Ten Years of Transmodern

An inside look at the festival that transformed Baltimore’s arts community, from the people who built it

By Baynard Woods
PUBLISHED: MAY 1, 2013

The Transmodern Festival began as a rather small, isolated event called the Transmodern Age at the now-defunct Chela Gallery in 2003. Now, it is one of the city’s most energized and energizing arts festivals, focusing on the odd, the bizarre, and the avant-garde in a way that is perfect for Baltimore. With the 10th-anniversary festival kicking off this week (see highlights, page 25), it seemed a good time to look at the ways that Transmodern has transformed the city and educated a generation of artists.

In recent years, Transmodern has become a more prominent event, with Fluid Movement’s Love Parade and Pedestrian Service Exquisite hosting daytime performances in public spaces. But if the festival was founded to bring a more visible role to women and queer artists, there is still room for much more diversity in the Transmodern circle, suggested Sheila Gaskins, a middle-aged African-American artist working on Rooms Fall Apart, this year’s rendition of the Rooms Play.

“I was not familiar with Transmodern at all, because the art scene is really segregated here,” she said. “I had no clue you guys have been doing something for 10 years. So this was a great opportunity to bridge two separate factors together and bridge it for the future. ‘Cause everybody’s doing art but all in their different little enclaves.”

With more funding and support from the city’s institutions, we here at Baltimore’s Most Transmodern Alt-Weekly hope the festival continues to bridge gaps within our own arts communities while also finding opportunities to “bring the world to Baltimore but also bring Baltimore to the world,” as artist and festival co-founder Bonnie Jones put it.

Amidst rumors of a Transmodern book, we asked some of the organizers and performers to talk with us about the festival’s past and its future.

We weren’t able to talk to nearly all of the people who helped power Transmodern over the years, but we reached as many as we could to provide a conversation-starting oral history of the festival that fights to keep Baltimore weird.

Bonnie Jones, musician, poet, curator, and festival founder: It’s very much about people creating the culture that they wanted to see in the world; that’s the way I always thought of it. Part of the reason why it emerged was that there was a group of performers that was invested in creating the culture we wanted to see in Baltimore.

Catherine Pancake, filmmaker, artist, and festival founder: Before Transmodern, outside of the [14-Karat] Cabaret there was no centralized organizing body that was dealing with a festival that included avant-garde performance and music.
There was Artscape, but there wasn’t a more avant-garde or experimental thing. But the festival, like a lot of things in Baltimore, brought a lot of people out of the woodwork and had them coalesce around an event. I was in the Red Room collective, and I was doing Charm City Kitty Club and High Zero, so I’d already been working in several different collectives in Baltimore, and the thing I was looking for personally, aesthetically, I wasn’t getting fully from those. I love improvised music, it’s something I practice, and I loved the experimental cabaret; but neither of them were fulfilling a desire that I had to see more experimental and avant-garde work by women and also interdisciplinary work, meaning bringing musicians together with dancers, bringing visual artists together with performance people. But I knew to have and celebrate more women in the milieu, I had to branch out past improvised music and bring people in from outside Baltimore. It was really small-scale. The first year we did it, the improvising musicians that I already knew from the Red Room collaborated together with performance artists and dancers, so it was more like these performance pieces that included the experimental music I loved, that also brought in a more diverse group of people that included more women.

**Jackie Milad, artist, curator, and festival founder:** At the time, Baltimore was a completely different place. There were very few artist-run venues, and the only other festival that had a lot of energy behind it was the High Zero Festival. There was this feeling that this should be something we do regularly. It was a matter of realizing that this filled a void in our cultural landscape at the time.

**Catherine Pancake:** The Transmodern Age was a phrase that came from a performer that had come to the Chela Gallery. It was the idea of this otherworldly, new kind of modernity that would cross-pollinate between disciplines and cultures. One of the images I had in my mind was the Los Angeles Free Music Society, which was a famous improvised music and [performance] collective in Los Angeles; I’d seen that they had done this fashion show with improvised music, and there were people who had made fashion out of electronics and wires, and there was this woman who had made these giant hoop earrings out of the kinds of wires you would see in a circuit board. So I loved this idea of bringing adornment and performance together with experimental music.

