

**BRIDGET MOSER**



**IS THIS THING ON?**



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*Essays by  
Stefan Hancherow &  
Sarah Hollenberg*

**MSVU Art Gallery**  
Halifax, Canada



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# Acknowledgements

It is a privilege to be publishing the first exhibition catalogue devoted to the work of the young performance and video artist Bridget Moser. Her work already attracted serious critical attention from contributors to Canadian art journals. In these pages, Sarah Hollenberg and Stefan Hancherow add their original analyses to the growing literature.

Stefan Hancherow is the guest curator of the exhibition. On his initiative, the exhibition includes a new video by Moser, shot on-site at MSVU Art Gallery. Hancherow's comments on the work-in-progress are necessarily incomplete, but they draw attention to an important theme in Moser's prop-driven performances—the traffic between art-world and consumer-world commodity fetishism. On behalf of the artist and the curator, I thank the Toronto Arts Council and the Ontario Arts Council for the grants that made this exhibition and new video possible.

In a separate essay, the contemporary art historian Sarah Hollenberg examines the semiotic workings of three older works: *So What?!*, *Asking for a friend*, and *Tender Offer Part I*. At the same time, she situates Moser's oeuvre historically "in a long line of meaning-makers, outclassed but clever, sparring playfully with the behemoth of mass culture."

It has been a pleasure to work with Bridget Moser, and to become acquainted with her methods by serving as a transit depot for the stream of exotic products arriving from Amazon.com, all destined for starring roles in her new video, *Memory Foam*.

As usual, I am grateful to the MSVU Art Gallery staff David Dahms, Traci Steylen and Susan Wolf for their efforts in preparing the exhibition and this catalogue. Both projects were mounted with the equally indispensable support of a multi-year grant from the Canada Council for the Arts.

*Ingrid Jenkner*  
*Director, MSVU Art Gallery*



# Bridget Moser's Grammar

## The Anxiety of Influence

I'm the best ever. There's never been anybody as ruthless. I'm Sonny Liston. I'm Jack Dempsey. There's no one like me. I'm from their cloth. There's no one can match me. My style is impetuous, my defenses impregnable, and I'm just ferocious.

The woman who speaks these words wears a white button-down shirt, clutches a brightly patterned blanket around her waist with one hand, and holds a microphone to her lips with the other. Pacing back and forth restlessly behind a shop window, she addresses the live audience watching her from the street. She is repeating words spoken by Mike Tyson after a particularly short match in 2000, and in doing so she points to a challenge faced by anyone who makes a living getting noticed, whether for creative or athletic accomplishments. "I'm Sonny Liston. I'm Jack Dempsey. *There's no one like me.*" We legitimate our favourite new player by comparing her to previous masters, stars, and victors; at the same time we demand that she be original, different, that there be *no one like her*. In *Tender Offer Part I* (2014), Moser circles around this conundrum; forgoing Tyson's knockout punch, she dances through the match, offering an homage to her origins then claiming the unique status of the original, startling us with her freshness one moment, and dismissing the very possibility of such the next.

In an all-white space, occupied by a white performer in white clothes, the aforementioned blanket stands out as the only substantial source of colour. When Moser pulls it over her head, it becomes a gaudy substitute for the swath of gray felt that covered Joseph Beuys in his infamous 1974 performance *I Like America and America Likes Me*. Standing in profile to the window, Moser hunches forward, her upper body rocking up and down to a looping, poppy synth track. Speaking in time with the music, she says,

... on some days, I get the strange sensation that we've been here before, or, more likely, I've borrowed a piece or two, or, more, likely, I'm just reliving a past life that's not mine, and that's alright. I'm getting by, by getting by, and that's alright, it's just one of those things, whispering quietly: "I like America and America likes me," or, some variation, one of *Seven Easy Pieces*, and, so it goes.

