

Hadland, Gracie, "With No Type of Story: Touring the Untied Mind of Pippa Garner," *MOMUS*, March 12, 2021.

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In 1978, the artist Pippa Garner wrote a list of "Opinions and Comments." Among them is one that reads, "People should name their brains," imagining the brain as an entity outside the parameters of the self. To name it would be to acknowledge its own individual subjectivity, as a being unto itself, like a pet or a companion.

Four decades later, Garner presents an installation titled *The Bowels of the Mind* (2020), in which the brain exists on its own, untied from the parts that would keep it active inside a human skull. Here, the brain is an animatronic sculpture, activated without human intervention. Like a wild animal held in captivity the sculpture is visible behind the storefront windows of Stars Gallery, on El Centro Avenue just off of Hollywood Boulevard, a place that is less zoo but more circus. People sing or shout with their belongings spread out over the stars on the walk of fame, tourists mill about in maskless packs, guests of the W hotel stumble around in branded bathrobes. Amidst all this, ringed with orange pylon cones, Pippa Garner has established a site of caution.

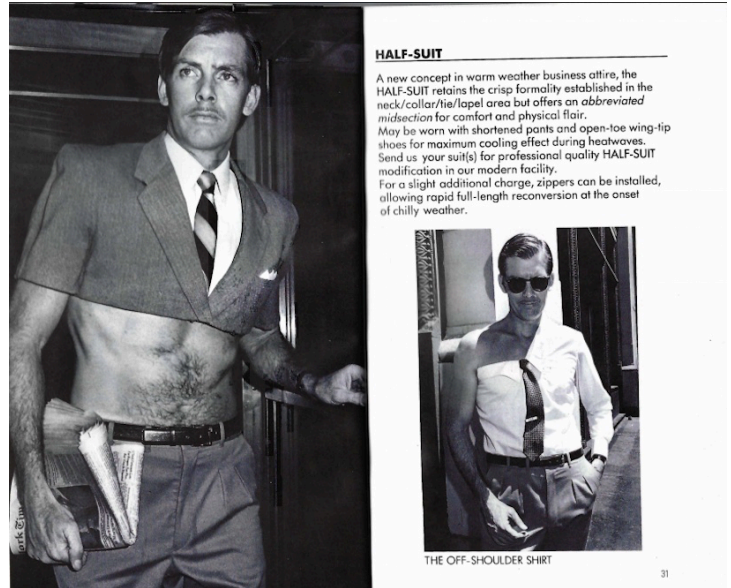
Throughout her life, Garner has been drawn to forms of artificial intelligence. She began her career as a satirist of industrial design, inventing and producing gizmos and gadgets, including Shower-in-a-Can, the Palmbrella, and the High-heeled roller skate. This was prior to her transition, when she still went by Philip Garner (what she terms her "previous identity"). She published a number of books collecting these models for her inventions, which were never manufactured, and instead functioned as prototypes for an imagined future that incorporated Garner's theories about contemporary culture. Many of the gadgets and designs are hybrids between human and appliance, such as the Vaccujac ("the wearable vacuum"), the SelfPhone (human with phone torso), the Smart Ass (a smart car affixed to a woman's buttocks). This parody, broadly aimed at consumerism and mimicking commodity fetishism, particularly seizes upon the kind of advertising developed in the mid 1950s, where the commodity was coded as an object of desire and the female body became an apparatus of marketing. Many 20th-century artists were preoccupied with this visual trend in advertising. I think of Richard Hamilton's *Hommage à Chrysler Corp* (1957), in which the body of a woman melds with the curves of the vehicle, or Hannah Höch's *Das Schöne Mädchen* (1920), which collages BMW logos over the portrait of a woman, so that she becomes *schöne* with the inclusion of various machine parts. Garner most often made her critiques literal, however, by pushing inventions to the point of absurdity. With a car affixed to the ass, Garner makes us wonder how far this really is from becoming a reality.

Pippa Garner began to develop a new identity in the late 1980s, when she transitioned from Philip to Pippa. She has written profoundly about this, narrating her process and experience but with little sentimentality. In an unpublished text titled *On Gender* (2005), she writes, "I began to see myself as an artifact ... So I kind of turned this beam that I had focused on things that were external at myself, and I saw potential for an art project that would be ongoing, that would always create a disorientation in my position in society, and sort of balk at any possibility of ever falling into a stereotype again." It's certainly the case that there are violent

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and egregious stereotypes imposed on trans people, but I get what she means; one establishes control in disrupting gender categories altogether.

