



Portrait of Felix Bernstein and Gabe Rubin, pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Felix Bernstein & Gabe Rubin with Nick Bennett

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Like many others, I came to know Felix Bernstein through his videos on YouTube, his book of essays *Notes on Post-Conceptual Poetry* (Insert Blanc Press, 2015), and his book of poetry *Burn Book* (Nightboat Books, 2016). Not as well-known is his long-time collaborator, Gabe Rubin. The two have been performing and making videos together since 2010. Their first show together, *Folie à Deux*, will be exhibited from June 1–July 28 at David Lewis Gallery in New York. Bernstein and Rubin paid a visit to the Rail HQ in early May for a conversation on influence in drag and camp performance; as well as the role of love, lust, and puppies in their newest film.

NICK BENNETT (RAIL): I know that you both are from New York, and met while attending Bard College. How exactly did you both meet, and when did you decide to continue collaborating as a duo?

FELIX BERNSTEIN: First Gabe stalked me in high school.

GABE RUBIN: I did not stalk you in high school. [Laughs.] A friend showed me some of Felix's videos on the website blip.tv in 2008, and I thought they were fantastic and watched them all the time. We both started Bard in 2010, and my first close friend there was coincidentally his best friend Cassie from high school. We bonded very quickly, spending many nights staying up late watching obscure exploitation, Euro Trash, and Sleaze films, and a diverse range of horror films from the '70s. We also watched a lot of performances of songs from musicals and sang a lot of karaoke. I had been grappling with my gender identity for some time, and he was the first person I came out to. The first time we ever recorded a video together we had just come back from a party and were lip-syncing to Aqua in my room.

BERNSTEIN: We first kissed lip-syncing to their song "Barbie Girl," which was an early song on YouTube people of all ages used to lip-sync to, to play with gender reversals. That song was very gendered and cartoony and we were both interested in the cartooniest extremes of gender. We met and bonded over musical theater, which is eternally the middlebrow aesthetic—cool people will always hate it. But we bonded over a recognizable and intelligible abjection. It's because of this bond we continue to collaborate.

RUBIN: When I got to Bard, I didn't think I would be spending so much time listening to musical theater with someone and revisiting my middle and high school experience—being a theater kid.

RAIL: From watching your many YouTube videos over the years, leading up to your new film and exhibition premiering at David Lewis Gallery, I've come to see your work as a product of theater. Not just because it is theatrical, but in how you utilize characters, narrative, and conventions of theater as a means to parody both hetero-normative and non-normative archetypes. Your work may seem ridiculous at first, but upon reflection, it all relies heavily on theory.

BERNSTEIN: Yes. Theory and theater—etymologically, theater is theory and theory is theater, so we made a new category for the show: Anemic Aestheaterory. Even though contemporary theory tends to be more aligned with 'performance,' there is an interesting counter-history that deals more specifically with theater and the proscenium. Especially important is Stefan Brecht's pioneering *Queer Theater* (1978), as well as the work of Herbert Blau and Carmelo Bene. We're both very influenced by Charles Ludlam who was interested in traditional proscenium and character—drawing influence from this history of Italian theater like commedia dell'arte, mimes, clowning, opera, and also silent film—in the context of downtown New York performance in the '60s and '70s, which was a very competitive and interesting collision of worlds. People hated each other on that scene. Jack Smith and Ludlam disliked each other, and then there are many visual artists who performed and speak of their performance as anti-theater, such as Carolee Schneemann. We're not trying to make these various influences compete with each other, as they historically did, but are instead blending antagonistic elements and heightening the contradictions. Can there be continuity between esoteric poet's theater and mainstream Broadway, even though there shouldn't be one? [Laughs.]

RUBIN: That's what *Cats The Musical* is, and that's why it draws us in—it's one of the most successful kitsch musicals, using modernist poet T.S. Eliot's text. We did a video using the main song from *Cats*, *Felix and Gabe Sing Jellicle Cats for Four Hours* (2014) and Felix sang "Memory," also from *Cats* at the Whitney Museum for *Bieber Bathos Elegy* (2016), in a version I performed on piano with the band Sediment Club. Of course, with poet's or artist's theater most people would rather think of Dada and the Bauhaus-Triadisches Ballet, which was the first video shown at the Whitney Museum in *Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905-2016*. But I prefer *Cats*.

