

Julia Heyward's Conscious Knocks Unconscious

June 2015



Photographs of an untitled performance by Julia Heyward, 1971. Photo: Johnna Arnold

Ceci Moss looks at an exhibition of the interdisciplinary art of Julia Heyward who came up in New York City's thriving 1970s–80s downtown scene

New York artist Julia Heyward utilises language as a central tie in a career that spans video, performance, music, installation, photography and collage. Named after her 1979 video, her solo exhibition *Conscious Knocks Unconscious* at the Wattis Institute in San Francisco explores her multidisciplinary output between 1971–84. Heyward, who at the time went under the moniker *Duka Delight*, was involved in New York City's thriving downtown scene. Primarily a performance and video artist, she was also involved with no wave, playing as a member of *T-Venus* and directing music videos for groups like *Talking Heads*. For this small exhibition, curator Jamie Stevens visited Heyward's home and culled through her personal archives to present this profile of one artist's work within a pivotal moment of New York City's history. The videos, storyboards, photo documentation, posters and costumes on display demonstrate how Heyward equally pulled from aspects of theatre, punk, video art and performance art to create her own world, a snapshot of the greater genre crossings happening all around her. Through the lens of a single artist's own creative trajectory, the exhibition gives the viewer

a glimpse into a moment that grounded the nascent form of music video and MTV in the 1980s.



Throughout the show, Heyward can be seen and heard singing, speaking, adlibbing, chanting, narrating, chirping and yelling into the camera. In the screening room, her single channel video from 1978 *This Is My Blue Period* plays on loop. An adaptation of a performance from 1977 at Artists Space, it's a monologue featuring four of Heyward's poems. Dreamlike and surreal, at once an incantation and internal dialogue, Heyward recalls a virus as it overtakes a body. Talk of an infected blood, heart and mind weaves in and out of chants about the burning bush, birdcalls and a monologue from an exhausted diner waitress and the interactions with her customers. Over and over Heyward repeats, deadpan, "*I just work here*". The audio from *This Is My Blue Period* floats into the rest of the gallery, allowing Heyward's voice to inhabit the space. Outside, the original eight page script is on display, as well as photographs from the performance.



Promotional photo for Julia Heyward's *No Local Stops* (1984) by Susan Grayson

Another work called *No Local Stops* is similarly presented in multiple formats. A 90 minute performance bringing together 17 interconnected songs in a medley of sorts, *No Local Stops* was staged at Ohio Theatre. Heyward wore a custom leather costume with LEDs, which is on display along with colour slides documenting the patterns programmed for the costume and a photo of Heyward wearing the piece. Later that year, she shot a music video for her group T-Venus using a song from the performance, *Dragging The Bottom*. All of these items are shown alongside each other, in addition to a never published travelogue comprised of collaged lyrics. Zine-like in composition, these 14 sheets feature lettraset letters and typewritten prose layered among magazine ad cutouts depicting motifs of suburban domesticity laced with a cold war subconscious.

The encyclopaedic presentation of Heyward's work matches the artist's own tendency to develop a single idea across multiple avenues. At the same time, it recalls critic Boris Groys's observation that biopolitical conditions now underwrite the creation of art projects. Just as life is something that can be acted upon, shaped, documented and retrieved in the 21st century, Groys argues that the entire progression of the art project – from journal scribbles to the

polished installation to its circulated documentation – now comprises the work. The appeal of Conscious Knocks Unconscious is the full display of Heyward's evolving ideas, something quite familiar in an era where we expect to see every moment of artistic production on social media. The draw, however, is Heyward's own vulnerability, perhaps a product of a time where artists could work (and make mistakes) without an awareness of constant broadcasting. This is evidenced in the single channel video *360* (1979–80), conceived as a video album to be released on the emergent format of the videodisc. Like an extended music video as fever dream, Heyward's ten songs (recorded with Jody Harris of The Raybeats and The Contortions and Don Christensen of The Raybeats and Bush Tetras) are interspersed by her signature a cappella-like monologues, in a pig's mask or dressed as a clown. A novel concept for the medium and a fascinating document, *360* was never transferred to videodisc nor released, a reminder that the best work often courts failure without expectation.

Featured

Julia Heyward

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