

# Don't Make Me Over

By Sean Burns

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I've read Jenkin van Zyl's work described as freaky, fantastical and dystopian, but I want to put all that language — the words we use to gauge how something other lands in an increasingly puritanical and conservative society — to one side for a moment.

Instead, I want to begin by considering the construction of van Zyl's work in relation to historical precedents in queer filmmaking and performance from the 1960s and '70s. He belongs to a lineage of artists that includes filmmakers like Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith and John Waters, as well as theatrical troupes such as Bloopers, the Cockettes and Hot Peaches — practitioners who often created work using the people and materials immediately around them.

Smith and Anger dredged the queer underground experience, producing low-budget, high-impact, stylised work that often delved into the darker corners of the psyche. Waters, on the other hand, revelled in — and ultimately marketed — the aesthetics and lifestyle of bad taste. Meanwhile, Bloopers, the Cockettes and Hot Peaches confronted audiences with an unabashed campiness that defied the social mores of their time. All of them enlisted friends to cavort, posture, copulate or canter across screen and stage.

In a way, van Zyl's proposition consolidates the politics of community and identity explored by these artists — a stance that seems to ask: where do we stand now in relation to these once-transgressive attitudes? Across all these examples, to different ends, the body becomes material — and it is this idea that I see as central to van Zyl's project. He is interested in what happens to the body when capital intervenes, shaping both our understanding of ourselves and our aspirations.

I see live performance as central to this practice, too, and van Zyl's work similarly shares affinities with 1990s body artists such as Ron Athey and Franko B, as well as video artists like Matthew Barney and Ryan Trecartin. Whereas Athey and Franko B sought, in some way, to exorcise the physical body through an almost religious martyrdom, van Zyl seems to suggest that catharsis and bloodletting — whether for the performer or the audience — are no longer options. We're trapped in a feedback loop of our own creation, scrambling around for a way out.

The through-lines here are an economy of means (lo-fi) — or the performative aesthetic thereof — the employment of friends or those around, and the extrapolation of queer subjectivity as a porous material that isn't intrinsically good or moral. Van Zyl also engages with spectacle — a trait shared by Athey and Franko B. Both performers drew more from club culture than traditional theatre, with the core spectacle emerging from the transgression of the private or specialised into the realm of public consumption (i.e., contemporary art). Genesis P-Orridge and Throbbing Gristle also employed this tactic.

Van Zyl's new film, *Lost Property* (2025), is one such evocation of an endlessly liminal and joyless realm, where characters gather to perform repetitive activities towards uncertain ends. It departs from a central logic — here, the setting is a fictional bureaucratic establishment in which the protagonists are not merely trying to recover wallets or keys, but searching for selves worn thin by desire, performance and recursion. Through repetitive enactment, the performance of the self becomes a burden. References to cinematic tropes are omnipresent, with actions unfolding on abandoned film sets and within deliberately constructed environments.

Costume is pronounced: characters don LED red light therapy masks, employ snake-oil techniques for reversing ageing or wear wrinkled prosthetic masks reminiscent of those used in the 1990 film adaptation of Roald Dahl's *The Witches* (1983) — it's one extreme or the other. Garments range from loose office drag (shirts, ties, blazers

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and so on) to strappy club tops and leotards, to full gowns.

Unlike Trecartin's characters, who babble relentlessly, the lack of discernible dialogue in van Zyl's film imparts an almost animalistic quality to its characters. However, their labour feels less instinctual and more procedural or ritualistic than that might suggest.

At one point, a figure wearing a frilly bonnet, negligee and an alien-like mask with sharp teeth dismantles a cake resembling their doppelganger, then casts the iced sponge into the air to the sound of Dionne Warwick's 1962 single "Don't Make Me Over", which includes the lyrics "accept me for what I am". The refrain feels prophetic, prompting me to reflect on the many ways in which the pursuit of a certain version of ourselves within a capitalist paradigm — where anything can be cake — demands endless self-reflection and self-measurement, shaped by diets, creams, clothes and influences that reduce self-improvement and self-acceptance to mere shorthand for shopping. Here, the consumption is literal.

In another scene, a figure in a dark bob wig, toad-like mask and corporate clobber — covered in red "lost property" labels — staggers through the backlot before cowering in a corner beside a door and pissing onto the concrete. It all seems too much: to be fashionable, punctual, professional and still have to attend to involuntary bodily functions.

Then, an intertitle reading "Auditioning Today" punctuates the scene, accompanied by the harrowing, familiar sound of an iPhone alarm. Van Zyl shows no deference to existing notions of the self, instead treating them as frontiers to be played with — asking: how do we stretch ourselves to fit in? It's a relentless race to keep up within a rigged system designed solely to make you spend. Are you young enough? Cool enough? Thin enough?

To call the film a critique of capitalism would be too easy; it is neither empathetic nor moralising. Instead, it circles a condition — its ridiculousness loses its sting once you realise those LED masks are what people wear every day. Likewise, bureaucratic establishments and institutions compel us to jump through endless hoops that ultimately feel performative, serving only themselves.

The characters in *Lost Property* are concentrations of us; perhaps they're simply more honest in their monstrosity. In terms of form, it leans towards the longer side with its 47-minute duration, like a short feature film. As I watched, I thought about the cult film *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), which, when shown on the big screen, created a makeshift environment for queer people to come together.

Whereas modern cinema often puts forward a closed tautology — a narrative that has usually been work-shopped by committee — I see van Zyl's films as playful and limitless exercises in finding out. So, what's left at the end of the day in the proverbial lost property bin? We've seen the scenes around the conveyor belt; we've watched the characters clatter.

Van Zyl once told the *RA Magazine* that art is "the best excuse for bad behaviour", so I'm not convinced his work aims to correct reality. Did Smith or Waters? No — they were drawing from and shaping a different canon. I see van Zyl's work as connected — in sensibility and methodology — to this special lineage of queer practitioners and shit-stirrers who organised their friends around vivid ideas and caused a scene.