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## ART MAVERICK LIA GANGITANO

*Participant Inc. is keeping the transgressive spirit of downtown alive.*

By Andrea K. Scott



*Lia Gangitano, surrounded by a bevy of Greer Lankton's doll sculptures. Illustration by Zohar Lazar*

The Lower East Side is no longer a haven for radiant misfits. The children of “Flaming Creatures,” Jack Smith’s notorious 1963 film, which was made in the neighborhood, have all been priced out. What the area does have is galleries, more than a hundred sprawling from Henry to Second Street, many appealingly scrappy and helmed by the young. Some dealers arrived with deep pockets and dreams of making them deeper, lured by the jet-set patrons of the New Museum, on the Bowery. Last spring, an outpost of Gagosian briefly popped up on Delancey, in a former Chase bank. Meanwhile, in a cavernous, unheated storefront on Houston Street, the dauntless Lia Gangitano, forty-seven, has been forging a vital link between the eclipsed downtown scene and today’s more polished art world. In 2001, she founded the nonprofit Participant Inc., equal parts gallery, performance space, screening room, and local clubhouse.

Last November, Participant introduced a new audience to the tortured glamour of Greer Lankton's doll sculptures, most of them made in the eighties. It was the transgender artist's first solo show in New York since her death, from an overdose, in 1996. The carefully fashioned figures, some of them life-size—of Diana Vreeland, Teri Toye, Jackie Kennedy, and others—were clearly labors of love, if too kitsch for some tastes. The heartbreaking high point of the show was the wealth of ephemera and photographs, including portraits of the fawnlike artist taken by Nan Goldin, as part of “The Ballad of Sexual Dependency,” her chronicle of the tarnished-dream demimonde. When Gangitano was approached about the project by Lankton's widower, Paul Monroe, she told me recently, “it felt like the phone call I'd been waiting for all my life.” The show made several best-of-2014 lists.

The Lower East Side is still home to a few artists whose fluid identities can seem like experimental works of art in their own right: the cabaret virtuoso Justin Vivian Bond, the empyreal singer Antony (of Antony and the Johnsons), the feminist shock rocker Kembra Pfahler, the “pandrogynous” avant-gardist Genesis Breyer P-Orridge. Gangitano has worked with all of them. Not each exhibition is quite as homegrown; the current installation, a jaunty but ponderous arrangement of photograms, stylized clocks, and a wall of neon, is by the Stockholm-based artist and queer activist Emily Roysdon. (It was organized by the critic David Everitt Howe, who moonlights writing grants for the nonprofit.)

As talk of art fairs and auction results becomes deafening, Gangitano's advocacy of the fringe feels radical. No one's involved in Participant Inc. to get rich. As Gangitano has said, “money problems are the best problems to have, because when you get some money it goes away. It would be worse if I felt that the work we're doing was irrelevant.” ♦

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*Andrea K. Scott is the art editor of Goings On About Town and has profiled the artists Cory Arcangel and Sarah Sze for the magazine. [Read more »](#)*

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