



Karl Erickson

WE CAN BE TRANSCENDENT APES





CONTRIBUTORS

Blair Murphy is a curator and writer based in Brooklyn, NY. She was a 2014-2015 Helena Rubinstein Curatorial Fellow of the Whitney Independent Study Program and is currently a partner at Field Projects. She holds a BFA from Maryland Institute College of Art and an MA from Georgetown University.

Esther Ruiz received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Studio Art from Rhodes College in 2011. Her work has shown nationally and internationally at galleries including New Release Gallery, Field Projects, Platform Baltimore, Vox

Populi, Fridman Gallery, Regina Rex, and The American Center for Physics. Born in Houston, Texas, she currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. You can see her work at www.estherruiz.com.

Ish Klein is the author, most recently, of *Consolation and Mirth*, a book of poetry.

Greg Purcell is the author of *The Fundamentals*, also poetry, as well as several science fiction stories.

RESOLUTION

by Blair Murphy

"I love making New Year's resolutions. Yes, January 1 might be an arbitrary date, but I think it's good that we all have a cue to ask ourselves, 'What would I like to change about my life? How could it be better than before?'"

—Gretchen Rubin, 'Happiness Expert'
and author of *Better than Before*

You wake up on January 1st. It's possible that you're hungover, recovering from a socially-encouraged night of year-end overindulgence, the final in a string of similar nights stretching back to late November. After a period of socially-promoted excess, it's time to switch gears. January 1, the beginning of the new year, provides the ideal moment to turn over a new leaf. As with the indulgence of the celebratory season that preceded it, the resolution-making that accompanies the new year is a communal affair. It's a yearly exercise, especially encouraged by companies with "transformational" goods to sell. Want to start the year off right? Try a juice cleanse, get a gym membership, join Weight Watchers, buy an exercise machine, use that new app to finally quit smoking. With only a few small payments, you can be healthier, happier, more attractive. You can be better.

The self-improvement barrage promises better living through goal-setting, self-help books, and a slew of food and exercise products. The most common resolutions are focused on the self, more specifically the body: eat better, exercise more, quit smoking, drink less. Relatively modest in scope and decidedly self-centered, the cliché resolution routine hardly seems transcendent. It's easy to mock this annual cycle, the celebration, followed by asceticism, the yearly ritual of overabundance followed by guilt. But what lies beneath this fascination with self-improvement, this perennial and perpetual search for a better version of ourselves?

Karl Erickson's *We Could Be Transcendent Apes* presents an alternate narrative of transformation, an otherworldly and epic journey, undertaken by an alien being who travels across the universe and around the world. The story's protagonist battles programming instilled in him by powerful overlords. His is a spiritual journey, driven by a desire for enlightenment, transcendence, and, ultimately, for love. The ape is seeking self-improvement, but in service to a greater goal. He is seeking, ultimately, to change his relationship with the world around him, by transcending his own deeply embedded habits and sense of self. But even the grand ambitions of Erickson's transcendent ape create a perpetual cycle rather than a triumphant linear narrative. Presented as a perpetual loop, on multiple screens, Erickson's videos don't provide an ending, much less evidence of a triumphant conclusion. Our hero dances, meditates, discovers love, undertakes a spiritual quest. And then he does it all again.

We Could Be Transcendent Apes displays an ambivalence towards our culture of perpetual self-improvement, presenting the ape's journey as both humorous and tragic. Outstripping our familiar New Year's resolutions, he strives for enlightenment, not mere improvement. The ape's goals may seem wildly out of reach, but he can't stop striving towards them. He's trapped in a loop of near-transcendence, on a journey that might be both futile and necessary.

KARL ERICKSON

in conversation with

ESTHER RUIZ

Esther Ruiz sat down with Karl Erickson to discuss what he's been working on as Field Projects' resident artist this past year, *We Could Be Transcendent Apes*, music and spirituality.

Esther Ruiz: What have been your major influences on this new body of work you are showing at Field Projects?

Karl Erickson: The videos have lots of referents, especially the texts that serve in the place of more normal text in movie trailers and title sequences. These texts are a mixture of self-generated aphorisms, commonplace sayings and quotes from visionary thinkers, all cut up and more or less randomly assembled.

In addition to the film *Robot Monster* from 1953 and the party flyers (and the music!), the main influences would be Harry Smith's short animated films, flicker films, the title sequence for "Alien," raw electric gospel music, and the myth of short attention spans.

ER: Do you consider your video pieces extensions of the original film?

