To enter the exquisite, emotional, and haunting show “Blacklips Performance Cult: 13 Ways to Die” (on view at Participant, Inc., through Dec. 19) 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
ANOHNI and Johanna Constantine invoke art from apocalypse

For Document’s Spring/Summer 2023 issue, Blacklips Performance Cult’s founders look back on their makeshift, allegorical archive
Performance Cult: 13 Ways to Die, an installation by musician and artist ANOHNI drawing from the Blacklips Archive. It featured video documentation of 29 plays over 29 days—just a small portion of an archive of over 100, written and performed by Blacklips Performance Cult, a late-night theatrical collective that staged something new each Monday night at Pyramid Club between October 1992 and March 1995.

Blacklips was started by ANOHNI in New York’s East Village in the summer of 1992, along with founding members Johanna Constantine and Psychotic Eve. Psychotic Eve once played Human-Sized Maggot in ANOHNI’s play Starvation and wrote a play called The Swiss Family Donner Party, in which Constantine eats the entire cast. Blacklips frequently enacted an “art of death,” as described by artist and queer theorist Jill H. Casid, anticipating the Necrocene with the production of allegorical plays addressing the intertwined issues of AIDS and the Anthropocene, weekly and with great effort, in scenes of post-apocalyptic horizons populated by dead and undead, human and non-human characters. The exhibition preceded the release of Blacklips: Her Life and Her Many, Many Deaths from Anthology Editions and of Blacklips Bar: Androgyns and Deviants — Industrial Romance for Bruised and Battered Angels, 1992–1995, a double vinyl compilation LP from Anthology Recordings.

Blacklips Performance Cult: 13 Ways to Die was the third in a series of exhibitions curated by ANOHNI exploring work related to Blacklips. It opened with Constantine’s first solo exhibition, Conduit, which fully transformed the space with a site-specific installation incorporating archival and newly-recorded dance performances. This was followed by The 4th Golden Cadillac by Marti Wilkerson, who co-edited the Blacklips book with ANOHNI. It was an expansive yet intricate photography exhibition that, looking back, felt like a slow burn toward a certain kind of ending. But it also foreshadowed a recurring Blacklips image—a microphone and a cigarette.

At the opening of Paul Thek’s Whitney retrospective, ANOHNI commented, “This is not a missing link, it’s more like a missing continent. And it’s too late.” But if one tends to listen to the voices of the dead who were speaking to the future, perhaps it’s never too late. Thek’s work teaches that futurity is hidden in bodily structures that connect one world to another, or to the next. Not unlike the magical geometry of the bone chapels, artistic kinships cross time. Looking for forebears, or trying to bring forward what otherwise feels lost takes persistence and work. And the silence around the work of Blacklips during its time demonstrates the fragility of such underlying structures; they are not immune to censorship, erasure, or reductive historicization. This is perhaps why Blacklips now resonates with people so much.

Lia Gangitano: In the afterglow of a series of exhibitions, could you talk about how you conceived of the installation?

ANOHNI: Since Chloe Dzubilo died in 2011, I’ve become increasingly preoccupied with capturing the voices of the people who have been a part of Blacklips. I videotaped interviews with everyone who was still alive, with the intention of making a film. I realized that people’s memory of the work centered around our emotional experience of being a group, rather than the output of the group as a creative body. It felt frustrating and incomplete to me. I finally digitized all of these video cassettes of the plays, which we haphazardly recorded from the back of the room.

I used my waitressing money to buy that camera. We often watched the videos after a night of performing. As performers, we never actually saw the shows, and by the time we watched them at 3 a.m., we were basically just waiting for our bit to come on. We didn’t really absorb the material. After digitizing the videos, we experimented with making stills because we noticed that—although the quality was generally annoying to us, cinematically—there were moments that seemed to embody the spirit of the work.

I had banned photographers from coming to Blacklips because, from the outset, they had a mercenary presence. They’d come back with a proof sheet and then say, ‘You could buy one for $500.’ None of us had $5, let alone $500. So I wouldn’t let them in, and as a result, there was very little photography of the stage action.

