



FRYE  
ART MUSEUM

Cherdonna Shinatra **DITCH**

January 26–April 28, 2019

Seattle-based dance artist Jody Kuehner skewers social and cultural norms of gender and sexuality through her persona and alter ego Cherdonna Shinatra. Combining contemporary dance, drag, clowning, and the lineages of feminist and queer performance, Cherdonna defies categorization in order to dismantle the patriarchy and seek more liberated ways of being. *DITCH* marks Kuehner's most complex and demanding production to date, taking the form of an immersive installation that includes daily performances by Cherdonna and members of her dance company, DONNA. Over the course of eighty performances, Cherdonna—clad in an outfit reminiscent of Pierrot the clown—and her six companions will grapple with the dismal state of the world by undertaking her greatest challenge yet: making every single person happy.

*DITCH* shines a light on Cherdonna's varied expressions of femininity and complex personality, contrasting her charisma and constant need to please with her ceaseless feelings of total fear and existential dread. What happens when she can't make everyone happy in the face of an oppressive existence? Is it better to stick it out or end it all? What about when she lets herself cross over into a state of abandon and resignation?

A wildly colorful, multisensory environment, the installation purposefully rejects the traditionally "neutral" white-walled gallery. Acknowledging the museum as a space historically dominated by men, *DITCH* is instead a matriarchal domain, presided over by MomDonna, a larger-than-life disembodied sculpture in a state of ruin that births the performers each day. The exhibition title not only riffs on a homophobic and misogynistic slur (a term that has been reclaimed by lesbians as an empowering identity maker). It also points to the cultural, political, and emotional holes in which we find ourselves as a society while simultaneously calling on us to ditch the very forces that degrade and marginalize people. To that end, Kuehner strives to carve out a space within the institution—physically and psychologically—for femme, gender nonconforming, and queer folx. Seeking to counteract the drudgery and turmoil of modern life, this exhibition sees Cherdonna and her dancers unapologetically inhabiting their femme selves, indulging conceptually, abstractly, and poetically in a quest for retribution and visibility in this trash fire of a world.

## Daily Performance Schedule During Exhibition

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**Tuesdays** 11:30 am  
**Wednesdays** 2 pm  
**Thursdays** 5 pm  
**Fridays** 11:30 am  
**Saturdays/Sundays** 2 pm

Frye Galleries

*Performances are approximately one hour*

**Jody Kuehner** (American, b. 1979, Fort Collins, Colorado) is a Seattle-based dance artist, choreographer and director. She is a 2017 Artist Trust Fellowship recipient, 2017 Henry Art Gallery Artist in Residence, 2015 Stranger Genius Award winner, and was recently awarded funding by the New England Foundation for the Arts' National Dance Project for *one great, bright, brittle alltogetherness*.

**DONNA** is a contemporary dance company formed in 2018 and led by Jody Kuehner (aka Cherdonna Shinatra) featuring dance artists Allison Burke, Jenna Eady, Carlin Kramer, Alyza DelPan-Monley, Julia Sloane, and Katie Wyeth. They are joined by company dramaturg Maggie Rogers, rehearsal assistant Erin McCarthy, costume designers Danial Hellman and Jordan Christianson, graphic designer Greg Newcomb, sound designer Matt Staritt, and company manager Sara Jinks.



Cherdonna Shinatra. Design: Greg Newcomb. Photo: Lou Daprile

## Start All Over Again

Jody Kuehner in conversation with Maggie Rogers

**Maggie Rogers:** *DITCH* is the formal debut of your new dance company, DONNA. However, many know you strictly as Cherdonna Shinatra, a solo performer. Who is Cherdonna to you?

**Jody Kuehner:** Cherdonna is an art project. She is a persona I have developed over the last ten years to experiment within performance. I'm a dancer by trade but have cultivated her to add aesthetic and environmental layers to movement and choreography. Cherdonna is very much a vehicle for me to express myself through form and melding clowning with contemporary dance.

**MR:** What was the impetus for forming DONNA?

**JK:** During *Kissing Like Babies*, my show at On the Boards in 2017, I hired a group of dancers to perform alongside me. We had such a great time and built an incredible relationship. After the show closed, I was interested in continuing to work with them. They actually approached me first as a group and said, "So we're going to do more, and we need a company name." They really pushed for it in this beautiful way where it was made clear that "You're not getting rid of us. We believe in this. We want to do more, and we'll do whatever to make that happen."