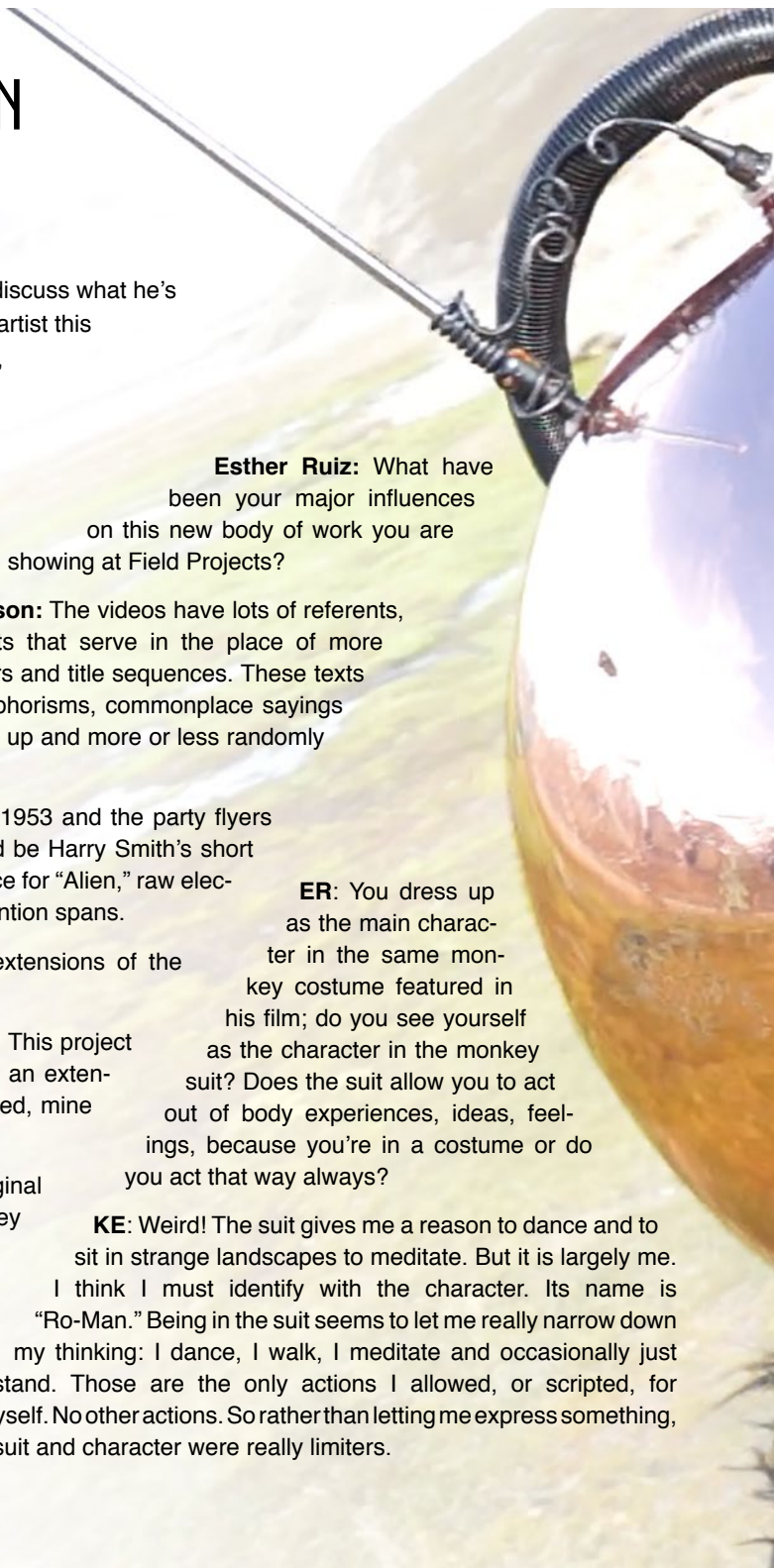
KE: The film is certainly a jumping off point. This project is more a "what if?" adventure, rather than an extension. If the events in the original film occurred, mine couldn't, and vice versa.


ER: Do you think about what the original producer would think of your films? Are they still alive?

KE: Phil Tucker, the filmmaker, died in 1985. He was kind of a hack, but made several burlesque films and edited some episodes of "Wonder Woman." I don't think he would like it: it is too Apollonian.

