TEN QUEER THESES ON ABSTRACTION

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1. Queer abstraction is an abstraction.

"Queer abstraction," like all categories, will fail us in the end even though it has served to make things possible and imaginable. You will be frustrated and fruitless if you go searching for a singular definition of "queer abstraction"—let alone anything resembling a style, an iconography, or a movement. Nevertheless, it has been used as a good-enough shorthand for the many ways in which both artists and viewers have invested abstraction with queer perspectives and priorities.

To nominate something as "queer" is to cast aspersion on it as being unnatural, incorrect, wrong, or abnormal. Anything called "queer" is looked at with suspicion and intensified scrutiny—no matter who or what receives the performative force of this insult. Indeed, it was the fear that this slur could be so easily and widely applied (and spark such distrust in anything so named) that increased its potency and the ferocity of phobic defenses against it. As the most visible and mobile manifestation of the policing of the boundaries of the "normal," the "natural," and "common" sense, the label "queer" was historically used to tyrannize those who loved, desired, or lived differently.

When lesbian, gay, and bisexual activists and thinkers rejected the presumption that they should assimilate and aspire to be merely tolerated, they embraced "queer" as a rallying cry. They upheld as a virtue their failure to fit into the normal. Decrying the assumption that there was only one way to live, to be, to desire, or to love, they challenged the ways in which normativity was policed, proclaimed, and inculcated. While "queer" is often used interchangeably with lesbian, gay, and/or bisexual, the concept as I am outlining here is a self-chosen political and personal stance deriving from a critical suspicion of normativity and of assimilations into it. To reclaim the insult "queer" is to turn it (and the force of its suspicion) back against the presumption that the normal is stable, agreed upon, or desirable. Anything claimed as queer defiantly stands to the side of the normal and demands witnessing of its exclusions and partiality. From this perspective, "queer" is better understood as tactically *adjectival*.[1] It simultaneously performs an infectious transmutation and declares an oppositional stance. Necessarily, its uses and contours shift in relation to the ways in which normativity is constantly and covertly reinstalled, redeployed, and defended. For instance, an action, a mood, a love, a desire that was queer a century ago might not be so today, and vice versa. Something queer in one place is unremarkable in another. Yesterday's queer insurgent can be today's gatekeeper of the new respectability.[2] Queer stances are ineluctably contingent, mobile, viral, and plural. However, the inability to make "queer" a stable noun—that is, to settle on a singular, immediately recognizable definition—is not the deficiency but rather the strength that comes with its deployment as a tactic of resistance.

Historically, when queer activism, art, and thought have sought to unsettle normativity, this has often manifested itself through a strategy of confrontational visibility. The political appropriation of "queer" gained traction in the first decade of the ongoing AIDS crisis, when it became clear that such visibility was a matter of life and death. The "in-your-face" tactics of groups like ACT-UP, Lesbian Avengers, Gran Fury, or fierce pussy disrupted public and art spaces alike, and they remain foundational to an understanding of queer art practices. Working in distinction (but not opposition) to such demands to be seen, some artists have instead explored afiguration and non-representational art for the ways in which they could be used subversively and expansively.[3] What we might call "queer abstraction" addresses the same desire to work from queer experience and queer revolt. However, its priorities often emerge from a

suspicion of representation, from a striving to vex visual recognition, and/or from a desire to find a more open and variable mode of imaging and imagining relations.

In its forgoing of representation and its embrace of afiguration, abstraction makes room for a different kind of sedition against the imposition of normativity. Rather than rendering recognizable bodies, abstraction stages relationships among forms and their contexts, allowing us to see differently the ways in which those relationships can unfold. That is, abstraction is about relations, and a queer investment in abstraction can be a way to allegorize social relations through a playing out of formal relations. Distinct forms of embodiment, deviating desires, and new ways of relating to bodies can be proposed through abstraction. Artists who turn to abstraction as a more open or apt way of subverting the "normal" (or a more pleasurable way of proposing its abandonment) all do so differently. We must attend to the particularities of the ways in which an artwork, an artist, or a viewer deploys queer tactics.[4] How, in other words, do they use the openness of abstraction to do such things as flout proprieties, refuse to aspire to being normal, uphold difference, eroticize capaciously, or disrupt assimilation? Abstraction turns away from the imitation of how the world looks, and instead it creates an alternative in which to imagine and image other ways of being and relating. As the filmmaker Barbara Hammer once wrote, "Abstract or nonrepresentational art appeals to me for several reasons. I have deeper emotions when I'm working beyond realism because there are no limits. […] I am not presenting a statement or an essay, but a more amorphous work which allows the maker and the viewer the *pleasure of discovery.*"[5] Queer abstractions are multitude. The abstract notion of "queer abstraction" is generative because it is not singular, not easily captured, and unforeclosed. It names only an open-ended provocation—one that is more radical to espouse as indefinite, capacious, and unending.

