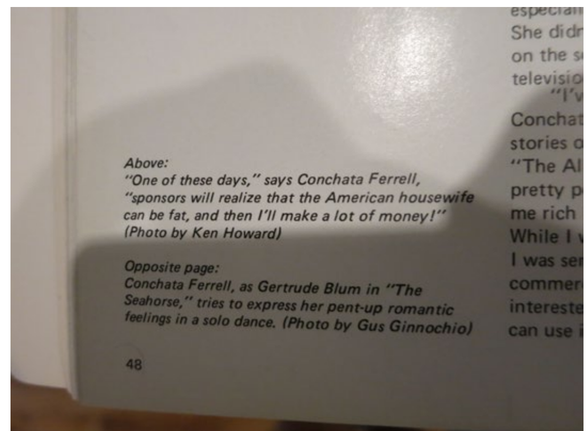

Above:
"One of these days," says Conchata Ferrell, "sponsors will realize that the American housewife can be fat, and then I'll make a lot of money!" (Photo by Ken Howard)

Opposite page:
Conchata Ferrell, as Gertrude Blum in "The Seahorse," tries to express her pent-up romantic feelings in a solo dance. (Photo by Gus Ginnochio)

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FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: **Giovanni Battista Tiepolo**, *Caricature of a Fat Person Wearing a Long Cloak and a Tricorne, Seen from Behind*, 1760, pen and black ink, gray wash, 6.875 x 4.8125 in. *After Dark Magazine*, September, 1974, Volume 7, No. 5.

SAM ANDERSON + DANIEL BOZHKOV =

In the 1970s, my mother met Zelda Rubinstein in audition waiting rooms, over and over again. As different as they were physically—Zelda was considered a smaller-than-average person and my mother was considered larger-than-average—they found out they were always auditioning for the same roles. After several discussions about their desire to transcend the limitations of their bodies through a perfect performance (and how this is impossible), this predicament of their physicality made them friends and, simultaneously, competitors. My father was an animator; I helped him move his work between the frames. I hated him for it, but here I could always be very precise. Each movement was stupidly slight, and I understood how to do this. Now it is like there is always this odd, invisible table or umbilical basket extending from my stomach that reaches the length of my arms. Whatever topographies are somehow constructed from objects that are trapped. I don't want to invent or control anything outside of that reach. I don't use strangers, always friends. Do you think of them as extras? They can be, and instrumental to the landscape, or they are like small tones, instrumental to a larger mood. Are bonsai trees miniatures? Bonsai trees bother me because they are cute. But they are interesting because they also belong to an imaginary plane. The Scarlet Empress*? The film tells the story of Catherine the Great as a bizarre visual extravaganza, combining twisted sexuality and bold, bawdy humor. The film is the sixth of seven collaborations between von Sternberg and Marlene Dietrich, and the strangest. It juxtaposes a Russia of gigantic, grotesque gargoyles and overdressed, towering Hussars with the giggling imbecility of the Grand Duke Peter and lingering fetishistic close-ups of Dietrich's cold, erotic face. Anthony Braxton is notorious for naming his pieces as diagrams, typically labeled with cryptic numbers and letters. Sometimes these diagrams have an obvious relation to the music—for instance, on the album* For Trio *the diagram-title indicates the physical positions of the performers—but in many cases the diagram-titles remain inscrutable. The titles can themselves be musical notation indicating to the performer how a piece is played. Sometimes the letters are identifiable as the initials of Braxton's friends and musical colleagues. Braxton has pointedly refused to explain their significance, claiming that he is still discovering their meaning. By the mid-to-late 1980s, Braxton's titles had become increasingly complex. They began to incorporate drawings and illustrations, such as in the title of his four-act opera cycle,* Trillium R: Shala Fears for the Poor. *Others began to include lifelike images of inanimate objects, namely train cars. The latter was most notably seen after the advent of his Ghost Trance music system.*

DANIEL: So we were talking before about an anxiety that is immediate and hostile. I'm trying to unpack this idea. Where does this come from … Are we talking about frustration? I understand hostility as a preconceived pushback.