ER: You dress up as the main character in the same monkey costume featured in his film; do you see yourself as the character in the monkey suit? Does the suit allow you to act out of body experiences, ideas, feelings, because you're in a costume or do you act that way always?

KE: Weird! The suit gives me a reason to dance and to sit in strange landscapes to meditate. But it is largely me. I think I must identify with the character. Its name is "Ro-Man." Being in the suit seems to let me really narrow down my thinking: I dance, I walk, I meditate and occasionally just stand. Those are the only actions I allowed, or scripted, for myself. No other actions. So rather than letting me express something, the suit and character were really limiters.





Nothing is New / You are me / limitless serenity

ER: Interesting, so the suit sort of dictates your actions? Do you enjoy being in the suit?

KE: Well, the suit and helmet are what make the character. And for me, the character "Ro-Man" is hollowed out, bereft of purpose after deciding not to be part the genocide of humanity. It latches on to the slight hope of losing itself through dance and rave culture, following that to a higher level of being, which leads to a sort of meditative stasis.

But I don't particularly like to be in the suit: it is hard to see out of, it is hot and cumbersome and all of the usual issues with costumes. I like being the character though.

ER: Do you enjoy the filming or the post production more?

KE: Post-production. 10,000x more.

ER: How long do you typically spend making a short film?

KE: Well, I had the original idea for this in 2001. Over the years I sketched out ideas and played with text and scenes. I finally started shooting this in 2013 while in the Arctic. But I usually spend months rather than years.

ER: We talked a bit about techno and “rave” culture when we met. What role have these interests played in your practice?

KE: More than my practice, techno has really influenced my life, especially the more minimal forms. The layers of loops and cyclical evolution of the music is a strategy I use in nearly everything I make, whether it be process or a formal quality. Plus, the aesthetic: to be able to be urban, gritty and futuristic, polished, yet rusty means a lot. And dancing. The intense focus of the music, for me, shuts down all thought. In the 1990s when I was going to warehouse parties and raves, I could just move in repeated patterns.

And then I just love the aesthetic of more goofy rave culture (as opposed to techno, if you want to start delineating genres). Giant pants, day-glo, glow sticks, crazy Photoshop graphics. Oh the graphics! Plus, the mythology of dancing to change the world, partying as revolution. What about you?

ER: I’m totally on the same page as far as techno being a lifestyle in

some ways. I see dancing and ‘losing’ oneself in the music a kind of religious experience, much like the whirling Dervish of the Sufi path. It’s transcendent. This is also a recurring theme in your work, transcendence. Do you feel like you’ve transcended any particular states of thinking or being when you’ve finished a work? And, do you hope the viewer has transcended with you, or would you like the viewing experience to remain separate?

KE: Definitely while I am working, I feel outside of time and sometimes physicality. When I’m finished, I don’t know. I can feel cleaned out, which is good. I would like viewers to feel transformed after the experience my art, for sure. It couldn’t be the same experience as mine, but the hope is that the physicality of it, the colors and lights and the humor and all that goes in, resonates and gets the audience to feel at least a bit off kilter from the daily lives.



The gateway to the invisible must be visible /
No more future / No more past /

Then they can have a different perspective, actually be different than they were before.

ER: Where did you say you're from?

KE: Michigan originally, just outside of Detroit. Then I lived in Detroit for a long, pivotal while.

ER: Aha! Detroit! The home of techno! We called going to the DEMF festival every year our "pilgrimage"! Do you have any religious associations with music culture like I obviously do?

KE: Sure, yes. Dancing and music is a spiritual experience, and a lot of the music I like, secular and religious, are appeals to a higher state of being, from gospel to Spacemen 3 to Juan Atkins to shape-note singing. It is all a call, a desire to move beyond where we are at.

ER: What relationship do your collages have with the short film, if any?

KE: Both share the big themes, and sometimes aesthetic: spirituality, preparation, thoughtfulness. They each use repetition, humor, brevity. The film is much more specific though.

