

Dragging Away: Queer Abstraction in Contemporary Art

By

Lex Morgan Lancaster

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

(Art History)

at the

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

2017

Date of Final Oral Examination: 5/2/2017

Dissertation Committee:

Jill H. Casid (Chair), Professor, Art History

Michael Jay McClure, Associate Professor, Art History

Ellen Samuels, Associate Professor, English; Gender and Women's Studies

Lauren Kroiz, Associate Professor, History of Art, University of California, Berkeley

Karma R. Chávez, Associate Professor, Mexican American and Latina/o Studies,  
University of Texas-Austin

Table of Contents

Illustrations.....ii

Introduction: Queer Abstraction: Difference and Difficulty in Contemporary Art.....1

Chapter 1: Hard Edges, Queer-Feminist Edging.....30

Chapter 2: Feeling the Grid.....63

Chapter 3: Flaming Color.....97

Conclusion: In Excess.....133

## Acknowledgements

This dissertation emerged from a moment of difficulty, and the challenges of growing and developing such a project could not have been met or worked through without the support of my mentors and colleagues. This project would not be possible without the guidance and support of my generous advisor, Jill Casid, who urges me to always question and challenge and not shy away from difficulty, and whose teaching has transformed how I see and encounter the world. I am infinitely grateful for an advisor who pushes with ambition, and refuses to accept “can’t.” I am also grateful for the teaching and encouragement of Michael Jay McClure, whose expertise is a great resource, and who keeps me on my toes. I am grateful for the support of Lauren Kroiz, with whom I had the pleasure of working for two years as a Project Assistant, and whose continued commitment and friendship have been instrumental in my completion of this dissertation. I wish to thank Ellen Samuels, who introduced me to disability aesthetics and Crip Theory, along with a range of visual practices that radically altered how I understand the body in art. I would also like to thank Karma Chávez, whose scholarship and activism are great sources of inspiration. These five scholars served on my dissertation committee, and I am deeply grateful for their careful review and thoughtful feedback on my work and how this project might expand.

The completion of this dissertation would not be possible without the funding I received from the Department of Art History and the Graduate School at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, particularly the Chancellor’s Dissertation Fellowship (2014-15), the Mellon Wisconsin Summer Dissertation Fellowship (2016), and a Dissertator Award (2017). I am thankful for the Public Humanities Project Assistantship at the Center for the Humanities (2013-14). I am also thankful for a Summer Graduate Internship in the Department of Photographs at the National Gallery of Art (2015). This dissertation has benefitted from development through presentation

and publication. I thank the editors of *ASAP/Journal*, Amy J. Elias and Jonathan P. Eburne, for their feedback and assistance in publishing my article, “Feeling the Grid: Lorna Simpson and Concrete Abstraction,” which helped in the formation of second chapter of this dissertation. I thank the editorial team at *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture*, especially James Cahill and Ennuri Jo, for helping me to publish “The Wipe: Sadie Benning’s Queer Abstraction,” which marks the beginning of this entire project and through which I worked out many of its central concepts. I am grateful to Katrina Schaag and Andrew Salyer for organizing the Art + Scholarship A.W. Mellon Workshops sponsored by the Center for the Humanities during Spring 2015, and for inviting me to lead a workshop on “Living Color” that fueled the third chapter of this dissertation. I had the pleasure of chairing a session I organized on New Materialisms in Contemporary Art at the annual College Art Association Conference (2017), with Anna Campbell, Linda Besemer, Sarah Cowan, and Joshua Lubin-Levy. Our conversations inspired and fueled my thinking and writing during this final semester.

There are a number of colleagues and dear friends who supported me in the process of writing this dissertation. For their friendship, encouragement, and thoughtful feedback at various stages of this process, I wish to thank River Bullock, Jessica Cooley, Ashley Cook, and Holly Rubalcava. Your ideas have pushed me to be a better thinker and writer, and your care has sustained me. I thank Rique Hagen for a friendship that has sustained me since our undergraduate years, and for her eagerness to read and think with me about drafts. I thank Anne Helmreich, my undergraduate advisor at Case Western Reserve University, who encouraged me to pursue contemporary art and gender and sexuality studies. I thank Rhian Brown, my chosen sister, for a lifetime of friendship and support. I thank my godparents, Rob Mebane and Jacqui Casey, who have believed in me always. I thank my mother, Lily Lancaster, whose unconditional

love, which is truly boundless, has made me the person and scholar I am today. This project is dedicated in memory of my uncle, Garrett Morgan Lancaster, who inspired me to dream of a life made livable through art, and who continues to inspire me every day to stay fabulously tenacious in making that dream a reality, to keep dragging away.

## List of Figures

Figure 1. Sadie Benning, *Wipe, Rust-oleum Flat Black and Rust-oleum Painters Touch Flat Sweet Pea*, 2005, medite 2, spray-paint, dowels and plaster

Figure 2. László Moholy-Nagy, *Konstruktion in Emaille 1* (Construction in enamel 1; also known as EM 1), 1923. Porcelain enamel on steel. 37 x 23 5/8 in.; EM 2, 18 3/4 x 11 7/8 in.; EM 3, 9 1/2 x 6 in.

Figure 3. Ulrike Müller, *Franza*, 2010, vitreous enamel on steel, 15.5 x 12 in.

Figure 4. Ulrike Müller, *Miniatures*, 2011, vitreous enamel on steel, 2 x 1.25 in.  
Ongoing Edition of wearable miniature paintings

Figure 5. Ulrike Müller, *Fever 103°*, 2010, 15.5 x 12 in.

Figure 6. Ellsworth Kelly, *Colored Paper Image XI (Gray Curves with Brown)*, 1976, colored and pressed paper pulp, 46 5/8 x 32 5/8 in.

Figure 7. Ulrike Müller, *Heatwave*, 2010, vitreous enamel on steel, 15.5 x 12 in.

Figure 8. Ellsworth Kelly, *Colored Paper Image VIII (Gray Curve with Blue)*, 1976, colored and pressed paper pulp, 46 5/8 x 32 5/8 in.

Figure 9. Silence=Death Project, *Silence = Death*, 1986, poster, offset lithography, 29 x 24 in.

Figure 10. Ulrike Müller, *Rug (con triángulos)*, 2015, wool, handwoven in the workshop of Jerónimo and Josefina Hernández Ruiz, Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca, Mexico. 86 x 64 3/8"

Figure 11. Emily Roysdon, *Beyond the Will to Measure*, 2014, wall-mounted ceramic, clock movements, acrylic, 56 2/3 x 10 1/2 in.

Figure 12. Lorna Simpson, *The Rock*, 1995, serigraph on twelve felt panels w/ 2 felt text panels. 100.5 x 94 in.

Figure 13. Agnes Martin, *White Flower*, 1960, oil on canvas, 71 7/8 x 72 in.

Figure 14. Agnes Martin, *Friendship*, 1963, incised gold leaf and gesso on canvas, 75 x 75 in.

Figure 15. Lorna Simpson, *Curtain*, 2011, serigraph on eight felt panels, 68 x 100 in.

Figure 16. Xylor Jane, *6th Order Magic Square Composed of Prime Numbers*, 2015

Figure 17. Jasper Johns, *Gray Numbers*, 1958, Encaustic and newspaper on canvas

Figure 18. Linda Besemer, *Large Zip Fold #1*, 2001, acrylic paint, 132 x 62 x 36 inches

Figure 19. Lynda Benglis, *Contraband* (1969), Pigmented latex, 295.3 x 1011.6 x 7.6 cm

Figure 20. Linda Besemer, *Red-Purple Slab*, 2009, acrylic paint, 10 X 8 ½ in.

Figure 21. Lynda Benglis, *Corner Piece*, 1971, polyurethane foam

Figure 22. Bridget Riley, *Cataract 3*, 1967, oil on canvas, emulsion PVA on linen, 223.5 x 222 cm

Figure 23. Linda Besemer, *Fold #8, Baroqueasy*, 1999, acrylic paint

Figure 24. Carrie Yamaoka, *koolpop #21*, 2007, urethane resin and mixed media on mylar

Figure 25. Carrie Yamaoka, *40 by 40 (blue)*, 2006, urethane resin, reflective mylar and mixed media on wood panel

## Introduction

### *Queer Abstraction: Difference and Difficulty in Contemporary Art*

The core questions that compel this dissertation were prompted by the challenge and difficulty of viewing abstract artwork produced by a queer artist. Specifically, my encounter with a series of strange little abstract paintings by Sadie Benning presented a problem for my conception of how a political queer art should look (an art I would expect to speak directly to non-normative gender and sexuality). I was initially drawn by Benning's experimental videos of the early 1990s, where the artist's life and body offered a content that I could read as explicitly queer. Benning's abstract paintings are more difficult; because the content does not address difference through a figure or body, I could not immediately see how they are queer. Each titled "Wipe" [Fig. 1], they are monochrome or di-chrome geometric objects that resemble color field paintings. As I discuss more fully in my article, "The Wipe: Sadie Benning's Queer Abstraction," these paintings reiterate a modernist formal language, but their taffy colors and marked surfaces, their small and intimate formats, depart from that austere language to produce a more "touchy-feely" abstraction.<sup>1</sup> And they merge this formalism with the language of video editing, wipes that seem to still a transitional movement across a canvas. While I could not immediately find a way "into" them, these paintings allowed me to see what I never noticed in the videos: the abstract and even gestural qualities that actually enabled my affective attachment to those early works in the first place.<sup>2</sup>

The difficulty of these objects not only press our conception of what queer art is, they demand a method of analysis that can account for how abstraction works queerly and politically.

