PORTRAIT

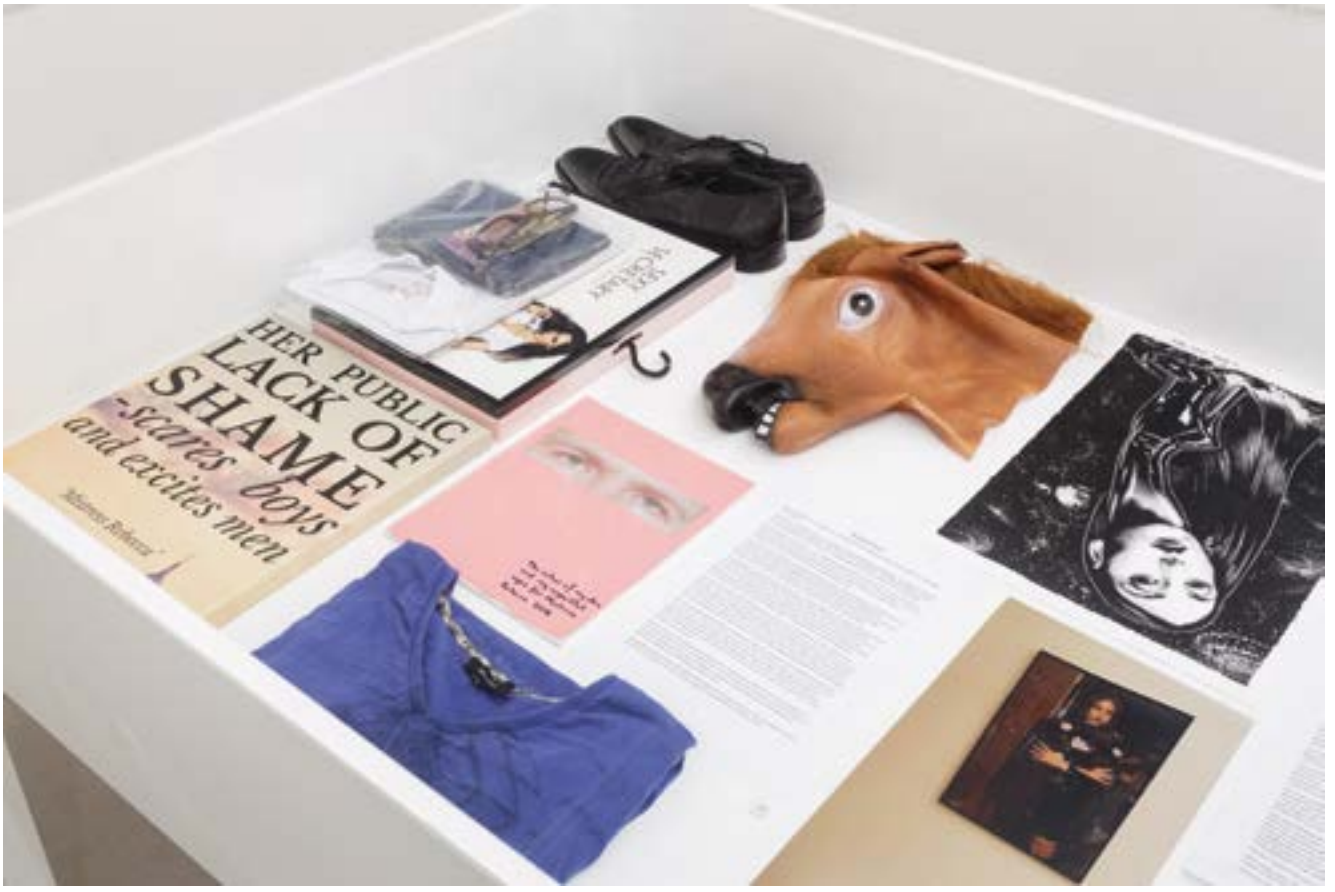
Micaela Carolan, Leigh Ledare, Reba Maybury

The Safeword is Post-Studio Practice

Sex work is work; art work is work; work is prostitution. Is that right? In a gig economy revision of the 1970s call for Wages for Housework, there's plenty of room to rejig the relationships of sub and dom(me), haves and have-nots, exploiter and exploited. *Victoria Campbell* asks whether prostitution can be productively instrumentalised – and if so, who pays.

