Queering Form: (Dis)ordering the Distribution of the Sensible through the Realm of Aesthetics

by

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I. “Jamais Vu: A Flâneur’s Dream World”

ARTIST STATEMENT

My work is often characterized by brightly colored, plastic, commercial or utilitarian objects placed or arranged – rather than modified or affixed – such that they can be easily moved, altered, or exchanged. This demonstrates my interest in working with objects as they are, rather than in manipulating or distorting them beyond recognition. This strategy of placing and arranging objects allows for innumerable permutations of presentation and display. Monochromatic fabrics on wood stretchers are in an interactive dialogue with the object arrangements, blurring clear distinctions between painting and sculpture.

Through my work, I foreground a sense of subtle, material potentiality, an idea which I hint at through the first part of the title of my thesis: The French, ‘jamais vu’, which translates literally to ‘never seen.’ As a corollary to the popular phrase ‘déjà vu’, jamais vu alludes to the experience of seeing the same thing so many times that it becomes unrecognizable. It is in this space of unrecognizability within the routine and ordinary that reordering and transformation become possible. Within this framework, by juxtaposing things as they are or recontextualizing them in relation to other objects, a certain space is wedged open to capacitate the emergence of new layers of meaning and alternative modes of seeing/encountering.

A la Charles Baudelaire’s ‘flâneur,’ the figure popularized by Walter Benjamin, and the second part of my thesis title, my artistic process begins with the experience of
meandering through the streets of a city, wandering the aisles of thrift stores, or cruising the ‘free’ section on Craigslist with a sense of openness and joy in the unexpected. In the vein of José Muñoz’s theorization of a queer aesthetics, my practice is inflected by a mode of (queer) cruising – that is, allowing my attraction or excitement, for one reason or another, to guide my selection and collection of objects. While there is a certain grammar to the objects I use, this process isn’t dictated by clear rules or preconceptions about the particular form of the object – it might simply be a color, a texture, a shape that draws me in.

In my studio, through playful and critical experimentation I create highly formal “paintings” that allow new formal and social relationships between objects to emerge. Through the use of the color, texture, and form of “commodity” objects as they are, I evoke a sense of joyfulness, playfulness, skepticism, and ominousness. What does it mean to desire and take pleasure in cheap frivolities? What does it mean to find pleasure in surface? What are the potentials and the limits of a non-representational mode of interaction? Where and how might we generate possibility from sites seemingly emptied of all hope?

While I use objects as they are and do not seek to disguise their original identity or function, I do always use them for their intended purpose nor for their familiar signifying capacities; instead, I focus on amplifying their formal qualities (color, shape, texture) in order to create sculptural paintings from everyday materials. In doing so, I destabilize their normative signifying capacity to reorder meaning and object relations. This practice of learning to see objects in new and unfamiliar ways translates (at least for me) to learning to see social relations in alternative configurations as well.
fig. 1
fig. 12
fig. 13
fig. 18
fig. 19
II. Queering Form: (Dis)ordering the Distribution of the Sensible through the Realm of the Aesthetic

Jamais Vu: Seeing the Familiar Anew

Our contemporary moment has been and continues to be conditioned by exponential technological advancement under neo-capitalism, enabling the proliferation and circulation of images at an ever-increasing speed and frequency.¹ Of course, this is not a brand-new insight. Perhaps the most influential and widely circulated theorization on the subsequent consequences on our contemporary epoch – although there are many from which we might choose – comes from the Marxist philosopher Guy DeBord’s seminal text, *The Society of the Spectacle*. Unlike DeBord, however, my project is not concerned with assigning moral or ethical judgments on image consumption, but rather probing the potentials of the aesthetic realm for new ways of navigating a world overflowing with images and commodities. In this paper, I suggest that a particularly queer turn to the realm of the aesthetic offers a compelling set of strategies for (dis)ordering entrenched social orders and a generous model for seeing and thinking the world anew.

