

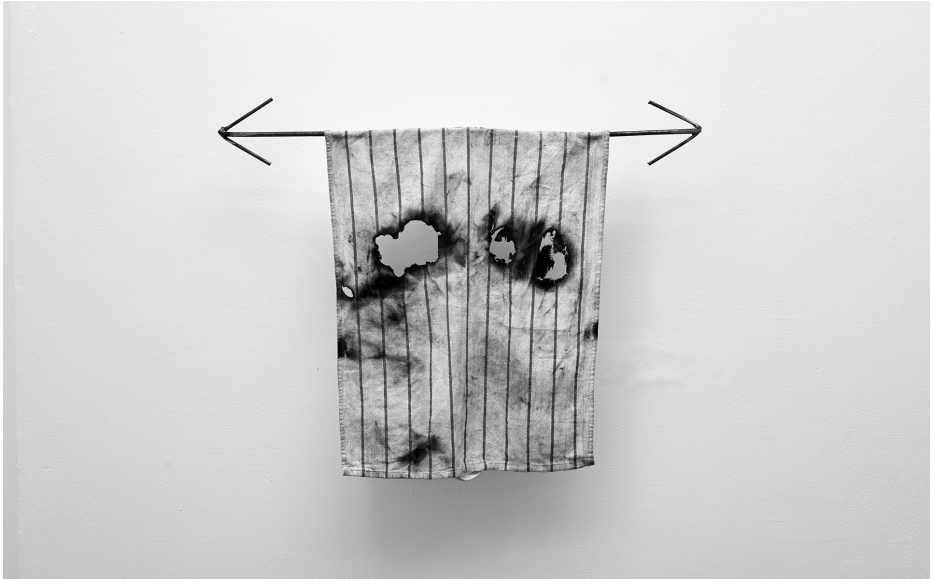
# *HG x JD*

"Love is more like a soft pocket of non-striving – flat as air and clean as water – in the sudden, surprising time-gap between desire, empire, and you." – JD

"so we are trying to make a community warm, loose as hair but shaped like a weapon" – Marge Piercy

"A little more than kin, and less than kind" – Hamlet

*by Hannah Gregory*



*Domestic Terror* (2016), Jesse Darling

## August 2016

I am meant to be talking to you about love and community in relation to art-making... art as love practice, writing as love practice (as I think you have said in the past), where love itself is a precarious relation and "all attachment is optimistic".<sup>1</sup> We should talk about 'love' and 'community' unromantically, with the recognition that these can be tyranny as well as harmony; power plays, violent or exclusionary, everyday or exalted. Both terms come with a historical halo of positivity which masks their problematics or cloaks their levels of control, yet – these days especially – as notions of sharedness, care or common ground, they keep needing to be asserted.<sup>2</sup> Maybe the kind of community I'm thinking about is ambient or imagined, or maybe real community is only actions.

1. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), 10.

2. See Sara Ahmed & Anne-Marie Fortier's discussion of community as 'common ground', "Re-Imagining Communities", *Introduction to International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2003.

These terms come out of my relation to your artworks, and out of my impression of the collective or collaborative aspects of your practice – a kind of “‘consensual’ community of feeling.”<sup>3</sup> The Kitson Road Living Project, an art residency né house share. White-iced cakes – coffee and chocolate – baked with performance artist Raju Rage then gorged on by guests, to cut with ivory-handled knives into the legacies of colonialism.<sup>4</sup> A crisis-era translation of *Antigone* – a drama that gives again and again over time in its questioning of what kinship permits and what it prevents – into an apocalyptic sound environment.

