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Life: LIVE!, by Lucy McCormick
Fierce Festival, Birmingham (UK), 19 October 2019

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To be a cult sensation you must aim for Hollywood-level stardom. In *King Kong* (1933), Fay Wray – who has spent the majority of her screen time screaming hysterically – dangles precariously as she is carried up the Empire State Building by the giant gorilla. This image is evoked by Dr Frank-N-Furter (‘What ever happened to Fay Wray? That delicate satin draped frame’) in an elaborately shonky ‘floor show’, which becomes the doomed finale of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975). Wet from ‘absolute pleasure’ in the pool, his mascara and signature heart tattoo have smeared across his skin as he is carried by Rocky up the cardboard RKO Tower, which topples and plunges them both a few feet to their deaths. *King Kong* used the most advanced stop-motion and model-building techniques of the day in scenes which, to a twenty-first century audience, add a layer of ridiculousness to the still heart-wrenching love story. In *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, the possibilities of what can be achieved by centring fantasy on a tight budget and schlocky-horror techniques means the work is both parody and tribute, never mocking what it loves but rather reworking it.

In 2019, I watch Lucy McCormick climb the silver stage rigging high above the crowds in a warehouse in Birmingham. Her Wray-like delicate frame is not draped in satin but wrapped tightly in a skimpy, strappy bodysuit made from pale green duct tape. Mascara runs down her face. The silk gown or feather boa is replaced with a resplendent cape made from a length of blue hose and dozens of silver takeaway dishes. My neck cranes to look up at her, our pop-feminist heroine fighting to be seen and recognized, to not fail or fall but ascend.

McCormick is crying as she approaches the lighting rig, head hidden under a towel like a starlet escaping a hotel under the paparazzi’s gaze. The tears are evidently scripted, but appear to lurch from contrived to heartfelt, littered with apologies. ‘Sorry, I’m a bit overwhelmed’, she sobs.

'I've just been waiting a long time for this'. As she clambers up the scaffold, the pseudo-humility of her blubbering speech is performed with saccharine sincerity: 'you know me, I used to have a bit of a problem believing that I am interesting enough just being me, but I think I'm over that now! [*Crowd Cheers*] Thank you! Thank you!'. As the beat is dropped for the next song, the tears dry fast and McCormick shouts hoarsely:

It's almost like every moment in my life, up until this point has just been leading to me being here, in this warehouse in Digbeth. You better be ready to party, because you know what? You can change things! Things do get better! Things can be good! You can be, who you want to be! Just look at me!

She sings the first verse of *O.V.E.R.* (one of the several original compositions she has written for the show) and releases a fistful of colourful confetti over our heads. I realize I have tears streaming down my face and start laughing at my own susceptibility for being swept up in the manipulation. As I look around, I realize that I am not the only one.

As much as the cynical Live Art crowd in attendance at Birmingham's Fierce Festival in the United Kingdom might appear to be hardened to such gauche notions as 'celebrity', myself, McCormick and the majority of the audience fall into the generational bracket of 'Millennial', raised in a pop-cultural daze of girl-power, Britney Mania, and The Fame Monster. I spent my teenage years trying to start hardcore bands, but not before developing three distinct dance routines to Christina Aguilera's *Dirrty* as a twelve-year-old in 2002. We long to believe in the dream of self-love and self-actualization, and McCormick delivers this in a self-serving emotional turn that is simultaneously utterly moving and ridiculous. Seeing the 26-year-old Ariana Grande break down in tears during her Sweetener Tour due to feeling 'everything very intensely' invokes genuine compassion rather than scoffing at her mawkish, repeated thank yous (*thank u, next*).¹ It is undeniable that Lady Gaga emphatically telling you that there 'could be one hundred people in a room, and ninety-nine of them don't believe in you but all it takes is just one and it changes your whole life' *feels* inspirational, until you see the internet montages of her saying it over and over again, each time with apparently candid earnestness which pushes it beyond meaninglessness into

the sinister.² Pop is already a maniacal arena. The female pop star in the twenty-first century is not easily defined, stretching the boundaries of femininity and cyborg, confronting patriarchal norms, expanding hyper-sexualization into strange territories, visibly accruing huge amounts of wealth, and speaking out against injustices. It is a nexus of the difficult and conflictual contemporary social space we occupy where our emotions are exploited and capitalized upon, but necessarily expressed with great intensity in desperation for connection.