The last sentence of this brief discourse on creative genealogy traces a historical trajectory for performance art that is either degenerative or liberating, depending on how committed you are to the idea of originality. Here we are reminded of how, in a single generation, the figure of the performance artist transformed from paragon of shamanistic authenticity typified by figures like Beuys and Marina Abramovic, to the performance artist as provider of poker-faced entertainments in a popular culture that consumes and monetizes everything, typified by Abramovic's recent work, of which *Seven Easy Pieces* is an exemplary model.<sup>1</sup> Instead of decrying this shift, however, or seeking a return to the seriousness and authenticity of performance art in the early 1970s, when Beuys and Abramovic first made their mark in an art world that set itself staunchly against the frivolity of pop culture, Moser engages that culture—in its current, pumped up, hysterical form—with absolute seriousness. In this and other live performances, Moser wields the shamanistic power that made Beuys and Abramovic art-world stars, luminaries of the eternal and universal, but she applies it to the quotidian culture of WebMD, corporate jargon, internet shopping, youthful nostalgia and guided self-improvement.<sup>2</sup> Rather than drawing her audiences into the libidinally charged state of awe provoked by Abramovic's performative presence, Moser casts modest spells that

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<sup>1</sup>Abramovic performed *Seven Easy Pieces* at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in November, 2005. It consisted of a series of reenactments of "seminal performance works by her peers dating from the 1960s and '70s." <http://pastexhibitions.guggenheim.org/abramovic/>.

<sup>2</sup>On Moser's engagement with the culture of self-improvement, see Daniela Sanders' excellent "Bridget Moser & The Art of Self-Improvement," *Canadian Art*, (Winter, 2015), <http://canadianart.ca/features/2014/12/04/bridget-moser-asking-friend/>.



*So What?!* 2013, video still

fulfill minor yearnings and assuage absurd fears. In *So what?!* (2013), after failing to escape her own shadow, Moser conjures up a slouching dance partner in a windbreaker and a ball-cap—a golem summoned not to protect or destroy, but to dance the slow dance of awkward adolescence.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Bad' dancing is a constant presence in Moser's work, tying it to a recent tendency in pop culture, celebrated in Yoko Ono's 2013 song and music video *Bad Dancer*, and more recently in Taylor Swift's *Shake it Off* video. This approach to dance signifies authentic and unselfconscious pleasure in movement by emphasizing a dancer's lack of skill. Moser's use of this particular language of movement, most directly engaged in her 2009 video *Real Education*, raises compelling questions about contemporary signifiers of authenticity that beg further investigation.

## Glamour

Etymologically, glamour is grammar corrupted. The Latin *grammatica* once signified learning in general, which included occult knowledge. The English split it into glamour (describing magical action) and grammar (describing the correct organization and declension of words in sentences).<sup>4</sup> Glamour controls perception: it charms, it deceives, it conjures new realities in the eye and mind of the observer. Grammar controls meaning: it orders, it tames, it conjugates when and who and how many.

Bridget Moser's performance persona is not glamorous: her hair simply hangs down or is tied up; she wears no visible makeup; she wears t-shirts tucked into sweatpants, or a blank white suit; she forgoes the signifiers of sexiness and glitz that we associate with glamour (she does so with such great effectiveness, in fact, that, in *Tender Offer*, she successfully wiggles herself slowly out of a pair of trousers in a shop window without giving off even a hint of seduction—a feat that would seem to be impossible for a person who belongs to a demographic— young, attractive, and female—that is perpetually and preemptively sexualized). Instead of performing today's pretty-girl glamour, she operates at the parting of ways, when one word went off to cast spells, and the other was left with the pedestrian task of ordering sentences; here, at the fork in their semantic river, the two words meet to signify the power to create and transform, to constitute new meanings and thus new realities, and this is where she works.

You think you know what kind of person I am, but look what I just did. I just changed everything. I just changed everything you know about me. You thought I wasn't someone who was wearing a very large, very elaborate necklace, but take a look at me now. Now I clearly *am* someone who is wearing a very large, very elaborate necklace, and I am telling you, I always have been, and I always will be. (*Tender Offer Part I*, 2014)

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<sup>4</sup>"glamour | glamor, n." OED Online. March 2015. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/78690?rskey=yhzRoN&result=1&Advanced=false> (accessed March 27, 2015).

