

# Garner

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From the auto body to the human body, artist Pippa Garner is one of the most pioneering artists of our time. Serving first as a combat artist during the Vietnam War, Garner's radical

practice took on the form of absurdist automotive sculptures and utopian inventions. A backwards car, an umbrella with real palm fronds, a half suit, satirized our lust for objects and teetered on the edge of fine art and commercialism. Even Garner's own sex change, transitioning from man to woman, became a materialistic invention, her sexual organs equal to the raw material sent down the factory assembly line; body and thing becoming one and the same part of capitalism's bioindustrial complex.



Pippa



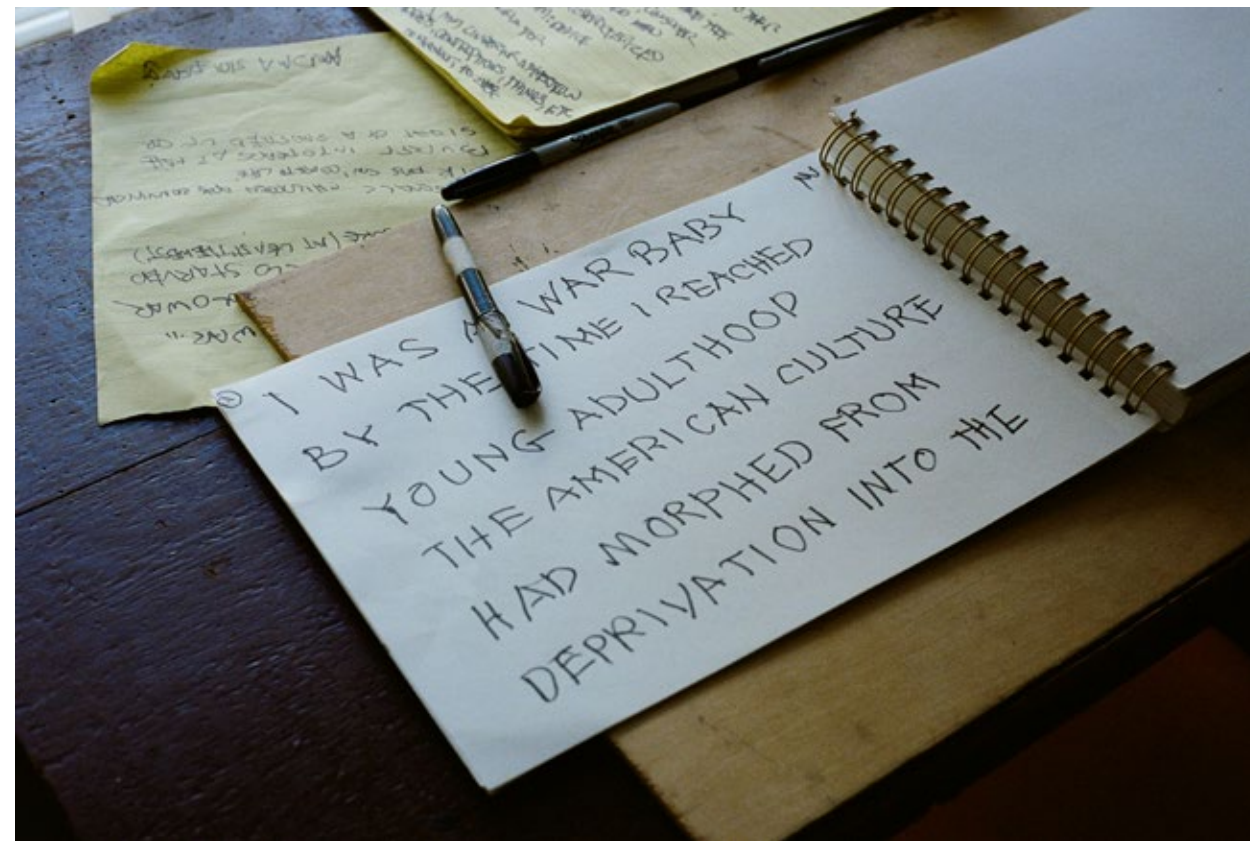
Hans Ulrich Obrist I wanted to ask you how it all began. How did you come to art or how did art come to you? Was it an epiphany or a gradual process?

