

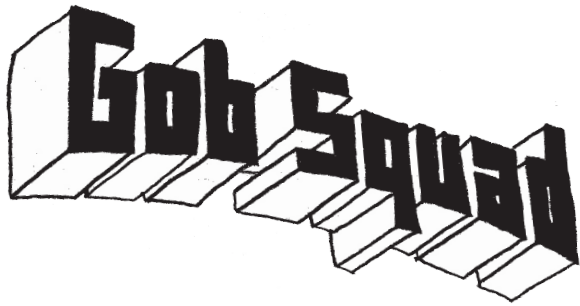
WESTERN SOCIETY



PRESS PACK

PHOTO: DAVID BALTZER

DOWNLOAD THIS DOCUMENT AND HIGH-RES PHOTOS AT gobsquad.com/press-packs



About the group

"This feels like one of the most impossible, beautiful, courageous and epic theatrical experiences you can imagine" The Guardian

Gob Squad is a seven headed monster, an **arts collective** with seven bosses. Gob Squad has a schizophrenic identity and a multiple split personality: hermaphrodite, binational and bilingual, both a patchwork family and a social utopia. Gob Squad have been devising, directing and performing together **since 1994**, working where **theatre meets art, media and real life**.

For over 20 years, Gob Squad have been searching for **new ways to combine media and performance**, producing stage shows, video installations, radio plays, interactive live films and urban interventions. The use of audio and video technology plays a prominent role in their work, with the result that **alienated forms of intimacy** have become a central theme. They try to scratch beneath the shiny, pixelated surface of the 21st century, seeking out the dark corners and hidden desires of contemporary culture.

Always on the hunt for beauty amidst the mundane, they place their work at the heart of **urban life**: in houses, shops, underground stations, car parks, hotels or directly on the street, as well as in theatres and galleries. **Everyday life and magic, banality and idealism, reality and entertainment** are all set on a collision course and the unpredictable results are captured on video.

Motivated by a desire to elevate the everyday and empower audience members to step beyond their traditional role as passive spectators, Gob Squad set up often absurdly **utopian scenarios** where meaningful collective experience and genuine **encounters involving passers-by and audience members** are suddenly possible. Audiences seem to like the feeling that anything might happen during an evening with Gob Squad. They might be asked to dance, sing or even kiss one of the performers. They might play guitar in a band, play the part of a lover or liberator in a semi-improvised film, or be asked to explain the complexities of the world to an unknown future. Or they might just simply be asked to sit and bear witness to the organised chaos unfolding on stage before them.

Gob Squad was founded in **1994**, whilst its members were still at Nottingham Trent and Giessen universities. **Berlin** has been the group's creative home since 1999. **Core members** are Johanna Freiburg, Sean Patten, Sharon Smith, Berit Stumpf, Sarah Thom, Bastian Trost and Simon Will. Other artists are invited to collaborate on particular projects. The group is managed by Eva Hartmann.

Gob Squad's international reputation has grown steadily since coming to prominence at documenta X in 1997. Their productions have been shown on all the continents apart from Antarctica where projects such as SUPER NIGHT SHOT (2003), GOB SQUAD'S KITCHEN (2007, winner of New York's Drama Desk Award), SAVING THE WORLD (2008, winner of the Goethe Preis at the Impulse Festival), BEFORE YOUR VERY EYES (2011, selected for Germany's Theatertreffen) and WESTERN SOCIETY (2013) have received wide acclaim.



DOWNLOAD THIS DOCUMENT AND HIGH-RES PHOTOS AT gobsquad.com/press-packs

PHOTO: GARRETT DAVIS/CAPTURE IMAGING

WESTERN SOCIETY

About the show

***No one is where they are. They are talking to someone miles away.
I miss them. But they are missing out***

- Sherry Turkle, "Alone Together"

Western Society is a portrait of civilisation in the 21st century, like a frame through which we can peep into the living room of an unknown family, and recognize ourselves.

Fascinated with technology, Gob Squad zoom the camera directly into the centre of the western home. By exploring the internet's remote darkness, Gob Squad have brought back a tiny satellite, a fairly unspectacular unwatched video of an anonymous living room, of a family gathering somewhere at the edge of the western world. There's a party going on. A room full of people. Family, friends and strangers are all being held together by a karaoke machine: alone together and together alone.

Gob Squad, dripping in bling, want to bring this little moment of lived reality back to life and they want to get the image just right. What are we doing here? What is this? Is this happiness? The performers keep asking themselves the same questions, wondering how the hell they got where they are today.

