Montage

Creative Exposure

Lena Chen transforms trauma into art and performance.

by Mathilde Montpetit

Tension crackled through the audience, which was clumped in a circle in the Frankfurt Conference Center. At the center of the group, Lena Chen ’09, an artist and writer, paced like a cat around a bed, scanning nervous faces for her next victim. A camera trained on her face projected her image onto the back wall, as she led each chosen person to the bed, before inviting him or her to pick one of the several notebooks fanned out in a semi-circle on the floor: they are revealed to be Chen’s diaries. Then, sometimes coquettish, sometimes convivial, she read several entries, both intimate and mundane, aloud to the group.

The performance was part of the B3 Bien­nial of the Moving Image, hosted this past October in partnership with the Frank­furt Book Fair. Earlier, Chen and frequent collaborator Molly Baber (the videogra­pher that evening) won an award for Best

Emerging Talent for their video installation, Expose Her. For that project, Chen posed in her Berlin apartment as her recorded voice recited passages from some of those same diary entries, which recount how she has dealt with revenge porn—she became one of its first known victims—online harass­ment, and mental-health issues during the last 10 years.

Chen was raised in Los Angeles, the

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Confessional Writing that's Not Just About Sex

Concentrating in sociology, with a secondary in women, gender, and sexuality studies, Chen thrived at the newly founded Women's Center, particularly in a seminar led by its then-director, Susan Marine. She says Marine taught her to understand that feminism “is not just about what you discuss in the classroom; it's about how you incorporate this in your real life.” For Chen, it has become a guiding artistic principle. In 2018, she and a group of other artist-activists launched Heal Her, a traveling workshop that seeks to help survivors of sexual violence—so far, in six different countries—through “transformative storytelling”: communal, therapeutic, spiritual, and artistic techniques for helping women process sexual trauma through art. Facilitators lead the women in meditation, psycho-drama, breathing exercises, and even neopagan rituals all focused on “opening up the body, psychologically, physically, [and] getting people into a safe state where they can start sharing their stories.” The resulting art...
objects, recordings, and writings will eventually become a collaborative show. Chen says her sociological training was central to creating workshops informed by the needs of those in attendance: “In every single community, they have their cultural methods, their localized approach toward: How do you talk about and deal with sexual violence?”

That is a question Chen herself has wrestled with ever since a 2007 event altered the course of her life. An ex-boyfriend posted nude photos of her on the Internet in an early instance of revenge porn, and years of harassment followed, especially by one anonymous cyber-stalker who also targeted undergraduate sex writers at other schools, predominantly those who were Asian women. The stalker was never caught.

After graduating, Chen began working full-time as an activist, organizing feminist conferences and events, and started writing a book—first memoir, then novel, but never published—about her experiences. But the strain of public exposure and the trauma and paranoia from her ordeal weighed on her. She was still being stalked online.

In 2012, she moved to Berlin in search of a new start. She assumed an alter ego, Elle Peril, and made her living modeling, often nude, for photographers and artists. At first, the new name was merely an escape from the reaches of Google. But as Chen began reading about feminist performance artists from the 1970s—particularly Sophie Calle, Lynn Her-shman Leeson, and Carolee Schneemann—who had made their bodies into sites for con-

virtue, and the shaping of the citizenry (through education in the humanities). Hankins’s project began before its relevance to contemporary politics could have been dimly perceived, and, one may hope, will long outlive the dilemmas of the moment.

The Great Democracy: How to Fix Our Politics, Unrig the Economy, and Unite America, by Ganesh Sitaraman ’04, J.D. ’08 (Basic Books, $28). The professor of law at Vanderbilt, operating on a less philosophical level than Hankins, takes stock of the neoliberal era that began in the 1980s and that he now perceives as “collapsing.” The contending visions for “what comes next” are “reformed neoliberalism” (more of the same, tweaked), “nationalist populism,” or authoritarianism: “nationalist oligarchy.” Finding those options grim, he advocates “a new era of democracy,” with vastly more civic engagement and institutions responsive to public, not private, interests.

The Emperor Who Never Was: Dara Shukoh in Mughal India, by Supriya Gandhi, Ph.D. ’10 (Harvard, $29.95). Why a history of the eldest son of Shah Jahan, the fifth Mughal emperor, who commissioned the Taj Mahal? If only to recall India’s full peopling and cultures, at this moment grim, he advocates “a new era of democracy,” with vastly more civic engagement and institutions responsive to public, not private, interests.

Three Poems, by Hannah Sullivan, Ph.D. ’08 (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $23). The author, associate professor at New College, Oxford, where she is a scholar of English modernism (Henry James, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, et al.), now crafts her own poems. The plain title hints at what is within: long poetic meditations prompted by the ordinary objects and scenes that launch memories and scaffold lives.

A New World Begins: The History of the French Revolution, by Jeremy D. Popkin, A.M. ’71 (Basic Books, $35). The Bryan Chair professor of history at the University of Kentucky, who grew up during the convulsions of the 1960s, crafts a narrative history of the revolution, two centuries and three decades after its convulsive beginning raised, indelibly, the persisting issues of liberty and democracy.