---

<sup>1</sup> I mean "touchy-feely" in the sense articulated by Eve Sedgwick, who connects affect with materiality in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 17.

<sup>2</sup> The introduction that follows draws in part from my article about these paintings, "The Wipe: Sadie Benning's Queer Abstraction," *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture* 39 (Forthcoming, 2017)



Sadie Benning's art practice helps to illustrate the key questions of my project: How can abstraction do queer work that is political, when the form and content of the work would seem entirely separate? How does abstraction address difference or marginality, when bodies are entirely absent from the image? Further, how can formalism as an art historical methodology contribute to queer theories? The problem of how to approach abstraction as an analytic object as well as a politically-motivated project also compels this dissertation.

The phenomenon that has come to be known as "queer abstraction" has exploded in the few years since I began this project, though definitions of the term are diffuse. The publication based on the exhibition and conference *Pink Labor on Golden Streets: Queer Art Practices* (Academy of Fine Arts Vienna) credits Jack Halberstam with coining the phrase "queer abstraction."<sup>3</sup> This origin story is perhaps due to Halberstam's lecture on this topic for the 2012 conference *Dildo Anus Macht: Queere Abstraktion*, also at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. While I do not trace a singular source for this term, Halberstam's argument in *In a Queer Time and Place* that Linda Besemer's abstract painting reclaims formalism for queer art practice is a core contribution to this conversation.<sup>4</sup> And it is significant that the term has circulated in international contexts, and that an interdisciplinary queer-trans feminist scholar is cited as its original champion. In a conversation with Tirza Latimer and Harmony Hammond, Julia Bryan-Wilson offers an open definition of queer abstraction as "a resource for all those in the margins who want to resist the demands to transparently represent themselves in their work."<sup>5</sup> One common thread of understanding across these conversations is that queer abstraction operates as

---

<sup>3</sup> Christiane Erharder et al., *Pink Labour on Golden Streets: Queer Art Practices* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 11.

<sup>4</sup> J. Halberstam, "Technotopias: Representing Transgender Bodies in Contemporary Art," in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (Duke University Press, 2005), 97-124

<sup>5</sup> Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Queer Abstraction: Harmony Hammond and Tirza Latimer in conversation with Julia Bryan-Wilson," (*Queer Conversations on Culture and Arts at California College of the Arts*, San Francisco, October 31 2014). Bryan-Wilson was quoted in Barbara McBane, "Queer Abstraction," *The Archive: The Journal of the Leslie-Lohnman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art* 53 (Spring, 2015): 11.

a site of resistance by which minority-marked artists undermine the demand that their work bear this burden of representation, or a site where they can play with alternative ways of showing up.

Related conversations about “queer formalism” have occurred between David Getsy, Jennifer Doyle, and William J. Simmons. Getsy and Doyle consider how gender, sexuality and desire operate beyond their straightforward depictions. Addressing formalism as both an approach to art making and art historical analysis, they assert the queer potential of formal tactics and challenge the notion that locating queerness in artwork that does not seem to picture it would be “reading into” the work something that was not already there.<sup>6</sup> William J. Simmons understands queer formalism (he credits painter Amy Sillman with the phrase) as a paradox: “It advocates for a ‘queer subject’ while attacking the notion of ‘subjecthood.’” Formalism’s investment in the “essence” of the singular object and specific medium is then understood to run parallel to a queer rejection of purity or universalism.<sup>7</sup> These conversations point to the tensions between the terms of formalism and abstraction that would seem to describe older practices of making and analyzing art, and the unsettled and necessarily destabilizing operations understood as queer.

Queer abstraction constitutes a trend in recent art practice, as many queer-feminist artists have shifted toward abstract styles and formalist tactics. Sadie Benning is one example, but Ulrike Müller, whose work is the focus of my first chapter, also began working in performance, installation and video art before shifting to abstract painting and drawing in the last decade. Emily Roysdon also uses an expansive array of media, performative and collective modes of art

---

<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy, “Queer Formalisms: Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy in Conversation,” *Art Journal* 72 (2013): 58-71

<sup>7</sup> William J. Simmons, “Notes on Queer Formalism,” *Big Red and Shiny*, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, December 16, 2013, accessed December 5, 2016, <https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/news/in-news/notes-queer-formalism>.

making that includes an abstract formal language of geometry in ways that still speak to queer cultures.<sup>8</sup> While this trend can be viewed as a “turn” to abstraction in recent years, it also illuminates the abstraction present to some degree in the artists’ previous work, and makes form evident as a mode of critical engagement that cannot be separated from collective social-political practice (Müller and Roysdon were members of the feminist genderqueer collaborative *LTTR*). Other artists whose work can be understood as part of this turn in recent art practice, or have been included in conversations and exhibitions around queer abstraction, include Linda Besemer, Nancy Brooks Brody, Angela de la Cruz, John Edmonds, Mark Epstein, Edie Fake, Avram Finkelstein, Chitra Ganesh, Jonah Groeneboer, Gordon Hall, Xylor Jane, Glendalys Medina, Donald Moffett, Prem Sahib, and Carrie Yamaoka. We might also locate one root of this tendency in the craft-based art practices that are so important for queer-feminist movements, as seen in the work of Glen Fogel, Harmony Hammond, Allyson Mitchel, Shila Pepe, or Nathan Vincent. The abstractionism of artists such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Robert Gober, or Anthony Viti might suggest another root in AIDS activism. And while much of the work taken under the umbrella of queer abstraction has been made since the late 1990s to early 2000s, former generations of artists working in radical formal styles can also be understood as precursors to this trend, including Barbara Hammer, Carol Rama, Amy Sillman, Joan Snyder, or Betty Tomkins.<sup>9</sup> So while this can be understood as a recent phenomenon, it also has roots in a longer history within queer-feminist art practice and movements. And while we may have understood artists

---

<sup>8</sup> See Alexis Clements, “Abstraction that Invites Speculation,” *Hyperallergic*, February 19, 2015, accessed December 5, 2016, <https://hyperallergic.com/183874/abstraction-that-invites-speculation/>.

<sup>9</sup> See William J. Simmons, “Notes on Queer Formalism,” Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, December 16, 2013, accessed December 5, 2016, <https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/news/in-news/notes-queer-formalism>. See Amy Sillman, “AbEx and Disco Balls: In Defense of Abstract Expressionism II,” *Artforum* (Summer 2011): 321-325. On Carol Rama see the announcement for her 2016 exhibition at Dominique Lévy, <http://www.dominique-levy.com/artist/carol-rama>. See also William J. Simmons, “Betty Tomkins: *Fuck Paintings* (1969-74),” *Flash Art* 303 (2015), accessed February 13, 2016, <http://www.flashartonline.com/article/betty-tompkins/>.

such as Hammond or Sillman to belong to a past moment, their circulation within these conversations and recent exhibitions makes evident the continuing resonance of their formalism in contemporary art.

Some queer-feminist artists have written directly about the political possibilities for abstraction and its import for their practices. Harmony Hammond wrote in the first issue of the journal *Heresies* in 1977: “if ‘the personal is political’ in the radical sense, we cannot separate the content of our work from the form it takes.”<sup>10</sup> Filmmaker Barbara Hammer argues that “radical content deserves radical form,” contending that conventional narrative cinema fails to address her as a lesbian spectator, and advocating for more abstract experimental cinematic forms that embraces play, complexity, multiplicity and difference.<sup>11</sup> From the vantage of 1970s lesbian feminism, Hammond and Hammer contend that the radical political import of their art practices depends on a more expansive understanding of what make certain forms viable for political art and collective movements. More recently, Linda Besemer writes about the possibilities for abstraction to speak to cultural specificity at the same time that it allows for expansive multiplicity. Reimagining the signification of the gestural brushstroke and reconfiguring the figure/ground binary, Besemer detaches gesture from the canvas: “instead of a penis as brushstroke, I tried to create something like a dildo as brushstroke,” in order to shift the hetero or binary economy of the Abstract Expressionist gesture to a genderqueer one.<sup>12</sup> Besemer’s feminist Deleuzian understanding of form, not as self-referential or essential but

---

<sup>10</sup> Harmony Hammond, “Feminist Abstract Art – A Political Viewpoint,” *Heresies* 1 (Jan. 1977): 66-70.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Hammer, “The Politics of Abstraction,” in *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*, ed. Martha Gever et al. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 70-75.

<sup>12</sup> Linda Besemer, “Abstraction: Politics and Possibilities,” *X-Tra Contemporary Art Quarterly* 7 (Spring 2005), accessed November 3, 2014, <http://x-traonline.org/article/abstraction-politics-and-possibilities/>.

decentered and fugitive, creates space for an impure formalism that can still work for queer-feminist art practices.

A spate of gallery exhibitions in recent years have addressed this broader shift in both contemporary art practice and understandings of what constitutes a queer aesthetic. For some curators and critics, this “new” queer aesthetic has less to do with the artist’s identity or overt sexuality and more to do with the artist’s deployment of materials in non-normative or excessive ways, embracing the devalued or craft-based mediums and processes. This approach might describe two parallel Chicago-area exhibitions, *The Great Refusal: Taking on New Queer Aesthetics*, curated by Oli Rodriguez (Sullivan Galleries at School of the Art Institute of Chicago, September 14–November 10, 2012) and *All Good Things Become Wild and Free*, curated by Danny Orendorff (Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin, September 11–November 17, 2012).<sup>13</sup> *Surface of Color*, curated by Paul Pescador (The Pit, October 2015) challenges the notion that identity and issues of cultural difference be depicted explicitly through figuration or performance.<sup>14</sup> For others, concerns with form and content overlap in that the work may not be explicitly sexual, but still either pictures bodies or is read according to bodily reference enacted through suggestive form even as it does so in an expansive and indeterminate sense. Examples of this approach include *Harmony Hammond: Becoming/Unbecoming Monochrome* (curated by Tirza Latimer, Red Line, 2014); *Eyes, Lilacs, and Spunk: Queer Aesthetic from Suggestion into Abstraction* (curated by Aaron Tilford, Visual AIDS, 2014); *Read My Lips* and the attendant Roundtable on “Queer Abstraction” at Knockdown Center (2016).<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Alicia Eler, “Queer Art’s not Just about Gender – A Chicago Survey,” *Hyperallergic*, November 15, 2012, accessed December 5, 2016, <https://hyperallergic.com/60339/queer-arts-not-just-about-gender-a-chicago-survey/>.

