Performing Ourselves at the Center

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The truth is that women have not stopped loving women, and there is no indication that phenomenon will ever go away, but the language and culture of those women remain as variable today as they were in the twentieth century.

Another truth is that patriarchy and its attendant misogyny continue to drive people of all genders to diminish women and those who align themselves strongly with the feminine.

What remains less clear today is the political piece of the equation—where and how does feminism link up with lesbianism today?

Creative Work by:
- Elvis B
- Susana Cook
- Leah Gilliam
- Trish Salah
- Stacy Szymaszek
- Fran Winant
- And More!
This interview sits alongside an extended version edited for Amanda Curreri’s solo exhibition, The Calmest of Us Would Be Lunatics, which took place from January 21–May 8, 2016, at Rochester Art Center, in Rochester, Minnesota. Curreri dug through the archival collection of the Daughters of Bilitis, the first lesbian organization in the country, and their journal, The Ladder, at the Tretter Collection in LGBT Studies at the University of Minnesota. The exhibition is titled after a line in Emily Dickinson’s 1877 letter to Elizabeth Holland which reads, “Had we the first intimation of the Definition of Life, the calmest of us would be Lunatics!” Prompted by the exhibition’s curator, Susannah Magers, I was asked to wear my lesbian/librarian/archivist hat and discuss the interplay of archives and art through the lens of feminism, queerness, and radicalism.

Amanda: Before going into the Tretter Collection, I got up early. It was freezing out, but I went for a run along the Mississippi River. Running for me is a way of getting to know a place, opening up my heart and my eyes. Going into archives is heavy. Some of the material I saw brought on tears. I needed to prepare my whole body. It’s a physical endeavor—digging through files for eight hours—and then I need to be emotionally responsive so I’m not just looking with my brain.

I’ve been working with The Ladder and Daughters of Bilitis for a while, but this has been the first opportunity to pull actual documents into an artwork. I didn’t know what I would find at the Tretter; it’s just one box that they have for Barbara Gittings. They have the full run of The Ladder.

Shawn: Tell me more about “naming” in The Calmest of Us Would Be Lunatics. How does naming affect your work as an artist working in abstraction?
Amanda: Recalling social organizing histories and naming those who have gone before, naming the dead is part of my practice. I think abstraction can get at that.

Shawn: I’m envisioning a conversation between the viewer, you as the artist, and this dead-named object, bringing it back to life—or not even back to life, because that assumes duality, but queerness opens this third/other dimension—this new, possible space of your art. It’s like a portal. It’s like a vagina.

Amanda: [laughs]

Shawn: It’s not a conversation if something doesn’t become a vagina. [laughs]

Amanda: I totally need that in my life. The work has to serve a function if I’m going to put it in public, and that usually means I want to connect with people. There’s something about the gallery space: it’s private; it’s public.

Shawn: I have been very lesbian-centered in my understanding of queer community. Is lesbian an anti-queer concept?

Amanda: I identify as queer as opposed to being a lesbian, though I am fully in love with my partner who is a woman, and women are whom I am attracted to. It’s less about the gender, and more about the multiplicity. The politics I’m so excited about in the Daughters of Bilitis archives are the nuts and bolts of necessary organizing for a community that goes from invisibility to visibility. I have lots of gender queer friends, trans friends, and I think somehow I identify with the flexibility of the term queer. Maybe because of my late coming-out, or because I haven’t stayed in one place for that long, other than San Francisco.

Shawn: The politics of location is not only geographic, but lives in our bodies and our selves. In Adrienne Rich’s essay “Notes Toward a Politics of Location,” she writes: “A movement for change lives in feelings, actions, and words . . . abstract thinking, narrow tribal loyalties, every kind of self-righteousness, the arrogance of believing ourselves at the center. Yet how, except through ourselves, do we discover what moves other people to change?”
Amanda: I really like how within that one quote Rich doesn’t choose sides. She talks about the problems of tribalism, but also, how else can we deal with this, unless we do it from inside, from the center, from the self. Within that, there’s this calm lunatics’ contradiction thing going on, where it’s both a visceral, lived intentionality, and still an experiment.

Adrienne Rich is one of the effigies in the Eff series of paintings. The painting for her is from her book *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems 1978-1981.* Rich pulls people up and weaves them in her constellation. It’s instinctual, and tempered with strategy, and then instinctual again; this way of performing myself at the core of the work. It just is.

Shawn: How do you think the conversation shifts with an audience in Minnesota?

Amanda: I’m going to add a work that I did in Korea called *Re-screening of KBS’s Cancelled Club Daughters of Bilitis (2011)*, which will be showing in the galleries at Rochester Art Center [in Minnesota]. It’s a ripped YouTube video that I screen, on a 60-minute loop, of a TV show that was cancelled in Korea the summer before I was headed there to be in their 2011 International Incheon Woman Artists’ Biennale.

Shawn: Cancelled!

Amanda: I was digging, and I find this TV program in Korea, that’s using Daughters of Bilitis in their title, re-appropriated for their needs, to make their first *The L Word*, their first lesbian drama for TV. The piece I ended up showing at the biennale was a re-screening of *Club Daughters of Bilitis* on a loop. The sponsor of the biennale was the same TV channel, KBS, which cancelled the TV show. It’s a fascinating “archive-alive” moment where a culture took an archive and put it to use.

Shawn: Does performance elicit a queer conversation?

Amanda: That’s one of the points of recognition—the performance of self in the work. When you try to step into the uncomfortable territory, it becomes a performance whether or not people participate or engage.
Shawn: It feels as if we're in some ways paying homage, and proving ourselves, to this culture of queers who are the queers who decide queerness.

Amanda: It comes back to naming, and identity, and hoping that queer is inclusive. The way color formally works, in color theory, is by way of difference. You put two different colors next to one another, and you recognize their properties and learn from them. It activates and energizes synapses in your brain, activating space for difference.