For many, the sense of familiarity with which one now relates to commodities (and that commodities have begun to relate to each other) is not only terrifyingly incapacitating, but emblematic of an immoral or ignorant submission to the ravages of

¹ In *Specters of Marx* (44-48), Jacques Derrida refers to “neo-” rather than “late-” capitalism to show the latter prefix presumes the coming to an end of capitalism, rather than yet another of its permutations. See Frederic Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* for a definition of late-capitalism.
capitalism. If the French adage ‘déjà vu,’ the experience of recognizing one’s present situation as having already been experienced in the past, describes a temporal relation to familiarity that is only retroactively confirmed as always-already-having-happened, then it is a relation beyond one’s control. Any hope to change one’s present is futile; it has, in the past, already happened. In contrast, *jamais vu*, translates literally as ‘never seen’; however, understood more expansively, it is the experiencing of something as if for the first time, despite knowing one has experienced it before. Thus, *jamais vu* describes the loss of a stable relation to the familiar. For one experiencing *jamais vu*, the same thing seen so many times before suddenly becomes utterly unrecognizable. For example: took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took took.

For psychologists, such an experience constitutes the designation of a psychological disorder; however, I see in it a radical potentiality. *Jamais vu* precipitates a moment of unintelligibility as the rigidity of normativizing strictures on the semiotics of a sign loosen – if only briefly – to allow us to ask new questions and imagine new meanings for even the most stabilized and naturalized of experiences, concepts, objects, and social relations.

Rather than engaging in a direct and oppositional critique of the status quo (which would ultimately structure the conditions of any new possibilities around an ontology of disavowal and transgression), I am interested in the ways in which individuals, seemingly against the odds, have created, found, or reappropriated their contemporary conditions into hopeful openings. As José Esteban Muñoz has shown, utopic thinking need not necessitate a naïve nor tacitly complicit project; in its very yearning for something other than what is “the prison house” of the “here and now” (1), such a paradigm proclaims that what we have is not enough. In this essay, I hope to
deploy a similar mode of reading the world – that is, a form of criticism that does not seek to challenge the validity of established and dominant critiques but moves beyond in the hopes of seeing things in a new way, to see things other than; in short, to see more queerly.

**Reparative Reading Practices: “A Possibility Amongst Possibilities”**

In her book *Touching Feeling*, the queer theorist Eve Sedgwick considers the divergent conditions and limits of theoretically opposing modes of critique. She discusses two principal reading practices: the paranoid or suspicious and the reparative or depressive. Sedgwick derives her formulation of the former of these two modalities from the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s theorization of “the hermeneutics of suspicion.” Sedgwick notes that despite such hermeneutics’ “very productive critical habits” (124) – exemplified in the thinking of philosophers such as Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud – it has since become “a mandatory injunction rather than a possibility among other possibilities” (125). In its present-day conflation with criticism, other theoretical and critical modes of thinking have come to be seen as ignorant, naïve, or complacent, which – for both Sedgwick and myself – demarcates the boundaries of “ethical” modes of thought and restricts the radical potential found in alternative critical analyses.

Concerned with the broad, overreaching, and widely-accepted domination of paranoid reading practices within theoretical criticism, Sedgwick endeavors to wedge open space for alternative reading practices. She does so through Melanie Klein’s turn to a formulation of positions, rather than fixed structures, as an alternative framework grounded in “changing and heterogeneous relational stances” (Sedgwick, 128). In
particular, Sedgwick is interested in Klein’s theorization of the “depressive position” as one which operates as “an anxiety-mitigating achievement […] to use one’s own resources to assemble or ‘repair’” (128). However, acknowledging the effectivity of the depressive position might well rest on the prior employment of some paranoid reading, Sedgwick is not interested in an outright rejection of the paranoid position. It bears repeating that neither Sedgwick nor myself are interested in a simple reversal through which the depressive position comes to solely occupy or reign over critical methodologies, but to highlight the effectivity of other models in tandem with the paranoid.

The first of Sedgwick’s loose set of the paranoia’s defining characteristics is its anticipatory stance. For Sedgwick, this stance necessitates that “there must be no bad surprises” (130), which in turn entails the enactment of its second characteristic: reflexivity and mimesis. In attempting to eradicate the possibility of “bad surprises,” a paranoid reading seeks “to understand only by imitation,” the result of which “circumscribes its potential as medium of political or cultural struggle” (Sedgwick, 128). In other words, paranoia produces thinking constrained by a need to counter the known threats rather than imagine unknown potentialities. Sedgwick reiterates this point through Klein’s theorization of the depressive position as “seeking pleasure” rather than the paranoid’s attempts at “forestalling pain” (128). Rather than distinguishing these two modes as entirely exclusive from one another, Sedgwick notes that both share a desire for looking, though for her, the paranoid seeks knowledge which asserts itself as “truth.” This leads to paranoia’s final characteristic, its faith in exposure: “as though to make something visible as a problem were, if not a mere hop, skip, and jump away from getting it solved…” (Sedgwick, 128). In locating exposure as its tacit goal, paranoid
reading practices seemingly operate on a two-fold presumption: that violence is not already (hyper)visible and “an infinite reservoir of naïveté in those who make up the audience for these unveilings” (Sedgwick, 141). Here Sedgwick elucidates a critical point undergirding the paranoid stance – that is, a self-distancing achieved by the paranoid reader from the violence and the perpetrators of violence whom it seeks to reveal.