Blacklips had been a creative laboratory for so many people; there was no one vetting it or keeping guard. The video camera was the only thing really collecting our work. Revisiting those tapes changed our understanding of what transpired.
Lia: Johanna, your exhibition welcomed this expansive chapter in the history of Blacklips. When we were putting it together, I had this feeling that you had been practicing for this for a very long time—almost like the way that you practiced your dance and performance.

Johanna Constantine: I have always had this aesthetic continuity in my personal life and in my work. We had been talking about how to show it in its entirety—the external environment and the internal philosophy it embodies. I wanted to use the show as an opportunity to generate and display new work, but also to maintain that continuous line with my traditional imagery—imagery of the struggle to survive in an uncertain world.

It would’ve been easy to do it as another archive piece, but that didn’t tell the whole story. I’m right in the middle of this body of work; I’m not at an ending or a beginning. One of the main threads has been this environmental pathos coupled with a desire for hope. In Blacklips, that building of community, and the work that we were doing, was so serious, even though it was obviously so comedic. There was so much raw emotion behind every one of those performances.

Lia: Despite its nihilistic subcultural origins, Blacklips was very involved in a strange task of defying nihilation, and by the mid-’90s, in the wake of too much death, wanting a future. While Act Up meetings were occurring Mondays on the West Side, Blacklips was staging—although in different ways—similar urgencies and intensities through the production of allegorical plays. Prior to immersing myself and seeing the plays every day, I would anticipate that Blacklips was portraying intertwined issues, and that AIDS and environmental apocalypse were inextricable, and that was what motivated this effort.

ANOHNi: For some of us.

Johanna: Well, it was—I think—for most of Blacklips, an exercise in building a community for ourselves during the AIDS apocalypse. You’d talk often about how we were all kind of refugees from the Family Values war. At that time, me and other artists were coming to New York because we felt forced out of our communities. Once there, I became certain I couldn’t assimilate my feelings into the entertainment culture of most club performances. I think we all needed a stage where we could express what we were actually feeling, instead of trying to tone it down.

“Perhaps there has been a 30-year rolling cultural and literal genocide against certain kinds of queerness, alternately tolerated and
ANNONI: I’ve been thinking about the ’90s in the same way that I think about the ’50s. Perhaps there has been a 30-year rolling cultural and literal genocide against certain kinds of queerness, alternately tolerated and annihilated in Western culture. In the ’20s, there was a slight flourishing of queerness and—whatever you might want to call it—expressiveness. But by the ’30s, [there] was clamping down in Europe, climaxing in concentration camps in the ’40s. By the ’50s, it was a silent forest, stripped of voices; queerness had supposedly been expunged. In the ’60s, there was a slight emergence again, as a new generation grew up; by the ’70s, it was in full swing. In the ’80s came AIDS—every faggot, every queer body was now an angel of death. I think of the new right-wing hashtag #TransTerrorist. It was the birth of the "moral majority," the burning of disco records in the football stadiums, in the same way that they burned Magnus Hirschfeld’s archives in the ’30s. By 1996, the beginning of the end of the worst part of urban AIDS in the US was followed by another silent forest, filled with black holes.

Now, we’ve just seen the restriction of reproductive rights for women in many parts of the US, and we’re coming into another election cycle that’s weaponizing conversations about gender identity as the principal threat that societies face. Not endgame wealth extraction, not ruthless capitalism, not biospheric collapse at the hands of malevolent corporations. Once again, they out trans bodies—the shock absorbers for the worst excesses of misogynist loathing—as scapegoats for their Roman colossums, to sway the voters to make a bid for fraudulent decency, in exchange for the last of their value and agency.

Blacklips emerged in the middle of the final onslaught of unmitigated AIDS, and ended just as a silent forest period began again. We staged a memorial for Leigh Bowery three months before Blacklips ended. Within a year, the first effective antiviral cocktails were on the market. The big clubs closed, Giuliani took over, and people kind of went numb in the run-up to the millennium.

