



Marcia Farquhar's

12 SHOOTERS

EDITED BY J. MAIZLISH

Live Art Development Agency

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Chelsea Hotel, March 14, 2008

MARK HARRIS

I first watched Marcia Farquhar's *12 Shooters* in a Chelsea Hotel room one night in March 2008. The Chelsea's shabby lobby, lined floor to ceiling with darkening paintings accepted years ago as rent, is only a cipher of all that has been made and shown there. Daniel Spoerri's work, for instance, was once shown in room 631, March 1965. In *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*, Spoerri tells stories about his table: 'I have set out here to see what the objects on a section of this table ... might suggest to me, what they might spontaneously awaken in me in describing them: the way Sherlock Holmes, starting out with a single object, could solve a crime ...'. Which is Spoerri's joke, since many of the objects' stories dead-end cluelessly, as they tend to do in real life: '10/Burnt match/undoubtedly from the box of matches described in No. 7. It is probably the very match used in place of the match in No. 7a. In any case, both could have been used for it because the stove doesn't work well.'

Marcia will likewise build a set of stories from things or images, although a work of hers will grow from a convergence of inventory and narrative, rather than prioritizing the former, as does Spoerri, who only breaks his own rules, of course, in comically irrelevant footnotes and commentaries. One of the footnotes (though neither irrelevant nor funny) is written by Allan Kaprow on that exhibition of Spoerri's in room 631: 'Spoerri's philosophical works were made in a hotel room, where he slept, made love, cooked marvelous meals, and defecated. His constructions crowded the space, mingling with the bed, the clothes, the odor of lasagne. One must pick one's way through this intriguing mess. Where does the work of art end, and life begin?' At that time, fighting limitations on happenings imposed by the architecture and social life of SoHo lofts or gallery cubes, Kaprow was driven by the conviction that lines between art and life needed to remain 'as fluid, and perhaps as indistinct as possible'. The supermarket, street, and city dump were his preferred art sites.

Kaprow and Spoerri would have felt at home during the *12 Shooters* screening. The evening readily blurred art and life, with a largely non-art audience, while events the following day (more on those later) further compacted the two in a mass public forum. First intended as a small event, the Chelsea screening fast expanded as Marcia's guests invited their guests. By the time I arrived, the screening had been pushed back to accommodate an impromptu party, with Marcia restaging an earlier performance. Marcia's work and life are attuned to social communities, with her performances approximating parties and her receptions like artworks, without either claiming to supplant the other. Practically a mission, a commitment to making the most of a gift for narration has Marcia giving herself over completely to a vast network as a chronicler – a contemporary bard, as

Olivia Robertson puts it in one of the films. Besides the filmmakers who each contributed a segment, *12 Shooters* involves many others from this network in its production, and in its storytelling it even draws in those who've passed away, whom Marcia recognizes as powerful agents in her life. Her stories test the chains that link us to the dead, as if reminding them to pay attention. Marcia still has issues with them, questions that need answering, and there are moments in *12 Shooters* when their stories are pulled into the present for re-evaluation. This differs from recent quasi-utopian relational projects, which use provisional communities to make art from the claim that a common platform can be established for sharing cultural assets. In contrast, it's the specific interaction of narrative and memory as a model for a populist history that provides Marcia with her material and purpose. Far from being a pretext for inventive socializing, it is the socializing that helps her to feel the quality of material, the texture of its past, in the process of talking about it.

