

# Pippa Garner's Body Shop

The trailblazing trans performance artist hacks everything from old cars to herself.

Interview by Emily Watlington



Pippa Garner wearing her Sperm Bank of America T-shirt, from the series "Shirtstorm," ca. 2005.

**Pippa Garner is the kind of exuberant** person for whom "artist" is the safest catchall term. Her silly and irreverent pranks, hacks, and inventions are powered by "what-ifs" and "why nots." Since the 1960s, the LA artist has presented witty inventions—a car that appears to drive backward, with its engine in the trunk; a shower in a can—in settings as diverse as museums, the open road, and *The Tonight Show*.

When Garner joined Johnny Carson on TV in 1982, she wore her famous "half suit," cropped to reveal a muscular abdomen. On the broadcast, Carson calls her an "inventor," and she presents herself as a businessman appearing on TV to show off new gadgets. In

reference to the suit, Garner explains that the "abbreviated" style popular in women's fashion ought to be adapted for businessmen too, since all its formality comes from the collar, tie, and lapel anyway. It's an example of the deadpan logic that underpins Garner's creations—logic that is as absurdist as it is indisputable.

Garner often gets labeled a "performance artist" because her personality seeps so fully into her work, and because she doesn't bother with distinctions as to where her body ends and her art begins. She began transitioning in the 1980s, buying estrogen on the black market; she once described the endeavor as an "art project to create disorientation in my position in society, and sort of balk any possibility of ever falling into a stereotype again." As a bona fide trans elder, her creative output has found an audience among young people today. Last year, her survey "Act Like You Know Me," organized by Kunstverein München, traveled around Europe, and this summer, Primary Information published a facsimile edition of her *Better Living Catalog* (1982), which advertises provocative inventions like high-heeled roller skates and a virtual pet that predates the Tamagotchi. Garner's current solo exhibition, at Art Omi in upstate Ghent, New York, through October 29, is accompanied by a new book surveying her practice, copublished with Pioneer Works. Below, the trailblazing artist discusses refashioning her works for a new era as the world catches up with her.

## **Tell us about your legendary tattoos.**

My underwear? Well, I got a bra and thong tattooed because it just seemed logical. I figured, even if I gain 300 pounds, it will still fit. Also, I never have to wash it. The only problem is that I'm no longer allowed to go to nudist colonies!

I also got wood grain tattooed on my leg after I was hit by a car while cycling. They put me back together after three months, but my left leg didn't match my right leg anymore. So I thought it was an opportunity to have some trompe l'oeil installed.



*Backwards Car*, 1973–74.

**Rumor has it that Art Omi has plans to tattoo some of your drawings onto visitors to your show.**

Yes, I might get some tattooed on myself. That way, I could be a walking portfolio.

**You have characterized your transition as an artwork. How so?**

Yeah, and it fascinates me that, these days, you can enhance the body to your own tastes, using silicone. Bodies like silicone; they don't reject it. If you want to emphasize your cheekbones, just squirt some in! It's like makeup. Fifty years ago, nobody would have thought of that.

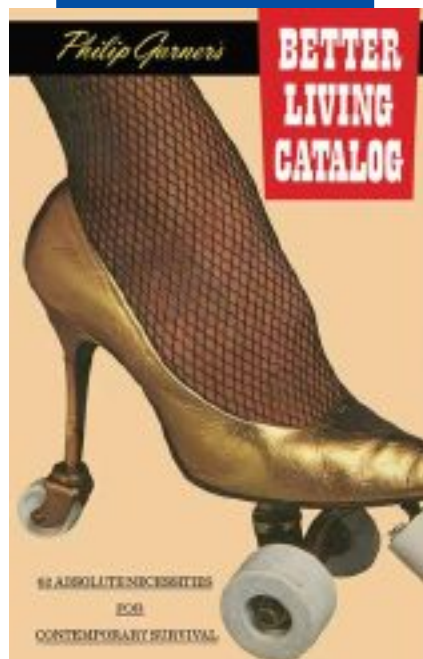
I often wonder, What if all the politicians were transgender? Maybe we could blend the best of male and female and avoid some of the negatives. For instance, men have 10 times the testosterone that women have, and that makes them more aggressive. If all the politicians were transgender, maybe we could have a balance.

**Sometimes you've called yourself an "inventor."**

At one of the three art schools I got kicked out of, I majored in industrial design, thinking maybe I'd become a car designer or something. I do have a US patent on a push scooter I designed. I rode the Santa Fe Century [a 106-mile cycling route in New Mexico] with that scooter.

**Why did you get kicked out of art school?**

Everyone took design so seriously. People were designing taillights as if it were the end of the world. I started making fun of it all. I made this thing that was half-car, half-man. The front part was a typical '50s-looking car, and then it became this male figure – quite realistically sculpted – lifting his leg on a map of Detroit. That was it for them. They were



*Better Living Catalog: 62 Absolute Necessities for Contemporary Survival* by Pippa Garner, New York, Primary Information, 2023; 100 pages.

getting a lot of money from the car industry and didn't want to see that sort of thing.

I went to work for a toy design company for a while and started documenting LA, which at the time felt like an overgrown small town. People who were feeling restless moved west after the war. What do you do for freedom? You come to California! A lot of really goofy people did weird things to their cars and their houses. I noticed all this while driving around and kept thinking, Gee, I wish

I could stop and take a picture. So I got rid of my car, and got a camera and a bicycle. That way, I could pull over and document postwar LA when it was still funky and whimsical.

**How does that relate to your work *Backwards Car*?**

I made the original *Backwards Car* in 1974. Cadillacs around then had these big tail fins, to make them look like they're moving even when they were standing still. One day, it struck me: what would it be like if this thing was going backwards? Then I thought, That would take a phenomenal fabricator and all kinds of facilities that I had no access to.

But I just couldn't sleep at night until the world had a backwards car. I settled on a '59 Chevrolet, because they had flat tail fins. You wouldn't be able to see over a Cadillac tail fin while driving backwards; it would block your vision. The Chevy was still very directional, but flatter. The whole car was teardrop-shaped.

I made sketches and sent them around. Finally, *Esquire* magazine said they wanted me to do it. They assigned a photographer and paid me a fee up front. I found a car and rented a space in a parking garage in San Francisco. I got everything unfastened; the body was no longer attached to the frame. By this point, it was just a matter of lifting it up and turning it around. I had a big party and invited all my friends. We ate and drank and, after a while, I said: "OK, everybody get around the car, shoulder to shoulder. On my command, I want you to lift." And we did it! I didn't know it would be possible.

By then, it was a matter of reconnecting all the controls and reattaching the body. I got that done, then got behind the wheel and started driving around San Francisco. Only some people noticed. I'd glimpse somebody on the sidewalk saying, "Look at that!" I went across the Golden Gate Bridge a few times and got some nice pictures for the magazine, with the car going 60 miles an hour looking like it's about to have the most horrendous head-on collision you can imagine.

When it was over, I had the car shredded. I wanted it to exist as a ghost, something people either saw or thought they saw. Also, I didn't want to kill anybody with it.

**What has it been like reconstituting the car 50 years later?**

I always thought that was the end of that, until the curator at Art Omi called me and said, "We want to do *Backwards Car* again. We have a fabricator and a budget." I said, "You can't possibly do it now with all the restrictions." The rules were more lax back then: all I needed was a windshield wiper on the back window and to flip the headlights and taillights. Also, modern cars look the same on both ends. The only way you can tell



