

THE LAST ARTIST IN NEW YORK CITY

BY POLLY FROST AND RAY SAWHILL

**FIRST PERFORMED AT PS 122 AS PART OF AVANT-GARDE-ARAMA,
DIRECTED BY JASON JACOBS, WITH KAREN GRENKE AND JAKE
THOMAS**

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SCENE 1. METUCHEN MALL

ANNOUNCER VOICE: Ladies and gentlemen, as the last performance at PS 122 before Chase/ Wachovia-Whole Foods moves in for your financial and shopping ease, Theatre Askew presents Karen Grenke, "The Last Artist in New York City." Karen is moving into the theater space with a flashlight. Points it at walls, ceiling, people in the audience, at herself ...

KAREN (TO AUDIENCE): Walking through the Metuchen Mall ... By my side, Xavier, my former lover in the Polyamory Art Collective ... You may know them as PAC ... Years ago, Xavier helped me find my current style ... Of course I helped him equally ... Metuchen? you ask. Central Jersey is the answer ... Central Jersey is always the answer ... My old partners had abandoned Williamsburg years ago ...

Flashlight continues picking out things.

KAREN (TO AUDIENCE): Dark corridors ... Dried-up fountains ... Display windows for Linens Etc and Williams Sonoma now cracked and jagged ... Sullen kids in tight pants and spikey hair camping out and smoking ... We're inside an abandoned mall, but I'm reminded of photos I once saw in a book about Astor Place in the '70s ... Xavier is talking.

KAREN (AS XAVIER): Why has it taken you so long to visit us in person? The time has come for you to give up the big city dream. Baby, New York doesn't care about art any more.

KAREN (TO AUDIENCE): Xavier pushes open a huge door ... Rave music up. People dancing, flashing lights, pulsing electronica ... **(TO XAVIER)** Oh my god, Xavier, this is the greatest scene ever! Retro-Hindu-Trance, aren't I right?

KAREN (AS XAVIER): Welcome to the Big Box, baby! **KAREN (TO AUDIENCE):** When the day began I had no idea how momentous it would prove. Rave music continues for a few seconds, then stops.

SCENE 2. KAREN ON SEGWAY

Swirly pink-green light. Earlier that day. Hurrying between jobs. Karen quaffs Red Bull.

KAREN (TO AUDIENCE): ... Floating through the city on my faithful Segway ... Between one job and the next ... Five day jobs and I barely get by ... Bouncing ... Ah, the hallowed cobblestones of SoHo ... Paying tribute ... The greats of the past ... Karen Finley, Eric Bogosian, Spalding Gray ... Then through Chelsea ...

Once full of galleries, now playdate central for families ... In Midtown, the former sites of Sonnabend, Castelli, Pace Wildenstein ... I nod silently ... Wavy ... blueglass ... highrises ... Taking over everywhere ... I hate those fucking things!

Ka-boop of iPhone email notification interrupts. Karen tries to keep balance as she pulls out iPhone and calls up email.

KAREN (TO AUDIENCE): Stefani Symonds. Dot N-Y-Times? That's right, the Times. The New York fucking Times! She wants to do a feature. That's right, about me, Karen Grenke. "You're the last remaining artist in New York City. You're a cultural landmark." Omigod, omigod, omigod After all these years ... All my sacrifices ... My time as a New York artist has finally come!

Twirls around on Segway in joy and -- horn honks -- almost gets run over.

SCENE 3. KAREN AT FRANK GEHRY HIGH

Hard white light up. Karen's at desk in "teacher" mode -- think Spalding Gray in eyeglasses. Takes a big swig of Red Bull.

KAREN (TO AUDIENCE): There I was, behind my teacher's desk, at Frank Gehry High for the Developmentally Gifted on the Upper East Side. As my student settled in, I crafted a proud email to my former mates in the Polyamory Art Collective ... PAC ... Been years since I last wrote them. But I felt certain they'd be happy for me ... The great artistic spirit that this city once had ... Embodied now in me and me alone! ... I was still buzzed as I began talking about Warhol's immortal brilliance.

KAREN (AS STUDENT): Screw immortality. How'd his paintings do at the most recent auction?

KAREN (TO AUDIENCE): God, how I hated these new entitled brats! But it was my own fault, I was the one who'd persuaded the principal to let me replace Introductory Art History with Art as Recession Investment strategy. It was time to steer the conversation in a productive direction.

(TO CLASS) Hey, I have a fun announcement this morning. The Times is doing a feature on me. That's right, me, your very own teacher, Ms. Karen Grenke. You never really believed I was an artist, did you? But now --

KAREN (AS STUDENT): What's "The Times"?

KAREN (TO CLASS): You really don't know? It's what we used to call a major news source. It symbolized New York and its great cultural life.

KAREN (AS STUDENT): Losing strategy. The underlying mortgage on that new

Renzo Piano building is killing them. You should be targeting Collegehumor.com instead.