As an example of Sedgwick’s defense of reparative reading practices, I’d like to reproduce a particularly compelling passage:

Reparative motives, once they become explicit, are inadmissible in paranoid theory both because they are about pleasure (“merely aesthetic”) and because they are frankly ameliorative (“merely reformist”). What makes pleasure and amelioration so “mere”? Only the exclusiveness of paranoia’s faith in demystifying exposure: only its cruel and contemptuous assumption that the one thing lacking for global revolution, explosion of gender roles, or whatever, is people’s (that is, other people’s) having the painful effects of their oppression, poverty, or deludedness sufficiently exacerbated to make the pain conscious (as if otherwise it wouldn’t have been) and intolerable (as if intolerable situations were famous for generating excellent solutions). (144)

Rather than performing a disavowal of the charges of being “…about pleasure (‘merely aesthetic’) and… ameliorative (‘merely reformist’)” which are levied at the reparative position, Sedgwick embodies a quintessentially queer strategy of reclamation and reversal to take up these supposed inadequacies as essential to reparative reading practices’ generative force. Though allowing us to linger on these traits’ “mere-ness” by reframing the charges in the form of a question, Sedgwick doesn’t explicitly detail how or in what ways the pleasurable and the aesthetic are grander than meets the eye. Yet, it is Sedgwick’s lucid theorization of reparative reading practices’ capacity to show “the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture – even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them”
which enables my elaboration of aesthetic potential. It is my hope and ambition to elucidate that, in fact, “the aesthetic” and the “pleasurable” are anything but “mere.”

Queer Aesthetics: Cruising the Ornamental & the Quotidian

How I conceptualize and take up queerness in this essay begins with its articulation by José Muñoz in Cruising Utopia as “a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” (1). In taking up queerness as a mode of being rather than an identification to this or that sexuality, I aim to draw attention to what I believe is queerness’ more fundamental and generative capacity to disrupt entrenched notions of being in the world and its attendant hegemonies of power. It is critical to highlight, however, that as a desirous mode, queerness is intimately intertwined with the dynamics of sexuality and those who enact such a mode of being in the world are, more often than not, not heterosexual. For Muñoz, as a form of longing, desire is indicative of and contingent upon an openness to hope which, in turn, he argues is inherently oriented towards a futural temporality rather than a fixation on the here and now. Imagining queerness in this way – as characterized by an openness to the unexpected, to surprise, to pleasure, and to “something other” rather than a simple “not this” – is perhaps why it is in the realm of the queer aesthetic that I have most frequently found the most invigorating proposals for enacting a new world.

These characteristics are also perhaps why cruising – traditionally understood as seeking anonymous (gay) sex in the public sphere – might be regarded as characteristically queer. Yet, what Muñoz finds queer in cruising is not only its
orientation towards non-normative sexual encounters, but a more critically essential openness to the unexpected. Informed by the work of the philosopher, Ernest Bloch, Muñoz calls for a mode of cruising that is attentive to “varied potentialities” and makes space for the inclusion of “both the ornamental and the quotidian” (1) as sites of potentiality in ways that might be otherwise overlooked or disregarded. If for Marxists (via a paranoid reading), the quotidian and the ornamental are the shiny façade of capitalist production, Bloch (via a reparative reading) finds in the non-utilitarianism of the ornamental a potential that is in excess of the capitalist machinery that produces it. It is apt to note that it is this broadened conception of cruising which informs the very (reparative) reading practices of queer aesthetics. Just as Bloch ‘cruises’ for an alternative reading of the ornamental and the quotidian – symbolic of capitalism for a Marxist audience – queer aesthetics takes as its objects of analysis the practices and products of artists (and “non-artists”) working across and within diverse genres and identity positions, even and perhaps especially, those products and thinkers otherwise presumed to be antithetical to queer politics. As a mode of practice rather than a categorization of artists working from identity positions, queer aesthetics does not confine its scope of analysis to the artwork of queer artists – though the artists Muñoz offers as examples; such as, Frank O’Hara, Félix González-Torres, and Andy Warhol were queer.