This announcement of a transformation into someone else (even if it is someone that she has always been) is exceptional. Usually, Moser draws our attention away from her own transformations, pushing various objects through absurd transitions from one semiotic state to another, while she shifts the meaning of her own body, rapidly, seamlessly. Our attention is taken by the glossy black weekender in *So What?!*, a bag that is a necklace, that is a loss, that is the inside of a small dancer (her partner, pictured above), and its transformations normalize her own—leaving the question of who she really is unasked and irrelevant. Like the objects she engages, Moser’s own body is open to an apparently infinite array of meanings. Are these transformations the product of a glamour, a conjuring of new meaning through deception or illusion? Or are they the result of grammatical shifts, changes in order or inflexion? Looking to the art-historical figures who constitute Moser’s Listons, her Dempseys, we find casters of old-fashioned glammers in Beuys and Abramovic. Taking grammar’s turn, we find its power in the work of figures such as Yvonne Rainer or Marcel Duchamp. The latter turned syntax into an art form when he pulled a urinal from a sentence about men peeing, put it on its back and inserted it into a sentence about art.<sup>5</sup> Moser does not stop at a single new meaning, however. Rather, anything can be one thing, and it can be another, and another. In *Tender Offer*, an ironing board is Darth Vader, it is a motorcycle, it is a body of water that buoys a swimmer. Each new meaning appears as natural, as viable, as the one that preceded it, and the one that will follow.

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<sup>5</sup>While one might argue that Duchamp took a urinal from a store full of plumbing fixtures and put it in a museum, the actual history of *Fountain* demonstrates otherwise. Having been rejected from exhibition, it existed as broadside long before it was ever viewed by the public. See Beatrice Wood and Marcel Duchamp, “The Richard Mutt Case,” *The Blind Man* 2, (May 1917), 4–6.











## Inflexion

When I finally catch my breath, I always end up having to release it. Like, catch and release, catch and release. (*Asking for a friend*, 2013)

Moser's performative grammar is grounded far more in inflexion than syntax. Although each of her performances and videos has a beginning, middle, and end *temporally*, there is no sense that they follow a linear structure. There is one thing and then another, and the only things that seem relevant to when one happens relative to another are the slight stain that one action leaves as ground for those that follow, or the shadow that an action casts back over those that preceded it (a process that operates not only in the relationship between elements within any particular performance, but also between performances). The same piece of music might frame the beginning and end of a performance (as a Moby track does *Tender Offer*), or a particular question might punctuate a video, as the question "Is this how to walk?" does in *Asking for a friend*, but these repetitions are just that—repetition, frame, rhythm—rather than development or denouement. This circularity, the rhythmic repetitions or arbitrary shifts from one state to another to another, flattens out the field of signifiers that Moser uses, allowing Bon Jovi and Yvonne Rainer, *Star Wars* and *Easy Rider*, Joseph Beuys and Taylor Swift to occupy the same space, to slide in and out of one another seamlessly.<sup>6</sup>

Have you ever been to an establishment that has all white floors and all white leather furniture? Because, because ... No! Of course you haven't. Because those things betray literally everything that's ever happened to them. I can't encounter a breeze ... No, a whisper. I can't encounter a whisper without it leaving a trace on these pants. (*Tender Offer*, 2014).

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<sup>6</sup>Asher Penn uses the term post-internet to describe "the new, nonhierarchical availability of both subcultural and mainstream." Asher Penn, "Eclectic Youth," *Artforum*, (November 2014), 175. Post-internet, a term associated with artists such as Marisa Olson, Cory Arcangel, and Jon Rafman, was first widely circulated by artist Artie Vierkant, who celebrated "the absolute collapse of the mythological and the quotidian into a single indistinguishable whole" in his 2010 essay "The Image Object Post-Internet," [http://jstchillin.org/artie/pdf/The\\_Image\\_Object\\_Post-Internet\\_a4.pdf](http://jstchillin.org/artie/pdf/The_Image_Object_Post-Internet_a4.pdf).

There is no there there.<sup>7</sup> The environments featured in Moser's videos, like the body that occupies them, strive for blankness, featurelessness. White walls, grey floors, track pants, t-shirts; this is what we mean when we call things that were never meant to have faces 'faceless'. Despite this aggressive blankness, the truth is that the blanker something is, the more susceptible it is to the insistent arrival of meaning. Because those things betray literally everything that's ever happened to them. When Moser offers a blank slate, there is always some remnant of previous inscriptions, previous meanings. Whether these are the meanings we expect things to have, or the meanings she convinced us to accept five minutes ago, they accrue; this palimpsest, the shadow of a shadow, ties one moment, one iteration, one moment of being to another.

