

HIDE AND SEEK

TENZING BARSHEE AND FORREST (HUSBAND OF PUPPIES PUPPIES) IN CONVERSATION.

The work of Puppies Puppies is often triggered by a certain push-and-pull dynamic between that which is intimately close and that which is far away, removed. For example, the artist relinquished their name, effacing the idea of authorship, but their chosen identity is that of young dogs, an animal well known for marking any territory against its better judgment. Puppies' works are usually readymade, sourced from the Internet, referencing the personal ideas and experiences of the artist, and tied to cultural and industrial production.

There is an aspect of assemblage, an order in which the artist arranges these objects in an exhibition and over a sequence of exhibitions. Throughout this narrative the artist is hyper-present, as much as they disappear behind a convoluted structure of signs and pathways—a maze, maybe. When I sent Puppies an interview request, I received a reply from their husband, Forrest, saying, "Puppies has asked me to handle interviews as a kind of hired performer. Is it alright if I answer your questions about them as myself, the artist's husband? Puppies asks that only gender-neutral pronouns are used to refer to them, and that I be referred to only as Forrest." At first, I felt like a door was being shut. Then I understood that the absurdity of someone who's intimately close with the artist, being their husband after all, playing the "distancing" role in their practice, was mirroring that push-and-pull dynamic that seems embedded in many of their works. They didn't shut a door but actually opened one; I was being invited into their maze. "Trust," Forrest wrote later on, "is an important thing here, you're right, both practically and conceptually—normally I don't give it easily, but because of the artists you love, I do trust you." Curious about these two actors, the artist and their husband, and how their appearance is intertwined with their identity's disappearance, I decided to return the trust, precisely because they love each other.

TENZING BARSHEE

I've heard that you've enacted the role of the stand-in performer before, conducting IRL studio visits in Puppies' place at your shared home. How did this become the way to be in touch with them?

FORREST

First of all, I don't interpret this part of Puppies Puppies' practice as motivated by a personal wish for privacy or distance any more than I interpret the use of the name Puppies Puppies that way, for example. I generally choose to read such decisions with the assumption that they are artistically motivated. You are not Puppies Puppies, and I am not Puppies Puppies, and yet we are now, together, doing their artistic "work," which is a strange and interesting situation.

TB

So what is the artistic motivation behind these decisions?

F Puppies Puppies approaches the question of "How do I answer a message initiating an interview" the way they would approach an invitation to make an exhibition. The choice to ask me to conduct the interview is like the choice to hang a painting made by another artist as a work by Puppies Puppies, say. I would, personally, connect this to Josef Strau's *The Non-Productive Attitude* (2006) and the broader question of what an artist is besides a producer of new things.

TB

How do you feel about performing this role?

F

It was strange at the beginning of our conversation to be suddenly thrust into what quickly became a very emotional place even without having met you in person—discussing my personal life, framing the work of another person in front of an important audience, even comforting you in response to a feeling of rejection. Even as you have rearranged our threads and tempered some of your questions, some intensity remains in my responses. But I appreciated the chance to feel as conscious as I did saying this the first time, just after waking up. It's hard. I felt taxed already after our back-and-forth about my involvement. My role is complicated, but I agreed to it and don't regret doing so.

TB

Can you talk about how their creative process is affected by emotion?

F

I often learn things about my spouse's emotional life first through the work of Puppies Puppies. For example, it wasn't until I was halfway through writing the press release for an exhibition they had this past summer that I realized they were considering adopting a child. Coming to understand the exhibition led to a realization that may eventually have dramatic implications for my own life that completely shocked me, and that filled my heart with emotions.



Press release for *Green, What Pipeline*, Detroit, 2015.
Courtesy: the artist and *What Pipeline*, Detroit



Top – *Minion Performance*, 2015. Courtesy: the artist and What Pipeline, Detroit
Bottom – *Lord of the Rings Ring*, 2014. Courtesy: the artist and What Pipeline, Detroit



TB To what extent does your representing them act as a sign, and what is being signified?

F I would say that the “lover” relationship is being used as a guiding image, to point to the perhaps overlooked intimacy of being interviewed, of reading an interview, of art as a social discipline. Already, we have both risked alienating each other, apologized to each other, tried to take care of each other’s feelings. We are, intentionally or not, betraying our true selves in the words we choose, the ideas we refer to, leaving the subtle fingerprints of our minds everywhere in this text. It’s not so unlike being married.

