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Greg Day, Stephen Varble, October 1975. © Greg Day. Costume sculpture: Stephen Varble, Elizabethan Farthingale, 1975.



LESLIE —
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RUBBISH AND DREAMS

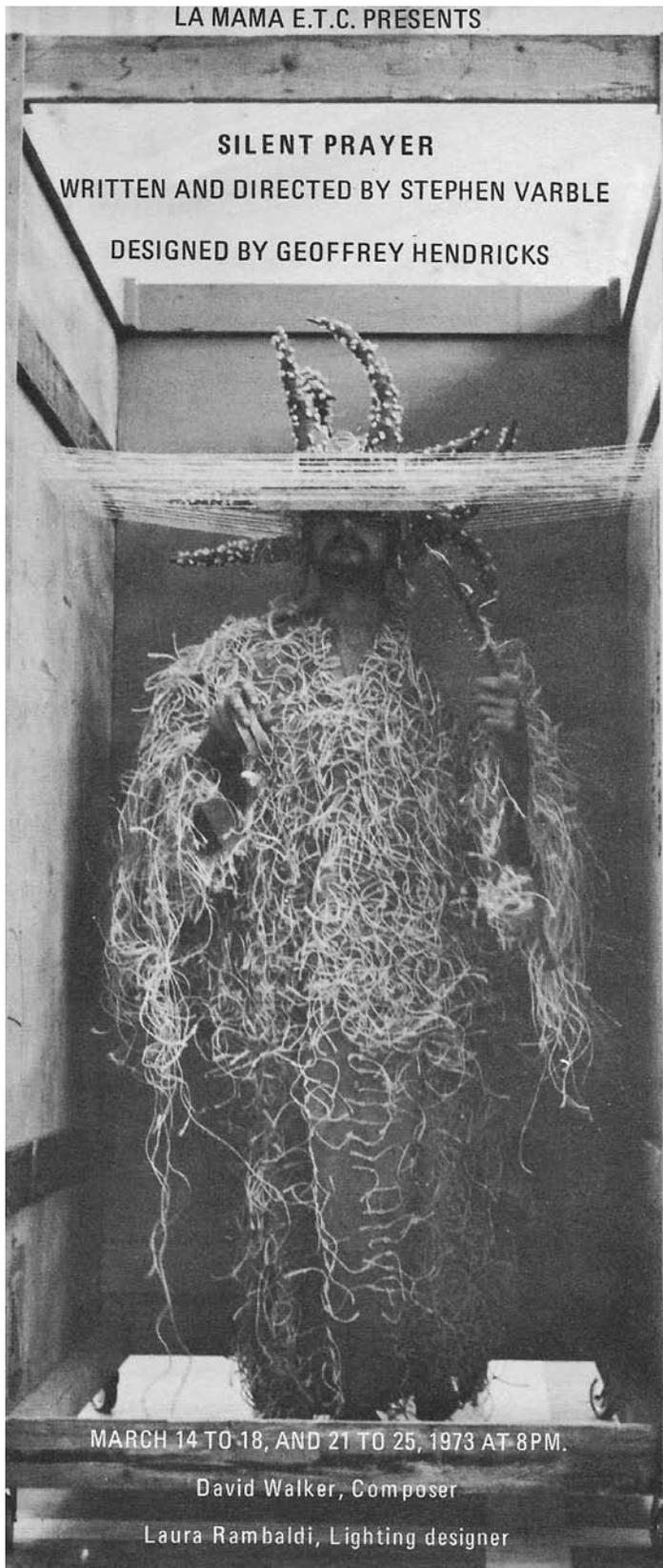
The Genderqueer Performance Art of Stephen Varble

David J. Getsy, Curator



Stephen Varble was “considered by some the embarrassment of SoHo, and by others the only touch of real genius south of Houston street.” With these words, the art critic Gregory Battcock captured the contradictory appeal of this disruptive, driven artist. In elaborate, gender-confounding costumes made from street trash, food waste, and found objects, Varble erupted into New York’s streets. In his “Costume Tours of New York” in 1975 and 1976, he would lead onlookers on unauthorized visits to art galleries and other sites of commercial luxury. Without warning, Varble would appear as a vision of transformed trash in a dress of milk cartons, chicken bones, and pipe cleaners. A pantomimed performance would end with a swooning bow that spilled milk out onto a gallery floor, with him sweeping out to lead viewers to the next confrontation with art’s commerce.

Peter Hujar, *Stephen Varble, SoHo, Franklin Street (I)*, 22 March 1976. © Peter Hujar Archive. Costume sculpture: *A Demonstration Costume with Only One Shoe (for the Chemical Bank Protest)*, 1976.



The “Costume Tours” were some of Varble’s most visible and outrageous performances of the 1970s, but they form only a part of his adventurous and largely unknown work. In September 2018, the Leslie-Lohman Museum will present the first retrospective of Varble: *Rubbish and Dreams: The Genderqueer Performance Art of Stephen Varble*. Varble performed outrageous displays of gender subversion that took aim at the commercialism of the art world, that reflected back the media spectacle of American culture, and that parodied institutions that turned art into a commodity out of the reach of the public.