<sup>14</sup> Abe Ahn, “Forging Queer Identity with Abstraction,” *Hyperallergic*, October 19, 2015, accessed December 5, 2016, <https://hyperallergic.com/243093/forging-queer-identity-with-abstraction/>.

<sup>15</sup> Aaron Tilford curated the online exhibition “Eyes, Lilacs, and Spunk: Queer Aesthetic from Suggestion into Abstraction,” *Visual AIDS*, June, 2014, understanding even the abstract work to be queer in content and distinct from a “gay art” that would explicitly sexual, accessed December 5, 2016,

These exhibitions and the conversations surrounding them evidence tensions in current queer art practice between methods and materials that reference the body and those that exceed it; images that represent specific cultural positions and those that undermine or explode beyond singular or binary situations; the explicitly political and the impossibly abstract. And rather than produce an impasse, these seemingly irreconcilable tensions may be the very condition that makes queer abstraction aesthetically and politically viable.

While this work may all seem to coalesce under a unified title, the phenomenon is not at all a unified movement but a contested terrain in which this dissertation is participating. These conversations about what constitutes queer abstraction as an art object or queer formalism as a working method and mode of analysis also problematically over-emphasizes the body as the privileged site of queering. While understandings of queer abstraction move away from explicit scenes of sex and sexuality, there is still a dependence on form interpreted in bodily terms. Even as these seemingly embodied forms are taken to express their queerness through the abject, the fractured, or the indeterminate, the body is still taken to be the oblique *content* of a politically viable queer art. This dissertation decenters the body from the core of this discussion in order to show how queer abstraction operates beyond this mode of signification.

### *Abstract Catachresis*

“Queer abstraction” might seem a contradiction in terms, if abstraction is viewed as a generalizing mechanism that would erase difference in its move away from representation, and if singular specificity is viewed as a necessary investment for queer politics. This dissertation argues that abstraction is not limiting or universalizing, but excessive and ambivalent in ways

---

<https://www.visualaids.org/gallery/detail/676>. See “Harmony Hammond: Becoming/Unbecoming Monochrome,” curated by Tirza T. Latimer at *RedLine*, August 2-September 28, 2014. See also *Read My Lips*, a two-person show featuring Kerry Downey and Loren Britton, and attendant *Roundtable on Queer Abstraction* at Knockdown Center, Maspeth, NY, November 12, 2016.

that refuse to settle into singular categories. The artworks that serve as case studies demand that abstraction be taken seriously as a tactic that moves away and estranges us from the realm of the recognizable, undermining a politics of visibility that demands otherness be settled by the image, that identity be fixed according to binary categories of difference. Queer abstraction performs this refusal and generates alternatives in large part through formal invention: form performs in this work and does so historically and politically. Thus, the dissertation is organized into chapters according to formal strategies of hard-edge, the grid, and color. The artworks I engage range from the *abstracting* work of photography that alienates viewers from a secure space of figural representation, to the impossibly abstract forms of painting and sculpture (both in the expanded sense and often combined use their mediums) that claim no relation to likeness. I understand abstraction not merely as stable non-representational form, not a “look,” but a process. Further, my purpose is not to argue for whether (or not) these works can be securely defined as abstract. My purpose is to consider how particular formal tactics of abstraction and abstracting can do queer-feminist work.

While abstraction is certainly not a modernist invention (one could argue that it stretches back to ancient art), I am engaging with it here as a legacy of modernism that persists in contemporary art. The particular aesthetics that are my focus (the hard-edge, the grid, chromatic abstraction) are modernist tactics that are also politically-loaded and have been continuously reimagined in and for the present. Each chapter explores the continued political relevance of these aesthetics for contemporary artists whose work can be characterized as queer-feminist in their unsettling of binary categorizations of difference (male/female, black/white, hetero/homo) while also addressing particular counterpublics and forging non-normative affinities. At the same time, each chapter shows how these artists deploy these forms in ways that

reimagine their own modernist genealogies. These redeployments remind us that abstraction is already political, and demonstrate its viability for queer-feminist movements now.

I use the term “queer-feminist,” strategically utilizing the hyphen to keep the queer and feminist in the tension of encounter without reducing feminist to a subsidiary modifier. Jill Casid has written that “the hyphen makes visible the join but also activates the spacing between”—acknowledging the un-easy join between bodies and worlds while also animating that space to produce connections and transformations.<sup>16</sup> The transitional space of the hyphen is useful here for connecting the queer and feminist as mutually constitutive to the collective and performative political possibilities of the work I am discussing. At the same time, the hyphen’s separation acknowledges that this join between queer and feminist is not an easy or clear one. Certain forms of essentialist feminism maintain a foundational investment in the category of “woman” that does not align with queer refusals of such categories, and this brand of feminism tends to exclude transgender and non-binary subject positions as well as women of color. Nevertheless, queer theory has built on feminism’s challenge to essentialized notions of gender and sexuality. Teresa de Lauretis’s foundational edited volume on queer theory, for instance, offered the queer as precisely a way to connect feminist and gay and lesbian studies (while at the same time maintaining the distinctions and the difficulty in connecting these terms).<sup>17</sup> In using the hyphenated “queer-feminist,” I refer to a social-political sphere and set of discourses and tactics that unsettle the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality in relation to embodiment and desire, and the alternative possibilities and worlds these tactics aim to create. Queer-feminist

---

<sup>16</sup> Jill H. Casid, “Alter-Ovid—Contemporary Art on the Hyphen,” in *A Handbook to the Reception of Ovid*, eds. John F. Miller and Carole Newlands (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 416-35.

<sup>17</sup> See Teresa de Lauretis, “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities, an introduction,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 3 (1991): iii-xviii



movements refer to collective politics that aim to create space for non-normative being and living on the margins.

While abstraction has been recently activated as an important exploratory site for artists who are marked as minority or non-normative and who are often invested in queer-feminist politics, my understanding of queer abstraction does not depend on the identities of the artists who deploy it, nor the content or context of their work. This is not to say that their aims or identities do not matter, but that the work they produce can exceed their own positions. I argue that this artwork *queers* by bending the resistant materiality of abstracted form for political ends, undermining and exceeding the representational imperative to “show up” in ways that are expected. I argue that queer abstraction operates as a *catachresis* by exceeding categorical boundaries of meaning (visually and textually), and thus extending the work of David L. Eng, Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, who insist on the catachrestic agency of queering. Queer then becomes an active verb, a force or vector that works in excess of particular bodies or identities.<sup>18</sup> This deployment of queer as a verb is useful for understanding how and why abstraction is taken up by politically engaged contemporary artists.

Operating as a catachresis, abstraction offers alternatives to stable representation, and does so specifically through form and style that produces disruptions and exposures within processes of signification. Remobilized in queer and postcolonial theory, *catachresis* refers to an excessive use of language, a term intentionally misapplied or perverted in order to offer a different and potentially transformative description of life’s positions and conditions. Thus, catachresis offers alternative approaches to personal and historical narrative. Along these lines, David L. Eng has defined “historical catachresis” as a problem of naming that works to dislodge

---

<sup>18</sup> David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, “What’s Queer About Queer Studies Now: Introduction,” *Social Text* 85 (Fall-Winter 2005): 3-7.

a reified version of history by denying the possibility of any singular historical context.<sup>19</sup> This opens up a space for difference and multiplicity within the slippages in language and history, where every naming is also exposed as a misnaming, and history is shown to be lacking and limited despite its ideals of presence and progress. As a radical disruption within the process of signification, the queering capacity of catachresis paradoxically insists upon specificity while troubling the defining and definitive regimes of normativity. In the artworks I study, abstraction constitutes its own catachrestic displacement, gesturing to specificities without direct naming, challenging identification even as the objects operate as vehicles for fantasy and projection. As a catachrestic operation, abstraction constitutes matter without reference, suggesting a version of catachresis that is visible but cannot be fully grasped. Catachresis can function as a formal property or technique that exceeds immediate reference or classification through a promiscuous deployment of materials that cross categorical boundaries, allowing a specific medium to perform in ways that depart from its normal function (sculptures that resemble the viscous qualities of paint, for instance). Catachresis might also refer to the strained use of an existing formal language of abstraction that shows it to be already arbitrary, or brings out its perversely ambiguous features.