2. Abstraction's queer appeal, for some, is that it models a resistance to the daily experience of surveillance and scrutiny.

Both the long history of structural homophobia and the "politics of visibility" that characterized insurgent history of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer social movements have privileged recognizability.[6] Whether to surveil, to attack, to uphold, or to connect, the pressure to make oneself visible as not-normal has been, itself, the norm. Visibility is politically urgent, there is no doubt. But, as Michel Foucault once remarked, "Visibility is a trap."[7] LGB history has organized itself around metaphors for becoming visible, such as "coming out." This was characterized as both a matter of personal liberation and as a demand for demographic recognition. While such metaphors for becoming visible have been important politically and personally to many, we have to remember that the imperative to make oneself seen is different than loving one's own queer life. The "come out" visual imperative is not equally effective, available, safe, pleasurable, or political for all—especially for subjects living at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities or for those living in contexts different from the United States, Western Europe, and their urban centers.[8] Some would cast tactics of opacity and camouflage as self-denial, self-loathing, or fear. Such a chauvinist disregard for other contexts, for the complexities of other lives, and for the insurgency of these tactics is merely another imposition of normativity, albeit swathed in rainbow. Disclosure cannot be compulsory, for the politics of visibility also benefit protocols of surveillance.

However much the politics of visibility are, have been, and will be a necessary tool in LGBT social and political movements, it must not be assumed to be the only way.[9] Infiltration, camouflage, and opacity must be embraced. It is a matter of survival, of thriving, and of resistance to have at one's disposal tactics of dissemblance, duplicity, masking, camouflage, and code-switching. The experience of being told one is outside the normal produces an activated relationship to resemblance, to recognizability, and to visibility. Consequently, queer practices of "looking like" are endemic and sophisticated. It is for these reasons that abstraction has proven an appealing language for some queer messaging. Abstraction, as a mode of visual poiesis, both conjures new visualizations and rebuffs viewers' impulses to recognize and categorize.

Glenn Ligon once said about his text paintings that dissolve into abstractions, "The movement of language

toward abstraction is a consistent theme in my work. I'm interested in what happens when a text is difficult to read or frustrates legibility—what that says about our ability to think about each other, know each other, process each other."[10] One reason to face abstraction is because it can avoid, circumvent, or delay the visual consumption of the immediately recognizable or readily legible. In figurative art, whenever a human body is represented, we rush to classify it—and taxonomies of race, age, ability, gender, class, and appeal are all brought to bear on that image of a person. This is, of course, part and parcel of how people deal with each other daily. They read clues from fashion, from their kinesic relationality to us, from their evaluation of theirs and others' bodily capacities, and from comparisons to (inevitably flawed) stereotypes of ill-defined groupings such as racial types and forced dimorphisms. For queer folks, such scrutiny is an agonistic daily experience, and many grew up having to conceal or camouflage their mannerisms, their furtive looks, their comportments, and themselves in order to blend into the presumed normal. (Such crushing scrutiny is compounded a hundred-fold for trans subjects who must always navigate others' relentless attempts to read their body as evidence of the past instead of seeing them fully as a person in the present.) Abstraction can be one means to resist the cultural marking of the human body.[11] This is a mode of defense, to be sure, but it is also fueled by an embrace of openness and the not-yet-known. Speaking of the extreme abstraction of the monochrome, Derek Jarman called it "an alchemy, effective liberation from personality. It articulates silence. It is a fragment of an immense work without limit."[12] Or, as Harmony Hammond has said of her works, "In their refusal to be any one thing at the same time they are themselves, the paintings can be seen to occupy some sort of fugitive or queer space and in doing so, remain oppositional."[13]

3. Abstraction that thematizes queer experience and politics can sometimes overlay, but is not equivalent to, abstraction that thematizes trans experience and politics.

In leaning on the term "queer," I make a distinction. For me, this term relates to experiences and lives that resist normative presumptions about relations—that is, about who one loves, desires, partners with, fucks, or chooses as a family or lineage. While such divergences from heteronormativity do trouble gender by complicating the presumed calculus of partnership and kinship, there are many queer lives (in various degrees of political engagement with these issues) that do not fundamentally diverge from cisgender ascriptions or from binary generalities. It is a mistake to equate such queer lives (however hard won, however allied, however political, however in need of upholding) with the experience of those who must combat others' ascriptions of gender to them, of those who must find a way to refuse the dimorphic accounts of their bodies, or of those who reject the ways in which the determined transformation of one's self is pathologized and caricatured. It cannot be forgotten that histories of LGB and queer movements have a troubled past of exiling trans constituencies, of delegitimizing non-binary or transgender experience, and of appropriating trans lives as a disposable symbol of sexual (not gender) revolt.[14] There are many who are doing the foundational work of building and rebuilding the coalition of trans, non-binary, queer, genderqueer, LGB, intersex, and all combinations thereof, but it is work to which we must continually recommit ourselves.