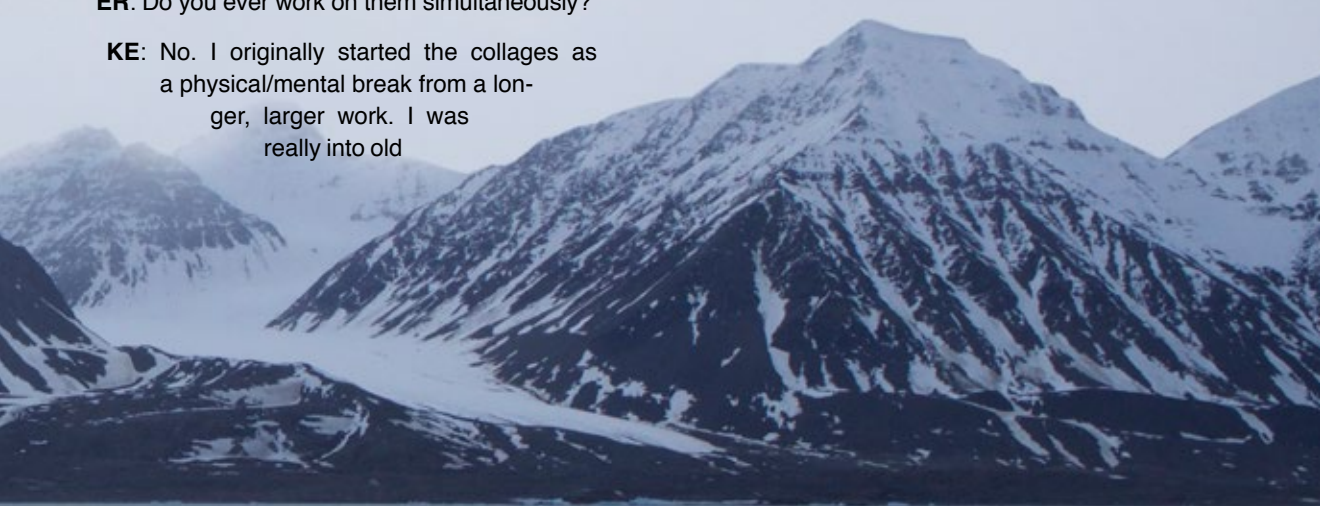
ER: Do you ever work on them simultaneously?

KE: No. I originally started the collages as a physical/mental break from a longer, larger work. I was really into old

LA punk flyers at the time, and I thought making self-help posters with the punk aesthetic would be a creative outlet while I also worked on the larger thing. I was just going to dash them off, photocopy them and be done. Of course, I immediately started making each collage into highly involved constructions that were about texture as much as the content and that took days to produce rather than hours. I am not good at working fast.

ER: Interesting that something you'd hope to be a break becomes another detailed process. But we can't really deny our natural tendencies in the studio I guess. Is there any part of your studio practice that is really quick and somewhat "thoughtless" for lack of a better word?

KE: Nope. Maybe just when I press "render" and get to watch the blue bar grow across the screen for a while. But some of the things, from drawing letters to cutting strips of paper to keyframing elaborate sequences in the videos are nearly thoughtless, and require a form of automation that is like losing oneself dancing.



Luminous perception / There is not even a question /
A transformation like no other /





THE PROBLEM ISN'T APEHOOD

A conversation with Karl Erickson,
Ish Klein and Greg Purcell

Ish Klein: Is transcendence digital?

Karl Erickson: Are friends electric?

No, I don't think it is digital, 1s and 0s. Technology is part of it though. So many creative and problem solving tools, so many ways to repurpose technology for different uses. It makes me think of John Whitney, one of the first abstract computer video artists, using an old anti-aircraft missile analog computing machine to plot his animations.

Greg Purcell: In her excellent novel, *Duplex*, Kathryn Davis writes, "Apes or human—we all made the same mistake, tempted by shifting leaves or the smell of sex, by music or a ripe banana." So our question is this: why transcend apehood? It's kind of fun being an ape.

KE: What a nice quote. The problem isn't apehood, necessarily. It is that we are just in this untenable middle state in which we cannibalize all that is around us. We have to move passed the read/react, need/satisfaction stage we inherited from our ape predecessors. Swinging from the trees, scratching, eating when we want is all good until you have to take care of the trees and grow the food and deal with others.

GP: It's funny, though. Science

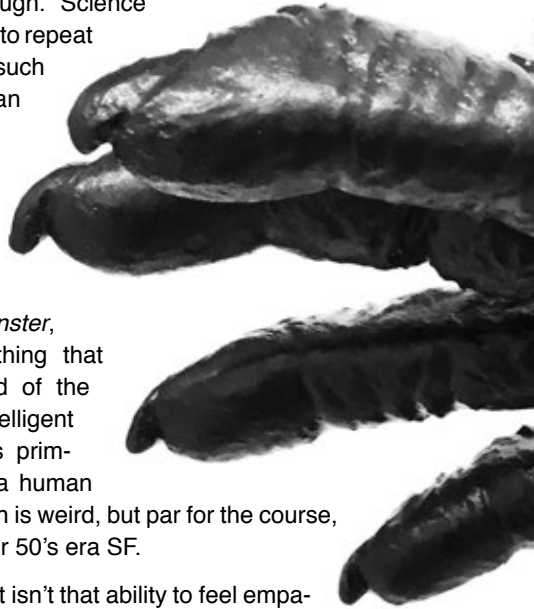
Fiction seems often to repeat the theme that such transcendence is an inherent evil. The Ro-man figure appearing in your videos is adopted from the 1951

