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## BROOKLYN RAIL

### Queering Queer Abstraction

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In deploying the term “queer abstraction,” Finkelstein cites a specific discourse around the mutual exchange of non-referential imagery and sexual and gender identities in order to intervene in it. This discourse has both galvanized discussions of modes usually considered hostile to identity politics, like Minimalism and Abstract Expressionism, and prompted queer aesthetics to reconsider its preferred means of self-representation for a more nuanced conversation about form as such. Queer abstraction has also asked artists and critics to consider new strategies for the imaging of non-binary genders, and explored the political value of theoretical and aesthetic illegibility—contra liberal advocacy for the very visibility of queers.



Angela Dufresne, *The real Allegory of my artistic and moral life*, 2014, oil on canvas, 84 × 132 inches

Yet, these positions repeat some mistakes of past art history that cannot be entirely accommodated by progressive sexual and gender politics. In the same way that the Euro-American avant-garde of the pre- and interwar periods proposed a Universalist, transcendent understanding of form, so too have some defenders of queer abstraction seen in its non-referentiality a near-limitless capacity for figuring identity. This desire and its ambitions are important for their sense of political futurity, but they embody a partial reading of abstraction that can be truncated in its historical breadth, non-intersectional in its theory, and perhaps lax in its understanding of what abstraction signifies today. Although the works in FOUND may vary in their force and aesthetic complexity, their heterogeneity, even incoherence, requests a more nuanced reading of queer abstraction than has been presented recently.

Proponents of queer abstraction have understood it as a method to explore questions of embodiment, relationality, self-presentation, and materiality without resorting to an established, and perhaps reified, queer iconography. As the artist Gordon Hall put it, with some degree of fatigue, “Often, artwork is described as queer when it depicts LGBT subjects or figures, is produced by a self-identified LGBT person, or references gay culture through recognizable motifs, references, or aesthetics. I call this the glitter problem. Or the leather problem. Or the pink-yarn, 1970s-crafts, iconic-diva, glory-hole, pre-AIDS-sexuality, post-AIDS-sexuality, bodies and body-parts, blood-and-bodily-fluids problem.” Taking Minimalism as a jumping-off point, Hall instead sees “sculpture as occupying a unique place to learn about and transform our experiences of the gendered body, not primarily because of what we see in the sculptures, but because of how they might enable us to see everything else.” In such work, he argues, exists “renewed possibilities for theorizing nonnormatively gendered embodiments.”

For Hall and other writers on the topic, such as Finkelstein and the art historian David Getsy, modes of abstraction refuse identifiable queer content in order to explore the expanded gender and sexual identities that open form allows. As Getsy writes:

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Abstraction has been embraced for its oppositional and critical possibilities, for it is in abstraction that the dynamic potential of queer stances can be manifested without recourse to the representation of bodies. The human figure in representation is inescapably culturally marked. Abstraction is one tactic for refusing the power of this marking and for resisting the visual taxonomies through which people are recognized and regulated.<sup>1</sup>

For Getsy, the shift from iconography to abstraction signals a resistance to a contemporary assimilationist politics centered on legibility. If queerness can be too easily “read” on its surface, then it can homogenized, trivialized, and perhaps commodified:

Visualizations of sexuality have tended to focus almost exclusively on bodies and their couplings as recognizable signs of queer sensibilities. Such a privileging of images of erotic objects has the effect of caricaturing sexuality as sexual activity (even as something to be defended and celebrated) while replaying the regulatory compulsion to produce evidence of existence—to appear as lesbian, gay, bisexual, homosexual, or queer.<sup>2</sup>

Getsy treated queer abstraction as an historical problem in his *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (Yale, 2016)—a target of a quite negative review in *The Brooklyn Rail*<sup>3</sup>—and for that has emerged as a central critic on the issue. Yet the topic has been explicitly taken up by curators, art historians, and artists across generations and the country in exhibitions like Ashton Cooper’s presentation of Loren Britton and Kerry Downey at the Knockdown Center in 2016 and in a 2014 panel convened by Julia Bryan-Wilson, Tirza True Latimer, and Harmony Hammond at the California College of the Arts. The artist Michael Buitron wrote on the topic as early as 2008 on his blog *Leap into the Void*, suggesting a less official circulation of “queer circulation” prior. The critic William J. Simmons, Getsy’s interviewer in the above citations, has further proposed the term “queer formalism,” a concept whose purview includes figurative aesthetics as well. In all of these formulations, queer art can patently take on the aesthetic without lapsing into a Greenbergian endorsement of art’s autonomy.