Thinking with the Bloch’s theorization of the ornament(al) and the quotidian as a site of potentiality, Muñoz reads O’Hara’s poem “Having a Coke with You” alongside Warhol’s paintings of Coke bottles (see slide 1) as highlighting a queer mode of seeing. For Muñoz, these artists’ act of displacing a quotidian (mass-produced, commercial) object such as a Coke bottle from its everyday context – where it might primarily represent “alienated production and consumption” – to the realm of the aesthetic, allows
them to “detect something else in the object… an opening and indeterminacy in what for many people is a locked-down dead commodity” (9). While Muñoz is fully aware of existing critiques of O’Hara and Warhol and their work as valorizing mass-production and commodity culture, he is instead interested in elucidating what he sees as a “queer relationality” made possible by the most quotidian act: the sharing a bottle of Coke (6).

The Flâneur, the Marketplace, & the Exorcist

A point of historical antecedence that productively illuminates the particularly intimate relationship between cruising, queerness, and the aesthetic realm in which I am interested might be found in Walter Benjamin’s book, Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism. Placing the work of the French poet, Charles Baudelaire, alongside a diverse set of cultural, historical, and artistic phenomena in late nineteenth-century Paris, Benjamin elucidates a nuanced analysis of the conditions and consequences of a modern city’s rapidly changing urban landscape. A central figure in Benjamin’s analysis is the flâneur, which translates from its French origins to mean “stroller” or “wanderer.” Though the term’s coinage in the early nineteenth-century is attributed to Baudelaire, it is through Benjamin, whose efforts to further define and consider the implications of the flâneur, that it has come to enter the popular lexicon – although certainly less so than the closely associated term: “dandy.”

While their flamboyant presentation and aimless meandering allows the two to be easily confused, the flâneur can be distinguished from the dandy via an observant-participant analysis of their relation to the crowd. In distinction to the dandy, who was only concerned with himself, the flânuer was deeply fascinated by the crowd. Benjamin
also differentiates the flâneur (for whom “the joy of watching is triumphant” (69)) from a “badaud,” or “gawker,” on the basis that the flâneur always retains possession of individuality, while a badaud loses it to the outside world. Equipped with an assured possession of self, the flâneur was capable of both moving with ease through the streets of Paris and taking enjoyment in its crowds of people. Benjamin reproduces Friedrich Engels’ own writing on the crowd, for whom the individual passer-by demonstrated a “brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest” (qtd. in Die Lage der arbeitenden… 121). However true this observation of the crowd may be for Engels, Benjamin’s account of the flâneur’s fascination with (and as part of) the crowd suggests a skirting of such “brutality,” while simultaneously maintains a sense of indifference to the particularities of its pedestrians and locale. Though content to wander the streets, it was in the Paris Arcades that the flâneur was most at home.

The Paris Arcades, or the indoor-outdoor, glass-covered, marble-floored, transitory passageways built in the fifteen years following 1822, were a byproduct of the boom in the textile trade and technological advancements which brought about the use of iron in architectural construction. In a passing critique of the aestheticization of capitalism, Benjamin writes that the arcades were populated with the storefronts of the luxury-goods trade which “…displayed Art in the service of the salesman” (157). Though the emergence of the Paris Arcades was conditioned by and intended for commercial ends, Benjamin highlights that the flâneur puts the arcades to use in their own way: as a “dwelling-space” filled with the aesthetic enjoyment of window-shopping. Seen through a traditional Marxist paradigm, the flâneur’s aesthetic enjoyment via window-shopping in the Paris Arcades and fascinated, individualized indifference to those who make up the crowd is only primarily made possible for the bourgeoisie class.
However, I am interested in drawing out another reading – one which sees in the flâneur, on the one hand, the potentials of a non-hostile indifference to others and, on the other hand, a non-possessive, non-utilitarian aesthetic appreciation.

