

Pippa Garner Talks Gender Hacking, Selling Yourself, and American Ingenuity

ART

The ahead-of-her-time artist and Vietnam veteran continues to reconceptualize herself, even after a fruitful five-decade career chockablock with cheeky irreverence and visionary toying with gender.

BY JESSE DORRIS November 13, 2023

In 1982, a weird little book dedicated to what it called “the spirit of American ingenuity” began circulating. Part surrealist prank, part Rube Goldberg invention, part proto–Sharper Image paperback store, the *Better Living Catalog* included products like the “Video Vanity Mirror” that have come into existence, others like a couch full of leaves that *should* exist, and odd puns like a pen-knife that is both pen and knife. It was the work of Philip Garner, now known as Pippa Garner, who embodies her own spirit of American ingenuity.

Born in 1942, she grew up obsessed with car culture; was drafted into Vietnam, where she says she was exposed to Agent Orange and today is battling the leukemia it caused; began making work like 1974’s *Backwards Car* flipped-chassis sculpture that appears to drive in reverse, and a midriff-bearing men’s suit to wear on Johnny Carson. She began transitioning in 1984, refuting binary thinking to make her own body into art.

Her prescient work feels tailored for the present, and indeed the world is finally paying attention: this year, Art Omi has mounted a [survey exhibition](#), Primary Information reissued [The Better Living Catalog](#), and the two groups collaborated on a magnificent catalog called [Sell Your Self](#) and accompanying line of T-shirts and hats emblazoned with slogans like “Obscurity Guard.” In October, OCD Chinatown installed her show-cum-tattoo parlor, “[Pippa Garner: I’m With Me](#),” while this November, White Columns is bringing her traveling exhibition “[Act Like You Know Me](#)” to New York.

And yet somehow it feels like an evaluation of Garner’s work has only just begun. On Veterans Day, *Surface* called her in San Francisco to talk about consumerism, bodyhacking, and making a new T-shirt every day.

What is it like to finally have this moment?

It’s fabulous, and a big surprise. I just went through the last 30 years doing work to amuse me, and all of a sudden, it seems to collect into one big heap and become interesting to another generation. I’m 81 and keep thinking about things in my past that make me feel like I’ve been alive for 300 years. I was a teenager when

they added television, and that was the introduction to the fabulous age of consumerism. Here we are in the information age, when it's all invisible and crammed into this little wafer we carry around. Everything is a next step. I'm hoping I'll stay around for another couple of years and see what it's going to be like.

Cars became central to your work early on. As you've begun hacking them, are you able to ride in a car now without thinking of it as a medium for your work?

I'm legally blind now, so I haven't been able to drive for almost 10 years. I use Uber, and whether it's a Kia or a Mercedes that picks me up, they ride about the same. The only difference is with a Tesla, the silence. In the '50s, you could feel if it were a Buick or a Hudson Nash. They were spongy, like they were stuffed with foam rubber. I got, very early, an addiction to mobility. But it was beyond that—it was an experience of the machine itself.

Was any of that tied to your thinking through your own masculinity?

Well, yeah. Something has to change in human organization, in culture. Men in power have this hyper-testosterone boost and they abuse it. Maybe 50 or 100 years from now, people with high responsibility will all be trans. *Transportation* indicated that's a word we need to get used to.

Got my vote. When did you first start thinking of your own body as a site of artmaking, and as material for it?

I had focused on consumer products, and it started to feel like I was repeating myself. I looked in the mirror in my bathroom and said: I'm looking at another appliance, the human body. I didn't make it, I was assigned it, so why not have some fun with it? I went to the Bay Area and spent the whole '90s there, and when surgeries were ready, went to Brussels and came back with a vagina. I wasn't identifying as a woman. I didn't try to learn how to walk like a woman. I was on hormones illegally. I was thinking, let's experiment with being a multi-gendered person. Androgyny goes back to the earliest cultures. It's the original idea and I found myself wanting to emulate that. For most of my career, I've been a *juxtaposer*. Obviously I couldn't help being sucked into the concept. It was like my work said, OK, now it's your turn. You've done the job with waffle irons, the vacuum cleaners, the cars. Now, it's *you*.

What was the genesis of the *Better Living Catalog*?

I'd been working with a really good photographer [Tim Street-Porter] who was helping me do some things I couldn't do myself. There was a group of architects that got into performance art videos called Ant Farm in San Francisco. I was visiting them, and they got hold of General Motors salesman training films. It was really absurd and funny. That was back in 1980. The films were made in 1962. Chip and I made it into a performance, it was at the Whitney, and then I came to L.A. and put the book together, sort of like a portable portfolio. I was very surprised [by the reissue]. And then there are these other books I haven't even seen yet.

How does it feel knowing there are sizable books of your work that you haven't seen?

I don't care. The past is behind me. I appreciate it but it just feels creepy. People say, well, do you want me to read this over the phone? They get three sentences in and I say, please, I don't think I want to do that

now. All I care about is the next thing I'm going to produce.

And what's that?

I got into this T-shirt thing about ten years ago, which was kind of inspired by Ed Ruscha, who was a friend when we were living in L.A. in the '70s and '80s. He was using words for art and they were esoteric and incredible. My approach is more entertainer, more theatrical. I just got a whole bunch of T-shirts and iron-on letters and started writing silly things on them. Everyone walks around advertising Nike or something. It's ridiculous, giving free advertising. So I started doing it and I got hooked. Every night I would make a T-shirt.

Mine says, in red and black letters on a gray shirt: *I support MANDATORY RENEWABLE LIFESTYLE PERMITS.*

I'm still doing them, but I'm kind of waiting for something else.

We're speaking on Veterans Day. Is the identity of a veteran something interesting to you? How have you integrated that moment into the rest of your life?

I was at the ArtCenter School of Design in Pasadena. I used up my two student deferments and got drafted. Suddenly, having sort of floundered around as an individual, I was put in this situation with 200 other people, all dressed exactly alike, everything as identical as possible because the point of the army is to turn the human being into a weapon. I had no patriotic imagination. I was in South Vietnam because they wanted to get images of what was going on. For 13 months, I took pictures of it. When I came out, I felt like I was back in the world. Jeans, jewelry, sweatshirts. I went back to school with this incredible, aggressive but productive attitude. I got the benefit, but it was bad.

I'm glad you made it. And I hope your health improves.

There's a chance that I can get some powerful antibiotics and medication for the leukemia. I'm hoping I can pull it together. I've never worked with an assistant, but now there's been one coming out once in a while. I find it difficult because I'm not used to the process, but I'm trying to adjust and hoping that will help give me more productivity. But I still want to try to do it myself if I can. I can't imagine stopping.