

playbill

ACT IX X XI XII

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When it comes to composing our annual report publications, we have got ourselves into somewhat of a Gregorian pickle: As it happens, our year-long program of four acts doesn't align with the calendar year itself, with the playbill year instead running at its own pace, unfolding somewhere between March to March, a rhythm unconsciously formed when we began back in 2022. When starting projects or founding platforms—which we can only now see we were doing, through the rearview mirror of retrospect—the energy and excitement so central to overriding the painful leg work required to get things going doesn't wait for no man, especially not Pope Gregory XIII. The point is that within the rigid structure of regulated time, life happens: an artist needs a passport renewed and can't travel as originally planned, a theatre is booked out or a co-curator comes down with the flu. Yet administrative structures hold us hostage to their systems of depersonalisation, and life happening is refigured as failing to keep up, as falling out of time.

Always, then, when making this publication and penning this foreword, it is a back and forth between what happened within our artificial definition of a year and the actual one, Gregory's one. For instance, only in writing this now do we realise that we falsely reported in the 2023–2024 report, as while we did become a registered legal foundation at the end of 2024, we didn't technically become one during that 'year' of playbill, which ended, on that occasion, in March. This out of timeness, however, feels relevant when it comes to the four acts that composed the 2024–2025 season. Beginning with Pamela Sneed, followed by Linda Montano, the second edition of Open Stage featuring Dyveke Bredsdorff, Cornelia Isaksson and Taylor Le Melle, and ending with Sue Tompkins, this playbill year was one of odes and tributes.

In a gesture of looking back, Pamela Sneed brought Big Mama Thornton to the stage, inscribing the legacy of an unsung pioneer of rock and roll into a queer canon of her own making. Then came Linda Montano,

who returned to a work from thirty years ago, made when her beloved mother was passing, transforming it from medical inventory to eulogy, sound beaming from above. In looking across time, this year's open stage saw Taylor Le Melle invoke their grandmother in an intergenerational act of transference; Dyveke Bredsdorff brought her life as a nanny to the fore, connecting her working conditions here in Amsterdam to a larger intersectional struggles around care work; and Cornelia Isaksson presented a monologue that plotted out the internal moral quandry of a resistor embroiled in an instance of geopolitical savagery, urgency recalculating time. And then we ended with Sue Tompkins, who in honouring herself refused to appear, sending her recorded voice in the place of a live act during a period when she was not up for performing. Now, at the close of the year, we can't help but see Sue's denial of liveness as a final conceptual honouring of those to whom we paid tribute throughout the program.

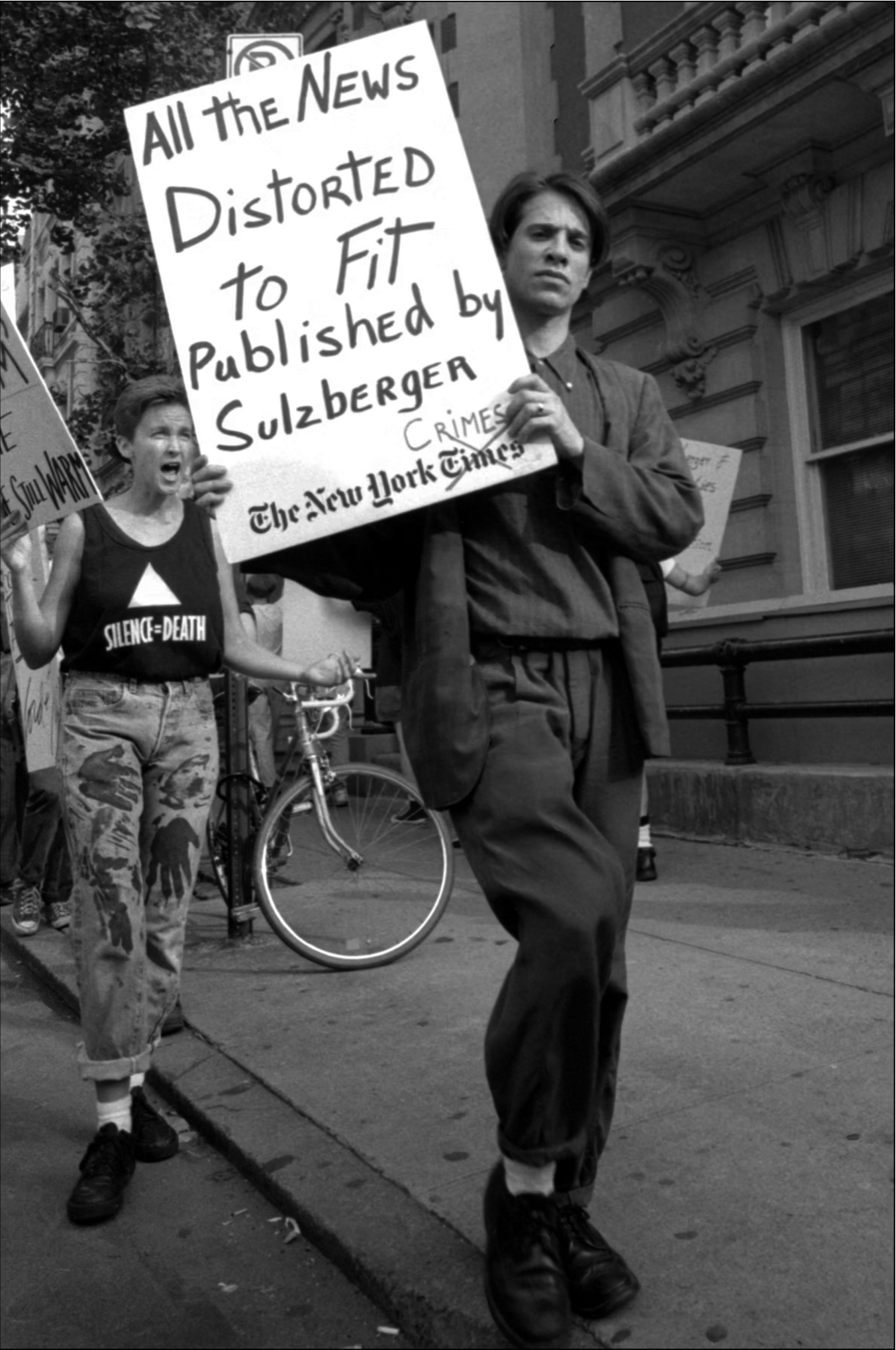
In returning to our administrative out-of-timeness, and in light of Ghislaine Leung's budget spread in this publication, it is also not lost on us that in honouring the playbill year we effectively create additional work for ourselves, as the formal requirements set out by our funders mean that much is now appended here between the lines of requirement, wherein two funded years merge their hinged halves to create a third, previously unreported, conjured year of time.