Pippa Garner Well, I was a misfit to begin with. It seems like the growth process can be enhanced by the situation you're in. I was a war baby. I was born in '42, and I still have a few memories of what life was like during that time. Everybody knew somebody that was in the Army. Even a small child can get a sense of what it feels like to have the world be at war. I didn't pick the time I came to life on Earth. The war years were a time of deprivation. And this is a country of extravagance—it was based on independence and outlaw thinking. And all of a sudden, the whole thing was thrown away because of the war. But living was good for me then because I went through adolescence just as consumerism was really born. The assembly line technology that had preceded World War II was advanced by war needs, so there were all these companies suddenly producing the fastest, best things they possibly could, from airplanes to shoes. Advertising was born out of that because they had to convince people they needed things they didn't realize they needed. Suddenly all these stores were flooded with consumer goods. Things that nobody could imagine: chrome blenders, waffle irons, ovens, and lawnmowers. And I was fascinated with that, particularly automobiles, because the cars that I grew up with all had very distinct faces—the eyes, the mouth, the nose. You could recognize whether it was a Studebaker or a Ford. They had a certain character and I felt like there was life there. It goes back to another childhood thing of wanting to bring things to life. I think all children go through that with their stuffed animals. They get off of it pretty quickly, but I never quite overcame that. Clear into my puberty and beyond, I still felt that cars were living. If I'd see a bad crash where the face of the car was all smashed, I'd burst into tears. I found that it was a useful tool as an artist because a lot of the stuff that I was making was a kind of consumerism.

HUO You were in the Vietnam War with the US Army as a combat artist. Can you tell us a little bit about that experience? It also brought you to photography because you got these state-of-the-art cameras from Japan and started to take personal photographs, which became important for your later magazine work.

PG I was drafted in college. I used up several student deferments. Finally, they sent me the notice. So, I was sent to train as an unassigned infantryman in Vietnam, having no idea what I was going to be doing. I went over on a big plane full of people who were going to be assigned to different units. Once I got there, I thought, *gee, I wonder if there's something that might have to do with my art background.* I did some research and sure enough, one of the divisions, the 25th Infantry, is the only division with a Combat Art Team (CAT). A group of people who had some art background were given an itinerary to go out with different units and document with drawings, pictures, and writing. The camera thing was interesting because the military store on the base had all this expensive Japanese camera equipment, very cheap. And I got a really nice Nikon camera for nothing and trained myself to use it. A lot of times things were going so fast that you couldn't really hold the image long enough to document it, so that's when photography became very much a part of my life.

HUO Then you studied transportation design at the ArtCenter College of Design in Los Angeles, an extremely well known institute. You had one of the first major epiphanies in 1969. You presented your student project, which was a half car,



half human. Can you tell me and our readers about the epiphany that led to *Kar-Mann* (*Half Human Half Car*). And also how people reacted to it?

PG There was a Volkswagen sports car in the '60s called the Karmann Ghia. It was considered a very sophisticated sports car during that time and that's why I modified the spelling and called the sculpture *Kar-Mann*. I started going to art school fairly early. I went to the ArtCenter College of Design, which at that time was called Art Center School and it was in Hollywood. My father, who was in charge of things, saw that my interests were leaning toward art. To him, that was bohemian and something he didn't like. He was a businessman and wanted me to go into business. And so he tried to direct my art to car design because I was so interested in cars. He did a lot of research and found out that the school where all the car designers were trained was this Art Center School in Los Angeles. So I went out there in 1961 and found myself alienated because all the other students there wore suits and loved cars in a much different way than I did. I cherished [cars] in a way that was sort of comical. I thought some of them were really funny and stupid looking, so I felt pushed into a satirical corner. So, I quit that school and went to the Cleveland Institute of Art in Ohio, which is a wonderful fine art school, and I started doing a lot of life drawings. I fell in love with life drawing. To study the form, you have to understand it from the inside out or else it doesn't look lifelike. But I got quite good at it. So, eventually I went back to the Art Center. I still had the design classes, but they had life drawing work. And so, I began doing tons of life drawing and sculpting the human form. It just fascinated me. But the idea of making this half car, half man, was something that I did as a sketch. There was a wonderful teacher that encouraged out-of-the-box thinking a bit more, and when I showed him the sketches he said, "Why don't you make that?" So, I figured out the proportions—I wanted the human part to be about the size of a small male figure, and then I found a toy car and was able to integrate that using styrofoam to make the basic sculpture. And then, I covered it with resin to make the surface hard and did all the detailing. I was making fun of cars.

