own artwork. Recent exhibitions include a solo show at Peres Projects Berlin, *I Don't Know But I've Been Told*, *Eskimo Pussy Is Mighty Cold*, and a group show at the Sculpture Centre in Long Island City where she presented her large-scale sculptural installation *The Asshole of NYC! The Best Job in the Universe (An Attempt in Conversation)*. Agathe is also included in this year's Whitney Biennial, where she will stage three straight weeks of performance at the Seventh Regiment Armory on Park Avenue, as well as *Shape of Things To Come: New Sculpture* with The Saatchi Gallery.

Text: Mary Blair Taylor **Portrait:** Rita Ackermann **Art:** Agathe Snow

WITH YOU AGATHE, there's a sense that you didn't decide to be an artist, you just do it, and you've always done it.

I've always made things. I can't live without making things. No matter what, I always put things together just because I have to use my hands. The real thing about being an artist is the attitude, the marketing, the myth. You have to create this personality that's not really you – a public personality – the myth I made for myself was uncapturable. I could adopt people, change houses, I moved around. I didn't have to be one thing. I liked that. **Do you feel you have to have a legible self as an artist that people can identify?**

I used to think that, I wasn't ready to BE something. I just wanted to be Agathe, this free being. I always wanted to learn more and know more. My father was super-critical of everything I did, nothing was ever good enough, so I always went a step ahead. I did tons of things anonymously or in groups where my name wasn't part of it, because I needed to do things – but I wasn't ready to market myself. I needed that break to study and find myself. So I would make these things without thinking, but I never really knew what they were saying. For me they were just – **inevitable.**

Yeah, like breathing and eating. Then as I grew older and became more conscious I figured actually I was saying something with these things. There were messages that were universal, that could talk to everybody.

Your originality is not tethered to the 'downtown New York art scene', it's not about a period in time or your friends – you would do this on an iceberg. Where does that come from? It's just there. It's interesting for me to actually understand that now. I have to say I've been very lucky – we've all been very lucky. We've all gotten a lot of attention. I refused the attention at the time when the

boys (Dash Snow, Dan Colen, Ryan McGinley) took it and I decided to stay in the background. I have to be super busy all the time, so I've done a million things, but I never put my stamp on them, although it was obviously me that did them. I wasn't ready back then and I knew what I would give would be angry and bitter and not good. I would even get jealous of the boys when they would get articles. I would say, 'Oh, I'm doing this shit too.' I really had to take the stance to say I'm not ready. And now I really feel that my time is coming. And it's not that the world is more sensitive to my ideas or anything, I'm just more willing to share.

And you're not confused by the ulterior elements.

I go through phases where I am terrified by what I feel and what I see and what I hear. I either numb myself with drugs, or I go ahead and deal with it. I'm proud of the choices that I've made because I've never had anybody make choices for me – I have a lot of freedom. But I also had no council whatsoever, no advise, so I had to figure everything out by myself. I'm happy that I'm here now.

I think your artwork completely and utterly speaks for itself on that level. It has so much to do with your experience on a day-to-day level.

Yeah. When I first met Dash – and that's why I completely fell for him – I would see things and have to experiment with them.

You once told me that you guys shared a space that was like a laboratory.

Yeah Dash would mix inks all day long. As a kid I didn't go to school, so I would spend hours and hours staring at the fabric of my nails, discovering this crazy world. I never wanted to think of humans as opposite to nature. That's why I love all these ideas of apocalypse and human responsibility. Nature is a lot stronger than us. If we're destroying the planet it's because it's supposed to be destroyed. It's like plagues are a way of regulating. It's

not God or anything, but I do think that nature is the ultimate power.

This makes me think of your solo exhibition at Peres Projects Berlin this past fall, *I Don't Know But I've Been Told Eskimo Pussy is Mighty Cold*. Everything in the show was part of a giant mudslide that flowed from the skirts of a Mother Earth figure. How did you come to that idea?

The show at Peres was about cartoon reality, and obviously any kind of revenge is always welcome. It was about cartooning archetypes of power that I hated, with Mother Nature on my side – but maybe she's not on my side.

So was the mudslide destructive? No. It was just a questioning. Reassessing things we've been told over and over again. It's like nature's saying, 'Enough!' At the same time she's sexy. It's time to turn back to nature, and people do – more and more they have money and say, 'Let's save Mother Nature.' But the first original human focus was to create a society and exchange things. There's nothing about exchange in nature. Nature is 'you're there or you're not.' There's no communication. It's just about living. As a way of surviving themselves, humans brought in communication. To look at Mother Nature as this sexy thing that is fed-up and actually ask questions was the point of the mudslide.

You're also a performance artist, what was your first performance?

I grew up in the theatre, but I really think that dancing on bars was my first real performance. Passerby in New York every Friday and Saturday, and then at The Hole. I would dance on the bar and do all these different things. It wasn't sexy. It was really about energy and getting people dancing. I would go into a trance. It was amazing.

