

# **TORSTEN ZENAS BURNS**

*is an artist and media arts educator currently living in Beijing, China.*

*Burns has been curating exhibitions, video screenings, performance art events and publication projects at Parsons Hall Project Space based in (The Uncanny Pioneer Valley /Holyoke, Massachusetts) and NYIT's visiting artist / screening series in Beijing. He received his BFA in video and computer arts in 1990 from the New York State College of Art & Design at Alfred University, and his MFA in New Genres: video and performance art from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1993. Primarily using video, photographs, sculptural installations and electronic publishing he explores speculative content including re-imagined educational practices, experimental space programs, zombie / afterlife relationships and post-human fictions.*

*Other long term art projects include video collaborations with Darrin Martin and Anthony Discenza (Halflifers). Burns' selected video work is distributed by Vtape, Video Data Bank and EAI. Over the past twenty years Burns has participated in over twelve residency programs including Headlands Center for the Arts, The Experimental Television Center, L.M.C.C. World Views Studio Program, Smackmellon, Eyebeam and Signal Culture. Burns has had video work screened at the Museum*

*of Modern Art's Video Viewpoints and Premieres series, The Whitney Museum of American art, The Pacific Film Archive, SF Camera Works, Dumbo Arts Center, Video\_Dumbo, Aurora Picture Show, Migrating Forms, Krowwork Gallery, The Chicago Underground Film Festival, The European Media Arts Festival, the Impakt festival, The Stuttgarter Filmwinter: Festival for Expanded Media. The Melbourne International Film festival, The Oberhausen Short Film Festival, The Busan International Video festival and The Liang Zhu Center of Arts in Hangzhou, China.*

*In 2015 he designed and curated a magazine + video performance screening called Holyoke Transfer at Parsons Hall Project Space. In 2014 he was awarded a grant from the Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation / Artists resource trust, Sheffield, Ma. which helped in the creation of his installation project: eat me alive so that i may see you from the inside.*

*In 2016 Burns curated the video program Speculation(Elation):The Encountering as part of New York Institute of Technology's Spring screening and visiting artist series hosted at ICUC / NYIT Beijing campus. In 2017 Burns along with his collaborator Monika Czyzyk exhibited at Exhibitions Laboratory a new installation and video series called Monstersweet in Helsinki, Finland.*

# **VARIABLE ARTIST STATEMENT**

*My work employs an interdisciplinary approach, ranging from video, performance, sculptural installation, to photography, digital design and electronic books. The themes I investigate center around research into the physical and ethereal body fused with re-imagined technology and culture. My earliest single channel videos and performance work drew heavily from my years working as a health care aide in nursing homes and head trauma wards, and has influenced much of the work I've done since then. The constant cycle of bodily care in these institutions informed a kind of visceral and visual psychological terminology expressive of technological and psychical solutions to bodily anxieties, the loss of mobility, loss of self-empowerment and the individuality of the aging or ill person. These early video and performance works aimed at establishing a visual alphabet of movements, a choreographed delivery system of gestures that spoke to a crisis of mind and body. As this theme began to take on broader cultural aspects in my work, I increasingly turned to collaboration as a strategy. With fellow artist Anthony Discenza, I formed the collaborative duo known as HalfLifers. Encased in protective gear and armed with a variety of bioorganic products, HalfLifers plunged into a rescanned world of rescue operations and healing narratives. Synthesizing tools from such disparate models as speculative fiction, zombie stories, docudrama TV, play therapy, and the local hardware megastore, HalfLifers forged ahead on a mission to recover the self from the constant threat of disintegration, and generate new evolutionary scenarios. While the HalfLifers project exists as an accidental juncture of fairy tale, 22nd century sitcom, and emergency training seminar gone awry, the goal of the project is ultimately empathic and restorative. Simultaneously embracing physical humor and a sense of nostalgia for alternate realities and timelines, HalfLifers imagines a futurological slapstick which provides a cushion against the alienating and disempowering effects of the modern technologic state. Within the HalfLifer cosmos, an endless series of cyclical crises unfolds, in which the distinctions between mental and physical, animate and inanimate, ritual and disaster are collapsed; a tragicomic zone of perpetual mishap abutting regions of deep seated anxiety and loss of identity. The frenzied inhabitants (alive or dead) of this zone exist in a permanent flux of emergency and recovery, where therapeutic calamities are catalogued and explosively re-staged in a continual attempt to maintain psychic cohesion. The HalfLifer working process is spontaneous and improvisational. Performative scenarios evolve out of specific props or locations that suggest the presence of unresolved conflicts. By entering these spaces and triggering improvised "crisis re-*

