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Bodies in Repose

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Bodies in Repose

by

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“To my darling...”

In 1954, Liberace gifted his boy toy du jour a cigarette case inscribed “To my darling...”, signed with a flowing “L” below. Tucked away inside, the message would have stayed hidden if not for a police investigation following a domestic dispute, the flustered young man forced to explain the nature of the gift. When the Hollywood gossip rag *Rave* caught wind of the flamboyant maestro's sexual deviance, they ran a front page exposé detailing the alleged backstage frolics with young men recruited for his pleasure. It was the denouement of Hollywood's Golden Age, a time filled with closets and codes, in a city that served as the hotbed of supposed Communist affiliation according to the FBI—rumor, hearsay and handshakes providing most of the evidence. The Motion Picture Production Code, the system of censorship more commonly known as the Hays Code, deemed what was and was not appropriate for films to articulate. Hollywood thus became a site for hidden messages embedded deep within both the subtext of the plot, and the physical space of the architecture and set design, such as the implied homosexuality of Hitchcock's *Rope* or the rich interiors and vivid lighting of Douglas Sirk's melodramas—the only way to articulate all that which could not be said.

Simultaneously under this age of McCarthyism, the cross-dressing FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, rumored to be a homosexual himself, launched a lesser-known but parallel campaign termed the Lavender Scare, a movement that oversaw the removal of hundreds of suspected homosexuals from the State Department, conflating sexual difference with matters of national security. As numerous psychological journals further attempted to link sexual difference to more extreme political agendas, sexuality became a threat, forcing practices deemed subversive to go deeper underground. Codes became the means by which many gay, lesbian, and transgendered

individuals survived throughout the following decades, a network of information accessed only by covert glances and hidden meanings.

Despite it all, the figures of the era remain ever-present in contemporary mainstream gay male culture—Joan Crawford's transformation into a camp icon in the 1980s film *Mommie Dearest*, to Liberace's recent revival by Steven Soderbergh's *Behind the Candelabra*. In both examples, the question of identity becomes one that is handed down through the nostalgia of those past cultural forms.¹ And yet the question remains as to what these inherited closeted forms mean for the present, at a time when the politics of visibility have transformed into the politics of bureaucratic equality.

Power structures define bodies, imposing regulations, desires, and dreams. Not only does the state dictate laws, but the basic organization of society—from urban planning to corporate finance—structures everyday life. Hollywood might have provided archetypes for how we live, love, and aspire, yet its narratives are dictated from outside by hegemonic forces that indicate right and wrong ways for bodies to behave. How can one make sense of a subject's affective potential and the real emotional responses elicited by power? How do bodies make sense of difference, of otherness?

I am, etc.

Sixty-some years later: I'm a late-twenty-something living in New York. The heyday of cruising has passed, as have hundreds of thousands of gay men at the hands of AIDS along the

1 David M. Halperin writes extensively of a gay male culture that is formed and perpetuated within gay communities, often with the older generation serving as a cultural model. But more interestingly, he also notes of some forms that persist and develop beyond or before these sites, such as the oft-cited stereotype of young gay men's love for musicals. David M. Halperin, *How to be Gay* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012).

way. The West Village piers have been replaced by a jogging path for the ultra wealthy. Apps like Grindr and Scruff now control the circuit of desire, gathering geo-locations and personal information while managing proclivities. Middle-class morality has come full circle, bland consumerism has replaced any hints of radicalism; subversion and subtext are replaced by gay marriage and corporate Pride sponsorships.

Walking through Tribeca, home to my subsidized studio overlooking the Holland Tunnel, I line up with bankers during the lunch hour rush for an overpriced salad before walking to SoHo to buy some Nespresso capsules for an upcoming studio visit—a small gesture of hospitality for the curator. It's August and oppressively hot, the smell of Chinatown garbage lingering long after leaving the neighborhood. Hardly anyone wears clothes, but the ones they do are designer. My eyes scan as I navigate the streets, sweat dripping down my back—I'm carrying too many shopping bags. Bodies are there for me to consume, flesh to be internalized and idealized. All I can do is collect the data: “He was cute,” or, “Look at that huge bulge.” And, as with the years of coding and shame of Liberace's time, where am I in all of this? Just one of eight and a half million people—a stranger, the same.

