

# Discovering Stephen Varble

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Stephen Varble, *RUBBISH AND DREAMS: The Genderqueer Performance Art of Stephen Varble*, a retrospective exhibition curated by David Getsy at the Leslie-Lohman Museum, New York, NY, September 29, 2018–January 27, 2019.

Upon entering *RUBBISH AND DREAMS: The Genderqueer Performance Art of Stephen Varble* at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of LGBTQ+ art and history, patrons walk through a bubblegum-pink fabric canopy entitled “Homage to Stephen Varble’s Enormous Pink Satin Skirt” by Diego Montoya. Like Alice following the white rabbit, we enter unknowingly into a (gender)queer Wonderland of sorts. Just inside the gallery is a silky pink mannequin sporting an orange life vest and a skirt of large costume pearls, punctuated by enlarged pearly genital fabrications. A metal cheese grater is perched atop the mannequin’s head as an ornate hairpiece, while more plastic pearls cascade down and curl around her would-be ears like tendrils of hair in glamorous absurdity. Later we discover that the original life vest (this display is a re-creation) was stolen from the Staten Island Ferry.

The introductory statement by curator David Getsy (School of the Art Institute of Chicago) orients viewers to Varble’s performance of “gender as an open question in both his life and his work”; his evolution from Fluxus co-conspirator to outrageous art-world provocateur to reclusive spiritualist and filmmaker; and his drag persona Marie Debris.<sup>1</sup> Young queer performance historians of the late twentieth century must necessarily become accustomed to receiving belated introductions to would-have-been elders who lost their lives to AIDS. In this sense, it is unsurprising that, for many, *Rubbish and Dreams* was their first encounter with Varble’s work. Despite a recent resurgence of interest in the early AIDS crisis years, detailed historiographic accounts of the artistic proliferation from this period have been decidedly lacking. This period includes such queer luminaries as Reza Abdoh, whose work received a retrospective exhibition at MoMA in 2018; John Bernd, whose choreographic oeuvre became the raw material for a Bessie Award-winning

new work by Miguel Gutierrez and Ishmael Houston-Jones as part of the Danspace Platform 2016: *Lost and Found*; and Ethyl Eichelberger, whose work was included in the 2015 Visual AIDS exhibit *Party Out Of Bounds: Nightlife As Activism Since 1980* at La Mama Galleria. The exhibition of these artists' works is a powerful way to fill the historic void left by AIDS and introduce young artists and scholars to their creative legacies. As *Rubbish and Dreams* demonstrates, Stephen Varble is another important name to add to this list.

A line drawing of a naked male body with hoop earrings and a small crown inside a larger line drawing of a chiseled face with curvaceous lips adorns the wall beside the curator's statement. A vertical acrostic poem extends from the smaller figure's bicep: "GOWNS MEAN NOTHING TO A LONELY GUY." The curlicue adorning the final letter "Y," however earnest the intention behind this poem—which seemed to imply Varble's own disavowal of and simultaneous secret wish for "real" gowns—the accessorized "y" belies a deeper truth: adornment matters, frivolity matters, and queer aesthetics matter. The vertical words align horizontally twice, making "SNNT" and "OOA." What seem to be nonsense words at first become apparent as textual representations of the coos and grunts that Varble was accustomed to include in his otherwise silent street performances.

A series of images of Varble in various costumes are projected on the wall adjacent to the large line drawing. Taken by photographer Greg Day in 1975, these images capture Varble's luscious movements and feminine embodiments while he vamps for the camera. Each costume enables his Marie Debris persona to take on a unique character: hippie innocence in a typewriter ribbon dress and flower crown; haughty, yet delicate reserve in a regal egg carton and tulle gown; the seduction of a femme fatale armored by a sleek dress of V05 cigarette boxes; the bacchanalian abandon with which she tore apart an outfit of green cardboard strips in a luscious purple wig and sensible pumps. The costumes and Varble's hyperbolic gender performativity are captivating, and the scrolling slide show encourages onlookers to spend time gazing at each image before moving on from the entryway to the rest of the exhibit.

