



Z is for ZANISNIK

Getting Weird with Bryan Z.

by Matt Chrystal

Picture it. Union, NJ. 1991. It's another suburban Sunday morning and the little town center is bustling with people. The sidewalks are randomly littered with white envelopes with "Rent Money" scribbled in chicken-scratch on one side. The writing resembles that of a lefty or maybe that of a child trying to copy the cursive style of his parents. Maybe it was both. The envelopes were slightly torn open with what appeared to be a thin stack of dollar bills sticking out. Occasionally, a curious passerby would stop to inspect, maybe it was trash or maybe it was treasure.

Perhaps, it was a would-be Good Samaritan that stopped or perhaps just someone who assumed it was their lucky day. Whoever it was, would be surprised to find an envelope stuffed with fake money, a plethora of loose notes containing disparaging comments or random jokes and as a bonus, the bottom would filled with fake vomit. The fake vomit was either mixed at home with care or purchased from a recent trip to the Union Market Place. As each victim threw down an envelope in disgust, a roar of laughter could be heard emerging from the backseat of white Saab parking across the street. Bryan Zanisnik had struck again.

Bryan Z. or sometimes just "Z." as he was called in those days was one of my closest friends when he was in seventh grade and I in eighth. Z. was a mad scientist of wacky schemes and ideas, observing his latest public prank from the backseat of his mother's car barely ranked as an odd activity. I mean this was a lanky white kid with a bowl haircut who during the week wore a Catholic school uniform and come the weekend, wore Public Enemy T-shirts and listened to NWA. Z. was known to eat a can of mushrooms as his meal when we came over for pizza and would spend hours videotaping and directing us on how to recreate scenes from blockbuster movies or a sequence from a basketball game that he had just watched on TV.

But as they say, friends go in and out of our lives like busboys in a restaurant. Bryan Z. and I went on to different high schools and somehow lost touch.

Then as fate would have it, just a few years ago, I was walking through an art gallery in Jersey City and saw an exhibit where a guy was wearing what appeared to be a television set on his head.

"Hey, I think I went to school with that guy!"

Sure enough, that guy was Bryan Zanisnik.

My "little buddy" was now looking like a hip professor on campus and was apparently more of a mad scientist than ever. Bryan Z. had grown comfortably into a multi-media performance artist and his creativity and imagination coupled with inspiration from growing up in the Garden State had taken his offbeat ideas to new levels.

Zanisnik's works have been inspired from the smells of the NJ Turnpike, the lure of the Meadowland's swamps and from experiences growing up in Union County.

Over the years, Z. has tangled with novelist, Philip Roth, clashed and collaborated with his parents during live performances and built monuments to honor Christopher Walken. His works have been exhibited throughout the U.S. and have made it over to Europe and Asia.

And while he's come a long way, both geographically and artistically, from pranking people in Union Center, Bryan Z.'s never forgot his roots or lost his fondness for his home state of New Jersey.

Matt Chrystal: In doing my research for this interview, I have seen you labeled as a





Meadowlands Picaresque, installation and performance at the Brooklyn Museum

"contemporary artist working in video, performance, photography and installation." While that's a pretty lengthy title, does that description accurately encapsulate you? Your creativity seems to have no limits and continues to expand across mediums... How do you describe what it is you do?

Bryan Zanisnik: I often joke that if someone met me at a party and I told them about my work I end up sounding like a fake artist. "So what do you do," I'm asked. "I make sculptures, installations, videos, photographs, performances, works on fabric, acting, writing and a few dozen other things..." The truth is I've always been more drawn to ideas than to particular materials. Sometimes these ideas are expressed best in a sculpture, and sometimes they are best in a performance. The only thing I've never done is make traditional drawings. I can't draw for the life of me. I took a drawing class in undergrad and the professor would hold up my drawings to the class as an example of what not to do. I was trying to draw a car but it was so out of proportion that it ended up looking like a monster truck.