This dissertation contributes to current conversations about the deployment of abstraction by queer-feminist artists, while also pushing the use of “queer” beyond the representational content or the context of the artist’s life and practices. Tirza T. Latimer understands the near-monochromes of Harmony Hammond in terms of how they would seem to signify: hearing Latimer speak about Hammond’s work at the College Art Association session “Abstraction and Difference” (2014), I cannot forget the phrase, “paintings under stress signify bodies under

---

<sup>19</sup> David L. Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 59.

stress.”<sup>20</sup> Latimer’s reading of these paintings as both interventions in the modernist history of the monochrome and as signifying bodies also suggests a conflation of form and content in queer deployments of abstraction. In writing about mid-twentieth century abstract art by Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Agnes Martin, Jonathan D. Katz understands abstraction to constitute a “queer code,” a means by which gay artists could express desire and sexuality through a veiled formal language.<sup>21</sup> While this view of abstraction as a form of closeting is taken in light of historical contexts that would seem to demand it, this also problematically limits the work of abstraction to constitute a signifying content determined by the artist’s life. David Getsy’s recent book on 1960s sculpture, *Abstract Bodies*, considers how work that emphatically refused figuration continued to explore the human as an implicit reference, and in ways that participated in debates at the time about gender’s plurality and the transformable human body. Through the lens of transgender studies, Getsy revises established narratives around the work of canonical artists such as David Smith and Dan Flavin, whose work may otherwise seem impervious to queer methods of interpretation.<sup>22</sup> Again, the foundation for this interpretation is the historical context of the work. My project is both in conversation with Getsy’s work, and a departure. On the one hand, Getsy’s mining the history of abstract art makes space for the cross-generational dynamics of exchange between canonical mid-century abstract artists and their

---

<sup>20</sup> Tirza T. Latimer, “Harmony Hammond: Becoming/Unbecoming Monochrome,” (paper presented at the annual College Art Association Conference, session “Abstraction and Difference” co-chaired by David Getsy and Tirza Latimer, New York, NY, February 14, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Jonathan D. Katz, in “Agnes Martin and the Sexuality of Abstraction,” maintains that abstraction would serve as a kind of closet, a hysterical erasure of identity behind which we must search for clues of the artist’s signifying practices—through her statements and interviews and literary influences—that will ultimately lead us back to the sign of sexuality in her work. *Agnes Martin* (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2011), 170-196. See also Katz, “Dismembership: Jasper Johns and the body politic,” in *Performing the body/performing the text*, ed. Amelia Jones (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), 267.

<sup>22</sup> David Getsy considers how artists and viewers of 1960s abstract sculpture “mapped bodily or personifying metaphors onto patently un-figurative, non-representational sculptural objects.” *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2015), 9.

contemporary queer and trans interlocutors, and this is a valuable foundation for my own project. And in other work, Getsy understands contemporary abstraction's queer and transgender capacities to trouble taxonomic categories of gender and sex, as artists use it to speak from experiences of difference without recourse to the "evidence" of sexual acts or eroticized bodies.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, I do not base my interpretation in the context of the artist's life, nor do I view abstraction in terms of bodily metaphor.

Departing from the arguments of scholars who view abstract forms as encrypted references to bodies or sexualities, my project shows how abstraction works in excess of signification and refuses to cohere or refer, rather than locate an encoded queerness in abstract forms. Nor do I use queer as a generalizing term to describe all abstract aesthetics. Rather, the tension between specificity that speaks to difference and the potential for a more expansive gesture is a productive point of departure for considering how abstraction can operate queerly. And it is precisely the threat of these queering gestures of abstraction that exceed the specificity of their positions to infect the ostensibly "universal" that I take as one aspect of their political potential. While my project is invested in the extent to which the form of the work actively revokes or rejects a signifying content, and I will argue that this is essential to its queering function, this is not to disregard or discredit those methods of art making and art history that remain heavily invested in the body as a crucial site of queerness. And my insistence on queer abstraction as an excessive catachrestic operation is not to deny the fact that many of these artists invested in abstraction do self-identify as feminist and queer and/or trans, that there are parallels

---

<sup>23</sup> David Getsy, "Appearing Differently: Abstraction's Transgender and Queer Capacities. David J. Getsy in Conversation with William J. Simmons," in *Pink Labour on Golden Streets: Queer Art Practices*, ed. Christiane Erharter, et al. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 39-55. Gordon Hall similarly finds possibilities in minimalism for theorizing non-normative gendered embodiments, "Object Lessons: Thinking Gender Variance through Minimalist Sculpture," *ArtJournal* (March, 2014): 47-57.

between queer as an identity category and as an aesthetic language. In fact, my own investment in the political possibilities of abstraction to exceed binary categories is driven in part by my position as a non-binary queer/trans scholar. By arguing for the queer political possibilities of abstraction as anti-representational force, I am not suggesting that we deny or do away with references to the body in all cases as a totalizing political gesture. Certainly, our experiences of the world are embodied, and our lives are conditioned in many ways by how our bodies are conceived as gendered, sexed, raced, and dis/abled. And this is precisely to the point, as abstraction has the potential to challenge the ways in which representation aims to fix difference on the bodies of others. I attempt to offer alternatives to this visibility politics by exploring how queer relations of affection and desire can be active in artwork that exceeds or refuses a settled corporeal figure, and exploring what this difficulty can do aesthetically and politically. While there are queer artists who use the body in their work in abstract ways (I am thinking particularly of the performance artist Cassils), I chose to focus primarily on works that are non-figural in order to consider the radical potential of that absence as a form of refusal or making-difficult. In the absence of the body, other possibilities can be made present and active in the work; this project explores these other possibilities.

The artists whose work I have chosen as central case studies—Ulrike Müller, Lorna Simpson, Linda Besemer, Xylor Jane, Carrie Yamaoka, Emily Roysdon—might suggest an elision of the contributions of self-identified gay male artists to queer abstraction. There are two primary reasons for my selection. First, I find that the most exciting and unaccounted-for examples of what can now be understood as a movement are the contributions of feminist work to the queering politics of abstracting. And I am invested in the important feminist stakes that are foundational to this recent trend. Second, I am invested in retelling a lesbian feminist history of

art experimentation that is not transphobic or racist, a lineage that I also understand to be at the heart of this current tendency, given the statements I cited earlier by artists such as Barbara Hammer and Harmony Hammond who have understood abstraction as a queer-feminist intervention since the 1970s. That said, my chapters will not refer to my central case studies in terms of the artists' identities. Restating the terms of a politicized identity category that would describe many of the artists I discuss, I use "queer-feminist" instead to describe the formal and political resonance of their practice. That is, when I describe an artist's work as queer-feminist, I am referring to the operations of the work itself and the ways in which that artist's practice contributes to contestatory gender, sex, and race politics, moving off from a discussion of the artist's cultural position in that regard. This is a project that acknowledges the fraught histories of these terms as categories of identity while pressing off from that to make space for the artwork to perform in excess of singular categories tied to their maker.

In considering how abstraction performs catachrestically to undermine notions of the real that would fix difference safely in the bodies of others, I am drawing on the work of Peggy Phelan, who puts forth an understanding of subjectivity as unrepresentable. In *Unmarked*, Phelan breaks down the assumed correspondence between representational visibility and political power, as representations of difference often seek to prove those differences to be real and to reinforce injustice. And yet, the politics of performance, for Phelan, shows how identity is not stably fixed in a name or a body; instead, our identities are always already constructed in relation to the other.<sup>24</sup> This argument makes space to explore how abstraction might perform in queer and feminist practice to strategically refuse representational visibility, perhaps rendering the

---

<sup>24</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (Routledge: New York, London, 1993).

mediated space of the flat canvas or the screen as one in which the given to be seen is *not* stabilized or fixed.

This dissertation is also in conversation with visual culture scholars and queer theorists who have written about the work of queer artists using abstraction in ways that speak to difference and generate alternative perspectives of those aesthetics that may be ghosted by troubled histories. I attempt to extend the work of José Esteban Muñoz, who understands queering as an aesthetic praxis of refusal that does not simply discard that which is problematic and overloaded (in this case, abstract forms that would seem to gloss over difference), but rather works with and through those elements toward which the queer has a charged and ambivalent relationship.<sup>25</sup> Jack Halberstam's reading of abstraction as a strategy for destabilizing representation in ways that speak to difficult transgendered embodiments paves the way for my study of the resonance of modernist aesthetics in contemporary art practice, and my continuation of queer-feminist understandings that difficult subject matter requires difficult form.<sup>26</sup> My study demonstrates the importance of this tension between form and content for the aesthetic, theoretical and political work of abstraction in contemporary art.

I am also thinking the limits of visual and political representation with scholars and curators concerned with race and specifically blackness in contemporary abstraction. My understanding of queer does not bracket out questions of race, and concerns about race do not drop out when a black body is absent from the image. Indeed, my conception of queer abstraction demands that we consider issues of race, sex and gender without the presence of a body. Several scholars and curators have countered the critical tendency to limit the significance of artworks by black artists to what can be read as explicitly racial about the work, while black

---

<sup>25</sup> José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 138

<sup>26</sup> J. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (Duke University Press, 2005).

artist's works are rarely the basis for formal and object-based debates.<sup>27</sup> Insisting on what Bennett Simpson terms a “freedom from representationality” or racially or biographically determined interpretations, new propositions for political tactics of “post-black” art take up experimentation with medium and form as the crucial territory for resistance (departing from a focus on content and figuration).<sup>28</sup> Adrienne Edwards, who recently curated the exhibition *Blackness in Abstraction*, explores how the color black has been deployed in late modern and contemporary art as a material, a methodology, and as a way of being in the world. Edwards argues that “blackness in abstraction proliferates as a resistance to figuration and realism in visual representation, and in doing it elides transparency, immediacy, authority, and authenticity.”<sup>29</sup> Black is then not only a surface color, but a medium and mode of production and critical position for refusing a clear visibility or “authentic” portrayal of one's cultural position. In his recent book, *Abstractionist Aesthetics*, Phillip Brian Harper champions abstractionist artwork because its emphatic distance from an easy referent in reality “invites us to question the ‘naturalness’ not only of the aesthetic representation but also of the social facts to which it alludes, thereby opening them to active and potentially salutary revision.”<sup>30</sup> While Harper ultimately champions narrative texts rather than visual forms as the most effective medium for abstractionism, his argument demonstrates the possibilities of abstraction's distance from the

---

<sup>27</sup> Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art In Total Darkness* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007). Kobena Mercer, *Discrepant Abstraction* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2006). Phillip Brian Harper argues against current norms of aesthetic reception that insist that blackness be represented and asserts the critical need for abstractionism to displace realism as a primary stake in African American cultural engagement, *Abstractionist aesthetics: Artistic form and social critique in African American culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

<sup>28</sup> Bennett Simpson, *Blues for Smoke* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2012). Hillary M. Sheets, “Black Abstraction: Not a Contradiction,” *ARTnews* (June 2014). Thelma Golden has done much work in this regard at the Studio Museum in Harlem, including *Freestyle* (2001) and *Energy/Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction 1964-1980* (2006). The Contemporary Art Museum Houston's two-part *Black in the Abstract* exhibitions explored the contributions of black artists to abstract movements since the 1960s (2013-2014).