And now, in writing in front of time, we also know that between the end of the 2024–2025 year and the end of 2025 proper, we signed a lease and moved into Sint Jansstraat 35, a new permanent home where we can expand on our programming in the theatre outside of it. We also write this with the awareness that we have just been awarded support from the Mondriaan Fonds for the coming two years, meaning that in the future that is next year playbill will make it to five years old—half a decade, speaking of marking time.

In returning somewhat to the moment, we end this year—a playbill year—having spent it thinking about honouring life and dedication differently thanks to Pamela, Linda, Cornelia, Dyveke, Taylor and Sue, and as with any at playbill, we were again gifted with the work of artists who take the stage with strength and continue to lay down the roots of resistance across and in spite of time.



Big Mama Thornton, 1970. Courtesy of Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images.



Julie Clark and Neil Broome protesting *The New York Times* in front of publisher Arthur Ochs Sulzberger's home in 1989; archival imagery informing Sarah Schulman's research for the book Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987–1993.

Pamela Sneed is Pamela Sneed and not Big Mama Thornton. What she produces is an elision of the other through a decades-late echo, imitation edging toward eclipse.

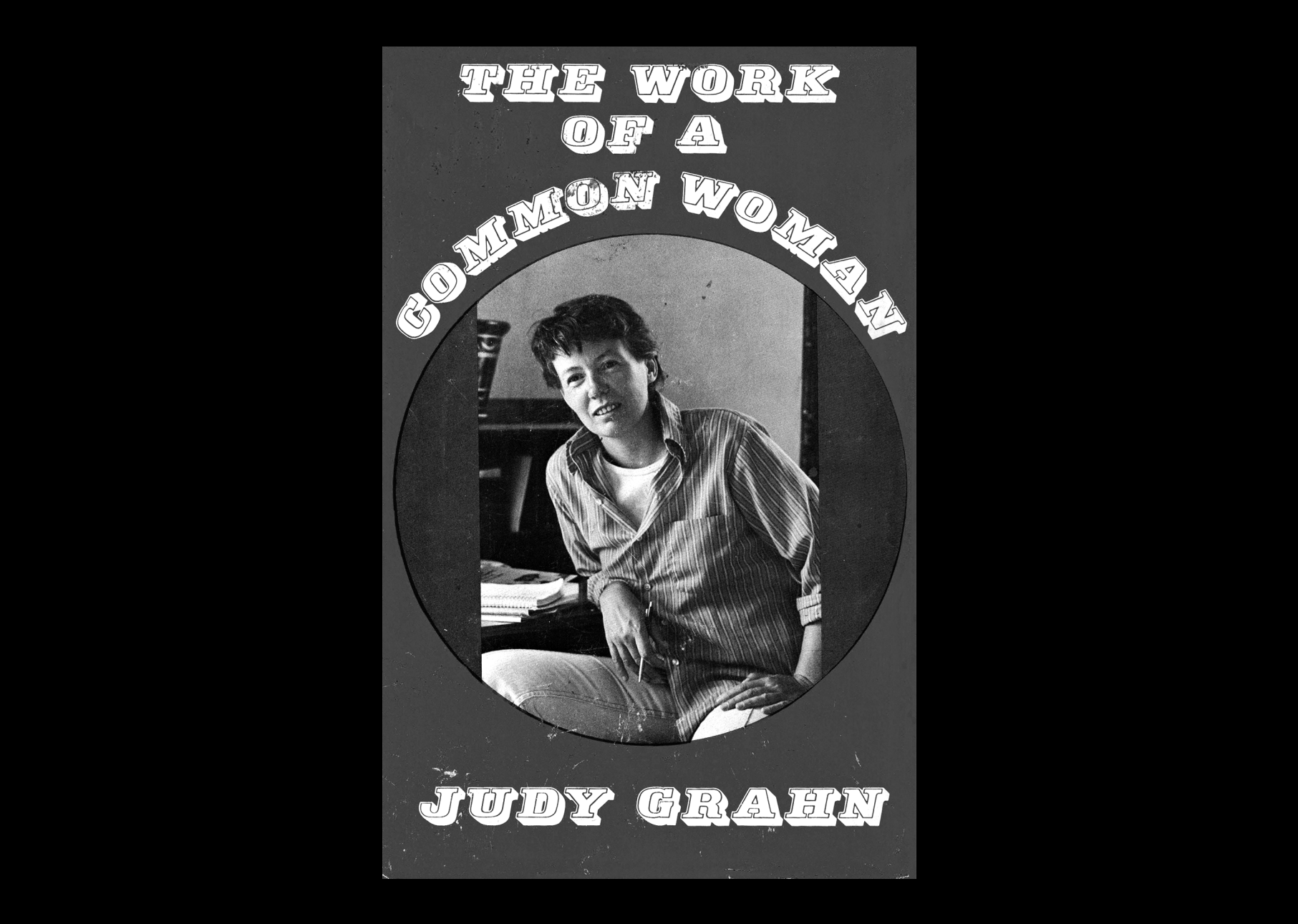
I am interested in the high school musical version of things; teenagers throwing heart, body and soul into sincere approximations of recordings and videos they have seen. Apparent, best-possible casting. The visibility of the performer alongside their cloak of material. Thornton is not my north star; I have not studied her closely. I bought a ticket to see the legendary Pamela Sneed, for whom I had expectations. Sneed wears a hat on stage—a squished jewelbox for newspaper-sanctioned poets—and teams up with local musicians, piano and drums, for a salute to Big Mama Thornton. The sound is intimate. Sneed’s voice presents and embodies itself in real time, listening to itself as an approximation of the originating legend, shaping itself into a body it is not.

