

**KATHY ACKER:
MITALI
RESTAURANT, NYC**

**INTERVIEW WITH BARRY ALPERT
ONLY PAPER TODAY
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ALPERT: I've never seen any of your performances, and I wonder if you might begin by describing what they were and then perhaps what your intentions were—in reverse chronological order, starting with the most recent.

ACKER: Well, my performances are never the same because, like my writing, they come out of wherever I am at the moment. They're not as central to me, they're more outgrowths of the writing or . . . yeah, outgrowths, they're a little farther away from the actual necessity. I don't know how else to describe it. So that I don't have as strong a line, a thematic line, from one performance to the next as I do with the writing. I mean I'd have to go back and search the writing for necessity . . . I can describe each one . . .

ALPERT: Yeah, I'd like that. You see my problem is if I'm not in New York City or other places where people put on deliberate performances, I have to depend on videotapes, reviews, or other forms of documentation. I encountered two conflicting versions of your performance with Lil Picard.

ACKER: Oh, that wasn't my performance, except that I was in it. I'll describe what happened. The most recent one I did was at The Kitchen. This was after the one I did with Lil Picard.

ALPERT: When was this?

ACKER: This was February of '76. I don't remember the exact date. And what happened was that I had been severely ill. I had two performances and I had to cancel one because of hospitalization and stuff. My mind just wasn't seeing art as the ultimate, and I was going through a slow turning away against the art world because I realized that whatever ideals I had weren't totally to be found there. I mean that seems obviously true, but I was going through that anyway. So what I was doing was just sitting on this bed, you know, because I wasn't allowed to move out of it . . .

ALPERT: In your room.

ACKER: Yeah. And I wanted to read—for some reason, I don't know why . . . I had a TV that was working at the time, so I was just watching all the late shows. I felt like reading the script of *Key Largo*, the Humphrey Bogart movie. And I couldn't get hold of it, you know, like no way.

ALPERT: You wanted to read the scenario?

ACKER: Yeah, I just felt like reading the scenario.

ALPERT: It's a play by, uh, Anderson . . .

ACKER: Maxwell Anderson, right, and then John Huston rewrote it for the movie.

ALPERT: I like the movie.

ACKER: Yeah. I had the scantiest of memories . . . I remember liking it and I remember two scenes out of it, and that's it. So I got a book about Bogart where they described . . . they had about three sentences about the movie. I decided to rewrite the movie since I couldn't read it, that was the only way. So I had this great time, you know. I just had nothing to do, it was like totally off the wall—writing a movie so that I could like fucking read it, you know? A week before the performance and I was going to do something based on the series—I'd been sending out a series the last nine months. That's over now.

ALPERT: The name of the series?

ACKER: *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Toulouse Lautrec.* I guess I thought of that as my “serious” work—I don't know what “serious” has to do with anything but, uh, I was thinking of doing a performance based on that or something based on an earlier performance I'd done at St. Mark's for New Year's Eve. But I was just enjoying this so much, and I was so distant from people. I'd been through this like heavy sickness, and I just didn't give a shit. I thought what the fuck, I'll just stage this weird movie script that I've been writing.

ALPERT: On the bed.

ACKER: Yeah, right. I wanted to make it all woman—I don't know why—I do, but I know in ways that I can't describe verbally. There are five characters in it. The thing I knew about

the movie from the Bogart book I had was who the characters were, and otherwise I didn't remember much.

ALPERT: The names of the characters?

ACKER: No, that I don't remember. I remember Johnny Rocco and that's it. I don't remember Humphrey Bogart's name at all. I know who played them because the book told me: Lauren Bacall and Humphrey Bogart, and . . . I just had these quick descriptions. There's the gangster's mistress and there's the innocent girl, so I took it from there. So I had Lauren Bacall, the innocent girl and actually Laurie Anderson played her. That was nice, Laurie-Lauren. There was Humphrey Bogart, who I think I made very different from the book because I haven't had any war experiences; I just wanted to talk about what it was like to think you were gonna die all the time. So I stuck all these speeches in his mouth . . .

ALPERT: Because that's what you were feeling—you were really that seriously sick?

ACKER: Yeah, I was seriously sick. They told me that I might die. They said if this happens, you gotta rush to the hospital . . .

ALPERT: Oh! Well, you seem better now.

ACKER: Oh yeah, I'm fine. And actually I didn't have what

they thought I had, but they had me scared out of my mind for about three days. Uh, and there was the gangster, Johnny Rocco, his girlfriend, Lauren, Humphrey, well those are the main . . . Oh the senator, of course, the innocent girl's grandfather, who's a wheelchaired senator. Those are the main characters, and then there's the hotel clerk, and I got him shot off very quickly so he didn't come in at all.

