

## Editor-in-Residence: Matt Morris

By CAW Team & Matt Morris

Guest Editor: Matt Morris

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*Chicago Artist Writers' editor-in-residence initiative asks a uniquely respected artist/thinker to select a few upcoming exhibitions in Chicago and ask young artists/thinkers in his or her network to respond to the exhibitions with a review. The EIR is encouraged to curate his or her choices to engage an interconnected theme, implicit or explicit, among the selections. S/he posts an introductory or summary text that highlights the content from his or her point of view, pinpointing how each exhibition covered relates to his or her individual concerns. Following is the introductory text by our first editor-in-residence, Matt Morris.*

1.

For the first week of the residency there were no takers for the notice I had posted on the bulletin board asking for male volunteers to pose nude in some photographs I wanted to work on. But

finally after one evening passing a bottle of whiskey around a campfire, he had agreed to model. We decided to go roaming about the property together the day after next. He was young, lean, handsome in an offbeat way. He was straight, and when he said he'd pose, it was with a mixture of shivery trepidation and self-satisfaction that he was so progressive and bohemian. The morning of the shoot, he asked if I wanted to put his face into drag. I didn't particularly; cute boys often turn into queens with lopsided proportions, and more than that it seemed counter intuitive to *add* when the endgame was *subtraction*. Still, it meant I got to touch his face, run the edge of my forefinger along his bottom lip to clean up the edge of the lipstick, delicately push his hair off of his forehead. We sat on the floor of the room I was bunking in, with the door open and his shirt off. When I blended the blushes and eye shadows with a big, soft brush, it tickled and he pleasantly pinched up his face and giggled. When he tried to put on the false lashes by himself, the glue ran into his eye. It burned and he whined. I finished off the face makeup by doodling in a pink gouache—tribal, radical faerie. I put on bug repellent, but he declined using it. We gathered up the camera equipment and props, put on our boots, and headed into the forest.

Three miles in we came to a creek, an idyllic looking space with dappled light, butterflies lilting through the air, and several boulders on which he might pose. He observed that the uncovered areas of his skin were already attracting mosquitoes, and complained that he would be eaten alive were he to disrobe. His voice trembled as did his hands as he knelt to untie his bootlaces. Bashful, he turned away as he took off his shirt, socks, and jeans. I crisscrossed around the area, metering the light, taking some test shots, adjusting the height of the tripod. When I looked back over at him, he stood grimacing in nothing but a pair of poofy light blue boxer shorts, long false eyelashes, and the pink-red cosmetics that appeared vulgar in our wooded setting.

He opened his mouth, a hesitant creak issued from his throat, "I... think I'm just going to keep my underwear on." His tone wavered, but his eyes were set and hard. "I think this is far enough."

Mildly perplexed, I lowered my camera. "Oh. Well, I thought that we'd discussed the shots I was going to take pretty specifically." I looked down at the pink satin ribbon with which I intended to bind him to a tree.

"No, I know. I don't mean to disappoint you. I just think it won't make much difference if I keep these on," he answered, hanging his head down, gesturing to the shorts that nearly reached his knees, covering a full third of his body. His young, shy body, glowing in the sunlight reflected off of the creek he stood beside.

Glowing, flustered, I spoke in measured pace, mustering logic and persuasion, "If it doesn't make much difference, then take off your underwear." Where was the racy flirtation I had imagined we would happen upon out in these woods? The innuendo, the hungry gazes, the exhibitionism? I felt lewd, instead, like a pedophile luring young men to their exposure and doom in a deserted landscape. I thought we had a clear plan.

His nervousness grew mouthy in my quiet. I averted my eyes and wondered what to do next. He spoke rapidly, making big gestures with his arms for emphasis. He was self-congratulatory in being able to locate and hold to his own limits. He daydreamed of a future girlfriend with whom he hoped to share his unadulterated body, and my photographs were made to sound increasingly as an attack on his purity. He mentioned his mother, and brought up this hypothetical lover again. His manner was wild, but the content was demure, conservative. While he paced through this diatribe, I watched the way his bare stomach would clench and unclench, and so would his fists. I watched the fabric bunched at his waist swish against what was beneath it. He was inconsistent, and from beneath glittery eye shadow, his glances over at me were tremulous. He would interrupt himself, and say softly, deeply, “I’m so scared I’m disappointing you.”