So with *DITCH*, I decided that I wanted to keep working with an ensemble, and from there we took the leap and made a company. I'm really excited about the new dimensions that working in a group format will add to Cherdonna. Also, by having our group be a bona fide dance company, it allows all the dancers to have a real investment and sense of agency in contributing to the evolution of the work.

**MR:** After DONNA was formed, you immediately went into rehearsals for *DITCH*. What was the impetus for this piece, and how has the company built the work together?

**JK:** It's been about a three-year process. I am a queer woman and the dancers in DONNA are queer, so identity as a theme has been present from the start. Originally, the root inspiration for the work came from wanting to pull from the history of lesbian culture—both Seattle's own history and the nation's—specifically the lesbian separatist movement, which peaked in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I was captivated by the story of one of the lesbian separatist groups in particular, the Van Dykes. They hit the road in a van, thus their name, traveling around the country in search of a female utopia sans men. They were seeking radical empowerment and a different way of living completely outside the constraints of the patriarchy and heterosexuality.

This idea of what a utopian society would look like today became the central question for the work. At the same time, the present feels more like a dystopia every day, so the possibility of building or finding utopia seems to be getting further and further away, nearly impossible at this point.

As an artist seeing the world in a state of constant, escalating crisis—what's happening with immigration and the US-Mexico border, the current political climate in general—there is a wave of doubt that comes over me when I start thinking, "What does it matter? Is art important? Maybe I should quit and be a social worker. I should go down to the border and camp out there."

**MR:** It's so funny you say that, as I completely relate to that sentiment as a fellow artist. Recently I've been on a lawyer kick where I keep telling myself, "I'm fucking going to law school, I need to help people," even though I know that isn't my path and not the best use of my skills.

**JK:** Yeah! That's the hard thing, because I do believe there is a calling for people, and it's connected to what you're drawn to and what you're good at. And even if I wanted to be a social worker, I know I'm not good at that kind of schooling or that kind of learning. I'm a dancer, and I use my body. This quickly jumped to this idea of "Okay, if I'm not going to be a social worker or a lawyer, then I'm Cherdonna . . ."

**MR:** And how does Cherdonna help people?

**JK:** Well, Cherdonna makes people happy! She brings joy, and she's a clown. *DITCH* is going to be a space for her to go in and try to fight the doom and gloom by making everybody happy. Which, again, is an impossible task. There's a sort of tragedy and beauty in this Sisyphean task.

That is the framework of the exhibit, wanting Cherdonna and her companions to make people happy and the conflict coming from butting up against the impossibility of it. As you can imagine, there's lots of trial and error.

**MR:** Do you think you would've made a show like this before the 2016 presidential election?

**JK:** You know, maybe not.

**MR:** Yeah, it's something I think about a lot. What art would we have been making if Hillary had been elected? Having a troll in office makes the context of everything feel dramatically shifted.

**JK:** I think I'm very much that liberal white woman who's been brought up to do "the right thing," but also I don't want to be one of the bad, unaware, liberal white feminists. It feels more extreme now, my responsibility to do more. And then, of course, we come back to that question, when I think, "Well, is making art the right thing? Maybe I can do something more drastic? But then, here I am." So there's this real cyclical nature to the conversation.

That uncertainty and its cyclicity feed directly into the piece, into this question of "Does it matter or doesn't it?" And of course I hope it does, because making art is what I'm good at, so I'm like, "Dear God, I hope it's helpful."

**MR:** Help and comfort have endless forms. Clowning has been a tool used for centuries to bring joy and insight to the masses. How does clowning come through in this performance?

**JK:** With *DITCH* I am bringing Cherdonna's clownlike nature to the fore, specifically the role of the more traditional old-world, European clown, as a figure who tries to make things better and provide relief. That's the hope, that Cherdonna gets in with people via comedy and fun and then can lead them into a more thoughtful place where people can walk away being like "Oh, I thought this was supposed to just be fun, but actually that work made me think about all these other things too."

**MR:** How does the title *DITCH* come into play?

**JK:** "Ditch" is another word for "dyke," which stood for the female genitalia in lesbian separatist culture. In the installation at the Frye, we have a massive disembodied sculpture in the gallery—a

matriarchal figure that we're calling "MomDonna." We're seeing her as this ancient ruin in the space. A relic of all the struggles of the women who have come before us. Also, her pussy is our entrance and exit, so we start each performance by emerging through the "ditch."

