

# THE BELIEVER



## THE 2009 ART ISSUE



\$10 U.S. / \$11 Canada

WITH A HUGE, TWO-SIDED POSTER BY JERRY MORIARTY  
(in conversation with CHRIS WARE) PLUS: ANDREA ZITTEL IN UNIFORM;  
MICHELLE TEA IN VENICE; COMICS BY CHARLES BURNS, ANDERS NILSEN,  
RON REGÉ JR, ET AL; GREIL MARCUS ON PYNCHON & POWERS; POMPIDOU POLITICS, MORE.

MICHELLE TEA

## THE FIFTH WEDDING

A DISPATCH FROM A THREE-WAY MARRIAGE AT THE 2009 VENICE BIENNALE BETWEEN A PORN-STAR-TURNED-PERFORMANCE-ARTIST, HER CHAKRA-SAVVY PARTNER, AND THE OCEAN.

DISCUSSED: *The Lone Butch of Venice, Co-Op Sex Toy Boutiques, The Bronzed Underwear of Certain Academics, Ambivalent Porn Experiences, Inspiring Alternatives to the Cracked-Out Pimp-Abused Sex-Worker Model, The Least-Angry Angry Woman, Silky Aqua Ascots, Cross-Dressing Nazis, Castrations Performed to Nico Songs, The Unpleasant Taste of Canal Water, The Need (After Wrapping One's Face In Dental Floss) For a Beer*

Sadie Lune is hanging out by the canal in a weedy, de-touristed part of Venice during the final muggy days of the Biennale. She's got a bunch of piercings all over her face and ears, connected to one another with a web of thin silver chains. Sadie is a San Francisco performance artist whose work reinterprets and perverts mythologies—I once watched her, as Eve, pull a feather pen from a snarl of hair and write a letter to Adam bitching him out for sleeping with the landlord (God) and getting them evicted from her garden. (She did this with a live boa constrictor around her neck, one she pulled from a shitty purse.) Like most of



the people here in Venice to perform at the wedding of the artists Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens, Sadie is queer and has done time in the sex industry, and both of these factors strongly inform her work. Later she will enact a mermaid spectacle

with a girl named Lian, but for the moment she is gazing across the lagoon towards San Michele, the island where the Venetians bury their dead, and bitching about the lack of queers in this sinking Italian city.

"She's not the *hottest* butch in Venice," Sadie says of the lone handsome gay woman she found. "She's *the* butch of Venice, and she's hot. She has a hot, young, femme girlfriend."

"She was a bitch," chimes Lian.

"She was just threatened," sympathizes Stephanie, a burlesque dancer who performs under the name Lady Monster. Stephanie has long red hair and a soothing voice; she actually resembles a younger Annie Sprinkle. The tattoo on her arm is of a nude woman with fire coming out of her mouth like a tongue.

"She's not a bitch," Sadie agrees. Upon asking the Hot Butch of Venice where she could find others of her kind, the Butch apparently replied, "Here there is nowhere, but you find them everywhere," and quickly split the scene.

Sadie and Lian wound up drinking at an American-owned disco bar, fending off men who went from "dulce to douche-ay" in ten minutes. The pair seem dejected by the results of their romantic efforts, though excited for the wedding, which is about to happen in a wide warehouse recently acquired and renovated by the Biennale. Performers from eighteen other acts have already gathered inside, among them a drag queen from Berlin, a feminist activist from Athens, a trio of mermaids from Switzerland and a gender theorist from Barcelona. Italy's top crusader for the decriminalization of prostitution is present, as is Carol Queen, the American sexologist who helped found the feminist co-op sex toy boutique Good Vibrations.

I have come to deliver the homily. Like everyone else, I am dressed in blue, as was requested by the brides. In the tradition of the Doge, Venice's ancient rulers, Annie and Beth will also be marrying the sea.

**A**nnie Sprinkle first got famous as a porn star, shooting films in the '70s and '80s. By the end of the '80s she was an international underground art sensation, using her knowledge of and comfort with sex and the body to create live art pieces in which, for example, audience members were invited to climb on stage and peer through a speculum into her vagina. Annie was featured in the classic feminist performance-art compendium *Angry Women*, published in 1992 by the punk press RE/Search. Thick with interviews with artists such as Kathy Acker, Diamanda Galas, and Lydia Lunch, Annie is probably the *least* angry of the bunch. Though her relationship with the sex industry is complicated (and she has, at points, critiqued aspects of the industry, for instance when she fellated a variety of dildos in a piece investigating her ambivalence towards some of her porn experiences), she enthusiastically affirms the liberating powers of being a libertine, indulging in extroverted sexuality for financial, artistic, personal, and spiritual gain. Part of Annie's work has been to return the status of prostitutes to the mythic, healer roles they are said to have had in other cultures.<sup>1</sup> The romance around this idea is thick, and we will