### **Is This How to Walk?**

One does not ask how to walk when one has a clear destination in mind. Only when the act of walking ceases to be about getting somewhere do we question its nature. Once walking becomes a purely formal exercise, though, innumerable gaits become available, as any runway coach will tell you.<sup>8</sup> Despite this, every new meaning Moser offers to her evacuated objects is grounded in the familiar, in the shared conventions of contemporary culture. Conventions do not go away (we can no more remove them than Moser can banish her shadow, as she attempts to do in *So what?!*), but they travel, and when they do, they change. The results of this exercise share the deadpan humour and semiotic play of Martha Rosler's video *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), in which the artist transforms the significance of familiar kitchen implements through

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<sup>7</sup>Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography*, (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 1993), 298.

<sup>8</sup>Not only fashion models, but dancers have asked how to walk. As Steve Paxton told David Velasco, "Modern dance got off looking at what's happening in culture or history, or at relationships between men and women. It was good as an art form. But if I were to be true to that idea of evolving, then I would have to ask some new questions. So my question was walking, and my answer is ... walking." *Artforum*, (July 24, 2012), <http://artforum.com/words/id=31419>.

misuse, activating them alphabetically by object name (apron, bowl, chopper ...). Working without Rosler's singular goal of undermining traditional associations of femininity and comforting domesticity, without her signifying location (the kitchen), or her rigid ordering system (the alphabet), Moser's transformations destabilize not only the meanings of individual objects and actions, but subjects the entirety of each performance or video to these shifts. This work is meaningless. It has no meaning just as the unsure walker has no destination; it uses meaning as a raw material, the complex collection of movements that moves a body forward.

If you hit itself with itself, is it less ... violent? (*Asking For a Friend*, 2013).

The mutability or instability of meaning is not a new phenomenon—grammar and glamour have been playing at this for a long time. Half a century ago we named it post-structuralism, as if it had come along after Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jaques Lacan had provided a structure to follow. Long before it was posted, though, someone began to fix it. Someone is hard at work naturalizing the connection between signifier and signified, keeping meaning on track. We usually refer to this someone as 'the culture industry'.<sup>9</sup> The culture industry ensures that the looser, the freer the field of signification becomes, the more immediately we grasp the bond between a particular run of notes and the stage in a dramatic narrative to which it is attached, between the rhythm of edits and an expected outcome, between a tone and a feeling, a single gesture and a total style. Moser uses these familiar notes—that we call conventions—as tools; she uses them to stabilize her slippery semiotic shifts even as she turns them back on themselves, slicing the bonds between signifier and signified with the ease of a practiced shoplifter removing a security tag. Moser does not defy or reject popular culture, but her performances do undermine the unified

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<sup>9</sup>Following Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, originally published in 1944, trans. John Cumming (Continuum: NYC, 1972), 120–167.



*Asking for a friend* 2013, video still

significations on which it relies, offering instead a thicket of signification so rich with distraction, dazzle and reflection that we forget the habits we came in with, forget, as it were, how to walk. In her activation of this dialectic of known and unknown, familiar and unfamiliar, Moser is less a young artist trying to define herself against the masters who precede her, than one in a long line of meaning-makers, outclassed but clever, sparring playfully with the behemoth of mass culture. She dances with it, revealing the trick to its magic—the grammar behind its glamour, knowing a knockout is impossible, but determined to stay out of its shadow, to leave a little of its blood on the mat.

What's the right way to react to this? (*Asking for a friend*, 2013)

Sarah Hollenberg



*Memory Foam* 2015, production still



*Memory Foam* 2015, video still



# Readymade for Bridget Moser

Post-production is in progress on *Memory Foam* as I write. The video was commissioned by and recorded on-site at MSVU Art Gallery. As sets, Moser appropriated the Brutalist-style Mezzanine gallery (in which the video will be exhibited on a monitor) together with adjoining architectural features, the stairwell and the beach cobble terrace at its base. These zones serve as the aesthetically-contrasted settings for two characters played by Moser, who communicate through phone calls and shouting.

In *Memory Foam* Moser interacts with an elaborate collection of therapeutic props purchased online: 'memory-foam' pillows, seasonal affective disorder lamps and ergonomic furniture. She maintains her rigorous approach to staging objects in a variety of humorous scenarios, necessitating unwieldy body positions accompanied by deadpan facial expressions. This is characteristic of Moser's performance work.