SAM: What do you mean by preconceived?

DANIEL: Not planned in advance, but more like a given, a state of mind, a certain attitude of pushing against, as opposed to friendliness.

SAM: Yes, not friendly. But do you mean hostile as in perpetually being suspicious?

DANIEL: Stockhausen uses the concept of hostility that I am talking about. He incorporates the violently hostile audience reaction to his music into the music itself. His choirs sing, but also laugh, whisper, murmur, speak, and exhale. You know classical music casts an organization of pitches and chords to create harmonious tonality. It will be misleading to call Stockhausen's musical organization "atonal," since its approach to harmony is as if tonality had never existed.

SAM: I appreciate it as far as I can appreciate severe European modernism. I like the spatialization of his music. And I love what happens with, say, your example of the choirs. But in most situations I cannot listen to it. What is your experience with his music? Do you like it?

DANIEL: Not necessarily. But I am attracted to this concept of open confrontation. When I hear something abrasive like that, it kind of matches my experience with the world. I like it but—

SAM: You wouldn't listen to it?

DANIEL: No, I *would* listen to it, but I would have to be in a special state of mind, like at my strongest. I need to be prepared and completely immersed in it. When I'm listening to the music it is fighting with me, and I have to fight back. It's not accommodating. It's certainly not the same pleasure that comes from harmony.

SAM: I sometimes cannot stand my own experience with it. I feel like a child on a walking tour of a museum, where I am

supposed to be respectful and quiet. For me, maybe, it is similar to what you mean by being at your strongest.

I am interested in Anthony Braxton. Stockhausen is one of Braxton's biggest influences, and also Sun Ra. He said he wanted to literally meld African-American musical traditions and European musical traditions. In practice, the way he approaches this is focusing on the synthesis (his term) of improvisation and composition. In his *Tri-Axiom Writings*, he takes this approach beyond just being a formula for creating works and extends it to a broad philosophical discourse with more of his own invented terms.

He uses imagery, colors, shapes, mathematical formulas, and stories to accompany most of his compositions. I think Braxtonian language is so compelling, but also alienating and isolating. He is very aware of the fact that his work is perhaps too esoteric for most people. I respect that Braxton's language is so singular and personal and complex, and there is a barrier there. I don't necessarily know if it is a hostile exercise for him, though. But he rejects explanation, and I like that. I don't need him to open the door for me, because having that access is not really important.

DANIEL: So you mean hostility in a way that sometimes … is this more like a state of mind that you can get into? In this case it is not like a building system that relies on conventional materials. In order to maintain it, he has to have his own unique language of notation. He doesn't use regular notes, so there is an active system.

SAM: Maybe after a certain point there is no difference between that system he created, his body, what his life was like before, when he started using intimate details as total truths and examples to his broad philosophy. For me, I think the body eventually bleeds in with everything else. I'm not sure if he created the system, or he was inside the system first and then he created a mirror of that, or everything synthesized later on. Braxton scholars think they know when and where and how, but they probably don't.

DANIEL: I'm interested in a language that develops not only from the need to communicate, but also out of its own making. At some point you realize that the regular notation doesn't do it. Like you need a violet circle and dash instead of Western notation. It is the realization that one of your tools for moving along relies on a certain kind of attitude of constant inquiry. This is like my problem with the Linnaean system. If you define fish as an animal that lives in water, what do you do with mammals that live in water? Are dolphins exceptions to the rule? It just screws your whole system because your system is too simple. And then, what do you do with something like a platypus? It lays eggs, but it is a weird mixture of everything—it's a crazy mammal. So I'm talking about a realization that the tools you have for moving along rely on maintaining—in this case, hostility—a certain elasticity and sharpness to the world … a certain discomfort … whatever you want to call it.

