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whitehot | August 2013: David Ford and the Kansas City Arts Revolution

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Kansas City drill team, the Pythons, perform while white guy grinds meat at David Ford's immersive retrospective, It's OK.

As the anarchy of cool becomes democratized, there are still plenty of rabble rousers like David Ford; artists and provocateurs who do things their own way and without permission from anyone but their own muse. It is also a tipping point for the Kansas City art community where he lives and works; which way will the ecology manifest itself?

The first time I went to a David Ford "meta-theatre" performance was in the mid-2000s at a warehouse scheduled for rehabilitation in an industrial Kansas City neighborhood still teetering between sexy and dangerous. In the melee of performance and speed was a man chopping onions at the entrance. You couldn't enter the space without passing the man slicing hundreds of stinky yellow onions with a huge machete at lightning speed. You either encountered this man, plus the stink and sweat that hung around him like a shroud, or you turned around and went home. I chose to enter and allowed this moment to become transcendent. As the onion man's life was changed. A subtext emerges in approximately half an hour into the performance, panic sets in. Tears fall from the stink of onions and you forget about your electric bill, or whatever problem is worrying you. The body releases endorphins and no matter how often Ford stages this piece (several times since its inaugural in the 1980's showing), this Paul McCarthy-like moment makes itself known and that is when Ford snaps the picture. This one kernel from an entire cob of truth encapsulates everything.

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Ford is very good at waiting, knowing the right moment will eventually make itself known. It is this patience and perseverance that strengthens the core of the Kansas City art community. We have time, space, geography and good people that stand alongside one another. The mentality here is horizontal, rather than vertical. And if one has to fry eggs or answer phones for someone else in order to fund a project, the mutual support is present, encouraging one another side-by-side.

But alongside such strong values, every organism also needs a predator in order to survive or else it just bloats and dies under its own auspices. It seems art school graduates are being churned out at number greater than before and there is a loss of independence because of it. And what is romantically perceived as a loner's passion, making art is evolving (if it hasn't already evolved) into an over-elucidated commodification.

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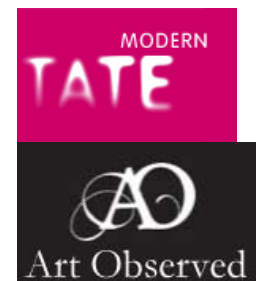
Kansas City artist, Paul Smith, member of David Ford's Krewe de Maximon poses at Ford's Maximon shrine - an ongoing fifteen year performance.

It is important to look at smaller cities with strong resources, like Kansas City. As more 'arts professionals' (a term I personally dislike) migrate here from places like Los Angeles, New York and Chicago, Kansas City will price and



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grow accordingly. The local arts ecosystem is determining how it will continue to present itself and evolve. This rubric is similar to a project Ford is currently working on in Guatemala with economist Neal Wilson. Ford offers two opinions; KC can be like the 18th and Vine jazz district, something that has a rich history and a lasting structure, something that could never again be replicated. Or, we can maintain a shiny, but very thin, veneer in the new Power & Light District in the city's downtown core, an enclave carefully planned to incite consumer activity. This pre-ordained experience is akin to Ikea-themed entertainment, cheap and fleeting.

This raises the issue that is paramount to our city's future as well as Ford's performance and installation work; quality of life and how we value it. A savvy, high-production business model is making inroads, however, artists like Ford also enjoy a "Pop decay" that continues to thrive in smaller pockets of the city, and "subterfuge" the proscenium. To that end, there are many art spaces that travel a more non-traditional route; Front/Space, Sub Gallery (an apartment gallery) and 1522 Saint Louis are among some exhibitions spaces that uphold the city's accessibility. Artist-run spaces like PLUG projects, for example, miniaturizes the gleaming white cube space into

something both manageable and cutting edge with original programming alongside exhibiting artists both local and national that keeps the city engaged.

In Ford's own installations and performances (as with his large body of paintings and sculptures) he mines pertinent political, social and cultural themes, a direct conversation with the city around him. And to a larger extent, the world we all live in. "Using beauty and humor to draw the viewer into complex situations, he (Ford) juxtaposes high/low, east/west, serenity/fear into a conversation of twenty-first century interface."

Ford's work is civic-minded, "protean sculpture, infinite maquettes" and all totally funded from his work as owner of YJ's Snack bar, in the heart of the Crossroads Arts District, an area both revived and still authentic. Because he is self-funded, it takes Ford about two years to put on one of his performance pieces. Actors, including "clergy, exotic dancers, demolition derbies, and African-American drill teams" are scripted and highly controlled by Ford. To say they are non-artists is inaccurate. They are, in fact, artisans, experts in their own field. Their actions are rehearsed and repeated over and over, and only then does it appear impromptu. It is the observer, who soon becomes the participant, who gets the immediacy of what Ford is orchestrating.



Kansas City artist, Peregrine Honig, actor in David Ford's 2008 presidential election night immersive performance

holds

Your Fear sign while strippers reverse power roles and throw money back onto onlookers.

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Ford considers his oeuvre divided as one third gallery, one third civic and community driven, and the last third underground. The underground part is imperative to the ideology representing Kansas City's past. While exciting to partake in this, I remain intentionally oblique and cannot be discussed here. One needs to be present. As with all of Ford's work, not only must you be here now, you must above all, be conscious. This is the only way to see the city beyond the landscape.

Appropriately, we are home to several artists who see the world outside the cocoon of education and academia, bringing it back to Kansas City. This "artist with a passport" as Ford himself describes it, is an abstract theory, supported by many local artists, like Garry Noland, Jaimie Warren, Anne Austin Pearce, Peregrine Honig and Paul Anthony Smith, to name but a small fraction who work and make KC their home. As they cross between mediums, are known outside the region too.

Endurance is a keystone of David Ford's enormous body of work. Making and creating is one component, being fully prepared to show here and anywhere in the world is another component. It's frightening and exciting, reminding me of one of Ford's most powerful statements; the *Your Fear* series of photographs. Groups and individuals of various age, orientation, occupation and ethnic demographics holding a cardboard placard with those words cut out of it. Like *Your Fear*, our art speaks to each of us differently. And as Ford is having a gas doing what he loves, this dialogue, like a leminscate, is continuous.





Ongoing conceptual photo documentation of David Ford's Your Fear, 13th Baktun in Chichicastenago, Guatemala.

Based in Kansas City, Missouri, Blair Schulman is an art writer/critic and curator. He is Editor of [Cupcakes in Regalia](#) and Associate Editor of [Art Tattler](#). Blair is a regular contributor to Ceramics: Art & Perception and Juxtapoz. His writing has appeared in Art Focus Oklahoma, Art Practical, fluent collaborative, The Kansas City Star and was a longtime contributor to the now-defunct Review magazine. He is also co-host

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Blair also completed the 2012 Oklahoma Art Writing & Curatorial Fellowship, presented by the Oklahoma Visual Arts Coalition (OVAC) The Fellowship is generously funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, the Kirkpatrick Foundation, Inc. and the Oklahoma Arts Council.

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