<sup>1</sup> There isn't really very much actual proof that Sacred Prostitutes exist; they seem to exist currently, in popular imagination, stronger than in antiquity. It was possible that some Middle Eastern matriarchal cultures had women working in such capacities, and Asian Tantra practitioners may also have filled such cultural roles. Courtesans surely existed, and they provide a contemporary role model for women looking to return glamour, meaning, and status to the occupation.

never really know whether sex work for women in antiquity was empowering or truly lousy (probably both, as it still can be), but by providing role models other than cracked-out pimp-abused street walkers, Annie has become a heroine and an inspiration to generations of sex workers. She can be largely credited with the explosion of sub-cultural sex work memoirs (she has her own, the scrapbook-y *Post Porn Modernist*, published in the US in 1998). These explore the phenomena of women working their way towards a gender studies degree by stripping (and interviewing their co-workers for their theses), the burlesque revival, and the new age hooker who identifies as a priestess (Sprinkle's 1992 video *Sluts and Goddesses* derived from workshops in which women were encouraged to access their sexuality via embodiments of slutty or goddessy female archetypes).

Annie's mentor is the performance artist Linda Montano, perhaps best known for the years she spent embodying seven different chakras by, for example, meditating in a room painted the color associated with each chakra and wearing chakra-appropriate-colored clothing. Chakras—whirling energy centers said to ladder up the front of every human being—were first mentioned in the Vedas, sacred Hindu texts originating in ancient India. Seven chakras are associated with the body's seven major energy centers (your lower body, your junk, your navel, your heart, your throat, your third eye, and the crown of your head). Chakras are also associated with ma-

terial and ephemeral elements (earth, fire, air, sound, light, metabolism, understanding, and love).<sup>2</sup>

Annie's partner, the artist Beth Stephens, was similarly influenced by Linda Montano's work, so the two of them decided to embark upon a seven-year project in which they are married to one another once a year in the spirit of the ascending chakras.<sup>3</sup> 2009 will mark their fifth wedding, thus the one honoring the fifth chakra, which is said to whorl above the throat and deal with communication. It is also associated with water, and so Annie and Beth decided to marry the ocean. (In 2008, they married the Earth.)

This wedding was meant to be a humble affair—just five or so guests, at a small art gallery somewhere in France. But when the artist Jota Castro learned that the couple planned to honeymoon in Venice to catch the Biennale, he invited them to stage a wedding spectacle at a pavilion his

art collective, the Fear Society, would be occupying on the outskirts of the Biennale (in the newly acquired warehouses). Castro's art includes inserting replicas of international monuments into anuses, so there was a resonance between the artists. Beth's own art concerns sex and the body, as well as feminism and the academy. For one installation, Beth shot video footage of the genitalia of various people she knew; in the final video, each person's genitalia is attributed to a different feminist heroine.<sup>4</sup> Beth has also collected underwear from both porn actresses and academics, for bronzing. Displayed side-by-side, they link women doing arguably feminist work in fiercely different environments, equalizing them through subtle reminders of shared physicality. Something similar happens with the video work, reminding viewers that the feminist legends may be icons now, but once were just living people like you and me, people with vaginas.

It's also worth noting how uncanny it is that Annie and Beth decided to marry the sea while in Venice, because such weddings are actually a local tradition. The Doges, Venice's rulers of yore, wed the sea on behalf of the city each year, as a sort of pagan ritual ensuring dominance over the waters that constantly encroach upon this soggy civilization. But the brides are not interested in having this traditional,

somewhat abusive relationship with the waters; they intend to innovate.

"We don't want to dominate or control the sea," Beth said to me when I ran into her at a literary reading some weeks before her wedding. "We want to *fuck* the sea. We want to love the sea and nurture the sea and take care of the sea."