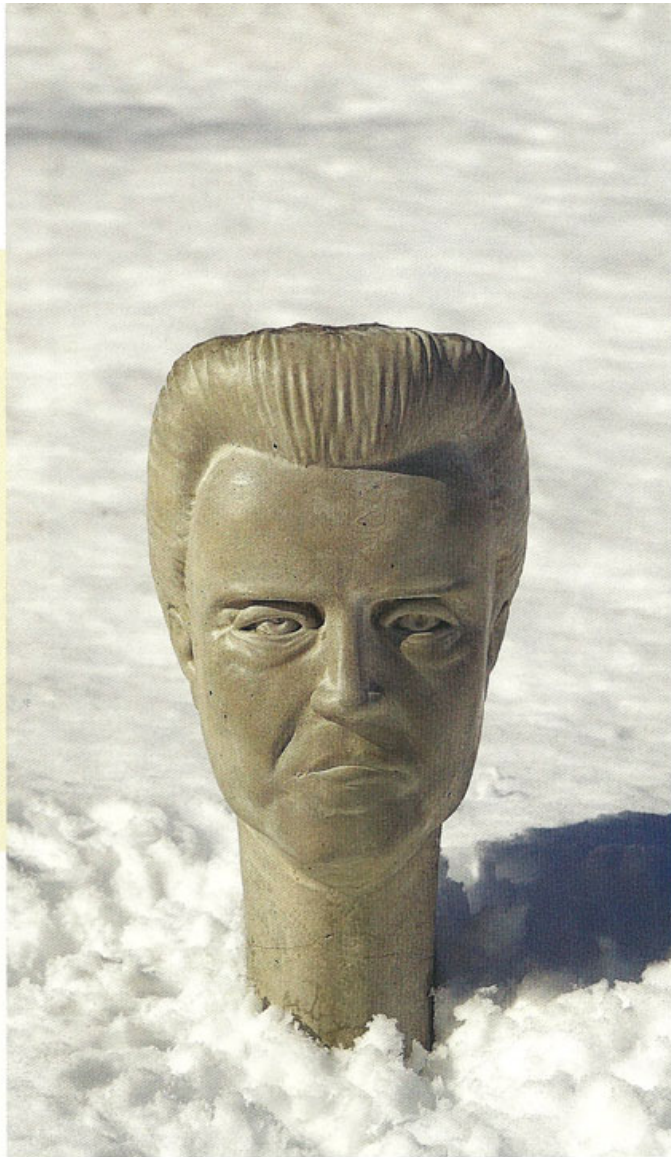
Let's get started with some broad strokes here... you have done pieces that incorporate the Meadowlands, the Pine Barrens and you make several references to your upbringing in Union County.... what is it about New Jersey or growing up in New Jersey that has inspired you?

I'm fascinated with New Jersey because it is this place of unknowns. I think that a lot of the state's identity has to do with it being next to New York City. New York City is amazing but it also feels entirely comprehensible. The city makes sense in some way. I've never felt this about New Jersey. It's always felt off to me – in the best ways possible. New York is similar to the ego of consciousness with all its skyscrapers rising above ground and professing confidence and strength. Meanwhile New Jersey with the Meadowlands, Atlantic City and history of Mafia activity is the subconscious – unknown, murky, mysterious and dangerous. As I teenager I had heard about a blind waiter at a Northern New Jersey truck stop who happened to be the best arm wrestler in the state. I drove there one evening with two friends and challenged him to an arm wrestling match. All the truck drivers sitting at the counter gathered around me, it was weird, uncomfortable and scary. This could have never happened in New York City.

In the article you wrote for *Triple Canopy*, in which you chronicled your explorations through the swamps of NJ's Meadowlands, you started off by



When I Was a Child I Caught a Fleeting Glimpse, performance at Hunter College, New York, NY



Monument to Walken in Springfield, NJ



Every Inch a Man, installation and performance at Abrons Arts Center, NYC

saying that the smell of the area drew you to it. I too was always fascinated by that smell growing up and it has given New Jersey quite the reputation. I don't notice the yellow haze in the air anymore and the odor seems to have dissipated. Is it all still there or have our olfactory sense become used to it?

I have to admit that the Meadowlands does not smell as pungent as it once did. I remember as a child having to roll up our windows when my family drove on the Turnpike. That isn't the case anymore. I did read an article in the New York Times in 2009 about a mysterious "maple-syrup" smell that had enveloped New York City. After years of investigation it was discovered the smell was coming from an herbal fragrance factory in North Bergen, NJ. Perhaps the smells are still alive, just a bit more pleasant these days.

Have you been back to the Meadowlands swamps since you wrote that piece? If so, any more run-ins with the police or reunions with hobos? And hey, whatever happened after your were exposed to mercury?