Your welded steel sculptures seem to stand as a just-propped-up community, or unlikely dislocated group. Separately, they invoke collections of interactions, clumsy and imperfect but no less beautiful for it. A precarious beauty, with ‘beauty’ held as ‘love’ and ‘community’ above – a word that describes a set of effects, but that is as multivalent and insufficient as the subject that speaks it.<sup>5</sup>

Yet each metal-limbed creature could also be lonely. *The Veterans* (2015) is a loping cross with a red ribbon tied at its heart and a flower sealed in a cellophane bag. *Our Lady of Whatever* (2014) hangs from angular arms as a ghost layer of womanhood; a tearable vessel once used to haul things around, now strung out with a torched hole. *Princess Horse (Tiril’s Horse)* (2015) has a pinkish mutt assembled from styrofoam, a peach plastic bag, a fake flower, and a Red Stripe can; these materials are tightly bound at the head of a one-wheeled crutch into an expression I would describe as ‘real’. The faces of the sugar and clay horses I had taken to be a sweet clan, the lost *Cavalry* (2016), are all yearning in different directions – though horses move in packs, perhaps these ones are not as together as all that. I don’t like the word ‘misfits’, because what must they or we fit into, besides their drilled holes or wall brackets?

I am fairly lonesome, not misanthropic but not a herd creature nor a nest-building creature either. A bad homemaker, resistant to furnishings – my tea towels have burn holes in them as per *Domestic Terror* (2016), hung on an arrow-line pointing two ways. I relate to the wonky build of *Home Unit* (2015, made with Takeshi Shiomitsu), which may be wheeled around for as long as its MDF sides don’t fall off, draughts blocked with expanding foam as more or less sufficient insulation from the public sphere or street. Maybe this is why I’m asking about community, because I feel I should be better at it.

**HG: What do you consider, at this point, to be the relationship between ideas of community, or commonality, and your art practice?**

3. Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (Polity, 2009), 37.

4. Kitson Road with Sarah Boulton, Sophie Jung, Elena Abashidze, Julia Marshand, and many others.

“Let Them Eat Cake, May One without Hunger Lift the First Knife”, part of Block Universe 2016.

NTGNE, as part of Serpentine Park Nights 2015, performed on the anniversary of 9/11.

5. And ‘precarious’, another word that starts to read as worn-out as the lived experience of precarity makes you feel.

***JD: The whole thing has never been separate from my lifelong project — to belong or to find ways of belonging — though the task seems now to decouple this and embrace my terrific loneliness and its attendant fears and death cycles. At our best, the works and I are in sync and conversation; it will be the works themselves that stand in for the ‘terrible community’.***

***It’s worth saying that the first community — and for sure it is also a terrible community — is the family. I would say that I am critiquing the family or the community yet I always, always seek to replicate it both in life and in work/s, so it must have been a kind of terrible belonging, never safe or always ambivalent.***

***This is not theoretical or speculative; it is very literal. The things I make keep me company, and in the ‘art world’ or the vertiginous void of the gallery there’s a sense of needing company. It’s why I collaborate, also, and I think where much of this compulsion towards sociality and communality comes from.***

Deleuze said that when you work you are alone, you exist in solitude — but a solitude populated with encounters.<sup>6</sup> This is the meeting place with the work; between the artist making and shaping ideas, transforming material and thought, and between viewers open to the work. A magick, spun by the creator, or just a set of relations. Either way, the encounter is expansive, and allows each person to step with one foot out of the world, into the common grounds of dream.<sup>7</sup> Into the ambient intimacy of shifting objects or texts, or the tall tales of twitter timelines.

I know Jesse as a member of an ambient community, that is, not especially well but across internet and shared-circle channels for some time. Close-feeling somehow without actually being close. Like, I visited Kitson Road for parties (#fuckfrieze), but not for dinner. I got a little high looking at the moon in the backyard, drinking special punch, but I don’t know the recipe. I fucked to the Brave New What anti-valentines mixtape time ago, but I don’t think I’ve ever mentioned this... Enough, anyway, to affect the way in which I encounter the work, which is warmly, subjectively... Enough to make me wonder about my criticality... though this (my ‘criticism’) has never been about distance. Communities are also, by nature of their formation, cliques. Within and without.

6. “An encounter is perhaps the same thing as becoming, or nuptials. ... Nuptials without couples or conjugality. ... a ‘between-two’ of solitudes. Dialogues with Claire Parnet (Columbia University Press, 1987), 8.