RAIL: It's incredible that you are both interested in this lineage of experimental and queer theater, and are becoming part of that genealogy by working with some of these original figures from the '60s and '70s, like Jill Kroesen and Black-Eyed Susan, and performers from the Wooster Group. How did you come to meet them?

RUBIN: Last June, we did a performance at Southfirst Gallery, Brooklyn in conjunction with a posthumous exhibition of Stefan Brecht's newly discovered photographic work, connected to his poetry book *8th Avenue* (1992). There we met Stefan's widow, Rena Gill, and Black-Eyed Susan, who was a member of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company. Black-Eyed Susan is a truly great mime: blank, big-eyed, and incredible.

For the performance, I sang Stefan's father, Bertolt Brecht's song "Surabaya Johnny," from the *Happy End* (1929), but which has become a cabaret standard in various affects, timbres, and voices. So I got to play through the strange intersections between Weimar cabaret, Brecht's alienation effect, and Stefan's writing on a ridiculous, theatrical modality with some of the people he wrote about there, which was great. We've also both performed

with some of these artists before through Jay Sanders's curating of '70s and '80s performance at the Whitney Museum. So I got to work with Jill Kroesen while acting in her play "Collecting Injustices, Unnecessary Suffering" at the Whitney last year.

RAIL: Building on this lineage you are working in, and connecting that to Felix's very first video, *Felix's Coming Out Video (15 years old)* (2008), as the title says, you were just 15—what kind of influences or interests did you both have at that age?

RUBIN: Simultaneous to Felix's coming out video, but before we ever met, I posted a video covering "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" by Bob Dylan, so it was a song addressed to a female, from the perspective of a lyric male poet. I was also presenting as female, and a lot of people looking for the original Dylan song on YouTube were leaving angry comments because I didn't label the video as a cover. But Dylan for me is the trans coming out—because, before David Bowie, he was the every-which-thing you want him to be and was culturally accepted, as the Todd Haynes movie [*I'm Not There* (2002)] illuminates.

BERNSTEIN: That video had more views than mine. I feel like we're senile—that we're so obsessed with this moment in YouTube history, because no one cares about YouTube. It's senility, but it's true: you had way more followers than me.

RUBIN: The first video I ever posted was the year that YouTube came out in 2006, and I did an impersonation of the character Marcus from the movie *About a Boy* (2002) in the scene he sings "Killing Me Softly" at a talent show. That got a lot of views too.

RAIL: Felix, you've written on and are obviously influenced by a lineage of filmmakers like Jack Smith, George Kuchar, Andy Warhol, experimental people like Stan Brakhage and Peter Kubelka, and more current artists like Michael Robinson and Ben Coonley. Based on the essay you published in *Texte zur Kunst* in 2016, have these people actually been an influence on you, or are they more a curated list that can be used for a college admissions essay?

BERNSTEIN: Right, the article I wrote for *Texte zur Kunst* is about how publicly 'liking' your private fetishes negates any distinction between the two. Admissions departments look for you to say, "I'm queer, here are my hybrid influences, this is my hybrid self, I have a media locker." So, no it's not real—the media locker is what you present to the world. And I think locker is the right term, looking at the history of the locker. Think of Rosie O'Donnell, who was attracted to Tom Cruise; that was her "locker pinup." The media locker is the closet door you leave open. Your pinup on the calendar is not your real pinup. These are the things that inspire me—the answer is always going to be elliptical.

RUBIN: There's something eerie about how we cling to the locker past school. The excitement of posting something, and depending on how many followers you have, the rush of likes, and then over time, less views and likes—and your mood dropping. It's actually such a banal thing, but it has a huge impact on my daily mood.

BERNSTEIN: So it's more like a mood ring than a mood board.