During Blacklips, in my imagination, there was no sense that we might have access to—or impact upon—daylight culture, the heterosexual world, or gallery culture. My generation had been drawn to Manhattan, but we were also fleeing the rest of America. It wasn’t safe. We made our home in the ruins of the ’80s Downtown scene. What was left were a few decadent remnants: a reiterative, suburban-style drag scene powered by new recruits and Michael Alig’s zombified empire. Some legends had died, while others moved on, or were trying to move up. RuPaul had a hit in 1994—the sale of the century. She used all her skills and beauty and agency and cunning to infiltrate daylight culture. Then there was a brief, horrifying drag queen fire sale in the newly AIDS-med-minted, pink-dollar queer economy. Previous club infrastructures that had supported underground drag just a few years earlier rotted away. The city swarmed with heterosexual bridge-and-tunnel crowds searching for a drag queen to serve them an omelet. The girls went from working as royalty in the clubs to serving garlic broccoli at Lucky Cheng’s and flooding cattle calls for movies with degrading roles. There were still stars like John Kelly and Joey Arias, Jayne County, [Lady] Bunny, and others doing turns at Wigstock—and great moments to be sure, here and there. But on another level, the early-’90s was a period laid waste by the losses of the previous decade in NYC queer subculture. That notion was our ground zero as hard-boiled young adults—our nest and our context.

JOHANNA: Growing up under so much oppression and aggression from people who really expected us all to be dead by 20, we didn’t have a foot to put forward anywhere. I decided to continue school, because my only [other] option was living on the street. That’s what most of my friends were doing. No one could get jobs. I always thought that our views and the way that the countercultural thought process was grappling with what was going on, were superior. I was pushing that we were not just worthy of existing, but that we were having better ideas. I didn’t assume that we would be listened to, but that never dissuaded me from the belief that we were important.
ANOHNI: You were the one who had a sense of where we were heading when we decided to move to NYC. It was a dark and innocent and magical time, the early days of Blacklips. I found this diary entry I wrote from September of ’92: ‘Johanna and I discovered the maggotty dog.’ We’d read this article about a man who missed his dead dog so much that he dug it back up, full of maggots, and took it home. We were sitting on the steps at six in the morning with this article in the Daily News, just screaming and crying with laughter. I guess we had taken so many hallucinogens in the previous three years that something spectral happened to us. The diary entry then says, ‘We remembered what God looked like. This proves that we are reality.’ I think it meant that, even though we were two people, with zero support or affirmation and seemingly zero avenues open to us, we were holding space for a meaningful perception of what was really happening. It was audacious, but we had nerve.

Johanna: ANOHNI’s singing provided an emotional context for my aggressive expressionism. I didn’t dare have feelings, because it was just too much for me to work with. We used to have debates about this. I’d come to ANOHNI saying, ‘I have no feelings, I choose to control them.’ ANOHNI was like, ‘You cannot control them. They come from within you.’

ANOHNI: That had been my little war growing up: I have the right to have feelings, even in the face of all this. We both came from the California deathrock scene. It was a weaponized reaction to a burgeoning fundamentalism and televangelism that was coming out of California in the early-’80s. Rozz Williams, in particular, as an effeminate, and Ron Athey, in a supportive capacity, were voicing this war cry, this vehemence. The deathrock of Rozz and the music of Diamanda Galas were prescriptions for survival in the suburbs of California in the ’80s.

Johanna: There were so many gay kids in the punk scene. It wasn’t talked about that much at the time, but there was a huge amount of really enraged, young gay people. Most of the gay kids in my town were being strapped down and electrocuted. That was how the queer child was dealt with: electrocution. In fact, ANOHNI and I actually called one of the Christian hotlines and said, ‘I’m gay! And I don’t know what to do!’ Just to see what they’d say. They literally told me I needed electroshock therapy, and that it would make me better.

ANOHNI: That was, like, Sunday afternoon college entertainment.

Lia: That was your version of a prank call.

Johanna: I’m gay, and I don’t know what to do!

“We made our home in the ruins of the ’80s Downtown scene. What was left were a few
decadent remnants: a reiterative, suburban-style drag scene powered by new recruits and Michael Alig's zombified empire.”