**Jackie Milad:** Catherine Pancake approached us [Milad and Jones], and I have this very distinct memory of her coming up to me after a show at Chela and saying, “I have this idea for a festival where it’s more of a performance-art festival meets fashion show.” I was very intrigued because those are two things I’m excited about. It just kind of started with a casual conversation about bringing more performance art to Baltimore.

**Laure Drogoul, artist and festival organizer:** I performed in the first Transmodern. My first performance was a piece that involved amplified writing and a headwrap piece. It was the first time I had pendants on my fingers and ran an amplifier to the sound of the writing. I would call it a theatrical performance, because there was definitely a couple things happening. I don’t think it had a title. The paper was amplified so you could see the hands write and . . . you could hear the scratching of the texts.

**Lexie Mountain, artist, musician, and erstwhile CP contributor:** It was my peer group. It was the crowd I fell in with when I moved here in 2002. I did the first one where I was in a piece Chiara Giovando wrote which was loosely based off of the Brion Gysin piece “Yes, Hello?,” which was a response piece.

**Catherine Pancake:** It really is a matter of the artists participating in the organization of the festival, and that first year we realized that this is something that requires a lot of input and a lot of work from everyone, so we started to pull colleagues in the Baltimore scene who were interested in the same things we were in regards to performance art. We asked them to participate and form a collective so we could do an even bigger event for the next one.
I think there were just a lot of artists I wanted to see and it was easier to bring them to Baltimore than me trying to travel all over the country to see them. I knew how to write the grants. I underwrote the festival with my own money, and I knew what the risks were. I felt like, from the Kitty Club and High Zero, that there would be enough audience to sustain the people. You can get people who would frequently charge a lot of money to come for much less. For instance [Seattle-based performance artist] Wynne Greenwood came to . . . Transmodern for $100. I got a staunch letter from her agent that said she needed $700, but she had already agreed for $100. So Wynne Greenwood was a sell-out show, she did Tracy + the Plastics at Creative Alliance [in 2005]. People would travel from D.C. or for up to an hour to see someone like that who is not in the area frequently. No one had seen her yet, and it was a nice sell-out show.

My vision for the festival was always for it to be a bigger, more serious national thing with a lot more funding. The question [that the second year was built around] “What Is It to Be Human?” made it not like another indie festival but a thing with a focus and a more serious concern of the art world, of fine art. We wanted the performers to not just do their normal set. I think Audrey Chen that year did a whole set in a tank of water with hydrophones; that was something she developed for the festival. That was the thing, naively, I went looking for, and people delivered. But I wanted it to be thematic and a fine-arts kind of thing that you would see at a museum but [done] in a grassroots way.

Lexie Mountain: One of the great things about Transmodern is the way it would bring people from a variety of disciplines but also bring bigger names. They brought Nao Bustamante, they brought Jim Drain, a lot of really big names over the years. And a lot of really great performers. A lot of people have lasting friendships because of Transmodern. And I think it’s really good for the city, not just in a “Fun! Art!” kind of way but [in] giving Baltimore cultural heft and giving it a connection with the outside world and allowing it to remain vital. Things like Transmodern are critical to the creative ecosystem. I definitely think the most important thing is to bring people from out of town here and [to] make connections. It’s also important for Baltimore because Transmodern at its best is going to keep trying to figure out the best way to have a sustainable festival foundation, because they’re so interested in changing it and trying to figure out what works and what doesn’t and really trying to pack a lot into the city. Its flexibility is going to help it survive—not just the content of the art, but the idea that Transmodern itself is flexible, that it can change based on the needs and geography of the city.