I follow Sadie and Co. away from the water and into the long brick warehouse ringed by weeds and abundant nature. Inside, the officiator Beatriz Preciado, is trying to wrangle a sweaty gang of performers into some sort of order.<sup>5</sup> Everyone is wearing blue, and the overall look is very Burning Man—costume and body paint, rhinestones and glitter, ribbons, tulle, sequins, chiffon, lots of tattoos, and some scarification markings keloiding across arms and collarbones. There are Venetian masks, fake flowers, and paper fans fluttering in the humidity. Beatriz has facial hair penciled onto her face and is wearing a silky aqua ascot tucked into the neck of her work shirt. On her head sits a blue Viking helmet with fat plastic rabbit ears where the horns should be. Beatriz is tall, good-natured, and seems to be saddled with the duties of

<sup>2</sup> There are also many, many minor chakras (some wager the total chakra count to be around 88,000). Like your internal organs, your chakras merrily do their thing whether or not you are paying attention to them. But actions can be taken to both support and harm your chakras. Self-care like meditation, positive thinking, sleep and good diet encourage healthy chakras; pastimes such as shit-talking, meanness, spitefulness, lousy diets, and overall self-destructive lifestyles hurt your chakras. Though there could be a chicken-or-egg mystery going on here, because who is to say someone isn't a terrible gossip because they have a polluted throat chakra?

<sup>3</sup> Though all the chakras are crucial, there is an ascending hierarchy to them; the lower chakras deal with earthly or "animal" matters such as physicality and sex, while the upper ones connect us to psychic, intuitive vibrations and, through the crown chakra, to the universe, God, or whatever you would like to call the big cosmic mystery.

<sup>4</sup> When I was twenty-five years old, Beth paid a visit to my house and I crouched bottomless above her camera. (My vagina was attributed to the infamous lady pirate Anne Bonny.)

<sup>5</sup> Beatriz's book *T Junkie* just came out in Europe and will be published in the US by NYU Press, on an imprint overseen by José Muñoz. The *T* of the title refers to testosterone. Beatriz's next book will deal with *Playboy* and architecture. She organizes queer arts symposiums at a university in Seville, and is the girlfriend of French writer Virginie Despentes, who made her controversial novel *Baise-moi* into an even more controversial film, and who just published a book of punk-informed feminist thought titled *King Kong Theory*.

wedding planner for those aspects of the wedding that are a wedding, and as producer for those aspects of the wedding that are an art event. But this is an assumed role, as the event actually has neither planner nor producer, hence a fair amount of chaos erupting everywhere, enhanced by the Biennale's reluctance to embrace the wedding as an event of its own. To begin with, the Biennale officials kicked the ceremony out of the Biennale-renovated warehouse and onto the hot, waterfront gravel in back, beside an ancient urinal where sailors and waterfront workers once fornicated with the prostitutes who worked the canals. Then the Biennale officials declared that the sound systems and chairs (taken from the warehouse) would be repo'd at six o'clock sharp, regardless of whether or not the wedding is actually finished. The Biennale officials announced that the warehouse would be bolted shut.

While this situation is no doubt quite stressful for the brides, many of the performers delight in their outlaw status within the Biennale. They also love their proximity to the brothely urinal.

"They've been having sex in that urinal since the fourteenth or fifteenth century," says Stephanie, now ornamented with a fair amount of swinging fringe and fluttering chiffon, ready to go-go dance to surf music for the brides as Lady Monster.

A boy walks up and offers me a baggie stuffed with ribbons. They're blue and read *Annie + Sea + Beth* and *Beth + Sea + Annie* in silver.

"What do I do with this?" I ask him. "Whatever you want." I tie it to my necklace.

Annie is handing out programs wearing a leopard blouse that sticks to her in the heat. On one shoulder she has a tattoo of a uterus topped with a golden crown; her other shoulder sports a heart with a banner reading BETH, crowned with a wedding ring. The vibe is hectic. Beatriz compiles the performance lineup. Starlight and Neptune, from California, are doing a sexy Hula-hoop dance. Tim Stüttgen from Berlin is enacting "the final castration" with a dildo to a Nico song. He swishes his hands fancifully. "It's a good-bye thing to the phallus, tra la la." Margaux from Athens will perform an act called "Sappho's Ritual." "I'm not speaking, just..." she rolls her hands around, suggesting interpretive dance. Beatriz's first language is Spanish, Tim's is German, and Margaux's is Greek. English is the common denominator, but communication becomes choppy and halting. Sadie and Lian are chanting some sort of order to their costume-based performance: "Hair, shells, pearls, squid, fish. Right?" I wander into the adjoining pavilion, to check out a show I'd seen advertised on the *vaporetti*, the bus-boats that ferry people through town since Venice has no cars. This is probably the single most stunning thing about the city, more wonderfully strange than even the ancient buildings and the gondoliers in their boats all decked out like the most garish of Valentines, red velvet and golden cherubs up the wazoo. *No cars. No roadways.*

Only narrow streets with platforms to walk upon when the waters rise, and canals traversed with all sorts of boats. In Venice it is a delight to see the trash boats, the police boats, the postal and delivery boats all navigating the crowded channels. After about a week I feel like I'm always bobbing on the water, regardless of where I am.