Upon closer inspection, the "Pearl Dress," a replica made by Vincent Tiley, reveals intricate swirling patterns on the mannequin's hips and sandal-like shoes. Another replica by Tiley included the "Milk Dress" in which Varble poured real milk out of his imitation breasts onto the floors of galleries during a histrionic performance of mock awe during unauthorized tours of 1970s SoHo. The dress is made of pipe cleaner, with Grecian sandals of ace bandage and large yellow sponges. Though see-through and impossibly low cut, the dress is regal. Styro-foam packing curls make a Louis XIV wig topped with a regal crown featuring a milk carton and chicken bones.

Directly to the right of the voluminous pink entryway, an iPad was stocked with photos of Varble's early performances for patron perusal. The image collection, though focused on works from 1971–73, includes several that introduce Varble's infamous 1976 *Chemical Bank Protest*. For this intervention, Varble was garbed in plastic netting poked through with glittery trash, dollar bills, and a toy fighter jet covering his naked crotch. A cardboard cut-out speech bubble protrudes from his head: "even though you may be forged—Chemical still banks best!" The images of Varble vamping on the sidewalk outside the bank epitomize his synthesis of acerbic wit and joie de vivre. The poses are stylized and balletic with extended legs, stretched feet, graceful arm gestures, and tilted head. A yellow tail protrudes from the back of the dress. The camp "advertisement" as sidewalk protest is delightful, but then he enters the bank. The images capture Varble barefoot as he speaks with bank personnel. Later, he sits dejectedly, spilling blood from his condom breasts and writing a check to photographer Peter Hujar for "zero million dollars." Varble's willingness to take up space and make others notice him is admirable—not merely on the sidewalk, where busy New Yorkers might roll their eyes or pass him by without notice, but in a place of business and labor, suits and ties.

Transitioning from an overview of Varble's mid-career highlights to a chronological display of his earliest works is aesthetically shocking. Varble is hardly recognizable without make-up. His hairy body appears blindfolded as he wears a loose-fitting white muslin shirt or a dress of wooden slats. The earthy Fluxus aesthetic and studied earnestness of this period in Varble's work (primarily in close partnership with his then-lover, Fluxus artist Geoffrey Hendricks), starkly contrasts the faux glamour and provocative irony of his later oeuvre. The wooden dress, made up what might now be called "upcycled" scraps, dates from his 1972 performance *Equinox*. A counterpoint to Hendricks's 1971 *Flux Divorce* performance with ex-wife Nye Ffarrabas, in *Equinox*, Varble and Hendricks get symbolically married, with the wooden dress intended as a feminine counterpoint to Hendricks's tuxedo. The pair often wore these costumes in their collaborations. Many of these performances were durational, with Hendricks sitting on a mound of dirt or otherwise in public and writing for hours in a journal, often about Varble and their relationship, while Varble pantomimed nearby. Readings of these journals by Hendricks accompanied the display. Standing under the hanging speakers, those curious could listen to the recorded minutia of Varble and Hendricks's collaborative lives. But Hendricks's monotonous droning is not as fascinating as the flamboyant performances of Varble's queer femininity on the exhibit's horizon.

Varble frequently wears a blindfold in this section of his archive. The blindfold was used in one of his earliest street performances, *Blind Walks*, in which the sensory deprivation, particularly in a public setting, renders Varble simultaneously



Greg Day, "Stephen Varble in the Elizabethan Farthingale," 1975, digital print, 21 x 14 in. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.



Allan Tannenbaum, "Stephen Varble—Fountain of Safety—SoHo," 1975, archival pigment print, 30 x 20 in. © Allan Tannenbaum 1975. Photo: Courtesy of the artist and SoHo Blues Gallery.