Catherine Pancake: To pay two or three thousand dollars to bring in somebody for a month-long residency from France, that was the kind of thing I was talking about. More well-known artists who would stay longer and do workshops. Cleveland was like that in the ’80s, so smaller cities can do it. But you have to have institutional support, and I did not find that. Even the Contemporary Museum couldn’t make it. I may have been looking for support from people who wouldn’t make ends meet. And I know the BMA is laying off people, so the institutions I was looking for support from themselves were probably not in the best shape. But you can put Dan Deacon’s name in all caps because he helped us a lot. And Matmos as well. I was looking for institutional support, and I got Matmos and Dan Deacon. The year Dan Deacon played [in 2009] put our bank account in a different status, and that made us be able to get bigger people and pay for more plane tickets.
We got our support from artists.

Lexie Mountain: After a couple years of Transmodern, it became unwieldy and bigger. The organizers decided to share the burden and cast the net further and allow independent curators to curate certain zones.

Jackie Milad: The Current Gallery and the Whole Gallery and the H&H—I mean, we took over the whole H&H Building, but in a way that wasn’t overpowering. We asked them to be involved.

Lexie Mountain: We found these dresses and we brainstormed these pink ladies. The catchphrase was “I do declare!,” playing on feminine restraint and the idea of being ladylike. Also just the fact of being able to wear a pretty dress. So we were into it for the reason that we looked pretty and the inverse, that it would allow us to get really gnarly and do all the things in those dresses you’re not supposed to do, which is curse and scream and crawl all around and stuff. So we got the dresses and we got hats and we all ate lollipops to turn our mouths totally blue, and we got in a van and circled around the Wyman Park Dell and it dropped us off at intermediate points. When we were all out of the van, we started by coming out of the woods at separate locations, and so we were coming out of the bushes in these pink dresses and screaming. To do it felt very negative: Screaming all those things you feel when you look at yourself in the mirror, like “Ahh, you suck!” and just being really hard on yourself and trying to exteriorize that. And just being really vulgar about it. Inverting or reversing how you berate yourself. So then we came together and we started walking and crawling around the dell. At one point we were all just standing in the middle. We came together in a big pack and then decided to crawl up a hill on our hands and knees.

There was giant fake clothing on the giant fake clothesline. It was really Pop. It made a giant impression on people because it happened out of nowhere, and then it was really immersive, and especially with the giant laundry, it felt like a different world that particular day. So it had this weird Alice in Wonderland kind of feeling and we were kind of playing with that tea party, you’re being social outside, out in the garden. I think we were trying to be a little confrontational about it.

Jackie Milad: The Lexie Mountain Boys did this insane performance where they were just very spring-like in these pink flowing dresses, and they kind of emerged into Wyman Park Dell through the brush, kind of combat-style, and there was this explosion between their performance and the performance of Sarada Conaway. That whole event was very particular to that location and to the Transmodern. It was taking over Baltimore in a way, because it was folks walking through the park on their regular walk and then coming across this absurd, insane performance by the Lexie Mountain Boys and [Conaway’s] cake and women dressed in white. The whole thing made my heart smile, it was so good.

Bonnie Jones: The audience was gathered down at the bottom, and all around us at this slope down into the park, [the Lexie Mountain Boys] came from all these different areas into this place where this audience was gathered. That year in the Dell was one of the first years we launched all these large public things. That was one of those moments when the spirit of this public intervention came back in Baltimore. There had been performances like that, I want to say in the late 1980s or mid-’80s, that Laure [Drogoul] had been a part of. So her interest in history and building these public interventions is part of her work (“The 14-Karat Cabaret,” Q&A, March 11, 2009).
Jaimes Mayhew, artist and curator: I first came to the festival in 2006, when I was living in Boston, and I did a performance with the Institute for Infinitely Small Things, which is a Boston-based collective where we did a performance called “Corporate Commands,” where we take a group of people and go on walking tours to find commands that are in the imperative in advertising. So we ended up going by a flower shop that used to be by the Eddie’s in Charles Village and it said “Say it with flowers,” and then we went to some of the performances that night and asked people how they thought we should perform, and we ended up buying a copy of Stephen King’s It and we took a bunch of flowers which we picked in Wyman Park—which is kind of scary in retrospect—but we put those flowers in our mouths and read from Stephen King’s novel for like half an hour. It was pretty funny and we had a great time. It was before I ever thought of moving down here and then when I did move down here, in 2007, I came for grad school at UMBC, but I knew that I knew people here, and I was really excited about it. One thing I saw at Transmodern that I never forgot was Kristen Anchor and Rahne Alexander, who were MCs that night, and I didn’t know them then, but seeing people that were very visibly queer participating in the mainstream art scene was really what made me excited about coming down here.

