To enter the exquisite, emotional, and haunting show “Blacklips Performance Cult: 13 Ways to Die” (on view at Participant, Inc., through Dec. 18) is to be plunged into an atmosphere whose central elements are color, light, memory, and activity. That the activity it documents, displayed on numerous screens, is three decades old doesn’t diminish what we see; time has added another level of amazement and melancholy to the proceedings.

Organized by the brilliant artist and singer Anohni, the exhibition pays beautiful homage to the Blacklips Performance Cult, which Anohni co-founded, with Johanna Constantine and Psychotic Eve, in 1992. Back then, the artists would gather at the Pyramid Club to perform their own scripts—stories that might suggest a cheap sci-fi flick with moral underpinnings, or a pulpy mystery that couldn’t be solved. (Constantine, Lily of the Valley, and Kabuki Starshine are pictured above, performing “The Blue Angel,” by Anohni, in 1992.) The performers might know their lines, or they might not. The point wasn’t professional polish but queer fantasia—the wild, nocturnal imaginings of artists who wanted nothing more than to entertain, and to play with the idea of entertainment. The show’s videos are complemented by vitrines filled with ephemera, including newspaper clippings and flyers that remind us that the grand gestures seen in these performances were important—necessary—because the times demanded them. AIDS was then the dominant social force in New York, a city in which so many great artists lost the fight to live, valiant efforts that Blacklips had no intention of forgetting.

— Hilton Als