You also hosted parties at clubs. Did that lead to the dance marathon?

Exactly. It was very much about unity and getting everyone riled up. It was after September 11th, and nobody knew what

to do. And I would really go in these crazy trances. I didn't know it was art, but then all these people started taking pictures and putting them in magazines and calling it something. So then I decided it was part of a project called *Stamina*. And then that lead to the *Stamina* dance marathon.

I remember that night – it was so amazing.

So amazing! I have so much footage from it. It's a really timeless piece. I will work on it in twenty years, when it will be even more fun because everyone will have become something else. There was a whole script and different events and games to get people in the mood. I wanted to get back to that time right after September 11th when we had this completely carefree 'there's no tomorrow, let's party' sense. It started at 5 o'clock at night, and by 6 in the morning I felt I got where I wanted to be. There was complete desperation, but we were also going to go on and do this until we really go down! It was so New York. I was looking at tapes of that moment at 6am where only the real hard-core people remained and the others left. But a lot of people came back throughout the day – it was amazing.

All of your exhibitions, until last spring, were essentially performances. All of them. They lasted just one moment.

There was nothing to sell, nothing left behind. There was never even a video, and people would ask, 'Why aren't we filming things?' But I didn't want it then. So when I decided to show again it had to become very personal and I had to promise I was going to share and give everything I knew. **It makes sense that you'd have to get older to feel you could do that.**

I had to become completely open to actually sell something. There could be no protection, no myth, no nothing. I don't know if you saw *Awaiting St Vitus* (2006)? That video was my promise. It was a kind of prayer. 'I promise from this day on that I will give...' and then it's basically me dancing until I become a puddle of oil. I'm



dancing and dancing, so sweaty by myself, under all these disco lights.

I've seen the stills from it – you are dancing into the shadow of yourself.

Besides me giving myself, it was also me connecting myself to all the archetypes of women. It was part of the becoming human series, I could not just be human. I had to connect myself as a woman, which I never did before. I never thought of myself as a woman.

You've been around a lot of men, a whole bunch of them.

Exactly. I never thought of myself as a woman or a man. I was not even human.

Do you find it difficult to make statements of identity without their being made to seem trite?

In this art world the first thing they say is 'Woman artist. Young woman artist.'

'Young woman downtown New York artist.'

The tag keeps moving. I needed to connect myself to those adjectives first. Society tells you that women act in particular ways. Obviously we have so many options compared to men, but they are all archetypes: the mother, the daughter, the whore. In *Awaiting St Vitus* I was playing with those veils. The video goes back to when there was the plague and whole cities were decimated. Right before people died they would lose their nervous systems completely, so people were dancing in the streets everywhere. And the dance is called Saint Vitus' Dance. He's the Saint Of Youth. So people would come out with these crazy nervous twitches – like zombies.

A last gasp.

A last gasp and then you die.

Oh my god. That's so awesome.

In the video I set this table for Saint Vitus and instead of being the whore, the mother, the daughter, I decided to be things that are very much manly: the hero, the martyr, and the brat.

Ah yes. The brat.

In America you have to be the hero, the martyr, or the brat or else you are nothing. It's a man thing. Men are raised to become brats. They get what they want. The brat is like the new hero or the new martyr. So it's 'Brat, hero or martyr, Saint Vitus I await you.' I'm waiting for my last date as these three things. I'm sitting there at the table, waiting for Saint Vitus to come, and then I start taking all the tablecloths off and dressing myself in them and dancing – with the really old-school biblical vision of what women are: the bride with her veil, the seductress Salome with the dance of the seven veils, before finally shedding all and becoming the Amazon with the tits out. It was every single aspect of women, from the most servile to the freest of women and the warrior woman. And I'm just dancing, dancing, dancing until I become a puddle of oil. It's like a sacrifice.

For the Whitney Biennial you are going back to performance more than you have in a long time. Why's that?

It's really my passion to get people together. I've done performances on my own since I started selling art, but I want to get back to where it's communal and generous. The Armory is like a drill hall, all the performances that are going to go on there are like little metaphors of everyday life, between four walls.

If you were going to pool together 20 artists that you love and think about, would more of them be men or women?

Annoyingly enough I think there would be more men, but that's because there ARE

more men. The pool of women artists is so small. If I could support all women artists, I would. There are so few. For every twenty artists that make it, there's maybe one woman.

I feel like people wince when you bring it up.

People ask, "Are you a feminist?" It was so hard to just become a human, to add this other thing! I definitely want to become more conscious of myself, and being a woman is part of it. Although I really feel like I'm stuck in a twelve year-old boy's body, and a twelve year-old boy is barely sexual.

I'm curious to know what you think, in terms of the male artists that we're around, I think sexuality becomes a bit ridiculous –

It's so plain! They're very conservative. I think most artists, especially the men, are very freaked out about sex. Especially this new kind of artist where the level of talent is an evaluation of how smart you are. All these new artists think what makes a good artist is someone who's smart, someone who knows what to pull out and reuse.