Although the flâneur is not the heroic figure of a Marxist crusader (and in fact, easily argued to be quite its opposite), I detect in Benjamin’s own fascination with the flâneur – as further demonstrated throughout his unfinished work, *The Arcades Project* – that despite this, some radical potentiality might still be drawn. Benjamin describes the modern city’s bombardment of the passerby’s total sensory system as a “shock factor” ([Charles Baudelaire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Baudelaire) 117), which elicited two modes of embodied response: *erlebnis*, understood as a shock-induced anesthesia (not unlike the alienation of the worker from his labor), and *erfahrung*, more positively characterized in the flâneur’s sense of freedom of mobility or cruising amidst all that the city offers. The flâneur is neither resistant to the commoditized marketplace nor consumed by it: “Empathy with the commodity is fundamentally empathy with exchange value itself. The flâneur is the virtuoso of this empathy. He takes the concept of marketability itself for a stroll. Just as his final ambit is the department store, his last incarnation is the sandwich-man” ([Benjamin, *Arcades Project*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Arcades_Project) 448). Benjamin goes on to reproduce a segment of Pierre Larousse’s *Grand Dictionnaire universel* to draw attention not to the flâneur as a rabid shopper, but an observant stroller “examining the displays of goods, surveying the shoppers seated before the doors of cafés… They would be able to tell you if Goupil or Deforge have put out a new print or a new painting, and if Barbedienne has repositioned a vase or an arrangement…” ([qtd. in *Grand Dictionnaire*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Dictionnaire_Universel) 436). Thus, we see in the flâneur a profound attentiveness to looking at the quotidian world as a set of aesthetic delights without the epistemic limitations of moral judgment.
Benjamin’s description of the flâneur’s empathy with the commodity (with exchange-value) is a relation which might easily be equated as empathy with the Devil. As Marx endeavored to show: it is use-value that is pure and good, and exchange-value that is deceitful and bad. Yet, in *Specters of Marx*, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida questions the stability of this distinction between use-value and exchange-value, which Leftists have come – through an inheritance of Marx – to conclude. “But whence comes the certainty concerning the previous phase, that of this supposed use-value, precisely, a use-value purified of everything that makes for exchange-value and the commodity form?” (Derrida, 200). He is quick to clarify that “it is not a matter here of negating a use-value or the necessity of referring to it” (200), but of destabilizing its supposed purity.

Marx’s insistence that the commodity (exchange-value) came onto stage after objects of use-value rests upon the establishment of an ontology, which is, in itself, an exorcism in the form of a conjuration. Instead, Derrida suggests that “the commodity is inscribed before being inscribed” (200), that the very conditions for the emergence of “exchange and commerce (by whatever name one calls it, meaning itself, value, culture, spirit [, signification, the world, the relation to the other, and first of all the simple form and trace of the other)” (201-202), are found in use-value itself. This is not to say that use-value and exchange-value are equivalents, but that the latter “affects in advance the use-value of the wooden table” (Derrida, 201).

Thus, from this position, from which there is no longer a “simple opposition between presence and absence, actuality and inactuality, sensuous and supersensible, another approach to differences must structure (‘conceptually and really’) the field that has thus been re-opened” (Derrida, 204). That is to say, if the relation between things (or the
commerce between commodities) is understood as the phantasmagorization of social
relations, rather than attempt a futile exorcism of the taint of exchange-value in the
hopes of returning to use-value’s (fictitious) state of original purity (the religious
resonances of which are not lost on Derrida), it is necessary to develop new analytic
models for negotiating commodity relations.

**Towards the Aesthetic as Rupture in the Distribution of the Sensible**

In *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, the French philosopher,
Jacques Rancière articulates an argument for the profound relationship between the
aesthetic and the political in a manner which might be productively read alongside
Muñoz’s own. Much in the same way that Muñoz endeavors to acknowledge, yet move
beyond, a Marxist insistence on reading a commodity object as always-already (and only)
a product of alienated labor and capitalist production, in an effort to think otherwise,
Rancière begins by acknowledging and setting aside a Benjaminian reading of aesthetics
put to use for “the perverse commandeering of politics by a will to art” (13). For
Rancière, if *aesthetics* is “the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to
sense experience” (13), then *politics* – as that which is concerned with what is seen and
can be said, with who can see and speak – is intimately intertwined with aesthetics.

In his introduction to *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Gabriel Rockhill describes what
Rancière calls “the distribution of the sensible” as “the system of divisions and
boundaries that define, among other things, what is visible and audible within a
particular aesthetico-political regime” (12). While the *police* (the social order) establish and
enforce the conditions of the sensible’s distribution, it is the dialectical interplay between
two forms of *dissensus* – aesthetics and politics – which is capable of disrupting this distribution. To take one of many examples, we might consider the ways in which the distribution of the sensible has normatively delimited conceptions of ‘violence’ to the realm of the physical.