Liveness and recording, or their reproduction, are difficult to calibrate. You want to see listening. Musicians on stage listening to each other. I listen as a conservatory-rat, aware that we hear in relation to source material. I parse for the charms of the drag host who might step into their own voice and transcend tribute, producing

a frisson that becomes a third object. Sneed instead plays to the size of the room while citing outsized theatricality. I find myself wanting more distance, to think more freely about what I am seeing. I should have studied the source material more closely.

What is the border between esoteria and landfill? How is care produced? What size audience allows appreciation? When does a public form, let alone an icon?

The room is filled with art professionals who do not quite hoot and holler. They watch attentively, as though pleased by their microfiche findings, and provide prompted sounds, perform listening. I am aggravated by their failure to complete the picture. There should have been an audience screaming, pre-recorded. Sneed’s tribute becomes a complex sleeve of invocations. How do we transpose memory across audiences, and how do our bodies propel or limit the making of a third object?



Cover of Judy Grahn's 1978 poetry collection The Work of A Common Woman, published by Diana Press, Baltimore.



HOMESICK FOR A PLACE THAT DOESN'T EXIST ANYMORE

I remember the last night before my grandmother passed away. I spent the whole night with her, sitting in a chair in the nursing home. Every time I stood up, she started screaming. Abstract screams, no words. Words failed to express what she wanted in those last moments. There was something so cruel about it. She was in a lot of pain. The day after, she passed away. During Linda Montano's performance, not long after that night, it was the only thing I could think about. But there was something comforting about sitting with that feeling on the floor of Torpedo Theater, unable to drift away from my thoughts.

Recently, while scrolling on TikTok, I saw a trend titled 'Homesick for a place that doesn't exist anymore,' where people posted videos of deceased loved ones. I was very drawn to that title. After my grandma passed away, my grandpa had to sell the house they had lived in for forty years. In one blow, all those memories of me and my brother going there after school to eat and study were stripped of their physical form. It's not only the physical space of the house I'm homesick for, but also the bodily one: her smell, her words, her laugh. They now exist only in my head, or in pictures. I have an accidental phone recording of my grandma and me talking about accountants. I listen to it sometimes when I miss her.

I would like to use this space, following Linda Montano's text, to contribute to this TikTok trend with these glamorous pictures of my grandma that I recently found from when she was young.