Moving Up without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility, by Jennifer M. Morton (Princeton, $26.95). The author, an associate professor of philosophy at CCNY and now UNC-Chapel Hill, reflects on what it takes, and costs, to move from one stratum of society to another as a first-generation student at elite colleges: in her case, from birth in Lima, Peru, through a Princeton undergraduate education and a Stanford doctorate. At a time of increased focus on such students’ needs (see Anthony Abraham Jack’s research, “Adjacent but Unequal,” March-April 2019, page 26, and the College’s First-Year Retreat and Experience, harvardmagazine.com/fyre-18), this welcome exploration deepens understanding of the real challenges.

The Affirmative Action Puzzle: A Living History from Reconstruction to Today, by Melvin I. Urofsky (Pantheon, $35). The professor of law and public policy and of history emeritus at Virginia Commonwealth University, a leading Brandeis scholar, has performed the useful service of delivering an even-handed, comprehensive survey of the subject—about which he was and is “conflicted.” The chapter on higher education necessarily deals extensively with Harvard, from the Bakke case to the recent, if preliminary, victory in the Students for Fair Admissions lawsuit (“Harvard’s Admissions Process Upheld,” November-December 2019, page 21). But it is worthwhile thinking about the whole field for a more than parochial perspective on what remains fiercely contested terrain.
versations about women's role in a changing society, she came to understand that by living as Elle Peril, she was also making art. “It started off as an extension of my writing practice,” Chen says of her alter ego. “Then it became a way for me to treat the trauma” by transforming it into artistic performances exploring the tension between her vulnerability and her power. She returns often to the refrain: “Who’s playing the artist, and who’s playing the muse?”

Her first solo show was a performance on performances, installations, videos, and photography exhibitions exploring the slippery world of identity—which Chen calls “the ultimate creative project.”

Now she is making art under her original name, which she returned to after a nervous breakdown in 2016, precipitated by living between these two identities. “Basically, I lost track of myself,” she remembers. Today, she is enrolled in an M.F.A. program at the University of Pittsburgh, and touring with shows like the one she took to the B3 Biennial. Though her alter ego has faded into the background, her art-as-activism remains all-encompassing. Chen’s body was once used against her, as a weapon of shame and degradation, but as an artist, she has regained control: “I have taken my trauma,” she says, “and I’ve transformed it into art.”

That art is often shocking, precisely because it—like the revenge porn—blurs the boundaries between her private and public selves. It is both literally and figuratively embodied: Chen has taken hormone pills and used a breast pump to try to induce lactation; has invited the public into rituals held by her Berlin-based coven, practicing non-monothestic spiritual traditions and witchcraft; and, in the case of the Frankfurt show, has laid bare every detail of her past.

Whether audiences experience her work in person or through video, Chen is driven by the potential for intimacy that, perhaps paradoxically, is a part of performance itself. “There’s always this impulse in me to reach inside people and do something more,” she says, “and break this barrier between what is performance, what is art, and what is reality.”

The Mystery of Mathematics
Teaching and learning math as a human endeavor
by JACOB BARANDES

A couple of years ago, I found myself reading through the “Principal’s Column” in an email newsletter from my kids’ elementary school. In her essay, the school principal wrote, “I don’t have memories of curling up with a workbook and solving equations the way I have memories of reading a good book in front of a fire. Math feels like work, while reading feels like pleasure.” I found it disheartening to see mathematics described in this way by the head of a school, as though recreational or professional mathematicians spend their time trudging through workbooks.

Unfortunately, I can attest that this perception of mathematics is widespread in education circles. And this mentality has real impacts on children. When I talk with high-school students, I often hear from those who enjoy their math classes that their favorite things about math are its rules and its definite answers—and I usually hear the same from students who don’t enjoy their math classes.

How has it come to this?
In some ways, math is a victim of its own success. Math has given human societies so many powerful tools for invention, for science, and for our practical needs that it’s hardly surprising that methods and applications of mathematics have come to dominate how it’s taught today.

But math can’t be reduced to these methods and applications, any more than the visual arts or journalism or music can be reduced to their methods and applications. Real math isn’t about memorizing arcane terminology, or following a set of rules and procedures laid out centuries ago, and has as much to do with workbooks and long division as real writing has to do with diagramming sentences or memorizing vocabulary.

Real math is a quest driven by curiosity and wonder. It requires creativity, aesthetic sensibilities, a penchant for mystery, and courage in the face of the unknown. It involves playing around with ideas, shapes, concepts, numbers, and structures; asking questions; collaborating with others; looking for patterns; breaking out of old paradigms; recognizing beauty; connecting with a transcendent realm of immortal entities; and making convincing cases to defend your claims. Real math is about making bold conjectures and then figuring out how to turn them into eternal theorems by proving them, or finding connections between existing mathematical tools and the worldly phenomena that surround us. Kids can start to do real math as soon as they’re able.