With *FOUND*, Finkelstein has both insisted on the unique contributions of “queer abstraction” while scrambling its specificity in positioning it next to “queer archaeology.” As he writes in the exhibition essay:

For the artists in this exhibition, detritus, the archival, and the supernatural are queer turf to be explored. So is mark-making and its erasure, mess-making, and charting the periphery. Thrift, cryptography, affect, and the limitlessness of abstraction are all queer, as are performance, metamorphosis, temporality, refusal, and the defining disposition of the late twentieth century [and] postmodernism... Queer artists have pulled up their stakes and moved on, prowling the sky, rocks, and trees of our material culture in search of more hospitable territory and the outlines of the queer commons ahead.<sup>4</sup>

On its surface, *Redress* (2015) by Lucas Michael refers to nothing specific. The sculpture consists of three neon bands shaped into an open rectangle with the lower line missing; the bands all emit a searing light red hue. *Redress* is meant to stand against a gallery wall where its luminescence grasps for the neutral tones of the white cube. Like its most immediate predecessor, the neon work of Dan Flavin, *Redress* seems to function as a formal exercise—a play between supporting architecture and imposed form, between saturated and neutral chromatic tones. But for those who viewed Michael’s piece at the exhibition *FOUND: Queer Archaeology; Queer Abstraction*, curated by Avram Finkelstein (of *Gran Fury* fame) at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art this past summer, its wall label illuminated a more immediate reference. The artist constructed *Redress* to follow the dimensions of a door at *Commonwealth & Council*, a gallery in Los Angeles. Moreover, the red light of the work recalls the red light of clubs, bars, and other nighttime dens. *Redress* creates a continuum of associations between geometric form and social life.

This play of universal shape and specific reference is noted in the title of the exhibition itself. In archaeology, one looks to recover past objects that might tell particular things about a given culture; abstraction discourages such a connection. *Redress*—if considered alongside the prosthesis of the wall text—aims for the archaeological precisely through the abstract. That said, other works go about it in reverse: Angela Dufresne’s *The Real Allegory of My Artistic and Moral Life* apes on Courbet’s *The Artist’s Studio* (1854-55) to render a nearly orgiastic tableau of figures milling

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around an atelier. Dufresne's smeary gestures confuse visible gender and race, figuring each character as a swirl of paint rather than a cohesive body. The specific model of Courbet's work becomes a means to occlude identification, to turn the scene of art-making into one of joyous illegibility.

As with most speculative citations of the word "queer," there is room for nearly anything and everything in Finkelstein's proposal. "The limitlessness of abstraction" is as queer as postmodernism, he argues; non-referential form and the simulacral economy of images are equally available for sexual and gender politics. Moreover, the "sky, rocks, and trees of our material culture" remain as equally available for repurposing as more theoretical notions of temporality and refusal. The tension between formal abstraction and the specific, recuperated image is never quite resolved in FOUND; non-referential work by Lucas Michael and Carrie Yamaoka populated the show alongside patently figurative work by artists such as Karen Heagle and Geoffrey Chadsey. Poetic abstraction even found a voice in Eve Fowler's THIS IS IT WITH IT AS IT IS (2012), which marketed the quizzical poetry of Gertrude Stein as street ad-cum-protest poster. While the categorical looseness of queer abstraction in FOUND is productive in its request to see how abstraction and archaeology might cohabitate, the political specificity of "queer" threatens to collapse. This struggle between an actual minoritarian program and a withdrawn aesthetic exploration marks the most frustrating aspect of queer abstraction.

In some ways, the conflict between queerness' capaciousness and its specificity is an old one. In the introduction to her 1993 essay collection *Tendencies*, Eve Sedgwick famously defined queer as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of one's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically." Yet, in the same breath that Sedgwick listed the variable self-descriptors that live under the sign of queer ("...masturbators, bulldaggers, divas, Snap! queens, butch bottoms..."), she warned against its overly labile application: "Given the historical and contemporary force of the prohibitions against every same-sex sexual expression, for anyone to disavow those meanings, or to displace them from the term's definitional center, would be to dematerialize any possibility of queer itself."

Twenty-plus years of sexual politics in this country might have dulled the intensity of Sedgwick's "every," but the term "queer" still slides in its definitional range from the nearly all-encompassing to the politically pointed. As Getsy notes, "Queer is no one thing—nor is it easily recognized... It is frustrating for some to deal with the fact that queer has no simple definition nor a readily available iconography, but it's important to keep it mobile, tactical, and immoderate." In FOUND, Finkelstein took this to the letter: as the wall text states for Alyse Ronayne's two untitled works from 2010, "Alyse Ronayne combines self-tanners, luminescent paint, and hand-selected confetti, creating abstract breadcrumb trails of parties gone by. These works are formal and casual at the same time, making something of nothing. Queer, in a word." Such an application of queer skirts the "mobile, tactical, and immoderate" and nearly falls into the domain of pure indistinction.

It is in this looseness that "queer" joins so well to "abstraction" for its practitioners; in its avoidance of rigidly legible representation, abstraction enables a free flow of self-fashioning. As Getsy remarks, "Abstraction makes sense as a vehicle for queer stances and politics because it is unforeclosed in its visualizations and open in the ways in which it posits relations." For Finkelstein, such inscrutability is even politically necessary as a non-surveilled zone in which queer expression might take root.