HUO I've just written the book *Ever Gaia* [Isolarii, 2023] with James Lovelock, who invented the Gaia Hypothesis with Lynn Margulis. He was a serial inventor. In a similar way, you are a serial inventor. You created all these objects between design and non-design, and then images of these objects were published in magazines, like *Esquire*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Playboy*. It's interesting that you then decided to go beyond the art world. I've always been very interested in that. Can you talk about how you bring these objects to a bigger audience, through magazines, but also appearances on talk shows?

PG When I was doing all that work in the '70s, '80s, and '90s, there was a real barrier between fine art and commercial art. If your work occurred in magazines, it was low grade. No matter what it was. It was degraded by the fact that it was published. And I reversed that in my mind. I thought, *well, gee, that's not right.* Here's an opportunity to have things out there reaching thousands of thousands of people as opposed to an art gallery. I love the idea of having as much exposure as possible. Even though I've had close friends that were recognized fine artists, and in a bunch of the galleries—I never really cared much about it. I did have a couple of gallery shows here and there, but mainly the thing that fascinated me was the fact that I could reach people clear across the country, and sometimes beyond, with these images. I didn't have much money during those years, but I always got enough out of the magazines.



HUO And of course, one of your key inventions, which is so famous today, is the backwards car from 1973. It's also interesting because it was a different time in magazines—when they paid for these extraordinary realities to happen. Can you talk a little bit about the epiphany of the backwards car and how it then drove on the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco?

PG There was a period in all the major American car companies after World War II when they started having these really huge design departments. They used a lot of references to jet planes. The Cadillacs in the '50s were huge, and they looked like they were moving even when they were standing still, which is called directional design. After my half car, half man, I started seeing cars in a context that had nothing to do with their purpose. The Cadillac particularly fascinated me because of the huge fins. And I had a good friend that was a designer who worked for Charles Eames in the early '70s. He and I would go roaming around sometimes on our bicycles. One time, we went by this used car lot and there was a '59 Cadillac, and it just popped into my head, *what if that thing was going backwards?* It was just devastatingly funny and that convinced me that in some form it had to happen. So, I started sketching and figuring out how to do it, and I made a nice presentation. *Esquire Magazine* in New York responded and said, "Oh my God, we have to do this. How much do you want? How long will it take? We're going to send a photographer to take pictures of the process." But it couldn't be a Cadillac, because you couldn't see over the fins. So, I started looking in the papers until I found the car I wanted: a 1959 Chevy, two door sedan, six cylinder, no power steering or power brakes. I wanted a drive train as simple as possible so it would be easier to reconnect. It had fins, but the fins were flat, so they didn't obstruct your vision. And so I did the whole thing myself in a little garage space. Now, it was a matter of, *how do I lift this thing up, turn it around, and set it back down on the frame?* I didn't have access to any sophisticated technology to do it, so I got everybody I knew and we had a little party when I finally got everything cut away. Once everyone got a little bit high from the alcohol, I said, "Okay, folks, everybody around this car, shoulder to shoulder. When I give the command, I want you to lift the car up, and then walk it back, turn it around, bring it forward, and set it down again." I thought it was going to be too heavy, but fortunately they didn't have any trouble. Once it was set back down, there was the backwards car. One day it was ready to try out and that was it, we went out and drove it around the San Francisco coast.

HUO The other day, I visited Judy Chicago, and of course she worked with car elements. There was also John Chamberlain. And during the same era, there was also Ant Farm, the architecture collective with whom you actually collaborated. And Nancy Reese was a big influence on you, because she made you realize that you can identify yourself as an artist. Can you talk about this?