7 @hannah\_gregory .@dzeij\_dii you had an install in a dark cottage in my dream, damp n cob-webs, hard to reach, funicular, I was sad / @dzeij\_dii: Several times ppl have contact me on social media 2 tell that last nite I installed a sculpture show in some unlikely alcove of their dream / @hannah\_gregory an exhibition of all the dream works, or a practice of lucid dreaming, and we can collaborate there.

**HG: Do you think that the idea of community in relation to art worlds carries any lived meaning? Should the idea of community be important for art production?**

**JD: Certainly at some point it felt less lonely and more empowered to imagine myself as part of a community; a geographical community like an urban/South LDN community, rag-tag mix-up outsider community, losermilitia, etc. And certainly at the beginning of my formal practice (by which I mean a way of working that was in a certain sense oriented towards and/or in opposition to 'the art world' proper) my friends and community felt very important as a network of peers whose critique and encouragement I felt I needed.**

**Now I am trying to rehabilitate some of those friendships from the fact of our also being colleagues in the post-fordist art-world scarcity model, and this necessarily means a redefinition of how 'community' should function. Nowadays I think 'my people' are distributed through time and space — I would say 'my contemporaries', but I think some are long dead and others yet to be born.**

**As to whether it 'should' be important... I mean there is probably someone to whom the work tries to speak or appeal, and ideally it wouldn't be some spooky rich collector with blood money and a big white apartment. But I also think that good mediumship requires a fluency in one's own desires, a kind of intuitive control of transference which should be held lightly rather than tightly in the way of all masterful gestures.**

Contemporary art produces singularities, for the market, by the individual, that do not easily constitute a collectivity or common, or so says Suhail Malik.<sup>8</sup> Yet while it is the individual artist's biography and production that is promoted by galleries and more remembered in art history — unless they are part of a named collective or 'company' — what is often forgotten is the way in which



Princess Horse (Tiri's Horse) (2015), Jesse Darling

8. "The Speculative Contemporary — A Conversation between Armen Arvanessian and Suhail Malik", Spike Berlin, January 2016.

artists' work develops in conversation with and thanks to nurturing from their peers. In every kind of collective venture there are contentions of giving and taking, and company, in both senses of the word — as business or as something that staves off loneliness — differs from community in terms of what is given and taken.

At the same time, communities are co-opted as target groups to reach out to, a pool of 'identity markers' to be read by, so that we should consider, after Sara Ahmed, "how communities become fetish objects".<sup>9</sup> Curator Taylor Le Melle articulates this when they describe how institutions often want to 'represent' minority groups while reproducing the same systemic power structures: the institution benefits from diversity figures and an image boost, while the artists exposed take on an extra burden of visibility, called upon to signify too much. Le Melle and Imran Perretta's curatorial initiative C.R.E.A.M. takes collective strategies against this, seeking a balance between presence and participation, and obfuscation and resistance.<sup>10</sup> It's a thin line to tread with each choice made, between engaging and detaching, stepping forward and retreating — as Jesse, also, knows well.

**HG: Should the artist care about audience in this sense? Is the responsibility as an artist too great, in this sense?**

**JD: How/why would you, could you, produce anything if there were not an imagined somebody who would see or care about it? But I'm wondering if there might be a way to think beyond this imagined other to whom the work tries to be in communication or communion or service or whatever. Having no precedents for such a relation in a life defined by gender and labour roles, I'm having a hard time projecting such a reality into my world but I would like to find a way. This singularity of purpose feels so implausible as to represent all the other implausibles: groundedness, fearlessness, peace in being-in-the-world. Of course I am obsessed by the idea that such an implausible thing might yet be possible and it feels like I'm on my own hero's journey towards it. Fucked up that it's gotta be full service or full hero and nothing in between: I think these polarities are also somehow gendered, and I'm trying to imagine or embody the limen. When I am a "real man" I won't be a man at all — nor a woman nor a hero nor in service as such, and it will be the way of the warrior, or the way of the artist, and this will be my life's work. I'm very much in my adolescence with regards to that work.**

9. David Joselit, "In Praise of the Small", 4; Ahmed & Fortier, "Re-Imagining Communities," 257.

10. Blackness on the Internet panel at the ICA, November 16, 2016, curated by Legacy Russell, <https://vimeo.com/196206409>. See also Hannah Black, "The Identity Artist and the Identity Critic", *Artforum*, Summer 2016.

