



Pidgeon Pagonis, *Children's Memorial Hospital Killia (CMHK)*, 2015, series of 5 photographs. Courtesy of the artist.



Mercer Union, a centre for contemporary art

1286 Bloor Street West, Toronto ON M6H 1N9 Canada
(one block east of Lansdowne TTC Station)
office@mercunion.org www.mercunion.org

Director of Exhibitions & Publications: Georgina Jackson
Director of Operations & Development: York Lethbridge
Lead Preparator: Danielle Greer
Curatorial Assistant: Katie Lyle
Gallery Administrative Coordinator: Liana Schmidt

Board of Directors: Joseph Banh, Joseph Borowiec, Meagan Campbell, Rochelle Chung, Miles Collyer, John Hampton, Lili Huston-Herterich, Rebecca Houston, Charlene Lau, Vanessa Runions, Michael Salem, Tamira Sawatzky, Kristen Schaffer and Negin Zabarjad

Mercer Union acknowledges the support of its staff, volunteers and members, the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Arts Council and the City of Toronto through the Toronto Arts Council.



Cover image: Carlos Motta, *Deseos/ رغبات* (2015), HD 16:9, video, colour, sound.
Courtesy of Mor Charpentier Galerie, Paris and Galeria Filomena Soares, Lisbon.
ISBN: 978-1-926627-37-3

SONIC PRINT Co. CA

To receive future publications by mail and many other advantages, become a member of Mercer Union.

Beloved Martina... is co-presented in partnership with the Images Festival, 14-23 April 2016. For further information, visit imagesfestival.com



PUBLIC PROGRAMMING

Film Screenings and Discussion with Pidgeon Pagonis
Tuesday 24 May 2016, 7PM

Join us for a screening of Pidgeon Pagonis' *The Son I Never Had: Growing up Intersex* (2014), Del LaGrace Volcano's *Gender Queer: Qu'est-ce que c'est?* (2005) and the documentary *Intersexion* (2012), written, directed and edited by Grant Lahood and produced by John Keir, followed by a discussion with Pidgeon Pagonis.

BIOGRAPHIES

Arisleyda Dilone makes film work about her life and family. Born in Santiago de Los de Caballeros, Dominican Republic, Dilone moved to New York at the age of seven and was raised in a suburb of Long Island. She holds an MA in International Relations and Government from St. John's University and a BA from Connecticut State University. In 2011, Dilone was awarded a mentorship by the National Association of Latino Independent Producers, and in 2012, she was awarded a Jerome Foundation-Travel and Study Grant. Dilone was a 2014 Union Docs Collaborative Fellow and a 2015 Queer Art/Mentorship/Program Fellow, in which she completed her short film *Mami y Yo y Mi Gallito (Mom and Me and My Little Rooster)*. Dilone is a member of Diverse Filmmakers Alliance and Brooklyn Filmmakers Collective.

Carlos Motta is a multi-disciplinary artist whose work draws upon political history in an attempt to create counter narratives that recognize suppressed histories, communities, and identities. His work is known for its engagement with histories of queer culture and activism and for its insistence that the politics of sex and gender represent an opportunity to articulate definite positions against social and political injustice. Motta's work has been presented internationally in venues such as Tate Modern, London; The New Museum, The Guggenheim Museum and MoMA/PS1, New York; Museo de Arte del Banco de la República, Bogotá; among others. Motta was awarded the Main Prize—Future Generation Art Prize of the PinchukArtCentre in Kiev (2014). He is a graduate of the Whitney Independent Study Program (2006), was named a Guggenheim Foundation Fellow (2008), and received grants from Art Matters (2008), NYSCA (2010), Creative Capital Foundation and the Kindle Project (2012). He lives in New York.

Pidgeon Pagonis is an intersex activist and artist fighting for their community's human right to bodily autonomy and justice. Born and raised in Chicago, Pagonis studied Women's and Gender Studies at DePaul University where they focused their studies on intersex issues and activism. Pidgeon is the former Communications & Operations Manager and Youth Leadership Coordinator for Inter/Act, an intersex youth project, at Advocates for Informed Choice (AIC)—an organization that fights for the legal rights of intersex children and their families. Pagonis recently completed a digital storytelling documentary titled *The Son I Never Had: Growing up Intersex* (2014) and had a similar titled piece published in *Narratives Inquiries in Bioethics: A Journal of Qualitative Research*. In 2015, Pagonis was given an LGBT Champion of Change award at the White House, Washington DC.