Valuing the difference between trans experience and queer experience is not an end to solidarity, but the beginning of a process of reparation for the appropriation and erasure of trans histories by LGB politics and culture. There are plenty of trans, non-binary, genderqueer, and intersex people who identify with the political stance of queer, but that does not mean their experience is fully or adequately described by that term (or that community). The term "queer" has space for trans or intersex folks who choose to identify with this position about relations, desire, and relationships. But, this can only happen if we defend ardently the understanding that the presence and history of trans or intersex experience is distinct from and (not uncommonly) critical of queer discourse.

With this in mind in relation to this exhibition, one must recognize that questions of visibility, of the endurance of scrutiny, of surveillance, of the surface of

the body as sign, and of opacity are fundamentally different when asked of non-normative genders versus sexualities.[15] This is a question for history, for the present, and for our future.

4. Queer investments in abstraction, like abstraction itself, are not (and need not be) pure. Abstraction need not be all-or-nothing, and there are degrees of hybridity between abstracting visual practices and representational ones. Indeed, one could say that any representation is at least a little abstract and any abstraction, however reductive, can never fully excise the symbolic or the figurative. There are those who would exploit this impurity as a means to disregard or cancel abstraction, as when Michael Fried famously attempted to critique Minimalism by saying that a work like Tony Smith's *Die* (1962), a human-scale six-foot cube, was "something like a surrogate person—that is, a kind of *statue*."[16] But let us embrace the inherent impurity of abstraction (and, while we're at it, mimesis) as a strength. In the decades since Fried's attempted castigation of literalist abstraction, many artists and viewers have lauded precisely this impurity and, with it, abstraction's ability to model relations, evoke personhood, and connect to lived experiences. As the poet and scholar Charles Bernstein once succinctly reminded, "Abstraction is figuration by other means."[17]

It is not a contradiction if an abstraction alludes to a figure, incorporates a found object that is recognizable for what it once was, or twists a recognizable image into a work that operates in relation to histories of abstraction. As well, the appropriation and queer adoption of recognizable images, objects, and artworks have been useful tools to question received meanings and to draw out suppressed possibilities. For instance, in this exhibition, one could look to Prem Sahib's erotic remakings of Robert Morris sculptures or to Tom Burr's *Deep Purple*—a masterful act of questioning mastery. Such queer uses of abstraction are synergistic with, rather than removed from, conceptual practices. As well, queer deployments of abstraction are often allied with, rather than mutually exclusive with, figurative and other representational practices. Impurity and promiscuity can be valued.

5. Abstraction is an easy target, queer abstraction is easier. *Illegitimi non carborundum.* Abstract artworks (or ways of reading them) that claim queer themes will always be easy to criticize (badly). Don't let that get you down. Abstraction seems like a ready target for critics who would demand disclosure, familiarity, and their own certainty. If they can't see it easily, it must not exist. This, we should remember, is also the argument used throughout history to erase and deny the presence and ubiquity of queer lives. (It is for this reason that it is especially pernicious when gay, lesbian, or queer critics use this gatekeeping tactic because they would hope to cast abstraction as removed from politics, as hamstrung by its histories, or as not being queer enough—for them.)[18] The lazy criticism of abstraction or queer abstraction demands instant disclosure and recognition by a skeptical adjudicator (the critic) in order to warrant acknowledgment. Queer reading practices, by contrast, have valued such things as insinuations, chance adjacencies, and alternate perspectives. Historically, such reading practices have been tactics of survival and worlding. They are used in defiance of patterns of erasure, of demands to conform (including those to conform to the critic's idea of a proper "queer"), and of the compulsion to make everything equally visible to everyone. Queer experiments with abstraction's afiguration and its refusal of instant recognizability are related to such practices of locating alternatives and reading against the grain.

This is not to argue that all abstract art is equally interesting or engaging, or that one should not be receptive to constructive criticism about the particularities of a visual work or a text. It is, rather, to call to task those critics who would fall back on generalities they create about abstraction or queer abstraction as their bases for dismissing a specific work. Some would see the category of abstraction as flawed from the start and hopelessly hermetic, but this denies the longer, geographically varied, and contentious histories of non-representational visual practices.[19] Others would caricature abstraction and try to convince that it is all interchangeable. As long as abstract art is practiced, there will be some who point at it and

exasperate "*What?*" They demand that all viewers agree with their inability to accept others' identifications, they lump all reasons for abstraction together, and they warn that anything might be permissible.[20] As with attempts to parody the contingent and viral mobility of the term "queer," abstraction's openness is claimed to be "exposed" because it cannot be nailed down. Faith in exposure, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick so beautifully argued, is characteristic of a paranoia that defensively seeks to make the world conform to its imperialist ways of seeing.[21]

Dispute the cliché of abstraction as everything-and-nothing. Recall that it can be an act of resistance to refuse immediate recognizability. Challenge entitlements to immediate access and compulsory disclosure. Demand particularity. Embrace non-exclusivity in your judgments. Invite new criteria. Model multiplicity in art writing (be it ekphrastic or hermeneutic). Question assumptions about what we expect and the speed with which we expect it. Imagine otherwise. Ultimately, such conversations are more rewarding, and they offer more expansive ways of engaging with those artists, writers, curators, critics, and historians who have looked to abstract art to ask different questions, to avoid the exposure to surveillance, and to visualize their politics and lives in new, unforeclosed ways.