I remember when Jesse said, a couple of years ago, that eventually the sculptures would stand in their place, and the artist would not need to be present. The 'precarious', 'beautiful' artist's body needed to step back, to stop performing (in spite of itself). The material artwork would become analogous to this body, and other bodies, their holes and ruptures inevitably carried through. A quick transition from performance to materials – from self-starring videos and gifs to hand-wrought objects standing in space – with artist as demiurge and sculpture as avatar.<sup>11</sup> Like the online avatar JD, the sculptural bodies would not be easy to separate from their maker and orator, but they would do the slippery work of representation, standing-for, nonetheless.<sup>12</sup> The sculptures, now formed through a series of laboursome movements – where, too, the artist's body remains – would not signal the separation of art and life, individual and community, but the embeddedness of one in the other.

This is what I mean, I think, when I write that the *Princess Horse* wears an expression that is 'real' – it's an expression that arises out of its situation, which is that of communities in crisis. Austerity Britain, tightened means, the opening up of gender versus the conservative tightening of identity categories. With their crutch prostheses, air bags and masking tape, JD's sculptures speak of individuals' fragility, urban societies' injuries, and the paranoid march of the everyday.

Wounded Door (2014), Jesse Darling



11. Though Darling continues to be invested in collaborative performance/installation. Demiurgos in Ancient Greek meant 'artisan' or 'one with special skill'; 'demi-' referring to 'people' and 'ergon' to worker; its history less spectacular than the modern meaning – crafter of the physical universe – suggests. Avatar comes from Sanskrit: the descent of a deity to earth.

12. Literally in German, representation = to stand for: darstellen; vorstellen.

In her review of the group show "Devotions" at MOT London, Lizzie Homersham describes the steel legs of Darling's *Wounded Door* (2014) as pushing and pulling, in tension with each other and with other of the works.<sup>13</sup> In the idea of relationality and uncertain trust, there are echoes of Lauren Berlant's realistic refrain: If "all attachments are optimistic", how do you know when you should let yourself be, and when you should self-protect? Homersham also notes "the gap between knowledge gained through spectatorship and knowledge of the thoughts, feelings, and references that underpin the work"; the inseparability, again, of intention, effect, and affect; of artist, work, and life.

The question of how an artist or a writer becomes attached to, then must detach from their work as it is released into the world is comparable, then, if there is a deep investment, to the trust and generosity, recognition and affirmation sought in personal relationships, where letting oneself go is liberating as well as risk-taking.<sup>14</sup> JD's sculptures might hint at "a way [or ways] of inhabiting a common space" (Rancière), but within the relational set-up of contemporary art, amid a mistrust of structures of meaning, it's up to the receiver to work out how to get there.<sup>15</sup>

## September 2016

*The Western tradition has produced an idea of art that does not favor the idea of community. We have inherited a couple of ideas of artistic practice that reflect this: one is aesthetics, where the artwork is considered uniquely as an aesthetic object; the other is the basic idea of the modern.*<sup>16</sup>

– Charles Gaines

Chipping away at the grand notions that founded the modern, which already find themselves in decay, has been at the base of JD's recent projects. That steel, for example, made molten so as re-solidify and become attached to a metallic neighbour, contains histories of capitalism and colonialism – as told in W.E.B. Du Bois' short story "The Princess Steel" from which the title of the artist's 2016 solo show "The Great Near" at Arcadia Missa in South London was taken.<sup>17</sup>

13. "captured in conflicted movement as one foot reaches forward and the other moves back". Lizzie Homersham, *Art Monthly*, May 2015, 27–8. "Devotions", curated by Takeshi Shiomitsu and Tom Clark in 2015, with works by Darling, Shiomitsu, Imran Perretta, and Milou van der Maaden.