Erin Silver is an art historian and independent curator. She is an emerging scholar of queer feminist visual culture, performance, activism, and art history and is co-editor (with Amelia Jones) of *Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories* (Manchester University Press, 2015). Silver has a PhD in Art History and Gender and Women's Studies from McGill University and is Lecturer of Critical Studies and Visual Culture at the Roski School of Art and Design, University of Southern California.

Del LaGrace Volcano is considered one of the pioneers of queer photography and has published five books: *LoveBites* (1991); the first photographic monograph of lesbian sexuality; *The Drag King Book* (1999), the only book to date exploring the performances and lives of drag kings; *Sublime Mutations* (2000), *Sex Works* (2005) and *Femmes of Power* (2008), the first photographic monograph celebrating queer femininities in the USA and Europe. Volcano is a regular contributor to academic publications, television programmes and films on queer visual art and theory. Volcano lives and works in Sweden.



Del LaGrace Volcano, *Self Portrait: Blue Beard* (1996), c-print. Courtesy of the artist.

UPCOMING

Steps/Mesures
Artist talk with Aymeric Vergnon-d'Alañon
Wednesday 20 April 2016, 7PM

In partnership with the Institut Français and the Consulate General of France in Toronto, the *Steps/Mesures* program invites artists and curators living in France to Toronto to forge conversation between cultural ecologies. Our second guest, Aymeric Vergnon-d'Alañon works in photography, experimental film and video. Select recent exhibitions and screenings include: Festival Côté Court, Pantin (2015); 59e Salon de Montrouge (2014); Galerie La Ferronnerie, Paris (2014); and Centre Photographique d'Île de France (2012).

FORUM: Are you the real deal?
Meditations on legitimacy with Liz Peterson and Vanessa Dunn
Thursday 28 April 2016, 7PM



Mercer Union is delighted to announce that Liz Peterson and Vanessa Dunn will be the next guests in our FORUM critical conversation series. Free as always.

Carlos Motta
Beloved Martina...
with Arisleyda Dilone, Del LaGrace Volcano and Pidgeon Pagonis
14 April - 4 June 2016
Artist talk Thursday 14 April, 6:30PM, opening reception to follow



Beloved...

Erin Silver

I feel you present. We are both prisoners. Our experiences are intertwined, despite the distance. My eyes are shut, too... What is wrong with my body?

These words are uttered by Martina in her letter to Nour in Carlos Motta's *Deseos / رغبات* [Desires](2015). Epistolary writing pronounces relationships of conspiracy. For individuals whose bodies are regarded, as well as treated, as suspect, letter writing permits the letter-writer to break through the physical constraints of their condition in order to occupy an imagined space, a space held jointly by the letter-writer and the reader to whom they write. Writing on the foundational importance of epistolarity to histories of contemporary feminisms, cultural theorist Margaretta Jolly envisions these "intimate archives," which combine private experience with political struggle, as contributing to the possibility of a fantasized women's community.¹

In addition to the relationships formed between confidantes, co-workers, and correspondents—the types of relationships formed by women through letter-writing referred to by Jolly—I add the relationship of co-conspirator. This is added in order to consider how, in working with a repository of historical texts and a cast of characters that break free from temporal and geographic boundaries, the Colombian-born, New York-based multidisciplinary artist Carlos Motta reveals the co-conspiratorial nature of queer discourses.² Here, to be co-conspiratorial suggests a shared recognition of the perceived criminality of specific social, sexual, emotional, and political formations, not to mention a desire to use text to instigate action—to be an accomplice. Critiquing Marx's historical materialism, Walter Benjamin articulated a materialist historiography that concerned not only "the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well" offering "a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past... blast[ing] a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history—blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework."³ Resisting the linear organizational impulses of history writing that occlude attendant histories of "barbarism" (in the Benjaminian sense), Motta performs a kind of historical "blasting" and, in doing so, constructs his own fantasy, convening the dead and the living.

The relationship between the two women at the centre of Motta's *Deseos / رغبات* (2015), presented in the front gallery of Mercer Union, provides a powerful backdrop for thinking through strategies of historical parallelism that permit for the simultaneous telling of personal and political histories along a spectrum of oppression and liberation. The 32-minute video is an epistolary fiction imagined from documentary evidence, co-written with collaborator Maya Mikdashi and set in 1803 in Suesca, Colombia, and Beirut during the late Ottoman Empire. The narrative develops out of the correspondence between the Spanish-speaking Martina and the Arabic-speaking Nour, who communicate across geographic and linguistic barriers to reveal passionate and criminal intimacies: Martina has been accused by her lover, Juana Maria, and prosecuted by the colonial Court of Colombia, for being a "hermaphrodite," her "noble parts" at once a site of pleasure and violence; Nour and her lover, Aisha, have been forcibly separated yet made to live as a reconfigured family unit with their respective husbands.

