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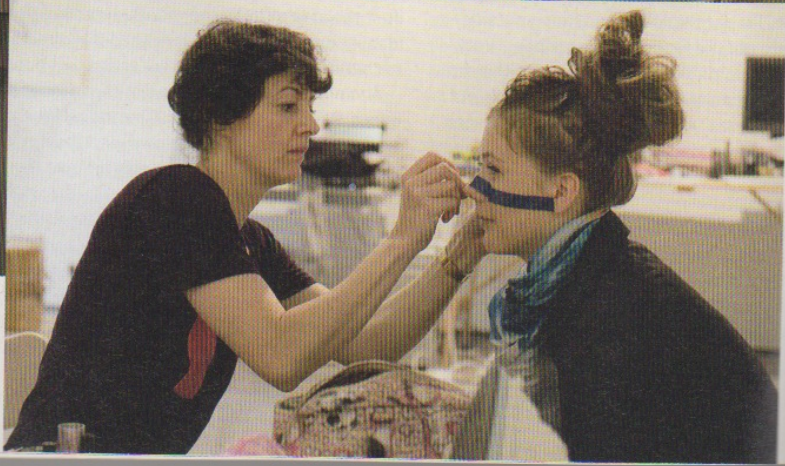
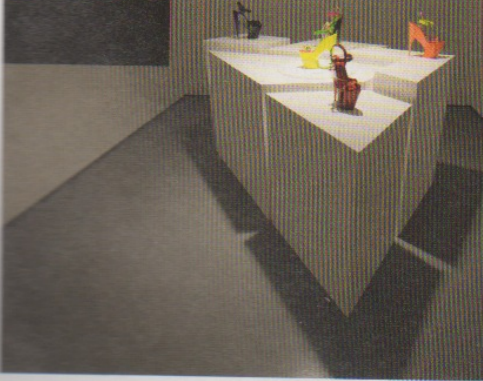
GIRLS

AT

OUR



BEST



Gawker, Fashion, Music in Dundee, June 2010

Storming the music, fashion and art worlds with a blitzkrieg of energy since their formation in 1997, **Chicks On Speed** have generated a collectivist approach to post-punk electronica, DIY craftwork and slogan based 'popaganda'. As they install a large art show in Scotland, Louise Gray reports on how the original trio have expanded into a multi-arts network based on several continents. Photography by Sean Dooley

It's the morning after the opening of *Don't Art, Fashion, Music, Chicks On Speed's* exhibition at Dundee Contemporary Arts. Extraordinarily, it's the first UK art/fashion/music retrospective that the (mostly) Europe based collective has produced. The Chicks celebrated in style the night before, with videos, painting and graphics, a fashion archive and a performance that culminated with one of their number, Nadine Jessen, dishing out quantities of 'Russian cocaine' to an appreciative audience. Meanwhile, the other Chicks did some West African dancing to a mashed-up Coupé Décalé version of their new single – featuring the Ivory Coast musician Shaggy Sharouf – "Amour Fou (Love Bite)".

It had been an evening of furious, good-humoured vitality. The Chicks' angular choreography recalls Hugo Ball and his dada pals at the Cabaret Voltaire. The music, mostly loud electro with its roots in the beat-riven melancholia of Kraftwerk, is permeable to outside influences and punctuated with bizarre solos on their 'objekt-instruments' including cigar-box synthesizers, a theremin tapestry, wired-for-sound hats and wireless guitar shoes, on which a number of the Chicks tottered.

One of the most arresting sections featured a miked-up 19th century weaving loom. Shetland weaver Morwenna Garrick clattered her shuttles in a way that made the loom's crashing noises terrifying. Only a few days after the death of Louise Bourgeois, the presence of the loom and its output took on new meaning. Each amplified movement of the machine was like a crisp sonic slap. Garrick was weaving a length of black and white wool fabric incorporating a Chicks-designed motif inspired by a sound speaker that had been simplified into a shape recalling the fin de siècle designs of the Wiener Werkstätte artists and craftworkers. And her presence, at the head of a small team of weavers, was part of the first Craft Scotland festival, of which *Don't Art, Fashion, Music* is a highpoint.

