Brand-New-Life
Magazin für Kunstkritik

www.brand-new-life.org
office@brand-new-life.org



Grab Your Pearls and Hog it Girl

A conversation between Charles Atlas and Ian Wooldridge

Ian Wooldridge

The following conversation took place in New York on May 19th 2018 with loose ends recently tied. The original transcript was much longer. We nerded over mathematics, technology and gay politics, scrambling about on fun tangents. One could define these tangents as frivolous and furthermore position «frivolous» as having a particular anglo gay tone. This tone carries into the varying roles Charles takes as an artist. One role he recently took was creating the exhibition design for the Robert Rauschenberg retrospective *Among Friends*, at MoMA New York. His practice refuses a stable single categorization drawing on community and collaboration while sitting on the periphery of portraiture and media. Atlas' position is outside of and in conversation with experimentation and improvisation, the live event and immersive environment. The freedom he takes radiates otherness and he has continuously placed himself at the forefront of new technologies, multi-screen installations, and live video mixing.





Charles Atlas. Portrait by Lori E. Seid.

Charlie invited me to the final evening of a series of live performances at The Kitchen, *Charles Atlas: Kitchen Follies*. In the foyer pre folly I bump into Stuart Comer. Time circulates. Stuart Comer was curator of film at the Tate Modern during my formative years in London and it was he who had introduced me, drunk, to Atlas at The Joiners Arms back in 2010.[1] Comer programmed the first UK survey of Atlas' work in 2006.[2] This survey was my introduction to the work of Charles Atlas. Earlier, in 2006, Stuart had requested to screen my first video *The Banana Monologue* at the Tate Modern, a video that included, unknowingly to me at the time, some of the same cast as Atlas' *Hail the New Puritan*.[3] Impoverished, I failed to provide a technically compatible copy. This was the era of BETA SP. It wasn't until 2013 that I begun making work again.

«Hey there, it's been a while,» we trip on time leaving me to ponder one's life's work, crowd and embodiment of being «among friends.»

CHARLIE SHOOTS THOSE AROUND HIM

let's folly….

IW: I would like to begin with community and collaboration. You have collaborated with choreographers: Merce Cunningham, Yvonne Rainer, Michael Clark and Karole Armitage, to name but a few.

CA: Most of the people that I work with are friends of mine, first. I am definitely part of a community, especially earlier in my life. Though community feels like more of a memory now.

IW: There is a certain chaos to a community, a communal body, being together, a collective conscious. Is your perspective on community that of a queer community?

CA: Well Michael Clark is the first queer. Merce Cunningham was gay, but not in the work in any meaningful way. And Yvonne wasn't even gay when I worked with her. It wasn't really foregrounded in my work until the 80s. In the 70s it really was not about anything, I wasn't hiding the fact that I was queer but it wasn't in any way a topic that I addressed. I was dealing with dance, I was dealing with other kinds of things and there are a lot of gay people in it but not as gay. Also, the way the whole environment shifted from the late 60s into the 70s and 80s, changing a lot in terms of visibility, gay visibility.





Charles Atlas. *Here she is…* v1, 2015. Single-channel video installation with sound Audio: You Were the One (written and performed by The Lady Bunny) Duration: 23 minutes, 44 seconds

IW: You received a special mention for *The Tyranny of Consciousness* at the 57th Venice Biennale, 2017 a work made of three elements: the video *Kiss the Day Goodbye* featuring 44 sunsets; *Here She is…v1*, a video of drag queen Lady Bunny on a tirade about the complex times we are living in, with statements such as «There really is an agenda to prevent us from being peaceful and prosperous. Because peace does not make as much money for the people in power»;[4] and *Chai*, a large digital clock counting down the 18 minutes it takes the sun to set. All the elements of the installation accumulate into an optimistic apocalypse ending with a disco song. Do you consider your work political?

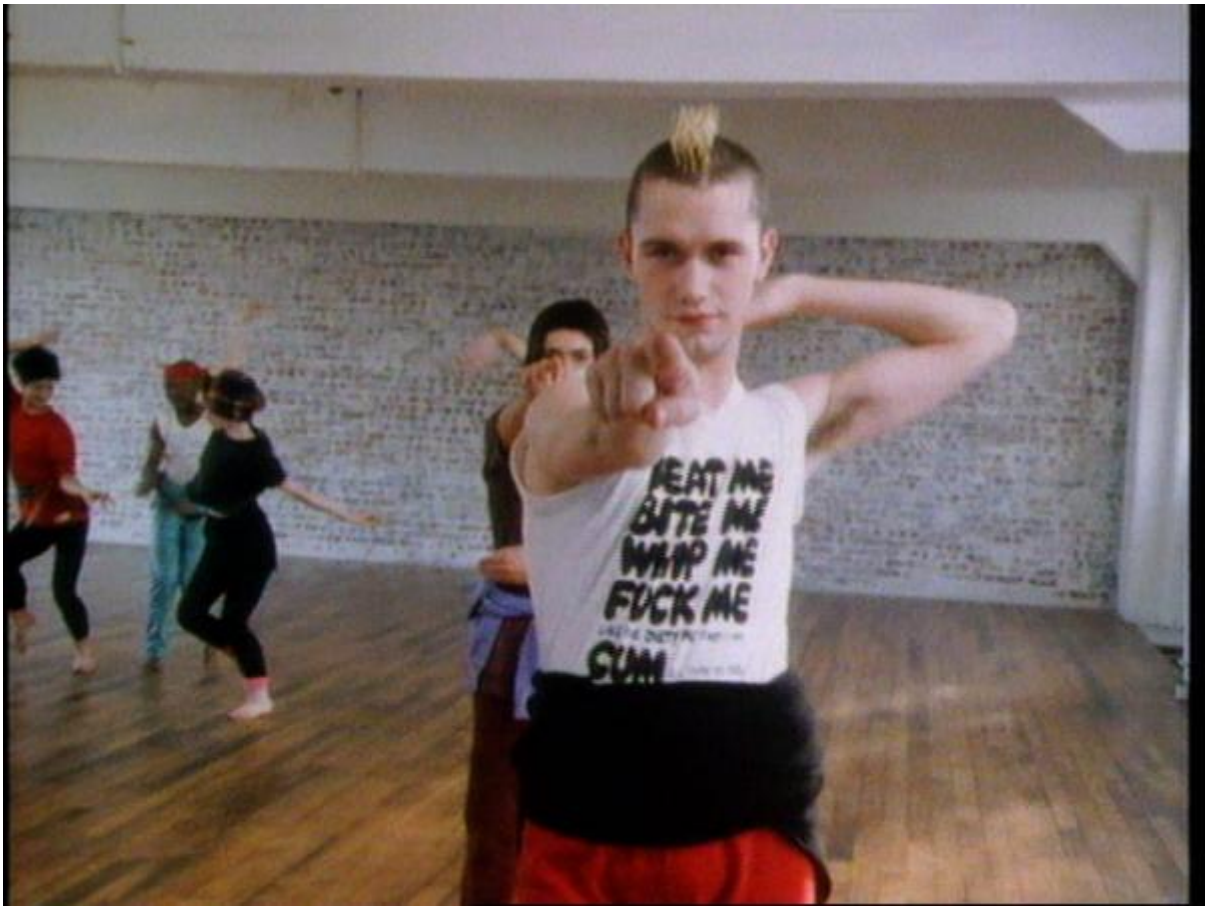
CA: Yes, I do, certainly in recent work it's much more overtly political. Though I've never made political art. There is art that's political but I consider the fact of just making what I want to make already political. Almost all the work involves people that are my friends, people that I hang out with.

IW: The first work I saw of yours was *Hail the New Puritan* (1986). A kind of fictional, experimental, documentary portrait of Michael Clark, depicting a day in his life as he and his company prepare for a performance of *New Puritans* (1984). There was so much hearsay about this film in the early 2000s in the gay club scene in London – it was somewhat of a myth. I have friends who say they were flicking through the TV channels when they chanced upon *Hail the New Puritan* in 1986. How many times was it broadcast on Channel 4?

CA: I think it was only repeated once. I know some people in America, too, which is rarer as it was only played once in New York and Boston, so a limited number of people caught it. On Channel 4, in the UK, it was broadcast at primetime. There were certain things I couldn't show at certain hours. Michael's t-shirt that says «Beat Me, Bite Me, Whip Me, Fuck Me» could only be shown after 9 p.m., so it had to be in the program at a certain point and the sex

scene couldn’t be shown until after 10 p.m.

IW: During the watershed.





Charles Atlas. *Hail the New Puritan*, 1986. 16mm film transferred to video, sound Duration: 84:54 minutes

CA: In *Hail the New Puritan* in 1986 there is gay sex, which, you know, that was the first time that I had that in any of my pieces. Michael Clark didn't object to the sex scenes. His work exploited that too, it was very gay.

IW: I guess the people on the scene were also pretty intoxicated. I'm from London and people drink like crazy.

CA: Like crazy yeah.

IW: It's still kind of the same.

CA: I know! (laughs) It's not quite as much but it's definitely more than New York. It's been a long time since I've been able to catch up; I drink half as much as anyone else.

IW: Looking back at *Hail the New Puritan*, you have this strange mixing of fiction and reality. The space between a fiction and reality is somehow the lived situation for the cast. In their heads they are one thing but the reality is something else and this shared blurred positioning builds a sense of community, a community living in the space between reality and fiction.

CA: In the film there is the reality and then there is the fiction but in life I don't know how that works.





Charles Atlas. *Hail the New Puritan*, 1986. 16mm film transferred to video, sound Duration: 84:54 minutes

IW: A sense of community is also built upon with a shared way of speaking, a stylized intonation that drools out certain syllables in certain words.

CA: Well that's the way people talked at that time. It was like «oh er ur.» I don't know. It was very particular but they don't do it anymore. It was really from that period and so many people, people who weren't cockney were speaking that way, sort of like Polari.[5] Michael had this book called Gay Talk.[6] He got a lot of his titles for pieces out of that book. There is one piece called *Drop Your Pearls and Hog it Girl*.

IW: (laughs)

CA: The British choreographer Les Child, part of the cast in *Hail the New Puritan*, was very much the expert on all that. He would come out with just the funniest things.

IW: These playful, constantly performed tensions lend themselves to being on video, to being captured.

CA: Well, certainly being on camera, nowadays, everyone is and knows how to be. When I started making those early dance films no one knew where to look or how to be so close to a camera. «Where do I look?» «How do I express?» There were certain people who are performers all the time anyway, but now everyone is. That's a big change. People weren't used to seeing themselves on camera. «I don't look like that.» «Do I really sound like that?» – no one says anything like that anymore. But that was a very familiar thing.

IW: What projects are you working on now and what are you motivated to do?

CA: Another film with Michael Clark, I'm curious how it will turn out, it's supposed to be *Hail the New Puritan* 30 years later, but I guess we will see. I go to London soon for a month. Location scouting, talking through the script, leading up to pre-production. Michael is busy getting a bunch of dance material together. It will draw a lot of stuff from his repertoire alongside new things that he wants to make.[7]

IW: This excites me.

CA: I'm excited too. It's going to be about London and set in London and around Michael but exactly what the film will be we don't know yet. I think it will have references to the old film and some of the same cast but I don't know how many.

IW: Have you managed to archive all the work that was analogue?

CA: Come here.

Charles walks me through to another room and I cut the tape. I'm shown a meticulously organized archive. Metrics of years, the careful placement of his life's work.

This interview has been published to mark the publication of the monograph Charles Atlas, ed. by Raphael Gygax and Martin Jaeggi, with texts by Raphael Gygax, Jennifer Harris, Martin Jaeggi and Elisabeth Bronfen. Published by JRP Ringier.

[1] Charles Atlas was in London to present the double projection of Torse, 1977, in the Tate Modern Turbine Hall, programmed in conjunction with Michael Clark company Turbine Hall Residency, 13 July–30 August, 2010.

[2] Charles Atlas: Hail the New Puritan Videos, 17–22 November 2006. Tate Modern.

[3] Hail the New Puritan, (1986) 16mm film transferred to video, sound, 84:54

[4] Lady Bunny is an American drag queen, nightclub DJ, promoter, and founder of the annual Wigstock event. Lady Bunny began her career alongside Larry Tee and RuPaul as a fixture in the Atlanta gay scene in the early 1980s.

[5] Polari is a form of cant slang used in Britain by some actors, circus and fairground showmen, professional wrestlers, merchant navy sailors, criminals, prostitutes, and the gay subculture.

[6] Gay Talk: A (Sometimes Outrageous) Dictionary of Gay Slang (Formerly entitled The Queens' Vernacular) by Bruce Rodgers (New York: Paragon Books, 1979).

[7] This project has been postponed

IAN WOOLDRIDGE

Ian Wooldridge (b.1982) is a British artist based in Zurich. In 2017, Wooldridge was scholar in residence at artist moving image centre LUX, London. His work deals primarily with questions around queer narratives and the skewing of media. He's currently pursuing a PhD - Queer Space, Video Space and Hermetic Space: States of Self Unhinged - under the supervision of Professor Ute Holl, University of Basel & Professor Mary Ann Doane, UC Berkeley.

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doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13930168