

# GREER LANKTON

By Carlo McCormick

I conducted this interview with Greer Lankton prior to her solo show at Civilian Warfare Gallery when her cramped apartment studio was filled with her dolls. I felt we were not alone. In the month since we talked, her show has come and gone and did not do so unnoticed. Lankton's art crosses many taboo social barriers and may always be subject to criticism for it. As various community groups received complaints on the content and accessibility (kids could walk into the gallery or see the show from the street) of Lankton's work, they banded together to force Civilian Warfare to paper its windows and enforce an R-rating admission policy.

I interviewed Greer Lankton because she is an artist I respect. We talked about her transsexuality because I was curious and thought a lot of people would like to know also. My fear has been that I was being sensationalist. Sure I was, but so is Greer Lankton. If I could prove anything with my interviews it would be that artists are works of art of their own creation. Lankton has changed herself and invented a character, a living personality that is one of the most real and human I have ever met.

DARYL-ANN SAUNDERS



Greer, when I've written about your work in the past, I've never mentioned your sex change. I just didn't think it was necessary.

It's not necessary to mention it all the time.

I don't think your work has to be put into that context. But when I do interviews I find it more interesting to talk about life than art. Do you mind if I ask you about your transsexuality?

Like where I got it and how much it cost? It was cheap. All the sordid details. How long ago was it?

Five years. And you have to wait three years to get one?

No, just one. I started hormones when I was 20 and had the operation when I was 21. I can figure out your age now. I'm 26, soon I'll be 27 and before you know it I'll be 30. Time for a facelift. Can I call your sculptures "dolls"?

Sure. Not like Barbie, but still about womanhood.

Sort of, but not always womanhood.

Transsexuality and androgyny? Yes, they're also about beauty, male or female. Like I was trying to make them pretty, but they always came out disturbed.

Like the obesity or the anorexia? Does that come from your self-image? Were you ever anorexic?

Yes, but not severely. I've been in therapy for two years. So we can't talk about how fat you are?

But I'm not fat, am I?

No, I was just testing you. Where are my diet pills, my laxatives? Sure, it comes out of that. But also just looking at bodies. There are so many different types.

But they're more psychological than physical.

Yes, I try to make them seem like they have some sort of personality and feelings. Something going on inside. Except for her, (pointing) she's kinda dumb. She looks like an African fertility goddess.

Yeah, with dreadlocks. I think she should have a cock, too, but I'm not sure.

I love that they have interchangeable parts, especially the sex organs. How are they built?

Wire, metal eye-joints, wood, plaster, fabric.

Do you stuff them?

No, I have to make them from the inside out, that's why they take so long. It's layers and layers of sewing. The skin is the last part.

And you recycle old dolls?

Yes. Right now I'm making mostly sissie dolls. And sex-change dolls. Like this one of Terri Toy; she's a sex change.

How planned are they?

I know how it's going to look, but then I don't. They get their emotions as I go along. I like to do lots of surgery, like a nose job or redoing their lips.

Do these personalities fit into an overall context?

Well, they're all freaks. Outsiders, untouchables. They're like biographies, the kind of people you'd like to know about. Really interesting and fucked-up. It's what you want to read, the kind of people you stop and notice.

Like the one with the sunglasses. They're self-destructive but that's half of our notion of glamor.

They're so glamorous. If you saw them in real life you'd die. I can't help but think of your *Artforum* ad; it was amazing. One has to credit Peter Hujar [the photographer].

He's wonderful.

But it set up an uncomfortable comparison between you and your dolls. You look as dead as them, you make your glamour into something grotesque.

It's meant to be uneasy. So much worry in it. But what's so grotesque?

You are so corpse-like, so emaciated.

Emaciated is a better word. I'm going to get in trouble with my therapist when she sees this.

But you were sucking in?

No, I'm that thin. A photograph puts ten pounds on you.

Do these dolls act as self-portraits?

Sometimes they end up looking like me, but they're more like people I'd like to see. Or sometimes I'm thinking of the way I'd like to look. Like that would be a really nice nose.

You're going to start stitching skin.

I wish I could. I'd love to do surgery. So our whole notion of beauty and glamor is intrinsically tied

to sickness.

Drugs aren't a major part of your women.

Some of them take drugs. But I don't put needles in their arms or pills in their hands.

It's just implied; otherwise it's a cliché.

It's so dull, but it's still a part of our notion of glamor. I mean, everyone comes to New York and does smack. That was my aspiration when I was younger. I wanted to be a junkie drag-queen.

It's still such a role model, the great difference, even creativity.