1.
In an interview for his latest Paris collection, the designer Rick Owens compared his career to Marlene Dietrich, the sexual decadent, the wartime patriot and the minimalist cabaret performer. He described himself moving into that last phase as well, emphasizing her costumes—including a jacket made from swan down. Through allegory, he suggested that he was making a cocktail piano spin, an occurrence I like to call *taking a late cabaret turn*.
2.
Think of Marianne Faithfull's 2002 single 'Sliding Through Life on Charm,' a four-minute electropop masterpiece of *fuck it all sangfroid*: 'I wonder why the schools don't teach anything useful these days / Like how to fall from grace, and slide with elegance from a pedestal.' There are artists who have spent decades making a good life out of the sliding, and the landing—of retreating, of almost giving up, of continuing to work in the shadow of earlier successes, of a recalcitrant relationship to successes that are oblique to conventional understanding, or have been forced into cack-handed narratives by people trying to perform a rescue job that isn't needed. The late cabaret turn does not have to take place in a cabaret, but it refuses any understanding of nostalgia, it refuses the fashionable gap or lacuna.
3.
Another example is Alberta Hunter, in the 1980s, in her eighties, at the height of her erotic power, singing 'Handyman,' a piling up of jokes, of lust, of historical winks and contemporary nods. Faithfull and Hunter's late cabaret turns exist after decades of negotiating desire. There is power in the waiting. All of this seems context for the conversation about Big Mama Thornton. The 'rescue job' on Thornton, whereby Elvis and Joplin stole from her, for example, foregrounds her activity from the 1940s and 1950s. In this reclaiming, the narrative of white sophistication over Black genius is reified, and the corporeal details of Thornton at her best are forgotten.
4.
Pamela Sneed's work about Thornton, developed over the last few years, rewards a late cabaret turn. I do not want to discount Sneed's work as a performer, as a writer or as an educator, but I keep returning to an essay that she wrote for *Them* a few years ago, where she explains, 'Like all families after the struggles for acceptance were over they discovered they would miss the man's hat, the coveralls, women's feet stuffed in work boots.' Then in that same article, there is a photo of Thornton from the 1980s, in a cabaret, in the same outfit that is described. The interest then, is the decades that unfolded between Thornton in the 1940s and Thornton in the 1980s. Thornton died in 1984, but in those four years where she overlapped with Hunter in affect and desire, she sang with a hard-won lust. Watching a late performance of 'Ball and Chain,' notice how much Thornton rides over that slide of a guitar, how much power she still has. When she sings about how much she still loves Big Mama, the question returns: Is it herself, a lover, the genre or the audience? The ambivalence of a small club and a rapturous audience made a late turn seem reasonable, as reasonable as the ten gallon hat she wears.
5.
Sneed's work in Amsterdam connects to work she has done in similar venues, like in New York, but here it seems almost more proper to have these performers take the stage at a former puppet theatre while thinking about the end of life and what is performed, or at least, if not at the end of life, further away from the middle. Cabaret and puppetry are a distaff tradition, able to tell the truth from the edge of the mouth, able to be performed in small spaces, easily transportable and closer to the street than the concert hall.
6.
That Sneed works out this problem of Thornton, returning it to New York institutions like Harlem's the Triangle or Downtown's Joe's Pub, literally embodies the gaps of Thornton's public perception. The gaps, and the returns,

can also be seen in the work of the other artists featured at playbill this season. In bands like Heavenly, who return after decades of inaction, the question remains: Where were they, what were they doing, how could they leave the stage? Sue Tompkins was in the vital, early Scottish art band Life Without Buildings. In interviews after the band broke up, she suggested that she never quite took the band seriously, and she kind of wandered off when it stalled out, but she worked for decades after, with the performance collective Elizabeth Go, which included shows in private apartments and ad hoc galleries, followed by a substantial solo career. Sounds were always important to her practice, and so her recent return back to the musical stage, unmediated, is not filled with mystery, but still another way of turning towards an audience, an abstracted cabaret if you will.

7.
I wonder if this might be a false dialectic, the idea that a singular narrative can be imposed on someone's life, by an audience or a critic who does not know the interiority of a subject, as a way of cleaning up all the mess of a life—the too little money, the gigs that went away, or never materialised in the first place. The survival bias of a late cabaret turn is the ability to return against all odds but with enough irony, and exhaustion, maybe enough pragmatism to refuse the sentiment of one narrative, especially if it is an inspirational one (as Faithfull indicates when she literally tells us to kiss her ass).

8.
The question returns: When is a turn not a turn, when is a move away enough? This might be too perverse, but Linda Montano's religious life, could that also be considered a late cabaret turn? A very pious child, she began performing in church, and the question of how to be pious, how to live within rigorous social control, was always there. The time that she spent handcuffed to Tom Marioni, or the liturgical creation of *Mitchell's Death* (1977), but also her retreat into the ashrams and zens in the 1980s, the retreat hostile to an audience, and, unlike Alice Coltrane, absent of a body of work which could find listeners lately. The idea that the performer and the audience are one, the erasure of that line, has potential for a late turn, but one which only exists when it is acknowledged as such. Treating herself as part of an audience and not as the leader of a performance, after the death of her father, she returns back to the church, and in more than ten pilgrimages she becomes a Catholic, not a camp one, not a pornographic one, not even the nun, but someone who goes to mass, and goes to pilgrimage, the quietude of a practice, having a rueful melancholy which might, in different circumstances, suggest the possibility of cabaret, though its politics are vexed.

9.
Owens suggests that in her swan down Dietrich is dying, but also that there is the possibility of living again—not as in the two endings of *Swan Lake*, either happy or sad, but a secret third ending, an entwining ritual, a historical mindedness with charm being the primary virtue. This is the aspirational cabaret turn.

1. Pamela Sneed, 'Big Mama Thornton Gave Me Permission to Exist,' *Them*, February 15, 2023, <https://www.them.us/story/big-mama-thornton-gave-me-permission-to-exist>.

ON OUR DESK: THOUGHTS FOR THE COMING YEAR

3/7



Members of ACT UP marching through Times Square in New York in 1992; archival imagery informing Sarah Schulman's research for the book *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987–1993*.