As retrospectives go, *Don't Art, Fashion, Music* is genuinely expansive, helping to make sense of the noise and action that surrounds Chicks On Speed. For the first time in the UK, the Chicks are not being presented as a post-punk, DIY electroclash group, but as a collective, a running together of artists based firmly in the tradition of the European avant garde. The Chicks' commitment to the dissemination of ideas and the transmission of power to their audience is evident. A small library, with books on the Bauhaus, the proto-dadaist Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, and Stewart Home's *Assault On Culture*, occupies a room adjacent to the gallery space. The activities at DCA surrounding the exhibition include Girl Geeks electronic music workshops, a zine with photocopies of articles on otherness and colonialism, craft sessions and, by the end, the generation of a handsome book to be published by Booth-Clibborn Editions.

And now it is the morning after. One of Chicks On Speed's two core members, the Australian born Alex Murray-Leslie, has wandered in to check the state of the stage. Melissa Logan, originally from Upstate New York, is sleeping off a sore head (literally – she walloped it during the early hours of an aftershow party). In the gallery's introductory room, a giant screen – showing the video for "Fashion Rules", the single taken from their 2003 album *99 Cents* – is switched on. The footage shows Murray-Leslie

scrambling in and out of Chick-made dresses. It's a capering, jerky film set to a bounding Techno rhythm and with exultant voiceovers: "Fashion is for fashion people/It's hard to be cool if you don't follow these rules/Fashion is for fashion people/Get out there and break the rules!" As the song's ambivalent title suggests, it speaks of playfully dressing up and assuming identities as well as the darker currents of an industry trading on compulsion. Like the cursed dancer in *The Red Shoes*, Murray-Leslie keeps dancing and dancing and changing and changing.

The linguistic play of short pithy imperatives, for the Chicks, is both inspired by and a reaction against Fluxus's injunctions, or any system's rules; a statement about kinship and collective action. These are all things, says Judith Knight, the DCA curator who brought *Don't Art, Fashion, Music* to Scotland, that make the Chicks' relationship to history, and art-historical history, so interesting. Knight mentions a few of the slogans that have accompanied the Chicks since their earliest years – 'More Is More!', 'Create Under All Difficult Circumstances', 'I Crave!' – which, alongside many others, are reproduced on banners encircling the main gallery space in Dundee. "To work with rules, categorisations and definitions is to immediately create a playfulness that can liberate enormous energy," she says.

It is an energy of contradictions: Chicks On Speed supply a continual, gleeful movement between low and high production values: the synths hidden in old cigar boxes, the amazingly high-tech shoes, the sonic hats – strange, organic shapes with built-in mics. The reason the Chicks are so interested in the loom is that it is programmed, in much the same way as early computers were with punchcards. As a trope for inserting a traditionally female activity (craft) into a realm which is too often thought of as male (technology), it is unbeatable.

That energy has resulted in an astonishing range of productions since the Chicks' formation in 1997, by Murray-Leslie, Logan and, from Germany, Kiki Moore. Present in Dundee are the Chicks' regular collaborators, Israeli born, London based performance artist Anat Ben-David, Vienna based Estonian choreographer Krööt Juurak, German dramaturge Nadine Jessen and two newer recruits: the Spanish artist Merche Blasco and the Paris based musician and editor Faustine Kopiejwski aka Lady Gla Gla. Offstage and elsewhere are Kathy Glass and the New York artist and activist AL Steiner. (Moore, now involved with a group called Bad French, left the Chicks in 2006.) Associates have included Peaches, Miss Kittin, Le Tigre and Douglas Gordon.