And as the show has morphed over time, so has the title. Whereas now the meaning of "ditch" has grown to encompass the idea of being stuck and ditching the things or beliefs you do not need.

**MR:** Could you tell me more about MomDonna?

**JK:** In all of my work there is an exploration of existential crisis and deciphering the meaning of life. The figure of MomDonna is a ruin of human experience that emits an oracle's all-knowing sense in the space. Not only is she evidence of the never-ending cyclical nature of threadbare human behavior; she is a literal representation of how tiny humans are compared to the expansiveness of the universe.

**MR:** You talked a little bit about the figure of the old-world clown, so where does your interest in clowns come from? Do you identify as a clown?

**JK:** I do. I think I do. *[Laughs]* And, you know, growing up, I didn't have a strong interest in clowns. But there's a deep lineage of clowning as a form in theater and dance. Specifically, the nonverbal-ness of clowning that is related to dance and body work. As a movement artist, I've always been interested in comedy and being able to have emotion be communicated through body and posturing, using the face and various limbs rather than using words.

Clowning and drag also have many similarities. On the one hand, with drag there's a link to emphasizing the features on the face as in clowning. I mean, clowning is doing it maybe in a more grotesque way, whereas drag is doing it for beauty, but then there's always been that other side of drag, the more "art drag," the more grotesque ways of exaggerating certain facial and bodily features. So it's all tied in, since Cherdonna has always been part-clown and part-drag queen, but not necessarily in the ways people expect.

On the other hand, in terms of clowning, Cherdonna as a character deals with problems by going to the simplest solution, as in "I need to make everybody happy, so I'm a clown." Like that's just what you do—it's obvious to her. And that's where Cherdonna's characteristic childlike naïveté comes out. Though of course, through the work, it all gets complicated, since Cherdonna is just as prone to naïveté as she is to existential crises.

**MR:** Is there anything you want the people to know, or things you're super excited for during the process?

**JK:** I'm just excited about the number of performances. So we'll do six days a week for the three months, totaling eighty shows, for around an hour per day. It is such a gift that the Frye is allowing us this run time. It is a very rare opportunity to be able to dance in eighty shows, which are totally free of charge, for such a broad audience.

But each show will be different! Well, slightly different. The framework of the performance will be set in advance, but there will be moments of openness and room for improvisation within the work so that we can engage with the audience and then build on that openness as the performances go on.



**MR:** So you could come to a show twice and it could be different each time?

**JK:** Not wildly different. There will be moments of audience interaction that will be based on who's in the room. For example, if there are only two audience members versus fifty, the show will vary.

At the same time, we've been thinking a lot about consent and what it means to approach and interact with audience members and have them feel safe at the same time. It's about building trust, and it also goes both ways, as sometimes there are audience members who want to interact with us in ways that might be inappropriate. Especially given the intimacy of the gallery setting, the hierarchy or divide between the audience and performers doesn't function or exist like it would in a more traditional theater environment.

**MR:** The white gallery space is what audiences expect to see when they enter a museum setting. How is DONNA turning this on its head?

**JK:** I have a conscious habit of completely transforming every space Cherdonna performs in—it is a rebellion to challenge institutions in how they frame work.

The white gallery is formal, and its presence has a sterile, stark tone to it. *DITCH's* space will disarm people and bring out more of a childlike view on Cherdonna's world. When audiences enter the gallery, it will be like jumping into Candyland.

I use the space the same way I use Cherdonna. She comes off as comedic and bright, but there is a deeper tone under the surface. The room is a physical representation of her mind: exciting, overwhelming, over the line, and slightly unsettling.

*Interview conducted in November 2018.*

**Maggie Rogers** is a Seattle-based director, dramaturg, sound designer, and fat activist who proudly hails from Louisville, Kentucky. She is the Resident Dramaturg for Cherdonna Shinatra's company DONNA, the Literary Manager and Resident Dramaturg at Washington Ensemble Theatre, and a company member of The Horse in Motion. She has worked with Cherdonna on *Cherdonna's Doll's House*, *Kissing Like Babies*, and *DITCH*. Her essay "All Sizes Fit All" was published in *American Theatre* magazine in March 2018.



**Cover and poster images:** Courtesy of the artist. Design: Greg Newcomb. Photo: Juji Lee.

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