12 Shooters reveals filmmakers figuring out how to address this grounding of Marcia's work in social life. The memories from which she draws as material for the performances are interactive ones, anecdotes of companionship and family, originally recounted to audiences whose own exchanges with Marcia may in turn contribute to later work. Though some of these stories are unusual, it's unlikely that they are any more so than what anyone else has experienced. They become remarkable however, in their retelling, where an acute memory elaborates constellations of intersecting tales linking antecedents to present-day events and implying connections to the future. Saskia Olde Wolbers's *Old Tartan Tales* is a nicely pitched example, where Marcia's stories are cued to outfits she is trying on. That reprise abbreviates the original *Acts of Clothing* which I reviewed in 1999:

Revealing a deep history she delineated old prejudices, locutions, obscure patterns of thought, once used by people who had drifted out of her life or died. This gave an unexpected social dimension to the feminist critique underlying her project. Performatively, Farquhar's piece was a lucid enactment of the processes by which women's clothing can express desires and thereby concede the means of repressing those desires – as with the modest suit worn to appease her father-in-law one lunch in New York, to which restraint he added the imposition that she refrain from drinking. This was an extraordinary performance, the more exceptional for its agile language, where Farquhar, with the timing of a stand-up comic, could turn her often hilarious anecdotes into unexpected revelations of vulnerability.

That review had personal significance for easing a distance between Marcia and myself, whose origins are vague to me now. One of the *12 Shooters* filmmakers asked me at the time (indiscreetly perhaps, but genuinely concerned) whether Marcia and I were now speaking with one another, and I felt surprised by this perception of estrangement, realizing I must have become, in absentia, another story. I always trusted Marcia as the

archivist of that with which the rest of us gradually lose touch. With Marcia it is like touch, reminding me of the scrupulousness with which Proust condensed the past into profile – ‘for memory was now set in motion; as a rule I did not attempt to go to sleep again at once, but used to spend the greater part of the night recalling our life in the old days at Combray with my great-aunt, at Balbec, Paris, Doncières, Venice, and the rest; remembering again all the places and people that I had known, what I had actually seen of them, and what others had told me.’

Given those attending and the content of the video we were watching, these Farquhar stories were anchored fast in the Chelsea reception. Marcia was in New York in part because her husband Jem Finer’s band The Pogues had St. Patrick’s Day performances scheduled, and their daughter Ella was singing Kirsty McColl’s part in ‘Fairytale of New York’ alongside Shane MacGowan. Kitty, their younger daughter, was at the party along with other musicians, including Shane. I’ve known Marcia and Jem a long time and, as I don’t run into the band that often, Marcia usually reintroduces me as one of the handful attending the shambolic first Pogues gig at the Pindar of Wakefield in 1982. My memory of that evening is enhanced by Marcia’s hilarious narrative of misunderstanding and nerves. She tells how Jem couldn’t find her after the concert. Convinced that their amateurish performance had launched the band towards oblivion, Marcia’s stress had accelerated her drinking until she finally collapsed under our table next to a pint glass of vomit. At the Chelsea I could see her enjoying the experience of old stories made vital by the assembly of this extensive network of friends. I chatted, as people arrived, with Ella and Kitty, with Jem, with Anthony McCall (who makes the funnels of light projected through dust), with Sim Cass, the head baker from SoHo’s Balthazar, with singer Spider Stacy and bassist Darryl Hunt (who I hadn’t seen since I was living in London five years ago), and with Marcia’s frequent collaborator and fellow Slade graduate J. Maizlish (Mole), whose Marseille Figs were opening for The Pogues. That night’s party and screening will likely become incorporated into future work, given the diverse constituencies gathered in impromptu celebration of Marcia’s project, reflecting on their own part in these narratives. There’s a generosity about this story-telling that needs remarking on. With self-deprecating humour Marcia’s performances reflect on interactions with people whose characteristics are embraced, like an intense study of natural phenomena.

A tragi-comic autobiographer, Viktor Shklovsky was able to invoke an astonishing range of memories from which to construct his pithy narratives. His grounding of intense emotional content in a kind of shorthand of factual description seems close to Marcia’s composition method: ‘Birds hold fast to a branch even when they sleep. People should hold fast to each other that way.’ His image of Mayakovsky recalls Marcia’s performance practice: ‘He treats life like a motorcycle: when it conks out in the middle of the street, he patches it up without paying any attention to the curiosity seekers that gather