<sup>29</sup> Adrienne Edwards, *Blackness in Abstraction* (New York: Pace Gallery, 2016), 10.

<sup>30</sup> Phillip Brian Harper, *Abstractionist aesthetics: Artistic form and social critique in African American culture* (New York: New York University Press 2015), 3.



sign to open space for reimagining the cultural codes to which it has such a difficult relation. That is, in producing a distance between the sign and its ostensible referent, abstraction creates a space in which the cultural conditions and positions otherwise defined by the visible signifier can be unfixed, multiply and proliferate beyond their boundaries.

*Stylistic Excess: Camp and Drag*

The title of my project, “dragging away,” signals multiple ways in which abstraction operates queerly in contemporary art, and points to the queering capacities inherent within the term itself. Etymologically, *abstract* is derived from the Latin *ab*, away, and *trahere*, meaning to draw, pull, or drag. Abstraction may be defined as a drawing away from the real or figural representation in art. The performance of drag also implies an aesthetic play with gendered signifiers on the body, a camping reiteration of the masculine and feminine norms that we not only work to enact, but that also *work* us every day. Yet, from within drag’s compulsive reiterations comes the potential to alter those signs through a performative repetition with a difference.<sup>31</sup> The queer potential of drag is at once a strategy of drawing out the oppressive strictures of gender and sexuality, while at the same time exceeding and torqueing those normative impulses in order to render them differently. This strategy of torqueing, also derived from the etymology of *queer*, is performed through various formal strategies in the work I study, for example: a stable object or flat painterly surface projects outward as a radiant environment, or a photographic reproduction is rendered soft and fuzzy. It is often the case that these formal strategies perform their drag through an excessive materiality that oozes or surface textures that invite touch and demand more intimate forms of spectatorship.

---

<sup>31</sup> I am drawing from Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

Offering a “freak theory” of queer art, Renate Lorenz deploys “drag” to name methods of queer artistic practices that produce a distance from the body and normativity while still registering in terms of gender and sexuality, making connections to others without representing them: “what becomes visible in this drag is not people, individuals, subjects, or identities, but rather assemblages; indeed those that do not work at any ‘doing gender/sexuality/race,’ but instead at an ‘undoing.’”<sup>32</sup> Drag both takes up and produces a distance from norms determined by the two-gender system, whiteness, ability, and heteronormativity. And for Lorenz as well as my own analysis, that distancing, or the paradox of distance and proximity, is precisely what makes these artistic strategies queer.<sup>33</sup> Lorenz uses the term “abstract drag” for artworks that use other objects to refer to bodies that they do not picture, that not only cuts ties to human bodies but “allows for a *queer embodiment* to appear in place of the representational conventions of human bodies, and in this way suggests new ties to bodies.”<sup>34</sup> But rather than search for coded signifiers of bodies in this work, Lorenz shows how connections to embodied experience can be made in the process of viewing this work, positing a queer embodiment that cannot be seen or isolated through analysis. Lorenz’s “freak theory” is a compelling example of how abstraction registers as a queer political strategy of denormalization that nevertheless withdraws signifying conventions, making space for new spectatorial positions and possibilities.

The drag that abstraction exerts is not only a formal and aesthetic pull, but is also a drag on its own history. This “temporal drag,” to borrow a term from Elizabeth Freeman, enacts a backward glance that puts the past into a disruptive and potentially transformative relation to the

---

<sup>32</sup> Renate Lorenz, *Queer Art: A Freak Theory* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2012), 21.

<sup>33</sup> I argue similarly in the essay, “Close Proximity, Intimate Distance: the Abstracting Effects of Photographic Contact,” in *The Wet Archive: History, Desire and Photography’s Liquid Intelligence*, ed. Jill H. Casid, online exhibition catalogue, University of Wisconsin-Madison and the Department of Art History, January 2015, [https://wetarchive.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/lancaster\\_close-upessay.pdf](https://wetarchive.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/lancaster_close-upessay.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> Lorenz, *Queer Art*, 133.

present.<sup>35</sup> Lorenz similarly notes that drag makes it possible to “pursue traces of history and to work out alternatives at the same time.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, at the same time that I examine the terms and incarnations of abstraction’s survival in contemporary art, I will also consider how this work retroactively transforms its own genealogy and with radical implications for the various forms of modernist abstraction that it recites, opening up the discursive ground of what is still a problematic history. This transformation is not merely the result of reading the queer back into certain historical forms, but a revision that can, as Edward Said so eloquently describes the dynamics of history, “dramatize the latencies in a prior figure or form that suddenly illuminate the present.”<sup>37</sup> Rather than simply represent the aesthetics of modernist abstraction, these contemporary works draw out the queer actions that are already there, and are activated through this backward exchange. Thinking with and against the history of abstraction within the field of art history, this project considers the ways in which we might think the queering potential of this history, the mixed and messy feelings and sensations that are already there—anxieties, desires, fantasies, compulsions as well as repulsions—when it becomes revitalized by contemporary recitations and repetitions of modernist abstract aesthetics. Understanding revision, “a seeing again,” as an aesthetic and political strategy allows me to think about how repetition might not render the same thing twice, but might produce something changed in the process. Though it may seem that recitations of a problematic history or canon would reinforce its power, there are also regressions, perversions, and alternatives opening out from the gaps and spilling over from

---

<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Duke University Press, 2010), 62.

<sup>36</sup> Lorenz, *Queer Art*, 22.

<sup>37</sup> Said’s work has encouraged my insistence that the past is alive and useful for us in the present. The full quote is: “Thus later history reopens and challenges what seems to have been the finality of an earlier figure of thought, bringing it into contact with cultural, political and epistemological formations undreamed of by . . . its author. Every writer is, of course, a reader of her or his predecessors as well, but what I want to underline is that the often surprising dynamics of human history can – as Borges’ fable of *Pierre Menard and the Quixote* so wittily argues – dramatize the latencies in a prior figure or form that suddenly illuminate the present.” *Freud and the Non-European* (London: Verso, 2003), 25.

the excesses of repetitive gestures. This is one way in which queering operates as creative praxis that *does* history, a citational activation in which this past continues to perform and might perform differently or open out onto alternatives.

My understanding of critical recitation is derived from Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, where repetition can create an opportunity to perform differently, to appropriate or exceed oppressive structures, and to throw norms of gender and sex into crisis.<sup>38</sup> Butler's work is crucial for my understanding of how the citational practices of contemporary queer and feminist artists do not merely reproduce the aesthetics of modernist abstraction, but work with its already perverse properties and through its repetitive logic to alter the terms by which we view the potential of abstraction altogether. Halberstam similarly compares aesthetic practices shared by both avant-garde and subcultural artists, and argues that the conversation between them creates "a powerful venue of political postmodernism."<sup>39</sup> Halberstam focuses particularly on seriality and repetition in the work of Besemer and Eva Hesse, arguing that these methods produce feminist and queer art histories: "Repetition, after Butler's work on performativity, has taken on the status of queer method in postmodernism."<sup>40</sup> I consider repetition both in terms of citational practice and in the aesthetic sense of serial forms and modes of production.

I also consider this citational practice to operate according to queer camp and style. Roland Barthes similarly views style as a citational practice which may re-form or transform through quotation or repetition with a difference which cannot be discarded as the excess of deviance. Challenging the binary relation between surface and substance, the aesthetic cover for the real content or truth of the matter, Barthes shows how the image is not a superfluous layer

---

<sup>38</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, xxiii

<sup>39</sup> Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 110

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid* 122

cast to the borders of “true” content, but a proliferation of layers, where the real is not of depth, but of surface.<sup>41</sup> Style can operate as a queering gesture of camp, an aesthetic sensibility understood to resist identification even as it helps to define a certain practice of representational excess. Susan Sontag’s 1964 essay “Notes on ‘Camp’” defines this “sensibility” as a “mode of aestheticism,” a way of seeing the world that delights in artifice, the marginal, and the exaggerated. Camp understands the degree of artifice and excess present behind the seemingly natural or serious, understands “Being-as-Playing-a-Role,” and is “alive to the double sense in which some things can be taken.”<sup>42</sup> An important feature of camp is its gratuitousness of reference, allowing me to understand reiterative aesthetic practices of the artists I study as a form of camping.<sup>43</sup> As Fabio Cleto points out, camp is an impossible object of discourse, working through semiotic destabilization in which the subject and object of discourse become collapsed.<sup>44</sup> The meaning attributed to the archive of referents to which the object or performance of camp gestures, then, fails to account for a legitimate origin point or historical progression, a truth of the subject covered by the artifice of the object. Instead, camp radically resists the notion of a substantive core or a stable foundation for its recitations, reveling in its multiple folding surfaces that project back out onto the world something altered, its source of playful parody revealed to have never been pure substance in the first place.

