

Performance Schedule

Mr. Akita

Thursday, April 13 7 p.m.

Friday, April 14 6 p.m.

Saturday, April 15 3 p.m.

Performances run 45 minutes.

Tickets available at bampfa.org.

\$10 General admission

\$8 BAMPFA members, UC Berkeley students, UC Berkeley faculty/staff, non-UC Berkeley students, 65+, disabled persons, 18 & under

Online service fees apply.
Seating is limited.

Biographies

Asher Hartman lives and works in Los Angeles. He received a bachelor of arts in theater from the University of California, Los Angeles, and a master of fine arts in studio art from the California Institute of the Arts. Hartman's work has been exhibited and performed at institutions in Los Angeles including Machine Project, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Hammer Museum, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), and Hauser Wirth & Schimmel; and at Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, Saratoga Springs, New York; Southern Exposure, San Francisco; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and Hayward Gallery, London.

Cliff Hengst lives and works in San Francisco. He received a bachelor of arts from the San Francisco Art Institute. Hengst's drawings, paintings, and performances have been exhibited at institutions in San Francisco including San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Ratio 3, Jack Hanley Gallery, and Gallery 16; at Machine Project and Hauser Wirth & Schimmel, both in Los Angeles; and at Marella Arte, Milan, Italy.



FRONT

Cliff Hengst in *Mr. Akita* by Asher Hartman.
Emily Joyce: *Sun Burn (Split) 1*, 2012; acrylic screenprint on Fabriano paper mounted on panel; 54 x 54 in.; courtesy of the artist and Inman Gallery, Houston.

INSIDE

Cliff Hengst in *Mr. Akita* by Asher Hartman.
Photo: Ian Byers-Gamber.

ASHER HARTMAN AND CLIFF HENGST / MATRIX 264 IS ORGANIZED BY LAUREN R. O'CONNELL, FORMER CURATORIAL ASSOCIATE AT BAMPFA. *MR. AKITA* WAS ORIGINALLY PRODUCED BY MACHINE PROJECT AND COMMISSIONED BY TANG TEACHING MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY IN SARATOGA SPRINGS, NEW YORK. THE MATRIX PROGRAM IS MADE POSSIBLE BY A GENEROUS ENDOWMENT GIFT FROM PHYLLIS C. WATTIS AND THE CONTINUED SUPPORT OF THE BAMPFA TRUSTEES. ADDITIONAL SUPPORT IS PROVIDED BY CONNECT ART INTERNATIONAL.



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Asher Hartman and Cliff Hengst

MATRIX 264 APRIL 12–16, 2017

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY ART MUSEUM & PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE

This collaborative MATRIX project brings together the multifarious practices of two California artists, Asher Hartman (b. 1959) and Cliff Hengst (b. 1962). Hartman, based in Los Angeles, writes and directs plays that explore personal and emotional histories, comically revealing latent discontent with Western culture. He also performs psychic readings for people and, surprisingly, buildings, as he did at the landmark 1909 Craftsman-style Gamble house in Pasadena, where he interpreted paranormal energies of past occupants for a series of projects that explored the house's architecture and history. He often invokes this clairvoyance (clear feeling) when writing, conceiving of each play in response to a specific site or actor. Hartman wrote the play presented in **MATRIX 264** for Hengst, taking into consideration the actor's practice as a painter, performer, and comic, as well as his "ability to feel very deeply, to be tough, to be frank, and forceful."* Hartman's productions are acted out in unexpected venues such as a luxury private residence, a dark hallway with connecting rooms, or a museum gallery. This unique approach that shifts away from the stage brings the actors and audience into close proximity, implicating the viewers in his idiosyncratic narratives.

Hengst, based in San Francisco, creates performances, drawings, and paintings that divulge a variety of life lessons through unorthodox means such as a bad drug trip, a lounge singer's reflections, and facetious one-liners. A recent series of text paintings, for example, includes wry lines such as, "I've been poor and I've been rich and believe me rich is better." Although often characterized by humor, Hengst's work can also assume more serious tones, as in his 2009 series *Paintouts*, in which photographs from newspaper clippings of protesters are almost completely blacked out, leaving only the demonstrators' signs and their sometimes opposing messages: "Young, Queer, and Proud," "Jesus or Hell," "No medication = Death." Hengst's work conveys vulnerability, along with a sense of longing, that relates to his past growing up as a closeted gay youth in a strict religious community in Southern California, and later leaving to attend art school in San Francisco, where he came out within a community dealing with the AIDS crisis. Hengst's performances are intimate engagements with the audience involving comedy, song, and even at times a warm embrace, allowing them to share in his highly personal repertoire. With an invitation from Machine Project to create a new work in 2015, Hartman and Hengst collaborated on the darkly humorous monologue titled *Mr. Akita*.

MATRIX 264 presents *Mr. Akita*, a satire about life, sex, art, masculinity, ego, expectations, failure, disillusionment, and the sublime, written and directed by Hartman and performed by Hengst. In this one-man performance, a nameless, middle-aged man with a mischievous and comedic temperament reminisces about his past, from youth to adulthood. The protagonist shifts among numerous personas and voices, as the first sentences of the play explain: "The man will be a Borscht Belt comedian, de Kooning, a watery ghost, a painting, Christ/Jack Nicholson. All lines are his." A large painting, *Sun Burn (Split) 1* by Emily Joyce, with a bright white sunburst radiating from its center, hangs across the gallery; the painting assumes the role of an interlocutor. As Hengst's character encounters the Op art painting, he engages it in an abstract conversation about art and class that leads him down a rabbit hole of memories, specifically about a convoluted relationship with his art school professor Mr. Akita.



As the name suggests, Mr. Akita's physical attributes are those of a dog (Akita is a Japanese dog breed), while his attitude and voice evoke the great Modernist painters—in particular Willem de Kooning, with his Dutch-American accent. In one scene, Hengst, embodying Mr. Akita, runs back and forth panting like a dog and rants about leaving art behind—an act of surrendering to the pressures and fear of failure. The protagonist moves between his own story and that of Mr. Akita as he recounts his quest for approval as an artist and affirmation of his masculinity. In the erratic narrative, teacher and student metaphorically devour each other—the teacher using the student to promote his own interests and the student exhausting the teacher with the expectation of inheriting all of his knowledge. In the end, neither completely receives what he desires. With one last plea for validation and answers to his existential reverie, the artist turns to the painting and says, "I adore you, painting! You're better than life. You're an imitation of it!" The painting elusively retorts, "Viewer, you can never know," leaving the protagonist with his need and desire set adrift in the interpretations of his own memories.

—Lauren R. O'Connell

* Asher Hartman, email message to the author, February 1, 2017.