14. With thanks to Lizzie Homersham for her thoughts on this.

15. Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 35.

16. [http://www.artspace.com/magazine/art\\_101/book\\_report/phaidon-akademie-x-charles-gaines-53752](http://www.artspace.com/magazine/art_101/book_report/phaidon-akademie-x-charles-gaines-53752) Text shared by JD on social media.

17. The exhibition was also framed by the Wikipedia summary of modernity: "the prioritisation of individualism... human perfectibility... the development of the nation-state and its constituent institutions..." or, indirectly, by the quote by Bertolt Brecht that heads @dzejidii's Twitter profile: "It hobbled up on new crutches which no one had ever seen before, and stank of new smells of decay which no one had ever smelt before."



The tale situates steel, “that skeleton of the Modern World”, within these histories – with which the histories of this current artist and writer are also complicit. The tale dreams, through the lens of a time-bending ‘megascop’, of the “little silver threads” of another realm.<sup>18</sup> It contains “soft cold clay”, careering horses, and “mystic words”, among other enchanted things. The story implies that while industrial society aspires towards technically enhanced futures through the detailed studies of science (it was published in 1905), it misses those truths of reality and injustice that most need fixing, right under its nose: “We can see the Far Great and the Near Small but not the Great Near.”

Many decades later, political writer Cherrie Moraga uses the action of welding metal as a way to imagine the re-forming of, if not history, then relations. Through “the intimacy of steel melting into steel”, she writes in her 1981 poem “The Welder”, new support structures are made.<sup>19</sup> Moraga is less invested in magical thinking than either Du Bois or Darling – “Not an alchemist. / I’m interested in the blend / of common elements / to make a common thing” – but the need to change state, beginning from what’s close to home, is shared.

“The Great Near” moves from the intimate question of the domestic, or trying to dwell, to the public spectre of ‘homeland’. Its sculptures teeter between, as their signs read, private and public, Ladies and Gents, magick and modernity. *Saint Batman*, a crucified bin-bag hero, in a protective eye-mask like the welding artist, devoid of power but granted a solace arch of ivy. The works’ ambition, whether they make it there or not, is to cross – throwing their revolutionary cherry stems over their shoulder and leaving their batman costume at the gates – from this Peckham railway arch, into the land of dream. Rosy, forested, over the hill – like the place at the end of Du Bois’ megascop.

***HG: Is the idea of dwelling together, dreaming together, what links the life-work and the artwork?***

***JD: No artist is an island of course; we’re not making or thinking in any kind of vacuum so in this sense there is a connectedness to the world, to the collectivity of being in the world. The collectivity might also and concurrently exist in a kind of deep(er) time imagining of artistic practice (and/or social practice, i.e. the practice of sociality, and/or religious practice) as it has been lived out across generations throughout ‘art history’ (i.e. modernity) and beyond. And every artist will have their own sense of that historical community based on their own subject position. At the moment it feels to me like the best way to imagine possibility and futurity is to examine the past for signs.***

18. All quotes in this paragraph from W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Princess Steel”, available at <http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b236-i002>. Jesse tells me that their grandfather was a steelworker, and that metal runs back through the family.