Jimmy DeSana, Untitled ("Stephen Varble performing Gutter Art with onlooker"), 1975, silver gelatin print (2018). Photo: Courtesy of Jimmy DeSana Trust.



Unknown, Untitled ("Stephen Varble in the Typewriter Ribbon Dress"), ca. late 1970s, digital print, 20 x 30 in. Gift of Geoffrey Hendricks.



Stephen Varble, *Gutter Art* flyer [recto], 1975. Xerographic print on paper. Courtesy Greg Day and the Leslie-Lohman Museum.

“vulnerable and bold.”<sup>2</sup> Referring to the blind walks and a 1973 *Silent Interview* in tandem, one exhibit placard suggested that “by experimenting with the removal of sight or speech, Varble tried to make these events stand apart from normal expectations.” Yet sightlessness functions differently than silence in these performances: while silent spectacle subverts the onlooker’s expectations, sightlessness subverts one’s own. In a striking photo by Hendricks from 1972, Varble (without his usual feminine accouterments) is blindfolded behind a police barricade holding a wooden board. The juxtaposition is surprising as Varble walks in meditative, self-imposed blindness through the mundane, daily dangers of urban American life. These earliest experiments intervene in the artist’s capacity for perception as he makes himself vulnerable to the unexpected and denaturalizes the everyday. As Varble’s career and performance persona become more developed, however, his interventions turn outward. Rather than further pressing the limits of his own bodily precarity, Varble’s work shifts into another stage that demonstrates the precarity of artists as laborers in a violently capitalist society.

Though Varble’s blind walks were accompanied by the songs of blind pop musician Stevie Wonder, these early public events with Hendricks were generally far more serious than his later performances of campy excess. For example, one image from the Fluxus period contains Varble in a gown of projector slides tied together with white rope. His hands peek out of armhole slits to carry a silver tray. The dress is shaped like a rectangle with a high, round Elizabethan collar. Varble is clean-shaven in white make-up and a plastic pillbox hat containing a white mouse.<sup>3</sup> The dress is made of slides from Hendricks’s family life and work, pre-dating his partnership with Varble. While Varble did not ask permission to appropriate these images for his costuming, in doing so, he seems to claim ownership and authority over Hendricks’s personal history, as well as archive both their current and future collaborations: “our life” versus “his work.” Perhaps more importantly, Varble takes one step closer to the extremes of feminine display and manipulations of normative, unremarked perception that will characterize his public, unsanctioned performances as Marie Debris; long live the queen.

During his Fluxus period, Varble also dabbled in the more “legitimate” theatre arts, writing and designing costumes for a play entitled *Silent Prayer*, which was produced by La MaMa in 1973. The exhibit includes a six-minute black and white film excerpt of the play in which Hendricks sits silently above the scene wearing the “Sky God” costume that Varble had previously created for his own use in the collaborative piece *Silent Meditation*.<sup>4</sup> Below Hendricks, as the character Matthew, a Vietnam War veteran, also sits quietly and despondently in a wheelchair for the duration of the play. His family members alternately ignore and lament Matthew’s disabled condition while failing to enact the “normal” rituals of daily life—cooking and eating, conversing, music-making—which are here

shown as violently absurd. A letter from Varble to La MaMa's Ellen Stewart begs for advance funds to complete the writing of this bizarre theatrical experiment. In the midst of an otherwise genial and businesslike letter, Varble interjects with "I am very poor" and asks Stewart to spare him through financial support, and from "that bitter wine, obscurity."

Despite Varble's having signed Hendricks's copy of *Silent Prayer* "For Geoffrey, a Promise," the artists split in the mid-1970s not long after the play's premiere. The exhibit gives very little information about the end of their relationship and collaboration, other than to say that Varble set out on his own. The separation was decisive for Varble's aesthetic, however. No longer intertwined with Hendricks's austere and organic style, Marie Debris is enabled to come forth from Varble in her full, kaleidoscopic, and comic glory.

