



"Teatro de la Cabeza." Nijmegen, Holland, 1993. Photo Credit: Ania Rachat.

An Evening with Rafael Sánchez

The androgyne is not for sale, says artist and performer Rafael Sánchez. Spanning the AIDS crisis, the redevelopment of Lower Manhattan, and the aftermath of 9/11, his artistic archive intimately portrays the playfulness, loss, and hardship that paved the way for today's gender revolution.

Rafael Sánchez is from a New York you always wanted to move to – the New York you might've missed if you first saw it in the new millennium. Over the past year visiting his studio, moving through his archive, he unpacked four decades of artistic practice for us. His art work is made up of theater, filmmaking, publishing, sculpture, painting, costume, and performance. If you ask him, he'll explain these disparate endeavors are anchored by a core of experimentation. Though glamour and spectacle

move through his projects, their beauty can be misleading. He is a difficult artist to characterize quickly, one of the underground's best-kept secrets.

Rafael refers to time as a medium and “drawing” as the core of whatever is the final form of the work. In every sense he is deliberate. He takes his time; he’s not in a rush. Rafael’s archive narrates histories of our city which are vital to record and preserve – the AIDS crisis, the redevelopment of Lower Manhattan, the aftermath of 9/11 – though he’d probably refute preservation as besides the point. Instead he prioritizes human exchange. He makes sculpture from observations and interaction. He treats language as a vital surgical tool that requires patience and respect. Talking with him about his life and work fills in your mental timeline in explosions – mythic forays, tragic erasures, urgent celebrations of life, and countless experiments. This is another New York story.

How did you get started creating performances?

When I was around 10 I had a nickname. They started calling me *Chico*. I had a strong Spanish accent at the time and this – Parsippany, New Jersey (as Cuban-born transplant via Queens and New York City) – was very white America. Even a white kid with an accent was a foreigner. And so I would act out my “Latin-ness” I guess, as a way to get by. I started doing performances that were really bonkers for a small group of friends who seemed to accept me because I could be funny. I would sing popular songs that resonated for me. It’s not like I planned or rationalized it – it just came out of me! There was a band called War that I liked a lot and they had a song called “The Cisco Kid.” Obviously Latin outlaw, right? There was another song, “Brother Louie,” by a group called Stories – the lyric is: “She was black as the night, Louie was whiter than white.” It was a song about an interracial couple and brother Louie was singing the blues because he had to deal with all of this judgment for who he was dating.

Skateboard culture wasn’t really a thing yet in 1970–72, but if it was we would’ve been that. So we would meet at strange marginal locations and smoke cigarettes, start little fires as boys do. We would mix flammable liquids from around the house in a container and squirt it around and make these flash fires by these strange concrete tunnels that seemed to divert the local water table under the roadways. The kids would say “Hey Chico, do ‘Brother Louie’” and I would squirt the liquid and light a fire and sing “Brother Louie.” Then I would roll on the fire and put it out

with my body during the instrumental part. That was my act. Those were my earliest performances. I guess I was figuring out how to be myself amongst the culture at large.



"Rafael In New Jersey," 1991. Photo Credit: Gail Thacker

Who were your influences? What were your main interests or concerns that kept you coming back to performance and drag?

Drag didn't make sense to me; it just happened. A key factor was spending time with Mark Morrisroe. He would come home from shows in town and tell me about what others were doing. At the time I still had my studio in Newark and was studying at Rutgers, and I was living in an apartment in Jersey City that I shared with my sister Lourdes. She and I were very close. We were both artists born in Havana, and we went through a very bizarre first generation upbringing

together. Anyway, I had a giant 7 x 10 feet tarred and feathered canvas that I couldn't fit anywhere. Fortunately we lived on the top floor, and the canvas fit exactly on the landing up against the wall. I first met Mark with that painting. He came upstairs to borrow a cup of sugar.

Literally a cup of sugar?

