Invited to come along last Thursday to Kharis Kennedy's curated show – ‘The man I wish I was,’ at the A.I.R gallery in Brooklyn I went curious as to what the evening would possibly hold. All I knew was that the exhibit would be concentrating on feministic themes and the interpretation of gender in a society capitulated with myopic gender intonations.

What followed was one of the more lively and provocative exhibits we here at Scallywag and Vagabond have attended in a while. Having said that I returned home and set out to deliberate on some intelligent questions that hopefully would honor the clever and at times very humorous exhibit at hand.

Although currently playing at A.I.R in Dumbo, Brooklyn (until the 31st of January) it seems that Kharis Kennedy has been able to strike a chord with other entities and is currently in negotiations to move the exhibit to X- Initiative later this month. We trust you the reader will find the questions compelling and the responses even more compelling.

-Scallywag.
SCV: What compelled you to curate this particular show? What were you specifically looking to explore?

KK: In the interest of full feminine disclosure I should confess that I never set out with the intent to curate a “feminist” exhibit...in fact up until relatively recently if someone had driven by and yelled “feminist” at me out the car window my initial reaction would have probably been to swivel around to try to get an eyeful of this mythical F creature for myself. Those F terms carry heavy connotations and survival of the fittest demands that the savvy lady never self-marginalize – my instinct was to distance myself.
However following block buster exhibitions such as “WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution,” “Global Feminisms,” and the opening of the Sackler Center for Feminist Art, I began to really think about the state of feminism and I began to wonder if there might be a threat implicit in the canonization of feminist art. The threat that the side-effect of canonizing feminist art may be that it robs the artwork of its vitality by freezing the very movement that made it revolutionary.

Which isn’t to say that ribbon-cutting ceremonies for the opening of institutions such as the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art shouldn’t be cause for celebration, but such events also suggested that it’s probably time for me to accept that my invitation to The Dinner Party was not lost in mail and move on.

So I began a cascade of self-questioning: is feminism still a movement in motion? Or have we reached a post-gender moment, a moment where gender is no longer a relevant signifier and we can comfortably slip into daddy’s shoes?
SCV: How much has our interpretation of women changed since the 1970’s when feminism became a palpable battle cry?

KK: I think the main thing is that there has been a subtle shift in the way our culture perceives gender; gender as a construct has become more fluid. Whereas in the 60’s and 70’s gender was largely considered intrinsic rather than socially constructed I think we’re all now taking a step back and re-evaluating that assumption.

In terms of de facto inequalities by many measures we continue to trudge on to the same tired diddy…but hand me a bull horn and a paycheck that isn’t 23% less than what my male counterpart earns and I’ll sing you whatever battle songs you’d like to hear all the way to the bank.

SCV: You mention that when you curated the show you wanted to bring to light what you thought was being glossed over. What was it that you thought was being glossed over?

KK: A riffle into the less-illuminated corners of feminist art revealed a substantial amount of work that deals not so much with being a strong woman (although it does inherently advocate female strength), but with the actual embodyment or usurping of roles commonly associated with “male.” There was a strange longing implicit in these works that caught my attention, a sort of underlying desire not to just imitate the masculine in an illusionary drag sense, but to truly embody a new persona by internalizing “male” gender roles. I think that the sub-context of these works, their admission to a type of longing to be male/the longing to shed the feminine/the longing of the individual to ultimately live free from gender restriction, does not often sit comfortably with traditional feminist strategies of self-empowerment. As a result the tendency has been to shy away from addressing these works through this particular gender-questioning lens in order to avoid certain implications that might be potentially undermining to the traditional feminist line.
SCV: How did you go about figuring out which artists specifically to include in the show? And which artists did you choose?

KK: Not coming from a feminist background I began by doing a little over 8 months of research; I followed the written chain from one artist to the next and ultimately compiled a frightfully Excel spreadsheet that should ultimately stand as a tribute to OCD at its finest and includes information on over 400 artists who have done work in this vein. I then painstakingly narrowed the list to fit the venue. But I was committed to the partially invitational, partially juried format because I believe that allowing for a range of works, curating to court the unexpected, is crucial to fostering a dynamic dialogue and so ultimately even this portion of the curating process remained a labor of love. In keeping with this spirit I don’t see a need to distinguish between the invitational and the juried artists…unless of course you’d like to offer me a bribe in which case that extra 23-odd-cents-to-the-dollar will do the trick.

SCV: Are there plans to have the show go onto wider pastures?

The show has attracted an organic interest and I am currently in conversation with a couple of
other venues that have expressed interest in the possibility of hosting an expanded version of exhibition. Which would be amazing as I would love to include any number of additional artists. We’re also in the process of planning a couple of events to be held in conjunction with Artbooks @ X-initiative as well as at A.I.R. Gallery itself, we should have finalized details in the next few days.

SCV: Do you think the press does a good job of canvassing feministic concerns and would you argue that the press on some level reiterates themes that serve to aggrandize the way women are perceived (the beauty object, )

KK: It is Vogue’s job to remind women that their most important task is to police their personal appearance. I facetiously pick on Vogue at random as this market strategy obviously holds true for all press publications: if each and every woman is not instilled with a constant, nagging sense of insecurity then what oh what would any media publication’s advertisers have to play to? And without the advertisers where would the media be? Feminism does not pay the bills.

SCV: How does an individual assert their own choices in the face of a too often caustic society with indoctrinated belief systems especially ones that hold women in a particular status quo position?

KK: I’ve always embraced the use of humor and irreverence in re-orienting a bitter system. The use of parody and other devaluation technique are extremely effective in discrediting deep-rooted traditions, plus they allow the individual to enjoy what would otherwise be quite a miserable ride towards reformation. Irony is still a huge driving technique in all things hipster….with enough irony you can even read Vogue.

Editorial update: as received from Kharis.

Just got confirmation from X-initiative and so the momentum builds! A.I.R. Gallery will present a screening + performance event in conjunction with ARTBOOK at X-initiative on Wednesday, January 27th from 6:00-8:00pm. (The “in conjunction with ARTBOOK at X-initiative” is an important bit as ARTBOOK really went to bat for the concept.) Full program details to be announced but it is confirmed that we will be premiering two of Sarah Maple’s new video works which should be quite a treat as her video work has never before been seen on U.S. soil!