Courtesy the artist

Leigh Ledare, *Pretend You're Actually Alive* (detail), 2008
Colour and black & white photographs, ink on paper, ephemera



Courtesy the artist and Arcadia Missa

Reba Maybury, *Precious Expressions*, 2018
Wooden painted vitrine containing the precious expressions of Mistress Rebecca's submissive men executed under her orders, perspex cover, 153 x 102 x 91 cm

"This anxiety for money denies us the time to indulge in the potential of one another's skins because we have to go to work" is an interesting line coming from a professional sex worker, though not surprising to read in a press release these days. In 2018, artist and dominatrix Reba Maybury organised the group exhibition "Putting Out" at Gavin Brown's Enterprise in New York in collaboration with Taylor Trabulus. Such a curatorial gesture broke new ground for a generation of millennial artists negotiating the terrain between professional performance and economic subjectivity. Call it a breakthrough in practice or call it like you see it – an old profession bound in new discourse, a working stiff in class drag; most would call it nobody's business.

This work isn't wholesome, in that hot Lynda Benglis kind of way. Neither does it voice a sex positivity safely cuffed to the virtues of free love and personal expression. What surrounds this work is the question of whether or not the forbidden economic relation – prostitution – emerges as a new medium before or after its art-historical justification. The safeword is "post-studio practice".

The press release for "Putting Out" doesn't directly quote the line "we are all prostitutes", from Silvia Federici's 1975 book *Wages Against Housework,* but it might as well. "We are creative directors, we are art directors, we work in media, public relations, [as] editors, as gallerists, as stylists, as influencers, models, brand ambassadors." Just as no artist would ever describe themselves as "contemporary", nor associate herself with anything but the contemporary; no "modern" woman would ever describe herself as a prostitute – even as we struggle for the right to be that also. Sex work can't be represented, but it can be exchanged with representation, which is why it's

illegal to launder money but not work. In Maybury's case, it takes a seriously proficient contemporary artist to integrate an academic career with the online performance required of a professional dominatrix; it takes a high-end sex worker to pay for, and run, a publishing house for experimental literature. That Maybury is able to claim these roles publicly, with the backing of both the art world and the university where she teaches, is itself evidence of the elite cultural strata the working artist occupies today.

The art market has always provided asylum for value, and also for people like us. Artists Micaela Carolan – with whom I have collaborated on various projects – and Leigh Ledare join Maybury as gatekeepers of the ethical and economic grey zone between conceptual practice and market ontologies. What we have in common is a willingness to exploit the bondage of capitalism with institutional consent. Here, the art object is an external context – one of many chains that link value to its legitimacy. Carolan's web-based project "The Chandelier Bid" (est. 2014) troubles the exhibition format with a series of e-commerce paywalls that may or may not function as installation art; Ledare and Maybury use more traditional forms of exploit: archive fetish, commodity dialectics. The exhibition, when it is used, appears as the territorial strategy of a certain troubled estate. The dungeon provides Maybury and Carolan with a pre-existing marketplace; as a motif, it easily extends to Ledare's prisonhouse of institutionally ringfenced desire.