TB Can you say more about Puppies’ decision to at times hide certain aspects of their identity, and at other times remove their presence altogether?

F Hiding has always been central for Puppies Puppies. The first work I was ever given was a sealed brown-green plastic bag printed with a camouflage pattern of oak leaves used to carry the dead bodies of birds murdered by hunters. I only learned many months later that a dead oak leaf was hidden inside. That leaf is as true an avatar for Puppies Puppies as I am writing this, or as their legal name might be. That said, on the one hand, Puppies makes incredibly personal work that is directly informed by the artist’s life, even confessional. But on the other hand, there is a relentless move to remove some aspects of the artist’s human identity, to be camouflaged, or to disappear.

There is another very early work that is quite important, *Untitled (Antibacterial Gel Dispenser)* (2012), which will squirt a dab of fluid onto the viewer’s hand. The fluid quickly evaporates. In a performance work, which was performed by a stranger in a mascot costume and spoken by a computerized voice, Puppies Puppies parenthetically described the work by saying, “I am the gel.” Disappearing can be read any number of ways. It does have a personal dimension—I can testify that the urge to disappear is a true and deep one in the person, too. But it is also an art historical image connecting many of Puppies’ most important sources—for example Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s piles and stacks diminished to nothing in early exhibitions, leaving an empty gallery, Sturtevant’s mimesis of existing artworks, or Bas Jan Ader’s *In Search of the Miraculous* (1975). For me, the act of not participating in an interview is also an insinuation of the artist’s death, of the desire to work in a way that does not require the physical, living presence of the artist. Puppies Puppies has expected to live briefly for as long as I have known them.

TB I’m sorry to hear this.

F Yes, thank you. This comes from a history of life-threatening illness, but also from a feeling of profound, almost cosmic, bad luck.

TB How does the artist’s choice to use the name Puppies Puppies, as well as their choice to have you represent them, reflect in their usage of signs, which can be read as part of our shared conventions?

F Puppies Puppies sees conventions as opportunities for contradiction. So the choice to take the name Puppies Puppies is indeed a disruption of normal patterns of signification within the field of contemporary art. But the name is also a found object, adapted from the urban legend of Kittens Kittens, a person who replaced their Facebook profile with endless photos of cats and then disappeared into the wilderness. Puppies Puppies was originally a Facebook profile, first name and last name are both required. So it is an invocation of a story of disappearance (and maybe even madness). It is also, formally, an echo, a word repeated twice, which is another recurring image in Puppies Puppies’ work. It is also a means of creating distance between the artist and the person, of obscuring facts about the artist’s gender, ethnicity, age, and other things that can be assumed from a name. And, of course, Puppies are also an expressive image, an image of perpetual youth, of a kind of manic affection that greets strangers by immediately falling in love with them, of total trust in the world and, then, intense vulnerability.

TB Can you say more about the artist’s use of readymades?

F Puppies Puppies is a Duchampian artist in the sense that they in some broad way see every work or gesture or activity that falls within their project as a readymade, as found. Puppies Puppies is an extremely emotional person who I think believes that the deepest things that they feel are also shared with many other people, and that empathy as a vehicle for understanding underlies the field of art.

TB How so?

F The best analogy I can think of is to therapy. My relationship with my therapist is a deeply intimate one. It’s just different from normal relationships because it mostly flows in one direction; it isn’t reciprocal. But it is still based on mutual trust and understanding and empathy. That’s what art is like.

TB It’s an uncanny liberty, which allows an artist with enough vision, audacity, and preposterousness to treat basically anything as an object of their work. This makes every move a potential artistic gesture, which can be either executed with a lot of precision, relatable and legible, or diffused into opacity. Is this ambiguity a vital part of such an art?



Green Eyes, 2014. Courtesy: the artist and What Pipeline, Detroit.

F I can’t think of many examples in the work of Puppies Puppies that are actually ambiguous or opaque. I think of ambiguity as a barrier, a wall. Puppies Puppies, and much art that I’m interested in, might be more like a maze, one with lots of entrances and no exits. I don’t think it’s true that it is hard to talk about any specific aspects of Puppies Puppies. It’s just hard to permanently resolve them.