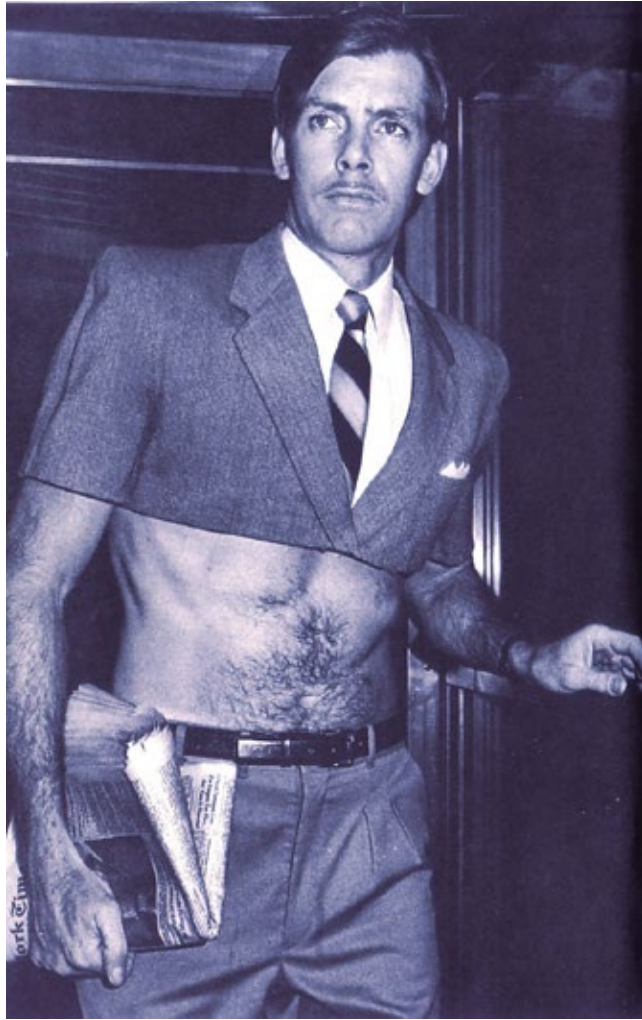
PG Well, that was an interesting evolution, especially when you think back on it from the Information Age. Now, everything is shrunk down to nothing. There's no presence. Even cars look almost identical. You can't tell one from the other. The only way you can tell the difference between a Mercedes and a Kia is by getting close enough to look at the logo. Other than that, they're identical. They all get the same input. They use CAD design. So, that whole era really stands out. Everything was so unique. There was such an emphasis on trying to make things attract attention and to design things that make people say, *gee, I gotta have that.*

HUO In 1995, you did this great project where you tried to get a custom license plate that said "sex change"—spelled SXCHNGE. But the authorities at the Department of Motor





Pippa Garner, *Neopop Businesswear (Half-Suit)*, 1980–1981, Photograph by James Hamilton.



Pippa Garner, *Backwards Car (Golden Gate Bridge 1)*, 1974, Photograph by Jeff Cohen.



Pippa Garner, *Un(tit)led (HE 2 SHE)*, 1995.



Pippa Garner, *Un(tit)led (Man with Kar-Mann)*, c. 1969–1972.





Vehicles turned it down, so you resubmitted with HE2SHE and it was accepted.

PG For me, the sex change thing was a material act. I never had a sense of being born in the wrong body as one of the expressions that they use goes, or had the trauma of being treated badly because of my sexual feelings. I never thought of any of this until I had already lived in my thirties as a male. And then suddenly, I ran out of interest in the assembly line products that I was so fascinated with. Even with cars, I felt like I had done as much as I could do. So I thought, *there's gotta be something new, something else*. And that was just about the time that changing your gender worked its way into the culture. The first example was, of course, Christine Jorgensen, way back in the '50s. But it wasn't until the '80s when terms like transsexual started to be used. Leading up to that was the whole gay revolution. When I was growing up, you couldn't be gay. It was the most horrible, evil thing that could happen to a person. Gay culture was completely concealed. So coming out of these cultural biases became a real issue. And the human body—flesh and blood—fascinated me because I could still be using existing objects and juxtaposing them, but at the same time, making it fresh again. So, I looked at myself in the mirror and thought, *you know, I'm just at an appliance, like that radio over there, or the car sitting outside. The body that I was assigned to, I didn't pick it. I didn't say I want to be white, middle class, and heterosexual*. So, if I am nothing more than another appliance, why not have some fun with it? Why not play with it and alter it in a comical way? Finally, that escalated into my deciding to go through with the surgery, which I went to Brussels for in 1993. I had what they call a vaginoplasty. Now, part of me is European [laughs]. I came back from that and thought, *this is great, I'm in my forties, I've had a penis for all these years, and now I have a vagina. What an amazing thing—I live in an age when you can do that*. You could go and pay somebody some money and say, "Here, I want to have my genitals turned the other way around." And they said, "Fine, here's the bed." (laughs) I was fascinated with the fact that I could do that with my body. It gave me a sense of control and a sense of a whole new area that I could explore. Meanwhile, the culture was changing and becoming more open. It's still not good, but it's much better than it was. I was kind of a pioneer with that perhaps.