Catherine asked me if I’d like to organize their Sunday thing for Transmodern that [next] year, and Laure Drogoal and I were going to work together on it, and then Rebecca Nagle joined in, so the three of us did the first year of Pedestrian Service Exquisite. We took over North Avenue between Howard and Charles streets and set up a bunch of outdoor performances. Then the Love Parade came through, and we had basically 30 or 35 performers that year, so we really temporarily changed the space. It was overwhelming because we expected maybe 50 people to come, but we guessed that 250 came. So it was really incredible to see that.

Part of the reason they paired Laure and Rebecca and I together is that we’d all participated in this festival called Conflux in New York, which I think has died out now, and it was basically a festival for artists who are doing interventive kind of work. It was setting up a space to allow what could happen here as far as intervention goes. It is a really important contribution for it, because when the outdoor/daytime stuff happens, that’s when the people who live in the neighborhood end up interacting with it and people who aren’t keyed into the art scene, which I think is really great. I went on a tour led by Graham Coreil-Allen [at the Transmodern] in 2011, and he was just giving a tour of mundane spaces around the area and he basically finds an empty parking lot or the space between a building that is only 6 inches wide, and it becomes a beautiful space of interest for him. People who were just walking around the neighborhood ended up joining us, and I think in that way they never would have encountered the festival without those moments. Transmodern works on a ton of different levels and can reach a really wide audience because of that—because there is music at night and gallery shows on top of it and outdoor things happening. But out of all of it, those are the most important things that happen. It’s kind of a duck-billed platypus or something.

Bonnie Jones: The idea was that the festival was to become this fully multi-level, immersive experience where we increased the number of performers and had them take over an entire space—the Load of Fun and then the H&H—and we had multiple events happening somewhat concurrently. We had people doing endurance work who would install themselves in the corner of a building and people who would do traditional stage stuff and people who did installation work but expanded the performance into different modes of what people would call performative in some regards—because of the combination, [or] because of the large, public, outdoor performance events, which kind of follow in the spirit of the [Conflux] festival in New York, founded on the idea of Situationist thinking and interventions to people wandering through the city. In earlier years we did a lot less outdoor events, and then Laure got involved and we did more outdoor events. And that was the thing that she was mostly interested in, and we started this Sunday event called Pedestrian [Service] Exquisite, which is always about those kinds of events, and it was a
really wonderful experience. As different members came in, that became one of the principal focuses of the festival: to be a medium of these large-scale public events.

Laure Drogoul: I really loved when we did Pedestrian Service Exquisite part in Fells Point and part in Tide Point and we were able to partner with the downtown sailing group, and they took people back and forth in boats and people made things and floated them and it was all in the shadow of those giant tanks. And we had the Baltimore Westsiders [community marching band] march in the parade, and you had the marching band and the tanks in the backgrounds, and visually it was like “Yes!” and one year someone was interning at the [Baltimore Streetcar] Museum and she gave trolley rides down. All the antics in Pedestrian are great because this project was completely on the street and you have all these marvelous moments of people not knowing where they are, and then all of this is going on and they have this look of surprise in their faces—sometimes fear, sometimes joy—because they did not expect this. And this is my favorite moment, when the canvas is open.

And this year we’ve changed the Pedestrian Service Exquisite into the Mayfair, creating a Mayfair which is more like a country fair in an urban environment, in a public space, and it riffs off of the Mayfair building, which is one of my favorites. The facade I love on Howard Street is one of my favorites to see.