What the tear-soaked moment in *Life: LIVE!* proves is that the emotional intensity of the pop star stadium concert survives McCormick's exposure of the displays of technique and artifice, her backstage revelation. It is parodic, but not in a way that simply mocks pop stars and their fans. Neither does the work patronize the audience by claiming to *show* the artifice at play in pop stardom, as if that would be a surprise to anyone. And I am most thankful that the work steers well clear of being archly clumsy, unpolished, or cheap *just because* that is perceived to be a 'Live Art' aesthetic. Instead, we witness McCormick locate us as spectators, expose her own feelings, make us conscious of our spectatorship, and lead us through various stages of involvement and detachment. She uses everything she can to create the spectacle – emotional, vocal, physical, material, and collaborative – maxing out the resources she has to create the deluded illusion of pre-eminence. McCormick can sing, but she is *in fact* not Beyoncé. I look really good, but I am *in fact* not Beth Ditto (although I am wearing my Beth Ditto for Evans dress), and Fierce Festival is *in fact* not Coachella. But it is also not cheap imitation. Coachella has been described as 'revelling in the decadence of consumerism',³ and in McCormick's high camp performance of pop stardom we are invited to revel in decadence itself, defined by Adam Alston as a 'playfully subversive ruination',⁴ disaggregating those consumerist terms on which mainstream festivals are based in order to open up a different practice of togetherness.

This is not to cast aspersions on the quality of artistic expression in contemporary pop music. The reason we could not have a Solange collaboration with Tania El Khoury (another artist presenting at Fierce), or to see them on the same festival programme, is predominantly financial

and commercial rather than ideological. Fierce cannot afford Solange's fees, and Tania El Khoury does not have a fan base big enough to interest the festivals that can afford those fees. This financial side-lining was evident when Joseph Keckler, the 'headliner' of Fierce, cancelled his performances the week of the Festival to go on tour supporting Sleater-Kinney instead. I would suspect that if St. Vincent had made the same offer to McCormick we would have lost her too. But there is no need to wait for the call for someone else to make you a star when it is possible to build a facsimile stardom for yourself, using whatever and whoever you can get your hands on, and inviting an audience to believe in the fantasy with you.

In *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (2012), Jack Halberstam writes that the twenty-first century landscape of popular culture is a historic and important battleground for queer activism, identifying a 'scavenger feminism' which 'borrows promiscuously, steals from everywhere, and inhabits the ground of stereotype and cliché all at the same time'.⁵ McCormick is scavenging from the scavengers, stealing tropes and gluing, nailing and taping them together until she has become a femme Frankenstein's monster that re-appropriates the female popstars who have appropriated queer aesthetics, churning the Vevo music video back on itself via a trip to B&Q. In *Justify My Love: Sex, Subversion, and Music Video* (2018), academic and popstar Ryann Donnelly writes that she is 'interested in how new performances can fuck up and expose old performances'.⁶ Here, she draws on Jodie Taylor's *Playing it Queer: Popular Music, Identity, and Queer World-Making* (2012), which qualifies queerness as 'resistance imbued with anti-assimilationist and de-constructionist rhetoric that aggressively opposes hegemonic identificatory and behavioural norms'.⁷ Drag performance draws on and transforms pop cultural iconography. The dream of being a pop star, or having one right in front of you, has long been one of the most rapturous enticements for both attending and performing drag ('don't dream it – be it', as Dr Frank-N-Furter sings).

