



KALEIDOSCOPE



Pre-Internet, when media was one-directional, Los Angeles artist ALEX BAG started “talking back” to television, her best imaginary friend growing up. Here, in conversation with PIPER MARSHALL and MITCHELL ANDERSON, she recounts how messing with tropes and formats with her “dirty little DIY hand” helped her make work that’s at once cynical and sentimental.

Piper Marshall and Mitchell Anderson

MITCHELL ANDERSON In putting together a survey covering two and a half decades, how do you look back at work that is so connected with the culture of the time it was made, yet still feels really relevant today? So much of it doesn’t feel dated at all.

ALEX BAG That’s nice to hear, that it is not dated. Well, you know, when working on a video, I watch it so many times, go over it so many times during the process of making it and editing, that it’s like I sleep the words and everything—and then, after its done, I really don’t look at the videos for years. So it is very odd to walk into a room and see them all going simultaneously. I had that experience at the Migros Museum with a kind of survey show, and it was very strange. I really hate watching myself on television; I do like watching videos that have my friends in them, and I especially like watching my brother and all the torment I’ve put him through over the years, but watching myself really makes my skin crawl.

Please don't ask me for any kind of revelatory or profound statements about my body of work until I'm on some kind of deathbed, or at least until my dementia has progressed further.

MA Right now is the moment of the rehash or the remake. The '90s especially have been rediscovered by corporate America; you see it in movies, fashion—even *Roseanne* is back on TV again. So when your characters sing Nirvana songs, it doesn't feel like the past. I think this is part of how things don't die anymore. What do you think?

AB I don't know. At the time, it really seemed important to me to talk back. Media was so much more one-directional—this was pre-Internet, obviously—so the point was to just sort of mess with it, to get in there and use the tropes and preordained formats, using my dirty little DIY hand to auteur the fuck out of it. Now there's YouTube, so it's almost hard to remember the olden times when it wasn't so easy to talk back, or put your voice out there into the Akashic records. I was also obsessively taping television because again, there was no YouTube—if you missed something on television, it was gone, and there was no way to find it again. So I always felt that it was God's work to stay up all night, recording the crappiest shows on television and re-editing them. It just seemed wildly important at the time. Now the stress is off.

PIPER MARSHALL When you taped television, edited it, and then re-performed its tropes in your videos, did you think of that as sentimental or as cynical?

AB Both. I try to avoid cynicism; I really am sincere, even though it doesn't appear that way. I try to be optimistic. Coming out of the punk rock ethos, I feel like it was more about reclaiming something that should be everyone's. There is something beautiful in that, as opposed to just finding fault, which is really, really easy to do. A bit of the downfall of the '90s was incessant fault-finding.

PM It seems like a lot of care and labor went into making these works.

MA It is a really interesting thing. There is a ton of labor there that you don't ever see on the screen, so I think, as Piper said, there is cutting, copying, watching, writing—there is so much labor here that we are also talking about how it is not cynical.

PM It is actually really beautiful: the amount of love hours which accompanies the labor. There is a lot of handwork that goes into your pieces, but because the artwork is video, the hand is elided. Can you talk about your interest in hand-craft?

AB The only kind of artwork that I have any compulsion towards making is drawing and writing. I feel like all those videos come from an urge to be a writer which was never realized. I am teaching a drawing class now with four ten-year-old girls at my house. It is just starting, and I spend the entire hour just telling them to make a mess—"It's OK, it's alright! That line doesn't need to be perfect!" I feel like this is doing a service to the future for these future women and all who will surround them. I wish somebody was there when I was ten telling me, "Make a mess!" Because it is insane how those tendencies toward perfection are embedded at such a young age. I'm constantly waging this eternal internal war with perfectionism, but my superhero is called Procrastinator. If I put off doing something long enough, there will come a point where I no longer can afford the luxury of agonizing. When my son draws, I just love his drawings, and I'm almost the opposite with him, because I'm afraid to put my voice in his head: the perfectionist's voice. Right now, he would happily go to school in his underpants, because there is no self-criticism or self-doubt to cripple him yet.

MA I think this brings up the social issues in your work, where we see you bringing up topics or parts of society that should change, especially the art world. I watch this now, and it's clear that nothing has changed in twenty, twenty-five years.

AB Super sad. Isn't that so sad? It is heartbreaking. No, it is just another place where it is so necessary, and continues to be necessary, to talk back. I know from *Untitled Fall '95* (1995), it emerged from going to a Josh Decter panel discussion and just listening to him drone on and on about, you know, "My generation of artists" or "This generation of artists." He was just talking out of his ass, and I was just so angry about what he said. I was just like, "Why do only the critics get a voice? Why can't I as an artist speak out?"

PM One of the topics I want to cover is your connection to television, and what it was like to grow up with television so present in your life. For instance, your mom was performing on television. How did you feel about that as a kid? How do you feel about that now?

AB Well again, it is interesting, because my mom was on television when I was young, but I didn't watch because it

made me extremely upset to see her with another group of children, telling them the same stories she told me. She was the writer of the show, she'd created it, so a lot of her banter with child actors were the stories that she'd told me, and I felt angry about having to share her or something, so I didn't really watch the show until I was in college. By that time, the show was in reruns, and it was on at maybe five in the morning on Saturdays. If I was up all night, she would magically appear on my television with this psychedelic background and giant collared shirts and sing and talk me down through the sunrise. My father was in advertising, so I got to be on the sets of a lot of television commercials, as well as his office, where more dark arts were happening. Also, my uncle is a writer/director/filmmaker. He made this movie *Death Collector* in 1977-ish; my brother and I are extras in that, in this scene where this guy gets shot in his car.