ALPERT: Some Indians if I remember correctly.

ACKER: That's what people tell me, I don't remember that . . . Well I think my script is so far, you know, from the . . . Except, I love it. I remember the scene at the end when they're in the boat, but I never got to the end, I got a little ways . . .

ALPERT: Oh the scene at the end is wonderful.

ACKER: Anyways, I staged this thing, right. But I was real embarrassed about asking people to rehearse. I couldn't go out, so they'd have to come there. And also I didn't know how to do it visually, so I had to do the easiest thing, in a way. Of course I didn't do the whole film, I just did the beginning. That's all I could do because I only had about a half-hour at The Kitchen. There were four sets, so to speak, four places where the action took place. So I had a friend go and sneak into the Strand. We just cropped the pictures so you couldn't tell they were from books.

ALPERT: Were they blown up or . . .

ACKER: Yeah, they were blown up . . .

ALPERT: Real large . . .

ACKER: Yeah, they were huge. So I took these pictures, and then I went to the Chelsea Hotel and used that for the inside of the hotel. It was all very funky and lots of jokes. And I had that projected against the wall of The Kitchen. The four people sort of sat . . . they couldn't memorize the script—I couldn't ask them to do that—so they sort of sat in front of this picture. The picture was projected over the four of us, and we read by candlelight. And I didn't know because I was too sick, I couldn't have set this up the day before and looked at what it looked like. I had to do everything the same day. It turns out that the candle reflected this weird light onto the floor. It was actually really beautiful. It was all dark, otherwise. So it was this weird thing with these four people—sort of visible, sort of not visible—the main light being these candles and then the thing. It was nice, from the pictures I saw. And the people read the script. I wanted them to read it real funkily, because it wasn't theater. I wanted to work off the edges—being in between a reading, in between theater . . .

ALPERT: Essentially there wasn't much improvisation?

ACKER: No, people had to sit where they were because they couldn't see otherwise.

ALPERT: It was a script that was completely written out in advance?

ACKER: Totally written out. There was no improvisation.

ALPERT: So it was a reading with a background, of sorts.

ACKER: Right. I liked it because it got away from my voice again. It wasn't me reading. When people took the parts, they totally transformed them. Laurie Anderson played the innocent girl, and she was just wonderful—I mean totally transformed the part. Whereas the girl who played the prostitute wasn't very good at all. And then my friend Jill Kroesin, who [*sic*] played the gangster, and she was just wonderful.

ALPERT: Did everyone dress normally, or in costume?

ACKER: Normally. You couldn't see them anyways, so it didn't matter. But everyone sort of dressed up, they were into it. We had sound effects . . .

ALPERT: Did you prepare a tape?

ACKER: No no no, I just told Peter to blow into a microphone like wind and crash chairs for thunder. It was funky, you know . . .

ALPERT: There was a hurricane?

ACKER: Yeah, right. They were all in a hotel, you remember . . .

ALPERT: In the Key West area . . . That gives me a pretty good sense of it. I think one of my students, David Barrett, went to a reading you gave at St. Mark's on New Year's Eve. That was off one of the works you sent in the mail, wasn't it?

ACKER: No.

ALPERT: Maybe I'll let you describe what that was. Two people took parts, and one was James Dean . . .

ACKER: Yeah, right. That's when I started the two-part thing, which is really much nicer than a reading, you know—it's not just me getting up there and . . . I like it. I like the movement to theater . . .

ALPERT: I liked the description, it sounded nice.

ACKER: It's just at this point it would have to be a huge movement to theater. I want to do some Noh plays now, I think that would be fun. I took two characters out of the books I'd been sending out, that is, Janis Joplin and James Dean, who had this love affair. And, uh, I just had them talking to each other. Jill was playing James Dean and I was playing Janis Joplin. But it was basically about this guy I had this huge crush on, so it was two things.

ALPERT: You figured him as James Dean?

ACKER: Well, no, it was funny. I started there, but it was a

real fictionalization. Fiction's a very funny thing . . . Oh it's hard to remember where I was at any time . . .

ALPERT: I thought it was amusing to imagine a conversation between Janis Joplin and James Dean, since they never could have had a conversation.

ACKER: Well they were alive at the same time at one point, though she was nine years old, actually. I mean it's ridiculous . . .