SAM: I think so, I feel like I'm on angry acid all the time—so, yes, that kind of hostility is inevitable.

DANIEL: Not for everybody!

SAM: Obviously not. There are some things I enjoy making, like figures, but mostly [mimics snapping something in half] it comes out of that. And it's not reactive. Maybe more in the way that everything you walk by you absorb; it is like a rapid osmosis. Or fermented. Definitely somewhat like drunkenness, drunk interpretation or allusion. We were also talking about how sometimes there are days where you need to sleep 20 hours. You have to do that because you need to recover from a being-drunk type of thing. You have to shut yourself down from absorbing before you can start again.

DANIEL: Not a reaction, but a state of being. Can you be angry for no reason, or do you need any prompting?

SAM: Well, both. Either way it works. And when I'm angry I'm most aware of everything, like you said about sharpness. Maybe it's fucked, but I can articulate best when I'm put off.

DANIEL: There is a word in Russian, *milost*—it means simultaneously "mercy," with an inflection of "I pity you," and it also expresses the most tender love. In English this may seem patronizing, but in Russian it suggests the depths of "I can only love you, when the state of pity expands the limits of my empathy." Empathy is based not on reciprocity but on recognition. What if at the other end of your anger is love?

SAM: It is, because if not, why bother? I like Bernini because his work is pretty; I genuinely want to make something like one of those sculptures, but obviously I know that I am incapable of this. And there's no reason for me to do it. Why not take this knife and snap it in half. And now it's a leg. This is the top half and this is the lower part. Maybe that snap is a different kind of hostility, because the Bernini leg is unavailable. Or it is also hostile for a thousand other reasons.

DANIEL: I think the whole practice relies on what makes you actually open up, having this kind of open, wounded tissue to the world; whatever it is that makes you vulnerable. You put it out there and it hurts, creates pity, anger, or whatever emotion makes you relate to the world. You really care about it, but you are also really fucking mad at it, and can't stand it at the same time.

SAM: But not the same as pouring lemon juice on a scrape. The process is definitely not masochistic—I do not like the stigma of suffering attached to practice. But I'm open to revealing and self-destruction. The state you are talking about is tough because when you do understand that it's happening again, it doesn't work unless you can completely forget about it for a while. Again, you need to recover. When you do this, I think everything stimulates you and is full of interesting potential, you are present and generous, but then you need to disappear from that, you need to vanish, otherwise I imagine you'll die.

DANIEL: Do you have a daily practice of going to your studio and having to do things to build up to that state?

SAM: No. Consistent production is difficult. And every time, the prototype ends up being the thing.

It's difficult to digest work that tries to be about some preset thing. Why pave over a road with the same political material someone else already paved it with? Put the car on top of the road and drive the car. It's the stupidest analogy but you see what I mean? I prefer to think about how you are weirdly connected to a material and how you end up filtering it. There's so much subject matter that I *like*, or it's nostalgic, and I habitually think, how do I pack those bits in? Everyone does that. There is a limit, though, because you can end up just collaging pastiche. Also, I don't think anyone is actually interested in the specifics of my research; I'm rarely interested in anyone else's.

DANIEL: In order to be really alive, you have to go one piece at a time. Seems less a process of making something out of nothing than a process that makes you internally aware if you are making something or taking it apart.

SAM: I guess I don't know. Whatever is on the table. Like a boxcar versus a bicycle?

DANIEL: Marcel Duchamp talks about "personal art coefficient"—the arithmetical relation between unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed. I think they both come from the precise conditions of your hostility.

SAM: Do you want some more water?

DANIEL: No, thank you. But let's change the camera angle… I think one of the important subjects we often talk about is how your works are not miniatures.

SAM: The other day you brought up the bonsai tree. It is supposed to be a miniature version of a tree, but it's not really a miniature. It's actually a tree or a small bush.

