



ESCAPE ARTIST

Text **Mark Jacobs** | Photography **Patterson Beckwith**



Art Direction **Ron Devito** | Styling **Jason Farrer** | Styling Assistants **Auke Sprangers, Sam Hancocks**
Photo Assistant **Phillip Gabriel** | Special Thanks **Carol Devito**

Alex Bag and the Suspension of Disbelief

Performance artist Alex Bag was instantly canonized in the mid-90s for her first official art world contribution: the brilliant, low-budget video project “Fall ’95,” in which she delivers dryly comedic monologues in the role of an increasingly disillusioned School of Visual Arts student. Her work since has included two legendary New York City public access shows, “Cash From Chaos” and “Unicorns and Rainbows”; performances like the one at the Utopian Art Festival at Hotel 17, in which she sucked fake vomit from a tube while wearing a prom dress; and signature videos, the last of which was 2004’s pop-saturated, media dissection, “Coven Services for Consumer Mesmerism, Product Sorcery, and the Necromantic Reimagination of Consumption.”

Bag now lives and works in the turn-of-the-century house where she grew up in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, hometown of Tom Cruise and Cindy Sherman. “There’s something lovely about being out of the fray,” she says, seated on her parents’ wraparound front porch while her mother prepares what will be remarkably delicious eggplant parmigiana. “It’s easy to be inspired and do your thing and not feel that weird city pressure. I lived for that for a long time. It’s good to have some fresh air and room to work.” Bag presents a much-anticipated new video this January at the Whitney Museum.

How did you become an artist?

I went to Cooper Union and was a sculpture major. I didn’t really work with film or video until I went out to San Francisco after I graduated, and started playing around with a friend’s video camera. Somehow with video, everything came together. I love clothes, I’m into styling. I didn’t think I was an actress, but that kind of wound up being part of the oeuvre. Originally, I started making two or three minute videos to entertain myself and my friends. That was around ’93. Some friends who were artists hooked me up with art dealers who wanted to see the work I had made. I didn’t even think [it] was art. Then “Fall ’95” came about as an assignment for a fall show, and that was the first time I made video specifically for an art audience.

Are the videos tightly scripted?

They are really tightly scripted. I’ve always been a writer. I identify myself as a writer more than as a performance artist. My primary creative outlet is writing. I didn’t really even know if I wanted to go to art school, or if I wanted to pursue writing.

Was the response to “Fall ’95” a surprise?

A total surprise. The career trajectory that most artists go through with group shows and mucking around for years before something



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happens—I went from working at home, to getting asked to do this show, to being on the cover of *Artforum*, to traveling and getting grants. It happened all at once and was an almost overwhelming kind of insanity.

Were you pursuing that kind of acclaim?
Definitely not. I’m still really uncomfortable with the attention. I love working and I’ve managed to find a niche that’s actually joyous work, but it’s been tricky to maintain.

Are you still interested in television?
Of course. My main influence is television. My inspiration really relies on that, the pacing, the editing structure, the quick attention span.

Have you been approached to work in television?

No. As a writer that might work, but I’m not an actor and I’m not really interested in doing anything outside of the art bubble in terms of performance. I have terrible stage fright. Video works well for me because it’s just me, a camera, and a little remote. There’s no au-

dience. Even just talking to you, I’m nervous. When there’s a group of people, I get physically sick. I’ve been playing around with the idea of creating a theater troupe called The Stage Fright Players, because I’m interested in bad acting. I love the weird empathy that actually makes you physically sick while watching somebody fail on stage. I was thinking that would be something to work with or be inspired by, to create a troupe of people who really have issues with performance, who throw up or run off stage or start crying or shaking or whatever response happens, and purposely put together a play that upsets the audience.

The auditions will be memorable.
I know! I can’t wait to put the troupe together. I remember watching a Cindy Crawford movie from the 90s called *Deception* or something and thinking that bad acting is actually more interesting to me right now than good acting. Like why does she look so strange when she’s

standing like that or talking? It’s almost like Beckett, you are just completely aware of the acting process and what’s gone wrong. Your suspension of disbelief is shot to hell.