The political ramifications of homosexuality have changed over the past several decades—and as a twenty-something white middle class New Yorker, sexuality is just another marker of already complex identities. Yet having been born during the height of the AIDS crisis and coming of age during the relative conservatism of George W. Bush's presidency, sexuality remains a complicated burden of both history and duty, as both a cultural precursor with which to contend, and as a political struggle to uphold. As homosexuality is homogenized and made mainstream by

gay marriage and the increasing inclusion of homosexual characters in popular media, one wonders whether the possibility of resistance to dominant ideology that was once felt so strongly as a gay person can still exist. Even if gay culture was rooted in an era of oppression, it was also the revolt against the oppression that made the fight for visibility feel all the more potent.

With this increasing homogenization and political representation, I am also interested in the role complicity plays within these structures, as well as the complicated struggles to redefine the body in a shifting cultural landscape. Popular media is still not produced in the image of a queer, so the question thus becomes how one might experience information through the lens of an other as a means to look for a definition of oneself.

My work looks for a contemporary queer embodiment that is both burdened by history and mediated through images, architecture, culture, and data. Identity can thus be seen as both an inherited, lived form, and one that is constantly being remade in the present, continually redefined as one navigates space and consumes information. Decisions regarding ones own definition of self are constantly monitored by larger structures of power, biometric data, and online profiles.

A Material World

My work employs a variety of media, including altered readymade objects, architectural interventions, sculpture, and photography. The installation becomes a source of meaning—the site, display, and relationship between different works acts as a phrase, with different gestures coalescing into an extended narrative. Laden with emotional and contextual signs, the work resists total exposure or easy comprehension, placing related objects in conversation with each

other to suggest a network of experiences, structures, and impulses. Surfaces serve an important function: quickly read, and glossed over, they operate as style, a camp sensibility that conceals the object's true intentions.² The body is directly called upon through these surfaces—polished aluminum and mirrored glass reflect the viewer, creating a surplus of visual information that dominates the space and allows more subtle gestures to go overlooked.

Reflection and obfuscation become two important attributes of the work, operating as very basic mechanisms of camouflage. Viewing becomes a strategic device, eliciting the desire to see or to be seen; bodies are not just activated by their presence in the space, but by the solicitation of the desire to look, and to consume. Meanwhile, architecture functions as a structuring device, organizing vision through inversion and reflection—the same mirrored surfaces that offer a surplus of information also locate and return the gaze in the acknowledgement of ever-present surveillance. This form of looking also becomes synonymous with “outing,” as to parse the meaning of the object is also to decode it and reveal its queer nature.

Legacies of Minimalism

Interested in that which is left unsaid, my work often connects to the trajectories of Minimalism, leaving objects to act upon bodies in more psychological or unusual ways. With their pristine surfaces and regulated forms, Minimalist sculpture also has the sense of being

² As Susan Sontag defines camp in her 1964 text “Notes on Camp,” she states, “Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization.” For Sontag, Camp is the theatrical presentation of self-image, a way of seeing things only by their surface, which she views as inherently apolitical. I would argue that the surface becomes an alternate site of the political—one that is able to obscure more difficult content and allow it to “pass.” Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 1966), pg. 277.

exclusionary—that in their universalism was a homogenization and rigidity that did not allow for otherness. Artists like Eva Hesse and Hannah Wilke both made work directly following the legacy of the Minimalist sculptors who came to define the industrial masculinity of the 1960s, redefining the object on their own terms. Materials became specific sites of meaning, and the relationship between object and its maker became an important site of the artwork as racial, sexual, and political identity became an increasingly valid line of inquiry for artists working through the 1970s and 80s.

