

Celebrating 30 Years, CounterPulse Continues to Shine in the Tenderloin

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CounterPulse in non-pandemic times. (*Scott Fin*)

In 1991, three friends—Keith Hennessey, Michael “Med-O” Whitson, and Todd Eugene—co-founded an underground performance venue on Divisadero Street known as 848 Community Space. A hub for body-based art and activism, including dance, pagan sex rituals, and performance art, 848 was a place where queer and sex-positive San Francisco could gather, perform, and create among allies. Born during a time when AIDS was still a full-blown public health crisis—a portent of pandemics to come—848 provided a safe haven of radical access and acceptance to its artists and audiences alike.

“One of the powerful aspects of 848 was that people lived there,” recalls Rick Darnell, CounterPulse’s current Associate Director of Neighborhood Arts, who performed at 848 in the early years with his own dance company—the High Risk Group. “People waking, making art, sleeping, and loving there really blessed the space...truly epic, authentic, vision-grade stuff.”

Now, 30 years, three spaces, and a name change later, CounterPulse may have lost some of its original outsider shine, but it’s gained an expansive constellation of resident artists, fiscal sponsees and co-presenters whose points of inquiry remain both the body and transformative

experiences. Now located in the heart of the Tenderloin's Compton's Transgender Cultural District, CounterPulse continues to expand its vision even as COVID-19 has contracted its in-person programming.



Beyond Gravity and Performing Diaspora performer Chibueze Crouch on the streets of the Tenderloin.
(courtesy of CounterPulse)

While planning any season comes with myriad challenges, planning an anniversary season in the middle of a global pandemic is definitely next-level hard. Hedging their bets, CounterPulse—like many other performing arts companies around the Bay—released their Spring season schedule just weeks ago, mostly without set dates. This precaution, Artistic and Executive Director Julie Phelps points out, was prescient, as several announced presentations, including their Spring Festival, have already been quietly withdrawn and pushed to the fall.

“Postponement has become a whole new feature of programming, and it feels less like ‘postponed’ and more like we’re ‘ongoing trying to find a place to situate this thing that we’re going to do,’” Phelps says. “When they made the announcement about the potential that the entire Bay Area would be vaccinated potentially as soon as August... I don’t know if we can have hope in that...or how we can expect that to change audience behavior, or what staff will feel comfortable with.” (Indeed, just days after we spoke, CounterPulse announced that this month’s Gravity Dance performance, scheduled as a virtual presentation, had also been postponed.)



Beyond Gravity performer and founder of Topsy-Turvy Queer Circus India Sky Davis in 'Wavelength.'
(Kali Ma Julien)

One performance that's still scheduled to go on as planned—though the granular details of the presentation format are in ongoing conversation—is April's Combustible residency, with StratoFyzika and Pseuda. Rescheduled from 2020, this double bill features two companies devising at the intersections of dance and technology. For their piece *Human/ID*, Europe's StratoFyzika draws inspiration from the laws of physics and the inner workings of the human mind, and the Bay Area's Pseuda presents work combining the immersive qualities of an installation piece with the isolating effects of screens and “rapidly evolving” technologies. The aspect of isolation is leavened somewhat, creator Nicholas Navarro adds, by the evolving realization that in the pandemic, virtual connection also provides “beauty and importance and power...in terms of visibility, representation, community and mobilizing people.”



Pseuda rehearsal on CounterPulse mainstage with Kim Ip and Taurin Barrera. (*Nicholas Navarro*)

“The pandemic started out as a speed bump in our path to enjoying in-person dance rehearsals and viewing our process through the lens of IRL rehearsal,” Navarro’s collaborator and choreographer Kim Ip reflects. “(But) once Nick and I realized our piece pertains to the social dilemma of socializing on screens, we understood that rehearsing online was the safest and most apropos—to the concept—option.” Now meeting and filming in small groups at CounterPulse in anticipation of their presentation, they look forward to sharing the results.

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The evolving role of technology has also manifested in CounterPulse’s neighborhood arts programming facilitated by Darnell, though with its own unique set of challenges. Designed to engage directly with the Tenderloin neighborhood—of which Darnell is a resident—TenderArts has included block parties, mural painting, workshops, skill-shares, open mics and other in-person performance opportunities. By partnering with community-based service organizations and inviting SRO residents and other Tenderloin-dwellers to participate in creative work, TenderArts had grown into a highly visible component of the CounterPulse calendar.

“The Tenderloin has really allowed CounterPulse to stretch our social justice muscle in ways that are authentic, loving, and community-centered,” Darnell asserts. Some of that has been through computer donations to low-income SRO residents in the neighborhood, and offering stipends to participants for upcoming workshops. But, Darnell readily admits, it’s impossible to keep the engagement with his neighborhood with the same frequency virtually as in-person.

“It’s actually painful to not be engaged in activities at the level of we were at...We’ll get back to the level of engagement we once enjoyed in about another year, I think.”



TenderArts workshop at CounterPulse on planting seedlings hosted by Associate Director of Neighborhood Arts, Rick Darnell. *(courtesy of CounterPulse)*

Despite the challenges, an event currently in the works is TenderFest (scheduled for March 11), a large-scale collaboration with Larkin Street Youth Services, the Tenderloin Museum and Skywatchers, a Tenderloin-based performance company. Focused on devised works and own voices, Skywatchers has performed several times at CounterPulse, and their shared commitments to the Tenderloin arts scene makes them ideal collaborators. In fact, Malia Byrne, Skywatchers’ Associate co-Artistic Director, mentions, the idea for TenderFest happened early on in the pandemic: a conversation between arts organizations working together to support each other and share their creative resources.

“Art is *thriving* in the Tenderloin,” emphasizes Byrne. “and...coming together and sharing is what provides abundance. That’s something that Skywatchers’ work really centers around and...that is sort of what we’re sort of centralizing this event around.” By foregrounding a creative response to the pandemic year, Skywatchers’ festival offering will be video-oriented, with clips of past works and footage of Zoom rehearsals—an inquiry and a document of a unique time in history.



Lawanna Bracy, Joel Yates, and Shavonne Allen in Skywatchers' 'Came Here to Live' at CounterPulse (2019). (Dierdre Visser)

While working remotely has been a much slower process than creating together in a room might be, according to Skywatchers ensemble member Shavonne Allen, it’s still been a generative one. Through facilitated two-hour Zoom meetings where ideas are brainstormed and workshopped, and time spent alone developing the ideas into moments of movement, music, and spoken text, Skywatchers continues to create together from a physical—but not a social—distance.

Sometimes the work even takes the form of visual art, such as the ongoing Opulence project, a collaborative series of portraits of Tenderloin residents channeling their inner power, which will hopefully live in the kiosks along Market Street sometime in the next year.

“The idea is to envision yourself as your highest self,” explains Allen. “Something that you want to own and possess something within you. The idea is to claim the heroes that we see in our community and to post them up so that we can have an opportunity to see each other. And also for the rest of the city, our neighbors, to see us...in a different light.”

By helping to amplify that light, CounterPulse continues to be a safe haven in a dark time, while building towards a still-emergent future.



Watch for CounterPulse’s 30-year Anniversary programming all year [here](#).