Not only is there an economic precedent for prostitution as a reinvention of art, there's rampant institutional sanction for it – the most prominent being Andrea Fraser's *Untitled* (2003), in which Fraser created an artwork out of a sexual encounter with an art collector who had paid to commission the work. The video documentation was then editioned and sold. It was a moment of unworkable conjecture under which the body of the white woman, as a pillar of morality, and the role of the artist, as a beaver of a cultural ethics, is realised within the sacrifice of exchange. A product such as Tracey Emin's *My Bed* (1999) – in which Emin places the festering residue of her psychological and physical drives, a soiled mattress bolstered with pharmaceuticals and personal detritus into the museum – is further evidence of this ideological loophole. "Well, nobody had ever done it before," Emin claimed, against a discursive landscape that championed the work of art in terms of the purity of its authorship. When Emin says, "nobody had ever done it before," she's in effect saying, "If I can stay in bed for three straight weeks, drink, fuck, and soil myself it's because my institutional privilege can afford it."

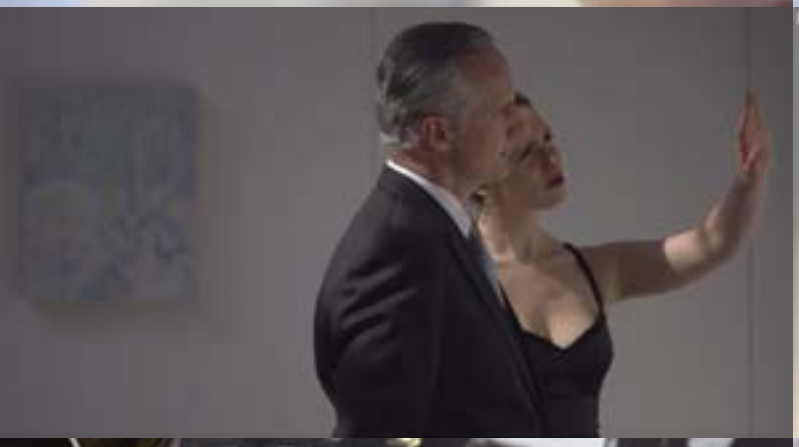
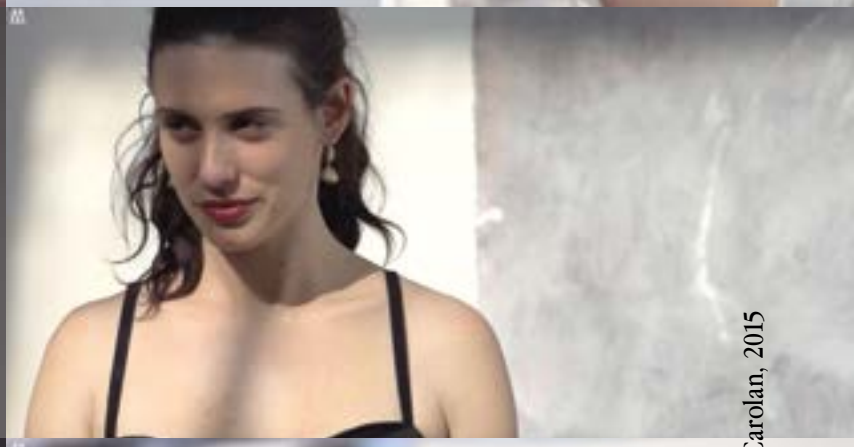
It's a dirty job, but someone's always going to be doing it, and artists have always done it well. Cultural prostitution is a privilege of biopolitical control, one that enables those of us who qualify as a representational elite to broaden the horizons of our working conditions. Maybury describes herself as a political dominatrix. She isn't "just" a sex worker – she's a worker with an agenda, one in which the economic product of her labour is a means to justify and produce the conditions of her autonomy. Whether or not prostitution is the only way to reconcile the imposed difference between living and making a living might not be the essential question here. What's being pointed to, rather, is capital's inextricability from prostitution. By using her clients, whom she calls "submissives", as unpaid studio assistants, Maybury turns the consumer into the product of work, a dual gesture that puts her labour-power in the service of value production but doesn't enable her an escape from it.