DANIEL: For me, there is one major difference there: It is a living thing, so it is not really a model. Simultaneously, it is a small version of a big tree, which makes it a type of miniature that is very different from your work, but somehow, because it is a living being, it is like your work as well—do you see what I mean? It's not a simple miniature like the miniature you object to, the one that explains itself too much through its scale.

SAM: Yeah. The miniature is about the pleasurable, meditative effort of making it, and the pleasurable, meditative act of looking at it. I don't like that. When I was younger I tried to make a miniature candle to see if it would work. If I used a small enough wick and the perfect amount of wax proportional to that of a real candle, would it burn at the same slow speed? Of course it did not; it burned through in five seconds… This miniature question comes up a lot and I can see why, though I've made plenty of work that is normal size.

DANIEL: In my mind the idea of bonsai coincides with another concept… hold on. I love your cat—he is somehow both beautiful and scary; it's kind of disturbing me a little bit. There is something *Next Generation* about him. Oh, my God, look at his eyes! They are too big for his head! What is that—not the pupil, but the rest of the eye—what do you call that part of the eye?

SAM: The iris?

DANIEL: His iris has two colors—a light color, and around that, there is like a dark-green, second pupil. And he moves and looks like a puma, have you noticed that?

SAM: Yeah, or a lizard or spider.

DANIEL: I have never seen a second rim of a pupil like that. There's a black layer, then the dark green, and then the light green. He's like a puma, but I've never seen a puma in this scale. It's like he's actually six feet long, but I have never seen this one like this before, from above. Look at the way he's moving… he's super sensitive. *Eeee!* Did you see that? He sprung backward like a reverse kangaroo jump. He seems like a creature I have never seen before! He is electrified. Hey, have you seen this video of the disappearing octopus? It's a TED talk. The whole point is that each tentacle of the octopus has a separate, independent intelligence and is less controlled by a central nervous system. Because of that each tentacle makes its own decision on what to do and how to do it, almost like having its own nervous system. So the octopus camouflage is amazing—other animals camouflage themselves by producing patterns that match the surroundings, while the octopus, by using tiny muscles, is able to reproduce the whole texture of whatever it is attached to, even if it is extremely varied, like some seaweed. We have to watch this right now.

[They watch the video.]

DANIEL: How did we get there? I think I wanted to watch that because in our last conversation you were talking about how the body bleeds into everything. We touch with our fingers to get a sense of something, but imagine if your back can do that. To rub yourself against something with your back and experience it and understand it that way; touch and sensitivity fully developed as a type of cognition.

Another thing I was thinking about in relationship to the bonsai idea—remember when we talked about the "extras"? Instead of acting and following a plot, the characters are just waiting around for the protagonist to arrive.

SAM: They don't have their own story; they're just there. They're not really dimensional. I guess an actor's job is to make them dimensional. But that aside, I like their stock language. They are quotational to the point that they almost don't exist. They can say anything like, "It takes one to know one," and it can be a cowboy or a schoolgirl. I think that's a way to think about some work, especially about one element positioned in a larger group. It's like a pocket for something else. And how the pocket that gets filled is really yours. I don't always know what it resembles when it is arranged collectively—if that is a landscape or a sound,

maybe—each piece has its own tones, but collectively it is one or two different moods.

DANIEL: I connected the idea of characters to the bonsai. It's not simply about understanding them as a smaller version of something else. Bonsai is not only a simple miniature version, but an actor acting out the role of the real tree, but in another opera. So it is an actor from another narrative. Like a visitor from a different story. It has a camouflage—you can confuse it with a small version of a big tree, but it is actually a small, separate specimen. Imagine the activities that engender them. If you take a real pine tree and a bonsai pine tree, the rituals that happen around them are very different. It is more interesting to me to look at those two this way, instead of how one is a smaller version of the other, and I think your work is somewhere in this territory. This allows narratives to run through different scales. They get cross-linked, and somehow we still think about the original pine. It's almost like another living being is acting out the pine role. And somehow the fact that it is very small helps us understand that it's a role.