Another section of the gallery focuses exclusively on the second and most productive period of Varble's career, including images familiar from my first encounter at the pink curtain. The photographs are further coupled with ephemera from Varble's unauthorized interventions and placards offer outrageous anecdotes regarding his antics: Varble as Marie Debris in the "Milk Dress" puckers at the camera and cups her milk carton breasts. The accompanying note informs patrons that in addition to spilling milk on gallery floors, Varble crashed the New York film premiere of *Tommy* in this gown. Again, spilling his milk, Varble purportedly posed with Tina Turner, who gnawed playfully on his chicken bone crown. A quote from Varble adorns the wall above these photographs: "by making my gowns from things I find on the street, I show that you can look divine with nothing, if you use your imagination . . . . It's a life acted out frame by frame, not in celluloid but in rubbish and dreams." Despite the distance of time and the distancing of the photographic frame, pictures of Varble in the revealing "Milk" and "Pearl" dresses are striking in their physical immediacies. The reveal of his flesh, the playful incongruence of his painted feminine features and of his bare male sex organs, are elements of these performances not captured by the mannequin displays.

It was during this fruitful period in the mid-1970s that Varble gained notoriety leading unauthorized gallery tours in SoHo. In full Marie Debris regalia, cooing and swooning, he performed hyperbolic parodies of appreciation for the celebrated (and gentrifying) art on display. Varble eventually took these tours further afield, including Tiffany's, where he was barred from entrance but nonetheless performed his "act" in the revolving doorway. Meeting wealthy businessman and patron Miyazaki Morihiro circa 1974 enabled Varble to increase his visibility and notoriety by crashing increasingly high-profile events. Varble was also taken in by Andy Warhol and the Factory crowd. He eventually began to have a

more legitimate presence in the fashion and art worlds, garnering invitations to swanky soirées—including the 1975 Met Gala at which Varble wore a costume entitled the *Festive Football Uniform*, created in collaboration with Miyazaki-hired tailor Shibata Atsuko, and which included an enormous inflated football as a headdress—and arriving in full glamour using a rented limousine or Miyazaki’s Bentley. Presaging the queer zines of the 1990s, Varble also sent out “mail art,” including press releases, fliers, and a single-issue newspaper. Continuing his street presence with a new round of *Gutter Art* performances, Varble would arrive at his chosen location, typically on Fifth Avenue (or other places of high-class commercialism) in Miyazaki’s Bentley. Kneeling at the gutter, Varble would proceed to wash pots and pans—some say in champagne—in the street while wearing a silk kimono and other eclectic accessories. Developing his genderqueer street performance persona and expanding his public interventions, including the *Chemical Bank Protest* when a forged check was cashed against his account, this period also included Varble’s first and only commercial gallery showing in 1977 and a profile in *Penthouse* magazine (which included a picture of Varble in the “Slide Dress” with Warhol, named only as “a fan”).

Success was neither uncomplicated nor unqualified for Varble, as demonstrated by his self-produced gallery show (with Miyazaki’s support), the Franklin Street Exhibition. Having painted the walls pink (as several are painted in the exhibit), Varble conceived of the loft show as a performance space as well as a showing of his costume work, and he often held performance tours of the ad-hoc gallery. When Varble faced eviction, he organized the Gala Ending Performance closing night party to end all parties. Warhol superstars attended dressed as live mannequins in his gowns. Gathering the costumed performers mid-party into his “Enormous Pink Satin Skirt,” the group then burst forth from the giant pink cocoon, birthed into dancing and simultaneously destroying the fabled object. As one critic put it, “even though invitations were hard to come by, everyone was there.”<sup>5</sup> What was intended as an epic ending led to further notoriety and Varble’s only commercial gallery showing. At Brooks Jackson Iola Gallery in 1977, Varble intentionally priced his trash as treasure gowns to avoid sale, calling the endeavor *The Awful Art Show*. The *Penthouse* write-up lists his gowns—of pipe cleaner, cardboard, and plastic pearl—at five thousand dollars each.

