

“YOU?”

by

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In 2009, Steve Kado and I went on a performance art tour of the West Coast, doing shows in small artist-run venues from Portland to Los Angeles.¹ The show in San Francisco had nearly no one in the audience, save for two men who looked like they had just left a rave, and the father of my collaborator at the time (the collaboration was called *Life of a Craphead*).² I can't remember much about Steve's performance, except that maybe it involved playing a guitar in a novel way, and that my collaborator's father didn't like it. I think he said something about how it was "unpleasant." Steve says he doesn't remember much about it either, and there isn't a recording of that performance.

There are recordings of other performances that Steve did that I had a hand in. In 2012, *Life of a Craphead* initiated a performance art series in Toronto named *Doored* that was extremely documented, in the sense that every show was live-streamed. We made this show partly because there weren't many opportunities for artists doing performance in Toronto, aside from fundraising parties for institutions, where you perform not to tired ravers but bankers. Steve was one of the artists we thought the show could be for. We tried to create an atmosphere that made the challenges of performance more palatable to an audience by having things like chairs, music, lighting. The show happened every few months, people made their performances relatively quickly, there was a lot of stuff that was funny, some stuff that was "unpleasant," and some both. Steve performed at five of these, but the documentation for two of them are lost forever.

In a performance Steve did at *Doored #8 (Mr. Holland's Opus/Farcaster, 2013)*, he began by initiating the audience in a metal-style chant, pitching his voice low and growly, of the phrase "organic food." After the audience was able to repeat this organic food chant to his satisfaction, he began assembling a PA system, putting two speakers on stands, placing two microphones in front of the speakers, and connecting everything through a mixing board. The speakers and microphones created a feedback loop and terrible noise, which Steve allowed to play for a few moments, causing a child in the audience to cover their ears and leave the room. Then Steve disassembled the whole thing as quickly as he had assembled it. The demonstration of technical skill resulted in a moment that was literally cringe-inducing, as in when you cringe away from something about to hit you, or when you bend your head or body in fear.

Steve's work often inhabits the space where the two cringes meet—the dictionary definition, as in "a movement motivated by fear"—and the current colloquial usage, as in "embarrassing or awkward." In another performance, at *Doored #23 (What is Food?, 2016)*, Steve relayed a story that began with a description of factory farming, then organic farming, then the

people who eat products from organic farms, then the people who are rich enough to eat whatever they want, including other humans, and then the reptilian aliens flying past the Earth, above all the people. The aliens refuse to make contact with the creatures who “poo into perfectly clean water:” they zoom past, debating what they would like to eat for a snack (“I want to feel full but I don’t want to feel like I’m digesting for days”). The performance ended with a loud computer chime. In this story, humans are the universe’s most cringe — scary in their (our?) capacity for dumbass destruction, and also just so embarrassing that no other being in the universe wants to meet them (us?).



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septuple rainbow in vancouver right now, feeling so blessed 🌈👉



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My inability to fully identify as human above — it’s hard to use the pronoun “us” — is maybe similar to the feeling of having to watch your past self in performance documentation, and also similar to a scene that Steve describes in his video work *Pleasure*. (2017), when, as a child, he saw, on the cover of an issue of *National Geographic*, a holographic image of a proto-human child’s skull, and realized that he, too, could one day become an object of study. This day might come after “a hopeful eradication of our unfair society.” *Pleasure*., like the two performances above, also begins with food — a long, thorough description of a delicious lamb tagine — and then concludes with scenes of beauty: jellyfish, seen through a pane of aquarium glass, pulsing against a rich blue; light from a sunset mirrored in windows; a half-closed laptop reflecting its screensaver colours onto itself; droplets from a sprinkler landing on leaves. Each of these images is built around a distance that is mournful, like the thought of having to produce a type of food that is “more healthy” because regular food is poisoned, but still retaining the possibility of joy, in the way that food is good.

While reviewing this slice of Steve's work from the last ten years, there were moments that I now laughed at but, at the time, had felt fear (the upset child) or laughed at again but now felt more fear (the world as "a giant, horrid daycare.") The feelings of looking back at a past I had contributed to arose: a sense of inevitability, a will to revise. In my notes I wrote down "FASCINATION" and "JUDGEMENT." There's the twinned feelings of being absorbed while being outside, of being part of something but also expelled. I'm reminded of a photo I recently saw, of a double rainbow in the sky above Vancouver,³ taken before this latest round of annihilating weather, but the photo had been doctored to have seven rainbows, some of them upside down and sideways, overlapping each other all over the frame.

1. Our tour took place on the unceded territories of numerous Indigenous nations: Portland is located on the land of the Multnomah, Chinook, Kathlamet, Clackamas, Tualatin Kalapuya, Molalla, and others; Los Angeles is on the land of the Gabrielino-Tongva; San Francisco is on the land of the Chochoyeno and Ramaytush Ohlone.
2. *Life of a Craphead* was the collaboration of myself and Jon McCurley, from 2006 to 2020.
3. Vancouver is located on the unceded territories of the x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Sel̓ilwítulh (Tsilil-Waututh) nations.