I keep thinking about your installation that had the frog skeletons. And how it had nothing to do with the culture of taxidermy, and how the real thing is performing itself, but the role has been changing because the genre has shifted.

SAM: Thanks! Are you talking about the frog skeleton that is positioned on a rock, like it's climbing it?

DANIEL: Yeah, it's about what the skeletons are doing in relation to what real, living frogs do. I think one was standing upright holding a hat. With the other objects around them we forget that they are actual skeletons of living things, but simultaneously we cannot forget that.

SAM: Well, I remember when we first visited that I talked about Frankenstein a lot. Frankenstein is reanimated from various parts of people, with the intent to function like a human being. But is he functioning or is he just positioned like a human being? And it is sad because he is sort of a prototype of a person. The question is not just, "Where is the self?" since he is made from different parts, but also, "Where the fuck are his thoughts coming from? Is he a new animal? Why is he sensitive to certain things?" I cannot just count on Mary Shelley's fantasy and explanation of it. Especially since the story came out of an anxiety dream. Frankenstein is simultaneously what it is and what it isn't, and it's too weird for me to get my head around it. He's just cobbled from whatever works. Maybe I am digging myself into a hole … he is like the bonsai, maybe. The marriage of several realities.

DANIEL: Marrying several realities that cannot be possible together. Yes, it is not only about the scale, or how the manipulation makes it seem bigger or smaller—it is about that whole format of looking at it; a positioning of the mind that switches the genre of comprehension.

I am also thinking of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920). Abstract sets and actors that use unrealistic, jerky, dancelike movements—shadows and real people share the same reality. And tracing and understanding film noir, both in relation to German Expressionism and to B movies. Expressionist mood needs a clear formality, created by weird diagonal camera angles and lighting. It is unsettling and very dynamic, but it is coherent. Meanwhile, the B movie is kind of like: What happened to the plot?

SAM: *Haha!*

DANIEL: Some sort of dark, predictable, and super-literal plot keeps going wrong: a car needs repair, repair is making it worse, every turn on the road takes you further away from your dream to reach California, sidetracking and falling apart all the way to the end. You are fighting for coherence, and the film doesn't let you resolve it. Nobody wins, including the viewer. There is a Frankensteinian kind of stitch that happens there. A literal plot and some very formalist language that is trying to animate a sticky situation, but somehow it never quite gets it together. These pieces come from different universes and in a way manage to stay there.

SAM: Yes, it doesn't line up, but I like that the intention is genuine, and they are not setting out for it to go wrong in any formal way outside of the demands of the script. That is interesting. It indicates more how they've absorbed and weirdly ended up filtering it. Maybe they don't even see any inconsistencies. I think it's better this way.

DANIEL: Because?

SAM: It's better than—I don't know. For example, I don't like perfectly resolved writings. I don't like a perfected email. It expects you to pay attention to its craft and cleverness first, and that's beside the point. All this labor and suffering is involved—like the drummer in the film *Whiplash* (2014) who refuses to tape his hands to prevent chafing. He'd rather bleed all over himself because then it seems he is more dedicated to the perfecting of his music. He is not! The work is not good because he's bleeding on it! I'd rather let things not line up if they can't.

DANIEL: And it's funny, because those things are a bit like the elephant that you decide not to think about, which immediately becomes the only thing you can think about from that moment on. I mean, you can have a general awareness of your tastes and maintain your attitudes, but I think you cannot have a program unless somewhere in the middle of the piece you decide it's too wound up and you're going to unwind it.

SAM: I've never had the opportunity to say, "This is too well-written—I'm going to unwrite it!"

DANIEL: But if you recognize that it is too well-written, you won't use it? Have you ever made the perfect object and decided that it is so perfectly executed that you just have no use for it?