As the performers search for answers, test their knowledge, show their best sides and spill their stories, reconstructing and projecting themselves into this tiny piece of history over and over again, a few lucky audience members may win the chance to take part in the shiny golden image.

Western Society is inviting and isolating. It's heaven and hell. Some see a nightmare, others a place they wished they could be – too real, too fake, too familiar, too strange.

Meanwhile, always somewhere, and despite everything the party goes on and on and on. Everyone is there, young and old and all those in the middle, and you are there too...

Credits

Concept

Gob Squad

Devised and performed by

Johanna Freiburg
Sean Patten
Damian Rebgetz
Tatiana Saphir
Sharon Smith
Berit Stumpf
Sarah Thom
Bastian Trost
Simon Will

Video

Miles Chalcraft

Sound Design

Jeff McGrory

Technical Coordinator & Lighting Design

Chris Umney

Costumes

Emma Cattell & Kerstin Honeit

Realisation Set Design

Lena Mody

Dramaturgy and Production Management

Christina Runge

Artistic Assistant

Mat Hand

Gob Squad Management

Eva Hartmann

Interns

Sarah Sarina Rommedahl
Sophie Galibert

Gob Squad is regularly funded within the Konzeptförderung programme 2015 - 2019 by the Senatsverwaltung für Kultur und Europa Berlin.

WESTERN SOCIETY WAS ORIGINALLY COMMISSIONED BY AND DEVELOPED WITH SUPPORT FROM CENTER THEATRE GROUP,
MICHAEL RITCHIE, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, LOS ANGELES, CA. THE WORLD PREMIERE PRODUCTION OF WESTERN SOCIETY WAS
ORIGINALLY PRODUCED BY HAU HEBBEL AM UFER, BERLIN. SPIELART FESTIVAL MUNICH AND BRUT VIENNA.
A HOUSE ON FIRE CO-PRODUCTION WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE CULTURE PROGRAMME OF THE EUROPEAN UNION.
WITH FINANCIAL SUPPORT FROM BERLINER KULTURVERWALTUNG.



PRESS QUOTES

ON GOB SQUAD:

Gob Squad is the one company of whom I'm a fan first, and a critic second. They're more like a band than almost any other theatre company.
WHATSONSTAGE.COM

This feels like one of the most impossible, beautiful, courageous and epic theatrical experiences you can imagine.
THE GUARDIAN

ON WESTERN SOCIETY:

"Truly profound... a deliriously sane portrait of the age of the selfie... A haunting, funny vision of a society. For sheer, audacious ambition, nothing tops the collective's Western Society. Unlike any other you'll encounter this year."

Critics Choice ★★★★★
NEW YORK TIMES

"Gob Squad virgins, please stop reading now, and go get your tickets!... Their comic touch manages to be feather- light, yet there's a real insistence on distance, sadness, disconnection, self-deception."
Time Out New York

"Sardonic and whip-clever, wryly interrogative, thrilling... A strange, surreal and fascinatingly revealing experience."
LA WEEKLY

"It is absolutely fascinating how Gob Squad dismantle the images of our living room society and reconstruct them with such finesse. The show has an irresistible magic and is quite simply a barrel load of fun."
BERLINER MORGENPOST

"A thoroughly entertaining, intelligent and ironic evening"
STAGE AND SCREEN

"Western Society is a perfect Gob Squad show - a tightrope walk between performance, video installation, interactive live film and improvisation... This is theatre in its purest and best form - ingeniously put together, extremely funny, entertaining, crazy and with a charming whiff of anarchy in the air."
KULTURRADIO RBB

"Powerful, ingenious, extremely funny... Who would have thought there was so much to get out of an insignificant YouTube discovery?"
DER STANDARD, VIENNA



PHOTO: DAVID BALTZER

WESTERN SOCIETY

Gob Squad: The unruly Anglo-German theatre collective still evolving after 25 years

THE STAGE
Jul 3, 2018

The Anglo-German theatre collective considers itself 'a bit like a blob' – 'morphing' to meet its members' needs. Founder member Sarah Thom tells Matt True-man how the company has grown together over 25 years

The Japanese art of flower arranging, ikebana, features heavily in Gob Squad's latest show. Throughout *Creation (Pictures for Dorian)*, flowers are serenely slotted into place under a heat lamp. As an art form, ikebana elevates the act of arranging over the final arrangement, and it celebrates the plant's life cycle – growth and decay – over the pristine beauty of blooms at their peak. As the performance plays out, petals wrinkle and wilt.

