

You Have No Idea How Weak I Am: Michelle Handelman’s “Hustlers & Empires”

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Michelle Handelman, *Hustlers & Empires*, 2018, 4k multiscreen installation. Production still. Photo credit: Mr. Means

Is there a choice to be a hustler? That question, which flits onscreen in a flurry of bold black and white text, is posed to three iconic historical and fictional hustlers who sit on a futuristic dystopian panel that resembles purgatory for radicals in Michelle Handelman’s new multi-channel video installation *Hustlers & Empires*.

Of course, the figure of the hustler is one that traverses, particularly queer, cultural history. From the novels of Jean Genet and John Rechy to Warhol’s films like *My Hustler* and even, songs such as former Cockette Bambi Lake’s “The Golden Age of Hustlers,” recently revived by Justin Vivian Bond, the hustler has been idolized, romanticized and worshipped as a symbol of transgression and a boldfaced refusal to live according to the rules of, as bell hooks articulated, “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.”

And yet, within this legacy, the vulnerability and very real hardships faced by hustlers are often underplayed. As “The Lover” in Handelman’s video, modeled after novelist and filmmaker Marguerite Duras, musician, performer and artist Viva Ruiz responds to the question of hustling as a choice. “There’s a difference between a hustler and a thief,” she says, “A hustler,

you don't have a choice. I think you are pushing to survive—maintain. I think if you choose to hustle people and you don't have to, then you're a thief." She's not wrong. For most, hustling isn't a conscious life decision, but one made in order to survive.

And yet, what if these two notions are not mutually exclusive? If transgression is the only means of survival, can it not be both a powerful form of defiance and a precarious balance between life and death?



Michelle Handelman, *Hustlers & Empires*, 2018, 4k multiscreen installation. Production still. Photo credit: Mr. Means

It's this dualism that Handelman explores in *Hustlers & Empires*, which is currently on view through March 18 at the [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#), through a whirlwind of multi-genre musical performances, rousing monologues and witty dialogue. In its totality, the video ends up appearing like a cinematic manifesto. As in her previous *Irma Vep, the last breath*, which starred [Zackary Drucker](#) and [Flawless Sabrina](#), Handelman draws from historical and cultural texts, reconfiguring them through the inclusion of today's queer performers and artists. Through this method, she creates both a sense of intergenerational lineage and dialogue, as well as imbues the original text with new and sometimes, subversive meaning.

In *Hustlers & Empires*, Handelman casts a multi-talented group of performers including [Light Asylum's](#) Shannon Funchess as "The Pimp" after [Iceberg Slim](#), whose 1967 novel *Pimp* defined Blaxploitation-era Black masculinity in the late 1960s and 1970s. Downtown chanteur and sometimes, chanteuse [John Kelly](#), who is certainly no stranger to inhabiting the roles of romantic fictional figures, plays "The Actor" based on the titular character from Fellini's short *Toby Dammit*. A washed-up alcoholic Shakespearean actor who loses his head over a Ferrari, Toby is a Filthy Dreams role model if I've ever seen one and no, it's not just his drunken swagger and bleach blonde hair. And finally, as previously mentioned, Viva Ruiz, known for her work with [The Crystal Ark](#) and her wearable art project *Thank God For Abortion*, plays the

desiring and desirable “The Lover,” inspired by Duras’ incarnation in her thinly veiled autobiographical novel detailing her teenage affair with an older wealthy man in French-occupied Saigon.



Michelle Handelman, *Hustlers & Empires*, 2018, 4k multiscreen installation. Production still. Photo credit: Mr. Means

Curated by Frank Smigiel as a part of the Limited Edition series organized by the museum’s Open Space, the SFMOMA installation not only features the video on multiple screens, but sculptural elements from its production such as the horrific inferno-like car crash backdrop that appears in later scenes, reminiscent of Warhol’s lurid *Death & Disaster* series. The installation will culminate on Saturday with live performances including a more ambient performance during the day with a perfectly named nine-person Hustlers Chorus, as well as intermittent appearances by Funchess, Kelly and Ruiz, and a more formal evening event with the performers all singing their songs from the film. While I sadly am not able to fly cross-country to see the installation, I spoke with Handelman about her new project to fill in the gaps.

Hustlers & Empires, like *Irma Vep, the last breath*, came from, as Handelman explains, “a very personal perspective.” “All my work is about me and my life,” she says, “it’s not like I’m an academic taking a critical approach.” This new project expands on *Vep*’s investigation of the underground. Handelman felt a connection with *Vep*, originally played by Musidora in *Les Vampires*, whose participation in criminal economies directly echoes Handelman’s childhood when, after her parents’ divorce, her dad “went off the grid and became part of the 1970s counter culture,” running a massage parlor and selling drugs. “With *Irma Vep*,” Handelman recalls, “I realized this is my story. As I started to segue into this piece, I realized I needed to explore this specific area of my life more.”