### *Citations Drag*

Locating queer invention in reiterative practices, this dissertation stages conversations between contemporary abstraction and the forms of modernism they drag. In “Abstraction:

---

<sup>41</sup> Roland Barthes, “Style and its Image,” in *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 90-99.

<sup>42</sup> Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” in *Against Interpretation and other essays* (London: Penguin, 2009), 275-292.

<sup>43</sup> David Getsy and Jennifer Doyle also discuss queer formalism in terms of camp in “Queer Formalisms: Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy in Conversation,” *ArtJournal* (March 31, 2014): 58-71

<sup>44</sup> Fabio Cleto, introduction to *Camp: Queer aesthetics and the performing subject: A reader* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 4.

Politics and Possibilities,” Linda Besemer shows how contemporary abstractionists re-iterating what seem to be dominant discourses of modernist abstraction (the grid, or the gestural brushstroke) might actually create space for cultural resistance, raising important examples of artists of color and queer artists who use an abstract formal language that also speaks to cultural specificity. Taking a Deleuzian approach to aesthetic form and to history, Besemer argues, “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.”<sup>45</sup> In this vein, I understand queer abstraction to stage an altered relationship between the particular and the universal, revising the claims to purity staged by certain discourses of modernism to make room for an impure abstraction.

This project is at once a study of abstraction in contemporary art and the ways in which contemporary artists are reconsidering abstraction’s history. Many of the abstract forms used by contemporary artists are borrowed from high modernism and many draw more closely from works created during the 1960s and 70s, a moment understood to be the start of the contemporary. Working postmodernism through a trans-historical lens, I trace genealogies of queered and queering forms of abstraction through the work of mid-century painters such as Ellsworth Kelly and Agnes Martin, iterations of minimalism and post-minimalism, and various forms of geometric abstraction from the grid to Op Art. Understanding that all of this work has its own citational impulses, and that my earliest examples are themselves reiterations of earlier modernist forms, some distinction can be made between the modernist discourses this work engages and the time in which the work was produced. For example, when I am discussing later

---

<sup>45</sup> Besemer, “Abstraction: Politics and Possibilities,” n.p.

works by Kelly or Martin, it is through that work I also engage a longer history of geometric abstraction and its utopian political ambitions that preceded it by several decades. The temporal framework for this project is not a linear historical narrative of modernism through postmodernism, but a close examination of various manifestations of abstraction since the fifties, focusing particularly on current queer-feminist practices that stage specific conversations by redeploying certain forms. The strange trajectory and genealogy it produces is not aimed to re-write modernism as though it were a monolithic historical formation, but to allow the work itself to lead me through these layers of citational redeployments. Rather than an antagonistic, anti-modernist move, and with an understanding that modernism has never been solely the property of the big straight white boys of the avant-garde, my project seeks to show how some aspects of modernist abstraction continue to be operational.

This dissertation furthers the work of art historians who have revealed and considered the minoritized, heterogeneous, and ephemeral qualities of modernist abstraction. Feminist scholars Anna Chave and Ann Gibson have challenged dominant accounts of abstraction as a transcendent universal language, showing how abstract forms are nevertheless marked by ideologies. Chave has argued against accounts of minimalist aesthetics as devoid of personal specificity and feeling, showing how objects that were perceived as neutral actually replicate oppressive systems of power.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Gibson has explored how aesthetic values of Abstract Expressionism were established, attempting to move beyond canonical interpretations of this movement and expand its participants in order to deal with its inherent racism and sexism.<sup>47</sup> Briony Fer and Mark Godfrey have considered the affective resonance of abstract objects, the

---

<sup>46</sup> Anna Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts Magazine* 64 (1990): 44-63. See also Chave, "Minimalism and Biography," *Art Bulletin*, 82 (2000): 149-163.

<sup>47</sup> Ann Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

anxieties and fantasies they generate around the history of modernism as well as traumatic historical events such as the Holocaust.<sup>48</sup> Briony Fer specifically addresses the gendered aesthetics of abstraction, importantly holding in tension the insistence on both abstraction and sexual difference within the work of Eva Hesse.<sup>49</sup> While these scholars demonstrate that modernist abstraction is not a universal visual language, this tension between seemingly unmarked aesthetics and the visual suggestion of certain minority positions marked by gender and race calls for further exploration in a contemporary context. I am similarly driven by a question of how abstract art continues to compel our interest, and with attention to the perversities and fantasies staged by modernist abstract aesthetics. I take this art historical work as inspiration for a different project: I consider the ways in which contemporary reiterations of abstraction produce the kinds of feelings and sensations these scholars have started to uncover in the history of modernism, the queering potential that is already there and becomes activated through this backward exchange.

In taking a backward or transhistorical approach to abstraction, my project might also be considered in relation to Hal Foster's work in *The Return of the Real*, which provides contemporary art with a genealogy in the avant-garde, both historical and postwar or "neo." Foster's understanding of the avant-garde as traumatic, particularly through Freud's concept of "deferred action," is useful for my investigation of the continuing resonance of abstraction in contemporary art as it shows how postmodern practice can exist in a relation to modern art that undermines standard historical notions of origin and repetition.<sup>50</sup> Brandon Tyler's recent book

---

<sup>48</sup> See Briony Fer, "Color Manual," in *Color Chart: Reinventing Color 1950 to Today*, eds. Ann Temkin and Briony Fer (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2008), 28-38. See Mark Godfrey, *Abstraction and the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>49</sup> See Briony Fer, "Bordering on Blank: Eva Hesse and Minimalism," in *On Abstract Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 109-130.

<sup>50</sup> Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: the Avant-garde At the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).



*After Constructivism* considers how the core principles of the Constructivist movement shaped subsequent developments in modern and contemporary art. Discussing current iterations of Constructivist ideals that incorporate a renewed interest in Bataille's *informe* or the corruption and decay of form, Taylor writes, "A dialogue of form and anti-form, then, has never been far from the heart of modernism. Yet inside questions about form are always questions about identity and about subjectivity [...] but now subjectivity registers more as malleability, flexibility and impermanence—seldom any longer in terms of unshakeable difference or distinction."<sup>51</sup> Taylor usefully demonstrates the continual resonance of Constructivist principles in contemporary art, including what he calls "attitude-painting" as a practice of camp.<sup>52</sup> These studies have paved the way for my efforts to demonstrate the continued resonance of modern forms in contemporary art practice that is both a viable means of addressing issues of minoritarian subjectivity and community while also registering the difficulty and instability of this address.

### *Chapter Summaries*

My first chapter, *Hard Edges, Queer-Feminist Edging*, explores the hard edge as it is reactivated in the work of Ulrike Müller in order to re-open the question of abstraction's ethical and political aims and operations. Müller's enamel paintings on steel recall hard-edge color field paintings, yet they are often read as bodily forms. Alternately, I show how the hard edge operates as a queer tactic that seemingly paradoxically produces fuzzy logics of multiplicity and incalculability. The line is deployed in this work as a bending and curving edge that both refuses to contain a sign or subject and utilizes its hardness to produce an erotics of edging. Putting Müller's work in contact with the enamel works of László Moholy-Nagy and the prints of

---

<sup>51</sup> Brandon Taylor, *After Constructivism* (London; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 231.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid* 237

Ellsworth Kelly, I explore the double-edged edge to show how these lines of movement reconfigure the space of the picture plane in ways that not only exceed binary logics, but allows for movements at the margins.

My second chapter, *Feeling the Grid*, considers the grid as aesthetic and political tactic in the photo-based installation work of Lorna Simpson, and its refraction of Agnes Martin's iconic grid paintings. I demonstrate that, far from only a tool of normalization and surveillance, the grid also has political possibilities as a vector for queer forms of relationality. The grid can generate intimate spaces of contact that still demand degrees of separation, rather than collapsing the specific into the general. This importantly allows for relations and affinities across difference while at the same time refusing the universalizing tendencies that fix difference on the bodies of others.

The third chapter, *Flaming Color*, considers color as an unruly medium in the sculptural acrylic paintings of Linda Besemer, challenging conceptions of color as mere surface used to distinguish between forms or to mark exceptional bodies, and reconsidering color's minor and deviant associations that are also activated in the genealogy I trace from Besemer back to Lynda Benglis and the Op art of Bridget Riley. Wrestling with the tension between the optical surface of color and its viscous materiality, this chapter attends to the ontological implications of painting. Rather than take painted color as the representation or sign of a raced, gendered, sexed body or subject, I consider the alternatives promised by the physicality, the depth, the plasticity of color as it both inheres in matter and projects forth as optical sensation.

This dissertation charts the contributions of these contemporary artists, otherwise marked as minor, to the continuing legacy of abstraction. In the process, it expands the scope of scholarship on abstraction that reads the political or the queer as necessarily tied to bodily

reference, revealing instead the important formal and theoretical interventions of this work within both modern and contemporary contexts. Ultimately, this study demonstrates how formalism can (and already does) operate politically, and that the radical potential of abstraction continues to be vital for contemporary queer, feminist, and anti-racist movements.