TB When everything is potentially an artistic gesture, the sequence of an artist’s moves can be viewed as a pattern, a geometric, abstract form, a strategy or algorithm perhaps. Aren’t those attributes of a machine?

F Puppies Puppies is inevitably the work of a person born during the rise of the Internet. The rhythm of their life has been established by machines. In some ways, this contradicts the personal and the emotional. But the Internet, especially in the beginning, was also deeply involved with intimacy and emotional connection between strangers. Sex with strangers reveals something very deep about human existence, and maybe coming to know some artists and their activity is like having sex with strangers.

TB I find it relieving that the idea of the all-encompassing artistic gesture is often reduced to the bare essentials of human activity: the bathroom, the toilet. In another interview Puppies said, “I tend to laugh about the idea that a kid is so excited when first learning how to use a toilet, that very emotional and exciting moment where a child says to their guardian, ‘Look, I pooped!’ I think there’s the same ‘Look what I did!’ moment with art.”



Blue M&M Shirt, 2014



Yellow Latex Gloves, 2015



Asian Plant Food (Green), 2014



Earth, 2014



Green Brain, 2014



Toothbrushes (Green), 2014



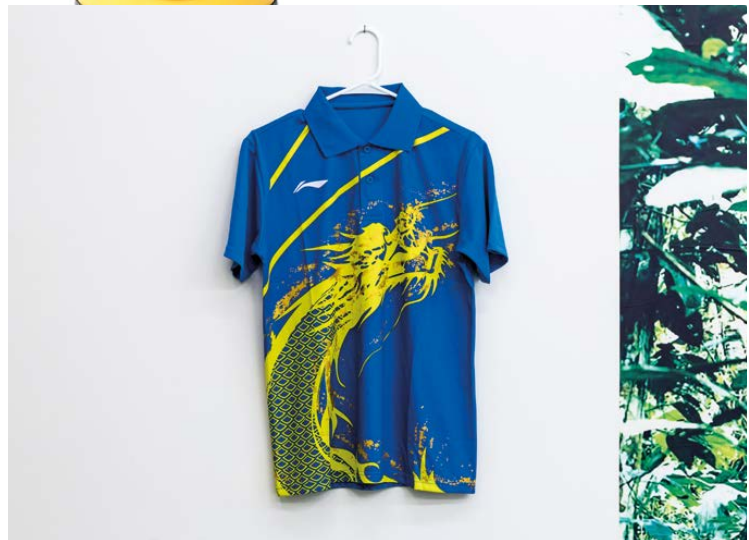
Coronas on Swiffer, 2015



My Last Breath before turning 22, 2011



Two Faces, 2015



Blue and Yellow Dragon Shirt, 2014



Blue Umbrella, 2015



Hulk Hands, 2014

All images - Courtesy: the artist and What Pipeline, Detroit



Green installation view at What Pipeline, Detroit, 2015.
Courtesy: the artist and What Pipeline, Detroit



Darren Bader Bootleg, 2014, *Green* installation view at What Pipeline, Detroit, 2015.
Courtesy: the artist and What Pipeline, Detroit



Burning Facebook App Performance, 2015.
Courtesy: the artist and What Pipeline, Detroit

F Yes, I think this is important and comes up a lot, for Puppies Puppies and for me, even before I knew them. It is my lot in life to endlessly refer to Thomas Nagel's "The Absurd" (1971). If you want to understand what makes humans unique, ask why we bother to walk the twenty paces to the toilet when we all know that eventually entropy will yield to the heat death of the universe, or some other exotic nightmare.

TB One of the reasons behind Puppies' predominant use of the readymade form stems from their intention to counter the idea of uniqueness and preciousness of an artwork. But most objects they pick seem to be charged with the most precious and unique human quality there is: emotion.

F All readymades are both common and rare, then, both precious and disposable. Like our toothbrushes—which are, in pairs, artworks—the more time a person spends with the objects, the more information they might have about us. Anything that lives with us gathers our DNA, hypothetically enough information to reproduce our bodies and brains, though not our experiences. Human beings all over the world are telling each other "I love you" dozens of times a day, a perpetual, tyrannical roar that will echo for as long as humans are alive. When I tell Puppies Puppies that I love them, we both know how much and how little that means.