film, *Robot Monster*, and the only thing that stays the hand of the genocidally intelligent Ro-man is his primitive love for a human woman. Which is weird, but par for the course, particularly for 50's era SF.

KE: Sure, but isn't that ability to feel empathy a sign for hope? Or do we assume that aliens will be of such a different intellect from ours that we won't be able to recognize one another?

IK: What is next for the ape, in your opinion?

KE: For us as ape-descendents, it doesn't look good in the short and medium terms. We will probably continue to gobble up all we can as quick as we can and deal with the consequences only when we are staring into the shrieking, gibbering, drooling maw of our own destruction. Or more likely, we won't recognize it in the mirror in the morning as we get ready to go to work.



GP: Who's we, pal? I place the threat of the so-called anthropocene directly at the feet of the dudes who purchased the environment. In other words, there's an argument to be made (by smarter folks than me, see this recent essay by Chris Nealon: <http://www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/infinity-for-marxists>) that problems of Capitalism are answerable by the people who own the capital.

KE: It might be their fault, but it is our problem. Over the course of the very long term, it might not matter. [In] William Gibson's *Peripheral*,

he has the concept of "the jackpot," when all of the world's multiple problems coalesced, radically altering the environment, taking out 75% of the population. The remainders further developed technology to remake the world, both in good, stabilizing the environment, and negative, a return feudalism and what not. Science fixes everything! Anyway, it is interesting to entertain the idea that "we" might be able to punch through and evolve.

IK: How important is it to you that the viewer knows the story of *Robot Monster*? Do you continue his story or is the rewrite total?

KE: Total rewrite. I don't think people need to know the film, it is one of those things that just kind of exists in the back of our memory closets. The monster has

What doesn't
exist, it is
important /
The Fabric of Matter
itself /



been ridiculed for so long, that it is almost just a simulacra rather than an actual referent. I can't remember when I first saw the movie, maybe on Channel 20 Double Creature Feature on a Saturday afternoon. But maybe I just want to think that and I really hadn't seen it until I was in my 30s.

GP: *Robot Monster* is like the SF version of Edgar Ulmer's *Detour*. Can you talk about this not-quite-classic film?

KE: Ha! How is *Robot Monster* like *Detour*?!

GP: Oh I wouldn't make a one-to-one analogy. It's rather the sense of something having been created quickly and cheaply, which then messes with the sense of cinematic pacing we're accustomed to. For all their economy, both of these films have a slow, almost poky, meditative quality.

KE: The pacing is leaden, it seems like 65% of the film is just Ro-Man walking from place to place. Which is something I touched on in my videos: there is a lot of walking, just moving through a land-

scape. It is good to experience narratives outside of the standard three act structure. It reminds us that there are other stories.

To me, *Robot Monster* is pretty great: it is a collage film in how it is assembled from parts of old movies: the dinosaurs and the space attack scenes combined with the stuff of the *Robot Monster* (its name is "Ro-Man"). It suggests it could be assembled in any number of other orders, or combined with other films, never quite actually done. It is kind of like a slower-paced *Bruce Connor* film. The fact that it has the hackneyed dream structure- but wait maybe it is not actually a dream! suggests a spiralling of realities and dimensions in accessible to us, but possible for the *Robot Monster*. If only he and his people could transcend, evolve beyond their conquest and exploitation driven ways, think of the wonders that could await!

And then there is the billion-bubble machine. This is Ro-Man's communication device, because, of course, a conquering space alien communicates with its masters with a bubble machine. Their science is not our science.

IK: At one point in the movie the Ro-man must kill the last five humans on the planet one of whom he thinks he loves (Alice). He realizes he cannot follow this order and asks himself 'at what point do must and cannot meet?'; at what point do must and cannot meet for you; and at this point what do you do?



Independent of sensory input /



KE: That is the pivotal moment of the film and what made me love it. Here is this war machine, pleading with himself to become something different!