**Q. Isabelle and Martha
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spend €2,582.00 on org
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abelle and Martha have
,

A display of talent.

I can see myself nodding my head affirmatively, seriously.

Taylor commences with some ablution-appearing preparations on stage, breathes.

Thermos creaks, tincture squeeze, rub, rub, sigh.

‘The whole school’. A celebration, a performance. These are not my words or my scene, none of them, though indeed I saw myself, nodding my head, jaw squared all serious. This is my friend, my comrade even, this is serious.

‘In her perpetual state of frustration,’ again not my words. These are Taylor’s or they’re a description of Great Grandmother M. The slow drawl, the eyes poking into eyelids.

‘Sweetheart motioned, her lips motioned, though no sound came out.’ Hand bobbing, lips still doing the aforementioned motioning.

Sweetheart pinned in place. Her body’s urge to leave the auditorium a warning. I’m not quoting anymore, but the mood is: I’m quoting. ‘That auditorium, angles, panels, ochres folding into butterscotches, into mahogany colours.’ This was early, this was the scene-setting. Brow furrowed, hand bobbing again, already.

‘I can’t wait any longer Sweetheart. Mariah. I can’t do that.’

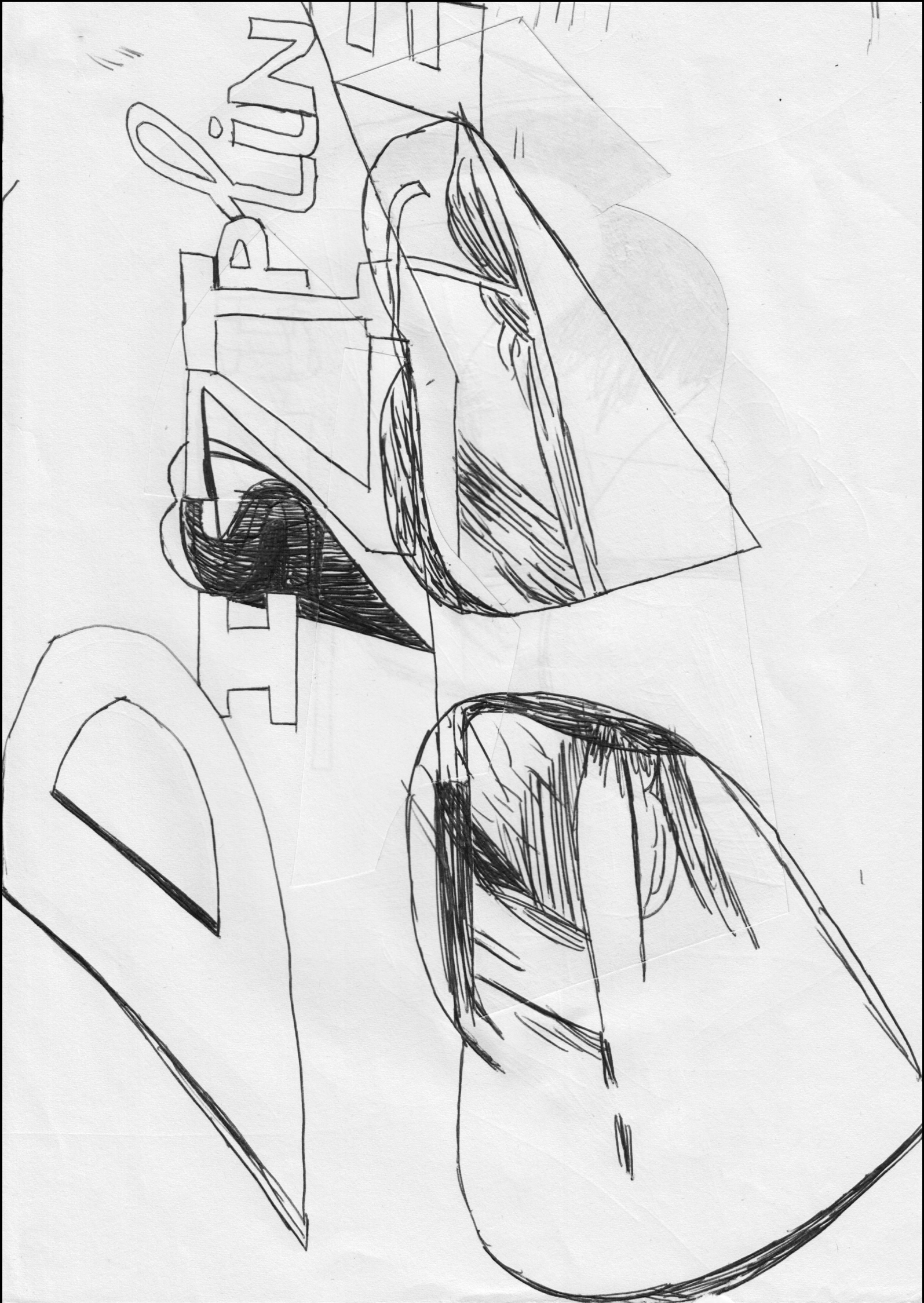
‘The talent, staring in curiosity, not tucked under her, struck him in the back, the whole auditorium blinked, no one breathed, and sweetheart filled with rage.’