Varble was born in 1946 in Owensboro, Kentucky, and his story starts in the environment of Lexington, where he was an undergraduate at the University of Kentucky. Experiencing first hand the culture of queer performance that was deeply rooted in that city, Varble developed a mode of performance that refused propriety and that adapted tactics of gender performance. With groups like Lexington’s “Pagan Babies” as an inspiration, Varble moved to New York, where he completed an MFA in Film Directing at Columbia University in 1971. In these years, he gravitated towards Jack Smith and was a regular observer of Smith’s late-night loft performances. From Smith, Varble learned a hostility to institutions and their commodification of art and artists, and he would build upon Smith’s example in his own creation of mobile performances and, later, videos that attacked art’s commercialism.

Varble shifted from film to performance art through his involvement with the important Fluxus artist Geoffrey Hendricks, who was his partner and sometimes collaborator in the early 1970s. It was in collaboration with Hendricks that Varble did his first performances for

(above) Stephen Varble, Flier for *Silent Prayer* at La MaMa ETC, March 1973. Costume sculpture: Stephen Varble, *Sky God Costume* (for *Silent Meditation* with Geoffrey Hendricks), 1972.

(top right) Jack Mitchell, *Stephen Varble*, June 1975. © Jack Mitchell Archives. Costume sculpture: Stephen Varble, *Pearl Dress*, 1975.



(top) Jimmy DeSana, *Stephen Varble*, November 1975. Photograph courtesy Fales Library & Special Collections, New York University. © Jimmy DeSana Trust. Documentation of *Gutter Art* performance, 1975.
 (left) Stephen Varble, Flier advertising *Gutter Art*, 1975 (verso).



New York's city streets—the *Blind Walks*—that involved him moving blindfolded through Manhattan. The two toured a collaborative performance in Europe, and he began making elaborate costumes out of found or appropriated materials. Costume, he soon realized, allowed him to move through yet somehow outside of the everyday. Whether in a wedding dress made from pieces of wood and twigs or an elaborate garment made from Hendricks's slides of his family, Varble invested in costume sculpture as a vehicle for magical transformation. He also developed his style of performance that was based on a form of pantomime largely silent except for whispered words and birdlike sounds. Combined with his staccato dance-inspired movements, his performances grew to have an aura of the fantastic or otherworldly.

Varble's output was as eclectic as his outfits. He did everything from direct an educational film for CUNY (*Heavy Duty: A Film Study of the Classroom Paraprofessional*) to ghostwriting a book on art auctions (*The Elegant Auctioneers* by Wesley Towner) to writing for *Andy Warhol's Interview* (with pieces, published and unpublished, on novelist James Purdy and artist Charlotte Moorman). His plays were performed at Lincoln Center's Repertory Theater, at colleges, and—most importantly—at La MaMa ETC, which hosted his 1973 play *Silent Prayer* (with sets by



(left) Stephen Varble, untitled drawing (“Dharma Buddha” Toilet Paper), c.1982. Ink on paper.



(right) Stephen Varble, untitled drawing (Vitamins), c.1982

Hendricks and costumes by Varble). His performances grew out of his writing’s blend of autobiography and fiction, and he invented characters that burst onto the streets in costume sculptures made from trash.

Rubbish and Dreams will document all of the major costume sculptures created by Varble and the specific performances for which they were developed. He took to the streets, directing his antagonistic costume performances at sites of commercialization and commodification. For instance, in March of 1976, he staged the *Chemical Bank Protest* in which he marched into a Sheridan Square bank to demand that funds from a forged check be returned to him. To the surprise of onlookers (and to the horror of the unwitting bank manager unfortunate enough to be working that day), Varble arrived in a dress made of fish netting covered in fake dollar bills, wearing a toy fighter jet as a loin cloth. Upon being told that he could not be helped, Varble proceeded to use a fountain pen to puncture the breasts he had made for his costume out of two condoms filled with cow’s blood. Using the blood as ink, he began signing

bad checks for \$0,000,000 (none-million) each before leaving the bank (to the applause of the bank patrons waiting in the cashier’s line). This was one of many of Varble’s protest performances at locations where the forces of money, luxury, and gentrification coalesced, and he also did similar interventions at SoHo Galleries, fashion boutiques such as Halston’s, and, of course, at Tiffany’s on Fifth Avenue.

Varble had a messianic attitude that was critical of capitalism and its exploitations. Extending some of the ideas gleaned from Jack Smith’s work, Varble increasingly declared himself a prophet whose aim was to expose and undercut commercialism, the conformity of gender in public spaces, and the unequal distribution of wealth. He did this by staging his genderqueer costumed performances that mocked wealth and cultural power. His most visible version of this was his performance *Gutter Art* in which he traveled through Manhattan in a borrowed limousine to stop at sites such as Fifth Avenue stores and the Metropolitan Museum in order to sit in the gutter and wash dishes he had taken out of the luxury car’s trunk. Varble

exposed himself to real violence and police harassment for his unauthorized performances, and he bravely confounded expectations of gender and sexuality in public as a means of interrupting the proprieties of capital and class.