Gob Squad's seven members have grown up together, over 25 years, but age has hardly withered them. The iconoclastic Anglo-German collective has built up a body of rambunctious performances unlike anyone else's – and is still going strong.

Creation, a careful meditation on ageing, art and visibility, which premiered at Brighton Festival, felt like Gob Squad's most mature work to date, but it still showed the silly side that has set the collective apart. En route, it has sent signals into outer space with *Calling Laika*, incited insurrection from the Institute of Contemporary Arts in *Revolution Now* and taken to the streets with camcorders and superhero capes to capture every single thing in existence for *Saving the World*.

Gob Squad has always felt similar to a gang – and watching it, you want to sign up and join in. But behind the buccaneering playfulness, there's always insight and

purpose. From its early site-specific shows to its own brand of real-time films, splicing the best bits of theatre and live TV, Gob Squad's work has consistently pushed performance. Its shows stretch their limits and expand horizons, whether riffing off classics, such as *War and Peace* or *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, or teaching robots to talk, such as in *My Square Lady*. But, for founder member Sarah Thom, it all adds up to something bigger: **"Just being Gob Squad, that's our greatest work. Some have come, some have gone, but we've managed 25 years. It's a piece in itself."**

Like ikebana, Gob Squad is an ongoing act: unfolding, evolving, undergoing growth and decay. It's more than its shows – more, even, than its members. Gob Squad is a process – perhaps a way of life. **It functions as a collective, completely and utterly. It doesn't just create work collaboratively, the team members run their lives and their company in the same way.** Touring dates, pay packets, funding applications – all of it comes from communal decisions.

"There really is no boss," Thom stresses. "It's a struggle, but we believe in the politics of that. You're constantly in process, negotiating things, working everything out so it's completely fair and egalitarian. We're all one – a bit like a blob. We can't exist without each other, but each of us is absolutely replaceable. Gob Squad would go on without any one of us."

It's not easy being Gob Squad. In fact, Thom reckons theirs is "the most inefficient way of working ever", but the benefits outweigh the hassle. "Everything takes longer, but it does mean that, at the end, everybody owns it." And nobody gets left behind, either – the company "morphs" to meet its members' needs and fit their lives. It has shifted to accommodate relationships, babies and illnesses – people

always come first. "There's no institution to defer or submit to. Everything's open to debate, everything's up for grabs. It's what has held us together all this time," she says.

Gob Squad grew out of Nottingham Trent University. Its founder members – four of which remain – met on its Creative Arts course, an inter-disciplinary programme rooted in collaborative practice that criss-crossed from video to visual arts. An exchange scheme with Giessen University gave the company its Anglo-German core: Berit Stumpf and Johanna Freiburg clicked with Thom and Sean Patten. They still do: "There was a kindred spirit. We just got on – that's the most important thing."

For the last 20 years, Gob Squad has been based in Berlin – the funding's much better, commissions matched by the state – but it has retained relationships with theatres in the UK. "The UK is so important to us, way more than people realise," says Thom. They still "feel very at home here", but homecomings are getting harder. "Funding's less available given the size we are now. Our shows practically have to fit into suitcases to tour."

Having begun making site-specific work, taking over houses, offices and a furniture shop floor to subvert everyday spaces, Gob Squad began taking "baby steps" towards theatres at the end of the 1990s. For its first foray on to the stage, *Close Enough to Kiss*, it built a mirrored box to block the audience out. "Theatre's about the act of looking," Thom explains, "not just telling stories. We wanted to ask questions about the stage as a space."

Effectively, it treated theatres the same as any other site, toying with their configurations and conventions. The show *Safe* likened theatregoing to travel: ticket checks, stewardess ushers, a pilot MC. *Creation (Pictures for Dorian)* is all about "frames within frames". Similar to Wilde's

WESTERN SOCIETY

novel, it examines the triangular relationship of art, artists and audience.

On stage, however, Gob Squad found itself constrained by the need to stick to the script. Since *Safe*, it has created structures, then improvised as it goes. **“Rules, risk, reality, rhythm” – that’s the Gob Squad playbook.** “Without them, something’s missing: the element of not quite knowing where you are. **We create a space where we’re able to be alive and to be ourselves** – and that is fun. It’s always at risk of being dropped and that makes it so much more exciting.”

If Gob Squad shows are alive, they’re also electric – literally as well as figuratively. Video is often at the heart of its work, the camera adding to and emphasising the quality of being live. *Room Service* plonks four lonely souls in separate hotel rooms for a night with only a camera for company. *Super Night Shot*, which it is doing for the National Theatre of Scotland this summer, sends four performers on to the streets to shoot a blockbuster film. One’s the hero, another the villain; one casts extras, another scouts locations. Their four feeds are mixed live.