HUO There's this amazing conversation, which you did with Hayden Dunham, about the struggle of being inside bodies. You say that because the advertisements and consumerism in the background in your life were always very gender oriented, you were forcing yourself to become more masculine. And at a certain moment, you decided not to conform anymore. It's so pioneering. Can you talk a little bit about that?

PG Everything is structured in the culture to try and keep people in a comfort zone. Unfortunately, that doesn't fit everyone. But how do you deal with that? How do you let people be what they want to be and still have a sense of the culture being unified and functional? Again, all these things are just a point of evolution. Things keep changing and moving forward, and they always will. I think about my life being one frame of an endless film—just my little thing, and then it goes to the next frame. And that goes on into the distance forever. I think that my perceptions of gender were very materialistic. I'm a consumer and this is what I do with my body. It was no different than someone putting on makeup, or somebody going to a gym, taking steroids, and building this huge body that doesn't have any purpose at all except for looks. I didn't have anyone that was going to suffer for it. If I had a family, it might've been different, but probably not. At this point, I was



single. I had nobody to be responsible for, except to keep things moving forward. I don't want my life to ever get stagnant, to start losing its rhythm. And that's what I'm fighting now, because at this age, how do I maintain that? It's very hard for seniors to keep one of the things that I think is essential for life and that is sexuality. Everything for me represents the lifespan—from baby to aged person. Whether it's called puberty, adolescence, middle age, old age, I feel the need to incorporate that thinking in my work to keep that sense of life going, and the most obvious way is by maintaining sexuality. If I don't have any sex drives, all of it goes flat. I take estrogen and testosterone so that I can keep an endocrine system that's young and still is attractive and wants to be attracted, even at 81. That's one of the real essential parts of my inspiration. If I lose that, I don't have any ideas. It's funny because hospitals are all divided into these clinics. Because I'm a veteran, I've got this ten-story VA hospital building at my disposal and there are clinics for everything but sensuality. So, they're really missing the point of trying to make people want to stay alive.

HUO In this conversation with Dunham, you say that you see the body as a toy or a pet that you can play with. You can change the shape of it. You're an inside and an outside.

PG Well, that's it right there. That keeps things interesting and keeps a sort of question mark floating in the air over everything. So, you're not quite sure what will happen, you know, maybe it will be a drastic failure, or maybe a revelation.

HUO We know a great deal about architects' unrealized projects because they publish them. But we know very little about artists' unrealized projects. I wanted to ask you if you have any unrealized projects, dream projects, which are either censored or too big to be realized, or too expensive to be realized?

PG Well, it's funny, because I always do. The problem is—and this is fairly recent—I was diagnosed with leukemia that was ostensibly from my time in Vietnam. I was there for thirteen months in the mid-60s. They were spraying Agent Orange, a defoliant, which turned out to be extremely toxic. I actually went on several of the missions with one of the planes that was spraying it, and there were no masks or anything. It stayed dormant until only a couple years ago, when all of a sudden, it caused pneumonia, which put me on life support for over six days. I was unconscious and I was in the hospital for a month in intensive care. Life support is terrible because it causes you to melt basically, mentally and physically. I've never gone through anything like that. All of a sudden, I found myself like a baby. I was able to go back home, but I still haven't fully recovered from that. I don't think I have the will. So, that's one of the problems. Now, I have this obstacle in my thought process because I'm constantly thinking, *am I going to have some more time or not?* You can be very isolated in Long Beach. Most of my friends are in Hollywood. So, I spend a lot of time alone, and I'm not good at that. I need to have back and forth. But I'm on the rules of the hospital. They did a five-hour infusion, which was a good thing. I'm lucky to have somehow survived to this point. I did something today with this young woman from the gallery who helped me take some pictures. It was a little thing I do for every Fool's Day, which is my holy day. And so that was something that represents my thought process. I didn't have that two weeks ago. Then, all of a sudden, there it was. The same little mechanism back there was working. One thing that will be interesting is when we get autonomous cars. I want to live long enough to see that—something tangible. Something that affects my life that I feel stimulation from. Maybe I'll just have one final burst left and then I drop dead. Or maybe not. I might be able to spread it out. 🙏