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AISLE ONE: For "A la Cart: The Secret Lives of Grocery Shoppers," Carlip dressed as characters and went to the supermarket.

## Her cart has come in

Think of artist Hillary Carlip's book as performance art — in print.

By MARC WEINGARTEN  
Special to The Times

**I**N eighth grade, Hillary Carlip was suspended from school for dressing up like Holly Golightly. Back then, it was a ploy to get her parents' attention. Now it's her job.

For her new book, "A la Cart: The Secret Lives of Grocery Shoppers," Carlip, a veteran performer and writer, started with a handful of shopping lists she found around supermarkets. Then she imagined characters who might have written them. From a handwritten slip that includes "Infusium 23, Hair Spray and eyelash glue," Carlip creates a tattooed goth chick who finds her life's purpose by posing nude for the Suicide Girls website. Another list is written inside a matchbook and simply reads: "Coors, Oreos." From this, Carlip creates Woody, a roughneck construction worker ("I'm working hard and have NO BANKRUPTCIES") looking for "A special lady who don't have kids. . . . A nice shower would be good too." "A la Cart" is an altogether unique artifact, a one-woman show in book form. Call it "print performance art."

"I think Hillary's a fantastic artist," said Paul Reubens, a.k.a. Pee Wee Herman, an expert on shape-shifting. "She takes it very seriously, in that she does something every day about being an artist, and that's a big part of the battle."

Certainly, Carlip has made list gathering a part of her daily routine. "I guess my love for shopping lists began some time in the '80s," Carlip said. "I was

walking out of the supermarket and I saw a list on the floor that listed peanut brittle and dental floss. I just thought that was curious. From then on, I was hooked."

Working closely with photographer Barbara Green and makeup artists Chris Nelson and Dominic Till — the latter an accomplished film and TV veteran whom Carlip found on Craigslist — Carlip fashioned elaborate characters that are more like L.A. archetypes than grotesqueries. "The fact that Hillary could fashion characters from scraps of paper is nothing short of miraculous to me," said Green, who shot all of the photos with her camera "concealed between a loaf of bread and a melon." "She's a found-objects genius."

### Characters come alive

No one blinked an eye when Green and Carlip shot their shopping tableaux in supermarkets around town. "It speaks to the seamlessness of the project that I didn't get a second look," she said. "The only time I attracted attention was when I dressed up like a porn star. Then I got a lot of propositions from men."

But it's Carlip's essays that wrest "A la Cart" from mere novelty into something more empathic and even poignant. It's hard not to feel for Lloyd, "the recently widowed septuagenarian who's fiercely determined to make it on his own despite his children's protestations. Or Dolores, "the stewardess who's found true love after years of looking" ("It was hard not to notice the rugged, handsome businessman, especially when he opened his briefcase and took out a needlepoint he was working on.")

Carlip reads shopping lists the way palmists read palms. She examines every aspect — the handwriting, the nature of

the paper it's on, the contents of the list — to find clues that will help her extrapolate a person from an abstraction. "I can tell if the penmanship is a man or a woman, or if it's a list for one person or a larger group like a family."

Once she homes in on the author of the list, Carlip collects reference photos from magazines and the Web, looking for visual clues to help piece together her character. She then begins the process of creating the faux shopper, me-

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HILLARY CARLIP,  
on performing "A la Cart"

ticulously dressing her characters right down to their stockings (or tube socks, as the case may be). The makeup for her "A la Cart" characters took from two to five hours to apply, and then it was a mad dash to the market with Green. "We didn't get permissions to do any of it from the markets," Carlip said. "We were in and out of there in 20 minutes, usually."

### Finally, a publisher

For Carlip, "A la Cart" is the culmination of a lifetime of creating alternate personalities to gain a few minutes of fame. Besotted by show business as she was growing up in Bel-Air, Carlip was desperate to crack the Hollywood code and become a

star, a journey she wrote about in her 2006 memoir, "Queen of the Oddballs." As a teenager, she was booked on "The Gong Show," Chuck Barris' cracked amateur variety review, as a "comedy juggling act" and actually won the grand prize, which now sits on her fireplace mantle. "That was a lot of fun," Carlip said. She claims that "Gong Show" panelist Jaye P. Morgan made a pass at her.

From there, Carlip hosted a show on KCET in the mid-'80s called "Confidentially, Vera," on which she pretended to be a nattering, heavily made-up Rona Barrett type who has the inside scoop on, say, Zsa Zsa Gabor's car washer. She also created Mindy Greenfield, a professional groupie who began a company called Rent-A-Fan Club, for those who want to hire swooning fans. Carlip even had a left-field hit in L.A. in 1983 with the song "Buffy Come Back," a song about the actress who played Buffy on the '60s sitcom "Family Affair," which she recorded under the nom de pop Angel and the Reruns. "Amazingly, Entertainment Weekly did stories on both Mindy and Angel without knowing they were me," Carlip said. "And they were both on the same broadcast."

Carlip shopped around a book proposal for "A la Cart" in the '80s, but had no takers. She thinks our current confessional culture is more in step with the concept, which is why she attracted a publisher this time around. But Carlip doesn't like to think of her work as some kind of variation on the vicarious peephole kicks that can be had from reality TV.

"My book has nothing to do with the voyeurism of tabloid culture, which is anything but real," she said. "It's more of an honest glimpse into human nature. To me, shopping lists are the new memoir."