ALPERT: It could have been possible. And that interested you: the fact that it could have been possible?

ACKER: Mmmm, not so much. I was more interested in myths and putting myths together and seeing what the new meaning was. If you figure he was the big myth of the fifties, and she was the big myth of the sixties.

ALPERT: I don't know, I guess for me, since I'm familiar with their very literal presences I can't see them as myths. I just consider them attractive figures who died young. I didn't think that your treatment of them in your work was myth-making in any sense, I just thought it was fictive.

ACKER: Yeah. Well I wasn't interested in making myths of them, I was interested in myths that existed.

ALPERT: Oh, I see.

ACKER: They're not myths to me personally. Janis is a little bit, James Dean not at all, but . . .

ALPERT: Well you see I saw Big Brother and the Holding Company perform around the San Francisco area about fifteen times, so she's no myth to me.

ACKER: Right. No, I was just interested in thinking about what people think about now, what's the ongoing energy. It was clear in the fifties that people really cared how James Dean lived. And they really cared how Janis lived, they were totally into it. You know no one cares how Raquel Welch lives or anything . . .

ALPERT: Certain people I suppose. They'd read *National Enquirer* rather than . . .

ACKER: I read *National Enquirer*, actually.

ALPERT: I wondered if you did.

ACKER: Yeah, in fact a lot of the things in my book about Janis were taken from *National Enquirer* . . . There was an article about Jackie Onassis and I switched it around.

ALPERT: I've been thinking about buying *National Enquirer*—you see them in every supermarket, and I'm often attracted to them . . .

ACKER: They're getting very good. They're getting fabulous as a matter of fact.

ALPERT: Now what about the performance with Lil Picard. I've had two descriptions of it that conflicted with each other . . .

ACKER: Oh I'd love to hear the descriptions, they'd be funny.

ALPERT: Well Dick Miller, who didn't stay very long, told me where it was, which was 3 Mercer St. . . .

ACKER: Yeah Stefan Eins's place . . .

ALPERT: It's a performance space?

ACKER: Kind of. It's like a funny little museum/performance space . . .

ALPERT: I see. Anyways, I think he told me that the performance consisted of you rolling around naked on the floor while Lil Picard gave people wine to drink which they spit all over you.

ACKER: That's one description, yeah.

ALPERT: And then *The Village Voice* account . . .

ACKER: Well, I'll tell you what happened. I saw Lil at St. Mark's one time. I really like Lil. Before I tell you this bitchy story, I'll tell you that I really like Lil and respect her and all that. She was saying, "I'm going to do this piece at Stefan's place," and it was basically for CAPS.*

* Creative Artists Public Service Program.

ALPERT: For who?

ACKER: She had to do a performance for CAPS, so CAPS could come and decide if they wanted to give her money . . .

ALPERT: Oh, CAPS I thought you said for cats.

ACKER: That would be great if someone did a performance for cats. She was just saying, “I need a girl who will lie naked under a table, I don’t know what to do or who I can get.” And I said, “Well, Lil, if that’s all you need I’ll do it, it’s no big deal.” I said, “My body’s not the most beautiful thing in the world, but you know if you can’t find anything else . . . What is it, two hours or something. I can lie naked under a table for two hours, it doesn’t bother me.” So she said okay. About two days before the performance she’s calling me up and telling me what it’s all about, and it’s about . . . Oh God, it turns out to be this whole script, and she wants me to talk to her, we’ve got to have this conversation, and it’s a real performance. And I’m freaking out because I would have never said yes to that. I have a lot of trouble with performances, I mean I’m just inordinately shy is what it comes down to. And I freak out and what happens to me . . . like when I was a stripper and I did performances—I almost change personality, it’s a really strong experience. And it’s all right except that I don’t do it that easily, it’s too strong an experience. Anyways . . . I was into it with Lil—I couldn’t go back out, so I said well I’m not going to talk really, and it turns out there was no table to lie under. I had to sit naked out in front of the table and all my friends were going to be there and it’s this tiny tiny little

space. That was it, I was naked right next to all these people who I knew, and I didn't know them *that* well. All right . . . and then it gets more . . . I have to put all this stuff in my hair . . . The worst was, by the time I got there, I was taking my clothes off and Lil looks at me and said "Oh your body's fine, your breasts are fine, da da da, why don't you put some lipstick on your nipples." And I went uhhh, I was real pissed, I was just real real pissed. So I got out there and realized it was freezing, this was in December and it's just a storefront. The door was open all the time so everyone was going in and out. I was just sitting there naked freezing my tits off, you know? She was ripping me off, because what the piece was about was basically spitting on . . . people would take liquids in their mouth and they'd spit them out on this white sheet and after a while the white sheet would be a painting. And she had another thing about the old birds feed the young birds and I was the young bird who was being fed by the old bird and therefore carrying on the tradition. Obviously I was the second Lil Picard or something.