In all recent works Garner makes her body an object, a toy, a game for her audience. For an exhibition at O-Townhouse staged in collaboration with Redling Fine Art in 2019, Garner put her body on display in *TORSOMAT* (2019), a work resembling an amusement park booth. Viewers could reach in and touch the artist's torso as she stood inside, her face and legs shrouded by a curtain. Similarly, in *Crowd Shroud* (2017), Garner put a wheelchair inside an angular wood-paneled box with a two-way mirror in it, so she could see out, but no one could see in, allowing her to move through a crowd invisibly. For the sculpture/performance *Action Figure* (2019), she strapped herself into a life-size Marionette-style rig – viewers could move her limbs by riding an attached exercise bicycle. By isolating, revealing, and then concealing parts of her body, a gesture of abject and amusing dismemberment, she indulges the in-betweenness of transgender and explores its cyborgian, superhuman potential. What if the body *is* just a product? How might that be freeing? Garner seems to engage this idea with relative ease, comfortable surrendering her corporeality as entertainment, tinkering with it as a kind of experiment, unconcerned with its results. Ultimately, the works that consider these questions refute existing gender conventions, shirking expectations of the trans body, and really, any body.



She began her transition by experimenting with hormones, getting them from the sex workers on Hollywood Boulevard. She viewed the body as a kind of product or commodity, as an appliance almost. In an interview with *X-TRA* from 2019 she said of her decision to transition, "I was working with consumer appliances and products, and I thought, Hey, I'm a product too." Garner's interest in objectification and her irreverence for the body goes against so much of the discourse around feminism and transfeminism which characterizes the body as a sacred site of the fully realized Self. Rather, Garner sees it as another commodity, something that can be embellished and altered. She writes in *On Gender*, "It only cost me about five thousand dollars to have the two-and-a-half hour sex-change surgery and seven days in the hospital. For that much money what could I get, a five-year-old Honda or something?"

But if Garner has an irreverence for the body, then she has a kind of reverence for the soul, the mind, the thinking being. She sees the body as a material enclosure for these things, and reveres the human ability to have instincts beyond survival; to fill one's body with ideas and to express creativity. In this same *X-TRA* interview, she stated, "I think of the body as another enclosure in a way. It contains all this stuff that you can't see, but you know it's in there."

Looking back at her oeuvre, Garner, it seems, is obsessed with anatomy and its functions, probing it as if it were a kind of machine, looking closely at the hardware. At Stars Gallery, on that stretch of Hollywood, orange traffic cones surround the moving sculpture. Five colorful pillow-like plush objects move slightly up and down, a pulsing inhale and exhale. The kinetic breath is slightly meditative but also has the quality of a smoker's contemplative drag. A net is thrown over the lumps as if they are in need of constraint, and a sign stuck in one of the surrounding traffic cones reads: "Warning: The Bowels of the Mind." A wire emerging from the gyrating bowels leads to a large light bulb that flickers on and off. The mind has a mind of its own. Against the window of the storefront gallery hang two T-shirts with an expository dialogue between a Critic and Artist spelled out across them in a loopy font: "Where do you get your ideas from?" asks the critic. Says the artist, "The shit just pops into my head." In a cheeky maneuver, the artist has pinpointed what constantly fascinates and obsesses the critic: the source of inspiration, the flick of the light. But Garner also gives away the artist's secret: that she is just as mystified.



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Garner's piece imagines an emancipation of the mind from the body, as a detached being, amorphous and unwieldy. The sculpture renders this source of inspiration like a bodily excretion, a metaphorical bowel movement. Garner is not one to be precious about the body or its shit (ideas), and yet she values the mind as an enclosure for the immaterial spirit of "thought" unto itself, deserving of its own name.

Witnessing the *Bowels of the Mind*, I'm struck by the radical distinction between the flesh (a container) and the mind (stuff). It suggests a future world far off from our present, one in which we might not be so acutely obsessed with regulating these containers. The deepest parts of the stuff are the most dangerous, most precarious, most powerful, and yet the most generative. It's the artist's source. I can just imagine the plush, colorful lumps jiggling around in the artist's skull, generating just enough friction to flick the light. The sculpture is a monument to these deepest parts and the discomfort they cause, a representation of what is inside – and what if the inside could be turned out?

When the pop star SOPHIE died a few weeks ago, my girlfriend and I drove around Hollywood listening to Immaterial, one of her hits, a liberated dance song about being free from the material body. SOPHIE sings: *You could be me and I could be you/ Always the same and never the same/Day by day, life after life/Without my legs or my hair/Without my genes or my blood/With no name and with no type of story/Where do I live?/Tell me, where do I exist?/We're just.../Im-ma-ma-material, immaterial.* We drove past the storefront gallery where Garner's mind slowly pulsed up and down, the lightbulb flickering then glowing in the window. "Im-ma-ma-material, immaterial," we sang along.