And it's something I'm fighting myself, it ends up coming out in my art. Always trying to be healthier, but I'm self-destructive.

Do you take a lot of hormones?

Just one a day. I've had a lot of problems with them. They're really bad for you.

Does it surprise you, with this show at Civilian Warfare, to think of yourself as a serious artist?

Sort of, but not really. I always knew I was going to do something like this, making dolls.

But you haven't fallen into the traps of many transsexuals.

A whore, a junkie, a plastic surgery addict.

It's not just that, you're more of a survivor, you have more

discipline in your life.

Yeah, I'm a bit more serious. I come from a healthy family and that helps. I was raised on the golden rule, the Protestant work ethic.

But you've certainly rebelled.

Sure, I've always rebelled. But I figured I might as well do what I want to do. And I don't want to get a job. I hate to work. I hate working for people eight hours a day, being a slave. But my dad was a minister. I grew up to be a good kid, not a whore.

I heard the great story that when you were born, your father's church...

Had a sign outside... It's a Boy.

A real problem?

No, they've been real supportive. My dad's an artist also, my mother just wanted me to be happy. They've got their priorities right.

Do you feel part of a drag or transsexual community?

Not really. I always love to meet transsexuals, but few are friends.

Do you feel part of the East Village art community?

Only recently; I used to be a recluse. Now I can go out to some openings and see people I like and some I don't and can talk about the next day.

Or when they're out of ear-

shot. How do you feel about Civilian Warfare?

How do you mean?

Well, it must be hard to find support for your work. And two years ago, before there were fifty new galleries, it was extremely difficult for young artists.

Yeah, I went to Fun and it certainly wasn't what they wanted, and I showed at Club 57 and Pyramid and P.S.1, but that's not the same. I really don't know if anyone would have taken me. It's hard to say.

What I do isn't like what a lot of people do, and they can like it, but it's hard for them to accept it as art. They think it's too cutesy.

It's hard to get credibility; being with Civilian Warfare has helped you.

Oh yeah, or it's too cartoonish, or they're just dolls. I mean, I think I'm really serious, but I also know I'm still young, aware that I've got a way to go learning how to use the materials. And that's what I like to do: making things, not images. I like to be able to play with it. That's the whole thing with the dolls, you can play with them. I don't care too much if people don't take me seriously, except I'd like to make a living off my art. It's not like it's super high art of

DARYL-ANN SAUNDERS



*my life is art*



anything. I make things that are art, that's all, and I'm serious about that. You don't ever deny the craft aspect of your work. Right, because it is a part of it. Hopefully the emotions are going to show through, and that's the strongest part. With Civilian I can do what I want, and that's good. I wanted to do this transsexual stuff because it was really important to me. They thought it was good, while a lot of other people might have found it gross or too personal. And it all was really personal.

**Is your art an exercise in working things out emotionally for yourself, or are you trying to communicate with your audience?**

Sure I was trying to understand myself, but I'm aware of my audience. Every time I meet people they have the same questions. No one really knows about transsexuality and they want to so I may as well tell them. I'm not really trying to educate, but they may as well know. I would like to do a transsexual etiquette book. So many boys have no manners towards me; they're the worst.

**Is it a constant problem?**

In a way, it's not great being asked all the time if you're a boy or a girl, or being whispered about and pointed to. I'm not embarrassed, though. If someone asks me if I'm a sex-change I say yes. But you're taught to be ashamed of yourself. After the operation you're supposed to move to a new city, change your name and burn all old photographs of yourself. I don't hide.

**Your art is like that. It's hard to imagine anything today being shocking, but your work can really offend people. Do you mean it to?**

No more than I am meant to shock. When I go outside New York I can really upset people, they're not used to it. I really have shock value.

**The art world, especially in the East Village, is sort of a magnet for people who are different, outsiders.**

New York has got this underground; it attracted us and all our friends. Everyone we know is someone who was the wildest from wherever they were from. I don't want my art to shock, but to be understood. That's kind of why I do the circus freaks. When you see them they satisfy your curiosity and you feel something of their deformity.

**Isn't it voyeuristic?**

Completely. I'm a total voyeurist and in some ways an exhibitionist as well. My dolls sort of make it less-threatening for people, easier for them to understand.