Stunned. Taylor speaks, interjects, as all the parts older, younger, wiser, stage, setting. Nearer to thee, darkness.

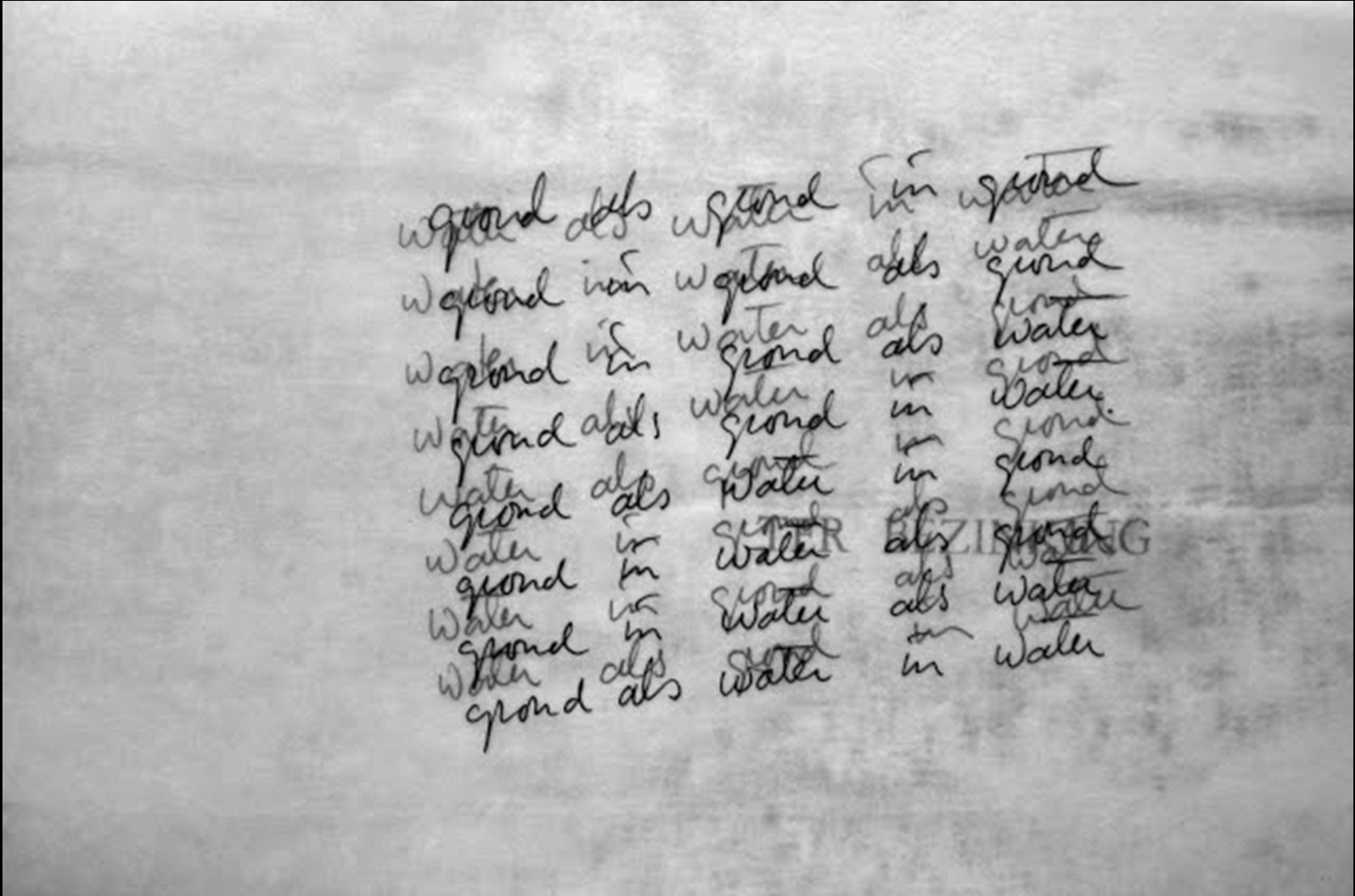
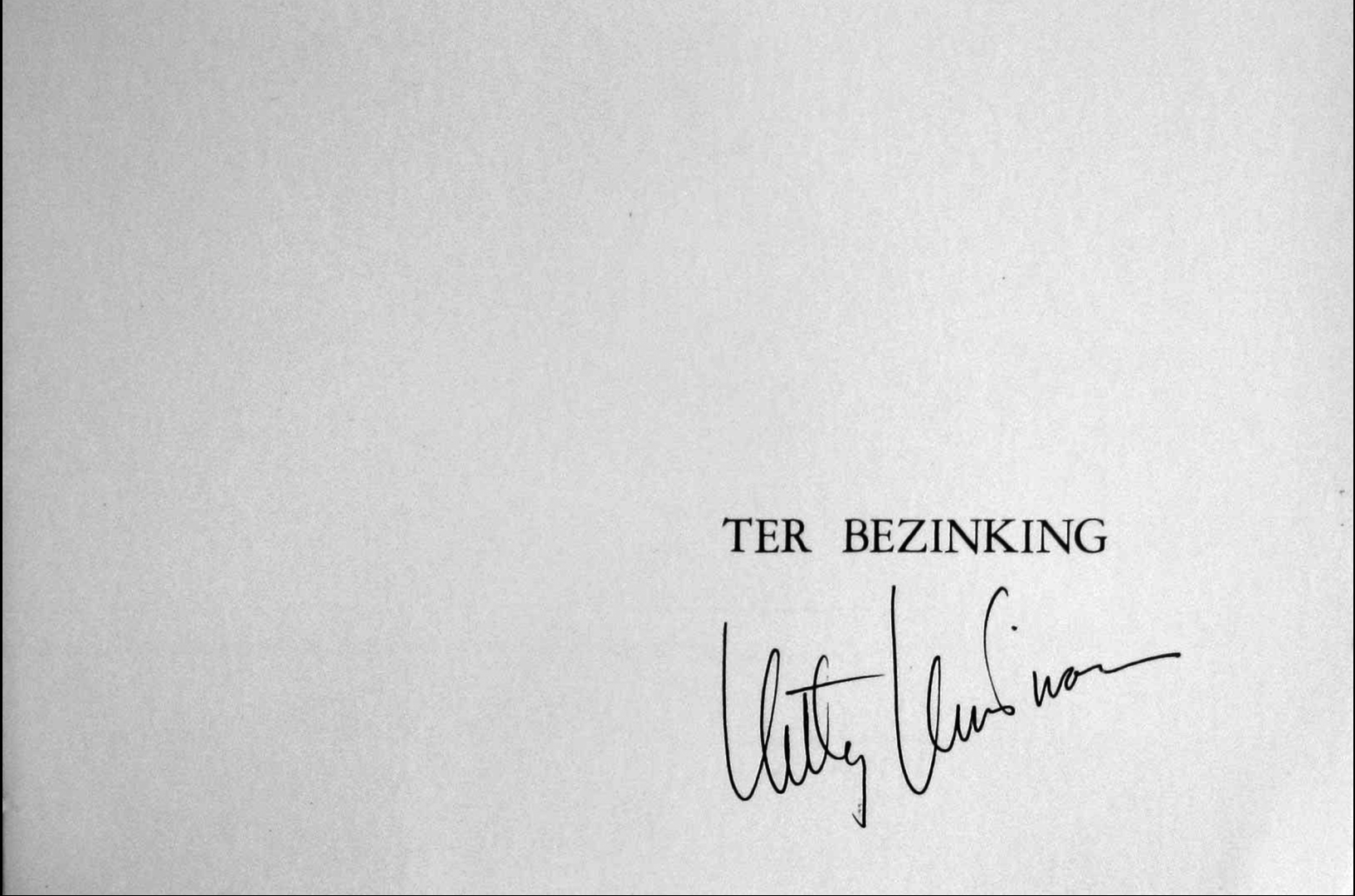
We speak to those who came before us.