Yes. I heard somebody out in the hallway before he even knocked and there he was, sniffing that painting. He had this strange squeaky voice and said, "Did you make this?" I said "Yeah" and he said, "I usually have to come around to other people's art but this is really fantastic." And I was like "Thank you." Then he said, "Can I borrow a cup of sugar?" And that was our friendship. That's what I mean by drag *happened* – there was no searching for motivations. Great things like this come as life's gifts.



HIV+ honey submersion photos, 2001-2002. Photograph, Rafael Sanchez

So who were some of your role models early on? Not just for drag but performance?

Jesus, that's so vast. Coming up through New Jersey, I guess at some point in my late teens and early twenties I found I was drawn to artists like Allan Kaprow, Robert Whitman, Robert Rauschenberg.... They all had roots in New Jersey and I was fascinated by the landscape, having been separated from my birthplace and never really knowing it. They were a generation of artist thinkers – to me, they were my beat poets. They worked outside conventional art systems and contexts. They helped me see that the landscape around us, no matter how banal, is part of us. To me, that is very spiritual. But I liked drawing most of all. In 1979, there was a retrospective of Joseph Beuys at the Guggenheim. That was a game changer for me. That and discovering Ad Reinhardt's work. I read a lot. Also, there was so much great music that my generation grew up on. Much of it had gotten under my skin, and I always wondered how that could be worked in: The New York Dolls, David Bowie, even macho acts like Alice Cooper and Kiss. We went through puberty with that stuff in our veins. Butch bands like Led Zeppelin – when you see pictures of them, they're all hairy and sweating and swagging this incredible drag. Robert Plant with his golden locks, and he's got these blouses and they're low cut. That was all very gender-bending. After college, I lived in Paris and really liked Dalida. She sang standards; I liked her sad period. She had two or three husbands who all committed suicide, so by the mid-70s she was very dark. I remember Mark was still alive when I first went to Paris. He was obsessed with Connie Francis and Judy Garland, these women turned icons, but I never got into that.

How did you first get into drag?

Well, what motivated me most was the real-life street experience and moving through the world that way – sending alternative signals via what I was wearing and how I presented myself. The world reciprocated somehow. The first time I went “out” in full drag was just for fun. It was Halloween of '91. The children treated me like a lady. They came right up and said “You're beautiful” as I stepped out the door. As a guy that resonated in my core. Males are never told that, ever. We don't experience that and it blew me away I guess – it was a kind of affirmation, and it raised a lot of questions for me.

The next day I felt very sensitive. I picked up some paintings Mark had left me from Pat Hearn. I felt like I was reconnecting with him though he'd died two years before when there was a piece of cardboard I found in the back, between the stretchers, and it was a portrait of Divine...an

original print by the photographer Jason Gavin. With what I was going through, that felt like a sign from beyond.

But, in the drag community, a lot of my peers were working through women issues. A lot of that drag was even filled with women hate. It made me uncomfortable.



"Dolores", Cimetière Montmartre, 1990. Photo Credit: Emmanuel Gaffard

Wow, in what way?

A lot of the clown drag seemed disparaging at times, even Raspberry's (Mark's)...it's complex. I'm not going to name any other names, but a lot of queens actually don't like women. Things they would say were so misogynistic.

Where do you think that came from?

A world that creates identity conflict and thrives on power. A lot of power drag was about assertion –extremely competitive and vicious. This whole thing of “reading” even...I still find it to be very macho. Even the terminology of “queen.” What is that? What’s with all this hierarchy? I enjoy the camp and poetry of it, but then when I would go out with love in my heart, suddenly it would be all about these things...like passing and being on top...reading...competition....

It mirrors society in a lot of ways though. Queer communities feel like an oasis when you first find them, but then it is shattering to realize they can have other chains of command.

I understand competing to become a better artist, but I learned very quickly that drag is a dangerous game.

How so?