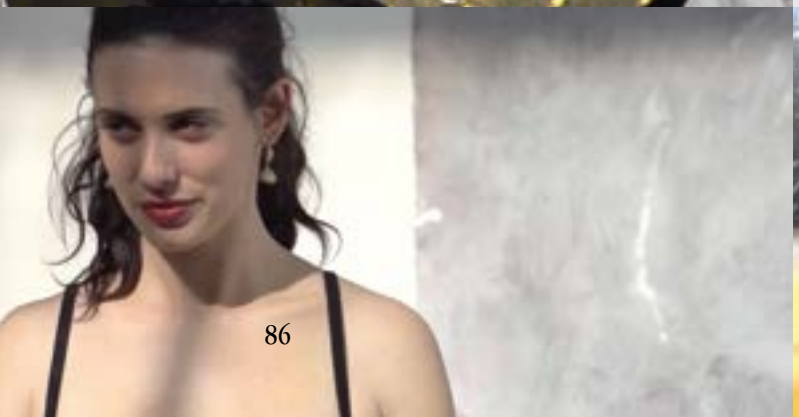
Maybury's medium is the capitalist; she preys on white men who often hold high-level positions in financial industries. Under the enterprise "Mistress Rebecca", the mismatch between these men's socio-economic status and their sexual drives surfaces in a master-slave relation, in which her clients are both masters and slaves. Maybury reduces these men to "worms", to biological fragments: she objectifies them, educates them, makes them work, and then she sells their creative labour-power (by having them produce her drawings, sculptures, and online content) under the signature of their mistress. As capitalists, they command and consume her labour as a luxury leisure product; as slaves, they're forced into the bondage of reproducing her role as an artist.

The ongoing series "Submissions" presents the questionnaires Maybury uses to select her clients. The responses are blown-up and proffered on aluminium easels as if for a trade show; mounted on shoes, the display is meant to be ignominious. These submissives are easily exchangeable subjects, and, like anybody on the internet, they can be mined for content as well as data. Maybury demonstrates a humiliation tactic scalable to a wide variety of art-installation contexts, one in