19. <https://theusesofanger.wordpress.com/2014/05/20/the-welder-ch/>

***Things have changed, and then they changed again and changed back around. It sometimes feels impossible to imagine an end to the current empire (easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism...) so it's reassuring to know that nothing, historically, is ever too big to fail.***

October 2016

Another horse, another crutch. I'm still note-making, now in the "Empress City of the West" (NYC), where Jesse happens to have another show: "Atrophilia", a joint exhibition with Phoebe Collings-James at Company. The horse is *Bucephalus/Comanche* (2016), black and white, foam and bin-liner, with long feather lashes and a taped muzzle that reads 'Thank You!' in party font. The most famous horse in history, that of Alexander the Great / the hoofed companions of Native Americans across the Great Plains. Reading Haraway, unrelatedly: Can we imagine "kinds-as-assemblages", species run-together, co-existence of kinds? Haraway reminds of Shakespeare's puns between 'kin' and 'kind': that the kindest were not necessarily blood kin, but those kins by extension or imagination we choose to have as friends.<sup>20</sup>

Also present are the *Valedictorians* (2016), groups of chairs like those plastic ones from community centres or primary schools, raised high off the ground with mild steel stilts for legs. They seem to me not so much a community as a class.<sup>21</sup> They are tall, superior – valedictorians (US) are the high-achievers honoured to deliver a speech at a graduation ceremony – yet also expectant as to their purpose, defunct. Or, they are a faceless audience, peering back at the artist, the viewer, asking vertiginously: What next? How many more horses to ride away on? How many more artworks to hang wishes on?<sup>22</sup> How many more propitiatory prayers, how many more votive planes, how many more vital signs?

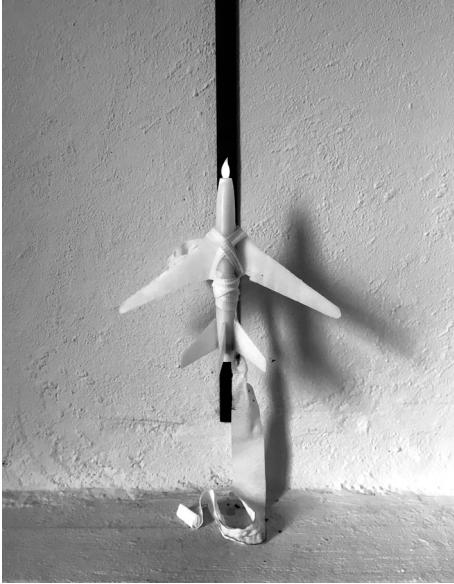
***JD: It is unfashionable but I really believe in art — not the circus that surrounds it but the possibility of transcendence or transference in the work itself. I am a very religious person somehow — I'm coming out of the closet here — and this is where my faith is currently invested. Like most faith systems it's a precarious suspension and apt to come crashing down which will be devastating at worst and bitterly disappointing at best, some kind of spiritual apocalypse which of course means breakthrough.***

20. "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin", *Environmental Humanities*, 2015, <http://environmentalhumanities.org/arch/vol6/6.7.pdf>

21. The piece was originally made for the "big circus tops" of Frieze London, where the chairs towered over gaggles of haughty spectators, collectors, and general public. Their image made it to the paper, proper, to another larger audience, where they solicited from the critic the simple comment: "Just like an artwork, just like a human crowd." (Adrian Searle, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/oct/05/frieze-art-fair-2016-review-everyones-a-performer-in-the-boozy-fruity-house-of-fun>)

22. Lauren Berlant: "Any artwork is at best an episode to hang a wish on." "Austerity, Precarity, Awkwardness", 2011, <https://supervalentthought.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/berlant-aaa-2011final.pdf>

***This, too, is a cycle I keep on repeating throughout my life. At present my faith is necessarily caught up in the idea of art as a container for the possibility of something gainful or transgressive or transformative. It should in the first place transform its maker, maybe. That doesn't seem too much to ask.***



Votive (2016), Jesse Darling

One turns towards whatever belief system, narrative system or object system relates to one's impression of experience: art, reading, S & M practice, tarot, celebrity gossip culture, religion, fundamentalism; one turns to whatever frees and grounds. Humans look for a sign that in some way, one's life has been recognized, even favoured, or that by living, one is making marks.<sup>23</sup> This helps me explain my own return to art amid the real world's real shit, and a hunch I want to rest on that this return is about more than escape.