**Figures**

Figure 1. Sadie Benning, *Wipe*, *Rust-oleum Flat Black* and *Rust-oleum Painters Touch Flat Sweet Pea*, 2005, medite 2, spray-paint, dowels and plaster

## Chapter 1

### *Hard Edges, Queer-Feminist Edging*

The seeming impenetrability of geometry as a technique of abstraction to aesthetic, material, or subjective excess would seem antithetical to the production of a queer visual language. The hard edge produces a sharp borderline that might define forms or mark a cutting division between figures, or produce a rift between the visual field and the rest of the world. The hard edge might seem to secure an undifferentiated subject, or a sign used to mark a subject (such as the triangle). And yet, geometric abstraction and particularly its legacy in hard-edge painting is a vibrant site for recitation by contemporary artists who produce work in the service of collective queer-feminist movements. The goal of this chapter is to reopen the question of abstraction's ethical and political aims and operations through the unlikely aesthetic technique of geometry, and particularly the hard-edged line. While modernist geometric abstraction is tied to radical political movements in early twentieth century European art, geometry seems a strange aesthetic strategy for queering now, one hundred years later, with the presumed exhaustion and failure of those utopian ambitions.<sup>53</sup>

This chapter focuses on the work of Ulrike Müller, whose small enamel paintings on steel recite forms and compositions of early twentieth century painting, producing hard-edged abstract geometric forms in a craft-based medium that also creates sharp lines and slick, swelling surfaces. But this work is not alone in its return to hard-edged abstract geometry. Sadie Benning's paintings (which I discussed in the introduction) use a language of hard-edge painting, particularly reminiscent of the shaped canvases of Ellsworth Kelly, where two distinct shapes are

---

<sup>53</sup> For a discussion of post-expressionist geometric abstraction, see Morgan Falconer, *Painting beyond Pollock* (London; New York: Phaidon, 2015). Iwona Blazwick traces a history of early utopian ambitions to postmodern critiques of geometric abstraction, "Utopia," in *Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society 1915-2015* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2015), 15-19.

paired to create sculptural wall reliefs. The borders of Benning's paintings are soft rather than hard, and their edges appear malleable, somewhat like putty. Nancy Brooks Brody (a member of the collective Fierce Pussy) creates "Color Forms" that similarly recite the shaped canvas, but these enamel paintings are embedded into the wall rather than protruding from it. Brooks Brody's asymmetrical monochrome shapes are rendered in enamel on metal embedded into gallery walls, and even though their surfaces are hard and cold to the touch, they appear liquid, fluid, undulating in the light. They are also very small in size, no larger than eight-inches on any side; not the monumental shaped canvas, but a small, devotional object. Kelly Brumfield-Woods camps California hard-edge by painting with glitter and faux fur used to create color fields, a form of painting drag that, as Grace Linden writes in a review of the work, both queers abstraction and undermines the hetero-masculinity tied with abstract painting.<sup>54</sup> If harsh lines are used to delineate shapes in the works of these artists, their excessive and unruly materials tend to produce edges that also activate another sense of edging that also drags away.

Ulrike Müller's enamel objects in particular produce hard edges that are both cutting borders and active margins that do the political work of shifting and challenging the limits; an edgy avant-garde aesthetic process. Considering the double-edge of the edge that operates as both a noun and a verb, the lines of these enamel paintings drag away from the containment of borderlines by which the hardness of geometric abstraction might otherwise be understood. Müller's work has drawn critical attention for both drawing on the formal history of twentieth-century painting, and for their sensuality of form and suggestion of queer communal ideals for

---

<sup>54</sup> Grace Linden, "Re-Enchanting California Hard Edge: Visual Politics in the Glow Paintings of Kelly Brumfield-Woods," *Peripheral Vision*, August 22, 2016, accessed February 3, 2017, <http://www.peripheralvisionarts.org/journal/brumfieldwoods-linden>.

which the artist is known.<sup>55</sup> Müller's abstract enamel-on-steel objects—“paintings” in the expanded sense—are the most recent iterations of the artist's conceptual and collaborative queer-feminist art practice. Even as Müller's objects are taken to constitute a queering of modernist forms, they are also taken to reference the body.<sup>56</sup> These abstract objects were recently included in an exhibition, *Figurative Geometry*, where the work was understood to “abstract representation” by referring the bodies through an abstract geometric language.<sup>57</sup> In a 2011 exhibition, these works are similarly understood as abstract engagements with the figure.<sup>58</sup> Müller's work is understood to queer by camping a modernist formal language in ways that ostensibly bring it into contact with the body.<sup>59</sup> These readings interpret the queerness of this work only by way of reference, and do not address the queering work of abstraction itself. I suggest, instead, that these objects do queer-feminist work precisely by dragging on the loaded visual language of the hard edge that can at once divide or mark *and* insist on a margin that edges away and opens up to indeterminacy.

Scholars and critics have also noticed that Müller's enamel paintings, with the particularity of this medium, exhibit a hardness while also pulling away from the boundaries their edges might seem to secure. In a conversation with William J. Simmons, “Appearing Differently: Abstraction's Transgender and Queer Capacities,” David Getsy mentions Ulrike Müller as an artist making abstraction from a queer perspective:

---

<sup>55</sup> See Branden W. Joseph, “Ulrike Müller: The Old Expressions Are With Us Always and There Are Always Others,” *Artforum International* 54 (September, 2015): 220.

<sup>56</sup> Aruna D'Souza writes of Müller's work, “The body is evoked in the most maddeningly formalist, modernist terms, which constantly slip and become indeterminate.” “Feminist Forms,” in *Ulrike Müller: Franza, Fever 103, and Quilts* (Dancing Foxes Press, 2012), 41.

<sup>57</sup> Collezione Maramotti, “Figurative Geometry,” Oct 16th, 2016 – Apr 2nd, 2017, accessed March 29, 2017 <https://www.artsy.net/show/collezione-maramotti-figurative-geometry>.

<sup>58</sup> Dean Daderko, “Reflecting Abstraction,” Johannes Vogt Gallery, April 14- May 14, 2011, accessed April 1, 2017, <http://www.johannesvogt.nyc/reflecting-abstraction/>.

<sup>59</sup> Oona Lochner, “Ulrike Müller: mumok, Vienna, Austria.” *Frieze* (March 10, 2016), accessed March 29, 2017, <https://frieze.com/article/ulrike-muller>.

Müller's coupled geometric forms have boundaries and interfaces that blur slightly due to the material. Visual differences of color and line are all made inextricable from (and intimately related to) each other once the powdered glass becomes fused through heat into one solid matrix. Divisions become continuities. Such work reminds us how materials and processes can also be used to evoke the complexities of personhood and its accruals, transformations, and exchanges.<sup>60</sup>

Getsy notes the play between a boundary that makes distinct, divides, but also blurs and blends. I am taking up the beginnings of this conversation about the queering potential of geometric abstraction in Müller's work in order to explore this indeterminacy, this slipperiness; I argue, however, that the slick surfaces and dragging lines refuse a signifying, figurative logic. This work might seem to produce edges as clear boundaries, but they also edge away from figuration toward a fugitive edginess that does not merely evoke or transform our sense of a "person" but actively opens up space on the peripheries of the expected or normative.

Müller has produced several series of these enamel objects that develop abstract languages of basic lines and shapes that both evoke something like a crisp Bauhaus aesthetic and yet interact with one another and the borders of their compositions in ways that might suggest an erotic proximity. This eroticism is generated by lines and edges that produce a sense of excess and movement into an unmarked zone, a wildness that refuses containment. Certainly, if we read these works according to a representational or signifying logic, we might find bodily associations, particularly if we are aware of the artist's previous body-based performance work. But how else might we understand these objects to do queer work? Even if these objects seem to ask that we read them as sexualized signs—they do take on the literal material quality of flat, shiny metal street signs—they do not reduce the queer to bodies and sex, nor reify what we might presume to "count" as a queer body or sex act. That is, if they appear as material signs,

---

<sup>60</sup> David J Getsy in Conversation with William J. Simmons, "Appearing Differently: Abstraction's Transgender and Queer Capacities," in *Pink Labour on Golden Streets*, 54



they do not point stably to a signified but instead suggest a site of connection. If they seem to direct us, they also move us toward a space of indeterminacy, where the undefined and undefinable finds expression without settling. Rather than ask how sexuality or gender shows up in these works, I explore how they reactivate a history of geometric abstraction in ways that both destabilize processes of signification and yet still activate or speak to the kinds of networks and affiliations on which queer political life depends. Rendered in an aesthetic language that evokes avant-garde geometries and hard-edge abstract painting, how might Ulrike Müller's objects posit a queer-feminist challenge to the sign, along with readings that attempt to de-code certain forms as legible signifiers of difference? Rather than an outdated aesthetic strategy, geometry's importance for modernist critiques of representational, pictorial convention is still useful for queer challenges to processes of signification. This chapter approaches the hard edge of geometric abstraction as a transitory process of edging that unfixes and exceeds containment.

### *Edging Tactics*

While "hard-edge painting" designates a specific tendency in late 1950s and 1960s art, I also use the term hard-edge more expansively to describe a formal device of geometric abstraction in general. That is, I will deal with the term as it is understood in the specific mid-twentieth century context, and also as a form or aesthetic tactic with iterations in earlier avant-garde contexts (exemplified by the work of Moholy-Nagy). In exploring Müller's enamel work through what might seem like odd comparisons to avant-garde and 1970s works, I will demonstrate how hard geometric edges can still offer a political tactic for undermining an iconographic logic by which form is solidified into a bodily sign. These juxtapositions might be considered akin to Jack Halberstam's *technotopias*, a collision of postmodern space and embodiment, sought by exploring new relations and shared aesthetics between avant-garde and

contemporary subcultural visual practices.<sup>61</sup> While Halberstam is arguing that forms of abstraction offer representations of unstable embodiment that produce transgender aesthetics, I am exploring the postmodern pastiche practice of Müller's re-citing earlier geometric forms in order to show that their instability and mutational capacities actually exceeds bodily signification.