This, perhaps, has been Gob Squad’s most pioneering front – not just in terms of performance, but in relation to society. Since the members of Gob Squad first picked up their VHS camcorders, cameras have become ubiquitous. Anyone can be a social media star. “When we first started using it, lots of people had home video cameras, so it felt quite universal, quite a DIY aesthetic,” Thom says. It proved liberating, freeing Gob Squad from ‘stageyness’ and participants from inhibition. “As soon as you’ve got a camera, you’re not crazy. You can ask people quite full-on questions in the street and they’ll answer.” In today’s camera-centric world, it can go one of two ways: either

people are cautious, wary of protecting their image online, or they’re comfortable – too comfortable.

That might explain Gob Squad’s retreat to the stage of late, and to those classic texts. Practically, it’s useful. Thom says: “Source material brings us all back to one point, as we go off on our seven different tangents.” But there’s politics too: about looking back, about remaking, engaging with the past. “You’re always standing on the shoulders of giants,” adds Thom. History, like Gob Squad, art and ikebana, is a process.

Matt Trueman

Five Facts about Gob Squad

1. *Gob Squad started in 1994. Its members wanted a way to get into Glastonbury for free.*
2. *Gob Squad has toured every continent but Antarctica.*
3. *Among the unusual spaces Gob Squad has performed in are the Steffi Graf tennis stadium in Berlin and a bingo hall in West Bromwich, UK.*
4. *Gob Squad’s smallest production was To@ster, which involved two performers, 10 toasters and 1,000 slices of bread. The biggest, My Square Lady, involved a 40-piece orchestra, a choir of 35 children, 30 technicians, seven opera singers, seven scientists and a robot called Myon.*
5. *Performing Super Night Shot in Rio, Gob Squad faced arrest. The show ends with performers running through the streets in pants – illegal in Brazil. They bought bikinis and swimsuits, which are fine.*



WESTERN SOCIETY

DER STANDARD, VIENNA

November 29th, 2013

Manipulated YouTube Dreams of California

Glitz on film: "Western Society" by Gob Squad.

Gob Squad have searched for the embodiment of western society and found it in a mundane home video on YouTube. Fortunately, the performance derived from it is ingenious and extremely funny. It has embarrassingly low viewing figures. The Anglo-German performance group Gob Squad has taken on a family video, uploaded with as good as zero reaction, and elevated it to the starting point of their most recent piece, Western Society. General disinterest is no rarity in this genre. Videos of parties you never went to and know no one at. What's the point? It's a case for some performance research...

The piece was produced with the participation of the Center Theater Group in Los Angeles, the supposed origin of the home video, which is what the karaoke song California Dreaming refers to. Eight non-descript people celebrate a karaoke party in low resolution with moderate success. Grandma dances with hands in the air in the background, a girl plays with a mobile phone, a woman tucks into a cake. The pixellated living room with its assembled guests is a joyless sight. To look at this room, you ostensibly peer into the face of western society - a tall order, which Gob Squad are fully aware of. If you proclaim something to be a portrait of "Western Society", you can only fail and that is what Gob Squad do, knowingly and in a clever and entertaining way.

The opening already shows how central ideas of society and civilisation are to the piece. It begins with Adam and Eve, and the supposedly lost paradise from the dawn of time. Or, judging by the sparse clothing of the men at the Munich performance, it all began with Adam and Adam, who put on platinum blond wigs, and meet each other later during the countdown of the passing years in glittering gold dresses at some point on a couch in California. The family video is reenacted live with volunteers from the audience and in this way placed in relationship to everyone present. The amateur performers stand in for the dancing Grandma or the cake-eating woman or mobile-phone-fiddling girl. They are purely screens for our projections, receiving instructions over their headsets; isolated by wearing headphones and therefore having no idea of their shared fate. This unsuspecting powerlessness has a powerful effect. It plainly shows the quality of being thrown into this world, the so-called 'contours of alienation' around us. It's a perfect role for amateurs - forms of audience participation are a Gob Squad speciality.

The mediated nature of consumed media reality is crucial in Western Society, the fact that our life is so nicely represented by media nowadays, that we increasingly communicate and look at each other pixellated. The family scene is recreated in front of a living room set at the same moment as it is projected live onto a screen. We observe the present, this family that could be our own, through a highly disruptive, manipulable and indeed manipulated template.