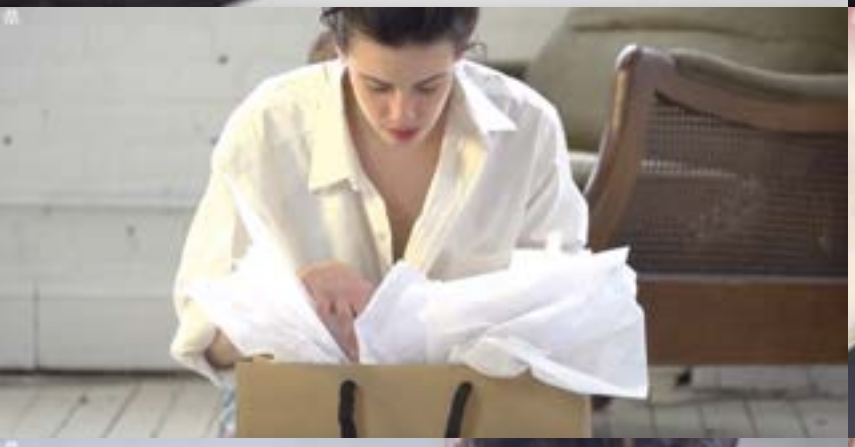



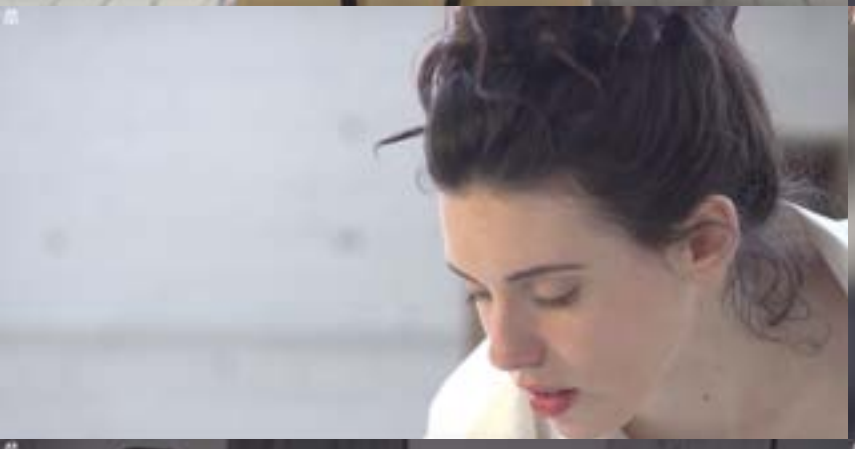

Courtesy Micaela Carolan

Screenshots from "TheChandelierBid.com" Website project by Micaela Carolan, 2015










which the relationship between client and service provider is one of educator and educated. Her project *My Deep Secret* (2018) at Arcadia Missa in London operated in perfect conformity with the aesthetic heritage of the commodity form. Painter, illustrator, and tattoo artist Will Sheldon produced contemporary wallpaper for the exhibition that oriented viewers around vitrines containing tributes extracted from Maybury's submissives. Reified by Mistress Rebecca's curatorial hand, the gesture could almost be benevolent.

Feminist criticism is already rife with conflicts of interest, personal stakes, and professional manoeuvres. It only becomes a double-bind when the feminist in question is a very good capitalist, and at the same time, can claim ethical ground for the future she's about to inherit. One reason why artists using sexuality as a means to political and economic power is difficult to discuss is because those who transcend their subjugation may do so on ambiguous grounds.

The work of conceptual artist Leigh Ledare hinges upon the relationship between the work and its maker. Ledare first rose to prominence in the 2000s with a body of erotic photographs of his mother, Tina Peterson, another soft prostitute. If the artist-as-prostitute is a device that makes visible the extension of commodity relations over both the body and the whole of life, Ledare engages what it means to be a male protagonist within this establishment. It also gives an ironic twist to the Greenbergian adage that the avant-garde is tied to the bourgeoisie by "an umbilical cord of gold".

Ledare's practice over the past twenty years could constitute a kind of anthropology of the avant-garde, one in which the ethics of the institution and its historical survival are pitted against the cultural logic of the viewer's gaze. The document, the archive, the glass-lidded vitrine: these are the watchwords of conceptualism and also of fetish. Imagine if Hans Haacke staged Kissinger in a pulp novella, or if the state found cause to subpoena your nudes. But regardless of what or whom Ledare represents, it's the politics of value that are on display. And value, under capital, is determined entirely by its mode of disclosure.

If anybody can divorce social practice from its philanthropic charters, it's Ledare, who uses lawyers, signatures, liabilities, and nudes on top of cutting edge, contemporary license. "An Invitation: Thursday, July 28, 2011" (2012) states: "For seven consecutive days from July 22, 2011 to July 28, 2011, Leigh Ledare was commissioned by Mrs _____ , a well-known writer and the wife of a highly recognisable public figure with connections to the media and politics, to stay at the home of her and her husband in order to make a series of erotic photographs that featured Mrs _____ as their subject. The sanctioning by Mrs _____ to allow Ledare the right to incorporate the commissioned photographs within a new body of work was agreed under the proviso that the identity of her and her husband, and their respective families, remains undisclosed."

The work is a museum quality installation of images, newspaper reproductions, and redacted photographs alongside the legal contracts the artist entered into. The presentation is seductive the way a crime scene is seductive; it's intriguing the way the Mueller report is intriguing. It should be noted that the installation shots Ledare uses to accompany the contract online are as timeless as they are placeless. Mrs _____'s nudity is exposed, but not her identity; the banality of her sexuality only acquires a tenor in relation to the commission.