Michelle Handelman, *Hustlers & Empires*, 2018, 4k multiscreen installation. Production still. Photo credit: Mr. Means

This drive led Handelman to the three characters, beginning with Iceberg Slim whose novel the artist read when she was young. While not obvious, each character has resonances with Handelman’s creative practice. For example, both Slim and Duras draw from their own lives lived on the edge to fuel their artistic production like Handelman, though, as Handelman notes, “I think the way I do it is a lot more abstract.” While Toby Dammit as a fictional character is the one outlier, Fellini’s film is directly culled from the Edgar Allen Poe short story “Never Bet The Devil Your Head.” “Poe is inside everything I do in some way,” Handelman observes.

From its opening, which starts with a rhythmic, almost chant-like description of hustlers (“charismatic...irresistible...cunning...the charming psychopath”), the video employs the combination of these characters and their three corresponding actors to reveal how different forms of control—whether racial inequality, the church, misogyny, homophobia, colonialism, capitalism—imprint themselves on the bodies of those perceived as “the Other” and how those labeled as outsiders can resist. The installation examines how, as Handelman pinpoints, “we find ourselves in these compromised situations that force us to transgress to survive.”



Michelle Handelman, *Hustlers & Empires*, 2018, 4k multiscreen installation. Production still. Photo credit: Mr. Means

With a flurry of archival footage, cars, strange liminal spaces of bars, bedrooms and stages and passionate monologues, *Hustlers & Empires* bombards the sense and provides viewers with an enormous and exciting range of references to mine. And while the video prompts the audience to dive into these potential intellectual interpretations, it is also just a cathartic viewing experience—a musical ode to, at once, abuse at the hands of hegemonic power and the possibilities of undermining that power.

Asked why she chose to have musical performances as a part of the video, Handelman responds, “Sound is seductive. As gob-smacking as an image can be, sound is where the emotional content is in any film.” From Funchess’s bold song, in which she spits, “Fuck you for showing me that violence equals love” to Ruiz’s danceable chant “I’m so mad,” illuminated by a vibrant pink background, and Kelly’s moving operatic song, mirroring the piece’s title, the musical segments add a lightness and pop sensibility to the video, while also refusing to relent on its anger.



Michelle Handelman, *Hustlers & Empires*, 2018, 4k multiscreen installation. Production still. Photo credit: Mr. Means

Beyond the music, my personal favorite aspect of the video is the talk show, which Handelman tells me was partially inspired by Sartre's existentialist (and thoroughly nihilistic) play *No Exit*. Like a (possibly dead) hustler version of *The View*, the three characters ponder questions like "How do you define living on the edge?" to a surreal clap and laugh track that is eerily similar to the one in Fellini's *Toby Dammit*. Not only do these scenes present a fascinating character study as each figure defines hustling ("really smart people with disadvantages," says Iceberg Slim or "The Pimp"), but they also confuse the boundaries between reality and fiction. At times, it's hard to tell whether the person talking is one of the performers in character or the performer as themselves. As Handelman reveals, "The performers were all instructed not to act...they're being themselves, but they're channeling the characters through themselves now as fierce political artists."

With this amalgamation of the real and unreal, the performers and their identities work to "queer" some of the characters' original texts. For example, by taking on the role of the violently misogynistic pimp, Funchess twists it by embodying that quintessential over-the-top masculinity as a Black woman, bringing, as Handelman notes, "the tension between the misogyny and the forceful feminism." It's a deliciously subversive moment when Funchess, as Slim, turns to the camera and states, "Patriarchy is the biggest con of all." Similarly, at one point, Funchess drives a car, waving and nodding at invisible passersby with an overlaid scrolling text that reads, "Ultimately she knows the pimping game is part of a racist system of oppression and therefore, her puffed-up self-confidence is merely a Band-Aid on her already lost and battered soul."



Michelle Handelman, *Hustlers & Empires*, 2018, 4k multiscreen installation. Production still. Photo credit: Mr. Means

Like this statement, *Hustlers & Empires*, as a whole, deals with the vulnerability and precariousness of those on the edge. “The Edge,” writes Hunter S. Thompson in his first book *Hell’s Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs* “There is no honest way to explain it because the only people who really know where it is are the ones who have gone over.” Handelman’s video depicts this sense of mortality and doom for those who have gone over the edge—the three characters seem to act as voices from the abyss. And yet, the video isn’t depressing or sad. In contrast, it’s pissed.

According to Handelman, this was the performers’ influence. Originally setting out to make a film that was “sad and heartbreaking,” she remembers, “It was my performers who were like, “Uh-uh, I’m not playing the victim here....Fuck that. I am here, I am fierce and I’m going to talk from that perspective’.”



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Production still. Photo credit: Mr. Means

“You have no idea how weak I am,” says each character at the end of their first monologues. This ambiguous statement can be understood two ways. On one hand, it could be seen as a statement of weakness, anxiety, fear and helplessness in the face of mortal danger and yet, on the other hand, it could be taken as a proclamation that one’s power has been underestimated, underappreciated and under-recognized. By the second monologue, however, there’s little doubt at the force of each character’s resistance. A battle cry for transgression as a means of survival with an awareness of the danger that comes with it, *Hustlers & Empires* reflects, as Viva Ruiz says as “The Lover, “disappearance occurs at the margins. I’m here, front and center, resisting erasure.”