



## violent femme

“(Trump is) obviously sexually frustrated” – hard at work on her new album, genderfuck icon No Bra talks Trump, tyranny and trans rights with film incendiary Bruce LaBruce

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**Susanne Oberbeck** AKA No Bra is discussing the track she uploaded to Soundcloud last November, just one week after the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States: her modest proposal for a solution called “Sex Slave in the White House”. “(Trump just has) this compulsion to dominate,” she says. “It’s like, ‘Why can’t you just calm down for a minute?’”

Known for her confrontational stage performances, usually topless and sporting a moustache, Oberbeck is an electronic punk provocateur and gender revolutionary, equally at home walking for Hood By Air as she is creating lolily humorous underground hits such as “Manhausen”, or appearing on tracks with NYC activist rapper Mykki Blanco.

“Susanne is really good at identifying these things,” says a voice from her laptop in the corner of her downtown Manhattan walk-up – Bruce LaBruce, the acclaimed Canadian independent film director and writer. A veteran of the 80s ‘queercore’ movement, LaBruce has been creating controversial, pornographic cinema and vividly transgressing social norms for over two decades with big-screen portrayals of everything from gay zombie sex to amputee fetishism. “Things like this idea of sexual frustration and impotence in the White House. It’s all overcompensation,” he adds. “I’m sure he can’t get it up.”

Hard at work on their latest album and movie respectively, the two friends, collaborators and sexual seditionaries come together to discuss the gender revolution, resisting the rise of the far right, and why Teen Vogue’s outspoken politics are a sign of the times. Down with the patriarchy!

**Susanne Oberbeck:** We met on Myspace, didn’t we? I wasn’t sure if it was actually you or an impostor. I’d been a fan since I first moved to London, seeing Super 8V2 at the ICA. You were like, “Your music is really funny.”

**Bruce LaBruce:** At that time, I was looking for music for my movie, Otto, about an alienated, queer zombie boy – I ended up using No Bra’s “Dohofucker”. With the punk fanzines I did in the 80s, we were doing the same thing that people are doing now with blogs and websites. The advantage now is that it’s instantaneous and accessible to a huge audience. That has its disadvantages, too, because everyone acts like they’re being monitored... Recently, Facebook made me use my real name, which I’ve been avoiding for years and years! I felt totally violated – really exposed in a way I didn’t want to be.

**SO:** When the internet first came out, there was all this cyber-theory about how you could invent an avatar for yourself and nobody would know who you were.

“The transgender community is eroding the whole concept of what being gay or straight, male or female is, and that could be good for everyone” – Susanne Oberbeck

**BL:** Nowadays, everyone has an alter ego or fake identity. In the 80s punk scene, we would do that for more practical reasons – basically, to avoid the authorities. We had fake names because we were making pornography as well, and writing very seditious manifestos.

**SO:** With Trump as president, losing your healthcare or having (to get) an illegal abortion is going to make it more difficult to make art if you’re not rich. There has to be a change of values. Why would you want to accumulate all this stuff? Because you don’t know how to enjoy yourself otherwise, maybe... Why is power so important? It’s important psychologically, apparently, but perhaps this is a result of a culture that overvalues competition and expansion. I think there has to be a shift in the way people get paid, like a universal income. Because a lot of the time people don’t get paid, or get paid really badly, for the stuff that they do – in fashion, for example.

**BL:** I’ve been making films since the late 80s and most of my features have been sexually explicit. Back in the day, film labs would call the police when I was trying to get my work processed, they’d come and try to confiscate the negatives. Now, pornography is so ubiquitous, everyone watches it – it doesn’t have the same impact to make those kinds of films. It’s not enough to just make a sexually explicit feature film, it’s the message and context (that matters). That’s where the radicalness comes in, not through using pornography itself.

