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# Curb Your Narcissism

Flatchestedmama's Underdeveloped Art

by [NATE LIPPENS](#)

On Saturday, September 18, the early morning's weather looked iffy. It had rained, it seemed likely it would rain again, and I knew there was a nervous bride in town who had planned an outdoor wedding at Golden Gardens: Amy Ellen Trefsger, or as she would be known by the end of the day, Amy Flatchestedmama Trefsger. The performance artist was changing her middle name to her performance name (not stage name, because her act is her life). As her wedding announcement had stated, she was having a commitment ceremony with her creative self.



ALICE WHEELER

FLATCHESTEDMAMA Marriage in need of a trial separation.

Because of the rain, the commitment ceremony was moved to CoCA in the evening. In the front gallery there was wedding-related art by Trefsger and artist friends. A little further back in the gallery, a video of a bachelorette party played on a monitor in which a man appeared in various outfits--mechanic's coveralls, a sailor suit--and stripped down to red underwear. A harpist and violinist played as the crowd

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mingled, looked at the art, and ate snacks.

The service began and five "matrons of art" made their way down the aisle, throwing plastic toys into the audience/wedding guests. One matron wore a plastic pig nose, another wore a blue beehive wig with a gargoyle bra outside her dress. The bride appeared on her father's arm wearing a wedding dress trailed by a large toy wooden locomotive attached to her gown's train. Two poems were read; neither better nor worse than what I've heard at many weddings, except one included the word fuck. Then Trefsgjer read vows, in a surprisingly tentative voice, for both Flatchestedmama and Amy. It was an announcement of intention, an acceptance of sacrifice with each promising to take care of the other. Two Butoh dancers in all white, who had been crouched down with two giant white balloons, rose slowly. Trefsgjer was handed two pieces of frayed giant rope and literally tied the knot. She walked back up the aisle, followed by her matrons of art, who again threw plastic toys into the crowd. The music played as the dancers moved slowly to the front and then made their way up the aisle. A balloon was popped and the ceremony was over.

In July, Trefsgjer lived and slept in CoCA as part of its group show *Domicile: A Sense of Place*. The concept was stale, and not just by art-world standards. A similar art-squatter was used on a *Sex in the City* episode for comic derision. The conceptual vein Flatchestedmama was tapping had collapsed years ago, in the twilight of the late '80s performance journal *High Performance* (a fantastic name with its overtones of a car glossy).

The feminist performance art of the '70s by Marina Abramovic and Ana Mendieta, and the endurance art of Linda Montano, would all seem to inform the kind of work that Trefsgjer makes. Some of those pioneering works had the stunt factor of world records and the tedium of Butoh. But others were creatively challenging and visceral erasures between life and art, the mundane and the transcendent. Maybe you watched and nothing happened. Maybe something as spectacular as birth--and probably as messy--unfolded before your eyes. You never knew exactly what you would get. The body art of the time involved mud, food, blood, and lots and lots of nudity. It was as if the entire history of female figure studies came to life and enacted their revenge on the art world.

Trefsgjer's *Domicile* performance and *100 Hours in a Lifejacket*, where she wore a lifejacket for 100 hours and photographed herself standing before a clock, had less to do with endurance and body art, and more with the magician David Blaine's self-indulgent stunts. Trefsgjer's appearances at art events, such as showing up in curlers and a mud mask for *Curlers* at a screening for *How to Draw a Bunny*, had little of the confrontational feminist stance of Eleanor

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Antin and Adrian Piper than the East Village wackiness of Ann Magnuson. The crucial difference was that Trefsgger's Flatchestedmama persona was neither provocative nor entertaining. It seemed whimsical, a goofing advertisement for something else. Trefsgger's medium is spectacle without the spectacular.

It's not a matter of this kind of art having been done before (really what hasn't?), but the shallowness with Trefsgger's incarnation of it. Art that punctures the scrim between daily life, ritual, and art--especially when we have grown increasingly compartmentalized and isolated--is important and necessary. But visual artists (in Trefsgger's case, she is a conceptual sculptor), and interdisciplinary artists who utilize performance, need to raise the bar. There is a very good reason the form became so maligned: It's solipsism and self-importance was off-putting. Instead of breaking down the barrier between performer and viewer (as it has been proclaimed performance could do in a way that static art and traditional theater could not) it has created a different wall.

Trefsgger's heavy-handed symbolism doesn't bother me (performance art isn't exactly known for stealth, indirection, and subtlety) but the misappropriation of a tradition that she adds nothing to does. There is nothing subversive to her work; it's all surface and that surface is facile--breezy and playful but without anything unruly or challenging. An instructive look at how the form can draw on its complicated history while staking a new freewheeling claim on it can be provided by the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera and the Indonesian powerhouse Arahmaiani, both of whom use performance, installation, and video.

Flatchestedmama took public vows to expose the very private decisions that artists make--vows that they must renew constantly as their faith is tested. Artists, like the rest of us, make sacrifices that can sometimes preclude comfort and even relationships. May I suggest a trial separation?

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