Within the traditional Westernized formulation of the category of ‘Art,’ Rancière identifies three major historical regimes: the ethical regime of images; the representative regime; and the aesthetic regime. The former-most of these, the ethical regime, arrives to us via Platonic thought and is characterized by questions concerning images’ origin (which inevitably expands to an evaluation of their ‘truthfulness’) and purpose. The central concern of this regime was how images affect the ethos of the community. Developed by Aristotle, the representative regime is characterized by mimesis which entails “a pragmatic principle that isolates […] particular forms of art that produce specific entities called ‘imitations’” (Rancière, 22) which are not bounded by ethical utility, but its own evaluative criteria. Lastly, the aesthetic regime “strictly identifies art in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres” (Rancière, 22). Yet, Rancière suggests this is only made possible by the destruction of the barrier separating it from any other mode of work. Here we find the central paradox at the heart of the aesthetic regime: at one and the same time, art is supremely singular from and identical to life. While this paradox simultaneously structures and animates artists’ practices under the aesthetic regime, Rancière argues that the autonomy of art from the realm of the everyday is essential to maintaining the political potentials of the aesthetic. As I demonstrated above, for Muñoz it was the displacement of the quotidian object from the realm of the everyday to the realm of the aesthetic that allowed it to be seen anew.
Muñoz extrapolates this theory through an analysis of the artist Jim Hodges’ large-scale paintings (see slide 2), which depict nature through both the abstraction of camouflage patterns and the “realistic” representation of branches, stems, and flowers. Muñoz argues that “a natural representational order as restrictive directive is being redeployed as dancing artifice that disrupts the tyranny of nature as a coercive mechanism” (140). A utilitarian or representational reading of camouflage might delimit its meaning to “hunting and militarism;” however, by moving into the aesthetic realm, “the form is reactivated and made to perform in ways that do not correspond to the coercive and pragmatic structures of the performance principle” (Muñoz, 138). Warhol and Hodges embody a queer aesthetic for Muñoz – that is, a mode of daydreaming and desire for ornamentation which functions as a refusal of the here and now and questions the regime of the supposedly “natural.”

**Queer Formalism: Form as Attack and Play**

Muñoz’s articulation of a queer aesthetic practice is later taken up and echoed in a conversation on “Queer Formalism” between the queer theorist, art critic, and writer, Jennifer Doyle, and the art historian and critic, David Getsy. This conversation and Queer Formalism more broadly demonstrate how a reparative reading of objects and aesthetics offers queer politics new potentialities. Through performing a reparative reading of 1960s Minimalism, Getsy and Doyle recover and elucidate – beyond its normative, canonized meaning – a generative set of strategies of resistance. If, as Getsy begins the interview by noting, “desire, the sexual, and the gendered operate beyond their straightforward depictions,” then, in moving beyond just the realm of figurative and
iconographic representation, perhaps we might come to better understand the social conditions which reinforce and naturalize their normative definition. As an example, Getsy argues sculpture and performance are intimately tied to the bodily relations between viewer and object and amongst viewers, and consequentially, these art forms “inescapably activate questions about gender and sexuality.”

In another example, Doyle describes the flipping of all the books in Andy Warhol’s house such that their spines faced the wall rather than outward to the room. In doing so, she suggests a refusal – of the book’s expected display, of a certain “practical” logic – is performed that “produces a kind of anonymous cruising in that the relation with the object occurs in willful ignorance of the book’s title, author, and cultural positioning.” This move is not reliant upon a disavowal of the particular books in Warhol’s collection, but instead, strategically employs minute recontextualization, making use of the books as they are and in doing so, “[turns] to form as an attack – and as playful” (italics mine).