around.' Mayakovsky wrote of his own life – '1906/Father died. Pricked his finger (putting papers together), blood-poisoning. Since then I can't bear pins. End of prosperity. After father's funeral we had three roubles left. Instinctively, feverishly, we sold our chairs and tables. Moved to Moscow. Why? Not even acquaintances there.' These Russian writers, with their charged prose and intense working lives, have an affinity with one particular fascination of Marcia's. The late Imre Goth, a Hungarian figurative painter and father figure, charges through Marcia's life, still living out the history and tenor of his pre-war Eastern European youth. He appears in at least two of the episodes in *12 Shooters*. He is Lazlo in Trine Lise Nedreaas's *Everyone's Here* and the focus of Uriel Orlow's *The Transgenerational Memory of Monkeys*, where Marcia discusses her relationship with him on a tour of his London haunts, adopting Imre's heavily accented English drawl. Marcia closely resembles Imre's portrait of her mother Jean, one of the few pieces of his that the family were able to retain. The loss of all that work to the salerooms, through inadequate estate planning, placed a high sentimental value on the paintings they kept. When Imre died I proposed a heist at his studio to remove the paintings he had promised to Marcia, but who knows what trouble might have ensued from that scheme, politely declined by the family? It's his self-portrait that Marcia shows to the Berlin Zoo's monkeys, one of whose predecessors Imre had befriended. Like the photographs of the Argentinian disappeared, or an icon leading a devotional procession, or the image of a dead pop star held by tearful fans, Marcia carries the painting face outwards around London, telling stories as she goes.

This infatuation with Imre, a solo performance of billets-doux both real and fantastic, is a live-art love affair which crosses over into the grave. It is also a melancholy affair with old Europe, a glamorous construct of individual resourcefulness and risk whose charmed survivors, like Imre, appear the other side of that hell with Stoic reserves to test our privilege. I find this kind of live love performed in the great, funny Berlin work of Shklovsky's, where distinctions between art and life are also blithely ignored. *Zoo or Letters Not about Love* is his correspondence with Elsa Triolet who – not long before Imre's arrival – was exiled in Berlin with Shklovsky, who saw the city as a zoo that caged foreigners. 'You gave me two assignments./1) Not to call you. 2) Not to see you./So now I'm a busy man', he writes. Already distressed by Shklovsky's attentiveness, Triolet was more upset when her letters were published verbatim in the book: 'Don't write me only about your love. Don't make wild scenes on the telephone. Don't rant and rave', although ironically Louis Aragon's admiration for Triolet's published letters led him to contact and then marry her. One Berlin monkey also fascinates Shklovsky, as he identifies closely with another's despondence: 'what I see behind those bars is a human being ... Naturally the ape languishes without his forest. People seem like evil spirits to him. All day long, this wretched foreigner languishes in his indoor zoo./No one will even publish a newspaper for him.'

Imre's old Europe legacy was felt in the flamboyant hospitality with which Marcia greeted the guests arriving at the Chelsea. Each was treated with genuine affection, made to feel special, and introduced to anyone standing around with Marcia's versions of their own life stories, and with an excessive charm that disinhibited the shyest visitor. From people who didn't know each other they became individuals who had to meet, as Marcia would recount incidents in their disparate lives as a pretext for new connections. 'Marcia's very good at telling everyone about everyone' we hear her mimic, just slightly wearily, in *Everyone's Here*, as if it were a curse, a proclivity she has to endure for some larger purpose, for she is also the narrator of this widening community, reminding us of our own stories whose colour and part in the constellation might otherwise escape us. There is a moment in Judith Goddard's segment *An Esoteric Afternoon* where we come as close as we ever will to an intimate Farquhar manifesto. She is talking with the extraordinary Lady Robertson, nonagenarian visionary and High Priestess of the Fellowship of Isis, who is explaining Marcia's aura and communicating with her dead father. As Marcia explains, 'I really try to tell stories to people that are familiar – but they have twists. I'm very keen on humour and a bit of vulgarity even, and rather a lot of depth and tragic, kind of strange moments interrupting otherwise quite light exchanges, and I'm very keen to give something. I actually *feel* people if I'm trying to give something. It sounds strange, but I want to give something that's not just entertainment, that's like a kind of exchange. Somebody said it was a bit like a prayer.'