TB But Puppies takes it further. The idea that Duchamp's urinal should actually have been functional swims through Puppies' practice like a red herring, leading us on, like believing in something that isn't possible to be believed in; it doesn't exist, or only paradoxically. It begins with the industrial or found object that is made and owned by collective society, which is introduced into the art sphere by declaration, and becomes elevated in status and value. Then the artwork crosses back into the sphere of actual life, becoming an object of both terrains, suggesting a unity of both or the existence of life among the art objects that we make. This circuit feeds both ways and seems rather utopian. Life constituting art and vice versa.

F The functional urinal is indeed a recurring idea, but I wouldn't say that it's a red herring. It's a very concrete dream, an ideal for many works that are currently in use while also being artworks. For example, the exhibition at Balice Hertling this past summer featured a working shower that was available for use by the public. I've just eaten dinner from a green plate that is simultaneously an autonomous work and part of a larger configuration of objects that is another work. Our dog Spider-Man is at my feet, and she is gnawing on a plush green and blue squid that she murders over

and over again throughout the day. Lately, that object is precious to her for reasons beyond my understanding, more precious than all of the other balls and bones and creatures littering the floor. That has nothing to do with the fact that it is an artwork by Puppies Puppies.

TB The signs used by the artist are easily recognized, traded, and projected on. Aren't these signs possibly the "functioning urinal"?

F I do agree that signs have utility, and that Puppies Puppies definitely does not distinguish between kinds of utility. A photograph of Gandalf using an Apple laptop has as much utility as a urinal; it just has different utility.

TB Can you talk about your wedding?

F Puppies Puppies' proposal to marry me is a performance work. They were wearing a bootleg Minion costume, and used a solid gold reproduction of the One Ring from the *Lord of the Rings*, inscribed in Elvish. This could be understood as alienating to me. Such a personal moment was given to the public, and the use of a costume could be a similar insertion of distance. But, for me, it landed as a double symbol of their humility in asking the question, positing them as a slave, as a jester, as Gollum, the wretch, who would never think of giving up their precious ring, except to me. Neither of us is at all sentimental about the convention of marriage, but the use of signs, I guess, added a lot to certifying our plan to stay together indefinitely. It was cemented when we celebrated getting married. We had a party by the ocean, and I wore a yellow M&M costume while they wore a blue M&M costume.

TB What is Puppies' obsession with the yellow-plus-blue-equals-green scheme?

F Generally the green works relate to love, to the combination of two separate entities into a single new entity. Almost everything in our little apartment, most of our clothes, so much is blue, yellow, or green. I think Puppies Puppies, perhaps quixotically, intends to mark this ubiquitous color combination in the minds of their audience, so that any yellow flower with green leaves in front of a blue sky will trigger an association to "Puppies Puppies" in the mind of the person who sees it. There is a series of works you might have seen that are our toothbrushes, always one blue and one yellow; I mentioned them before. The yellow brush is always mine, and the blue one always belongs to Puppies Puppies.

TB Then there is the recurrent motif of the binary: the pairs, the lovers, the colors. What about that?

F I do believe that Félix González-Torres was right, that two things that echo each other can be rightly understood as homoerotic. And anyway, Puppies Puppies is a Gemini.

Puppies Puppies Woof woof Puppies Puppies woof woof woof, woof woof woof woof woof. Woof woof woof woof woof woof. Woof, woof woof woof woof woof woof woof - woof woof, woof woof woof woof woof, woof woof woof woof. Woof woof, Woof Woof woof Woof, woof Woof Woof woof woof woof woof. Woof woof woof woof woof.

Tenzing Barshee is an independent writer and curator currently living in Berlin. Last year he curated a two-person exhibition with Anne Speier and Judy Fiskin at wellwellwell, Applied Arts University Vienna, and the exhibition *Le Mérite. 2014-2016* at Treize in Paris. He co-curated Rochelle Feinstein's exhibition *In Anticipation of Women's History Month* with Fabrice Stroun for Centre d'Art Genève, the group show *Passo Dopo Passo* with Molly Everett and Dorota Michalska for Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo in Torino, and Margaret Honda's exhibition *An Answer to 'Sculptures'* with Fanny Gonella for Künstlerhaus Bremen. He's a columnist for *Starship* magazine.