As the women recount the details of their lives in terms both sensuous and violent, we touch and are touched by a haptic montage of still and moving images: the drawing of the object of desire; open waters and rocky terrain; religious iconography, including a figure of a blood-stained Christ; and pans of present-day highways—a "blasting" out of the past and in its place, a new continuum of enduringly treacherous passages. Literary theorist Frances Ferguson has observed that, "the letter, precisely because it lays claim to a reply, registers an attempt to both generate and to enforce resemblance between the correspondents."⁴ Martina and Nour's correspondence becomes a conduit not only for imagining the absented love objects, but also for forging a relationship of resemblance and a confessional space where public morality is temporarily suspended. Separated by distance, language, and culture, Martina and Nour nevertheless become accomplices, building a shared ammunition against experiences of domestic isolation and gendered violence.



Carlos Motta, *Deseos/ رغبات* (2015), HD 16:9, video, colour, sound. Courtesy of Mor Charpentier Galerie, Paris and Galeria Filomena Soares, Lisbon.



Carlos Motta, David Iris Cameron from *Gender Talents* (2015), 6:56 min. video, color, HD 16:9. Courtesy of the artist.

Motta's historical preoccupations take on physical form in the piece *Beloved Martina...* (2016), a series of small-scale sandstone 3D-printed sculptures modeled on Greco-Roman, 16th and 17th century statues of Hermaphroditus, the son of Hermes and Aphrodite, whose body merged with that of the water nymph Salmacis into an androgynous form, while two of the sculptures are modeled on late 19th and early 20th century black and white photographs, one by Nadar. Presented in the back gallery, the intersex reliquaries are at once reminders of the enduring historical fascination with the intersex figure and the ways in which intersexuality has long been subject to the classifying gaze.

The constraints of the museological repository are countered with voices from the present: The back gallery also presents five films from Motta's *Gender Talents* (2015) focusing on intersex artists and activists, alongside works by Arisleyda Dilone, Pidgeon Pagonis and Del LaGrace Volcano. An important gesture in working against the historically classifying gaze directed at the intersex body and of the recognition of the importance of self-representation, Motta's invitation extends the archival expanse of the exhibition, simultaneously engaging in a the politically urgent practice of "holding space."⁵

Extending the archival impulse of his 2012 multi-platform *We Who Feel Differently*,⁶ Motta's video portrait project and archive, *Gender Talents*,⁷ focuses on the autobiographical experiences of trans and intersex activists and the ways in which these experiences intersect and contribute to their political identities. Writing in the late-1990s, following a decade of queer theory that worked to deconstruct the materiality of gender, cultural theorist Jay Prosser theorized that transsexuality is always a narrative work; the difficulty, he argues, lies in the unrepresentability of the transition itself. Reintroducing the body into cultural theories of gender, Prosser argues that, "we must make changes to our theoretical paradigms if we are to make room for the materiality of transsexual narratives."⁸ Making central the idea of a "body narrative" through which "the story of the transexual weaves around the body in order that this body may be 'read,'" Prosser retraces foundational queer texts (including Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*, as well as lesser-known memoirs, psychoanalytic accounts, manifestos, medical narratives, and polemics) in order to make visible the transsexual body and to render it a classifiable subject.⁹ Here, the body narrative of transsexuality is woven through with experiences of loss, trauma, and injury—the "feeling backward" (in the words of literary theorist Heather Love) of queer histories.¹⁰ Although the body narrative forged in trans theory opens up to experiences of gender, including intersexuality, that challenge the transcendent foundations of queer theory, the body narratives of intersexuality do not hinge on the unrepresentability of transition, but on wresting control of the body and its right to self-determination.