All of them have their own projects. Ben-David, who is now embarking on an opera, has a tight body of multimedia work concerned with power and performance: her 2003 *Popaganda* explored charismatic leadership in the forms of fascist leader and pop star. Taking the form of an album, performance and live action – the latter at a huge party for Hugo Boss, the firm that designed the Nazi SS uniforms in the 1930s – the project was a cunning and incisive interrogation of power and performance. Merche Blasco is a member of the Barcelona based arts project, Burbuja. Logan and Jessen have just taken the Chicks' *Girl Monster* club night from their local Kampnagel Theatre in Hamburg to the Ivory

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Coast, and there are plans to expand it to the world’s festival stages.

Girl Monster comes from a project created by Leslie-Murray in 2005. “The idea was to create a herstory, of women in music and give a historical base to what we’re all doing now, we’re all like links in one very big chain,” she says. “Girl Monster was always perceived to be music. Theory, performance, art and a tool of communication, a place to give other women a base. At the same time the motive was to create an educational tool, for promoters of big festivals who so often overlook what women are doing and fill their line-ups with boring boy bands.” The project has already yielded a three CD box set, released in 2006 on Chicks On Speed Records. The compilation honours 62 women in music, from Angie Reed and The Slits to Peaches and Lesbians On Ecstasy.

Opportunities are always seized. After a Girl Monster event in Abidjan in April, Logan and Jessen found themselves stranded because of the Icelandic volcano. They took the opportunity to get the Dundee banners printed there, while Jessen, a sometime DJ specialising in what she calls PoCo (post-colonial) House, took the opportunity to choreograph and film the Chicks’ “Love Bite” single with two local dancers. Murray-Leslie, living in Barcelona, is the professor of fashion performance at the city’s Elisava design school at the Pompeu Fabra University. Their multiplicity and ability to make-do can seem daunting, especially in a world that focuses on expertise in one area and distrusts multitasking.

What are they? The Chicks never set out to be a group – or rather, they set out to make a détournement of

a group. Their *Box Set* (1997) was an album-sized box. “It contained tacky band merchandising,” says Murray-Leslie. “One of our early slogans was in it: ‘Don’t do it yourself, do it with everybody else’.” There was a mixtape, a T-shirt, some posters. We created a fake interview to go with it and that was our manifesto.”

The three original Chicks all met as students at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich in 1995. Murray-Leslie, then a jewellery student, had made the journey from Melbourne to study with internationally respected goldsmith Otto Künzli. Logan, a painter, had been attracted to the Munich academy for “its old-fashioned respect for artists”. She says: “That was something that didn’t exist in the US at the time. It does now, but it’s very much job-fixated and money-fixated. Munich was a place where you could do whatever you wanted. I couldn’t study in America any more. It was so discouraging there. As a student you weren’t taken seriously and [it was continually emphasised] that very, very few people would make it, be able to live from art.”

Chicks On Speed (named by a friend for their frenetic methodology) ran club nights at the local Seppi Bar and elsewhere, organising the club as a nocturnal readymade. The *Box Set* came out of the Seppi nights but was also, Murray-Leslie says, a Fluxus piece, just as it was equally a way of breaking out of their disciplines and discovering an aesthetic of fun. They picked up fluent German by working to get through school. “We started scooping ice creams and then stepped up to hanging shows,” says Logan. “We hung up Bosch and Warhol, doing these long hours, talking all the time. We would use [gallery] offices to do our sneaky things – use the fax, make long distance calls at the Haus der Kunst in Munich, this really weird marble building made by Hitler as the centre of art for the world, with all the Nazi furniture in the cellar.”

Music entered the realm of possibilities later, in 1997, via an electronic music workshop offered by the academy and led by Cologne Minimal Techno producer Jörg Burger. “Alex and I decided that we would become electronic musicians,” says Logan.

“Jörg thought we were freaks,” adds Murray-Leslie. “We kept saying it had to be louder and there had to be vocals.”