RUBIN: But it's interesting, because I've noticed more of the younger generation use Tumblr, YouTube, or Instagram to build or test a persona or a new gender through online usernames or avatars. I guess it was like that for me too. I used to go online and role-play, in text and fan-fiction forums where I would play male roles. And DeviantArt and YouTube parodies are important to our work. But now, I don't think Instagram is at all a part of my trans identity. I do think we'll see a new generation using the internet to come out pretty commonly as non-binary or trans. But those platforms can also push you into a stalemate, endlessly building up your image in a comparative assemblage; it becomes a variation of Zeno's paradox.

RAIL: Playing a social media avatar is much like playing a character in a film or piece of theater. In your new film, *Madame de Void: A Melodrama*, Felix plays the title character, who breeds puppies for their fur. Blot, one of her selections, shows great potential and the two fall in love in a crescendoing *folie à deux*, or, madness of two. I have my own view of these characters, and visitors to the gallery will develop their own as well, but how would you each describe the characters you play?

BERNSTEIN: Madame is based partially on the character Auntie Mame, from the 1958 film starring Rosalind Russell. Mame's disenchanted with New York and wants to push a "bohemian-anarchistic" education on her nephew, who she takes in. Ma(da)mme tries to teach him about Freud and Marx and her ultimate disappointment is when he marries a generic WASP. I can identify with her, but there's always a limit in any identification—a smudge that creates repulsion. A lot of what Gabe and I do is to look at where identification with cleanliness or dirtiness, sadism or masochism, leads to ambivalence, as it becomes impossible to fulfill the rules of the required type. When you put the "catty" or "New Yorker critic"-type into a cartoon landscape, it can produce a stock set of reactions that can work in any context and lose any active dialectical edge. Cartoon worlds like Disney take on drag, queer,

trans affectations and do deeply satisfying things but, in the end, it is a repressive desublimation. The only difference today is that Disney explicitly thematizes queerness now that it is acceptable—you get the queer backstory of the Disney villain or the fawning gay assistant; whereas before you just had the un-credited influence of Divine on Ursula. I don't see Madame de Void as an actual critic of her society, but just someone who throws a stock, arched brow, at the people she surrounds herself with. She speaks in quips, which can be fun, but only mildly subversive. With quips the aimlessness depoliticizes them but also allows them to transmit quickly and bypass certain rational procedures of speech. Quips can be easily repeated and memed and morph into unanticipated contexts.

RUBIN: And Blot is miming or memeing Madame's wickedness. Blot functions as the repeater, but he also maintains his blankness. In the end, he fulfills the sentimentalism of melodrama—sacrificial love. Blot attempts to reach enlightenment, but instead becomes a mirror for narcissists; he takes on whatever philosophy each teacher presents him. But his saving grace is the blankness he keeps in reserve. Which I think is a hidden power of nimble subterfuge in trans and proto-trans figures in history.

RAIL: Blot is like the embodiment of theater—he represents mimesis. And both of these characters stand in as a mirror or as reflections or shadows; in one scene, Blot has a moment of self-recognition in a mirror, in other formal shots, Madame de Void is presented not directly but in reflections of mirrors.

BERNSTEIN: Madame lacks the capacity to love and represents problems with any art economy that presents the illusion that cultural capital feels good or fashion feels good, just as Petra von Kant does, like other characters from Fassbinder films. Most successful artists have one idea that they repeat over and over. Should that feel good? I don't think people are happy making art as a profession. In melodrama, as in the work of its greatest progenitor, film director Douglas Sirk, everything is shot through an aspirational mirror. He was poking holes in what was called the American Dream, which today is more the dream of living up to types you give yourself on social media. The type may offer a kind of freedom but it quickly becomes a trap, no matter how many times a day you change it. Social media famously enables blocking others but more importantly it blocks your own self-critical limits—it blocks blocking, and is endlessly permissive. I've lost many people as they sought some high-fulfilling sort of social media type that led them to do destructive, unethical, and regressive things.

RAIL: Can you discuss the importance of Lacan's mirror stage, the see-saw, and how they relate to this film and these characters?

BERNSTEIN: We had been toying with the idea of the see-saw for a while, and the fact that it was disappearing from playgrounds for being unsafe. I was surprised to find the see-saw in the first book of Lacan's seminars in English, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book I, Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953-1954*. He uses the "see-saw of desire" as a way of rethinking Hegel's master-slave dialectic. The see-saw is the next step in the acquisition of symbolic knowledge, after the mirror stage. A theme I return to often is the language of resisting the father. Is that resistant to the symbolic order, or is that another language in the symbolic order? Can you invent your own *Lalangue* like Lacan says James Joyce does in *Ulysses*; and Blot attempts to do? There's a rich history of the mime creating ideograms that trespass language and genre, while also defining generic conventions of gender and theater. The mime needs us to fill in music (and with that projective identifications), thus inventing melodrama. The mime is a giant cause of desire, the cause of early vaudeville, then stage melodrama, which brings about the whole theatrical apparatus, which we still live in—films, TV, Netflix—it's all melodrama. Blot comes into the film as a blank slate. The blank slate then invites everything in.

RAIL: Gabe, over the course of filming, you transitioned from female to male. I find it interesting you play a character that undergoes a great deal of physical and mental transformation at the same time your own physical self is changing and transforming—it's like a literalization of theater pushing life to its limits. Did you see this role as an opportunity to transition? How did you mediate your self and a character you were playing?

RUBIN: Over the course of making the film I physically transitioned, so I had surgery and was also on and off hormones, and was also gathering all of my paperwork for the legal gender and name changes. But, I have been male-identified since Felix and I met each other. Blot and I are not great speakers and we learn through memorization and repetition. That's what his name means, like an ink blot, as in a Rorschach test, but also an accidental stain—a mistake or imperfection, not being able to use the ink properly to articulate, or, it can negate something entirely, as in, to totally blot it out. On top of the process of playing Blot, I was directing, and this film very much felt like a coming of age for me. This role has very much been a coming in to my self, and for that reason, even though Blot is a dog, I felt very much like myself.



Film still from *Madame de Void: A Melodrama*. Courtesy the artists and David Lewis Gallery, NY.

RAIL: This film is self-described as an exploration of the melodramatic partnership of madness and queerness in drag and transgender performance. Returning to theater, drag dates back to Greek theater and Shakespearean theater, with all female roles being played by effeminate boys.

RUBIN: Yes, from Peter Pan to the opera's "pants roles" (young beautiful men played by women), female-to-male play has often intersected with age play in theatrical contexts. So, I'm also interested in how transition has as much to do with age as a kind of time-stamping; connoting biological age and time period. The trope of boyishness remains powerful; sometimes as a subversive authorization of transgender power; sometimes as a melancholic, fetishized projection of an impossible ideal of youth. It remains fascinating how vocal pitch is used to assess the authenticity of age and sex. Most noticeably, there's the pubescent "voice change," when octave shifts go along with shifts in authority, as well as altering musical repertoire. But today's multiple techniques of morphing the voice through various appendages and technical supplements have not erased the way the culture prioritizes the voice as indicator of truth, age, sex, and beauty.

RAIL: Many characters Felix has done are in drag—you define drag performance in a YouTube video *Boy Crazy: My Gay Cabaret Memoirs* (2012), as "A parody of campy, homosexual parodies of heteronormative culture that already parody themselves ... A parody of a parody of a parody that will parody the futility of gay parody to resist the demand for spectacular displays of feminine freakishness issued by patriarchal authorities." How do you contextualize yourself within drag when you do something like *Madame de Void*?

BERNSTEIN: For me, in practicality, drag is using whatever is nearest to me, which has included my sister's clothing or my sister's and even my grandmother's very camp idea of femininity. I use what I can fit into. And I've been shaped by my summer visits to Provincetown when I was young, and seeing drag bar performances. I remember doing a drag performance in a diaper during a popular open mic night, and my dad was there, and after he said "You know, they just didn't relate to you the way they related to the person doing the Liza Minnelli impersonation," and he was right, the audience was titillated but not enthused. *Boy Crazy*, and other of my YouTube videos were about trying to point to a limit in camp—in its actual ability to subvert the systems that it's operating within. Today is different, drag has been universalized as a means of transcendent communications, as with gaymoticons and doggy filters, and that sort of reverts back to drag's fundamental role and consequent problem in theater—no matter how resourceful you are, you still can't totally fulfill the mask assigned to you. You *can* wink through it but any mask remains cumbersome, especially the winkly-faced mask.

RAIL: Does Gabe playing Blot constitute as drag or acting?

RUBIN: It feels authentic in many ways. Not to say that I identify as a dog, but there's something very trans about it. But the difference between drag and

trans performativity is often reductively framed as camp vs. sincerity. Some people think trans is humorless, or that a trans-person cannot be satiric or ironic—since you can't make fun of them not passing because it's such a real-life concern or because trans represents a benchmark of total realness. But it's really interesting to see trans queens or trans performance artists or furies who make fun of their transition, or point to limits and contradictions, like what Felix does with camp. There is always contradiction, and that's a good thing. Otherwise, we'd just be living and seamlessly communing through Snapchat dog filters, 24/7.

Trans characters are usually villains or serial killers in films, and the reveal is usually funny, like in the reveal from *Sleepaway Camp* (1983). Jack Halberstam, a professor of Gender Studies and English at Columbia University, has talked interestingly about this history, and how we don't have to dread it. Villainized trans adds to the fact that being trans surrounds a culture around sadness and isolation—similar to the gay and camp villains in Disney. My character Blot begins in an isolated room and doesn't just reflect *Madame de Void*'s image but also receives it as a transmission or imprint. There is a shared villainy in them. This relates to the Yukio Mishima play *Madame de Sade* (1965), where there is a bond of wickedness between Marquis and Madame that in many ways masks a shared, but disavowed, pain in being ostracized.

BERNSTEIN: There's also the queer narcissist as villain, which comes up in trans and homo screen portrayals. The mirror presents the issue of the double, which remains tethered to the homosexual—no matter how much we *like* them, we see them as doubling narcissists, which was Otto Rank's and Sigmund Freud's original diagnosis of the homosexual. Being overly attracted to the same. And there's no way around that stigma. There is an aspect of camp repetition and mirroring that truly is annoying, unnecessary, and narcissistic. But it remains an interesting contrast to the idea of the avant-garde and multimedia art being always in new territory, keeping it new with ever-refreshing relations to mediums and mediation. Camp is a thorn in that cog. In the end, I firmly believe that camp is in the eye of the beholder. You can't really produce it, only reproduce it.

RAIL: Susan Sontag said originally "Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp but a 'lamp,' not a woman but a 'woman.'"

BERNSTEIN: That makes me think of literary critic M.H. Abrams's *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), a classic guidebook to romanticism. The lamp is the romantic genius's spontaneous overflow, which is pitted against the ordinary artist who just mirrors life. The mirroring artist, or campy artist, is a way to stigmatize and identify artists from Plato on, as bad imitators. Then there's Wilde's idea that life imitates art, which breaks apart both categories.

RUBIN: Susan is a lamp.

RAIL: Camp and theater come together for me in two quotes, the first also from Sontag: "To perceive camp in objects and persons is to understand being-as-playing-a-role. It is the farthest extension in sensibility of the



Film still from *Madame de Void: A Melodrama*. Courtesy the artists and David Lewis Gallery, NY.

metaphor of life as theater.” This connects to a quote I came across in a performance by Jim Fletcher, who you collaborated with in your new film, reading from artist and theater director Tadeusz Kantor’s 1980 essay “The Infamous Transition from the World of the Dead into the World of the Living: Fiction and Reality,” where he reads, “Theater is an activity that occurs if life is pushed to its final limits where all categories and concepts lose their meaning and right to exist, where madness, fever, hysteria, and hallucinations are the last barricades of life before the approaching tropes of death in death’s grand theater.” What role does death play in your version of theater?

BERNSTEIN: Herbert Blau says theater is dying on the stage, which is similar to Kantor’s idea, which I deeply appreciate. The Netflix show *13 Reasons Why* makes you crave a coincidence between rescuing the suicide and watching them die; you need their death and retroactive stories to animate your desire to save them. This coincidence is the aim of theater, achieved in the hyperbolic statements of Antonin Artaud or Blau or Kantor. Right before biological death, death becomes a final plastic trope, and then you have the conflict of stage presence versus memorialization.

RAIL: But how does that translate in the last scene of the movie, with the Madame wearing the coat made from Blot’s fur, who willingly dies to provide? How does death relate to what the Madame calls her fate of “infinite joy” rather than infinite dread?

BERNSTEIN: It’s funny; the last word of Lacan’s see-saw book reads, “Death is the absolute master.” Which sums up where he takes Hegel and Freud—not towards a homeostatic ego or absolute state but to a confrontation with negativity. The see-saw is a mirror view of psychic development famously summed up in Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage, which he presented in 1936; in the see-saw there is slippage back and forth, rather than even development towards mastery. You can’t simply exchange polymorphous childlike multiplicity with a symbolic code or a coherent body image. Nor can ‘adjusting’ to life, personalizing the symbolic, or hardening your ego help you cope with all that you lose—slippage recurs, like the necessary stumbling block of the banana peel. There is also play and theatricality to the see-saw—it architecturally manifests the psychic back and forth as a physically pleasurable game. But the infinite joy of it is also a painful and compulsory jouissance.

RUBIN: I don’t think that a literal death took place in the span of the film for me. But I did grieve a death that had recently occurred, of my female self. With acting there’s a distance involved, and you can control the stages of grief; you can literally stage them. You choose when you can exit and enter—it’s a medium for immortality, for replaying, and for ghosting. But then there remains the temporariness of the body, which the mask and prosthetics cannot fully cover up.

BERNSTEIN: In preparing for this show, I feel it is about the death of some *thing* that you experience alongside death. After the melancholic play ends, you then face up to the abyss of zero contact. Allegedly, the stages of grief are

an ordered mechanism, but in film, the scenes are not shot in order—the last scene is typically shot first—and that shuffling of time and restaging grief mimes how inconsistent any ‘stage’ is. I think this was part of Lacan’s insight with the see-saw: by the early 50s, he had shifted from viewing the mirror as a transient stage in infant development to a permanent part of subjectivity, the Imaginary. The Imaginary stages *you* as the main character. That is the traumatology of the unconscious.

RUBIN: So how theater is the restaging and repetition of death; film seems a frozen relic, embalming spaces and bodies. The objects in the gallery are frozen vestiges of the artifacts from the story and the sculpture of Blot captures this uncanny transient body that is neither child, adult, male, female, human, or creature. I think of Blot’s statue as a readymade, not because it is a prop from the film plopped into the gallery, but because it is mimetic of the back and forth miming that is what I am already. Blot is hoping for permanent sleep; a fantasy of unlimited duration. But unlike the still statuary of a crucifixion or casket, the see-saw keeps jostling him awake.

RAIL: I’ll end with where I began in my preparation for our conversation. Before I saw a preview of the film or read any material related to your upcoming exhibit, I was focused on Artaud, who is quoted throughout Felix’s *Burn Book*, and of his concept of the Theater of Cruelty. It was validating then, as I continued to research, that your work does come from and lives in theater in relation to artist’s and poet’s theater. Your work transforms disparate forms of cruelty into something almost tender.

BERNSTEIN: Gilles Deleuze’s *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty* (1967) frames the masochist as a child wanting to be swaddled and tied down. If you crave tenderness, you might also crave cruelty, and if you crave cruelty, you might also crave tenderness. We’re in a culture obsessed with types, but whatever type you claim unconsciously tends to want the opposite of your type, so you won’t be satisfied by assuming a specific type and then looking for its complement. For this reason, none of the characters in the film find satisfaction or joy. Lacan says that the masochist makes the sadist too anxious; and the sadist gives the masochist too much pleasure. To reach any deeper contact requires the disintegration of these types. And it is this disintegration that theater, at its heart, permits—you see though it, not over or around, but through to the other side and then back.

RUBIN: Theater relies upon the fractured and depersonalized performer seeing through the eyes of another, the eyes of the audience—jumping into their perspective to see yourself. That is why no role in the theater is just yours or just sadistic or masochistic. But it isn’t a uniting symbiosis—it’s a mutual disintegration, which can also be a shadowy kind of love. ☹

NICK BENNETT is a contributor to the Brooklyn Rail.