But in its capacity to escape the restrictions of the world and imagine a new social realm, queer abstraction recalls its forebears in the early twentieth-century, a historical connection that is practically absent in the literature on queer abstraction. "I have ripped through the blue lampshade of the constraints of color. I have come out into the white," Kasimir Malevich dreamily wrote of his Suprematist abstractions in a catalogue text from 1919. "I have overcome the lining of the colored sky, torn it down and into the bag thus formed, put color, tying it up with a knot. Swim in the white free abyss, infinity is before you." When considering the urge to escape in Malevich (and in figures like Kandinsky)—this drive to expand the self beyond societal borders—could one describe such a poetics as "Queer, in a word?" The affect of emancipation is perhaps crucial for any political aesthetic, but its users must discern the historical currents that determine any of its means of expression.

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To this end, abstraction can never operate as value-free, neutral territory, as Malevich's benediction of whiteness as such might suggest. In November 2015, curators at Moscow's State Tretyakov Gallery discovered the words "battle of the negroes" in Russian within the painted layers of abstraction's historical endpoint, Malevich's Black Square (1915). The words, the curators gathered, most likely referenced an 1897 all-black artwork by the French humorist Alphonse Allais titled *Negroes Fighting in a Cellar at Night*. Such a connection need not damn abstraction tout court (although it could), but it should temper the enthusiasm by which abstraction can be joined to a queer project. Minimalism and other abstractions can be plundered for their value to a contemporary queer politics, but these historical idioms need to be deconstructed before they are recuperated. In his review of Getsy's *Abstract Bodies*, Jarrett Earnest casts similar doubt on the author's stated claim to "infect the canon" for its presumptuous revisionism. While all readings of art will be reshaped by present-day contingencies, it is an unequivocal mistake to think the discovery of queer sexuality in dominant art is also that work's redemption.

Getsy polemically opens a recent essay titled "Queer Relations" in *ASAP/Journalwith*, "There is nothing intrinsically queer about a form. Rather, queer capacities are engendered by activating relations—between forms, against an opposition or context, or (in this case of complex forms) among the internal dynamics of their components." As an ontological claim, it may be correct to argue that forms cannot carry an identity by themselves, but there is no form that is not always already understood as relational: Relations surround the scene of interpretive encounter from the onset. The blank Judd cube or lyrical Pollock canvas cannot be mapped onto the expansive self-articulation of queerness so easily. Political and historical codes have, however regrettably, "infected" the canon in advance.

As the artist Sheila Pepe noted in a roundtable following Ashton Cooper's *Knockdown* exhibition, abstraction carries a pre-loaded racial connotation insofar as it mostly greets an audience constructed by whiteness and its concomitant values. Finkelstein himself confesses a similar reading along the lines of class: "I am old enough to remember the phrase, 'I don't know much about art, but I know what I like.'" As he notes, "Most people don't understand at all what they are looking at when they are looking at abstraction. They feel very detached from it because it's not anthropomorphic; it does not relate to the body. It is not them, mirrored. I feel as though abstraction is locked into a death match with class, in this way." There is, along these lines, a distinct irony that queer abstraction has centered so overwhelmingly on the terms of sex and gender, when one of queerness's goals is precisely to understand how variables of race, ethnicity, and nationality must figure into any sexuality. Conspicuously missing in much of the discourse of queer abstraction is discussion of those projects that have tied race to questions around abstraction, whether they are philosopher Édouard Glissant's notion of the "right to opacity," or curator Adrienne Edwards's lauded *Blackness in Abstraction* exhibition at Pace Gallery last year.

Perhaps these elisions and assumptions have occurred due to an overly neat transition from queer iconography to queer abstraction. The perils of normativity and of the incorporation of queerness by systems like the state and the market demand critique, but legible images might have their own power. For in their recognizability, these motifs and figures can act as loci for the making of publics and communities. What ought to be kept in tension is the utopian desire to transgress conventional idioms of queerness and the tactical utilization of their historical import. It has always been a queer project, after all, to steal away iconographies and reformulate them as needed. Even more so, abstraction in the reified world of art production is already its own iconography. It is the language of museums, art history, and high-brow hobbies. Abstraction has a cultural baggage that cannot be ignored, but it can be resignified, repurposed, and fucked up. It is a utopian impulse to transcend the things we see in an immediate field of vision dominated by cisheteropatriarchy, and the aspirations of this impulse cannot be merely discarded. But utopias are best when they are situated amidst the dystopias that surround them.

1. David J. Getsy in conversation with William J. Simmons, "Appearing Differently: Abstraction's Transgender and Queer Capacities, in *Pink Labour on Golden Streets: Queer Art Practices*, eds. Christiane Erharter, Dietmar Schwärzler, Ruby Sircar, and Hans Scheirl (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 43-4.

2. *Ibid.*, 41, 43.

3. Jarret Earnest, review of *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, by David J. Getsy, *The Brooklyn Rail*, February 3, 2016, [http://brooklynrail.org/2016/02/art\\_books/abstract-bodies-sixties-sculpture-in-the-expanded-field-of-gender](http://brooklynrail.org/2016/02/art_books/abstract-bodies-sixties-sculpture-in-the-expanded-field-of-gender).

4. Avram Finkelstein, "FOUND: Queer Archaeology; Queer Abstraction," *The Archive* 60 (Spring 2017): 3-4, <https://issuu.com/leslielohmanmuseum/docs/issue60>.