KAREN (TO AUDIENCE): Christ! After class, I was unlocking my Segway. I noticed this shy girl from class standing there. You know the type. Gaunt ... dreamy ... Her hair a different color every week.

KAREN (AS JESS): Sorry about my idiot classmates. Screw them. They know nothing about art.

KAREN (TO JESS): Oh. And you do? **(TO AUDIENCE):** She pulled out her iPhone ... It's a YouTube mashup showing Schnabel, Fischl and Sherman mouthing the lyrics to "Sheena is a Punk Rocker."

KAREN (AS JESS): I did it by myself. AfterEffects. Flash. Final Cut.

KAREN (TO AUDIENCE): I started to lecture her about giving people you're stealing from credit, then ... Decided not to go there. Why squash creativity?

SCENE 4. KAREN ON SEGWAY

Lights change back to Segway-swirly. Karen on Segway, a dreamy-pleased state, slurping Red Bull as she steers with one hand.

KAREN (TO AUDIENCE): So there's hope ... New York may have a cultural future after all! ... Cruising home ... Me and my Segway merging as one ... Crossing 14th ... Ah, my beloved East Village ... Home of The Beats ... The punk rock revolution ...

Takes big swig of Red Bull. It has its effect.

KAREN: But even downtown the biomorphing blueglass buildings are taking over.

Another big swig.

KAREN: Fuckers! iPhone email goes ka-thump. Karen calls it up.

KAREN (TO AUDIENCE): Eden, my rival for Xavier in the Polyamory Art Collective ... PAC ... I know what you're thinking -- "rivalry"? Well, if you're polyamorous you know how it goes ... All the blah blah around who's sleeping with who ... Ethical sluts talk more than they fuck! ... But there was just no getting past our feelings of possessiveness ... In the space behind Eden, the other members of PAC writhe in a naked heap ... Rehearsal or orgy?

KAREN (AS EDEN): Congrats! We'd help you celebrate in person but we never come to NYC any longer. Honey, today's real artists don't even know where

Manhattan is.

KAREN (TO AUDIENCE): Once a bitch, always a bitch! Why can't Xavier see that! Swigs Red Bull in fury.

SCENE 5. KAREN AT HER APARTMENT

Swirly lights stop. Karen now sitting on the desk, as though on sofa or bed. Many empty cans of Red Bull in a mess around her.

KAREN (TO AUDIENCE): The real trouble, I was starting to realize -- I've been so busy maintaining life in New York that I haven't gotten much art done. None. Zero. Nada. What will I have to show when I meet with Stefani? Takes big swig of Red Bull. Sets empty can down among others. Contemplates arrangement of cans. Re-arranges them.

KAREN (TO SELF): I was starting to see some real artistic possibilities ... Karen kisses the Red Bull. Fondles it. Runs the can of Red Bull over arms, head, legs, boobs, tummy. Starts to masturbate using the can of Red Bull. In big gesture of heedlessness, she sweeps all the other cans of Red Bull onto the floor. As she's starting to feel the heat -- The iPhone makes its email ka-thunk sound.

KAREN: Oh, shit! Karen calls up email.

KAREN (TO SELF): Say it isn't so!

(TO AUDIENCE) Stefani's been downsized. The underlying mortgage really is causing hell at the Times! And worse -- the article about me is off! What has my life been about!? I blasted off a woeful mass message to my entire email list. The Collective got back to me instantly ...

SCENE 6. KAREN ON SEGWAY

This time we get a nightmare version of swirly pink-green Segway lighting and subjective movement. It's dark and stormy, and Karen is despairing.

KAREN (TO HERSELF AND THE AUDIENCE): Come join us, they say ... A performance in Metuchen, they say ... It's the old loyalties that help us out in tough times ... I throw on my old artchick party clothes ... The first time in years ... The Segway and I are off! ... Dodging potholes ... Steering around young families with their damn baby strollers ... Blind with emotion, we fly -- fly! -- through the rain ... Screw you, New York City ... Screw your SUVs ... Your endless bank branches I hate tourist-safe neighborhoods! ... Screw your K-Marts ... Your Barnes and Nobles ... Your family-friendly Disney musicals ... I hate branding! ...Trader Joe's I'll make an exception for ... Excellent prices on

wine ... And like that --

Lights go to black. Big whoosh sound.

KAREN (TO AUDIENCE): I was in the tunnel on my way to central Jersey.

SCENE 7. METUCHEN MALL

Flashlight in Karen's hand, as in opening scene. Sounds of flogging and moaning. Karen stares offstage, takes big swig of Red Bull.

KAREN (TO AUDIENCE): In a room to one side of the dance space Xavier is laying into Eden ... When I was living with the Collective, flogging and suspensions weren't our thing. But ever since Kink.com took all those awards for BDSM porn everyone has been into it ... Ouch! ... Still -- oh, Christ, look at that ... So gruesome ... It really is beautiful ... Shit, that was a motherfucker of an orgasm! ... I have to say that PAC is doing their best work ever ... Hanging exhausted from the rack, Eden is transformed into an icon of desire ... No! No! I can't keep watching ... Artistic jealousy ... Sexual jealousy ... It's a lethal combination! ...

