

# THINGS

A QUEER LEGACY OF GRAPHIC ART AND PLAY



**CURT MCDOWELL**

**TOM RUBNITZ**

**ROBERT FORD**

**SETH BOGART**

**RAFA ESPARZA**

**AIMEE GOGUEN**

**BRONTEZ PURNELL**



**SEPTEMBER 17 - DECEMBER 11, 2016**



ONE Archives at Plummer Park, Long Hall  
1200 North Vista Street  
West Hollywood, CA 90046

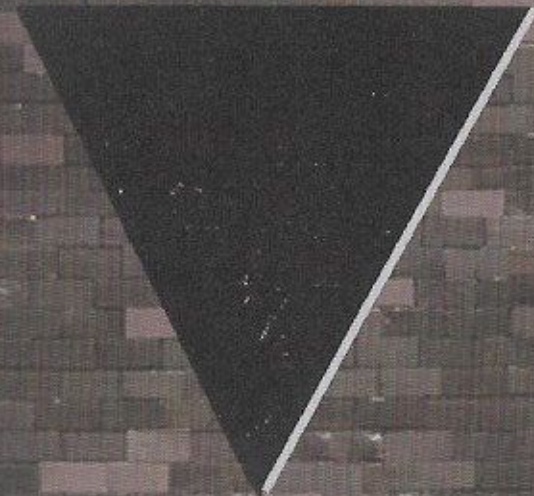
Exhibition Hours: Thursday-Sunday, 1-5pm  
Closed Monday-Wednesday