*The Awful Art Show* ultimately marked the end of Varble’s public career. In 1977, he and new partner Daniel Cahill receded into Varble’s Upper West Side apartment and created the *Happy Arts School of Manuscript Illumination* melding visual arts practice with vitamin and enema-based wellness rituals and a communal practice of a New Age spiritualism called Sobud.<sup>6</sup> Varble’s artistic endeavors shifted from performance to line drawing as he became particularly interested in the

interplay of language and image (as seen in the enlarged drawing on the wall at the beginning of the exhibit).

In this section of the exhibit, the juxtaposition of binary oppositions—high and low, sacred and profane, feminine and masculine, commodified and explicitly anti-capitalist, popular and obscure—continue to animate Varble’s two-dimensional drawings, as they did in his Marie Debris costumes and public performance interventions. One drawing of a Varble-like, youthful femme boy surrounded by large leafy shapes is encircled by the words “all I care about is cock/cock and virgin moms.” Another image pastiches Princess Diana’s face onto a promissory note for shares in the Dharma Book Company, the then-recently defunct publishing arm of the Sobud organization (where Cahill had been employed). Varble has further embellished the image of Diana, Princess of Wales with flame-like hair and jeweled breasts, an inordinately long and thin penis, as well as a self-administered enema hose.

One of the final elements of the exhibition featured an unfinished film of epic scale entitled *Journey to the Sun*. Returning to his artistic roots—Varble had come to New York as a graduate film student—the film retained the artist’s trademark juxtapositions: highly scripted dramatic scenes with long, open-ended improvisations; philosophical musings and non-verbal singing; spiritual mysticism and a veneration of Greta Garbo. Varble unsurprisingly played the lead role, the Grey Crowned Warbler on a hero’s journey. The scenes are sometimes silly, sometimes earnest, and often both. The walls of Varble’s apartment, covered in drawings and strewn with detritus, form the scenic backdrop. An eighty-minute segment of the uncompleted work plays on a loop in the rear corner of the exhibit space. Heavily and expertly edited by Varble in his home, no further editing was done for this showing, save the choice of when to begin and end the excerpt loop. Small crowds gathered around the film, necessitating that some visitors watch in silence while the four accompanying headsets are all occupied. Silent or with the accompanying sound, the moving images are regal in their absurdity. In a peacock feather headdress, Varble speaks solemnly. A still of this very image adorns a wall nearby. The scene shifts to a trio of female friends drinking, laughing, and making melodic tweeting noises with rhythmic drumming in the background. The scene changes again and a smooth-skinned young man in go-go shorts and a bow tie undulates, teasing and challenging the Grey Crowned Warbler by mocking his quest.

Viewers exit the exhibit through the entrance, retracing their steps and undoubtedly taking several last glimpses of Varble’s oeuvre. His work is at once perfectly unique and yet strikingly similar to the work of several of his peers. The over-the-top genderqueer performance of Marie Debris is reminiscent of Ethyl



Eichelberger's frenetic performances as classical heroines and Minnie the Maid. His combination of earnest mysticism and campy humor, especially alongside the communal aspects of *Journey to the Sun*, evoke the work of John Bernd, such as his solo *Surviving Love and Death* and his magnum opus *Lost and Found: Scenes From a Life*. A rare image of two figures in a happy, intimate embrace is surrounded by words that belie Varble's insecurity: "people go/stay/wall/too many/depart." The word "depart" is housed inside a frame within the frame that also captures the two embracing faces while the more chaotic and multiple lower bodies are left outside the inner rectangle. But despite the studied ephemerality of his work and the stability of his partnership with Cahill, Varble remained afraid of disappearing or of being left alone. As his friend Fernanda Eberstadt wrote in her diary after a night of hijinks with him when she was just fourteen years old, "I wish he didn't need such constant reassuring and support, but . . ."7 Indeed, don't we all?