**In the way that they are extensions of you, you are a Greer Lankton doll yourself. A living art work.**

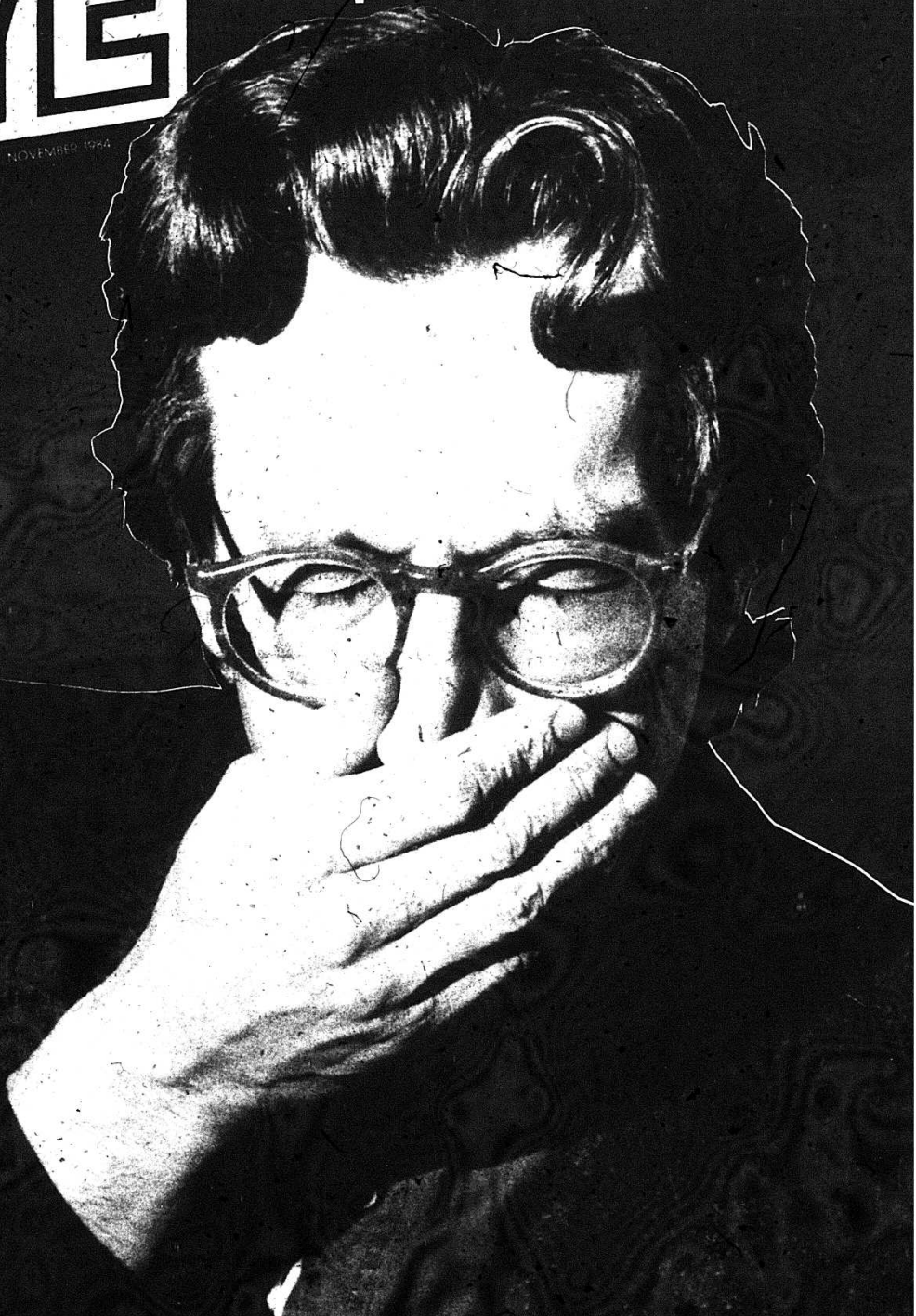
Ever since I was little I wanted to be a girl. It was a art piece deciding who I was going to be, the process of making myself pretty. I love biographies and looking at the way people make their lives. I try to do the same. Even down to this run-down apartment, it's so glamorous, walking up five flights of stairs, my deep crotch like a bottomless pit, my choices, my clothes, the way I decorate my house.

"IT'S ALL TRUE"

# EAST VILLAGE EYE

\$1.00 NYC \$1.50 OUTSIDE NYC \$1.95 CANADA NOVEMBER 1964

**Grand Juries: Where's the justice?  
Greer Lankton: Transformation art  
Plus: John Jesurun, John Kelly,  
Beth Lapidis, Three Teens, The dBs**



ALL THESE EVENTS TAKE PLACE AT THE EAST VILLAGE

## THE WACKY WORLD OF WIM WENDERS