Occasionally the objects' transformation requires only a slight contextual adjustment, as when Moser walks among gallery plinths displaying memory-foam body pillows. She muses:

I tried to explain to her that these pieces are so important because they're very avant-garde and cutting edge and expensive but she didn't get it, she just like, didn't get it, she was like, "it just seems outdated and when I look at it all I feel is alone" and I just felt, like, exhausted, because what can you do when someone doesn't understand art?

In this scene Moser treats the backdrop as what it is, an art gallery. But her glib patter, equally evocative of the commercial gallery assistant and the fashion boutique sales clerk, reduces the readymades posing as Modern sculpture to mere commodities. Her interlocutor doesn't 'buy' it.

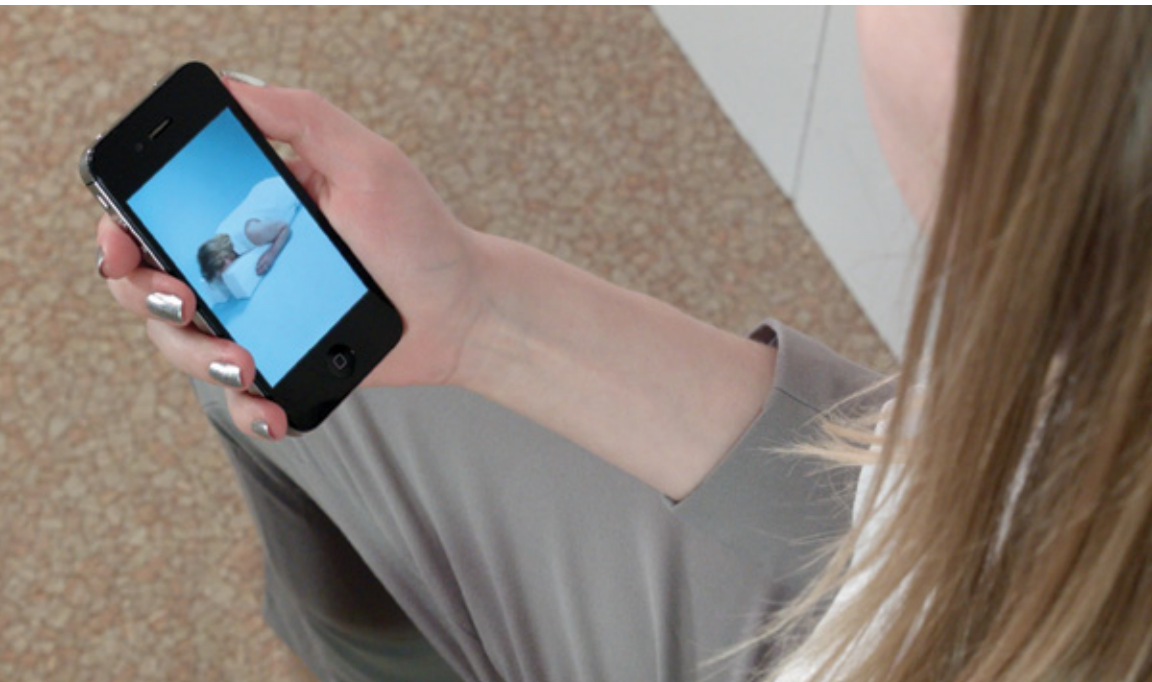
Moser delves further into the marketing of the 'art experience' by appropriating a Smithsonian Museum survey asking visitors why

they attend the museum. She says, "I liked to connect with others emotionally," while she tilts her head, hand to chest, and gazes at the peel-and-stick Dental Room Wall Mural she purchased on-line. "I liked to be moved by beauty," she adds, awkwardly scurrying across the frame in her Zenzu Pro Ball Chair. With her face planted in the ergonomic face-down pillow she comments, "I liked to think about my life." Mysteriously, she speaks in the past tense, as if something about her has changed. Perhaps this change makes her anxious, which would explain why she engages so compulsively with therapeutic objects while talking about art.