The impromptu party stopped awhile for Marcia to re-perform *Rose Bud* (the Bruce + Marshall component to *12 Shooters*), before settling down on beds and floor to watch the film. Most of the *12 Shooters* segments show Marcia reenacting key pieces alone, well away from her usual audience with whom she usually trades repartee and laughter. Her address in these videos is more inward-looking, as if pausing to review her own life in performance. The Chelsea party let her appraise this introspection through observing an audience of friends reacting to the work, the whole evening a collaboration between audience and performer, taking on reflective and celebratory aspects. Marcia's typical conviviality and improvisational bravura before a crowd is stripped away in the films to expose a performer's meditation, most obviously in Dryden Goodwin's *On Reflection*, a still-image sequence of Marcia watching a video of earlier performances whose respective audiences were responding frequently and loudly. In our own deliberations, our contemplative and declaratory responses to the film, and to Marcia's hospitality, we began to recognize and enjoy ourselves as a community.

Performing in the Chelsea connected Marcia to other stories. Alex Cox's *Sid & Nancy* used the Chelsea Hotel as a principal location: 'Chelsea Lobby. Interior. Day. The walls are packed with grimy pop art.' Jem's composition 'Junk Theme' was on the *Sid & Nancy* soundtrack, along with music by Shane and Joe Strummer (who is anonymously commemorated in *12 Shooters*). This last summer Marcia saw Leonard Cohen perform in London, and I

imagine her missing the delicacies of 'Chelsea Hotel No. 2', which he omitted that time: 'Then I moved into the Chelsea Hotel. That was a lot of fun. Everybody was there. Nico, and Ginsberg passed through there a lot. There was Harry Smith, Janis Joplin ...'. Nico dominates several scenes in Andy Warhol's 1966 *Chelsea Girls*, including one where a psychedelic light show plays across her face as she listens to The Velvet Underground. Alberto Moravia wrote of Warhol's actors playing soliloquies from the center of their community; self-aggrandizing divas regardless of whether they were fighting, talking, or having sex. Marcia's working roles relate to Warhol's use of his Factory community. 'I loved all the Factory family incest', she recently wrote, 'and at 14 had photos all over my wall of the Velvets and Edie. All I wanted to do was run away from Francis Holland and throw myself at the feet of Candy Darling.' In the first place, it is as if Marcia is attuned to the intersection of memory and social life in the same way that Warhol was sensitive to the minutiae of his environment. And, secondly, she recognizes the campiness and theatricality of the soliloquizing diva as valuable stage qualities, where material gathered through her hyper-attunement to social histories can realize its complexity and colour in performance. Though Marcia's work may include live music (for example Marseille Figs played in the original performance on which Zoë Brown's segment *Ophelia the Deadly Warm-up* is based) and may elaborate stories by reference to her friends in the rock milieu, it is never about music itself. Marcia's sense of mission, to engineer an exchange of emotions or intensities in narration of the everyday epic of her time and people, is how we can also understand the achievements of Warhol in the '60s and of Derek Jarman in the '70s with their communities, The Factory and Butler's Wharf, respectively. In 12 *Shooters* the musicians are referenced anonymously, but watching *Old Tartan Tales* you could hear Shane chuckling at the jokes credited to him as 'the same witty fellow since become something of a legend himself', while later in that segment an unnamed Strummer becomes 'the same friend whose funeral I *hadn't* attended in a mantilla.'