After establishing himself as an undeniable presence in SoHo, Varble made the unexpected step of almost entirely receding from view in the late 1970s. His one exhibition in a commercial gallery, at the Brooks Jackson Iolas Gallery in 1977, was a turning point. He made it almost impossible for the gallery to sell anything, and he priced his works at unfathomably high numbers. He refused to sell drawings but would, rather, only sell photographic reproductions of them (again for astronomical sums). In keeping with the anti-commercial focus of his work and its critique of class, he inhabited the role of gallery artist only to subvert it. After this, he turned his attention to works that could be distributed widely and freely. He began a practice of drawing with the aim of making books, and he founded (with his partner Daniel Cahill) the “Happy Arts School of Manuscript Illumination.”

Varble created drawings with the aim



Stephen Varble, video stills from *Journey to the Sun*, 1978-83.

of making modern manuscripts, and he was an early adopter of new technologies for reproduction and production. He used photocopy machines to make "prints" for distribution more cheaply than other processes, and, most importantly, he began working in video as another means of combining words and images. Both manuscripts and video allowed Varble to blend his fantastical writings with his outrageous imagery and costumes, and he became committed to making a "total work of art." He filled his far Upper West Side apartment with drawings. Windows were blacked out, and the apartment became both an immersive art environment and the studio where he, Cahill, and their collaborators worked on Varble's vision for an epic piece of video art, *Journey to the Sun*, from 1978 to 1983. This video occupied Varble for the final five years of his life, and he became hermetic in his immersion in the work on it. Extant footage of the video runs over four hours, with segments in various stages of completion. Varble (like Smith before him) constantly revised and re-edited the footage, and the work was never settled around a singular script or plan. *Journey to the Sun* is an intensely edited work of video art on which Varble and Cahill labored for years, with imagery drawn from Varble's writings, drawings, and costumes. He also wrote some of the music for the video on an early home computer, the Alpha Centauri, and drew on the music of his friend and former partner Robert Savage for the soundtrack. *Rubbish and Dreams* will present segments of *Journey to the*

Sun that were near completion and offer viewers the ability to see, for the first time, this remarkable work of video art. His final years of determined work on his epic video were accompanied by an extensive practice of drawing, and the exhibition will also showcase Varble's work in this medium.

Varble's work has largely been forgotten and many of the objects and costumes have been lost. His anti-institutional attitude became an obstacle to his being incorporated into histories of art and performance, and little has been written about him since the 1970s. *Rubbish and Dreams* is based on oral history interviews with his friends, collaborators, and associates, and the exhibition will bring to light previously unseen materials from private archives. The photographic record of Varble's costume performances is rich, and the exhibition will showcase photographers such as Peter Hujar, Jimmy DeSana, Greg Day, Allan Tannenbaum, and Jack Mitchell. In addition, Varble's performance art will be contextualized in relation to other street-based performance art of the 1970s with representative works from such artists as Betsy Damon, Adrian Piper, John Eric Broadus, Scott Burton, Colette, Pope.L, and Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt. Overall, the exhibition aims to recover, via Varble's work, some of the contentious and confrontational uses of the street as stage for performances that challenged expectations of identity, gender, and class in the 1970s. My research for this exhibition will also be extended in the form of a book on Varble and street performance to follow in

the coming years.

Rubbish and Dreams contains examples of Varble's work from 1971 until his death from AIDS-related complications in the first days of 1984. Across this decade of work, Varble created performance art and costume sculptures that challenged the expectations of "fine art" and that took genderqueer presentations to the streets. He lampooned the art world's pretensions, and he styled himself as an oracle for a world corrupted by commerce, capitalism, and the class conflict. The street was his stage, and he believed in making work that did not require the authorization of an institution. Because of this attitude, Varble's story has been written out of the history of performance art in the 1970s. He took to art's peripheral spaces to establish a distance from which he could glamorously lampoon the idea that art was a commodity unavailable to the everyday person. He remade himself as the prophet of possibility, showing others how to take rubbish and turn it into dreams.

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David J. Getsy is the Goldabelle McComb Finn Distinguished Professor of Art History at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and his books include *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (Yale, 2015), *Scott Burton: Collected Writings on Art and Performance, 1965-1975* (SoberSCOPE, 2012), *Rodin: Sex and the Making of Modern Sculpture* (Yale, 2010), and, most recently, the anthology of artists' writings, *Queer* (MIT Press, 2016).

Rubbish and Dreams: The Genderqueer Performance Art of Stephen Varble, curated by David J. Getsy, will open Sept. 29, 2018 and run through Jan. 27, 2019 at the Leslie-Lohman Museum.