ONE Archives at  
the USC Libraries



ARCHIVES FOUNDATION

# THINGS



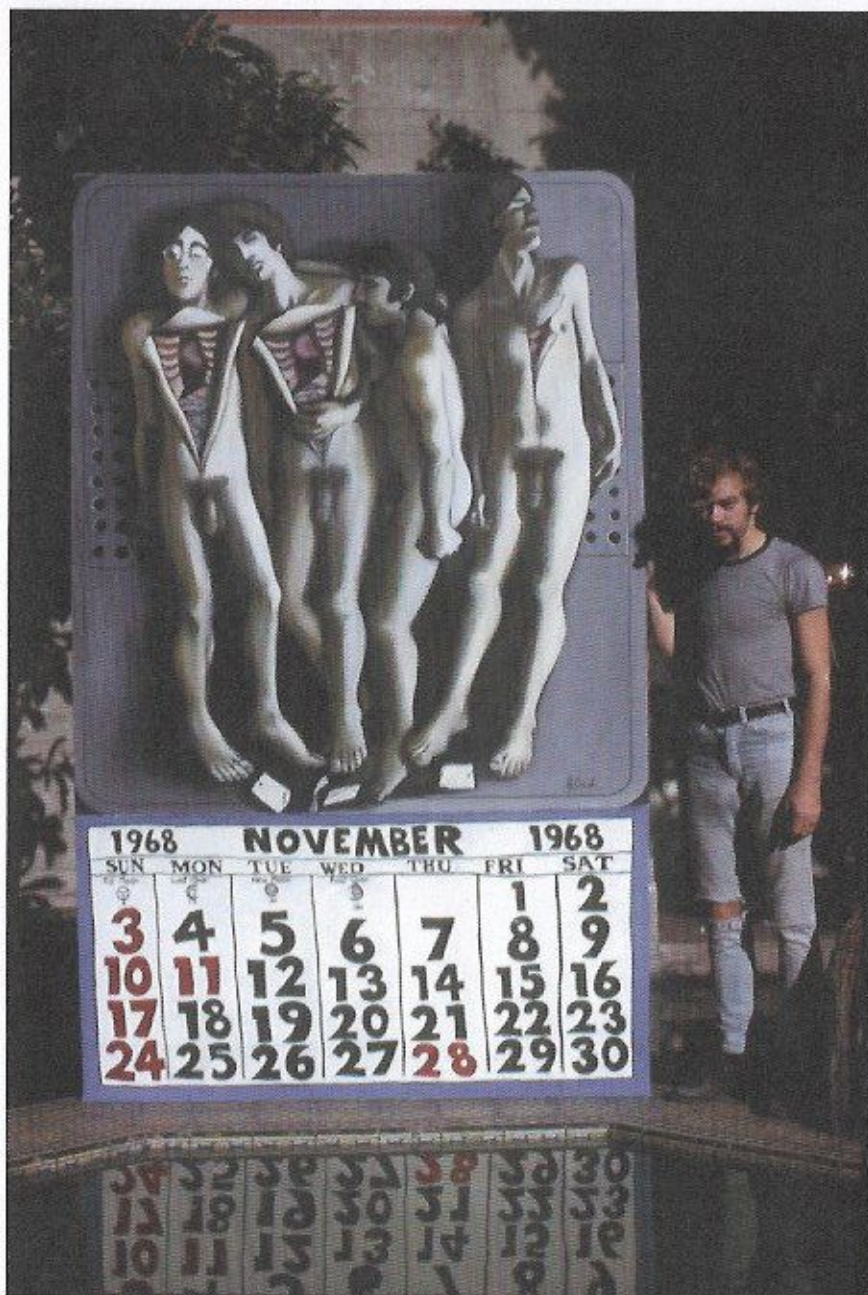


**"THERE WAS NO PRACTICAL APPLICATION FOR ANY OF IT... AND THAT'S WHAT MADE THAT TIME SO MAGICAL."**

In February of 2013, I led a post-screening conversation with artist Ann Magnuson following a retrospective screening of videotapes produced by Tom Rubnitz from 1980-1991. Achieving cult phenomenon status due to the second life his *Pickle Surprise* (1989), a 90-second sandwich making tutorial starring RuPaul, the "Lady" Bunny, and Sister Dimension, has found on YouTube (over 2 million views and counting), *Pickle* represents the zenith of Rubnitz's productions, which trained early consumer-grade video technologies on the outré performance cultures teeming at the 1980s East Village hub, The Pyramid Club. Magnuson purred the above quote when a question arose as to the authorial intent of *Pickle*. Elsewhere, Amy Taubin has offered that Rubnitz's "glitter-dusted videos distill the sensibility of a generation of TV babies whose venue of choice was the Pyramid Club rather than the Whitney Museum." Rubnitz's pedigree included performers like Magnuson, John Sex, John Kelly, David Wojnarowicz, Hapi Phace, Tabboo!, and the Wigstock staple Frieda, the dancing disco doll. From the audience, another question emerged to which neither Magnuson nor I could provide an answer, "what ever became of Tom's paintings?" And so this voyage began.

**TOM RUBNITZ**

Like other time-based artists of his generation, Rubnitz's initial efforts in the city followed a studio art impulse. Maintaining a loft in Soho to continue his painting practice until health-related complications deemed its upkeep unmanageable, it would ultimately be the videos for which Rubnitz would be best remembered. These mostly short-form titles revised the pop television broadcast formats of the 1960s, crafting candy hued parodies of cooking demonstrations, travelogues, concert films, and biopics with drag queens and East Village scene stealers as their stars. The paintings are ironically also tethered to moving image culture, either aping advertising aesthetics of the boob tube or literalizing television spectatorship in an ongoing series of three dimensional wall relief "TV tray tables." Early exhibitions included a three person painting show at Artists Space in 1981, though the art objects that remain seem to have been largely distributed through friend networks, with gorgeous graphic dedications "Alan" or "Charlie" scrawled in broad strokes on the backs of each work.



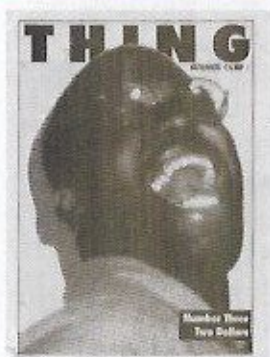
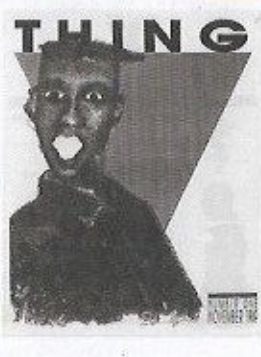
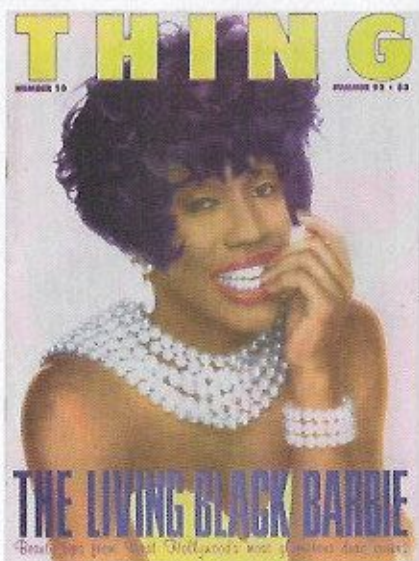
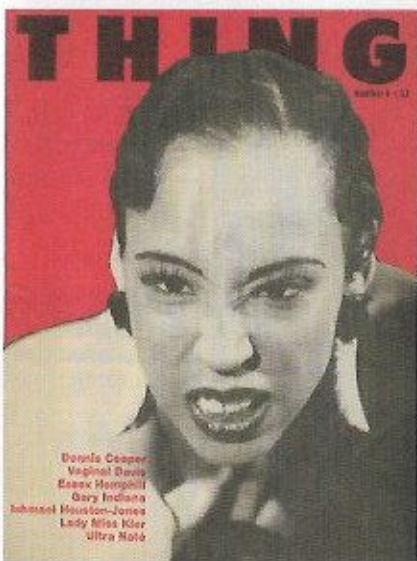
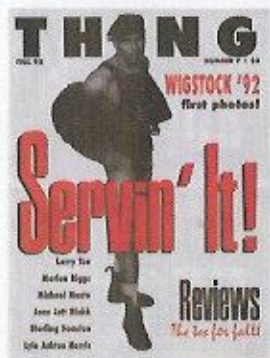
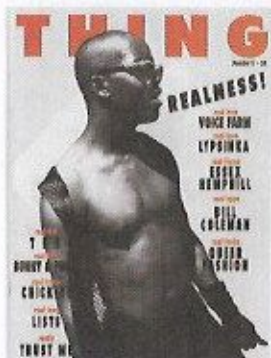
Curt McDowell with his painting *Beatles*, 1968. Courtesy of the Curt McDowell Estate and [2nd floor projects], San Francisco

