Identity Binge: How Lex Brown Makes Television

by Kerry Doran

For a residency at Recess Art in Brooklyn from April to June of this year, Lex Brown built a participatory production studio—equipped with a sound booth, editing dock, and a floor-to-ceiling green screen—called “The Inside Room.” Brown acted more like a producer/director than an artist-in-residence. She spent much of her time arranging shoots with friends, family, members of the public, and participants in Recess’s Assembly initiative, an artist-led program for youth convicted of misdemeanors in Brooklyn that offers work experience as an alternative to incarceration and may end in a clean record. Once inside Brown’s installation, visitors could engage on varying levels, by getting in front of the camera to act out improvised scenes, collaboratively drafting parts of an evolving script, or observing. This was a departure from previous works, for which she developed a storyboard or score and played a host of characters, altering her voice or changing her appearance with costuming and makeup. By taking on multiple roles, Brown expresses a position laid out in the foreword to *Consciousness* (GenderFail, 2019), her book of lyrics and poems: “My identity was never the point so much as being a consciousness within a randomly assigned body.” “The Inside Room,” however, seemed to expand her understanding of identity into collaborative and constructive play.

Brown led participants as they created characters and improvised a narrative, simultaneously livestreaming recording sessions and uploading raw footage to YouTube. In these unedited takes, we see Brown bang her hands together in front of the camera, like a human clapperboard. We hear her voice off-screen guiding the scenarios. These gestures signal that she, the director, is a black woman. As we might extrapolate from her statement in the introduction to *Consciousness*, Brown understands her identity and the power (or lack thereof) associated with it as determined by arbitrary social conditions. She and her participants made up a new system with new roles, casting against types: a kid, not even ten, plays a judge; two black teenagers are affluent prospective buyers of a self-driving car. As the residency progressed, a vague narrative formed.

On June 8, the final day of her residency, Brown organized a “binge party,” screening hours of unedited scenes. The audience—many of them also participants—talked among themselves as the footage played and laughed when they saw themselves or someone they knew acting in a clip. But the room fell silent when *The Inside Room, Episode 1*—the edited footage—came on.
After an unsettling musical prelude, Brown announces the show as a newscaster named Melanie. We’re transported to a self-driving car with two passengers. Melanie appears again, now as a virtual assistant on their dashboard display: “This drive is brought to you by Tony Silvercreek and Associates.” The place of action shifts again, to the “Steps of Justice,” where we learn that Silvercreek is a lawyer representing a nonprofit called Better Tomorrow Development & Associates. This organization has accused two employees of inappropriately spending their organization’s money on hot stone massages. The pair justifies their expenses, claiming they needed the massages after working seventy-six hour shifts. In turn, they accuse Silvercreek of slander and become media sensations as precariat heroes. It’s hard to follow the story. Plaintiff becomes defendant; one person stands in for another. The roles keep shifting, as if to say identity cannot be ascribed to one character. Silvercreek never appears in court, sending his white, female assistant to do his bidding. The ending is a cliffhanger: the employees are sentenced to forty years in prison, and we cut back to the self-driving car, which takes its dozing passengers off course into a mystical forest.

The video was received with a high-spirited energy that, I imagine, would have been unmatched without Brown’s investment in the community who came together to make the work. Laughing and cheering crescendoed as Brown recited her poetry and rapped. What started as a reading broke out into a serious dance party.

I danced, thinking back to Brown’s performance of her operetta 
Focaccia town (2012/2017), at the Kitchen in New York this past February. Wife and husband Arial Black and Antoine Antwon Anton Jenkins are throwing a party for their investors; Black encourages their daughter, a social-media influencer named Brioche, to promote the party to her following. Meanwhile, “a black man with a bag of chips,” appears on the property of their castle. Jenkins perceives him as an “armed assailant,” he shoots and murders the man who Brioche then discovers is her long-lost brother. Melanie briefs the story (“This bag of chips was found. The body was not.”), which loosely follows that of Trayvon Martin’s shooting. Brown played these four characters—plus Jingle, a fairy godmother—and hurriedly switched between roles with physical comedy that brought tears to my eyes. She hurled an open bag of Lays into the audience. Chips flew overhead. When the bag landed among the audience, no one dared to touch it, let alone taste a chip. You could feel the whole room wondering if it was okay to laugh. No one knew what to do with this humor, or with the bag of chips.

Brown thrives in moments like these. She performs with unbridled exuberance to address troubling subject matter. Her methods highlight the reductive tendencies of mass media, which project assumed identities back onto us and underscore how, on social media, we are often reduced to types and appropriated for other entities’ agendas, even if we feel like we are establishing the terms of our own representation.
When I visited Brown at Recess in May, we discussed how the residency was helping her develop new editing and directing techniques. Brown wondered, “How can I reference the certain type of power someone has because of their skin color, without referencing their skin?” While Silvercreek was a driving force of the action in *The Inside Room, Episode 1*, he never appeared on-screen. I assumed he was white because he had a power that enables him to act without consequences. By making him “invisible,” Brown privileged the narratives of those affected by his actions instead.

The typecasting common in movies and TV has extended into other forms of media. Brown experimented with collaborative character development as a way to mitigate this effect: not to provide a solution, but to illustrate how easily someone’s image can be adapted for a specific agenda, even when that person had a hand in shaping the image. Playing the unedited footage before *The Inside Room* allowed us to compare takes with the finished product. We saw which sections Brown chose to include and how she cut or spliced lines in order to impose a subjective, political message on the footage. Television is an obviously one-sided medium, but its conventions pervade user-generated content, too. Brown’s project demonstrated how all media, in her words, “conspire to render us powerless,” while proposing some tactics for eluding their totalizing effects.