The party is paused again and again, the family projected anew and claimed as their own by the performers to which they ask the most varied and very private questions. In this way, the state of the society they belong to is debated, "Bombing Syria - yes or no?", "Losing your mother or losing your legs?", "Malta or Mallorca?" Who would have thought there was so much to get out of an insignificant YouTube discovery?

Margarete Affenzeller

WESTERN SOCIETY

It's a Selfie World After All
NEW YORK TIMES Critics' Pick
FEB. 19, 2015

Go ahead. Take a picture. Make a memory. Then send it out into the universe, and maybe it will turn into somebody else's memory, too. You'll be a star. You'll be an interchangeable nobody. These destinies are not mutually exclusive.

The use of cameras is encouraged during the performance of "Western Society," the Gob Squad's deliriously sane portrait of the age of the selfie, which opened on Wednesday night at the Skirball Center at New York University, where it runs through Saturday. Indeed, picture-taking smartphones are considered an essential accessory for its audience members.

That's especially true for those theatergoers who are selected — via a lottery system involving stuffed animals, which are randomly tossed into our midst — to participate in the show's climactic tableau vivant. This scene, which I promise you is unlike any other you'll encounter this year, is a movement-by-movement re-creation of what is described as one of the least-watched videos ever to be posted on the Internet.

But before we're allowed to ascend to that pinnacle of empathetic, egotistic artistry, we need to figure

how we got here. And the Gob Squad, a media-mixing British-German arts collective that isn't daunted by vast questions, takes us back to the dawn of humanity. Well, even before.

The show's opening minutes are a countdown, year by year, from 2000 B.C. to the present, with the digits projected on a screen, while sound effects capture the changing tempo of time's march. At some point, real live Homo sapiens (four, to be exact) arrive on the scene, and they are a glory to behold.

They're as naked as God made them, except for those high heels and California-blond wigs. (No benevolent creator sends its children into the world without a bit of aesthetic armor.) But as the years move on (and time flies when you're naked), they don cloth of gold and sunglasses and bling to die for.

And with increasing frequency, as we near the 21st century, they freeze to strike a posterity-minded pose together. Bring on the cameras, world. Humankind is now more than ready for its close-up.

Few performance artists today use cameras as probingly or entertainingly as Gob Squad. Its earlier offerings have included "Super Night Shot," in which an entire movie is made within the hour before curtain time, and "Gob Squad's Kitchen (You

Never Had It So Good)," a reassembling of a home video by Andy Warhol, the company's patron saint. (Both were seen in New York several years ago as part of the Under the Radar Festival.)

But for sheer, audacious ambition, nothing tops the collective's "Western Society," which improbably makes good on the promised breadth of its title. The show's cast members — Sean Patten, Sarah Thom, Bastian Trost and Simon Will — and technological gurus deploy lenses both macro and micro to put us, as well as themselves, into the big picture of contemporary civilization.

Their achievement of this immodest goal is centered on a home video that, when the Gob Squad first came upon it on the Internet, had received a total of four views. Lasting 2 minutes and 50 seconds, the clip shows a festive gathering of seven unidentified people of different generations who dance, perform karaoke (to the Mamas and the Papas' "California Dreamin'"), flip through magazines and eat lots of cake.

Legal restraints keep the Gob Squad from showing the original video, except from a discreet distance. Instead, following a blueprint of body outlines that is projected onto a screen, the performers insinuate themselves into the forms and movements of their prototypes.

WESTERN SOCIETY

The Gob Squadders are not entirely confined by the roles they take on. As they dance, eat cake, flip through magazines, etc. — their simulcast images seen on the screen that separates the audience from the live action — they ask one another questions about the burning choices that confront the world today.

A random sampling: “Louis Vuitton or Chanel?” “Diapers for adults: a good thing or a bad thing?” “North Korea or South Korea?” “Sleep deprivation or waterboarding?”

At the same time, their curiosity about the people they are imitating shades into more solipsistic concerns, about their own families and futures and pasts. It’s sort of exhausting, stretching a mere four people to embody seven characters. So the cast members bring seven people from the audience onstage. (And don’t worry; you can just say no.)

These lucky designees are assigned the roles of the people in the video, whom the Gob Squad has given names like Dancing Granny and White-Cap Boy. With astonishing seamlessness, the new cast members — who receive instructions through headsets — replicate the movements of the people in the video.

Freed of mimetic duties, the Gob Squad folks insert themselves, as themselves, into this happy gath-

ering. They take turns pretending that the figures in the simulated video are members of their own family, to be caressed or confronted. And suddenly “Western Society” turns out to be about projection in much more than a technological sense.