The Chelsea event was followed the next day by a Pogues concert at Roseland, played or attended by most of those who had been at the screening, alongside thousands of fans. With the intertwined lives of band and Farquhar family, this concert elicited amongst a crowd that which Marcia's work has always sought amongst smaller groups, the unfolding and celebration of intimate life details. We were off to the right-hand side on a platform some five feet above the crowd. I sat slightly behind Marcia, Kitty and Ella (before her turn on stage). From this perspective, past the family to the audience and the band beyond, I understood that the concert expanded on the events in the Chelsea the previous evening specifically by opening up that intimate world of story-telling and celebration to the elation of a mass audience. And this was done not symbolically but concretely, through the manner in which the long history of family and friends had arrived at that exact point where a rock band's performance embodied the entire constellation of the audience's

stories. In that extended hour of ecstatic celebration and inward rootedness lay the invitation that was the audience's own constellation, as if Borges' *Aleph* were the Roseland stage – 'In that unbounded moment, I saw millions of delightful and horrible acts; none amazed me so much as the fact that all occupied the same point, without superposition and without transparency.' Promoting this end was the manner of the music's generosity, its celebratory outward explosiveness, where humour, melody and noise were providing far in excess of entertainment. In counterpart to that ecstasy was an inward movement with roots into worlds of history, emotion, biography, family, poetry, punk, folk, London and Ireland. Sitting with them, as I had been the previous night in the hotel, I was thinking of Marcia's family and of what it meant to have lived through this whole era of family, art, rock music, and survived. While Marcia and Kitty watched Jem playing banjo and Ella singing a part based on a storyline of Marcia's, I felt that this dense knot of music, family, friends and story-telling had suddenly become pellucid, the event defined as the sublime delineation of imperfections. Beautiful imperfection being of course a crucial interest of Marcia's stories. As unlikely as any intimacy seemed in the thick of the noise and the crowd, this network of possibilities converging on our present seemed never better realized than it was at that moment.

I'd once talked with Marcia about Heideggerian ontology over a beer and a sandwich in a London pub. We were recovering from a convoluted Slade lecture on Heidegger by the resident art historian. The Heidegger commentator Gianni Vattimo has written about rock concerts in trying to answer questions of aesthetic value, turning over Heidegger's early insights that ambitiously broadened the field for understanding art's effects. Vattimo asks: 'But then again: if not this – if not an enquiry into the truth of the work as an opening of historical worlds, as a prophecy, a document, or simply a change of perspective – then what is to be done?' He invites re-evaluation of social aspects of art and rock music that were seldom regarded as more than diversionary achievements – 'the reduction of violence, the weakening of strong and aggressive identities, the acceptance of the other, to the point of charity', all of which he classifies as values of nihilism. It seems to me, after the experience of those two days in New York, that the temporal expectations are too high for art's transformative capacities, that the moment of engagement is always brief and unpredictable, and that the task is to preserve that truth, not force onto it expectations of permanence or even moderate endurance. Furthermore, it seems sensible to explain how different perspectives and intensities are experienced with the same art or music event, even if this happens as part of a mass audience.

As I left the concert with Tracy Drew, an artist and writer who had also been at the screening, I talked about wanting a standard that could be taken from that kind of experience and applied to art. I've often wanted this, but it was especially relevant that night. Tracy amusingly remarked that such criteria would not meet with the approval of some of her colleagues in the

field of art history, who are no friends of hermeneutics or philosophical aesthetics. But I had really meant it in a way that *would* meet with such approval, imagining that world opened up in all its contradictory and intricate experiences, with the intimate, reflective, personal response being like a physiological encounter with art, without which any analysis is impoverished, even though the encounter had been a noisy, ecstatic experience, simultaneously involving many levels of engagement with lots of people. And I wanted that experience to count as a gauge for all encounters with art, as if it's no less incumbent on an artist to bring their concepts to life in a similarly world-engaging manner as had that concert and that night at the Chelsea.

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The *12 Shooters* screening runs approximately 2 hours with a 10-minute interval. It is preceded by a brief in-person introduction by Farquhar, including two short mini-performances intended to reiterate the difference between the live and the recorded performance. It was funded by Arts Council England and filmed in England, Ireland, Spain and Germany.

For information about *12 Shooters* screenings, please contact the publishers at the address below. For information about Farquhar's past work, visit: www.marciafarquhar.com

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