In his three-part essay on Neo-materialism Joshua Simon states that "every art object begins with shopping, whether by the artist or by someone else."<sup>1</sup> The video *Memory Foam* also began with shopping, at the online shopping site Amazon.com. The curious social alienation of Moser's character and her fetishistic involvements with props bear out Simon's theory of the 'unreadymade' art object. According to his account, which owes something to Marx's description of the commodity fetish, the object's undoing as a stable sign results from its having become a collaborator, read in multiple contexts, in people's attempts to alter their relationships to things.<sup>2</sup> Hence the interchangeability, in one *Memory Foam* character's view but not the other's, of consumer commodities with artworld ones. Simon explains:

The unready-made is a form of dispossession—it can take many different approaches, yet all recognize, on some level, the inability to master the object. By actualizing its birth as a commodity and its unruly subjectivity, the unready-made functions as a split-object shifting between subjugation and subjectification.<sup>3</sup>

As an eccentric consumer of commodities, Moser's performance persona struggles audibly and visibly to understand their relevance to her needs. Needed or not, things continue to infiltrate her life, thanks to behavioural targeting practiced by online advertisers. The products appearing with Moser in *Memory Foam* are examples of 'readymade-for-you', the retail-therapeutic remedy that arises so magically in online environments such as Amazon.com. Surrounded by things, she ignores their utilitarian







*Memory Foam* 2015, video still (detail)



Memory Foam 2015, video still



purpose and responds to their mediating potential. In the process, Moser models the acts of imagination through which many of us engage in subjective completion through art.

*Stefan Hancherow*

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<sup>1</sup>Joshua Simon, "Neo-Materialism, Part Two: The Unreadymade" (*e-flux Journal*, issue 23, 2011) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/neo-materialism-part-two-the-unreadymade/>.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.* The author acknowledges the contributions of others involved in the discussion "The Language of Things," organized by Caterina Riva and FormContent at The Showroom, London (December 4, 2010).



# Works in the Exhibition

## Documentation of Live Performance

*So What?!* 2013  
video, 8:00

Performed at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, as part of *Doored*, presented by Life of a Craphead. Video recording by Daniel Goodbaum.

*Tender Offer Part I* 2014  
video, 23:46

Performed nightly, through October 2014, in the storefront window at 8–11 Art Collective, Toronto. Video recording by Paul Tjepkema.

## Video

*Asking for a friend* 2013  
video, 9:56

Recorded at XPACE Cultural Centre, Toronto. Video recording by the artist.

*Memory Foam* 2015  
video, work in progress (April 2015)

Recorded at MSVU Art Gallery, Halifax. Video recording by Tim Tracey, sound recording by Daniel O'Neill.



## About the Artist

Bridget Moser graduated with a BFA in Studio Arts from Concordia University, Montreal, in 2009.

In 2012 she attended the *Experimental Comedy Training Camp* residency at the Banff Centre, Alberta, and afterward relocated to Toronto to maintain the connection with her new colleagues. Moser performs regularly at *Doored*, a monthly performance art and comedy show organized and hosted by Life of a Craphead (Jon McCurley and Amy Lam). The formation of this Toronto performance milieu is recounted by Kari Cwynar in "Experimental Comedy Training Camp," *C Magazine* (Spring 2015): 26–30.

Moser has presented her work in venues across Canada, including La Centrale, Montreal; VIVO Media Arts Centre, Vancouver; Video Pool, Winnipeg; the Khyber Centre for the Arts, Halifax; the Art Gallery of Ontario, Gallery TPW and Mercer Union, Toronto; and Owens Art Gallery, Sackville. She has presented projects throughout the US and Europe, and has been a resident artist at Fondazione Antonio Ratti in Como, Italy.

Visit [www.bridgetmoser.com](http://www.bridgetmoser.com) for further information and to view video and performance documentation.



## Notes on Contributors

Sarah Hollenberg is Visiting Assistant Professor of Art History at the University of Utah, specializing in the art and visual culture of the twentieth century, with a focus on the intersections of mass culture and fine art. Her current research project, *When Video Was New* investigates cultural and technological intersections between early video art and broadcast television.

Stefan Hancherow is a curator and collector based in Toronto and is currently the Director of the Feature Contemporary Art Fair. He is an alumnus of NSCAD University, and graduated with an MFA from OCAD University in Criticism and Curatorial Practice in 2013. Recent curatorial projects include *Absolutely Free* at OCAD U and *There is No There* at the Hamilton Artists Inc.

*Bridget Moser: Is This Thing On?*

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