Self-exposing performance art can be unbearably tedious. But this production extends and blurs the boundaries of individual selves in ways that wind up qualifying as truly profound. The manipulation throughout of images and objects — which include champagne buckets, red velvet ropes, golden miniature animal statues and, but of course, cell-

phones — coheres into a haunting, funny vision of a society that shifts from total inclusivity to isolating exclusion.

Many whimsical questions, as I’ve mentioned, are posed in “Western Society.” But the most frequently asked is, “What are we doing here?” Gob Squad, bless its oversized heart, keeps doing its darnedest to cover the cosmic waterfront of possible answers.

BEN BRANTLEY



PHOTO: DAVID BALTZER

WESTERN SOCIETY

TIME OUT NEW YORK
FEBRUARY 2015

If you are new to Gob Squad, if you didn't see the Public presentations of Kitchen (You've Never Had It So Good) or Super Night Shot, you should not read the last paragraph of this review. It will spoil delicious surprises for you, and much of Gob Squad's power emerges from the way it tickles its audience—and you mustn't see your tickler coming.

The media-savvy company of German and English actors has been thinking about the ordinary, about the joy of joining, the impermanence of relationships and about how strangers can sometimes act as friends. To investigate these issues, they re-create—every night anew—an Internet video. The clip in question is a YouTube nonentity, a short record of a family celebrating something (there's cake) and singing karaoke, a kind of ne plus ultra of the Modern Awkward. "When we found it, only four people had watched it!" crows Bastian Trost, the member whose sweet enthusiasm most animates the evening. That we begin with a video countdown that started at 1,000,000 B.C. indicates a certain rue on our hosts' part. Civilization! It's gotten us here.

As the gold-lamé-bedecked quartet move in and out of roles like "White Cap Boy" and "He Dances with Granny," they first reveal their thoughts in their given places ("I am thinking about this leather couch...and about how once it was a cow standing in a field") and then slide imperceptibly into talking about their own very personal memories. They also pose each

other unanswerable, improvised questions like, "Islamic fundamentalism or Christian fundamentalism?" so we can see them squirm in close-up. Indeed, we wind up watching almost the entire show through the live video feed, since a rolling screen usually stands between the action and the audience. The film eats the show, which eats the film; no one can play this sort of game like Gob Squad. Their comic touch manages to be feather-light, yet there's a real insistence on distance, sadness, disconnection, self-deception.

Okay. Gob Squad virgins, please stop reading now, and go get your tickets.

Fellow aficionados—at last we're alone. I can now confess to you, as people also thoroughly enamored of those other works, that Western Society does slightly disappoint. The meandering delights of those other shows have slowed here to a sometimes difficult amble, and the naughty inclusion of randomly selected audience members, cued by headsets, hasn't the same urgency and thematic complexity that it did in Kitchen. Previous Gob Squad visits set the standard ridiculously high, and it doesn't help that the piece keeps asking us about memory, to remember a party we'd like to relive. I know which one I was thinking of: Gob Squad threw it in 2012.

HELEN SHAW

WESTERN SOCIETY

A Living Room of One's Own
HUFFINGTON POST
FEB. 2015

In case you haven't noticed, we live in an age of constant self-documentation. This shouldn't be news to anyone, but I was reminded of this when I stopped in Starbucks and ended up in the back of someone's selfie stick-filmed video. Was this person trying to capture a grippingly interesting coffee-getting adventure, or were they more interested in the everyday nature of midtown coffee routines? Perhaps that video has already been uploaded to YouTube. It's not exactly viral video material, but how much of what we record and share about our lives really is? Let's face it: the vast portion of our day is not something anyone else would be interested in viewing.

So, what happens when these moments do get recorded and put out into a digital world that hasn't picked them up and made them stars in their own right? In Western Society, Gob Squad sets out to champion one such video. If you had to define "Western Society" as a concept in one video, it might not look very much like "Keyboard Cat" or "Charlie Bit My Finger - Again!". According to Gob Squad, a group of German and UK-based artists, the video that speaks to them about today's "Western Society" is far more mundane. It is a scene from what appears to be a karaoke party, filmed from a mounted camera of some sort. Despite there being eight (main) people visible in the video, Gob Squad claims that it had only four views when they found it. If all the people shown in the video couldn't even be bothered to watch it, why should anyone else?