## CURT MCDOWELL

Escaping Indiana for the carnal delights promised in the city by the bay, Curt McDowell established himself as a cinematic staple on the scene from the early 1970s until his death in 1987. Working at The Roxie Theater and attending San Francisco Art Institute, Curt was the first student to enter the classroom staffed by the recently-relocated George Kuchar. That tutelage would transform into a collaborative relationship in all activations of the term, with George appearing in the bulk of McDowell's cinematic output, providing the screenplay for his epic pornographic midnight movie *Thundercrack!* (1975), and a brief but emotionally resonant affair that would endure through friendship and mentorship. Like Kuchar, Curt was constantly drawing; in between his cinematic bursts, McDowell produced a staggering number of quick sketches, watercolors, and elaborate Zip-A-Tones. With the exception of one, 24-hour exhibition of the large canvas, *Beatles* (1968), his was a private practice, often the byproduct of regularly held Tuesday night art parties. Reflecting the alarming candor of McDowell's hyper sexual films, this graphic output captures the intimacy of his ever evolving relationships and deeply rooted social circle. And it was into that circle that much of the work was distributed, officially or not so much after the artist had passed. Friends, lovers, confidantes took what they felt was theirs. With great care and respect for her brother and his wishes, Melinda Milks, Curt's sister, did much work to reconfigure the artist's estate over the years, tracking down posters, illustrations, photo collages, and "cum drawings" that had made their way out into the world, to be stored and maintained by community advocate and gallerist Margaret Tedesco's [2nd floor projects], San Francisco, where they are immaculately archived today.

## ROBERT FORD

Robert Ford was a writer and music enthusiast who managed Rose Records in Chicago. As a freelance journalist for publications like *Planet Rock*, *Babble*, *Jam Sessions*, *Chicago Music Magazine*, and *Jazzgram*, Ford was a tastemaker and music reviewer turned activist, with the commencement of his regular health column in *Pulse*, which focused on his experience as a black man living with HIV. In collaboration with friends Trent Adkins and Laurence Warren, Ford became a publisher, releasing the arts magazine *Think Ink*, which was "very Black, not very gay but queer friendly," before unleashing *THING* onto the world in 1989. Initially released as a small run zine charting Chicago's Black queer underground, *THING* grew in size and influence, ultimately reaching a distribution count of 3000. *THING* was fierce, fearless and opinionated, a magazine that boasted, "She Knows Who She Is," collecting interviews, a tastemaker chart



"THING/No Thing," obituaries, "TEE Time" gossip, also issuing sporadic literary compendiums containing stories which may or may not have been cleared with the original authors. An *LA Weekly* article by Dennis Cooper on the Homocore zine craze of the early 1990s praised, "if there was ever a zine that begged for the backing of a gutsy billionaire, it's *Thing*, though it looks plenty resplendent in simple Xerox," while in the same breath the author maintains that his own writing had been appropriated for the publication unbeknownst to him. *THING* folded after its 10th issue, in order for Ford to return focus to his writing efforts during a period of diminished health, shortly before his death in 1994.