**Has the free availability of pornography changed the way you work?**

**BL:** No. I made my first feature that wasn’t sexually explicit, but still on a controversial topic, which was Gerontophilia. And my latest film, The Misandrists, which Susanne wrote a song specifically for, is an homage to 70s softcore. It’s about a group of feminist, lesbian, separatist terrorists. Within the film, the characters make lesbian porn as part of their very militant, anti-patriarchal strategy. I think that one needed to be somewhat explicit in order to give credence to the subject, which is using porn as a radical tool. Like I said, it’s not enough just to make a sexually explicit film.

**SO:** For me as a performer, it’s really important to play shows to people that wouldn’t normally go see me, so opening for a bigger band is really ideal, when you have these unassuming people and suddenly a woman on stage topless with a moustache or whatever. They don’t know what to make of it, and that feels really effective. I also get these young kids telling me that finding out about No Bra opened up what being queer or gay could mean.

**BL:** I consider Susanne a gender warrior. Gender is really the most significant, radical development in the past decade. As gays and lesbians gain more acceptance and become more integrated into the mainstream, it’s the people who are really fucking around with gender and questioning sex stereotypes who are making a political impact.

**SO:** The transgender community is eroding the whole concept of what being gay or straight, male or female is, and that could be good for everyone. But then there are always limitations put back in, like one thing is more real or valid than the other. And people make assumptions. I might be wearing a moustache, but that doesn’t necessarily mean I’m a lesbian.

**BL:** Even I get confused about your gender, because it seems like a complex kaleidoscope of gay, lesbian, male and female. It’s a shape-shifting identity, which I think is really cool.

**SO:** That’s how it is – I can’t do anything about it.

**BL:** It’s not artificial; it’s pure expression. Though I find a lot of gender stuff very navel-gazing. Of course, there are strong political elements... But, for example, the fashion industry is very interested in all this at the moment. Do you know what I mean? It’s like *John Waters* said, “Gay is not enough.” You can now apply that to transsexuals. You have to use it for another purpose, a more political purpose. It goes beyond gender. (It’s about) questioning the patriarchy, questioning marriage, questioning...



**SO:** Consumerism.

**BL:** It used to be, if someone were gay or lesbian, you would assume they were more leftist on the political spectrum, but it's not necessarily radical at all any more. In fact, there are a lot of gay conservatives. The *Caitlyn Jenner* thing amounted to people ignoring the political ramifications of having this Republican, Christian role model for transsexuals. In her case, the gender activism is, for me, completely useless.

**SO:** The patriarchy is very powerful, isn't it? A lot of women have found a place within it that works for them. You can actually benefit from the patriarchy as a woman, if you play it a certain way.

**BL:** It's assimilation. Yes, you have equal rights – but now you're colluding with the people that used to hate and oppress you. That's the theme that runs through all my movies, the oppressed. Ideally, you have to destroy the system and rebuild it from the ground up.

**Has Trump already affected both of you in the way you work? Susanne, you put out a song shortly after his election, 'Sex Slave in the White House'.**

**SO:** I felt so frustrated and angry that I made a song about it. I just thought, really, that it might be a solution. Because he's obviously sexually frustrated.

**BL:** Are you promoting the idea of a sex slave in the White House?

**SO:** I think it would help him.

**"The patriarchy is very powerful, isn't it? A lot of women have found a place within it that works for them. You can actually benefit from the patriarchy as a woman, if you play it a certain way" - Susanne Oberbeck**

**BL:** He has a certain impotence that is apparent. I'm sure he can't get it up. I'm sure.

**SO:** He would be happier! Everybody would be happier in return.

**BL:** Susanne is good at identifying these things – not in a simplistic way, but embracing the contradictions. I was thinking about her song 'Construction Worker' and that basic feminist strategy of reversing objectification so that men become the sexual objects.

**SO:** A lot of people didn't pick up on that and thought I was trying to perform some sort of act of revenge. I think for women to openly speak about men in a way that objectifies them – to be predatory – is fairly unusual. *Debbie Harry* did it; she got away with it.