Ledare displays the system of credentialing that shackles conceptual art to its historical record. Paraphernalia, such as newspaper clippings and primary source documents, are memorialised via lithographic print, but also the exhibition catalogue. As the viewer peruses the media on display, a world of titillating, and hardly critical, imaginative tangents emerge: Who is Mrs _____ ? What is the nature of her relationship with her husband? Did she have an erotic encounter with Ledare, how much was he paid? Are "connections to the media and politics" enough to implicate the art institution? Are we encountering the work within a context of immunity, in which the autonomy of a work of art trumps the legally binding contracts on display?

Ultimately, the object of defamation in "An Invitation" is an amoral service provider capable of being motivated by either money or high ideals, but who realistically is in the service of neither. Ledare's work seem to suggest that one no longer has to be a creative genius in order to assume the role of artist. In fact, one could even be a pervert – or anyone with the technical prowess necessary to both produce and deliver pornography as a luxury good within the art economy.

In 2015, the New York-based artist Micaela Carolan contracted a team of freelance product developers, myself included, to transform her studio practice into a functional platform for financial domination. *The Chandelier Bid* predates the

The attempt to qualify a working life seems to take precedence over producing a viable cultural product.

Reba Maybury

It's a relationship where everything is liquid, and the payoff is an erotic detente on the avantgarde's chains of command.

Courtesy the artist

Above and opposite: Leigh Ledare, *An Invitation* (detail), 2012
Seven hand-fed photolithographic prints on archival newsprint, with silkscreen and pencil additions, matboard, polished aluminium frames, laserjet contract, vitrine


The New York Times
Late Edition
Seeing Threat, Boehner Tries Tougher Tack
Seeks to Gain Control Over Restive G.O.P.
SUPPORT IS SURER FOR ROVE PLANS ON DEBT CEILING
BUT DEAL OUTLOOK DIMS
Peach Rivalry Becomes War Between the Tastes
Seeking Alien Life Forms, Right Here on Earth
The Fallout From Norway
Afghan Mayor Assassinated
Undoing Environmental Rules
Teacher Tenure Ruin Plummets
A Comic Revival Stalls
Supreme at the Y.A.A.
Online Music Unshackled
Don't Wear Plaid
Emerging From Underground
Frank Bruni

crowdfunding platform Patreon with a member-oriented platform made possible by the sadomasochism of the ecommerce industry. The title is auction house parlance, for when the sprezzatura of an auctioneer leverages non-existent bids. Financial domination is the medium; it's the method by which meaning (and money) gets made. In financial domination, sexual desire is mediated through the dominatrixes' control over the assets of the submissive; it's a form of S&M tailored for an online economy circumscribed by the exchange of signifiers. *The Chandelier Bid* was formally established as a limited liability company in 2014 and emerged from Carolan's online practices; the website is instrumental in establishing Carolan's "work" within a system of formal relations. Like any successful online enterprise, the project consists mostly of industry-standard digital assets and legal documents. For clarity on the boundaries that determine where the work begins and how it comes to completion, one might have to refer to Carolan's tax return.

Before viewers enter the website, they're asked to read a short treatise on the role of the artist as tastemaker and the role of the arts patron as a submissive consumer of intellectual and aesthetic content. "You will not only trust my taste, you will bank on it", the text reads. By clicking "Submit", the viewer consents to participating in a dialogue that "requires the absolute obliteration everything you know and are". Clicking in, one first sees a high-res video of what turns out to be a paintbrush in swirling liquid. In *Tease,* a splash video showing the artist at work, a voiceover commands softly, "It is just you and me. It is just us. And because I exist, you owe me…" Carolan's voice fades out into avid descriptions of the relationship between patron, artist, and the illicit relationship value has to profit. Then she tacks a Baudrillard quotation over another "Submit" button.