Discuss your new work for the Whitney.
My mom had a progressive children’s television show in the 60s called *The Carol Corbett Show* and then another in the 70s called *The Patchwork Family*. She was the hostess and had a big puppet that she sang and spoke to. There were special guests, like a scientist, an artist, a musician, or someone who came on with animals, and a small studio audience of children. I like the format, so I’ve been researching what’s going on with children’s television now, and it’s such a commercial world of shit. I’m doing something that’s educational, but with a hostess who’s prone to depression and has existential crises. The guests will also be in that vein. There’s definitely going to be a Desert Storm vet in a wheelchair with a guitar who’s going to sing a depressing song, some

Clockwise from top left: **Alex Bag**, Film still from *Fancy Pants*, (1997) | **Alex Bag**, Film still from *Harriet Craig*, (1998) | **Alex Bag**, Film still from *Think Wall for Coven Services for Consumer Mesmerism, Product Sorcery, and the Necromatic Reimagination of Consumption*, (2004) | **Alex Bag**, Film still from *Fancy Pants*, (1997) | **Alex Bag**, Film still from *Think Wall for Coven Services for Consumer Mesmerism, Product Sorcery, and the Necromatic Reimagination of Consumption*, (2004) | Center: **Alex Bag**, Film still from *Think Wall for Coven Services for Consumer Mesmerism, Product Sorcery, and the Necromatic Reimagination of Consumption*, (2004)



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kind of occult magician type, and there has to be a chick in there somewhere, maybe a radical feminist.

What will you teach the children?

You know, real life. I’m going to put the weight of the world on their shoulders. It will be dark and horrifying, but it won’t be so dark. Ultimately it will be educational. It’s in the public lobby of the Whitney so they have script approval. [laughs] I like the idea of a dark master feeding the minds of youth. I’m not going to have children, so why not say what I have to say to the next generation?

When you were four years old you were on your mother’s show interviewing a monkey. How did that go?

It went really well. I got to spend a couple of hours with this live monkey that had a little stroller that I pushed around the studio. And *Captain Kangaroo* was just down the hall so it was awesome.

Have you heard that *The Electric Company* is being revived?

I liked *Zoom*, too. But they were way different from children’s television now. There’s nothing really meaty out there. You could say *Dora the Explorer* is ostensibly educational, but it’s not the same.

When you first showed “Fall ’95” at 303 Gallery over a decade ago, you installed a companion library of esoteric video clips for patrons to navigate. Combine that with your staged testimonials and you essentially have the DNA of YouTube.

I included pieces of interviews and performances, things that I thought were anomalies on television, like Public Image Limited on

American Bandstand, or Patti Smith on *Saturday Night Live*. You can watch hours and hours and hours of television and go brain dead, but every once in a while something magical happens. It’s amazing that people now want to share that.

On YouTube it’s usually someone’s niece in the living room dancing to a Janet Jackson remix.

That’s far more interesting to me than watching *Desperate Housewives*. Video is so accessible. Everyone has a video camera now and seems to know a thing or two about making their own entertainment. In the not too distant future I would like to make specific work for that context.

Just to add academic flavor to the interview, here’s a question I read online: “How does one mount a successful critique, when irony, satire and subversion have been enshrined by advertising and the popular imagination?”

I feel like I’m constantly up against that wall. It’s just such a fine line. People have used words like irony and sarcasm to describe my work, and it’s tricky because I like those things but I also fight against them. I work with humor, I work with cultural criticism, but I don’t like being preachy. I don’t like being didactic. Not to sound like a Pollyanna, but I like something more positive to be found in my work. Even suggesting something to just think about is better than dismissing everything outright. I have a lot of Aquarius in me. Maybe that’s why I feel like it’s a part of my responsibility, as an adult, to try and be hopeful, and find the good within the shit parameters that we live in. I don’t know if that’s an answer.