SAM: I don't think I've tried to. But I throw a lot of things away. ==

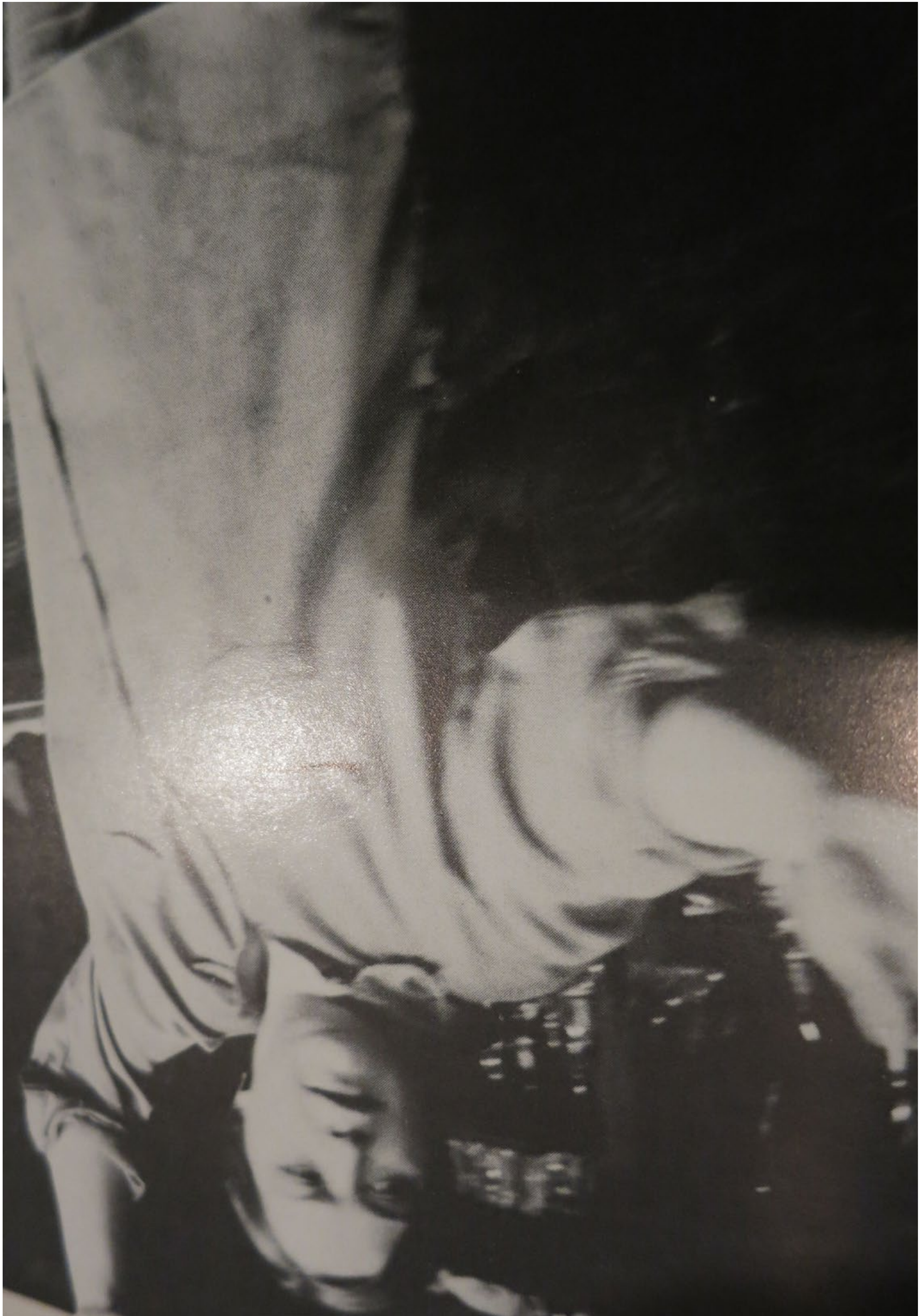

Photo by Gus Ginnochio, *After Dark Magazine*, 1974,
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