I was lost in this enchanted forest. He was chaste like a fairytale. I would take a few pictures at a time so that he wouldn’t feel useless. Intermittently we’d debate the point. My tack was consistent: being shy about one’s body was a powerful and subtle mechanism of a repressive culture; body shame and monogamy were manipulations and constructions; he should want to undress as a liberating act. I only half-believed what I was telling him, but I let out my rhetoric in full force so that my embarrassment, horror, and growing disgust in both of us would be less visible. The borderline he had announced with such confidence—that line that demarcated what he would and wouldn’t do—turned out to be more irregular and wavering than he’d let on. He considered that he wouldn’t mind being observed by me in the nude, as long as it was from behind and wasn’t documented in any way. It was his dick, however, that he didn’t want seen, photographed, nothing. Not for insecurity over size or beauty, but out of some propriety. He spoke about it in the abstract, more phallus than bodily member. I wanted to swallow it, have it lying on my tongue.

Eventually I tied him to the tree, boxer shorts and all. I tried to make it hurt, and as I added other lengths of ribbon, I relished where tree bark had dug impressions into his back and shoulders. He prattled on nervously, a measured cadence of guilt, guilt, refusal, guilt, guilt, refusal.

“Stop talking.” It was an order barked in hushed tones against the rustle of the forest. I wanted him to really start to worry. His eyes grew big, wide, defiant, and then wet. Giant and brown. “I’m going to take your picture. Your face will be in these shots. I want you to look at me with all of the conflicted feelings you keep talking about. Show me in your eyes.” His neck craned forward, and his chin dropped slightly. He took air into his lungs, and one of the tight ribbons slipped under his lowest rib. His pelvis drew arches up from the elastic band. There was no button on his fly, revealing a dark curl of fur within. As he ran through his troubled thoughts, exhausting his resistance, he hadn’t bargained for how much more naked and revealed a state he’d be left in—far more than if he’d only stripped. I raised my camera in between the space where our eyes met, him pleading, longing, anxious. I looked through my camera and shot him over and over.

2.

When people tell me about the *subject* of their art reviews, I usually just assume they mean *object*. How could they not? But then I'm easily confused by how the languages of psychoanalysis intersect with those of grammar (and the more arch grammarology), art historical methodologies, and colloquial speech. I don't assume any of us can be truly objective, but rather our subjectivities are projected and glazed across the surfaces of our considerations; the objects of our inquiry are sudsy with the residue of our personal encounters with them. I was once mean, cagey, and defensive with a classmate even though I knew deep down that I was wrestling with the memories of bullying he triggered in my thought life. While we bore away at our often frustratingly impenetrable unconscious drives (some with more intent than others), writing about art objects presents a space for more visible, gratifying revelation. Relational objects, cathected objects, theories of attachment, theories of detachment: these tropes of subjectivity play out in descriptive analyses of art towards usually profound but at the very least novel results. Lately I've been growing more interested in the libidinal energy being sublimated in an exhibition—mine, the artist(s)', the myriad ways that the art world brands itself as dripping with sexy power relations.