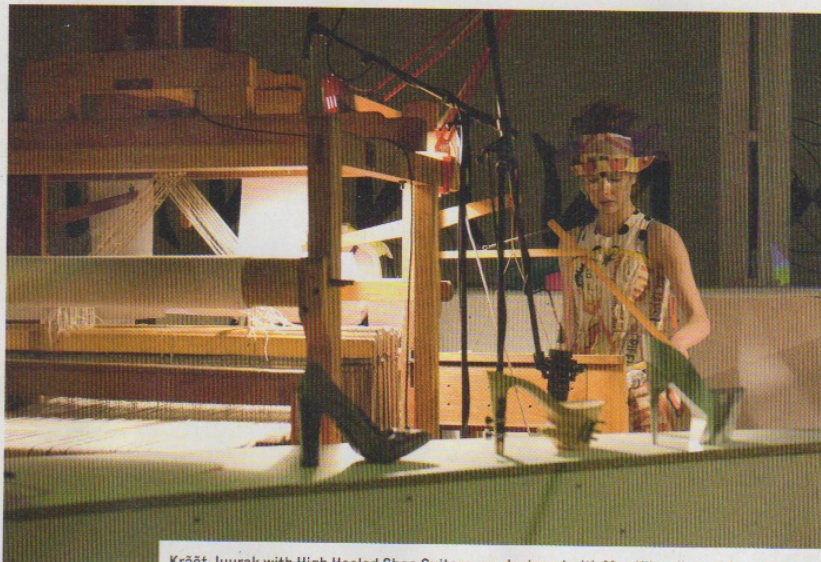
“He was famous. He was part of the Kompakt posse,” Logan says. “So everyone on the course thought we were a little bit crazy. We were running around recording vocals.”

The first music the Chicks released was on *Analog Internet*, a shortlived cassette zine that contained tracks by Panasonic and Hecker. A 7” followed in 1998, a cover of The Normal’s “Warm Leatherette” with DJ Hell. Shortly after setting up Chicks On Speed Records, the group faced a problem. “At the art school, Alex’s professor supported us, but I was in a different school,” says Logan. “We were doing performances, the Seppi Bar and touring – bringing it into museums, sometimes in a container and shipping it next to an opera house and using what open space there was around. When it went in this direction, my professor said, ‘If you’re collaborating with people, you should be collaborating with people in your class because the class is your family. You should certainly not be collaborating with people from different genres.’”

Things came to a head and Logan was refused her diploma. It was a crisis that demanded that she reappraise her entire art practice. “I went to Scotland and stole a book from a friend,” she says. “It was *Assault On Culture* by Stewart Home. I read some of it and thought, wow, this is great. I didn’t give back the book and I felt bad. I photocopied the book, and I heard that Stewart Home was in town, in Berlin. I went to the cafe where he was, said, ‘Hello, I really like this book. Would you sign it for me?’ It was a

Chicks On Speed on stage at DCA. Left to right: Nadine Jessen, Krööt Juurak, Alex Murray-Leslie, Melissa Logan, Merche Blasco (obscured), Faustine Kopiejwski, Anat Ben-David





Krööt Juurak with High Heeled Shoe Guitars, co-designed with Max Kibardin and Steve Dawson

plagiarised copy. 'I know you write about plagiarism.' At first he replied, 'I have a family to feed!' So I took his shipping address, sent him some records, some T-shirts for his kids.

"I told Stewart that when I got kicked out of art school, *The Assault On Culture* was a very important next step to understand what my history is. He sent me a diploma back. It read, 'You have passed the Stewart Home test. Everything you do or touch is avant garde art.' Alex graduated with honours, but I have my diploma." She took this as permission for Chicks On Speed to move to the next stage. After Munich, Logan did continue painting, but her relationship with art was in need of repair and renewal. "I used to sell quite a bit of my painting, and eventually I sold, I think, 24 paintings that I had painted in two days. After that I couldn't paint any more."