The freakishness of McCormick is created by McCormick. She is both Wray and Kong, Furter and Rocky. In *Fill Me Up* (another original track), McCormick's head and torso are swamped

by a giant Lion's head created from chicken wire, multi-coloured fur scraps and cable ties, blood-stained tin foil teeth, and gaping eyes lit internally by torches. There is an allusion to a sexy cat costume, one of the most ubiquitous of feminine dress-up tropes, but it manifests squarely in mechanical terror, reminiscent of Lindsey Lohan as Cady turning up at the Halloween party in *Mean Girls* (2004). McCormick is the archetypal 'hot girl' who cannot, or will not, perform the expectations of 'hot girlhood' correctly. The pop song, like much chart fodder, has a sexual thrust rimmed with enough murkiness to ensure it can be played to a family audience. McCormick stands on a platform and has the bottom of the lion's jaw (a grey pipe insulate) which is held up and manipulated by Lennie (one of her two backing dancers) as the creature is fed (filled up) with half the contents of the corner shop – ketchup, cornflakes, porridge oats, oranges, bread, and crisps. She lustfully sings – over a moody slow electronic beat with heavy, reverberating bass – 'baby fill me up, fill me up'. Words like these – which can pass for sincere emotional desire but appear to 'really' be about dirty sex – are revealed through the image as describing bestial consumption in a comically literal turn.

McCormick's work is undeniably camp: a skilfully crafted and deliberate camp, self-conscious and self-parodic, which intentionally reveals a failed seriousness through artifice.⁸ It is the essence of 'Being-as-Playing-a-Role', where the being, playing, and role are all held uncomfortably and murkily. There is Lucy McCormick (off stage), and there is Lucy McCormick (on stage), and these manifestations are not exactly the same (in terms of behaviour, speech, intention, and so on). However, Lucy McCormick has identified that the driving force of Lucy McCormick is still Lucy McCormick.⁹ There may be exaggeration but there is not invention. This emphasis on the camp approach to self-representation, which merges artifice and realism, theatricality, and authenticity – without being able to clearly draw the lines between them – is transgressive, as it explicitly undermines the notion of fixed identity and any claim to an authentic existence.

When the work was next performed at Battersea Arts Centre (BAC) in the summer of 2021, to re-open their space following the pandemic closure, I was disappointed to notice that in the copy Lucy McCormick had been differentiated clearly from her alter-ego Lucy Muck.¹⁰ I am unsure whether this is for the sake of sanity or professional protection (McCormick will be performing in *Wuthering Heights* at the National Theatre in autumn 2021, and when booking Lucy McCormick to do a virtuosic acting performance perhaps you would not want Lucy Muck to turn up). Being able to locate an alter-ego of McCormick clearly as the hysterical hedonistic narcissistic creature is much less satisfying. It removes an awkward complexity and reads much more clearly to non-queer audiences. Predominantly, this is due to how the workings of camp are partially explained by allowing a clear binary separation to be made between Lucy McCormick as the reasonable, real and stable subject and Lucy Muck as a slightly terrifying, egotistical and highly unstable fictional ‘character,’ easily dismissed as unreal and unreasonable. Many reviews of *Life: LIVE!* at BAC noted how the Covid-compliant physical distance required between audience and performer removed the ‘threat’ that is often inherent in McCormick’s work, where she may cover you in various liquids, scramble over your head, or scream into your face from millimetres away.¹¹ This threat, from which much of the tension in the work is created, is also disarmed by McCormick being distanced from Muck. The audience is kept comfortable in the knowledge that they will remain intact existentially (as subjects) as well as physically. The thrill and political potency are both reduced.

The two backing dancers now essential to all of McCormick’s recent work, here Lennie (only their first name is given) and Francesco Migliaccio, are the explicitly sexually desirable and visibly queer locus for the audience’s thirst.¹² This desire is thus displaced from McCormick, who becomes free to occupy a grotesque femininity that does not and will not submit to anyone or anything. In *King Kong Theory* (2009), Virginie Despentes describes the typical subjugated position of femininity as a requirement to behave as though ‘inferior’:

Not talking too loud. Not being forceful. Not sitting with your legs splayed to be more comfortable. Not speaking with authority. Not talking about money. Not wanting to claim power. Not wanting a position of authority. Not seeking glory. Not laughing too loud. Not being too funny.¹³

McCormick queerly torpedoed all these expectations, arriving at epic full femme mastery. This is supported by the skilful presence of the show's designer Morven Mulgrew as a visible soft butch in dungarees and walking boots. Their performance adds another amusing camp layer of butch/femme dynamics as much as it draws attention to the (otherwise invisible) artistic labour of the designers, dressers, and technicians in pop shows.