Recently I consulted with a friend on an article I was have difficulty writing. He grinned and said that I was writing for *Artforum* but what I'd written read as if it was intended for *October*. And added that those two entities are different for a reason. His twinkling mirth as he explained registered with subtext, 'Silly, you know that!' And yes I know the facts, but perhaps my apparent confusion in the tone and mission of these bastions of art criticism reveals (or more appropriately, remembers) the entanglement of those relations. It strikes me as funny to think that Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson left their posts as editors at *Artforum* to found *October* over (among other things, I'm sure) disputes around Lynda Benglis' 1974 self promotional ad where she posed, greased up and tan, hefting a large dildo between her legs. Funny because this was the latest in a series of goofs and provocations Benglis had going on with Robert Morris. Funny because Morris' advertisement from earlier in '74, which featured him bare-chested in S/M drag, trussed up in chains and gear, **was actually taken by Rosalind Krauss herself** (an oft elided detail brought up in the July 2009 exhibition *Lynda Benglis/Robert Morris: 1973–1974* at Susan Inglett Gallery, curated by Specific Object/David Platzker). Funny because in the two decades to follow, Krauss brings art history and psychoanalysis into intimate contact with one another through her own work, when really I feel it distinctly and terribly probable that her own efforts are the high minded equivalents of what she treated as the "brutalizing" baser instincts of Benglis' ad. It's a cultural assumption (or maybe it's my assumption, subject in this text that I am) that artists will do both: submerge ourselves in surging libidinal energies and the throes of animal, visceral forces operative in our world, but also retain the posture and clarity of mind to frame our artistic gestures critically. Maybe *that's* brutalizing, but it's a burden I want to be permitted to explore more often in my art criticism as well as my studio practice.

Chicago Artist Writers not only permits but anticipates that I will be both. And they've invited me to extend that permission to several other artists. This is sex-positive, experimental writing that takes as its assumption that desire, longing, fantasy, fetish, intimacy, kink, and perversion

may be present in the rooms where art is presented. It's an attempt to measure what is possible when a reverence for art and the discourses we construct around it is allowed to flow freely into reveries about the erotic schemata underlying our regulated social systems, the 'art world' not least among them. This capsule of art reviews calls forward the subjective positionality from which any critic opines (whether or not they willingly render this transparent); it takes up the paragon of Feminism fundamental to an activist stance that *the personal is political*; it draws near to sexuality as a particularly vulnerable pressure point across a personal body; it hunts out sex not only in explicit coital scenes but also in the charged erotic potential of tone, structure and other formal devices in the artwork reviewed as well as in the textual body of the reviews themselves. As I and the other artist-writers included in this set do in our respective artistic practices, our words here trouble categories of 'art work,' 'sex work' and 'self work' into indistinct interrelations. Through this conflation/collapse, hope to be speaking to underbellies and oblique standpoints that characterize the artworks, exhibitions, and artist's practices under consideration.

In so doing, we join "the oldest profession." We have been compensated to perform this sexual service, thus echoing a recurrent if not oblique angle within art discourse. I look across my bookshelves as I type this, and the problematic orgy of Krauss/Benglis/Morris/*Artforum/October* mentioned above is hardly the only precedent from which this project proceeds. Here are a few choice others that I have held in my thoughts while writing and editing. I take to heart Susan Sontag's thrilling close to the essay "Against Interpretation" when she says, "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art." Andrea Fraser's *Little Frank and His Carp* (2001) and *Untitled* (2003): in the former video she stages an erotic encounter with Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, while in the latter she videotapes herself having sex with an unidentified American collector who is rumored to have paid nearly \$20,000 to participate in the work. *A Different Kind of Intimacy* collects performance artist Karen Finley's monologue polemics on sex, violence, and injustice into a book that is always at close reach from where I write at my desk. The strategies that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick—self-described "perverse reader"—employed to draw queer sexuality from out of her topics of study haunt this work. Genet, deeply, truly. I was pleased as punch when a friend of mine, artist and writer Mark Harris, shared his syllabus and bibliography for a course he wrote called "Images of Sex;" I'm reassured by our kindred minds. In the book *Art – A Sex Book*, editors John Waters and Bruce Hainley ask a plethora of contemporary artists such questions as, "Can good art be a sexual turn-on?" and "Are you sometimes turned on by making your own art?" Most recently, my colleague David Getsy has been telling me about an as-yet-unpublished text by Scott Burton (most known as a maker of incognito furniture-as-art installations) wherein he extends the Benglis/Morris one-upmanship further into a bawdy threesome fantasy in which he ravages both of them and finishes by fisting the straight-identified Morris. Looming large during this editor-in-residence is Georges Bataille, who as author of a tremendous body of work grafted surrealist sex drives into political, social, and creative thought. If permission is needed to foray into a space where art and sex overlap, these and many other predecessors have granted it by example.