The aesthetics of *The Chandelier Bid* suggest a neo-romanticisation of support structures within which financial domination is posed as not only the most obvious form of contemporary patronage, but also the most tasteful. Carolan never displays a finished product. It's pure, process-based abstraction and visual fetish, immersed in highly specialised language. Carolan's medium is a narrative space that consciously activates the logic of immaterial production within the framework of a formalised, legal, type of prostitution. The product is ultimately the consumer, who is conditioned to see the output of her labour – her very existence – as something to be idolised. Carolan, like Maybury, transforms idolatry into a vehicle of consumption through her political domination practice.

The attempt to qualify a working life seems, for Maybury, Carolan, and Ledare, to take precedence over producing a viable cultural product. Ledare is bound by invisible power structures, the proof of which is the legal document; Carolan and Maybury by the personal and professional prison-house. It's a relationship where everything is liquid, and the payoff is an erotic detente on the avant-garde's chains of command. Each signal the prostitute as first an economic position, second a representational figure. Maybury and Carolan's use of the domme-sub relationship are a reflection of the claim the creative class has on moneyed capital: Carolan's "paypigs" and Maybury's "slaves" represent the so-called "1%" – a ruling class that has no legitimacy, because it has no culture. The nascent elite are neither the traditional bourgeoisie nor the working class, but a new stratum within which the transmission of wealth is channelled.

This article features three artists daring to break new ground with regards to the relationship between economic representation and prostitution. The ritual order of S&M surfaces in the imagination of a socially but not economically autonomous class of workers. It comes as no surprise that the signification of bondage emerges during a time when the right to control and reproduce one's own working conditions often takes precedence over the claim to an income. This is, after all, a social practice.

Money is sanctioned by art, just as women (not the gendered woman, but the subjects of biopolitical control) are sanctioned by "fertility" – the ability to reproduce. If there's any ethical critique of these practices, it's that the attempt to bind these working practices within institutional history requires work, the motives of which differ from the work being represented. Just as the woman demanding wages for housework makes visible the irony of her position under capitalism, the artist who claims prostitution as a signifying practice canonises the unworkable horizon between art and life. We may be able to contract, condition, and paywall our labour, but that doesn't mean we're on top.

VICTORIA CAMPBELL is a New York-based artist, writer, and co-founder of Visit, Inc., an artist-run software company.

Courtesy the artist

Leigh Ledare, *Pretend You're Actually Alive* (detail), 2008
Colour and black & white photographs, ink on paper, ephemera

MICAELA CAROLAN was born in 1987 in San Francisco and lives in New York.
She has produced content for web communities and institutions including Knockdown Center, Emergency Index, and RedBull Studios. Group exhibitions include "Whats Her Face IRL" at The Hand Gallery, New York (2017), "Memory Room" at OUTPOST, New York (2016), and "CKTV Karaoke Bar" at Red Bull Studios, New York (2015).

LEIGH LEDARE was born in 1976 in Seattle and lives in New York.
Solo shows include "Leigh Ledare: The Plot" at the Art Institute of Chicago and "Vokzal" at The Box, Los Angeles, both in 2017; Office Baroque, Brussels (2016); Les Rencontres d'Arles, Arles (2009). Recent group shows include "Straying From the Line" at Schinkel Pavilion, Berlin, and "Group Therapy" at the Frye Art Museum Seattle, both 2019; the 2017 Whitney Biennial and Manifesta 11 in 2016.
He is represented by The Box (Los Angeles) and Office Baroque (Brussels).

REBA MAYBURY was born in 1990 in Oxford and lives in London.
Solo/duo exhibitions include "NANA Miami" with Lewis Hammond and "My Deep Secret" with Will Sheldon, both in 2018 at Arcadia Missa, London. With Taylor Trabulus she co-curated "Putting Out" at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York (2018), and recently participated in the group exhibition "I, I, I, I, I, I, I, Kathy Acker" at the ICA, London (2019). She is represented by Arcadia Missa (London).