Life: LIVE! is McCormick's bid to belong to the 'cult of the diva': a role model of extraordinary talent, who embodies our longings, fears, heartaches, joys, and failures.¹⁴ The audience squeals with excitement when, in the first finale of the show, a jeep reverses into the warehouse and McCormick jumps on it and is driven (very slowly) into the street. She quickly runs back to demand that we demand an encore. The audience obliges. After another song, and adorned in a magnificent sculptural ball gown made of underlay, McCormick disappears into a hole carved by Mulgrew into the floor of the stage with a circular saw. She reappears to sign autographs and announce that t-shirts are available at the merch stand for £12. The audience, still cheering for more, are chastised by McCormick as she dances through the crowd shouting 'that's it, it's really over now!'. But we are not ready to stop. Luckily for us a piped air horn blasts into the room, a DJ takes over, and the space is instantly transformed into a club night, with music acts and performances into the early hours of the morning. It is close and sweaty. A few hours later I slip over on some blue paint that had been squirted over McCormick in the midst of dancing with hundreds of others to Robyn.

Access to the substantial joy of the work requires an investment into McCormick and her practice. This willingness to invest exists for many due to the successes of her previous two shows, *Post-Popular* and *Triple Threat*, either when performed as full shows at venues such as Soho Theatre in London, or as shorter extracts in (mainly queer) nightclubs and cabarets. It feels exhilarating to

believe that we have followed this performer as she has reached the heights of pop stardom. It is all the fun of McCormick ringleading us into collectively imagining a contemporary fairy tale – where we can all be part of the story, as long as she remains firmly both the heroine and the villain at the centre of it.

*

Postscript: This review was intended to be of *Life: LIVE!* at Battersea Arts Centre in July 2021. Due to having to self-isolate, I was not able to attend and instead wrote about this earlier iteration. The closeness and gig-format felt essential, as well as the general messiness of McCormick and the threat of her detritus (which the audience had to dodge alongside a moving vehicle), all of which seems vital to the pop-and-roll intoxication of the work.

¹ ‘Ariana Grande explains tearful performance: “I’m still processing a lot”’, BBC News, 8 July 2019, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-48906836>> [accessed 13 December 2021].

² ‘Fans are finding it hilarious that Lady Gaga can’t stop saying the same thing about Bradley Cooper’, *NME*, 23 October 2018, <<https://www.nme.com/news/music/fans-finding-hilarious-lady-gaga-cant-stop-saying-thing-bradley-cooper-2392679>> [accessed 13 December 2021].

³ Allan Dumbreck and Gayle McPherson, *Music Entrepreneurship* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 256.

⁴ Adam Alston, “Burn the Witch”: Decadence and the Occult in Contemporary Feminist Performance’, *Theatre Research International*, 46.3 (2021), 285–302 (p. 299).

⁵ J. Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), p. 30.

⁶ Ryan Donnelly, *Justify My Love: Sex, Subversion and Music Video* (London: Repeater, 2019), p. 134.

⁷ Jodi Taylor, *Playing it Queer: Popular Music, Identity and Queer World-Making* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2012), p. 14.

⁸ See Susan Sontag, *Notes on ‘Camp’* [1966] (London: Penguin Random House, 2018).

⁹ McCormick discusses the blurred boundaries between Lucy McCormick as a persona and her own sense of identity in the podcast ‘Curtain Twitchers’, hosted by Bourgeois and Maurice, 11 January 2021. This is also explored in McCormick’s *Workshop* (VFD, London, 2018), which is the performance of an artist’s workshop by Lucy McCormick in her stage persona, while still functioning as a workshop that can be fully participated in.

¹⁰ See McCormick’s website, <<https://www.lucymccormick.com/life-live>> [accessed 13 December 2021].

¹¹ For example, Ava Wong Davies ‘Review: Lucy McCormick’s *Life: LIVE!* at Battersea Arts Centre’, *Exeunt Magazine*, 10 July 2021, <<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-lucy-mccormicks-lifeline-battersea-arts-centre/>> [accessed 13 December 2021].

¹² McCormick has a rostrum of co-performers who occupy these roles, appearing in various combinations across different iterations of her work.

¹³ Virginie Despentes, *King Kong Theory* [2006] (London: Fitzcarraldo, 2020) pp. 128–29.

¹⁴ See Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: Macmillan, 1986).