Yet Gob Squad became obsessed with this odd relic from an unremarkable party in Santa Barbara, California. To be honest, that obsession is contagious. As I watched the performers embody these anonymous partygoers, talking us through what

they think is happening to the people in the video, I found myself wondering about a lot of aspects of that party, YouTube culture, and society. Devoid of any information about the context of this found footage, Gob Squad and the audience is able to simultaneously extract and impose meaning and narrative onto this scene that YouTube has allowed us to endlessly repeat. "What are we doing here?" the performers constantly ask each other, as they step in and out of the various roles of this approximately three minute long clip. The trick is that the answer to that question both is and isn't contained in that video.

You see, the use of this video is not the first thing that I saw on stage at NYU's Skirball Center. Western Society begins with its own abridged history of what has come before - it reminded me a bit of the opening of 2001: A Space Odyssey. As Sean Patten, Sarah Thom, Bastian Trost, and Simon Will entered the stage wearing nothing but heels and wigs, they literally built society up around themselves, moving furniture, a screen, and a video camera into place as the years raced towards the present moment. We have come with them through the past, and now we're here in the present.

But what are we doing here? One of the most fascinating aspects of Western Society is that the entire mood of the piece forces us to continually question the "here" in that sentence. What are we doing in New York City? What are we doing with our technology? What are we doing in a seat in the Skirball Center? Sean, Sarah, Bastian, and Simon are all calling each other by their real names, directly addressing the audience, and even interacting with actual audience members who are brought up to take on seven of the eight roles in some of the recreations of the video. These conditions mean that this performance creates a different kind of theatrical experience for an audience member. It's an almost hypnotic mix of the excitement of live performance and the comfort of the distance provided by technology. We feel somehow very close to the performers, who speak to us like friends and who have interacted with seven randomly chosen delegates from our audience

community, yet we are protected by the screen and by the media that allows us to keep a safe distance. We know the performers are there, but we very often see them through a livestreamed projection onto a screen.

Western Society, like its namesake, actually requires your participation in the system to make meaning. Western Society has four performers -- like the four original viewers of the video -- who have now brought this slice of life reality to a broader audience. By putting the bodies of audience members on both sides of the equation, they have taken a video more impressive for its isolation on YouTube than for its content, and made it a model for the human desire to make narrative and meaning. As we watch the performers interweave their own stories (or, at least, what is presented as their own stories) into this video, we are encouraged to make parallel moves in our own minds. What do we think of when we first see "Cake Lady" or "Granny"? Who are these people in our own lives? What are we doing here?

All of these questions ebbed and flowed in my mind as I sat in the Skirball Center, watching a live performance of the complex relationships formed between technology and culture and reality. But the performance itself was most like Granny in the video, who several of the performers remark is just "pure joy." Gob Squad has managed to create a piece that asks and explores real questions through a performance that doesn't make thinking about any of these issues seem like work at all. Though Western Society has already moved on from the Skirball Center, you should be sure to catch this piece or any other Gob Squad offering the next time they're in town for a night worthy of a whole lot of YouTube views. It's like having a living room of one's own, but in a room full of people who feel the same way.

BESS ROWEN

WESTERN SOCIETY

Die Welt
21.08.15

“Western Society” – Überraschende Performance eines Youtube Videos

Vier Personen hatten das Youtube-Video über eine Karaoke-Party in Kalifornien angeklickt, bevor das deutsch/britische Künstlerkollektiv Gob Squad es mit der Live-Performance “Western Society” auf seine eigene Art verbreitete. Zuletzt auf dem Internationalen Sommerfestival auf Kampnagel, wo sowohl die Performancegruppe, als auch die private Gesellschaft aus dem Video viele neue Fans gewonnen haben dürfte. Das reale Video wird von Gob Squad nicht im Original gezeigt, sondern auf die Bühne geholt: “White Cap Boy” und “Girl With Phone” sitzen auf einer Couch. Hinter ihnen tanzt “Granny”. Eine “Cake Lady” isst Torte und weitere Figuren stehen herum. Die Partyszene wird vielfach gebrochen gespiegelt. Auf eine Leinwand in der Mitte der Bühne sind die Figuren in ihren Umrissen aufgezeichnet. Dahinter wurde ein echtes Wohnzimmer aufgebaut, das auf die weiße Fläche projiziert werden kann.

Eines der unbeachteten Internetvideos aller Zeiten wird zu einer glamourösen Show: Die Gob Squad Schauspieler Johanna Freiburg, Berit Stumpf, Sarah Thom und Bastian Trost haben sich mit Glitzerfummel gestylt und schlüpfen in die Rollen der Leute aus dem Video. Als diese führen sie das Publikum in ein Spannungsfeld aus Gegensätzen: Während sie ihr Innerstes nach außen kehren, bleiben sie dennoch in Rollen verhaftet, die ein in die Öffentlichkeit gestelltes Video ihnen vorgibt.