When you put yourself, your body, your being out there in a world loaded with constructions about identity, you’re fucking with it and it’s going to fuck back with you. And that’s a dangerous game. From the most perfect of strangers to the family you grew up with.

It’s very layered. I have so many friends who are navigating these things constantly, even as children. One of the things that inspired me at that time was meeting and making friends with people who lived on those margins. What motivated me was to create the best art I could, to elevate our perceptions and discover things, and to learn. Regardless of how I was being defined, my higher aim was to create work that was transcendent. Unquestionably beautiful. I was interested in the darkness of Artaud and Camus, but I never made performances that were mean-spirited. I would go back to the art I was doing before my drag, the sculpture and drawing, and try to bring it to *this* kind of theater.

As a queer person with a decades-long history of cross-dressing but who does not identify as trans or gay, your experience of and entrance into drag culture is intriguing and complex. Can you share a bit about your experience of gender, gender deviation, and gender fluidity in your life and work?

I've gotten a lot of shade in these performance circles because I'm not "gay." For me it doesn't have to do with being gay, straight, or any of those definitions. None of that comes remotely close to touching what motivates my art. It's much more than that. For me it's about a human ideal that has been subverted by the West – the androgyne, our ideal gender expression. Lately, it's been academized so it seems like a cliché, but it's not for sale. Having spaces where we feel comfortable to express ourselves is a sublime thing, and we all, especially as artists, need to give back to these communities that support us. And even the littlest show in the littlest space requires a team.

How do boys in skirts handle bravado? What would it look like when other performers sized you up or when you sized them up?

I don't know how to answer that. I was hit on a lot and I dealt with it. I was also aggressed a lot. If you mean competition, I guess a lot of that occurred in dressing rooms. Sadly, like High School lockers, I guess. Sometimes, backstage there could be a lot of reading going on, and I just tried to let it roll off of me as best I could when it would happen. There were specific times where shade was coming on pretty thick, and I would just turn and focus on what needed to be done...because some of the costumes I had were really hard to get into. If I was read, I knew I'd perform and deliver on stage and mouths would drop. That's all.

But didn't this banter kind of make drag culture what it was?

Some people are more into that showbiz toughness but it's not my world. I think I was coming at it more as a visual artist. The heart of what I was doing was quieter and a response to another kind of universal that is perhaps more spiritual and less competitive. But that does not mean that it is not ambitious. I enjoyed the showbiz and lifestyle, but I *loved* the experience of stage work. I wanted the work to be great, and I love the engine of a show. But to be fabulous for its own sake wasn't really my end game ever.



Post performance, Needle Exchange Benefit at Mother, 1997. Photo Credit: Claire Barnier

What rituals, if any, did you partake in on a night where you would get ready as your most famed drag character – Dolores de la Cabeza? Did those change over the years?

Dolores was performance art. The name literally translates to “pains of the head,” or in more general terms, headaches. (I suffered from migraine headaches often.) But, I learned a lot through Dolores. I would get decked out. I loved speed metal at the time, bands like Anthrax, Megadeth, and Slayer. One time, I knew I needed to stay close to my date at a Motorhead concert at The Ritz. I feared for my life when we were separated and was lucky to get out of there. But I would go to nightclubs where hair bands were playing, like L’Amour in Brooklyn, and I felt like that world was just filled with a very twisted kind of drag. I liked that music, but it was intensely heteronormative and misogynistic too, so I also knew I was going out there as Dolores to fuck with it. I was still young enough to be brave that way. I would get glammed out and get out on the PATH train to the middle of Brooklyn and that was part of it for me. It wasn’t about getting in

a cab – I wanted to take Dolores out for that ride. It got scary sometimes and I learned to fight as a lady, well sort of, but mostly the experiences were very positive and full of wonder and fed my art in many ways.

In what ways did Dolores refuse to be a persona? Was it her shapeshifting?

I just never wanted to create a character who was specific. I was expressing through wherever I might be at that moment in time and *that* would essentially *shift*. It was Situationist. I had other names I would use, Dolores was just the one that stuck. Probably because I wrote it down for a show, but at any given time it could have been different. Why didn't Pavonia Newport stick? I never purposefully tried to manifest any of it as an identity. In a way, Dolores de la Cabeza represented for me an experience.



Sugar Paintings, Installation and opening performance, Hoboken Dental Specialties, 1995 (w/ Roger Johansen, D.M.D.)

Ok, ok. So when did you decide to take Dolores into the streets?

Actually, she came out of the street. I went with my gay friends Bill Doherty and Bruce Greer. We took the PATH from Hoboken to New York and spent the night out – West Village, East Village, Meatpacking –and my sister Lourdes joined us. We went to Uncle Charlie's, where she won the contest prize as Liza! It was wonderful! Then we ended up at Dick's bar where we ran into Bitter Bob. She was an old friend of Bill's, and Bob was a transvestite [*this is a reference to Bob's identity at the time*] who lived on West 10th near the river. We later lost Bob to, I still don't know, if it was AIDS or liver cancer or both. But in those days Bob was always at Dick's Bar. She was probably the most bitter of all queens – or the most bitter person – I ever met. Chain smoking and always with a drink in her hand. Funny but bitter, like battery acid.

For some reason, Bob took to me and took me under her wing. Bob loved where I was coming from. She would give me drag she didn't want anymore, makeup tips, and was very kind with me. And sweet. And beautiful in her own way. I would visit her often but I never got too close. There was a bit too much booze – though at the same time there was also AIDS and people were coping and escaping. A lot of it was self-medicating, because times were so hard and difficult to comprehend.

So we met Bob that night and we were hanging around. I was among loving friends who were very encouraging with me...that's my point.

And that was that? You conjured your look and your lady and she appeared?

Interestingly enough, I went out as a blonde that night and I haven't done that since. I wasn't passing. I just threw it all together and it wasn't that good, but I felt embraced and that's what mattered. People called me Madonna and Marilyn that night – which was weird – I didn't want to mimic anyone. But I understood that drag as a practice could take me out of the studio, and that my studio practice and this experience were not mutually exclusive. Drag gave me a show life and a way to be in the landscape with new eyes. My studio practice brought something to it too.



Left: Untitled Performance, Bruce Labruce Book Release, Jackie 60, 1997. Photo credit: Claire Barnier. Right: Dolores at FIAC (pictured in front of John McCracken sculpture). Paris, 1991. Photo Credit: Emanuel Gaffard.

Who did you perform with? What was the geography, spaces, and scenes?

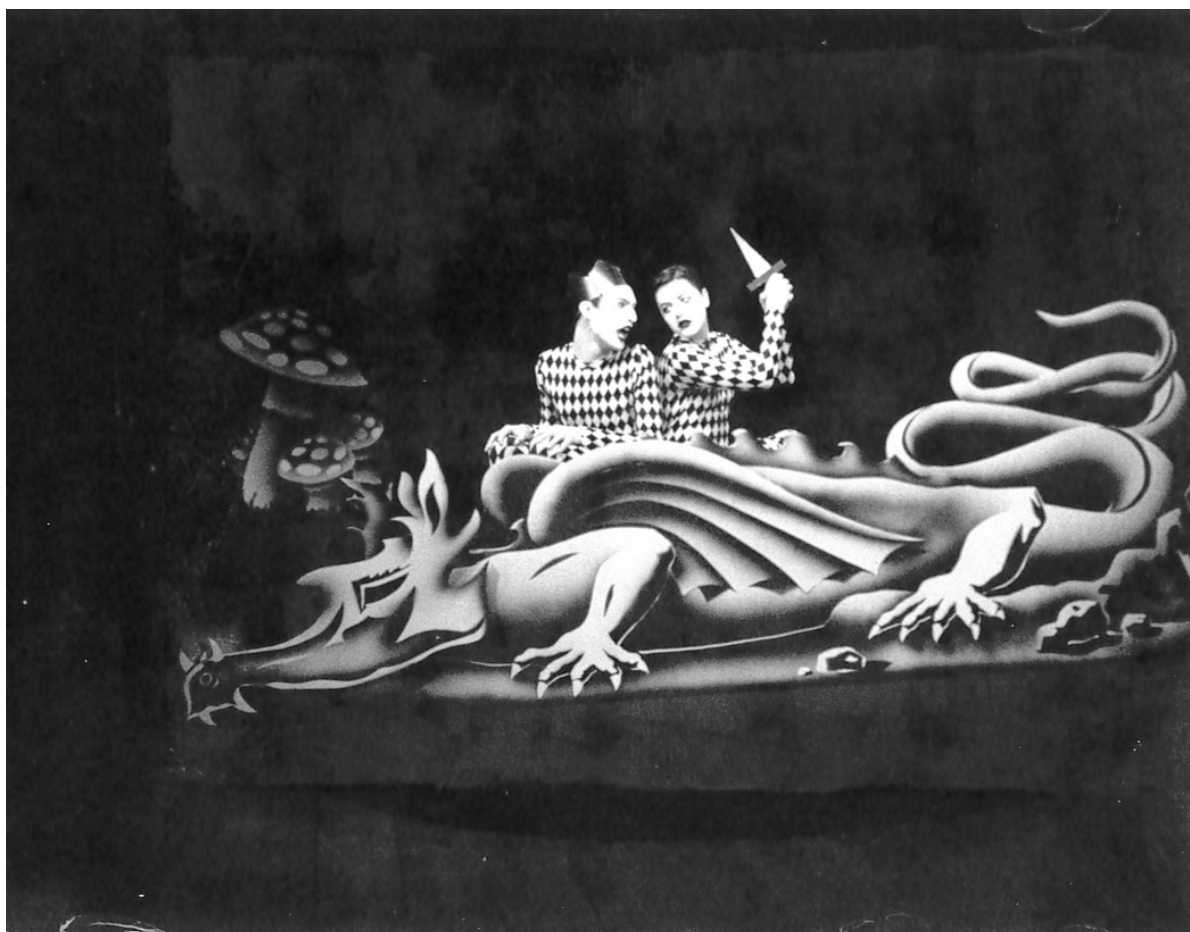
I went out, I guess, but I was really exploring. Places like Webster Hall, Limelight, etc. were not really my scene or destination, unless someone I knew was doing something special there. I mean, after all, after Mark died I moved back to Paris and fell in love with Claire Barnier and Dolores really bloomed there for me. Through Claire, I was acquainted with circles around Leigh Bowery, whom I met once as Dolores and found completely inspiring. I would come back frequently to New York and work and play with Gail Thacker, who always had her Polaroid camera, and that process with Gail informed my work immensely – possibly more than anything because it turned what I was doing into a kind of movie, a story that I could see. But when I moved back to Jersey City in 1992-93, I was also returning to Europe, often for residencies around my work. One day stateside, I ran into Tina Benez on the PATH train from Manhattan to Jersey. I remember I was wearing a satin cheerleader outfit that was an interpretation of the Cuban flag. I remember

clearly it was the middle of the day, sunny out. I qualify it because it wasn't always about going out to some night thing. It was a way of life and we were crossing over on many levels and often with all the other commuters! I had that dress made for me by a local seamstress that did lots of Puerto Rican flag versions out of her shop, and I had her do a Cuban version for me. Anyway, Tina asked me immediately if I would go-go dance at her night at Maxwell's on Sunday – *Vertigogo*. I ended up making a lot of the sets there, and I met Jersey girls, like Taxi, and Glamamore was a regular. She was a legend, and that raised the bar. I learned a lot from that experience with Tina, and especially from Glamamore as a performer. And of course, Times Square before Times Square closed, if that's what you mean. We started to lose Times Square around 1996, but really the loss was a casualty of the AIDS crisis. You wouldn't have recognized the city before all that disappeared. Regular bars had little stages. Giuliani wanted to clean everything up. The vitality of queers, drags, and sex workers bled out into the streets and that kept at bay the suburbs, the frat boys, the 7 Elevens, and all this mall culture that is so present nowadays in the city. The scene was so electric, really. Tina Benez, who lived in Hoboken, made a good try to bring some of that to Maxwell's, and I loved her for it because once you cross the river to New Jersey, it really is much more suburban in one way and absolutely less tolerant. In a big way what we were doing at Maxwell's was way more radical than say Pyramid or Boy Bar in that there was no safety net at all. We were out in the face of society. In those years, I met the German queer director Rosa von Praunheim, also through through Tina. Rosa had just released his film *I Am My Own Woman*, which I loved before even having met him. I was doing research for the artist Matt Mullican (so this must have been 1993-94) on the history of the computer, and Rosa asked if I would research for him the history of drag in cultures around the world. I was thrilled to do it and that's where I learned that the heart of it has nothing to do with sexual orientation. That gig was a revelation. A few years later Tina brought me into a night Hattie Hathaway was doing at a little bar called Nuts N' Bolts in the West Village. I was living in the Village by then. Those little places were my favorite. After a few shows there, Hattie invited me to do some Jackie 60. I loved it, and by then the characters I embodied were way beyond Dolores, and I would just use my given name. I blossomed into a whole other cosmology as my studio practice infused my performance work. But most of those venues were disappearing as the Giuliani administration had its way. I was fortunate that I had other avenues to explore this work, which were emerging due to people like Lia Gangitano, with whom we basically figured out how to bring this theater into the art

world once and for all. We did *The Libation Bearers*, a full-on production at Thread Waxing Space on Lower Broadway – transforming the gallery into a theater in 1999.

So after everything closed where did the queers go? Where did you go?

Well, it didn't happen suddenly. All the cleanup took advantage of the community being so vulnerable. AIDS and 9/11 overlapped. Around 1997, the FDA approved the pills that kept people alive without killing you. The nation, the world, stopped hemorrhaging lives to AIDS. Then 9/11 happened and AIDS was swept under the rug in a way, though it was far from over. The stigma and the silence around it just got worse and more silent in a way, sadly. In this time between 1997 and 2001, while the city was being sanitized, we were still grappling with so many traumas. We took care of our friends who weren't being taken care of by the system. AIDS was not over. There was and still is a very real underground around the disease and its stigma, which is society's disease really. I was getting weary and succumbed to the trappings of a rock and roll lifestyle. I became HIV positive in 2002, a year after 9/11.



Libation Bearers, The Opera, Threadwaxing Space, 1999. Photo Credit: Gail Thacker

You'd been in art and queer communities and had to mourn for so long. What did it feel like to contract HIV and have to interpret those feelings within your own body?

Being HIV positive makes one very much aware of the body down to a microscopic and psychic level. Immediately we process how that relates to others and their bodies. This relationship is complex and we navigate it constantly. It's extremely personal. And it is extremely societal. Our bodies are very vulnerable and most people just get by. This has something to do with what I said earlier about drag being a dangerous game. When you step out into the world, no matter how strong you are, the world's response will always affect you. Here in New York City, most of us can surround ourselves with people who give us strength but it's still dangerous. Having HIV now is weird because it doesn't show on the outside but the stigma is there and many of us have been very sick and know that we have something that makes us different. Even though we can speak openly here, it is not that way 85 percent of the time. Ironically and sadly, a lot of silence about who we are is part of our reality. I am labeled "straight" by many of my friends because I love and prefer women openly, but I spend a lot of time at GMHC for services and rarely to never see anyone there from my art or performance communities.

When I became positive my thinking started to change. I was really adrift for about a year and a half. Then I fell in love with Kathleen White in 2004. Kathleen was part of the same world, in many ways more so. We met through Lia at Participant and we both had shows there in 2004. We were thinking of other ways to give back through our work outside of what was expected. We recognized a paradigm shift. We longed for another kind of exchange. We wanted to be citizens in a broader way.

When we were younger, part of Manhattan's allure was that you could get just about anything you needed without ordering it in some catalog from far away, like how we nowadays order things online. So much was at our disposal. You could get that obscure part for your projector with two phone calls. We are down to the bottom of the barrel when it comes to access to materials, and art has become a pay-to-play game. Everything's so expensive. Forty-five dollars for a small tube of cadmium red...it feels so precious. And, things have become *way* too serious. The disappearance of the clubs, of the stores we would go to for art supplies, of the mom-and-pop stores we cared about, the delis, bodegas, porn stores, bookstores, record stores.... Kathleen

and I wanted to put something back, at the very least activate those things somehow – to honor the essence of value through our work and create environments that spoke to us and addressed those concerns. Much of it seems very serious as I speak of it, but we had a lot of fun actually.



Double Bridge, Aljira Arts, Newark 1984. Photo by Rafael Sanchez

From 2004 to 2014, you and Kathleen White ran a stand with found books, records, and tapes outside of your apartment on Hudson Street between Bank and West 11th Streets. Though Kathleen passed away in 2014, you have continued to perform the bookstand as an act of spontaneous theater, meditation, and exchange. Can you talk more about this project in the context of your relationship to New York as a place?

As Kathleen and I watched the city transform, we questioned how we could continue to relate to it. How would we go about making work in this transformed environment? There was a sense of wondering: *Where do we go?* After 9/11, this question seemed increasingly urgent, if not

perplexing, living in Lower Manhattan only blocks from the towers. It was then that Kathleen and I elaborated on the bookstand that I was already running as a live artwork. It was an offering from our hearts to the city. The bookstand is a table where exchange happens. A forum for discussions to take place, like what *is* value, what *is* loss, what *is* forgiveness? What is an opening or a walking through? Is the exchange of an old used book an act of forgiveness? Something that's lost or used is acknowledged with an exchange of value. There is a beauty in that exchange.

Loss is a constant. My generation came to our practice at an incredibly beautiful moment but also at a time when our colleagues started to die and die and die. I'm not talking about elders. I mean young people, our friends. The issue of loss was huge. I guess everyone navigated that in many ways. People I was working closely with, developing my practice with: it had a big impact on us. Kathleen as well. So how do we navigate loss into something that's living? It was a point we had in common early on, as we fell in love and she accepted me completely. We understood each other in relation to loss. We were both dealing with it. We were able to come together in the projects we did – like the bookstand in the shadow of the fallen towers. That event loomed and still looms. It's not just a metaphor. It physically *occurred* – geographically, on the map. It wasn't just losing nightlife, or losing a place we could go to be safe with our *drag*. It was love among the ruins. And Kathleen was an eventual casualty. She was diagnosed by the 9/11 victims unit at Bellevue. So I don't even give fuck about that so-called "drag" or whatever it's called anymore. Whatever anybody wants to be, just be it. What we lost in 9/11 was even bigger. We have been in World War III since the towers came down. Nobody seems to really notice. We are losing hospitals to luxury condos every other day. We are living in a feudal society. I mean, look at who's in the White House presently! We have a fucking landlord for President!

So, how do we navigate loss? The bookstand was *one* way forward for us in a post 9/11 millennial decade. The stand has a specific location in relation to that event. It is an idea generator and as such is also nomadic. Much is harvested on the tables and set forth. It is also a proscenium for a series of random encounters initiated by the material placed upon it. The project is about potential. That's how we saw it, and I'm still in that practice. That experience informed us and still informs much of my work. Like the nomadic dolmen that Kathleen and I

made. The standing stones of the dolmen speak volumes. The work we did together continues to have a life. Is loss something that has a forward motion? That's a good question.