Because you felt it was devalued? "Yes, because it didn't feel creative any more. It felt like I was making a product, and I knew I wasn't studying art. This was the breaking point of realising that that's not what art is, and then the realisation of developing new things – this adventure – was what art is for me. And not being alone in the studio, that wasn't the attractive part, although it's quite romantic. This realisation that isolation is the enemy – that was another slogan – because of course you get together as a gang and the number of people there is a certain power you have. Very soon it came to this group thing."

This aspect of Chicks On Speed is pivotal to their current and future identity: this group thing. While there's been much debate about what Chicks On Speed actually are – a group, a clan (Logan); a project (Murray-Leslie); an organism (Ben-David) – it is their capacity for collective action that constitutes their most revolutionary facet. In all that the Chicks do, it's often easier to see the whole rather than their individual gestures and skills. This is important because their many elements – painting, video, performance, technology, music – cohere when viewed as a totality. The Chicks have actually enjoyed a modestly successful run of album, single and EP releases (including a fun version of Tom Tom Club's

"Wordy Rappingood" in 2003), with their sixth album, *Cutting The Edge*, released last year on their own label. Yet in *Don't*, one sees the Chicks not so much as an artists' collective, but as a movement reacting against the history that made it. Logan mentions that performance became possible for them after the rejection of conventional disciplines: "[Performance offered us] so much room for action, for situations, for breaking out of the stereotypical positions that really attracted us. It had this non-confining, non-definable thing."

Yet the group thing is not an easy option. The semi-permeable membrane that exists around the Chicks is a new thing, Logan points out, and it's enabled them to be "more free and open". They have, she says, slowly found new structures of working. "It's now in a series of overlapping concentrations, but the definitions aren't always clear. It's not so clearly defined. We have AL Steiner in New York, but then Kathi [Glas] has a baby, so she makes the outfits from Berlin. It's actually really messy and sometimes it makes one's head hurt, but it's also good that way. We feel alive."

Given the collective members' disparate locations across the world, an ergonomic relationship to work is necessary. "So AL Steiner, who's an artist and activist, will say, 'I need music for my video' – she's just made a feminist porn video that is showing at [New York gallery] PS1 – and she needs it in two weeks," says Logan. "So we send over stuff, but we also say, we are sending a box over to the Armory Show, please go and put up the installation for our gallerist. It's like that. It's not clearly defined in a business way, but it is this group [reciprocity]."

In the hours before the opening of *Don't*, the Chicks' group ethic is much in evidence. In a meeting room above the gallery, Ben-David is editing video for the performance, Murray-Leslie is screwing guitar-shoes together, and Blasco is under a table soldering contacts. Logan is sewing sequins onto a banner featuring four running legs, in a design that looks like a feminised version of the Isle of Man's flag. In a group, it's easy to forget individual talents.

"I studied ballet, I went to class every day, I remember the positions," Anat Ben-David is saying. "Oh?" says Krööt Juurak, the Estonian choreographer. "You did?"

"You didn't know that?" says Ben-David archly. "I was doing my class everyday, da, da, da. Modern dance. She [Juurak] doesn't believe it. I can show you all the moves, I am hiding it from her. I am shy. Krööt, you didn't know that I was a ballerina." Ben-David walks the few steps to the centre of the room, extends her right leg skywards in a grand battement and then holds her pointed foot above her head. Exiting the position, she does a few entre-chats and then returns to the laptop and video editing for the evening's performance. Krööt nods in recognition. "Now you believe me," says Ben-David.

Performance, demonstration and point conceded takes less than a minute. □ *Don't* Art, Fashion, Music is at Dundee Contemporary Arts until 8 August: dca.org.uk. An accompanying book of the same title is published by Booth-Clibborn Editions in September. A second *Girl Monster* compilation is scheduled for December release on Chicks On Speed Records. chicksonspeed.com

Alex Murray-Leslie playing Cigar Box Synthesizer