3.

“Uhhh,” the artist rubbed the back of his neck and turned to look around at what else he could present to the visitor at this studio visit. “I wonder what you think about these,” he pointed at several sculptures that looked however abstractly like books being handled with fingers grasping at their edges. When the artist spoke again, his voice was lower, breathy, and measured, “I think all of these things are about longing. Feeling isolated. Longing to be touched.” Their eyes met, shined. One man could hear the other’s breathing, an Adam’s apple bobbing above a t-shirt. The artist cleared his throat and moved over to a set of shelves where he opened one of several boxes. “I had meant to get some of these out to show you.”

His guest drew up behind him, and as he peered over his shoulder, leaned in so that their sides touched. Whatever was being held in front of him to be seen and considered, he missed it. He was blind to all else but that sensation of contact. He gulped. The artist in front of him smelled of cigarettes and did not move away.

In a tumble, lips were wet against necks, mouths groping up throats to chins, to meet. The artist’s face was flushed. He went cross-eyed as he stared back at so unexpected a turn in their conversation. He squirmed and did not move away.

When his eyes tracked back to his eager counterpart, he felt the fullness of this response to his loneliness. His tongue darted forward into the mouth of the other man, and clumsy hands felt at the visitor’s waist and back. In turn, cool hands reached beneath the artist’s t-shirt, felt how tight his stomach muscles were clenched. He shook, trepid. When his knees shook, a strong leg pressed between his so he wouldn’t drop to the floor. They felt each other’s hardness, close as they were with faces, chests, and hips touching. “Was this the touching you were talking about?” the visitor asked him.

“No,” he started. The breath he exhaled was like gravel, and the studio smelled of drying clay, plaster dust, and gouache. “I wasn’t thinking about this when I said that.” He pressed his mouth against the corner of his guest’s lips, and touched his face with his tongue. He felt the man’s hands go to his belt buckle, and he moved his own hands to catch them. To stop him? They stood, meeting gazes and holding hands against the warm hardness behind the fly of his jeans.

The visitor pushed the artist’s hips to rest against a table made from a board lying across two sawhorses. A tall bundle of plastic tarps stood atop the board. The artist’s belt was unbuckled, fly unbuttoned. His penis slid up out of the top of his boxer band; the visitor took it in his left hand, pumping it. The artist’s head rolled backwards and his fingers locked around the edge of the makeshift table he leaned on.

A loud shatter. The wrapped sculpture had slid off the table, and chunks of ceramic crashed about on the concrete floor. Half undressed, both men froze in bewilderment.

“Fuck! That’s not mine, it’s my studio mate’s!”

Pausing, the visitor began to pull away. “Do you want me to stop?” He looked over at the modest wreckage behind them. The artist wrapped his hand around the hand that held his shaft. But what had been hard—full of coursing heat—just before the crash now felt gummy and timid. The artist closed his eyes and rested his hands on the other man’s shoulders. A wave passed over the two of them, as all tension and excitement drained away, replaced with disappointment. The artist lowered his shirt from where it had been pushed up around his chest and coughed. The penis softened and lay in bashful repose. Dark pubic hair rustled against their linked hands.

*Matt Morris is an artist, writer, curator, and educator. He's exhibited internationally, with highlights including Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago, IL; The Mary + Leigh Block Museum of Art, Evanston, IL; The Elmhurst Art Museum, Elmhurst, IL; The Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, OH; and The Poor Farm, Manawa, WI. Morris is a transplant from southern Louisiana who holds a BFA from the Art Academy of Cincinnati, and earned an MFA in Art Theory + Practice from Northwestern University, as well as a Certificate in Gender + Sexuality Studies. He is a lecturer at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. [Visit Matt Morris' website](#)*

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