Many of the narratives Motta includes in the selected works from *Gender Talents* open with experiences of medicalized violence as repeatedly enacted on intersex bodies at birth: experiences mirrored in the photographic work of Chicago-based intersex activist Pidgeon Pagonis, who, in the exhibited series *Children's Memorial Hospital Killa [CMHK]* (2015), adopts the online activist practice of sign holding to narrate the surgical details of their enforced gender assignment, standing in front of an abandoned hospital—a site, and symbol, of psychic trauma at the hands of medical professionals. In Motta's archive, the "gender trouble" of queer theory becomes "gender talent" in resistance to the idea that difference must necessarily be solely defined by narratives of trauma. Diverging from a discourse in which gender weighs, rather than liberates, participants not only self-define, but also define the structures of their personal narratives: Jim Ambrose tells the story of the founding of the Intersex Society of North America in the early-1990s, which introduces a narrative support for the telling of his own experience of being born and growing up intersex. David Iris Cameron flashes photographs of his pre- and post-medicalized body—static images that he holds at a distance as he animates and rejects his own linear and binarizing narrative. When Sean Saifa M. Wall recounts the experience of giving testimony at the San Francisco Human Rights Commission's Intersex Hearing, personal and political narratives are fused as Sean recounts struggling with feelings of nervousness about the public nature of his testimony while at the same time recognizing the importance of the public record.

⁵ Here I refer to the political and activist intersectional practice of recognizing one's privileged position relative to others who experience additional layers of marginalization and oppression and, rather than "filling in" space and/or speaking for others, using one's privilege in the ability to occupy ideological and/or physical space by giving it over to, safeguarding it for, more marginalized peoples.

⁶ Part of the *Democracy Cycle*, these are six distinct works in which Motta interrogates historical constructions of democracy and their effects on marginalized individuals and communities, exploring the potential of thinking sexuality not along the lines of equality, but as forged through difference.

⁷ www.gendertalents.info

⁸ Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁰ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).



Carlos Motta, *Hermaphrodite (8)* from *Beloved Martina* (2016), Sandstone 3D print. Courtesy of Galeria Filomena Soares, Lisbon; Mor Charpentier Galerie, Paris; Instituto de Visión, Bogotá.

about her body, the grainy home video quality suggesting an active process of self- and re-defining against the grain of the historical record, can be read along the performative lines of telling "the better story": stories where agency lies with the individual.

In the midst of the ironically essentializing identity politics of the 1990s—countless attempts at "visualizing" gender just as gender was being afforded more performative potential—pioneering intersex photographer Del LaGrace Volcano picked up her camera, held a pose, and took a self-portrait that, over twenty years, later, continues to assert "the better story" in the face of the historically medicalizing gaze of photography directed at the intersex body. The photograph *Self-Portrait: Blue Beard* (1996) depicts LaGrace, then Della Grace, against a blue backdrop to match the dyed blue wisps of her goatee and mustache—a static image, yet gender nevertheless "in transition." Indeed, gender, in Volcano's portraits and self-portraits, plays a transitional, and interstitial role, never keeping in time with photography's decisive moment in a visual sense. But the self-portrait of the artist documents a pivotal transition: the moment before Della Grace became Del LaGrace Volcano. The portrait was published in *The Guardian*'s weekend supplement the same day that Volcano married artist Johnny Volcano—documentary evidence of when "Del LaGrace Volcano" was born. Volcano, art historian Dominic Johnson has observed, "complicates [the] diagnostic model by embracing intersex as an 'evangelical calling' and as a twisted kind of 'manifest destiny.' Volcano adopts the ironic rhetoric of missionary zeal to describe a great awakening of sorts, in which one's body is revived—born again—in its own heretical design."¹²

Forging a visual language through which to narrate intersexuality as embodied, Motta's collaborative approach proposes, as well, a framework in which speaking intersexuality relationally—the epistolary and dialogic episodes both encountered and enacted by an audience—further permits intersexual experience to come into view. But like an inveterate co-conspirator, a queer ally, Motta disappears into the crowd, ceding the gallery to a historical and present-day chorus of gender co-conspirators, who, together, produce a spectral cacophony as individuals share stories, both silent and bellowing; living relics, stones made flesh.

¹¹ Dina Georgis, *The Better Story* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013), 1.

¹² Dominic Johnson, "Transition pieces: the photography of Del LaGrace Volcano," in *Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories*, eds. Amelia Jones and Erin Silver (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 341-2.

¹ Margaretta Jolly, *In Love and Struggle: Letters in Contemporary Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 2.

² Jolly, "Confidantes, co-workers and correspondents: feminist discourses of letter-writing from 1970 to the present." *Journal of European Studies* xxxii (2002): 267-82.

³ Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, 1940.

⁴ Frances Ferguson, "Interpreting the Self Through Letters," *Centrum*, 1 (2) (1981), 111.