Getsy’s brief art historical genealogy of Queer Formalism encompasses earlier art historical movements; such as, Minimalism, Camp, and even nineteenth-century Aestheticism on the basis that they share practices which “[establish] meaning through use” rather than operating through naturalized or normative meaning. This shared strategy: “to see a material or an object in a different way – against or to the side of its intended use – is a queer tactic.” Getsy asserts the origins of Camp aesthetic practices might be found in Aestheticism (whose figureheads include the likes of Oscar Wilde), which insisted upon experience and form, the contingency of meaning, and the refusal of the instrumentalization of art towards utilitarian or illustrative ends.
As an art historical movement, Minimalism and its advocates have been derided for perpetuating a hyper-masculine agenda that is ungrounded from material realities. Rather than challenging the validity of these critiques, Getsy offers another reading. In particular, he highlights Minimalism’s formal strategies; such as, the “refusal of convention and medium, [...] the hyperbolic performance of those rules as a means of parody/critique and – most of all – the shift of emphasis from maker to user.” Doyle goes on to argue that the refusal of representation enacts a radically feminist and anti-racist resistance to “the vision which demands that a person’s being is reduced to what they are (as if the latter could be known) …” In its refusal of representation and turn to abstraction, works grouped under the moniker of Queer Formalism allow viewers a more spacious relationality – one that is not predicated upon ascertaining figurative identification, and instead, opens up a “semantic space and [establishes] divergent sites of identification…”

The work of Félix González-Torres – a queer, Cuban-born conceptual artist, who lost his life to AIDS – exemplifies the spacious relationality and potential for “divergent identification” that Queer Formalism recognizes in Minimalist strategies. Much of González-Torres’ work is characterized by formal strategies of minutely (if at all) altering, manipulating, juxtaposing, and/or repeating quotidian, commercial objects; such as, clocks, candy wrappers, stacks of paper, and string lights. Despite being presented as– they-are, these objects are transformed into something entirely other. I’d like to draw particular attention to one piece within a body of his work colloquially known as “candy pieces.” Created in 1991, the year González-Torres’ lover, Ross Laycock, passed away due to AIDS-related complications, Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) (see slide 3) consists solely of individually, brightly wrapped candies spilled into a pile in
the corner of a room. The quantity of candies was determined by Laycock’s healthy weight (175 pounds); however, invited to take a candy from the pile, viewers’ engagement with the work slowly diminishes its weight, mirroring the devastating effects of AIDS on Laycock’s body. Though a critique of the U.S. government’s complicity in the spread of AIDS and its disproportional decimation of black, brown, and queer lives can be read through Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), González-Torres employs form (the quotidian, mass-produced, commodity candy) in a manner that is – at least at first glance – playful and fun. He allows and encourages viewers to take pleasure in the candies’ aesthetic beauty and edible sweetness whether or not they are aware of the conditions that led to the work’s creation.

SEEING QUEERLY NOW: NEW FORMS, NEW RELATIONS

González-Torres’ artistic strategies and material forms offer a succinct concatenation of the themes which make up my argument. Like the reparative position and cruising, the meaning of González-Torres’ works is contingent upon viewers’ own openness to the unexpected, to both good and bad surprises. González-Torres’ use of pieces of candy speaks to a reparative reading practice which acknowledges (if not celebrates) rather than disavows the aesthetic pleasure of the quotidian, the commercial, the mass-produced. Yet, by simultaneously making use of pieces of candy as they are normatively intended (as edible delicacies) and as a non-figurative representation of his former lover, González-Torres invites viewers to see in new ways. Through the realm of the aesthetic, he illustrates the potential for commodities to mean something else and be deployed towards different, non-utilitarian ends. In other words, he disrupts the
distribution of the sensible. González-Torres shows critiques of the status quo need not always come to us through paranoia, nor shock, nor pain, but that sometimes, when we allow ourselves to be open to the unexpected, aesthetic beauty, play, and enjoyment can be critically powerful modalities.

As I wrote this, I felt the force of my own self-critical paranoia: the incessant need to anticipate critique(s) and to defend against known threats. Why are reparative reading practices and the desire to take pleasure and enjoyment in the aesthetic compelling political strategies for me? For whom and under what conditions is this possible? What are the consequences of abstracting utilitarian, quotidian, or otherwise labor-based objects into aesthetic forms? Again, for whom and under what conditions is this possible? How does such a theory contend with the intimate relationship of abstraction to the history of slavery and capitalism? What does it mean to question the political force of representation at the same time that black artists are increasingly coming to access and gain prominence in the art-world through self-representation? While I do not yet have answers to this unexhaustive list of concerning questions – and perhaps I will come to find that those answers will prove to fundamentally undermine my project – I have written this in the hopes that we might allow ourselves to continue to see and think the world anew, to see and think the world otherwise.
SLIDES:


TEXTS:


