

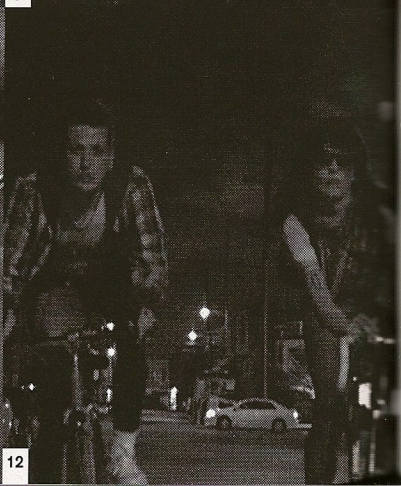
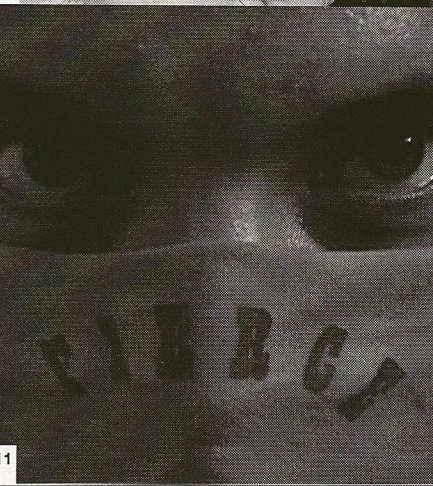
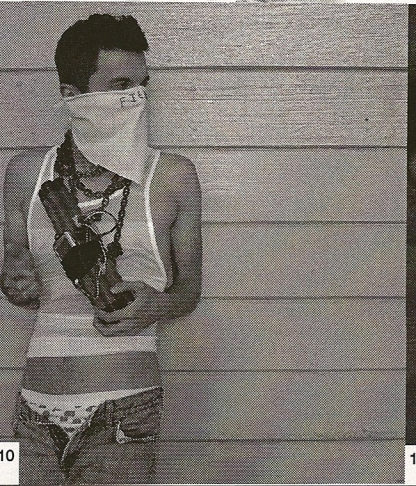
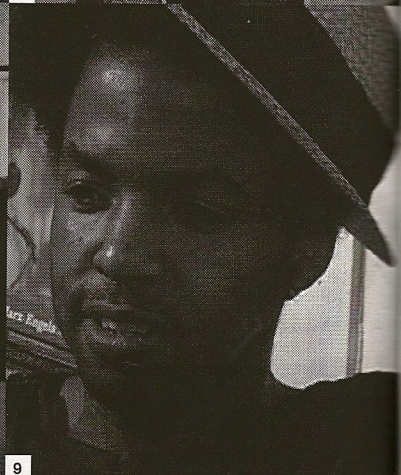
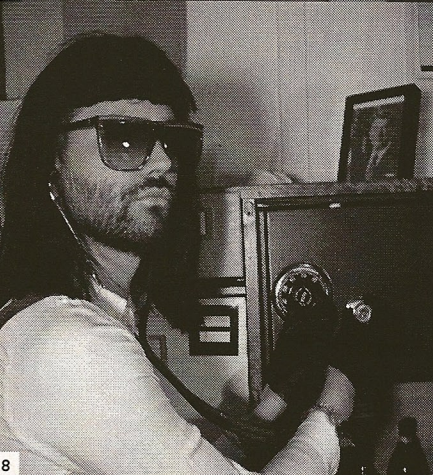
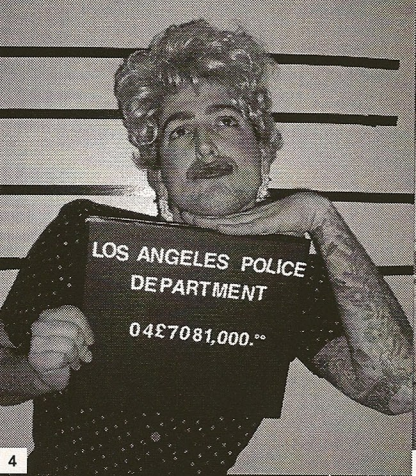
Performing Gender and Sexual Liberation: A Roundtable

by Ryan Conrad

Since 2006 Eric Stanley and Chris Vargas have been creating some of the most challenging work in contemporary queer film and video as both makers and performers. With the debut of their featurette *Homotopia* (2006) and the follow up feature length sequel, *Criminal Queers* (2012), they have staked claim to a new, radically queer aesthetic. With a critical vision of a queer utopic futurity that is neither possible nor hopeless, they use video and performance to confound our visual expectations of the now predictable “experimental” film genre and push the possibilities of the medium itself to spark much-needed dialog on queer and trans subjectivity.

Working in and around the limits of visual representations of gender performance, public sexuality, queer utopia, safety, and futurity, Chris and Eric document the political escapades of quirky characters whose on-screen lives build on the gendered and racialized realities of the performers themselves. The directors’ unfunded, unpermitted, shoot-and-run style creates an unfinished visual aesthetic that blurs the line between narrative film and performance documentation of queer political public interventions. Far from acting, these amateur anti-hero performers play out a campy imaginative fantasy narrative of what queer and trans liberation might look like in the shadow of the ever-growing prison industrial complex.

In October 2009 Chris and Eric gave a director’s talk and screened a work-in-progress version of *Criminal Queers* at Concordia University in Montréal. The evening was presented by QPIRG Concordia’s “Keeping it Reel” monthly Subversive Cinema Series, in collaboration with Q-Team, the Prisoner Correspondence Project, Queer Concordia, Queer McGill, the 2110 Centre for Gender Advocacy, and the Union for Gender Empowerment. After the event I was able to catch up with Chris and Eric to begin what turned into the round table discussion that follows.



Ryan Conrad — Since the release and tour of your video, *Homotopia*, you two started working on a new project, exploring the intersections of queer/trans subjectivity, prison abolition, and the dismal landscape of queer activism, titled *Criminal Queers (CQ)*. Can you briefly describe this new project?

Eric Stanley — *CQ* is a prison break film that attempts to gather up our radical histories of working toward collective freedom through outlaw means. We were interested in what a “prison abolitionist” film might look like if it were fictional and queer. We were also interested in how we might work history and historical figures into the present to create alternative futures. We also wanted to think about what cinematic forms might be necessary to produce a document of a history that in many ways escapes the frame. Or we were interested in how might we collapse history into narrative in a textured way.

R.C. — Where do you situate your project historically within an art and/or activist lineage? Which other queer performance artists and video makers influence your projects?

Chris Vargas — We like to imagine that *Homotopia* is the Frankensteinian offspring of the merging of Gillo Pontecorvo’s *Battle of Algiers* (1966) and Lizzie Borden’s *Born In Flames* (1983). But there are so many artists that influence and motivate me personally, including filmmakers Jack Smith, George Kuchar, and John Waters. Then there are artists responding to the AIDS crisis in a variety of ways: General Idea, Gran Fury, DIVA TV, David Wojnarowicz, Félix González-Torres, Marlon Riggs. I’m also influenced by absurdist performance art from the Chicano collective ASCO (1972-1987), as well as Dynasty Handbag, and the many humorous and political performances of Annie Danger.

R.C. — What prompted making this sequel?

C.V. — While touring with *Homotopia* we had so many conversations with audiences that were really exciting and provocative. At that time we found that many people, all over the United States, had not been exposed or were not engaging with the queer politics and history that Eric and I were evoking in the video and lecture program. The most accessible

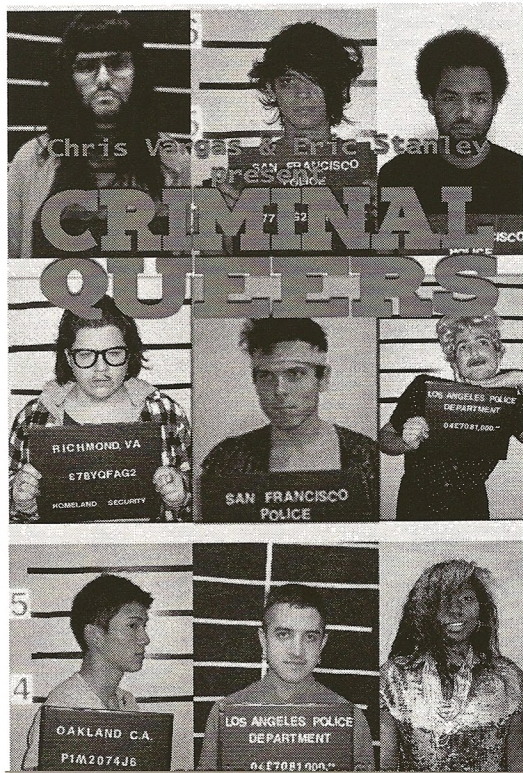
form of cultural production for many people is what Hollywood puts out, and most often those films or TV shows are not situated politically or historically. So we discovered that there was a lot of work to do in the way of exposing an alternative style and voice. Film and video also has the potential to be a really seductive medium, so we found that luring people into these densely political conversations by way of fun, camp, and ridiculousness was very successful.

R.C. — If *CQ* is the sequel to *Homotopia*, does the hilarious cast of characters continue to perform these confused genders that often leave the viewer unable to assuredly identify what is going on?

C.V. — Like *Homotopia*, the characters in *CQ* will continue to perform and represent genders that are failed and raggedy, not clean nor legible. Their genders become even more confused in relation to the prison industrial complex (PIC) which attempts to make distinctions that are not so easy to make in relation to trans and queer bodies. Most of the time in our movies there are multiple conflicting gender cues, which I think challenges audiences to reflect upon their expectations of what male, female, and of course, transgender look like.

E.S. — Although we are not invested in “positive” gender non-normative representation, we do work through an ethic of gender self-determination. Gender uncertainty is not only

Criminal Queers handbill. © *Criminal Queers*, 2012.



a representational practice on screen, but is also how many people in our films live and perform their genders in the everyday. Over the last decade or so, “trans” as a signifier has productively opened up more of the varied temporalities our bodies inhabit. In other words, gender can not only change over linear time, but for many in our projects it is a simultaneous instability. We try to signal this confusion, which can be tricky in terms of representation because once it becomes an image it is brought into a visual language that assumes knowability. This is, of course, always the problem of representation, but it is a particular problem if you are interested in depicting the beautiful chaos of desire, embodiment and performance.

R.C. — *Homotopia* was conceived as a critical utopia where queer bonds create kinship networks often unimaginable by mainstream gay and lesbian heteronormative standards. This critical utopia of queer sociality seems to be the connecting affective link between your two projects.

C.V. — Both narratives in *Homotopia* and *CQ* rely heavily on these intimate and extended networks of friends, lovers, and acquaintances in order to move the stories toward some kind of resolution, whether or not it is finally realized. Everyday queer and trans people rely on these networks in order to survive a queer- and trans-phobic world physically, mentally,

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and spiritually. Also, these bonds that we create have the potential to be so much more inclusive than what is generally understood as “family” and I think *CQ*, and the making of it, is a beautiful example of this more inclusive model. In the scenes leading up to the finale the characters call upon all their available people and resources for an epic prison-break,

and an end to imprisonment as a logical form of punishment forever. Also, in making a movie with such astonishingly few resources, Eric and I relied heavily on the generosity of our friends, our friends’ friends, and sympathetic strangers to help with the making of it.

E.S. — I think the idea of utopia is central to both films and our larger political visions. In contrast to earlier articulations of “utopia” that understood it as an achievable goal, we visualize a utopian politics that is unmade through a deconstructive performance that believes love and failure are central. Jose Munoz’s latest work, *Cruising Utopia* (2009), asks many of the same questions. When making *CQ*, I also had Derrida’s notion of a politics to come, or a horizon, which is actually similar to the work of prison abolition. It seems people have connected so strongly with *Homotopia*, and hopefully will with *CQ*, because they offer a radical queer representation that does not affirm an identity that is divorced from the political. I think this speaks as much to the overall poverty of LGBT/queer film and performance work as it does to our projects. I also agree with Chris that the production of our work, in a way, serves as affective archives for the material worlds that Chris, I, and the other people involved in the process inhabit. Much like a durational performance, our films work to catalog some possibilities of relating through art that are hopefully less based on consumption.

R.C. — Although the story of *CQ* is specific to the United States and is situated in a western geo-political framework, your other film toured internationally and has an international appeal. The subtle visual clues that point to post-colonial critique in both films suggest that it can, and should, have an international audience. Not to mention that here in Canada the Harper government recently passed an omnibus crime bill that is largely modeled on the criminal punishment system and privatized prison industry in the state of Texas.

C.V. — Because of the US’s imperialist presence in the whole world and its complicity in models of imprisonment and methods of torture everywhere, this movie won’t just be relevant in the US. I think it would be a responsible strategy to announce to the world that the US’ PIC is a deeply flawed system, and

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that there are queer people in this country that are critical of it and are dreaming about and working towards its abolition.

E.S. — I think it is also important to remember that the United States is a “post-colonial” nation that is built on the slaughter of First Nations/Native people. But it is also true that we are heavily influenced by both the materiality of anti-colonial struggles and the theorization of those struggles. For example Fanon’s work figures prominently, both theoretically and materially, in both our projects. Although we are well aware of the misogynist and homophobic currents in some of his work, we still want to attempt to bring his mesmerizing body of thought into conversation with queer politics and performance.

R.C. — Surveillance and policing of bodies, borders, and behaviors is a key component to the PIC. The issue of surveillance in CQ is portrayed as both terrifyingly serious and laugh-out-loud silly. What do you hope to achieve by playing with terror and humor to illuminate how surveillance works to police our bodies and gender performances?