Carol Queen arrives and begins costuming herself for the event. She strips down to black bra and underwear and fishnets, and ties a length of blue satin around her hips. "Why does this town remind me of New Orleans?" she asks. It's the water, of course, threatening to take the town—not with a sudden bursting of a levy but slowly, over time, a wet erosion. Carol tells me about a statue she saw. The salt air had caused the marble to peel right off the form. "It looked like it had leprosy," she says.

The wedding is about to start. One performance is already underway; a girl named Natalie Loveless is winding a thick, clear thread that looks like dental floss around her face, rendering it hideous, her mouth and nose pushed into a snout. Sadie and Lian push themselves into their mermaid costumes—tubes of skin-tight metallic blue spandex with zippered pockets at the crotch and, in Sadie's case, a full face hood with a perverse hole for her mouth.

Beth shows up, holding a couple of baby blue telephones connected by a curling telephone cord. "These are our communication telephones," she tells me. Beth is a sturdy butch,

with short brown hair and a perpetual smirk. She's wearing a crazy satin outfit covered with blue waves, and a Doge's hat—a tight cap that comes to a rounded tip. Her pants have a puffy white codpiece spangled with silver. She calls it her cloudpiece.

"This is Annie's bouquet," Beth shakes the phone mounted on a little post tied with ribbons, "And this is my bling." The bling is a phone Beth can hang around her neck with more curling phone cord. "We're waiting on the bride," she says, referring to Annie, who suddenly dashes by in a huff of stress. "Can I help you, honey?" But she's gone. Sadie Lune dashes by next, half-naked and covered in glitter, clutching a big blue dildo. Beth waxes poetic about their vows to the ocean. "It's about sea empowerment, power to the mermaid." A boy wearing a giant powdered wig and a smart suit toddles by. "It's a Mozart wig," he informs, "But I'm not Mozart." He's meant to be a Venetian, though he is in reality a Londoner. Due to read a poem in Italian, he is now quite nervous because so many Italians are present to critique his poor delivery. He fans himself with a paper fan like Karl Lagerfeld and walks away.

Leaning against the wall, Carol Queen is learning about one of the pieces hung in the Society of Fear pavilion—a collection of photographs of German Nazis cross-dressing for fun. "A Berlin artist found them and is blowing them up and making a gallery show of them."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>The artist's name is Martin Dammann; the piece is called *Soldier Studies*.

Finally, the wedding begins. The mermaids, who cannot walk once stuck inside their finned suits, sort of elegantly hurl themselves from their chairs and pull long strands of pearls from their mouths. Then they make out and pull objects from their unzipped crotch-pockets: hair, seashells, squid—which they eat—and that giant blue double-sided jelly dong (they each suck an end while rolling in ecstasy). Tim's final castration involves tin foil and whipped cream and finishes off with the artist flinging himself into the mucky canal, much to everyone's delight. Margeaux's interpretive dance interprets lesbian sex, fondling imaginary breasts and folding her hand into fisting position. A girl named Diana Pornoterrorista, in blue body paint, a tutu, and a Mohawk, pulls a long roll of gauze from her vagina in the tradition of Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll*. A genderqueer slam poet indicts capitalism. Some weird dude shows us his underwear. A man attaches beads to the bare back of his girlfriend with piercing needles.

Through it all Beth and Annie sit, delighted, like royalty watching performances by loving members of their court. Annie wears a great blue veil, layers of netting spotted with fabric droplets of water. Natalie Loveless, the girl who was winding thread around her face, finishes her act by dunking her head into a bucket of purple-dyed water and howling painfully. When she cuts the threads away, her skin is deeply marked and splotched with color.

Unfortunately, time has slipped away from everyone. It's 6 p.m. and

the Biennale henchmen arrive to claim the sound system and lock the warehouse doors before Annie and Beth are able to perform their vows. We decide to process to a local *campo* to have food and drinks and continue the ceremony. Inside the warehouse it's crazy. Annie drops her little blue clutch purse, spilling her belongings all over the floor. "Honey... this is fucking hard," she sighs at Beth. "This is a fucking hard gig." The floor is strewn with her asthma inhaler, Euros, makeup, and pasties.

"I know," Beth agrees. "It was beautiful, though." Tim shows up, dried from his plunge into the canal.