As imaginative and interesting and quirky as all the artists who are a part of Transmodern are, so, too, does the organization have to think of new ways to reinvent and reimagine how and where its going to operate. And that could be in different places, different forms, different partnerships, and it will change based on who is organizing. Transmodern is fluid that way. Different people join the organization and they have different ideas and interests and strengths, and it progresses in that way. It will take the form of the people’s interests and necessities because of what happens in town—where you can work and afford to work.

Lexie Mountain: Some of my most formative memories of this city are through Transmodern, things I’ve done for Transmodern, people in town for Transmodern. They’ve trusted me enough as a performer and let me do what I want. As an artist, you can’t ask for much more than that. A lot of who I am is because of being able to do the kind of things Transmodern allowed me to do.

Bonnie Jones: I always had a sense about Transmodern, that on the one hand, while it could involve a lot of international and national artists, there was something about the framing of the festival that is a very Baltimore-driven festival now, and I’ve always appreciated that part of it. Our idea was that we would bring the world to Baltimore but also bring Baltimore to the
Transmodern Highlights

The Transmodern festival is always something of a sensory overload with multiple levels of craziness packed into a few short days. Below are a few of the things we’re looking especially forward to.

**Thursday**

Things kick off with a show of work from the late and lamented artist, poet, and provocateur “Blaster” Al Ackerman’s years in Baltimore (1992-2010) at Current Gallery (421 N. Howard St.), 7-10 p.m. Since Ackerman’s spirit seems especially present in Transmodern, this is a timely tribute after his death earlier this year.

Over at Maryland Art Place (218 W. Saratoga St.), Gallery 788 is hosting DC vs. BMORE, a show that attempts to bridge the seemingly massive divide that an hour on I-95 can create. 7-11 p.m.

And Rooms Fall Apart: A Serious Play, this year’s iteration of Rooms Play, launches its two week run on the fourth and fifth floors of MAP at 8 p.m. We stopped by and saw dozens of people preparing for this fully immersive, interactive play that this year takes a darker turn than the Copycat Theatre’s previous incarnations. The play runs at 6, 8, and 10 p.m. on both Friday and Saturday nights, with afternoon performances on Sunday and a full run the following weekend (see our review next week).

**Friday**

Smell is the least used of our senses for art, but Laure Drogoz may change that with the Olfactory Seance at the 14-Karat Cabaret (also at 218 W. Saratoga St.) at 8 p.m.

At 8:30 p.m. the Live Writing Group offers another homage to Ackerman and his notorious Writing Group games, while poet Bonnie Jones and dancer Asmina Chremos work with live projected text and
dance at 14-Karat Cabaret.

At 9:30 p.m. there is magic by David London, and at 10 p.m. Abdu Ali performs, followed at 10:30 p.m. by DJ Alex Funk.

**Saturday**

The Current Gallery’s back lot hosts the festival’s big musical performances beginning at 6 p.m., with Snails, Dan Deacon, Ed Schrader’s Music Beat, Moss of Aura, OCDJ, and Alle Alle.

At 9 p.m. Single Carrot Theatre performs a scene from its upcoming play, A Sorcerer’s Journey, based on the work of Carlos Castenada, and at 9:30 p.m. internationally acclaimed filmmaker Martha Colburn shows recent work at 14-Karat Cabaret.

**Sunday**

The day of outdoor shenanigans begins at 11 a.m. in Current’s back lot. Fluid Movement’s sixth annual Love Parade starts at 3:30 p.m., and the Maypole Celebration begins at 4:30 p.m.

Things wind down on Sunday night at 14-Karat Cabaret with a performance by the Mole Suit Choir at 8 p.m., followed by a screening of films and discussion with Catherine Pancake at 8:30 p.m.

You can also find the Breastival Vestibule and the Pedicab Project between spaces. Transmodern is a fluid affair, so check transmodernfestival.com for the latest details.

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