Rave lighting and music up as Karen switches off flashlight and staggers back to desk. Starts to climb stairs up to desktop but she's so emotional that she stumbles. A strobe light pops off.

KAREN: What the hell? Looks around. Another strobe pops off, then another.

KAREN (TO SELF AND AUDIENCE): Somebody shooting photos Right up between my thighs! **(TO STRANGER)** Hey, quit it! **(TO AUDIENCE)** A woman. At least it isn't some pathetic frat boy ... We gasp. We look at each other in confusion. **(TO STRANGER)** I know you! You're Stefani Symons!

KAREN (AS STEFANI): Karen, I'm sorry that the story didn't --

KAREN (TO STEFANI): And I'm sorry about your job.

KAREN (AS STEFANI): Don't be. I landed a gig with CollegeHumor.com two hours later. Between us, the Times is going to be bought out by CollegeHumor.com within the month anyway.

KAREN (TO AUDIENCE): Stefani snaps a couple more shots ... She promises to put them on CollegeHumor's site later in the evening ... Screw it. If I'm going to be here at all I should dance, dammit, dance ... I give over to the wild spirit around me ... Pouring vodka into my Red Bull ... In the ladies' room taping on smart-drug skin patches ... Maybe I do need to throw aside my dreams ... Maybe it's time to move to Jersey ... The stall door swings open -- it's Xavier. He glares

at me. "Fuck polyamory" I mouth at him ... Ten minutes later I'm leaning against a wall ... Groups of people -- anyone passing by -- is writing on my legs, my back, my arms ... I'm being inscribed ... Someone is drawing on my tummy. A girl with pink hair stands up.

KAREN (AS JESS): Ms. Grenke, please don't tell my parents you saw me here!

KAREN (TO AUDIENCE): It's Jess, the arty girl from Frank Gehry High!

(TO JESS) How'd you know about this scene?

KAREN (AS JESS): Everybody knows Metuchen is where it's at. I get out to the Big Box every week. I take the bus and change into my party clothes at the Metuchen bus station. God, it's so depressing to have to live in Manhattan! Did you see what I wrote on your left arm?

KAREN (TO SELF): "You are my role model."

(TO JESS) Really?

KAREN: We share a big hug. Jess looks deep into my eyes. We're naked to each other emotionally, spiritually, artistically. Then she can't help herself and bolts.

KAREN (AS JESS): I gotta get home to boring Manhattan. But I admire you so much I'm gonna write about how great you are on your my blog! I get tons of hits!

KAREN (CALLING TO JESS): Sweetie, I haven't done any art in four years!

KAREN (AS JESS): Don't you know what you are to me? What you represent? Check out your other arm!

KAREN (READS WRITING ON OTHER ARM): "Karen Grenke has stayed in New York. That is the performance. You are the art."

Inspired, Karen waves bye-bye to Jess, then climbs stairs to desktop as music gets louder.

KAREN (TO SELF, AUDIENCE): I am my own art form. My life ... My art ... Up on the desk now, music louder, Karen dances...

KAREN (TO AUDIENCE): OK, so immortality isn't in the cards. That dream is dead. But tomorrow I'll be the last artist in New York City once again. And I'll be showing up on CollegeHumor, and on a very cool girl's blog. Pulls string attached to large can of Red Bull mounted on ceiling. Glitter falls from it all over her

KAREN (TO AUDIENCE): There's always the chance that I could go viral!
Dances ecstatically, finally released.

SCENE 8.

Music fades, house lights come up. Karen shifts back into being "herself," awkwardly getting down off desk and picking up a stack of flyers.

KAREN (TO AUDIENCE): Thank you very much for watching my performance --

ANNOUNCER VOICE (INTERRUPTS): Thank you for joining us at this final show at PS 122 --

Karen waves to stage manager to shut the announcer up, but construction-crew guys are coming onstage to initiate demolition. Karen gives them an outraged look, hurries to audience, and starts handing out her flyers.

KAREN: Join me on May 16, 2019 at 10 pm for a talk-back about the important issues that I've raised in this piece! Will there be any art at all in Manhattan by that time?

ANNOUNCER: Please ignore the artist and begin filing in an orderly fashion out the doors so that the construction crew can begin the transformation of this ratty disgrace of a building into a gleaming new retail space --

KAREN: We'll be meeting on the corner just outside no matter what blueglass piece of shit the fuckers have turned this building into! Please show up and help celebrate our legacy! Help me do it, so that art will will not be forgotten!

ANNOUNCER: Be sure not to forget your personal belongings, and remember to return to enjoy Chase-Wachovia/Whole Foods, a new concept in banking/shopping pleasure, designed from the bottom up to suit you, and the way you tell us that you like to live ...

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