The three artists at the core of *THINGS* turned to objectmaking on impulse, in what would be a secondary and yet immediate practice. The intimate contexts of production and the social means through which these materials were distributed situates these things more within the mode of craft, apart from the artists' primary, time-based or literary modes of self-expression. The timespan of *THINGS* witnessed queer people mobilizing from the Gay Liberation Movement to HIV/AIDS activist communities. The piqued ribaldry of Curt McDowell's sexualized bodies transforms into the flamboyant activist strategies in the pages of Robert Ford's *THING*—both documents reflecting regional subsets of queer life intrinsically linked to their period of artistic production. And from this private, radical urgency, an aesthetic emerges that can be located in contemporary practitioners today. *THINGS* aligns McDowell, Rubnitz and Ford with their queer heirs, exhibiting sculptural objects, illustration, and video made by performers Seth Bogart, Rafa Esparza, and Brontez Purnell, and sculptural costumery by video artist and experimental animator Aimee Goguen. Like their queer predecessors, these artists maintain time-based practices largely outside of the material objects assembled for this show. The immediate nature of this direct, graphic response produces documents that trace the immediacy of reflection or perception. These idyl hour materials provide a telling glimpse into the psychological or emotional states of artists lost to us at a point of tumult or liberation during key points of queer history. And those things must not remain hidden in the cabinets of loved ones or the drawers of those who remain.

**BRADFORD NORDEEN**



(Clockwise from top left)

Aimee Goguen, *trash dog*, 2016. Rubber, crayon, acrylic, glue, plastic, plaster, latex, and trash. Courtesy of the artist.

Seth Bogart, *Necessities*, 2015-16. Ceramics. Courtesy of the artist.

Brontez Purnell, *Free Jazz*, 2013. Super8 on video. Courtesy of the artist.

Rafa Esparza, *paños puñales: you can see it in their faces. uno (faggot handkerchiefs... one)*, 2011. Blue ball point, blood, urine, saliva, and black ink on white waist boxer. Durón Family Collection.



## SETH BOGART

is a multi-disciplinary artist living in Los Angeles. Last year he had his first solo exhibition, *The Seth Bogart Show*, in Los Angeles at 356 S. Mission Rd. He likes creating immersive worlds filled with paintings, video, sculpture, and music. He was a member of the bands Gravy Train!!!! and Hunx and His Punx and this year released the first album under his birth name. His first 'zine, *Puberty Strike*, was released in the late '90s, followed by *Psycho No. 1 Fan*. He also runs a clothing line and store called Wacky Wacko.

## RAFA ESPARZA

was born in 1981 in East Los Angeles. Esparza studied at East Los Angeles College before transferring to UCLA. His intermedia performance practice spans installation, sculpture, drawing, and painting. Esparza has exhibited work at a variety of sites, including traditional fine art contexts, such as *Made in L.A.* at the Hammer Museum and the *MexiCali Biennial* at the Vincent Price Art Museum, and community-based platforms as well as outdoor public locations that he independently seeks out and organizes.

## AIMEE GOGUEN

is a video artist, object-maker, and experimental animator who received her BFA and MFA from CalArts. Over the past five years, Goguen's work has screened internationally at venues like REDCAT, Anthology Film Archives, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, Night Gallery, and Periwinkle Cinema, in addition to numerous stints at the Druid Underground Film Festival. She has performed in video work by Harry Dodge and provided animated sequences for *William S. Burroughs: A Man Within* (2010).

## BRONTEZ PURNELL

has been publishing, performing, and curating in the Bay Area for over ten years. He is author of the cult 'zine *Fag School*, frontman for his band The Younger Lovers, and founder and choreographer of the Brontez Purnell Dance Company. He was formerly a dancer with Gravy Train!!!, a queer electro indie band that gained national prominence in the mid-2000s. He earned a BFA in Theatre and Contemporary Dance at California State University, East Bay, just published his first novella, *Johnny Would You Love Me (if My Dick Were Bigger)*, with Rudos and Rubes, and will publish a second novel, *Since I Laid My Burden Down...*, with the Sister Spit imprint of City Lights Books.



## THINGS: A QUEER LEGACY OF GRAPHIC ART AND PLAY

is curated by Bradford Nordeen. The exhibition is presented by ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the USC Libraries, the ONE Archives Foundation, and PARTICIPANT INC in collaboration with Visual AIDS. Special thanks to the City of West Hollywood.

Exhibition lenders include: Seth Bogart; Durón Family Collection; Rafa Esparza; Mark Freitas; Aimee Goguen; Gerber/Hart Library and Archives; Owen Keehnan; Steve Lafreniere; Alan Mace; Curt McDowell Estate and [2nd floor projects], San Francisco; ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the USC Libraries; Brontez Purnell; Mary Lu Roffe; Peter and Susan Rubnitz; Michael Thompson; Thread Waxing Space; Stephen Winter; and David Yarritu.

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(Above) Curt McDowell, *Buzzy (California or Bust)* comic panel, c. 1975. Zip-A-Tone. Courtesy of the Curt McDowell Estate and [2nd floor projects], San Francisco

Cover design by Aimee Goguen with graphics from Robert Ford's *THING*, 2016  
Title text throughout this brochure also by Goguen