The transformation of a Donald Judd-esque plywood box into a porn movie theater by the artist Tom Burr showed that the language of Minimalism could be used to indicate something else, a soft-spoken indication of what is accessible just beyond the surface. This historical legacy was further queered by artists such as Robert Gober and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, two artists whose historical narratives have become deeply intertwined with the longing, exclusion, and loss felt by the gay community in the wake of AIDS.

Much of this work was formative to me as a gay artist; it was made with an urgency of visibility following the AIDS crisis that no longer exists in the same way for mainstream gay culture, though remains ever more vital for transgendered people and homosexuals of color. However, as the legacy of artists like Gonzalez-Torres becomes more institutionalized, it becomes sweetened, aestheticizing the historicity of the moment and the event to which these artists responded, rather than the urgent crisis of AIDS that threatened the very existence of gay men. What becomes palatable in Gonzalez-Torres's work is death, rather than the gay sex that brought it about.

Questions of institutional critique, by artists such as Michael Asher or Andrea Fraser, are

also part of an important historical lineage in my work. How might an artwork speak both to the body it defines as well as the structures that order it? More recent contemporary artists like Henrik Olesen have used this shared history of marginalization as a form in itself, turning the past into a deeply charged questioning of political and representational power, while others like Danh Vo have used his position as a gay immigrant of color in Denmark to forge more personal and nuanced investigations into the flows of colonialism and capitalism. In both instances, the question that is raised is how the personal might become a site of political power.

To engage these histories is to engage in the complexities of identity itself at a time in which neoliberalism has made subculture and difference marketable. Gonzalez-Torres's candy piles are seen less as a reference to AIDS-related wasting as they are to the participation in a recognizable artwork through its consumption. As AIDS activist and writer Sarah Schulman describes in her 2013 book *Gentrification of the Mind*, gay culture has entered a period she calls “The Crash,” a point when the histories of isolation, struggle, and difference are beginning to be forgotten, usurped, and normalized.³ It is at this contemporary moment that my work functions, questioning the complicity with which the present is accepted as we look back on the histories of struggle. If the post-Crash era seems to normalize once marginalized sexual practices, it does so by normalizing the ways in which these impulses are enacted. Gay marriage, in its monogamy, became a touchstone of the struggle to be reclaimed by the law, and as such, to transform gay sex into gay marriage.

For within this personal contradiction, a moment of agency seems possible, an attempt to make sense of these complicated struggles between selfhood and state. To deny the right to be

³ Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

seen in totality is not necessarily a return to a language of codes, but rather a refusal to be homogenized, a refusal to let go of histories demarcated by absence and death. To embrace these pasts is also to advocate for a future that does not merely make bodies equal, one that acknowledges difference without trying to usurp it.

Bibliography

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Image List

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Christopher Aque, *Repose (an arm)*, 2016, slumped glass on down comforters, 12 x 32 x 32 inches

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Christopher Aque, *Repose (an ass)*, 2016, slumped glass on down comforters, 12 x 32 x 32 inches

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Christopher Aque, *Identity Intelligence (World Trade Center)*, 2016, Super 8 film transferred to HD video on LCD monitor with privacy filter, 5:00 looped, full film can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/164488589>

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Christopher Aque, *Identity Intelligence (World Trade Center)*, 2016, silver gelatin print and acrylic screen print on matboard in aluminum frame, 20-1/4 x 16-1/4 inches

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Christopher Aque, *A Lover's Gaze*, 2016, mirror installed in each corner of a space, installation dimensions variable

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Christopher Aque, Installation views, Hunter MFA Thesis Exhibition, May 19–June 4, 2016



Repose (an arm), 2016



Repose (an ass), 2016



Identity Intelligence (World Trade Center), 2016



Identity Intelligence (World Trade Center), 2016



A Lover's Gaze, 2016



Installation view



Installation view



Installation view