I haven't been back to the Meadowlands in a year or two, mostly because it has become a bit harder to explore with all the recent development happening there. Now you are more likely to run into a construction crew than a hobo encampment. Luckily, there are a few areas around Kearny that haven't changed much over the past decade. As for the exposure to Mercury, I miraculously survived! In all seriousness I think my exposure was so minimal it was nothing to be concerned about. Although I do have a peculiar headache while I am talking to you. **I read in an article on Art21, that your piece "A Woman Waits for Me II (2014)" evokes your emotional journey from a reclusive adolescent to the artist you are today. Since I knew you when you were a "reclusive adolescent" and I rediscovered you through your art as adults, I would like to hear more from you in your own words about your transition/growth from being a shy youth to the outgoing artist you are today. Was there a turning point or a gradual change over time?**

When I look back upon my childhood I do recall being incredibly shy, but of course there were moments I was outgoing. You and I were friends, and if you recall, we even made a remake of Terminator 2 in my parents' driveway. Maybe I should dig that video up? That aside, as an adult I have become more outgoing and confident, but of course I sometimes feel very shy as well. I think a lot of my performances capture this dichotomy between being shy and outgoing. On the one hand, I am confident enough to perform in front of large audiences, but on the other hand, there is something introverted and introspective in the ways I conceal my body and create performances with practically no movement.

You have incorporated your parents into many of your projects and pieces. There's a very interesting dynamic there that I would love to hear more about. Your parents play many roles within the realm of your artwork including that of your accomplices, collaborators, subjects and assistants. Can you talk about what it was like when you first approached them to be involved in a project and what it has been like to work with them throughout your career?

I first approached my parents about collaborating in my work in 2007. The year before that I had found eight hours of home movies I made with my grandmother when I was thirteen. I would dress her up in a War World II uniform and ask her to crawl across the basement floor shooting Nazis with toy guns. In another video she played an Italian immigrant who hated all Americans. The videos were perverse and disturbing, yet displayed an intimate relationship between a grandmother in front of the camera and a grandson behind. They were also relevant to the current political climate, dealing with timely issues like war and immigration, so I began to edit the raw footage and present them as documents of my youth and portraits of my grandmother.

At first my parents — especially my mother — were concerned how these videos would make my grandmother look. My mother was concerned people would think grandma was senile or crazy. In 2007 I first exhibited the videos, and my mother saw that the audience genuinely celebrated grandma's personality and humor. Seeing this positive reception made it possible for me to ask my parents to perform in future works.



Monument to Walken at Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens, NY

I was truly sorry about your mother's passing in 2015, I can fondly recall many of the fun times when she took us to local comic shops, put up with us making home movies and going to Knicks games... As we discussed, your parents have been heavily involved in you work and I was wondering how it has impacted your work, has working with your father after her passing has been cathartic or difficult?

After my mother's passing in early 2015 I decided to no longer present live performances with my parents. I always knew that body of work would end at some point, and I felt that my mother's death was an honorable way to close that chapter. At that point in time I had presented nearly 30 performances with my parents, some performed four or five times each. While both my parents were in each performance, it was my mother who was the dominant performer. Each time we rehearsed she would stop me and say, "I don't want to do this performance your way, I want to do it my way!"

It was a real struggle between director and actor, often with hilarious results. I recall one time in the middle of a performance in Brooklyn she unexpectedly left the gallery, walked down the street to a café and ordered a cup of coffee. A friend said to me afterwards, "I saw your mother at the café during the performance," and all I could respond was, "Well, that was part of the performance."