ANOHNI: Vito Russo was a very catalytic force for us, having come from New York to teach the first-ever class on AIDS in California at UC Santa Cruz, where Johanna and I met. It kind of opened our eyes. Johanna already knew about Marilyn and the Movie Stars, John Sex, Details magazine, Andy Warhol, and things like Boyd Rice and Coil or Savoy Publishing—stuff I had no clue about. Vito's class gave a political framework for understanding what had, until that point, seemed to me like a personal struggle. I’ll never forget him saying that you can’t be a gay rights activist without being a feminist, because homophobia was built on the loathing and subjugation of femininity.

Johanna: My friends and I were highly politicized, [but] we didn’t really know what we were doing. The cops would beat up my friends, and I would spray paint the police station in pink. Or a friend of mine was institutionalized, and we’d ask the local drug dealer to go and sign him out. We would go on these missions and do these protests that would make people hate us. I felt so futile about it. Seeing someone like Vito standing up in this position of knowledge and authority, saying, 'Why be nice? Are they ever nice to us? Are they going to accept us? It’s okay to be enraged!’ I was like, Maybe my instincts aren’t as nihilistically off-the-mark as I thought.

ANOHNI: We put a quote of Vito on the Blacklips record, from a radio interview he did with Gary Reynolds, an AIDS activist and student from UC Santa Cruz. Vito said, ‘We have learned the sad lesson that nobody likes homosexuals, nobody supports homosexuals, and the nicer they are, the shittier they treat you. So being polite little boys and girls who are all dressed up and ready to do the right thing isn't going to make one bit of difference, because they are still going to hate us, they’re still going to be bigots, and there still is going to be no money for AIDS. So I say: Disrupt their lives.' This notion of disruption as a final frontier of self-expression, in a world where you might expect to die before there would be any meaningful change to your lot, was a primary directive to receive from a university instructor.

Gary, who also had AIDS, said, 'Do you think they’re always going to hate us?’ And Vito said, ‘In my lifetime, yes, I do. They still hate Blacks. It’s not like, after 50 years of struggle, racism has gone away; it’s gotten worse.’

Lia: Which is unfortunately relevant in a profound way again, as we’re experiencing another cycle of, Guess what? The sources of power want you to die. I don’t mean to suggest that Blacklips was this crystal ball, but I think, in this unadulterated form, it was speaking to a future audience in its visceral portrayal of that moment.

It feels like you saw this time coming, Johanna. In your autobiographical science fiction, you describe scenes of post-apocalyptic horizons. In Class Nine Nuclear Mishap, a deep-state conspiracy play written by Clark Rander, you play a nuclear reactor. And in your play, too, ANOHNI, Miracle Now, Johanna is Death of America. It seems really prescient. There is, and was, a future audience that needed to see this work.

ANOHNI: I really don’t see it as that personal, you know? That’s been the revelation for me at this point in my life: ‘This isn’t so personal.’

Johanna: But I’m so glad that we are presenting it now, again. Because there’s a giant patriarchal wrecking ball that’s gonna smash everything that’s been built. And it’s not because it isn’t incredible, successful, valuable work—it’s just that that wrecking ball is huge. There are younger activists and artists and humans that haven’t seen this wreckage before, where it swings back so violently. We’ve seen it a couple of times, and it’s not because we didn’t succeed. We did. Now, we have to fight again in that really survivalist way. Even if you have nothing, you can still do it, and you can do it well. That is the power of Blacklips.

Lia: You still have the outfits for it.

Johanna: I come prepared for battle.

Hair (ANOHNI) Sergio Estrada. Hair & Make-up (Johanna) Johanna
Anohni
Blacklips Performance Cult
Culture
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Johanna Constantine
Nightlife

Music
Kevin Abstract and Charles Atlas interrogate physical realities in digital fantasies

Fashion
Saoirse Ronan and Grace Coddington are artists in the craft of character-building

Music
Perfume Genius expresses the indefinable on ‘Ugly Season’

Fashion
Rick Owens and Ron Athey were born from the sociosexual underworlds of Los Angeles