Ein Spiel, das berührt und doch fremd bleibt – und sich steigert, als das Publikum einbezogen wird: Die unvorbereiteten Leute sitzen, tanzen und laufen im hinteren Bühnenraum herum, ohne dass man ihnen anmerkt, dass sie plötzlich ein Publikum haben. Vielleicht, weil Kopfhörer und die Leinwand im vorderen Bühnenraum sie abschirmen. In unserer digitalisierten Welt ist es möglich und unmöglich zugleich, mit völlig Fremden in deren Wohnzimmer eine Party zu feiern, ohne dass diese etwas davon merken. Zumindest in der Performance von Gob Squad bringt die Party sehr viel Spaß.



PHOTO: STEVEN GUNTHER

WESTERN SOCIETY

Guangdong Art Journal 24.11.17

"Sketches in the age of the selfie"

Excerpts from the full article:

"When the performers invite the audience to participate in the game, the meaning of Western Society is clear: the theatre itself becomes an exhibition of authenticity, individuality and reproduction, part of a discussion of the problem..."

"The performance asks the question: in this homogenised, globalised era, how much of our experience, thoughts and emotions are individual and original when multinational companies shape our very way of life? This is why we [in China] see "Western Society" by no means as exotic. It depicts not only Western Society but also all of us..."

"At the end of the show is a song: 'The Party's Over', and there are so many layers, you can not tell the meaning of the song any more. Is the reconstructed home video actually in the original party? Or are we the ones laughing and playing in this moment, with a stage full of champagne and chocolate metaphor? In the end, people always enjoy fantasy. It makes us part of the civilized world, as Shakespeare said: "The whole world is a stage."

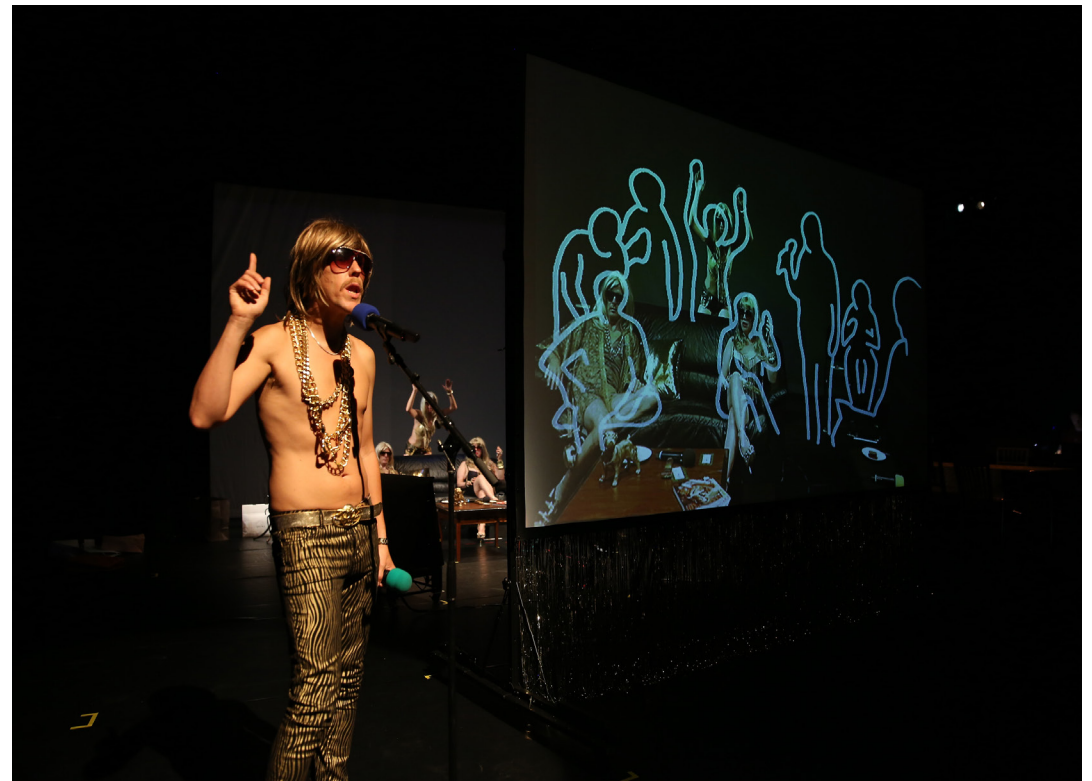


PHOTO: STEVEN GUNTHER