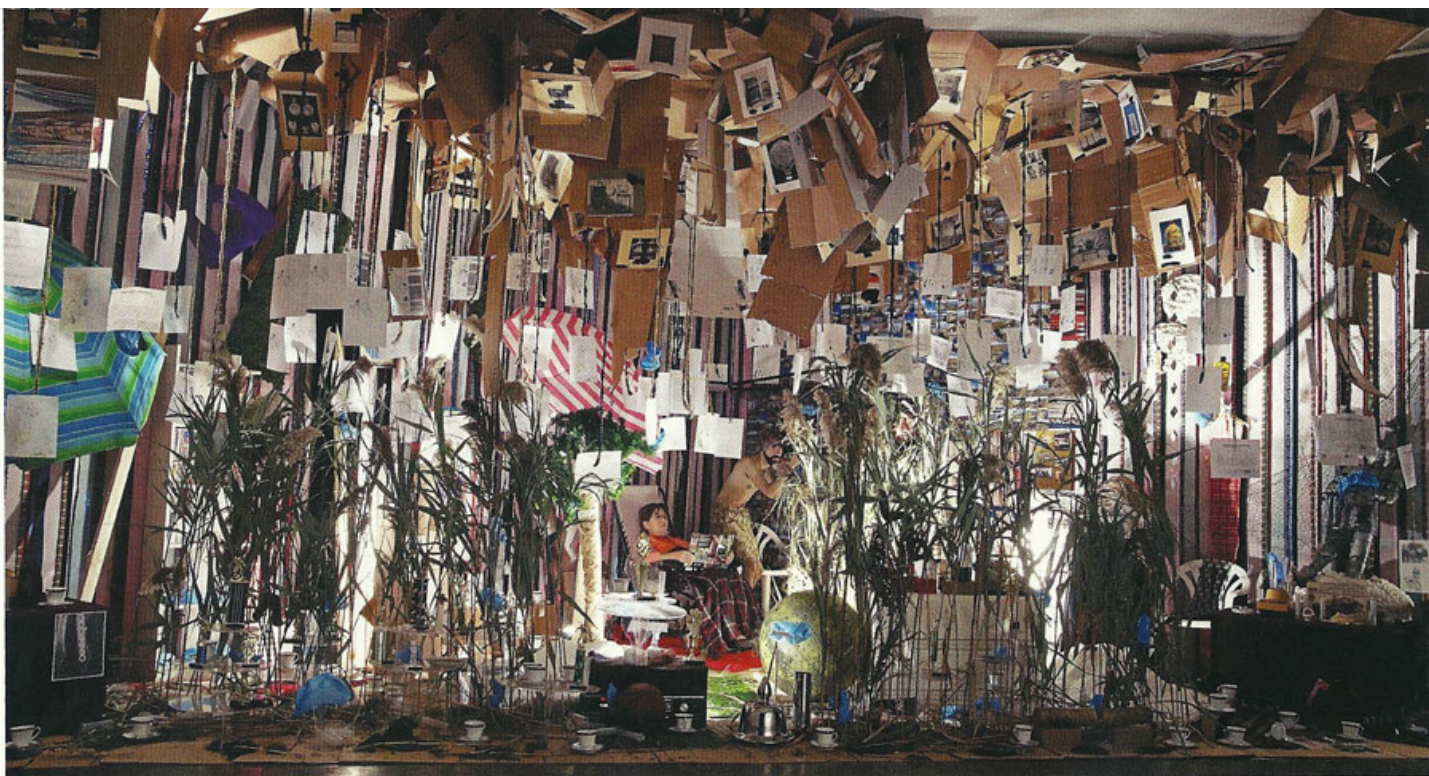
One of the things I loved about working with my parents was this unplanned and raw aspect of the work. Unlike professional actors, real life intervened and unpredictable, often absurd moments would emerge. Whether it was leaving the gallery midway through a performance, or, another time, my mother whispering to an audience member, "What time is it?" the performances were a blend of reality, fiction, performance and portrait. I felt that they truly captured the complexities, frustration and intimacy of a family.

Speaking of incorporating fellow New Jerseyans into your work, you have projects that literally (see what I did there?) make use of the writings of the Newark, NJ native turned world-renowned novelist, Philip Roth... From my understanding, you were drawn to his "The Great American Novel," by a feeling of that of kindred spirits. But as it turned out Mr. Roth was not quite a fan of the free publicity and basically sent you a cease and desist to refrain from silently reading his books in public. It all sounds pretty ridiculous now but at the time were you flattered, annoyed, or confused? Can you talk about your feelings and what was going through your head as this was happening you.

I think a lot of my performances capture this dichotomy between being shy and outgoing. On the one hand, I am confident enough to perform in front of large audiences, but on the other hand, there is something introverted and introspective in the ways I conceal my body and create performances with practically no movement.



Philip Roth Presidential Library II, installation at Queens Museum, Queens, NY



Meadowlands Picaresque, installation and performance at the Brooklyn Museum, both top and bottom photos.



The legal battle with Philip Roth felt like something straight out of a Philip Roth novel. Basically he claimed that holding his novel in public was a performance of the novel, and that violated his copyright. Of course that seems to be an extreme interpretation of copyright and what is deemed a performance. I worked with an attorney on the matter, and he said if Roth wins this case then people wouldn't be able to silently read his books on the train or in a park, as they'd be "performing" his novel in public without permission. The legal battle went into the media, and shortly thereafter Roth dropped any charges.