E.S. — For us humor is an important way to fight against the enormity of the PIC. However, as popular culture often produces humor at the expense of incarcerated people, we also turn the read back against the State. Or in other words, we use a campy sensibility to denaturalize the ways we all inhabit and reproduce the surveillance cultures of the State. Ultimately our goal is to abolish the PIC and dismantle the State, however, we know that all means necessary—from armed revolution to campy humor—must be utilized to combat such massive and shifting structures.

R.C. — But as it is commonly framed by law and order politicians, prisons are “for our own safety.” They are a place to put the threatening bodies and contain dangerous behaviors so that outside the prison walls a general population can feel safe. When queer and trans bodies occupy a disproportionate amount of space in the prison system, as noted by the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (www.srlp.org), how can any queer or trans person not imagine the entire prison system as anything but unsafe in itself?

E.S. — Because many LGBT/trans/queer people have such a personal history with corporal or psychical violence, opening up a space for a conversation around the kinds of structural violence performed by the PIC is not an easy task. I think this is evidenced by the excitement around the passing of the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act in the United States in 2009. Yet, as CQ illustrates, the prison itself is a hate crime, so if we are serious about diminishing violence then we have to be serious about dismantling the State. What is always a bit shocking to me are the ways in which people that have been historically and in the present moment so directly affected by the PIC still have faith in it. This almost fantastical belief allows many to continue to be tethered to this logic, and these practices that work toward our death.

C.V. — The ideology around crime and punishment is that the logical consequence to any form of crime is imprisonment. Many queer people don’t realize the disproportionate numbers of queer and trans people in prison, so sadly I don’t think that many LGBT people realize that this is a pressing issue in need

of desperate attention. The Marriage Rights movement has become *the* issue that has eclipsed all other issues relevant to the everyday lives of queer and trans people, including the imprisonment of the most vulnerable segments of our communities and their lack of resources that make them prey to the kind of surveillance and policing that puts them behind bars. But many gay people don't want to acknowledge that racism, transphobia, poverty, homelessness, joblessness, no access to education, and dwindling funding for HIV/AIDS as well as other health services, are pressing issues that make people directly vulnerable to imprisonment and that result in a disproportionate number of queer and trans people imprisoned. If the larger LGBT rights movement could really look at the fact that 1 in 3 transgender people have either been in county jail or in prison at some point in their lives, a statistic noted by the Transgender Gender Variant Intersex (TGI) Justice Project in 2008, it might help to shift the priorities and resources toward the abolition of this incredibly problematic institution. It's a tall order, but I, along with many other people, have hope.

Crédits Photos

- 1 "Joy, Lucy, and Susan with an S" film still. © *Criminal Queers*, 2012.
- 2 "X on set of *Criminal Queers*" film still. © *Criminal Queers*, 2012.
- 3 "Wedding planner and husband to be taking cover at a failed gay wedding" film still. © *Homotopia*, 2007.
- 4 "Susan with an S mug shot" film still. © *Criminal Queers*, 2012.
- 5 "Joy picking up bomb to blow up gay wedding" film still. © *Homotopia*, 2007.
- 6 "On set of *Criminal Queers*" film still. © *Criminal Queers*, 2012.
- 7 Film makers and cast" © *Criminal Queers*, 2012.
- 8 "Joy breaking into a safe at the Human Rights Campaign store" film still. © *Criminal Queers*, 2012.
- 9 "Lucy Parsons on set" film still. © *Homotopia*, 2007.
- 10 "Yoshi holding bomb" film still. © *Homotopia*, 2007.
- 11 "Yoshi putting on a disguise" film still. © *Homotopia*, 2007.
- 12 "Susan with an S and Joy biking to pick up a bomb" film still. © *Homotopia*, 2007.

Résumé en français

Le compte rendu suivant est celui de la table ronde entre Ryan Conrad, artiste et activiste résidant à Montréal, et Eric Stanley et Chris Vargas, deux cinéastes multidisciplinaires de San Francisco. La conversation est centrée autour de deux projets de ces derniers, soit *Homotopia* (2006) et *Criminal Queers* (2012). Ces deux œuvres cherchent à susciter une réflexion politique de fond au sujet du mariage gai et du complexe industriel correctionnel dans une optique *queer* et trans radicale. Cette exploration est véhiculée à travers la captation de performances non scénariées d'acteurs (en majorité des amateurs, et représentant le spectre complet du genre) qui laissent transparent leurs expériences de vie à l'écran. Cette discussion a eu lieu lors de la projection de *Criminal Queers*, qui était en cours de production, à l'Université Concordia en 2009.