"We all wanted to go in that water, too!" Annie enthuses.

"It's better you didn't," says Tim. "It taste—not so much."

"You better have your tetanus shot!" Annie laughs and swishes away in her wavy blue bridal skirts.

**W**e parade through the streets chanting *Mama mia! Que tetone!*, referencing an Italian song about a man who is seduced by a buxom woman who proves to be transsexual. The ragtag queers have embraced the song as a transgender ballad and a celebration of huge tits. We pause at a bridge to wait for stragglers. A butch girl wearing a sailor's hat and an outfit stenciled with blue raindrops asks Natalie about her face-wrapping performance. "It takes a lot of attention," the artist says. Her face looks like a purple map marked with highways and tributaries.

"Do you feel like you need a nap after?" asks the butch.

"No. I need a beer."

At the *campo* the wedding takes over an outdoor café. Annie pulls a compact from her purse and powders her face while Greek tourists snap pictures. "This is the most hilarious event ever," says Beatriz.

Annie shoves her makeup back into her over-stuffed purse. "The love is abundant, the logistics suck," she says.

The brides and officiant convene to decide how to proceed. Vows have been written, but how and where to perform them? They also want the attendees to make vows to love and honor the sea. There are rings for the brides and also rings to be offered to the waters. The vows are on computers which are zipped into luggage which has somehow materialized in the *campo*. Annie decides not to read her vows. She is regretful about this because the vows contain lines from a poem written by Michael Jackson. She learned of the poem in a *USA Today* article she read on the plane, about the painter David Nordahl who did heraldic, almost religious portraits of the deceased pop star as mystical royalty, bearing swords, wearing capes, being knighted and crowned. Annie has the article and shows me. The poem is painted onto a portrait: *I am the seeker, the seeking, the sought*. Beth looks admiringly over the shoulder at the glowing portrait, a triptych. "I want a picture like that of me and Annie."

Annie and Beth return from a socializing spin around the café and grab Beatriz. The officiant stands. "This is the end of the ritual," she

proclaims loudly to the guests. "You will all get the chance to marry the sea." Annie and Beth agree to love, honor, and protect the sea, ("Si!" Beth hollers punnily), and Beatriz goes to circulate the sea's wedding rings around the café, inviting each person to state their wishes for the waters, which are in peril from pollution and overfishing and other human tinkering.

"No, have them yell it out!" Annie interrupts. "There's no time!" Gondolas are due any moment to whisk the brides away on the water. People begin to yell out their blessings for the sea.

"Juicy love!" "Abundance!" "Save the fisheries!" "Save the beautiful whales!" The rings are pocketed by the brides to be flung into the water later. Something about flinging them into this particular stagnant stretch of canal doesn't seem right.

"I now pronounce all of you married to the sea!" Beatriz hollers. The gondoliers arrive, taking the brides and their luggage away. The party fractures, later reconvening near the Grand Canal at Arsenale, the Biennale's center. Beth suggests they climb the stone bridge and declare their vows there but Annie declines, exhausted. She recently contracted asthma, right when they began planning this wedding centered around breath and the throat chakra. So there, on a flight of stairs leading down into the water, the brides and their priest recite their vows. Beth and Beatriz read theirs from a laptop held by my girlfriend Brittney, who kneels before them. Annie freestyles hers. She begins a

tangential narrative that begins in her suburban girlhood home, in a swimming pool that was the landscape of her first fellatio, and travels onward, detailing her growing relationship to water, christening herself Sprinkle (her birth name is Ellen Steinberg), and identifying the ocean as her first lover. By the end of her vow Annie is in tears, full of passion for the ocean and rage at what has been done to harm it. The rings are brought back out and passed around the smaller gathering; we each hold them, fat and studded with blue rhinestones, and whisper or psychically transmit our good wishes for the ocean into the jewelry. The brides toss them into the canal with a splash, bringing to mind Ruth Gordon throwing her lover's ring into the water in *Harold and Maude*: "So I'll always know where it is." Annie and Beth's rings to the sea will stay here, lodged in the muck beneath the canal's water, somewhere between the Arsenale bridge and Eolo, a restaurant on a boat serving only fried fish and wine.

The party begins to break up. People reminisce about the day. Annie especially loved Natalie's piece, appreciating the rage it invoked. "We needed some anger," she says and nods her head, with its cascade of red hair and blue veils. Diana Pornoterrorista appears, her body still covered in blue paint. She's wearing a T-shirt, but is naked beneath her skirt of safety-pinned tulle. She climbs down the stairs where the vows were just performed and pisses into the canal. ★