

My Favorite Shape is a Circle:
A Curator's Interview with

TARA MATEIK

» **Amy Cancelmo:** Tell me a little bit about the Friends of Dorothy project, and how you came to be interested in *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Wiz*.

Tara Mateik: As a book, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (and its subsequent titles) have a super interesting transfeminist background. I started experimenting with the *The Wizard of Oz* as the source material for a liberation narrative, in part, because its 20th century origin. The author, L. Frank Baum, lived with his mother-in-law, Matilda Joslyn Gage, an eminent suffragist abolitionist. She co-authored *The Declaration of Sentiments* and edited the first three volumes of *The History of Woman Suffrage* with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. Designated an Underground Railroad site, her home was also Baum's residence. Her influence permeates Oz, especially in the governance of Oz, a land where women (queens) rule. My project revisits and fleshes out the feminist thread present in the Oz series, expanding these themes to challenge the concept of the leading man as well as the governing principle of gender itself—the binary.

The technological innovation, mishaps, and experimentation kept me captivated. Starting with L. Frank Baum's *The Fairylogue* and *Radio-Plays*. In the original title, "radio" was a term generally used to indicate the latest in technological advances, like "high tech." Though *The Fairylogues* and *Radio-Plays* often sold out, ticket prices couldn't support the cost of crew, musicians, and facilities. The show closed in December 1908, though it was originally intended to play through 1909. Sadly, There are

no surviving prints of the *Fairylogues*—travelogue movies about mythical fairylands. You dig and you find other facts that keep you engaged with the same material. For example, in *The Marvelous Land of Oz* (1904), the sequel to the *Wonderful Wizard of Oz* Dorothy Gale does not even appear. Instead the story's protagonist is a boy named Tip—who was born female and, at the end of the book, transitions from Tip to Princess Ozma, the rightful heir to the Emerald City.

Most recently I collaborated with *WOW! Café Theater* to produce *Friends of Dorothy*. In its mission they "welcome the full participation of all women and trans people in solidarity with women." To be able to work collaboratively with a collective that articulates in their mission what I wanted to tease out of the Oz narrative is pretty awesome. Both *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Wiz*, celebrate non-gender conforming models and female heroines while the theater collective, *WOW*, reflects this not only on stage but in governance.

» **Who are Diana Ross and Judy Garland to you?**

TM: They are an entry point to a conversation.

» **I'm interested in the idea of collective consensus on queer icons: do you think of these icons as collaborators in the creation and presentation of queer identity - sort of like a collective unconscious?**

TM: I think of the impersonators and tribute artists as collaborators, but I don't think of Diana or Judy as collaborators. They are the part of the material I'm

working with. I typecast people or their drag personas, for example, you'll see in the production photo credits "MargOH! As BT Shea as MargOH! Channing as Judy Garland as Dorothy Gale."

I'm interested in a practice that includes regular participation in a collaborative process, one that fosters transfeminism, an inclusive feminism that integrates the lived experience of genderqueer people and extends important feminist concerns beyond the limits of rigidly defined gender.

» **Your work is really performative, do you have a background in theater at all?**

TM: I was trained as a competitive gymnast from three to twelve. So in terms of physicality and team effort, I was trained. As a video artist (I went to college in the early 90's) performance is an important part of my practice and history. I think most of us got comfortable in front of camera at the same time we figured out how to be within the frame—we featured ourselves in our own and in each other's projects...I came to video inspired by early AIDS activism and media collectives like *Paper Tiger TV*—both with a history of non-traditional performance.

» **You position yourself as Victor Fleming, the director. Is this the role you identify with in your practice? You are often collaborating with so many artists, and authorship can be a sticky subject.**

TM: I'm the director/producer and perform as the director/producer. I'm not just Victor Fleming, I'm Sydney Lumet,

Rob Cohen, and Steve Rubbel. Is that more slippery than sticky. As a director, it's my vision, I created the structure and the content—but it can't exist without the impersonators. And each person's interpretation just becomes part of a larger conversation. Maybe the interpretation of the icons by each performer is the sticky part. It's definitely a less controlled variable. Gestures, costumes, the use of props—these are things that I discuss with each performer—but ultimately, this whole project is about the concept of home and the idea of knowing yourself as being home.

» **How do you think working collaboratively has affected your individual practice?**

TM: My favorite shape is a circle. •

Mateik Tara. Email interview with author. May 29, 2013.