When I first received the cease and desist letter I was shocked, and a bit scared. I've never been threatened with a lawsuit before. As time went on, and after I consulted a lawyer, I was less nervous. There was an endless amount of legal documents coming my way, and I began to photocopy the documents and insert them into my installation in the gallery. The exhibition began with Roth only being a small aspect of the work, but by the end the show was really about Roth, copyright and our legal battle.

Where did the idea for the sculpture park of Christopher Walken heads stem from? Where are the heads now? Any future plans for them?

When I was working on a proposal for the Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens, NY, I was drawn to the fact that Christopher Walken grew up in the neighborhood. His family even owned a bakery a few blocks away from the park, called "Walken's Bake Shop." Working with a 3D modeler I created the Walken heads to look like mushrooms, as if Walken's DNA was imbued in the ground and caused Walken mushrooms to spring up every year. That exhibition closed last year, and since then a few of the Walken heads are traveling and a few are hanging out in Springfield, New Jersey. I even set one aside in case Christopher Walken wants one for his garden.

You have had residencies, exhibits and workshops in places like NYC, Los Angeles, Miami, Prague and China. Was there a certain project or a moment of creation when you knew that what you were doing here in NJ/NY was catching on and getting noticed worldwide?

It's difficult to say if there was one particular work or moment where I felt that things were really taking off. I know that going to graduate school at Hunter College in New York City really benefited me. I met a lot of amazing artists there, and was lucky enough to have the time to develop my work slowly over the course of several years.

With all these travels to exotic lands far and wide, have you had any weird or interesting tales of adventures you can share?

When I was in China in 2011 I bought a Chinese army hat with a red star on it, the hat made famous by Mao last century. I bought the hat because I thought it looked cool, and because the sun was incredibly strong and I needed the shade. I had no idea that walking down the street almost every Chinese citizen I passed would salute me. Children would stand next to me for a photo, us both saluting side by side. An entire bus even slowed down and all the passengers saluted me in sync. I was in Guangzhou, a city not visited by many western tourists, and I think the sight of a westerner wearing a red star cap was hilarious and absurd to everyone living there.

Does any place out there compare to the weirdness of the good ole Garden State?

I am happy to say I have yet to visit a place as weird as New Jersey.

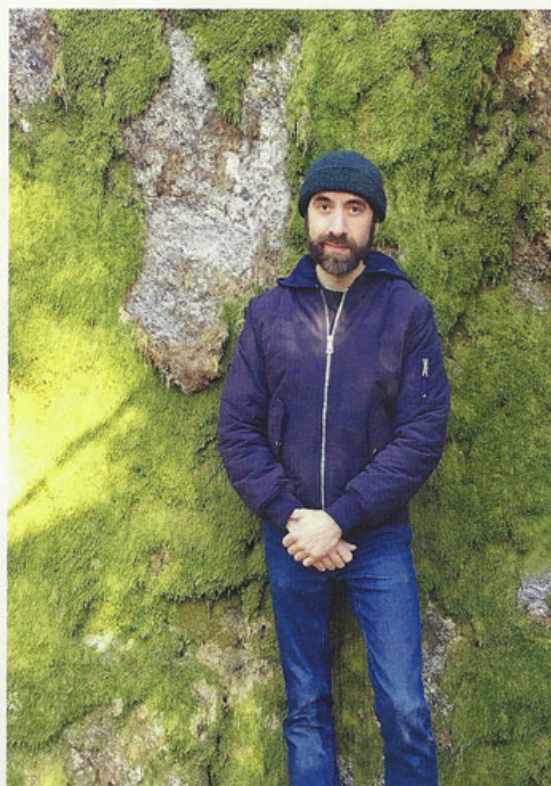
Can you peel back the curtain on anything you are currently working on?

For past last year I have been learning how to identify edible mushrooms in the forest. So far I can safely identify about eight different species, including giant puffballs, which can easily weigh over ten pounds. I'm starting to make some new work that is inspired by my mushroom expeditions, so stay tuned.

Where can we go to keep up with you and find out all the goings on in the world of Bryan Zanisnik? Rumor has it, you just revamped your website to prepare for the influx of *Weird NJ* fans!

You can find me on Instagram and Facebook as BryanZanisnik, and on my website www.zanisnik.com.

Editors note: Author Phillip Roth passed away on May 22nd, 2018.



Z. in Sweden, 2016.



Philip Roth Presidential Library, installation at Locust Projects, Miami, FL