For me, artistically, personally and the like? Must and Cannot are in constant frisson. I suppose I most often give in to Must: going along to get along, not shrieking at passerby, clocking in and I guess I knuckle under a lot. But that is why I make videos and drawings: I can create the way things should be, or at least think about them and invite others to do so.

GP: So, the man and the animal are addressed here. I see, too, a strong engagement in your work with the natural environment. Could you speak to that?

KE: Well, about the idea of the animal: in my video, the Robot Monster, the ape suit is actually his environmental suit, his space suit as it were. It is just a remarkable coincidence that it just looks like a low-rent ape suit. So there are a couple of scenes in my video where he takes it off.

But, yeah, I am interested in the environment, how landscape and place can become characters in narrative. Obviously, place determines our moods and action, but the ongoing challenge is how can we collaborate with our surroundings to make something new and better? Currently we aren't getting it done. And what

is going to happen when we become even more immersed in virtual realities and digital lives? I could get high-horsy here or utopic or maudlin, but it might be enough to say that we need to be constantly reminded to be more aware of our surroundings. My landscape-based videos, like the ones I made in the Arctic, are lenses for me to do that.

IK: The landscape is always bigger than the figure in the shot. The ape is so clearly on top of the landscape; and this seems like part of the apes dilemma. Do you think ape transcendence, if attained, would lead to ape landscapes made of ape how would these be?

KE: Ho ho! Ape landscape made of ape? By ape? The barriers would be more permeable, one could literally move through, and better, with the landscape. Transcendent Ape landscape operates on a different time scale, not geologic, maybe geogalactologic. Transcendent Ape Time would be like Neo's "bullet time" in *The Matrix*, but instead of seeing bullets make ripples through the air, you could hear rocks grow.

We can occupy an edge /



An edge of time /

Time that that defects our geometries /



GP: Can you talk about your trip to the Arctic? How did it inform your *Apes* series?

KE: It was amazing. It was like continuously recharged and gobsmacked. And it all seemed so pure to me as a first time visitor. It was quite sobering to meet and talk with those that live there or have visited multiple times: they spoke of the new species living in the Arctic, ones that could never have lived there before. That was the most striking, more than them talking about the receding glaciers and raising water levels: it was the knowledge that things that weren't supposed to be able to exist in the Arctic were thriving there.

In terms of the *Transcendent Ape* video, to be honest, I proposed a completely different project going up there. But then I realized I had this video in mind, this *Transcendent Ape* I had been thinking about for twelve years or so. I realized that the Arctic landscape, or at least my imagined version of it, would be a wonderful set for the *Apes* explorations, it's kind of lost wanderings as it searches for a way to become something new.

IK: I have read that your video work investigates the nature of digital light; what have you found out so far about it? Has your video work ever given anyone a seizure? Would it change your practice if it did?

KE: My videos have never given anyone seizures, that I know of. However, at one of the liquid light shows I did with Robby Herbst at Machine Project, some one went into fits. That could have been something they ingested though.

I don't want anyone to have a seizure because of my videos, but i do want people to have a bodily response. That is why I layer so much and have fast cuts: it makes us blink, and blinking is a way of letting us have new thoughts introduced to our consciousness. As well as wetting our eyes.

Karl Erickson:

We Could Be Transcendent Apes

January 14–February 20th, 2016

We Could Be Transcendent Apes features artist Jody Wood and music by Todd Carter, Chris Colthart, Kelly Marie Martin, and Karl Erickson. This project was produced partly during residencies at The Arctic Circle Expedition, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Swing Space, and Signal Culture.

Thanks to everyone who made this possible, especially Jody, Todd, Chris and Kelly for their collaboration and to everyone at Field Projects for the support. Particular gratitude to Colin Dickey who tolerated more gorilla fur on a sailing ship in the Arctic than he could have reasonably anticipated. Eternal thanks to Gretchen Larsen for...everything (plus the 'zine layout).

About Field Projects

Field Projects is an artist-run project space and online venue dedicated to emerging and mid-career artists. Centered on short-term curatorial projects, Field Projects presents monthly exhibitions at their Chelsea location in addition to participating in pop-up exhibitions and art fairs. Field Projects was founded by artists Jacob Rhodes and Keri Oldham in 2011 and is currently run by artists Jacob Rhodes, Rachel Frank and Jason Mones and curator Blair Murphy.

www.fieldprojectsgallery.com





 **Field Projects**

526 W 26th Street, #807 / NY, NY 10001

www.feldprojectsgallery.com / info@feldprojectsgallery.com