ALPERT: Were you literally being fed by her during the show?

ACKER: At one point, yes. But she was using me, sexually, as her return, her rebirth.

ALPERT: She's what, seventy-six now?

ACKER: Right. And I said, "Well why do I have to be naked, what's that about?" And she just said, "Well everyone likes a little sex." I mean I was obviously being totally used . . .

ALPERT: Right, as a sex object in someone else's piece.

ACKER: Right. And then she opens the piece and says this da da da and this is the *Black Tarantula* . . . I mean I didn't dig her using that name either, because that involves my work. I thought I'd just sit there, I was like an object in something, and suddenly she says, "And she's the star of the piece." Okay, so I'm sitting there naked being the star of the piece and I decided the best way to deal with this one is just sit there and look like some queen or something. Like sometimes in bad stripper situations what you do is you play the sadist: it gets you out of it. So I just lorded over everybody. I wasn't thinking anymore. All the feelings and everything started to work. All right. So Lil said to someone, "Come up and take a sip of something and then spit it out." So Dieter Froese comes up, takes a sip of something and spits on me.

ALPERT: Oh, he spits on you.

ACKER: Yeah. Well that started it. I figure if this is what's going on . . . from then on all hell broke loose. What I'm going to do is take these vibes and throw them back at the audience magnified, so everyone will realize what's going on because I can't fight it any other way. So I took tomato juice in my mouth and just let it drool all over me. Then Judy Rifka (you don't know her, she's a really good painter) comes up to me, takes a sip of something, comes up to me, opens up my cunt lips and spits on my cunt. From then on the audience figures, you know . . .

ALPERT: Anything went.

ACKER: Yes, it was totally weird, like totally weird style. I mean I would call it art . . .

ALPERT: Well, you didn't go after the audience, then. In other words, when you said you drooled all over yourself I thought you were going to say you spit all over the audience.

ACKER: What I'm saying is by doing that (spitting on me) I was telling them that they could allow themselves to do these things. They'd become conscious of the power mechanism that was going on. I actually walked up to a guy from *The New York Times* and spit on his camera. I spat at the audience.

ALPERT: Oh I see. The other act seemed to me to invite their venting of sadistic . . .

ACKER: Yeah, well I invited it and then I went back at it.

ALPERT: I just wondered whether you returned it.

ACKER: Oh yes. Very much so, but not viciously or anything. I heard afterward that there were friends there of Lil's who went out and vomited, they were so disgusted. Now all that happened was spitting. I mean, come on . . . really there are worse atrocities. Getting spit on is not . . .

ALPERT: It went on for a long time, too, didn't it?

ACKER: Oh yeah, because she wanted to repeat it. After the first time, where I was shaking, we took a break, and then she said, "Kathy, we have to repeat this."

ALPERT: Oh. One after the other, then?

ACKER: One—twenty-minute break—the other. Yeah.

ALPERT: That was about a two-hour period? I remember seeing you (apparently right afterwards) at the opening of that show *Lives*.

ACKER: Oh right, yeah. So it was about two hours. I think it started at four . . .

ALPERT: And *Lives* was ending around seven . . . Were there many performances before that?

ACKER: Well I did a lot in California . . .

ALPERT: Oh, you did?

ACKER: Oh, I don't remember . . .

ALPERT: Not too many in New York, then?

ACKER: I've done readings, you know, little readings here and there. I don't remember, I could look.

ALPERT: Nothing within the genre of performance.

ACKER: No no no, that sort of started me off.

ALPERT: Well didn't you do another variety of performance (we can cut this out later if you want), but it seemed to me the first time I met you, if I remember correctly, was at Jerry Rothenberg's uptown place . . .

ACKER: I used to live up there.

ALPERT: At that time I think Rothenberg mentioned being satiated by stories about your experience working as . . .

ACKER: I was working in a sex show. You don't have to cut that out, it's in my writing . . .

ALPERT: Now, did you conceive of that (obviously you were getting paid), did you ever conceive of that as a kind of performance for yourself, or was that just work?

ACKER: It was work.

ALPERT: It was always work?

ACKER: Yeah, except that I'm into it. I don't draw hard categories, you know.

