

HYPERRALLERGIC

A Satire of the Moneyed '90s Art Scene that Resonates Today

Seventeen years later, Artists Space is screening Laura Cottingham and Leslie Singer's *The Anita Pallenberg Story*, which uses the Rolling Stones as a lens into the white privilege of the art world.

By Zachary Small

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Laura Cottingham & The Anita Pallenberg Story, installation view, Artists Space (photo by Daniel Pérez)

Is uptown money killing downtown art? And do the rich use culture as an indistinguishable commodity or a branded investment opportunity? Posing these still pertinent questions in 1998, Laura Cottingham and Leslie Singer began investigating the emergence of a new phenomenon. In her essay, "Love, Sex, Fame, and the Life of the Image," Cottingham identified artists complicit in the monetization of culture as "rock star artists" whose record-breaking sales and desire for fame far outpaced their artistic merits. These were artists like Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst, who, despite critical disdain, earned millions off their schlock. Cleverly, Cottingham and Singer decided to examine this rock



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star trope by returning to its ultimate embodiment: the Rolling Stones. Why did the Stones assimilate into mainstream culture after years of making music on the vanguard of a sociopolitical rebellion? Why, in turn, were artists in the 1990s so interested in becoming rock stars well after the music genre's heyday? (The quick and easy answer is money.) But Cottingham and Singer took their argument further, showing how, like appropriation artists in the 1990s, the Stones rose to fame on the exhaust fumes of others involved in performance art, the sexual revolution, Black Power, and women's liberation. What distinguishes the Stones from these groups, Cottingham and Singer argued, was their white cis-male privilege.

By 2000, the pair of artists created *The Anita Pallenberg Story*, a satisfyingly smarmy film that mocks the rock star persona by mixing archival footage of the Rolling Stones with contemporary artists who pretend to be the band members. For her part, Laura Cottingham plays Mick Jagger and Brian Jones in the film, but we see other famous faces, too, including Cosima von Bonin as the titular character and Nicole Eisenman as Keith Richards.

Presenting *The Anita Pallenberg Story* 17 years later, Artists Space joins a trend among galleries in revisiting the late '90s and early aughts for some much-needed retrospective on identity politics and the ethics of appropriation art. Certainly, this is an important conversation to have today across cultural industries. (Recently, Miley Cyrus has taken criticism for dismissing hip-hop as sexist, only after years of adopting the genre and its aesthetic for financial gain. And who can forget the controversy over Dana Schutz's painting of Emmitt Till at the Whitney Biennial?)



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The first words spoken in *The Anita Pallenberg Story* come from Cottingham's impersonation of Mick Jagger. Looking in the mirror, he wistfully comments, "The thing that really gets people is that I'm a man, not a woman...I should probably read more." These humorous little non sequiturs are peppered through the film, creating a dialectic between the Jagger persona and Cottingham's persistent criticality. Throughout the film, actors freely dispense with their personas when they have something biting to say, which makes for an engaging watch. This veiled criticism also persists in the film's musical numbers, in which Cottingham and Eisenman dance around the stage while lip-syncing to famous Stones songs like "Play with Fire."

Cottingham is dressed as Mick Jagger dressed as a woman gyrating to his own music. While funny, these layers of identity are how Cottingham and company queer their criticism of the Rolling Stones, revisiting Mick Jagger's patent rituals and idiosyncrasies as a strange, solipsistic Oedipal complex — one that only a man could perform without receiving licentious condemnations. And what would the Rolling Stones be without their rampant misogyny? Would we still consider them rock stars without tales about their traveling harem of groupies? Chief among them was the Italian model and actress Anita Pallenberg, who reportedly had affairs with all three of the lead Rolling Stones. Von Bonin's impersonation of Pallenberg is hazy and detached, as if perpetually on the edge of an overdose. Calling herself the sixth member of the Rolling Stones, she sees herself as the band's battered muse. "I feel like their avatar," she says at one point before collapsing in delirium. She is a symbol of the Rolling Stones' blatant contradictions: They perform femininity as glam rockers but fail to respect women.



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One of the tenser moments of the film occurs when the Rolling Stones are confronted with their own racism. After a staged scene where Richards and Jagger excitedly talk about their chance to eat fried chicken and tour plantations when they play in the American South, a reporter from Rolling Stone Magazine (played by Ghada Amer) confronts them. She asks Jagger and Richards if they'll ever acknowledge their musical debt to black R&B and blues musicians. "That's culture!" shrugs Jagger, "Starts here, goes there. We made the rolling stones." No, they didn't, the reporter points out, that term originates with the blues musician Muddy Waters. Will the Rolling Stones reimburse him for his contribution to the band? "Power to the...lady...we love women!" Richards randomly interjects, cementing the band's willful ignorance.

Succinctly put, the Rolling Stones want all the fame without any responsibility. The same could be said about many artists who suddenly find themselves in the spotlight after riding on someone else's creative coattails. Cottingham and Singer try to collapse these themes of ignorant white masculinity into a running commentary on the art world's obsession with male artists. They succeed in showing the pageantry of it all, and the privilege of white artists to appropriate without knowing, or ever having to acknowledge, its implications.

Laura Cottingham & The Anita Pallenberg Story continues at Artists Space (55 Walker St, Tribeca, Manhattan) through June 18.