**BL:** We live in the most regressive period of history. Everything is so regressive now: attitudes toward gender, towards race... It's mind-blowing that the rise of the extreme right is going as far as it is.

**Has it energised you at all?**

**BL:** The zeitgeist or political climate radically shifts from one extreme to the other – I'm always making the same kind of work. Now, I feel the films I'm working on have more relevance than ever, because of these regressive times.

**SO:** I think the same, but it's sometimes difficult to navigate this world with so many things coming at you. Sometimes, you can't even say your opinion any more, somebody (always) tries to shut you down. It's a struggle, which I'm sure can be a good thing as well. It definitely makes me angry, experiencing things like this.

**BL:** I have to say I know so many young kids in their late teens and early 20s who are real activists and doing really interesting things, but I don't find it cohesive. It's in pockets, not organised.

**What do you both think about this idea that the far right is the new counterculture?**

**BL:** I've been talking about this for a long time. I call them revolutionary reactionaries. It's marketing. It's not like they're actually revolutionary...Well, they're revolutionary in their approach, because they're now using all these techniques like branding. The right used to be humourless and without irony. But now it's the left who are kind of clueless. They're doctrinaire in their politics and Hillary Clinton's campaign was completely unimaginative, lacklustre, dull and prosaic. Trump's campaign was revolutionary, in a way. I mean, so was Bernie Sanders'.

**SO:** But (Trump) has the advantage of being an aggressive white male who bullies people. Apparently, that's popular. How much did he have to do besides just being himself? Like Valerie Solanas said, being a man is based on an error, so you have to prove it over and over again. I feel like that's what we're seeing.

**BL:** Hillary was pretty much an aggressive white male too, I mean, come on... She played so far into the system that she became indistinguishable from the enemy.

**"(Trump) has the advantage of being an aggressive white male who bullies people. Apparently, that's popular" - Susanne Oberbeck**

**Susanne, you walked in the Hood By Air show last season. What role do you think fashion and brands can play in these ideas of resistance, identity and activism?**

**SO:** It's a performance and spectacle. It's genius that they can do something so subversive in a fairly conservative industry and create all this visibility for radical ideas. HBA is very gender-subversive and futuristic and alludes to SSM sex, but at the same time there's celebrity culture and consumerism in fashion, and for some people maybe it's just an image. I find it really political, but it's such a vast culture and the lines get a bit blurred.

**BL:** Teen Vogue. Have you been following their tweets and everything? That's something that gives me hope, because fashion, even though it may pay lip service to being left-leaning, is a super-conservative phenomenon. This youth magazine is using a platform you wouldn't expect to be political to reach young people. In the 90s, it was *Sassy* magazine. They had a lot of feminist verve and were quite political in their way.

**Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised. It makes sense that a magazine created for young women would be very engaged with the future of the world right now.**

**BL:** I think it's also a good example of the pendulum swinging so far to the right that (you start to see) resistance in unexpected and more commercial places.

**SO:** I wrote a lot of songs last year and I'm going back to them now, but I work like that anyway. It's sex and politics, not so different from what I was planning. I wouldn't want to give any politician credit for anything...

**BL:** I'm using Susanne's song for *The Misandrists*. It's a great theme. 'Down, down, down... Down with the patriarchy!' Very catchy. Of course, I use it over a montage of lesbian sex so it's very provocative. Susanne is really one of the most interesting musicians going at the moment, so I'm looking forward to her breaking through this year as well. I think people are going to be more attuned to the message she's sending out.

**What is your final message or motto for young people in 2017?**

**SO:** Down with the patriarchy!

**BL:** Don't just question authority, undermine it. Aot, don't talk.

*Hair* Marco Braza at *Kramer + Kramer* using *R+Co*, make-up Ingeborg using *Make Up For Ever*, photographic assistant Enrico Brunetti, styling assistants Ioana Ivan, Jared Martell

*No Bra's* new album is out in the summer. *The Misandrists* is out later this year