Film still from Itziar Okariz, To pee in public or private spaces. Brooklyn Bridge. New York, 2002.



Tosca Monteyne, Pink Drawing (Diszipline), 2026, biro and collage on A4 office paper, 21 × 29.7 cm.



Cover and page from Ter bezinking, an artist book by Hetty Huisman published by VOID Editions, Amsterdam, in 1982.

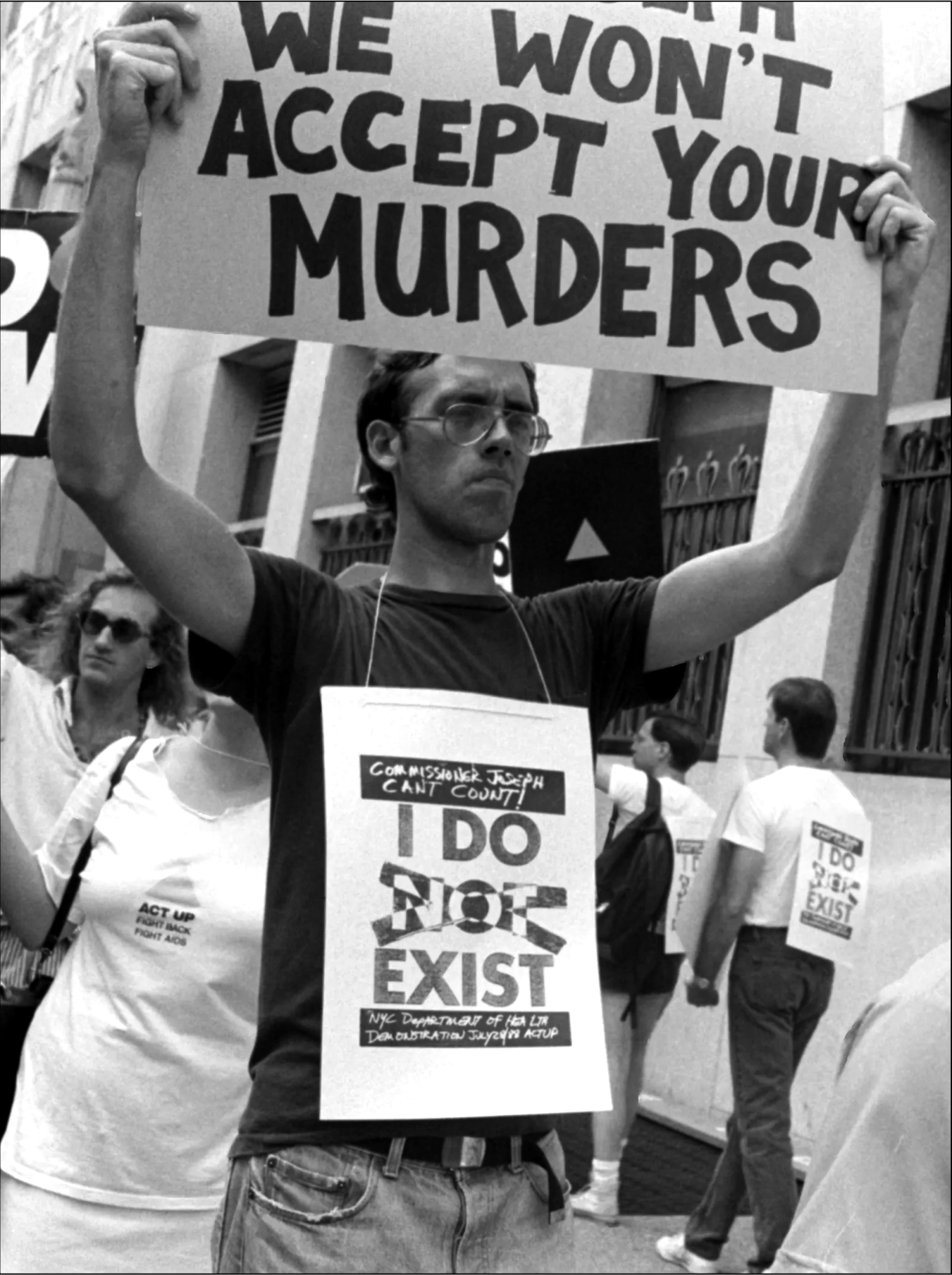
I had already thought about Sue Tompkins the day I was asked to write a response to going to ‘hear Sue’ at playbill last April. I had been digging, digging really *hard* in the hard drives. I had also been horny after a sleepover, really horny. I found and deleted pornographic videos and photos of myself as I kept thinking about what a mess my archives were in and what’s going to happen when I die. I came across an audio piece that I renamed *Spicy Mermaid* after a cocktail we used to make at work. It’s a four-minute script spoken into an iPhone off the backdrop of Vessel 11, a red boat functioning as a British restaurant in Rotterdam. I listened to it and thought that it’s so good I have to put it on my website. I made a button for it and everything. On second listen, I doubted it. I left the button empty. I wonder if Tompkins ever doubted her pieces of paper too. The audio reminded me a little of Tompkins’ work itself. So the timing of the invitation was a coincidence, or more than a coincidence in my book (of destiny and fate)!

Tompkins’ work is iconic and recognisable. Like other pioneers in art, she was doing something new that rang people’s bells. She hit the nail on the head. Doink! She is a trend setter, a trail blazer. She uses a mixture of cliched and ‘original’ language. I mean, a sentence that sounds new and novel. But it probably isn’t. Can language still be ‘original’? Well, it’s not *just* about the language. It’s embodied and performed by Tompkins *herself*. Her voice and her, her body. Performance is a medium where you can bring yourself, your body, your character, your charisma, your personality.

When I started making my scripts, I’d never heard of Sue Tompkins. She’s also from the United Kingdom. Sometimes people from the UK tell me I remind them of someone else from the country.

My piece *Spicy Mermaid* can be heard by following the link on the right, shared so you can have a listen. Perhaps it reminds you somewhat of Sue too?

https://soundcloud.com/sophie-bates-3/spicy_mermaid



David Wojnarowicz, artist and member of ACT UP, demonstrates outside the offices of the New York City Commissioner of Health in 1988; archival imagery informing Sarah Schulman's research for the book Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987–1993.

COLOPHON Edited by Martha Jager and Isabelle Sully with contributions by Sophie Bates, Ivan Cheng, Steacy Easton, Annie Goodner, Ghislaine Leung and Maxim Preaux. The *Annual Report* is designed by Maud Vervenne, and printed by Knust Press, Nijmegen. Published in June 2026 in an edition of 150 by playbill, Amsterdam. playbill is an event-based project invested in the presentation of experimental language and text-based artistic works on the (small) stage. Our live program is hosted by Torpedo Theater, a long-running, thirty-seat theatre in the heart of Amsterdam's city centre. Originally founded by *Het Parool*, a Dutch national newspaper, the theatre has been committed to the spoken, written and performed word from the beginning. playbill is curated by Martha Jager and Isabelle Sully, and designed by Maud Vervenne. For our third series of acts, we would like to thank Amsterdams Fonds voor de Kunst, Gemeente Amsterdam Stadsdeel Cetrum, and Mondriaan Fonds; Dyveke Bredsdorff; Gavin Everall and Book Works, London; Cornelia Isaksson; Taylor Le Melle; The Modern Institute, Glasgow; Linda Montano; Mara Rosenbloom; Pamela Sneed; Jasper Stadhouders; Terry Bleu, Amsterdam; and Sue Tompkins.