

**Seònaid MacKay, "Fruit Bat,
I Want To Have Your Baby"
performance (2004, London)**



**Akil Kirlaw, "Maya Deren, I Want To
Have Your Baby"
performance (2003, Buffalo, NY)
part of *I Want to Have Your Baby*,
Caroline Koebel (2003-05)
VIDEO IMAGE CAPTURES,
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.**



Caroline Koebel, 2003-2005, collective performance action documented on miniDV, approx. 4 hours total, sound, color, multilingual with English subtitles, various presentation platforms: single-channel video, video installation, website, large-scale prints, artist's book.

In the collective performance action *I Want to Have Your Baby* (2003-2005) more than 300 participants in sites including Los Angeles, Budapest, Havana, Berlin, Buffalo, and London conceived hypothetical offspring in a digital repopulating of the world with humane beings. *Baby* draws inspiration from the global protest movement against war and violence and seeks to give voice to the international peace-loving community. In serious play, it goes to the heart of things by focusing on "The Family" in order to subvert the American right-wing's appropriation of family in justifying its aggression machine. The project also seeks to broaden the meaning and representation of family. *Baby* combines political activism with conceptual art and feminist concerns. Not unlike the instruction pieces of Fluxus, *I Want to Have Your Baby* provides a framework within which others act—a catalyst of sorts. My role is at once to facilitate the individual participant's original steps through the project and to join these steps with the paths of former and future participants. The project promotes change through both adversarial and exemplary means: it provides an extensive and persuasive critique of authoritarian power structures while also harnessing the power of mindplay to posit alternate life-affirming

potentialities. *I Want to Have Your Baby* disrespects limits and subverts forms in the way that it makes art out of politics without making

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"political art." Through this project that multiplies—that generates "life"—I hope to expand resistance of spirit, thought and action, while promulgating an aesthetic of choice.

Participants—regardless of gender, age, sexual orientation, and biological reproductive capacity—give "mom" performances in which they conceive hypothetical babies that they believe would make the world a better place. Participants pretend to speak to their baby's other parent, saying why they want the baby and what they imagine the baby to be like. Co-parents range from best friends and favorite pet dogs to endangered species to specific places to famous people from history and to abstract concepts, including Mahatma Gandhi, Jimi Hendrix, Brazil, virtual reality, and the breeze. Anything is possible. *I Want to Have Your Baby* was inspired by my frustration—better put: my anger, my rage—not only with the Bush administration's policies, i.e., attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq, but also with the sham election in which the ultrafundamentalists in the first place seized power of the so-called "world's greatest democracy." It was important for me at this time to follow a "no business as usual" stance, and

I WANT TO HAVE YOUR BABY

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I felt a kinship with others who were also moved to take action in support of democracy and of the rights of all the world's peoples. I joined millions of others in online petitions and marches in D.C. to put brakes on the war machine. Hearing about simultaneous mass demonstrations in places like Rome and London from within the context of the U.S. movement was exhilarating. Soon I followed the growing desire to more consciously extend activism to my practice as a media artist, and I wanted to be tactical about this.

Although not initially intended to be anything resembling an ethnographic survey of cultural difference, *I Want to Have Your Baby* ended up drawing me into considerations of place, nation, individual rights, freedom of expression, sexual identities, and more. Because the project was trans-national and continental, I came into contact with numerous individuals who brought specific backgrounds and concerns to their participation (or lack thereof) in *Baby*. To share what I mean, I will describe some of the more memorable (mis)conceptions of *Baby*.

While some participants conceived fleshly babies, others leaned more towards the theoretical, seizing the occasion of the video performance to comment upon the status of representation (by way of the moving image) itself. For example, a participant in Buffalo, NY, chose Maya Deren as a co-parent for how she has "provided a blueprint for film as a medium for observing the ephemeral" and for her desire "to articulate desire itself." The participant followed Deren to Haiti where she "produced a groundbreaking study of the occult and became a Vodoun priestess." He concluded his performance, "Through ritual you transformed both your mind and body into a silver screen onto which the living gods of Haiti were projected."

Having begun the project in Buffalo with participant contributions going more or less as imagined, I then found myself in a quandary when a member of an East London artist's collective chewed the spirit and terms of *Baby* and spewed them back at me. Behind the camera lens, I was in complete disbelief as I heard this participant articulate her desire for Osama Bin Laden's baby. This was not supposed to happen. Confused and bewildered by the imagination of the artist, I knew at the same time that it was not my intent to censor anyone's video performance (and interpretation of the project), so I kept steady for the interval of internal angst and attempted as best I could to give her free reign. In the end, the participant gave a stellar performance of the conception of her idea-baby, turning sex and reproduction with "the terrorist other" into radical peace negotiations. I also was appreciative of how her controversial response to my authorial ambitions caused me to dismantle any preconceptions of how the collective performance—and thus my project—would be realized. In crafting the framework of *Baby*, I sought to catalogue multiple and divergent responses, not to limit them. This participant helped me to accept the autonomy of the project's outcomes.

The breadth of knowledge brought by contributors to *Baby* inspires one to reflect anew on the bond between education and understanding and on the cultural politics (read the ecological necessity) of placing oneself as subject in relation to all other living things. Ignorance breeds fear. In an inter-species conception by another London participant, stereotypes about a distant Mammalian relative, the fruit bat, were dismantled. News to me was that after humans and dolphins, fruit bats “have the most complex language in the animal world.” This performance further emphasized education: the half human, half-bat baby’s genetic mapping contains the imperative to “go out into the world and teach others what amazing animals fruit bats really are.”

At a gay and lesbian art and film festival in Budapest that hosted *Baby* as part of the Evolutionary Girls Club, I had a very hard time securing new participants. With Hungary’s pride movement in relative infancy and memories of all too recent repression of alternate sexual identities, locals felt shy and intimidated and generally could not commit to being on camera. One young woman attending college in the US was the exception. Stressing the importance of “a room of one’s own,” she performed the conception of Virginia Woolf’s baby. Ironically, her stake in self-expression was resistant in large part to self-censoring her identity in the U.S. At her small Midwestern Christian college, homosexuality was a taboo that (she feared) could be punished with the loss of her scholarship and expulsion. She explained the love relationship she had cultivated with another closeted young woman living under similarly homophobic conditions. Their relations took place mainly online through email with the focus on imagining how to be in actual physical proximity. (No wonder she was conceptually prepared to contribute to *Baby*).

In Cuba I walked the streets of Havana and visited the art school with a translator who’d identified me as “a progressive North American.” Unlike the abundance of people at an art event in London choosing to decline, it was easy in Havana to pique strangers’ curiosity. The Cubans’ babies in particular bespoke free roaming imagination, and they conceived joy, the color spectrum, voice, song, nature, fantasy, and love (granted, they also chose Shakira, Jane Fonda, and Jennifer Lopez). Whereas in other cultural contexts I seemingly had to explain things ad nauseam to convince a minority to contribute, in Cuba the pleasure of my part in the process—and not the pain—was privileged (although I can’t claim to grasp all the subtexts of this generosity of expression).

I Want to Have Your Baby is video activism, performance document, interventionist practice, and conceptual art coming together, laboratory-fashion. It is the opinion poll turned topsyturvy. *Baby* remembers and resounds the primacy of the imagination in acts of resistance.