MA What's your connection to television now, as an adult?

AB I watched so much television as a child, and I still watch so much television today. That was like my best imaginary friend growing up. I was an extremely awkward child, but television fed me—it's candy. That was an escape that I needed, and it still is. It's still a huge part of my life, and I am not embarrassed to say that. So that is just part of my subconscious, consciousness, whatever.

MA Has your idea of watching TV shifted along with the prevalent viewing modes? You know, like, with Netflix and the ability to binge-watch?

AB Being able to watch almost exactly what I want, without advertising breaks to ruin it, makes me think that my attention span is changing, lengthening. I am choosing to binge TV shows, not movies, so it is making me think that movies should be at least six hours long now. But there is this trade off: I have a longer attention span, but I also have a circadian rhythm disorder. As soon as I can't sleep, I am on Netflix; hours go by, and then before I know it, I have to get up. So I'm tired all day, and then I want to take a nap, so I will watch more Netflix to fall asleep. It is really awful. My son has been watching these YouTube videos of people playing video games, which I find really interesting. It is the favorite and preferred entertainment of seven-year-olds everywhere.

MA All my thirty-year-old friends, too.

AB There are so many layers of removal. You are not playing the game; you are watching somebody else play the game. My son is on these ones now that are gameplay but with storytelling—like a *Minecraft* game, where somebody has created a world and then goes back into the world and snaps videos around and makes voiceovers for the different characters, so it is like a movie. They have made their own movies. I love that, that you can make your own film that way. I've been playing a lot of video games lately. Within a preconceived world, the world of the programmed game, there are sometimes opportunities to fuck around and play. My son is into these LEGO games, where you have to gather up these chips for missions by breaking and shooting bricks. I can't tell you the joy I get from running amok and breaking LEGO houses. There's one where you're in New York City and you walk down the street and break the shit out of the city. The entire city landscape. It's fucking awesome. It reminds me of my favorite game back in the day, *Grand Theft Auto*. My boyfriend at the time was all about the missions, but my favorite thing was to go on these crime sprees, mugging people and running them down. The joy in that, just being able to be within an environment and make mayhem. I would love to make a video game some-day.

MA I don't know if you'll have something to say about this, but I think it is also crazy how, ten or fifteen years ago, I would have been very lucky to have seen one of your videos—I would have to wait for an exhibition—but now I have the ability to binge-watch your work all at once. It changes the viewing experience for all kinds of video art at the same time. Do you think about this while you are making new works? Or are you going about your process the same as always?

AB I try to not think about that. Anytime I am making a video, I am making it for my people, this small little group of people who are friends. If I tried to think about that larger audience, I'd get terrified and nothing would ever happen. I would never make anything. It really used to scare me that you could see my videos. I have gone through the ups and downs, the pitfalls, the trials and tribulations of video art—which, shockingly, is not the most profitable of artmaking mediums. I used to run into people who'd say, "I just got a copy of your video." And I'd say, "Where'd you get a copy of my video?" Because I never sold anything; I still haven't, really. A few people bought videos early on and only occasionally, so as soon as they started showing up on YouTube, the first thought was again horror and dismay. But now it makes perfect sense to me. I was always happy that they were at EAI, and that if you wanted to see them, that you could always see them there. That's where all the big boys have their videos.

MA I think these kind of market things are interesting, especially since you've dealt very much from the beginning with

the objectification of the artist as someone who creates a product and that's their job.

PM While you've been talking about these ideas for years, they seem to align with the current mood and political climate, where the objectification of the artist, specifically the female artist, is being spoken about very publicly. As someone who has been speaking about this since the '90s, how do you feel about that?

AB I just find it interesting. It seems like something that is worth talking about—especially since I feel like with my work, it's *made* of talk. There is not ever really so much to say about it when it is done, because it's all sort of there. It is direct communication. It is not like there are layers of interpretation. The kind of celebrity around art, or even being interviewed like this—that's something else. A couple of years ago, I got asked to be interviewed at a school in Spain, and it was simultaneously translated into five languages as I was talking. I still have nightmares about that day. There is nothing I have to say that should be translated into five languages simultaneously.

MA This kind of echoes back onto the art world system.

AB There's this whole other job that you're expected to do after you've made what you made. I've always been uncomfortable with speaking at length about the work, and suspicious of people who are very comfortable with speaking at length about their work.

PM Do you think there is a reward in the art world for this kind of self-presentation?

AB I always hoped not, but yeah. That is definitely part of the artmaking process. I do think that some people are rewarded; when someone has that talent, you see their career taking off early on. But I also feel like if the substance isn't there, it eventually bites them in the ass. They get found out. That's another fear I have—that somebody's going to find out just how stupid I am.

MA *Untitled Fall '95*, *The Artist's Mind* (1996), *the Van* (2001), *the Van Redux* (2016): throughout your films, there are consistent characters that play with the idea of the artist talking about their work, and even make fun of it. Do you think artists shouldn't talk about their work?

AB No, I don't know if that's the answer. It depends on the art that you're making. If you are working in a more abstract way, or poetically, like with painting, you should be able to explain some things. What I would expect from a good arts patron is that they have a personal connection and they get out of a piece what they want, rather than what they're told it's about. Where's the fun? Art should mean different things to different people. In an ideal world, I don't think there should be so much fast talk, but that's part of the market. To sell the work, you need to have a slogan and a jingle. It's another product to sell. The whole world around it is about the marketing of it, which is always ugly, always. That's advertising. So I guess, yeah—shut up!