The exhibit does not provide any information about Varble's illness and death. When did Varble discover he was sick? When did he know that he was going to die? The *New York Times* first announced the existence of the new "gay cancer" in 1982, but with an untreated lifecycle of approximately nine to eleven years, the men who were dying in these early years were likely infected long before even the early symptom-based diagnosis of GRID (Gay Related Immune Deficiency) existed in medical parlance. It is likely that the entire third act of Varble's career from 1977 to his death in 1984 was produced while the artist was living with HIV/AIDS. Perusing the line drawings, their mysticism and references to enemas and vitamins, it seems likely that Varble knew or at least feared he was nearing the end.

Returning to the placard accompanying the large wall image at the beginning of the exhibit provides a final opportunity to ponder the inclusion of several re-creations by contemporary artists and designers. These reparative gestures initiate an intergenerational queer community in the impossible process of becoming a community of care-taking, memorialization, and artistic creation through the re-production of Varble's work. Unprecedented care has been taken to highlight these labors and connections rather than obscuring them with the help of the entrance curtain created by Diego Montoya (b. 1982); an enlarged line drawing by Carlo Quispe (b. 1978); and a replica of the "Pearl Dress" and "Milk Dress" by Vincent Tiley (b. 1987). The youngest of these legacy caretakers and re-creators had not been born when Varble passed away and the eldest has now outlived his queer ancestor.

When, as a twenty-three-year-old film student, Varble arrived in New York City, he attended the performances and film screenings of his idol, Jack Smith. Emphasizing Varble's place in this lineage of queer aesthetics, images and descriptions

of Varble's more-or-less intimate forbears are interspersed with his own works: Smith, The Cockettes, Collette, Hot Peaches, and a queer theatre troupe called the Pagan Babies from Varble's home state of Kentucky. For contemporary Varble re-creators Montoya, Quispe, and Tiley—and for visitors—this exhibit welded back together an otherwise missing link in the chain of queer aesthetic influence that was interrupted but not broken by AIDS. What we have are photographs and ephemera, a few surviving videos and drawings, and the reproduction of lost iconic objects in the wake of Varble's absence. What we have are haunting evocations of a camp spirit, a few bits of leftover rubbish, and the seeds of new genderqueer dreams.

## NOTES

1. Quotation taken from the curator's statement for *RUBBISH AND DREAMS: The Genderqueer Performance of Stephen Varble* by David Getsy, affixed to the wall just inside the pink canopy at the beginning of the exhibit.

2. Quoted from the informational placard accompanying "Stephen Varble's *Blind Walk*" (1972), photograph by Geoffrey Hendricks. All quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from Getsy's commentary via placards and wall statements accompanying the images and ephemera of the exhibit.

3. White mice, as the exhibit demonstrates, were a common feature in Hendricks's performances and consequently in his collaborations with Varble. As the placard states in the exhibit, Varble wore a plastic pillbox hat that contained a live white mouse in reference to Dick Higgins's *Mice all Over the Place* that accompanied Hendricks's 1971 *Ring Piece* and their subsequent *Silent Meditation* collaborations in Europe.

4. A full recording of *Silent Prayer* is available at <https://vimeo.com/298888224>.

5. Quote by art critic Gregory Battcock included in Getsy's curatorial description of the event, affixed to the exhibit wall.

6. Sobud is a nondenominational communal spiritual practice that was initiated by Muhammad Subuh Sumohadiwidjojo in Indonesia in the 1920s.

7. Fernanda Eberstadt, "A 14-Year-Old Girl, A Genderqueer Performance Artist, and One of New York's Most Unlikely Friendship: Fernanda Eberstadt Remembers the Late Stephen Varble," *Literary Hub*, accessed 7 March 2019, <https://lithub.com/a-14-year-old-girl-a-genderqueer-performance-artist-and-one-of-new-yorks-most-unlikely-friendships/>.

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