*enactments, ordinary activities and settings are transformed into interior landscapes charged with potential hazards. Temporal turbulence, loss of memory and/or identity, equipment failure, and complete physical collapse are just a few of the obstacles that may be encountered. Only through healthy physical movement and the repeated application of organic by-products can communication pathways remain open and our mission sustained. The residual electronic transmission, or videos resulting from these procedures functions as a psychic poultice, absorbing latent anxieties and transforming them, via absurd humor, into restorative parables. Here, as in my earlier work, the state of the body is projected outward onto space and manifested sympathetically by animate and inanimate objects alike; attempts to heal these objects thus represents a ritualistic technology designed to heal the self. The establishment of ritualized activity, play-acting, semi-dramatic reenactments as a technology of control over psychic and physical realities are explored further in a later and equally significant collaboration with Darrin Martin. In the pieces that Martin and I have made we explore similar thought processes based on magical thinking and tulpoidal ritual manifestations. The collapse of boundaries between linguistic and/or functional categories; the organic object as technological device or spiritual augment prefigure this later work as it is taken a step further into the realm of re-imagined institutions, schools, retreats, alternate worlds and re-envisioned films and art histories. Since 2002, Martin and I have been creating variable videos and installations that explore a new educational institution called Learning Stalls: Lesson Plans. In them video is used as a trans-disciplinary curriculum exploring diverse speculative fictions and alternative learning techniques. Psychic surgery meets physical therapy as matter and anti-matter merge under the choreographed supervision of other worldly beings. In the search for new mind/body experiences, workshop participants enact paranormal interactions, inter-sexual dynamics, pseudotesting methods and staged quasi-therapy sessions. We were fortunate to have been awarded an EyeBeam residency to make this piece and the opportunity to work with Smoke & Flame editing software. The Smoke & Flame program allowed us to break the video imagery down in ways reflective of the structure of the learning environment we wished to create. It became an altogether new space, a multi-disciplinary, trans-planar curriculum grid with exploding emissions and wire-frame enhanced, interdimensional classrooms. It has been described as "a super-sized gymboree. [Where] class meets anytime, anyplace, anywhere, any way." Out of my collaboration with Darrin Martin on Learning Stalls: Lesson Plans several video pieces followed. Although all address the psychic-body-workshop, we began*

to apply the fluid interchangeability of linguistic and symbolic models to the process of assembling of a new narrative from appropriated and original footage. The result is *The Abominable Freedom*, a 41-minute video that serves as a formal and thematic send-up to our previous work. Original video and appropriated film are woven together to launch a musical celebration of the flesh. In *Abominable*, an egg from the missing link holds a skeleton key to our educational future. On a parallel world life coaches made of bone and fur activate televisual coursework including circular zooming studies, spectral mating and etheric birthing techniques. Here the notion of manifest destiny eludes its colonial past and takes refuge in our pagan libidinal nature. My current collaboration with Martin is the *What-If?* project. *What-If?* is an experimental video and installation series unfolding a role-playing workshop where participants reenact a fictional polyamorous romance. The performance, played by a rotating cast of artists, leads to a group wedding and honeymoon between characters based upon two obscure Marvel superheroes and two renowned art personalities. The happy foursome are Stelarc, an artist whose cybernetic mission in life is to render the body obsolete; Orlan, an artist whose actual redefinition of her own body via plastic surgery confronts representations of women throughout history; the Scarlet Witch, a mutant superhero who has unlimited powers over probability and the Vision, a "synthozoid" whose mechanically fabricated body contains a human soul. *What-If?* tells the entangled stories that brought this romantic foursome together spanning the gulf between genders and representations, the body and technology. Concurrent with my collaborative work, my ongoing investigation of the body as speculative vehicle has culminated in a large collection of performance, video, sculptural and photographic pieces that form a series of personal portraits entitled *Bodybanks*. Inhabited by my family and various afterlife characters, post-human and artificial entities, engaged in improvisational and choreographed movements and habits, *Bodybanks* seeks to re-imagine and re-map hypothetical realities, of spaces, systems and practices, forgotten histories and estranged futures. The texture and form of these worlds are often excavated from resurrected electronic and physical detritus, appropriated and original material is fused in aging analog technology and new digital hybrids to create unique images and stories. Research interests involve further investigation of digital design & sculptural media hybrids and their variable delivery systems. Content interests include cultural research into global space programs, dance and choreography for film, the future of Trans-Human / animal potentials, re-imagined sexuality fictions and collaborating with artists, colleagues and students on speculative stories.