6. Abstraction as a mode of resistance to visibility is not limited to queer perspectives. Intersectional accounts of abstraction and visibility are necessary and expansive.

There have been artists working from many different marginalized positions who have used abstraction as a mode of resistance to visibility, scrutiny, and surveillance or who have utilized it as a means of worlding, of poiesis, or of futurity. These are articulated in response to the daily experience of others' categorizing gazes and to the persistent cultural marking that any representation of the human form calls forth from viewers. Such employments of abstraction gain their political and affective resonances because they are drawn from the anger, exhaustion, and facility that come with navigating the ways in which "marked" positions of difference are opposed to (and defining of) a supposedly unmarked "neutral." Of course, any unmarked position only gains its contours by policing boundaries of difference, and power is dispensed across these borders between the "normal" and the "other." We know well these unmarked positions that attempt to mask themselves as somehow natural; among the most insidious are Whiteness, heteronormativity, ability, and the doctrine that genders are binary and static. Abstraction's resistant capacity can be used against this hegemonic positing of the invisibility of normativity and the visibility of difference.

In thinking about the wide range of deployments of non-representation and afiguration, it is the power-laden relationship to visibility that is the key variable. For instance, there are long and complex histories of Black artists who have used abstraction in relation to the virulent force of racism, whether to call out its workings or to circumvent the speed with which race becomes a primary factor in the visual categorization of persons.[22] These and other invested ways of using abstraction should be understood in relation (and, at times, precedent) to those practices that seek to render or allegorize how queer persons suffer under and attempt escape from normative categorizations. Respect the different ways in which surveillance is endured. But of course, marked positions also imbricate and intersect, and many people live at the margins of multiple identities. Sometimes, this intersectionality is addressed head-on by artists or writers and, at other times, there is a usefulness in focusing on one aspect of identity or on only some of them. Many individuals pivot (sometimes hourly) between the positions they inhabit in a system of cultural marking and categorization. They deploy an array of survival tactics in order to navigate visual taxonomies, surveillance, and compulsory visibility.[23] An understanding of the differences between these positionalities (and the categories they navigate) is a precursor to a more complex intersectional analysis of their connectedness.

Abstraction as a visual strategy is particularly useful as a means of discussing questions of difference, intersectionality, and power because it asks the linked questions "What is visible?" and "What are you looking for?" These questions, simply put, *mean differently* when asked from or of positions of cultural difference

such as queerness, Blackness, gender non-conforming, differently abled, and *intersections thereof*. These questions generate multiple, interdependent answers that unfold into contention and connection.[24] The conversation about how these questions are confronted across different positions, identities, and intersections can be the basis for alliances, for a productive skepticism about those alliances, for synergies, and for more wide-ranging critical resistance. Indeed, abstraction's openness might be generative of surprising ways to visualizing such intersections, solidarities, and critiques.

7. Abstract art sometimes resembles other abstract art. Resemblance does not mean equivalence. Resemblances can be strategic.
The expunging of the recognizable image or the refusal of representation in a painting, sculpture, film, or photograph (to name a few) is both freeing and constraining. Abstract works can easily come to look visually approximate to other abstractions. (This is especially the case if simplicity, unity, or reductiveness is put in the mix.) The art historian Erwin Panofsky appropriated the term "pseudomorphosis" to account for such approximations and resemblances.[25] Pseudomorphic works might, at first, be mistaken for being the same, being related, or coming from the same source. Pseudomorphosis is a feature of any formal vocabulary, but abstraction has a higher susceptibility to being so misrecognized. For this reason, suspicious viewers might lean on pseudomorphism as a means to denigrate abstract work as derivative, meaningless, or hopelessly arbitrary. We need to remember that while pseudomorphoses happen, they don't produce equivalence.

Pseudomorphosis can also be strategic. Isn't it what we call, in other conversations, such tools as camouflage, passing, impersonation, and infiltration? "Looking like" is a tactic that has long been practiced as part of queer life—as well as of other lives who have similarly had to navigate visual policing of the "normal." With this in mind, we must embrace pseudomorphosis not just as an everyday occurrence (which it is), but also value it for the ways in which it might be employed. Again, abstract art asks the questions "What is visible?" and "What are you looking for?" An intentional pseudomorphosis exposes the deeper connotations and effects of these questions, and it challenges the viewer looking for *difference* with *appearing to be similar*. So, rather than decry simplicity, similarity, and pseudomorphosis, why not see them as ways to challenge the idea that difference must necessarily be made visible? Isn't it presumptuous of the viewer to expect that an artwork should make its complexity and particularity fully and immediately available for inspection? Turning away from that demand to be recognized is a queer stance and an embrace of opacity that values non-disclosure, code-switching, and the ability to infiltrate. Practicing dissemblance can be unsettling and mutinous.

8. Abstraction might lend itself to a queer engagement inadvertently.
While it is tempting for many to try and nail the slippery idea of a queer abstraction down to queer artists who intend to thematize queer experience in their work, this is only one possibility. There are, of course, artists both historical and present (such as many in this exhibition) who have engaged with queer experience as a resource in developing the conceptual and formal stakes of their work. In addition, there are artists who might identify as queer, as lesbian, as gay, as bisexual, or otherwise with a non-normative sexuality who might demur against the appellation "queer" for their work. Reasons for this are many, including the desire to avoid being seen singularly as only representing that experience (a problem for any artist who works from a marginalized identity), a wish to keep the work open to viewers who might be blocked by that naming, an intention to infiltrate through a tactical camouflaging, or because their other political, personal, or ethical priorities seemed more urgent to emphasize at that point. Artists working from non-normative and marked positions are under no obligation to make that a key theme of their work, even though their experience cannot help but be infused with their endurance of normativity.

Queer engagements, however, have never been delimited by intention. Queer reading practices and

patterns of interpretation have always identified objects of love, desire, and engagement far and wide. Fighting historical erasure has required the adoption of images, objects, and narratives that were not intended to be queer for the ways that they can repay affection and identification. (The reception practice that is Camp, for instance, embraces devalued objects of culture and revalues and exalts them. This works just as well—if not better—when there was no intention to speak to Camp in the first place.)

Queer readings are sometimes forensic, tracking the traces buried or exposed by a queer maker. Queer readings can also, themselves, be creative by identifying those capacities in a work's form, content, or context that make room for the otherwise, that question the artificial bounds of the natural, that eroticize sameness, and so on. "Reading into" is often declared to be a bad thing, but for queer readers it can be a lifeline.[26] Subverting the "common" sense interpretation of a text is, after all, a very queer thing indeed. Reception can be just as engaging as creation for queer investment, and reception (and its dissemination) can be tactical.[27]

For abstraction, this is especially important because of its capacity.[28] Many abstractions contain inadvertent logics and sites of cathexis for queer viewers looking for ways to see otherwise. Such a claim will no doubt infuriate those critics who ask if this somehow dissipates queer or, more to the point, ask if anything at all can be queer. The riposte to that criticism is a defiant "yes"—queer possibility can be located (as well as hidden) anywhere. As the critic Kenneth Baker wrote in a prescient account of the feeling of undefined embodied intimacy in Ellsworth Kelly's work, "To be satisfied with the feeling of recognition and not the act is a kind of test of one's willingness to trust one's experience."[29]

9. Capacity and openness are not the same as ambiguity. Refuse ambiguity.[30]

Abstract art is often considered "ambiguous" due to its openness and capaciousness. Even though this sometimes sounds like a compliment, it is not. More often, it is used to avoid confronting the particularities and complexities proposed by an abstract form and others' investments in it. The same intransigent form can and does mean differently for different viewers. To call this situation "ambiguous" is to fall back into hopeless subjectivism and avoidance. Instead, let's call this situation "competing" to show how much it is in the viewer's incomplete attempt to classify that differences emerge and that supposedly stable taxonomies unravel amidst contestations and divergences of reception.

Nominations of ambiguity are nothing more than declarations of resignation. We call something ambiguous when we give up on it and when we avoid committing to learning about all that does not fit into our categories. Objects, people, texts, events, and acts are not themselves ambiguous. They are particular, inassimilable, unorthodox, unprecedented, or recalcitrant. To invoke "ambiguity" is to flee from the confrontation with something that does not easily fall into one's patterns of knowing. This act of exhausted reading disrespects the particularity of that which is before us and instead writes it off as being at fault—as being unknowable, indiscernible, and incompletely categorizable. "Ambiguity" is safe to invoke, because it places blame for our own limitations elsewhere. It is a method of deflection and scapegoating. It enables us to throw up our hands and beat a hasty retreat from confronting how limited our categories and systems are. After all, what do we really mean when we say something or someone is ambiguous? We mean that *we* cannot read, cannot identify, and cannot classify. Instead, I want to uphold the particularity and inscrutability that the backhanded slur "ambiguous" attempts to manage. I want to see that particularity as a challenge to systems of knowing.

"Ambiguous" as an invocation or description merely signals the limitations of the one who would deploy that term. This does not mean I want everything clear and in its place. Quite the opposite: I want to embrace the radical particularity that always exceeds and undermines taxonomies. This is a queer stance, for it denies the applicability or the neutrality of those taxonomies as adequate representations of the world's complexity. Rather, they are artificial impositions of normativity more concerned with policing boundaries than with engagement. To take this term to task is to demand that we see the greater structural limitations that its

invocations hope to mask. “Ambiguity” as a description is not just lazy. It’s chauvinistic. More to the point, its deployment keeps us from recognizing and embracing the chance to see beyond the categories that are nothing more than blinders forcing us to stay on a narrow path.

Especially today, we cannot afford ambiguity. We must attempt to embrace inscrutability and particularity, and we can defiantly exceed or jam the taxonomic protocols that seek to delimit and define us. The undertow of ambiguity is complacency and surrender, and it is misapplied to acts of refusal and self-definition.

10. We’re not always in the mood for queer abstractions.

To my fellow queer readers: We need to keep the option of abstraction, but it can never be the only option. Sometimes we need radical visibility. Sometimes we need polemically clear agitprop and political art. Sometimes we need figurative art that enfleshes queer sexuality through particular bodies. Sometimes we need rainbows, glitter, and the rest. Sometimes we need art that speaks to histories of trauma directly. Sometimes we need work that gives voice to queer separatism. Sometimes we need unflinching representations of sexual practices that others call “perverse.” Sometimes we need history paintings about queer families and their love. Sometimes we need to stand up and be counted. Sometimes we need a break from being queer for others. Sometimes we need to be inscrutable. Sometimes we need to use metaphor. Sometimes we need to say it frankly, bluntly, and crassly. Sometimes we need to see each other. Sometimes we need others to see us. Sometimes we need to imagine how we might see differently. Sometimes we need to vex sight itself. Abstraction can sometimes navigate these and other needs, but it is a misstep to think that it can do everything or that it, alone, represents queer experience. Nevertheless, a queer engagement with abstraction can remind us of how we must remake the forms we encounter through our own particularity, our own history, and our own ways of surviving the daily experience of falling outside of the normal.

I’m not always in the mood for queer abstraction, but there are moments when it seems the only egress. I think of it like poetry. I live in a world of prose, both short and long, but I turn to poetry to see words and the spaces around them differently. I can’t imagine speaking in poetry all the time, but I also can’t imagine not being able to turn to poetry. Queer abstraction is like that, for me at least.

1 For a more extensive discussion, see my “Introduction: Queer Intolerability and its Attachments,” in David J. Getsy, ed., *Queer* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 12–23.

2 Indeed, the popularization and commodification of the word “queer” as shorthand for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and (sometimes) transgender is itself evidence of the ways in which normativity absorbs challenges to itself and is constantly redefining. But, we should not be placated by this circulation of the word, for it also reinstalls a new “normal” that comes with its own exclusions and policing. Homonormativity, respectability politics, pinkwashing, and resurgent assimilationism are among its ramifications. Even after the word “queer” has lost its current (but waning) affective force, there will still be the need for escapes from and rejections of the “normal” and the “natural” as unceasingly imposed criteria. This is more than a lexicological concern. Such shifts register, synecdochally, political contests over newly reified forms of normativity—and homonormativity. For a useful range of discussions, see the prescient account in David Halperin, “The Normalization of Queer Theory,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 45.2–4 (2003): 339–43; D. Gilson, “Colby Keller for President,” in *I Will Say This Exactly One Time: Essays* (Little Rock, Arkansas: Sibling Rivalry Press, 2015), 74–87; and the work of the Against Equality collective in Ryan Conrad, ed., *Against Equality: Queer Revolution, Not Mere Inclusion* (Oakland, California: AK Press, 2014).

3 It should be said that there are artists who pivot between both modes, as with the core members of fierce pussy (Nancy Brooks Brody, Joy Episalla, Zoe Leonard, and Carrie Yamaoka), all of whom include forms of abstraction in their individual practices. On fierce pussy, see Lauren O’Neill-Butler, “Labor of Love,” *Artforum* 57.6 (February 2019): 126–33, 200.

4 See, for instance, the statements on abstraction by Amy Sillman, Mahmoud Khaled, Prem Sahib, and Gordon Hall in Getsy 2016, 56–61, 191, 194–96.

5 Barbara Hammer, “The Politics of Abstraction,” in Martha Gever, John Greyson, and Pratibha Parmar, *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 73.

6 For a more extensive discussion of this history, its relation to trans history, and abstraction, see “Appearing Differently: Abstraction’s Transgender and Queer Capacities: David J. Getsy in Conversation with William J. Simmons,” in Christiane Erharter, Dietmar Schwärzler, Ruby Sircar, and Hans Scheirl, eds., *Pink Labour on Golden Streets: Queer Art Practices*, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 38–55.

7 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* [1975], trans. A. Sheridan, 1977 (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 200.

8 See, for instance, Marlon Ross, “Beyond the Closet as a Raceless Paradigm,” in E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, eds., *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 16–189; José Quiroga, *Tropics of Desire: Interventions from Queer Latino America* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); C. Riley Snorton, *Nobody Is Supposed To Know: Black Sexuality on the Down Low* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); and Katherine Schweighofer, “Rethinking the Closet: Queer Life in Rural Geographies,” in Mary L. Gray, Colin R. Johnson, and Brian J. Gilley, eds., *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 223–43.

9 As Judith Butler argued, “Can the visibility of identity *suffice* as a political strategy, or can it only be the starting point for a strategic intervention which calls for a transformation of policy? Is it not a sign of despair over public politics when identity becomes its own policy, bringing with it those who would ‘police’ it from various sides? And this is not a call to return to silence or invisibility, but, rather, to make use of a category that can be called into question, made to account for what it excludes. […] If the rendering visible of lesbian/gay identity now presupposes a set of exclusions, then perhaps part of what is necessarily excluded is the *future uses of the sign*. There is a political necessity to use some sign now, and we do, but how to use it in such a way that its futural significations are not *foreclosed*?” Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in Diana Fuss, ed., *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 19.

10 Glenn Ligon quoted in Hilarie M. Sheets, “Glenn Ligon: The Writing on the Wall,” *ARTnews* 110.4 (April 2011): 89.

11 Abstraction is, of course, not the only mode in which such resistance to recognition can be located. In particular, I have found very useful the discussions of surveillance and its rejections in Herman Gray, “Subject(ed) to Recognition,” *American Quarterly* 65. 4 (December 2013): 771–98; Toby Beauchamp, “Surveillance,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, 1–2 (2014): 208–10; Shaka McGlotten, “Black Data,” in E. Patrick Johnson, ed., *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 262–86; and the foundational Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* [1990], trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

12 Derek Jarman quoted in Tony Peake, *Derek Jarman: A Biography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1999/2011), 515. This is in reference to Jarman’s astounding 1993 *Blue,* in which he further proposes, “From the bottom of your heart, pray to be released from image.” See also the discussion of plurality and resistance in Tim Lawrence, “AIDS, the Problem of Representation, and Plurality in Derek Jarman’s *Blue*,” *Social Text* 52/53 (Winter 1997): 241–64.

13 Harmony Hammond, “A Manifesto (Personal) of Monochrome (Sort of),” reprinted in Tirza True Latimer, *Harmony Hammond: Becoming/Unbecoming Monochrome* (Denver: Redline Art Space, 2014), 4. See also Latimer’s essay in that same volume (pp. 7–27), which compellingly argues for Hammond’s pivotal importance.

14 For treatments of this history, see Viviane K. Namaste’s writings on this topic, including “Tragic Misreadings: Queer Theory’s Erasure of Transgender Subjectivity,” in Brett Beemyn and Mickey Eliason, eds., *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Anthology* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 183–203; “The Use and Abuse of Queer Tropes: Metaphor and Catachresis in

Queer Theory and Politics," *Social Semiotics* 9.2 (1999): 213–34; and *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000); as well as those of Susan Stryker, including "Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity," *Radical History Review* 100 (2008): 145–57; "Transgender Studies: Queer Theory's Evil Twin," *GLQ* 10.2 (2004): 212–15; and *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, second edition (New York: Seal Press, 2017).

15 See, for instance, two recent books in transgender studies that have made the question of visibility central: Toby Beauchamp, *Going Stealth: Transgender Politics and U.S. Surveillance Practices* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019) and Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017).

16 Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* 5.10 (Summer 1967): 21.

17 Charles Bernstein, "Disfiguring Abstraction," *Critical Inquiry* 39.3 (Spring 2013); 488.

18 This is not to say that we should not have abundant skepticism for the commodification, co-option, and over-use of "queer." Both the willful slipperiness of the term and its tactical, adjective, and multiform mobilities demand an attention to particularity about how normativity is resisted or the otherwise is visualized. For a useful discussion of the problems of "queer" as a label in the art world, see Ariel Goldberg, *The Estrangement Principle* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2016).

19 For instance, Joaquín Torres-García reminded his peers that abstraction had long predated its European emergence: "Every age has what is usually called 'modern art.' It is the art that—abandoning the misleading road of imitation of reality—reaches the depths of the abstract." Joaquín Torres-García, "The Abstract Rule" [1946], translation in Mari Carmen Ramírez, ed., *El Taller Torres-García: The School of the South and Its Legacy* (Austin: Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery and University of Texas Press, 1992), 168. See also the essays collected in Kobena Mercer, ed., *Discrepant Abstraction* (Cambridge: MIT Press and the Institute of International Visual Arts, 2006). More recently, Charles Bernstein, chaffing against an invitation to participate in a symposium on "Inventing Abstraction," pointed to such longer histories and wrote "Abstraction, that is, is not invented but rediscovered, over and again. Those reinventions are themselves the signposts in the history of art." He also warned against a totalizing characterization of abstraction, reminding that, "Abstraction is plural and multiform. The relation of one approach to abstraction to another is not underlying unity but incommensurability." Bernstein 2013, 487 and 491.

20 Linda Besemer has discussed the patterns of criticizing abstraction and offered alternatives, writing "abstraction is not locked in an historical dead end, nor do all the forms it produces 'collapse' back into a pseudo universal subjectivity. Rather, multiple—even conflicting—forms and histories cross over and through one another, 'mutating' into unexpected and paradoxical forms and subjects." Linda Besemer, "Abstraction: Politics and Possibilities," *X-TRA* 7.3 (2005): 14–23.

21 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 123–51.

22 See, for instance, Kellie Jones, *Energy/Abstraction: Black Artists and Abstraction, 1964–1980* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2006); Mercer 2006; Adrienne Edwards, *Blackness in Abstraction* (New York: Pace Wildenstein, 2016); and Darby English, *1971: A Year in the Life of Color* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

23 For a text that discusses intersectionality and positionality in relation to the visual and to recognition, see C. Riley Snorton, "'A New Hope': The Psychic Life of Passing," *Hypatia* 24.3 (Summer 2009): 77–92.

24 For an excellent example of such a forum see the special issue of *ASAP/Journal* on "Queer Form" edited by Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Roy Pérez, and, in particular, their introduction: "Queer Form: Aesthetics, Race, and the Violences of the Social," *ASAP/Journal* 2.2 (May 2017): 227–39.

25 See Erwin Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture: Four Lectures on Its Changing Aspects from Egypt to Bernini* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1964), 26–27, 52–54. For a discussion of the limitations of ascribing intention or equivalence based on pseudomorphosis, see Yve-Alain Bois, "On the Uses and Abuses of Look-alikes," *October* 154 (Fall 2015): 127–49.

26 As Jennifer Doyle has adroitly summarized, "That complaint about 'reading into' usually displaces a conversation about desire with a complaint about identity—it mistakes the effort to expand on how pleasure works for a taxonomical project, turning the queer reading into the abject shadow of art history's most conservative projects." In "Queer Formalisms: Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy in Conversation," *Art Journal* 72.4 (Winter 2013): 61.

27 Such receptions can be proposed by other artists, and I would point to the examples of Gordon Hall, Jonah Groeneboer, Amy Sillman, Tom Burr, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and Prem Sahib as just a few examples. A superlative example of how a deep engagement with abstraction led to an unfolding identification and adaptation can be found in Hall's 2018 *The Number of Inches Between Them* at the List Visual Arts Center at MIT, which took an abstract artwork by Dennis Croteau as its catalyst. This project is documented in the artist's book and critical anthology of the same title, released by Hall in 2019. See also Gordon Hall, "Object Lessons: Thinking Gender Variance Through Minimalist Sculpture," *Art Journal* 72.4 (Winter 2013): 47–56. In addition, a guiding example for me of an artist's reviewing of the history of abstraction has been Amy Sillman, "AbEx and Disco Balls: In Defense of Abstract Expressionism, II," *Artforum* 49.10 (Summer 2011), 321–25. For examples of texts by historians or critics writing about queer and transgender capacities of artists' abstract practices, see J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); Jonathan D. Katz, "Agnes Martin

and the Sexuality of Abstraction," in Lynne Cooke, Karen Kelly, and Barbara Schröder, eds., *Agnes Martin* (New York: Dia Foundation, 2011), 170–97; Jeanne Vaccaro, "Felt Matters," *Women & Performance* 20.3 (November 2010): 253–66; Lex Morgan Lancaster, "The Wipe: Sadie Benning's Queer Abstraction," *Discourse* 39.1 (Winter 2017): 92–116; and the essays in Gilbert Vicario, ed., *Sheila Pepe: Hot Mess Formalism* (Munich: DelMonico Books and Phoenix Art Museum, 2017), to name a few. See also Erharter, Schwärzler, Sircar, and Scheirl 2015.

28 In another context, I have discussed the methodological usefulness of the concept of "capacity" as a means of addressing how non-binary genders erupt and proliferate in unexpected, ubiquitous, or inadvertent ways. For me, this term was developed in relation to abstraction (but is not limited to it), and I have found it a useful framework within which to discuss how one proposes potential (be it non-binary, non-dimorphic, non-hegemonic, or queer) in a work of art—whether it be proposed by the maker and/or the viewer/reader. See David J. Getsy, "Capacity," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1.1-2 (2014): 47-49.

29 Kenneth Baker, "Ellsworth Kelly's *Rebound*," *Arts Magazine* 51.1 (September 1976): 110–11. This remarkable two-page article offers a theory of embodied viewing that, without naming Kelly's sexuality as a source for the work, sought to unpack the intimate capacities of his abstractions.

30 This section contains excerpts from a text that first appeared in Carlos Motta, John Arthur Peetz, and Carlos Maria Romero's *The SPIT! Manifesto Reader*, a chapbook that accompanied their performance at London's Frieze Projects in 2017.

queer abstraction

JARED LEDESMA
WITH AN ESSAY BY DAVID J. GETSY

DES MOINES ART CENTER