ALPERT: Well, you were doing it mainly for the money at that time, is that right?

ACKER: Totally.

ALPERT: But it seems that there are topless dancers who are sort of well known . . .

ACKER: Yeah, there are some very famous topless dancers.

ALPERT: No, but I mean in a literary context.

ACKER: Carolee Schneemann used to . . .

ALPERT: I didn't know she did . . .

ACKER: She used to do dirty films.

ALPERT: Janine Pommy Vega discussed her dancing in relation to a poem she read at St. Mark's.

ACKER: Oh Janine did topless dancing?

ALPERT: Yeah, in San Francisco, and Timotha Bialy.

ACKER: Yeah, I know Timotha did it, but Frisco's so light, though. I mean you don't do anything in Frisco.

ALPERT: Oh, it's harder in New York, you think . . .

ACKER: *Honey!* [laughter]

ALPERT: It's illegal now, isn't it?

ACKER: Well, they still dance. They go back and forth about

what you're allowed to show, that's all. San Francisco's very mild. There's a rough section but you'd never work there. I mean in New York . . .

ALPERT: You write about doing . . .

ACKER: Topless and bottomless. No, only topless in New York, topless and bottomless in California, San Diego.

ALPERT: I see. And then live sex acts as well?

ACKER: Well, I didn't actually fuck on stage. It was pretend . . .

ALPERT: Simulated.

ACKER: Yeah, simulated. It was a place for voyeurs . . .

ALPERT: Well, how much did that stuff pay, I'm curious . . .

ACKER: \$200 a week. Yeah and I worked with a guy, so he earned \$200. So we earned \$400 a week.

ALPERT: Oh, that's not bad, if you can stand it.

ACKER: Oh, no! What do you think we were doing it for! Plus, I made unemployment for a year off of it.

ALPERT: I see. So you lived high on that.

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ALPERT: I see. So you lived high on that.

ACKER: Oh, yeah. I needed a lot of money at the time, I was sick again so . . .

ALPERT: I was trying to establish whether there was any connection between that activity and the art-world performances you did.

ACKER: At Lil's, yes.

ALPERT: Obviously the experience gets into the writing, but . . . I mean when I went to The Kitchen in late November, there was a series of "pornographic" photos . . .

ACKER: Right.

ALPERT: That was a rather shocking . . .

ACKER: Lynda Benglis's?

ALPERT: That was Lynda Benglis? I didn't know whose work that was. It was really outrageous, I thought.

ACKER: Oh, no, you saw Ralph Hocking's probably. Did you see color or black and white?

ALPERT: Black and white. All around the front room.

ACKER: Yeah, Ralph Hocking and Sherry Miller. It was excellent, it was really the best I've ever seen.

ALPERT: I've never seen that blatant a tone in an art context.

ACKER: Yeah, it got popular this year.

ALPERT: "Porno Art." I wondered what you thought of that.

ACKER: Oh, I don't think very much of it. How naive they are, that it shocks them. Last year one girl did a performance where all she did was a striptease (I didn't see the performance but someone described it). It wasn't a wild striptease at all. I mean, I've seen some gorgeous stripteases. This was just . . . whatever. And it's ridiculous. You know, these people don't go to bars and see it?

ALPERT: Well, I go to bars and see it; I'm interested in that circumstance. For me to see upfront sexuality in an art context makes me think further about it.

ACKER: There's a big difference between doing simulated sex acts on a stage (and even that was interesting) and working as a stripper. Working as a stripper is a very high form if you want to take it like that . . . I mean it's gorgeous and a real art unto itself.

ALPERT: And you considered it an art in which you perfect your moves?

ACKER: Absolutely. Absolutely. And I could never be a good one. I don't know that, but I never trained to be a good one. But I've seen good strippers and they are absolutely amazing.

ALPERT: My sense is that you can make an art out of any activity you engage in. Bringing it over into an art context is I think the . . .

ACKER: I don't really know what art is. I know what an art context is . . .

ALPERT: If you do it in certain places, it's not only voyeurs who go . . .

ACKER: But I must say, one of the essences of stripteasing is money. [*laughs*] Let's face it.

ALPERT: Right. If you do a sexual performance at The Kitchen, you're not going to get paid too much. Or at all.

ACKER: Yeah, right. And I just find it very amusing [*laughs*] that people do it for free. Because it's about power.

ALPERT: The power you have over the audience?

ACKER: Yeah. And the power they have over you and the whole business. I mean it's complicated. I'm not sure what it's about, but I know that's one thing it is. And I know it just doesn't exist without money.