The works of "Atrophilia" continue to be preoccupied with the restless ghosts of the modern, here taking in their backdrop of American settler colonialism, rather than British post-industrial decline, with the bright red banners of Chinatown in sight out the window.<sup>24</sup> They contain signs of how capitalism became a new purchase-based communion, and how that

transactional system casts people out. A replacement belonging of carb consumption or buying land (*Liberty Poles's* bleached white flour bags with red ribbons), which dries up with your credit limit. They suggest some faint place where the divine and the everyday need not be separate; where grace (without God) could be passed through the relations of things, beyond the rites of ownership.<sup>25</sup> So *Liberty Torch 1*, modelled on the Ace of Wands tarot card and a popular vibrator brand, is a secular-spiritual offering – a pretend white flower, grasped by a blue glove (clinical or comedic, but either way performative), and dangling a dollar-store gold chain. The hand carrying the torch pushes through the wall – like the Liberty Island statue, beckoning the beholder into the dream, a symbol of arrival and outdated hope.<sup>26</sup>

23. In the first part of this sentence I am paraphrasing Mark Cousins at the Serpentine Miracle Marathon 2016.

24. A Chinatown currently seeing rent hikes and the effects of (artist-led) gentrification.

25. And this, within the CA gallery...

26. Phoebe Collings-James's wall sculptures also call upon motifs of movement and migration, placing torn food sacks and delivery bags in red frames, some in the shapes of crosses, like quotidian shrines.

The saddened muzzles of the *Border Sphinxes* pose as several masc Americas – the red-cap wearer, the territory police, the low-profile hoods-up street kid – but their Champion jersey sleeves are crossed in camp defiance. Sphinx as warder, sphinx as guardian, and to the state surveillants, *ta gueule!*

As usual, somewhere there's a cross: a 9/11 wax plane attached to a steel vertical with a barely glowing electric candle. It's a votive to lost lives, but also to the razing of "phallic modernity", linking back to the artist's 2014 text "Precarious Architectures", on the falling of the twin towers and power relations between bodies.<sup>27</sup> Planes are always looping in and out of Darling's life and work – aside from the requirement of the emerging artist to keep getting on planes (JD posts on-board selfies and calls for witnesses to wish them well on the way), the plane crash biscuits served at the performance of *Antigone* on the anniversary of 9/11, and previously, the DIY film *Ground Zero Suite* (2013), with model wings hand-flown into body orifices. "Ground Zero is a gravehole is a rectum is a vaginanus at the end of the [man's] [man's] [man's] world", they write, laying the public on the private and the libidinal anxiousness of the body politic onto the subliminal anxiousness of every thing outside. If art isn't to be escapist, then it must prove Sontag, when she wrote after 9/11 that "the public is not being asked to bear much of the burden of reality", wrong. It must bear some burden.<sup>28</sup>

## November 2016

Throwing soil on the grave of the modern makes new ground for other imaginaries of community, or "a solidarity that in no way concerns an essence."<sup>29</sup> At least, when you still have the capacity to believe. Christina Sharpe writes, post-US election, in her essay titled "Lose Your Kin": "Rend the fabric of the kinship narrative."<sup>30</sup> Rend it, for this narrative has only ever been woven with exploitation and oppression, permitting one but not another kind of kin. Or, turning back to the words of Moraga, "Yes, fusion is possible / but only if things get hot enough – / all else is temporary adhesion, / patching up." It isn't the task of one artist or one person alone, but it is a common virtual project. A model for making and re-making that is based on something humble – whether the join holds. An ideal belonging on its own terms, which can, with individuals supporting each other, form communities; side by side, in difference. "Love" – in a figure later dreamed by JD – "not as muse, but as model for perseverance."



*Boundary Boys* (2016), Jesse Darling

27. "Precarious Architectures and the Slippage of the Phallic Modern", *How to Sleep Faster* #4.

28. "Tuesday, and After", <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2001/09/24/tuesday-and-after-talk-of-the-town>

29. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, available at: <http://zineLibrary.info/files/comingcommunity.pdf>

30. <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/lose-your-kin/>