You mean being able to make art whose job it is to reference other artwork?

Yes. Images are not invented, they are used again. It's similar to being completely detached from your body, because you are only using your brain in a way that's only about show and cleverness. It's like philosophers in Greece – it was all about words, and that's how they would distinguish themselves - in arguments.

Now it's through the use of images.

So it's almost Socratic?

Yes but with images instead of words. There's a show of intelligence in what you recognise – it's not about recognising beauty, it's not about recognising the force of nature, it's about recognising the ridiculousness of things.

It's like an in-joke in a way.

Yeah basically. Who's in the club? Who's not in the club? And if you have this certain bitter sense of humor, then you're smart. Another reason there are so few women artists is because that kind of brain-use is a very manly quality. Men are conditioned to recognise images and have favorites and look at news in a particular way. There are too many feelings that get involved with women. Men can be so detached that they see a picture of war and look at it from an aesthetic point of view. Women are not known for that.

Is that why we can't jack off to porn as much?

I really think so. We need the story behind it. We need completeness. Men can go for just one moment without thinking of the whole long line of things. But with women it's got to be more complete because we have cycles. It's rounded.

Ugh I know.

I was brought up doing more boy things. I feel like I understand men very well. For me doing art like the men are doing now is so easy for me it's insane. When they come up to me with their work it's so easy for me to say, 'Oh add this color, this background of fake wood etc' because I totally understand it. It's like playing with cubes. The whole thing is based on this creation of moments that don't belong to a storyline. I have that, and I don't think it's a very woman thing to do.

Maybe it's because you grew up...

Free.

Well, yeah. Maybe it's also to do with the fact that you are always on an island? Corsica, Manhattan, Shelter

"The more you do what you're supposed to do, the lonelier your course is, and the lonelier you get the more serious it gets. It's scary but I've always known I would go somewhere very lonely - but also reach more and more people."

Agathe Snow

Island...

I'm my own island. It's why now I feel like I'm supposed to see what I'm supposed to see and learn to trust my instincts more. And before when I was not conscious I didn't have that problem at all – I would just go for things. And then I became conscious and I was a bit lost for a long time. Now I feel I should follow my instincts. I love from here. It's all from the stomach.

Being unselfconscious and being confident are different things, though, aren't they? Or maybe they're coming at the same thing from different sides?

I feel like men think I'm very confident. I think I scare the shit out of them. But I don't think I'm very confident. I have this thing where I'm extremely scary for men, but at the same time, if they play the macho game on me I become a complete servile retard. I'm like, 'Oh, can I massage your feet?' There's this power. I really play into the power trip, the ego trip.

I think that's natural on a biological level.

On a biological level I don't compete. On an intellectual level I compete. I want real men. I want them to go back to hunting. I wouldn't mind at all being at home cooking if they brought me back a fucking full deer. But I want the hunt. I need the virile thing, and I think the macho thing is the closest thing to virility. The idea of me as muse is because I am so close to them. The only way to accept that is to make me muse or servant. Yeah – that's another thing: the more you do what you're supposed to do the lonelier your course is, and the lonelier you get the more serious it gets. It's scary but I think I've always known that I would go somewhere very lonely – but also reach more and more people.

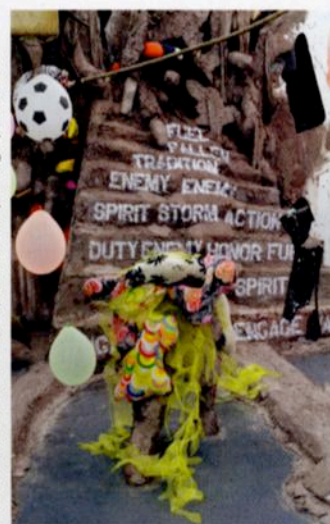
Do you think it has to be inversely proportional like that? To reach a broader audience you have to be more cordoned off in your personal life?

Yeah. I think you do have to become really you. And then in becoming really you, you actually touch everybody.

Are you afraid of getting old?

No. Actually the older I get, the happier I get. But I feel a lot younger than I am. I blacked out so many years of my life that I'm really truly 24. There have been a few moments in my life where I really felt on the verge of death. You have to make the conscious decision – do I want to live? Most of the people in my life committed suicide, so I always thought of death as a choice. Even disease was a choice. But then recently I realised there are accidents too. You're not always in charge of your own destiny. I found freedom in that. I feel like I'm part of a grander plan and not completely independent. But no matter how long it's going to take, I am here to do one thing. Everyone has their time and their mission – their space in life. Maybe it takes two years for one; they have to pick up their radish, and others are supposed to live a hundred years and say the same word over and over again.

Peres Projects Los Angeles is pleased to host a solo exhibition of new work by Agathe Snow this April. peresprojects.com



I Don't Know But I've Been Told, Eskimo Pussy Is Mighty Cold, 2008