Excavating the double edge of the edge that operates as both a noun and a verb, I consider the work of the hard edge in geometric abstraction as a form that performs as an opening; a pulling or dragging away that opens a space for the freedom of experimentation and play. The edge can marginalize, it can do harm as a cutting border. At the same time, it operates as a fugitive tactic that incites movement, giving an edge or power to a marginal space. As I will show, abstract forms are not neutral gestures, but more akin to what José Muñoz calls a queer utopian aesthetic praxis; these practices do not simply refuse that which is problematic and overloaded (the surface decorations of camouflage in the work of Andy Warhol, or the mirrors of narcissism in Jim Hodges), but rather work with and through those elements toward which the queer has a very charged and ambivalent relationship.<sup>62</sup> This queer potential to generate alternative worlds by reimagining loaded visual histories of abstraction is precisely what is at stake here. This is not necessarily a utopian space in that the potential for the sharp piercing of the edge is not lost or forgotten, but holds onto the difficulty and hardness while also producing alternatives. This difficulty and ambivalence is precisely what makes the edge a queer strategy: the cutting margin also produces possibilities for alternate movements and indeterminate directions, a slipperiness that does not slide into settled singular meaning but can chart new territories for something like belonging, or even freedom.

---

<sup>61</sup> Halberstam, "Technotopias," 103.

<sup>62</sup> José Muñoz, "Just Like Heaven: Queer Utopian Art and the Aesthetic Dimension" in *Cruising Utopia*, 138.

*“Hard-edge” Abstraction*

The hard edge has historically worked as an essential design element in early twentieth-century geometric art: the line was both a primary means of mark-making and an industrial, accessible element of a democratized aesthetic strategy. Seemingly neutral and objective, the hardened borders of geometric form could speak to modern forms of social organization, uniting creative craft with industrial design (in the work of Bauhaus artists, for example). Forms of geometric abstraction that manifested in hard-edge painting and minimalist sculpture of the 1960s were similarly preoccupied with the mechanical and seemingly impersonal manufacture of objects, the systematic structuring of space, clean lines and surfaces that were undisrupted by expressive mark-making. The term “hard-edge” developed out of the 1959 exhibition *Four Abstract Classicists* curated by Jules Langsner, who used the term to describe California artists using clean hard edges, uniform shapes and flat colors: “These forms are not intended to evoke in the spectator any recollections of specific shapes he may have encountered in some other connection.”<sup>63</sup> Lawrence Alloway criticized Langsner’s use of the term “classicism” to characterize this work because of its art historical baggage, and the implication that Romanticism is always “fuzzy and personally autographic” (Langsner understood these new forms of Abstract Classicism to avoid the “ambiguous or fuzzily subjective”). Alloway also understood this work to be “systematic painting,” a shift from expressionism to an interest in painting determined by a systematic order, though for Alloway, “the artist’s conceptual order is just as personal as autographic tracks.”<sup>64</sup> So the personal or the human is not tied only to the gesture, and the work of art, a present object in the world, can do more than signify or produce association.

---

<sup>63</sup> Quoted in Martin, “Lawrence Alloway’s Systems,” in *Lawrence Alloway: Curator and Critic* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2015), 93.

<sup>64</sup> Lawrence Alloway, “Systematic Painting,” 1966, in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (University of California Press, 1995), 46-55.

*Queer-Feminist Edging and Fuzzy Logic*

Geometric abstraction would seem to produce no excess, nothing fuzzy, but this discourse around the origins of “hard-edge” begs the question of why excess would necessarily be tied to subjectivity, or the fuzzy to authorship? One answer might be that the clean lines and flat planes speak more readily to the mechanic or readymade mass-produced object that distances its production from the artist’s hand. And yet, mechanic production does also produce some excess, something unexpected in the slippage of our encounter with what would seem entirely divorced from the human. I want to explore how we could understand the fuzzy to operate, not as a necessary reflection of the artist’s life or the body, not as a “look” or tactile softness, but as an edging curve of queer-feminist forms of knowing and being. Fuzzy logics might produce a model for imagining queer relations and spaces—openings for positionalities and relationalities that exceed a Euclidean Geometric imaginary. Feminist philosopher Karen Barad writes of the constraints of a Euclidean logic for feminist understandings of positionality, social location, and embodiment: where issues of positionality are figured in geometric terms, and “intersectionality” is still considered “in Euclidean geometrical terms as mutually perpendicular set of axes of identification within which marked bodies can be positioned.”<sup>65</sup> For Barad, this topological model is problematic because it presumes that race, gender, sex, and other identity categories are separate characteristics of human beings, whereas intersectionality is much more topologically complex. Barad draws from her theory of agential realism and offers the dynamics of “iterative intra-activity” as an alternative to this geometrical metaphor. Barad’s critical rethinking of feminist tools of analysis—positionality and intersectionality—as geometrically constrained and her understanding of identity formation as mutually transforming material processes prompts me

---

<sup>65</sup> Karen Barad, “Re(con)figuring Space, Time, and Matter” in *Feminist Locations: Global and Local, Theory and Practice*, ed. Marianne Dekoven (Rutgers University Press, 2001), 98.

to imagine that queer-feminist forms of geometric abstraction might also offer alternative political possibilities, and that their spatial and material dimensions are crucial to those possibilities. The Euclidean concept of geometric space does not allow for stretching or bending—space is flat and congruent—whereas forms of non-Euclidean geometry allow for parallel lines to curve and bend toward and away from one another (rather than maintaining a constant distance, producing a regular gridded space). While this field of mathematics is vast and complex, it is worth noting that there are many geometric models that are alternative to the Euclidean, and to suggest that geometry itself is not necessarily a foreclosed formal device. If geometry offers formulas for mapping the relation between signs and figures, the shapes and positions of figures in space, what might a queer-feminist conception of geometry do differently?

I consider a queer-feminist deployment of hard-edge geometry according to fuzzy logic, which Michel Serres defines in *The Parasite*: “Between yes and no, between zero and one, an infinite number of values appear, and thus an infinite number of answers. Mathematicians call this new rigor ‘fuzzy’: fuzzy subsets, fuzzy topology.”<sup>66</sup> As the translator notes, the French term *flou* originally used by Serres means nebulous, blurry, cloudy, and carries all these implications at once. In mathematics, classical set theory would assess the membership of a set in binary terms (an element either belongs or does not belong to a set); by contrast, fuzzy sets have elements with varying degrees of membership, not determined according to a bivalent logic. To be “rigorously fuzzy,” in Serres’s terms, is not to resolve between two answers, but an expansive openness to infinite possibilities. Another synonym for *flou* is *troublé*, suggesting a difficulty and disorder, a nebulousness as well as something like public unrest. I am thinking of the fuzzy in terms of a geometric edge or line that opens onto a void of indeterminacy, edging away from the

---

<sup>66</sup> Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 57.

cutting legibility in recti-linear Euclidean terms that it would otherwise seem to enforce. Fuzzy geometries might configure space in ways that not only exceed binary logics, but allows for affective movements and trajectories across unsettled orientations and unsettling formations of difference. Pressing the margins, this challenging roughness offers a bending and curving away that both destabilizes and opens out.

I consider this edging as a tactic for opening up the fuzzy logics that the notion of edge—as containment, or border, or outline that fixes or holds—seems to refuse or keep at bay. Edging allows for spatial variability within geometric formats that refuse singular definition or settled location in ways that might allow for more expansive conceptions of positions and relations between subjects. Two recent exhibitions also draw on this concept. *Fuzzy Geometry* was the title of a 2014 exhibition of colorful, synthetic hair-wrapped wire grid sculptures by Sydney Blum at Kim Foster Gallery. According to the press release, Blum’s series is informed by this mathematic concept “where spatial coordinates become a variable with a range of value, rather than being defined by a discrete singular location in space.”<sup>67</sup> Sadie Benning’s 2015 exhibition of abstract relief wall sculptures at Los Angeles Projects, *Fuzzy Math*, takes this concept from set theory as a starting point to account for the uncertainty and open-ended promise of abstraction to allow for multiple possibilities. There is also, one art critic notes, the way in which “fuzzy math” has been co-opted by journalism, politics, and economics to deceive and manipulate.<sup>68</sup> It is a political catchphrase used to dismiss another’s argument (perhaps most famously by George W. Bush). The (at least) double valence of this term “fuzzy,” the way in which it could be expansive as well as pejorative, resonates even more closely with the term “queer” for its re-forming of that

---

<sup>67</sup> Kim Foster Gallery, “Fuzzy Geometry,” June 5-July 3, 2014, accessed January 25, 2016, <http://kimfostergallery.com/exhibition/fuzzy-geometry/>.

<sup>68</sup> Terry R. Myers. “Sadie Benning *Fuzzy Math*,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, February 5, 2015, accessed January 25, 2016. <http://brooklynrail.org/2015/02/artseen/sadie-benning-fuzzy-math>.

which is seemingly problematic beyond repair, and the double valence of edge as a noun and a verb that slips and torques beyond the linear force of a cutting straight line. This indeterminate “betweenness” and uncertainty is precisely useful, I would argue, because it is not entirely clear of difficult associations or even terms of injury.

### Slippery When Wet: Erotic Edges

Ulrike Müller produces abstract geometric compositions across multiple media: enamel painting, drawing and prints, and textiles. I am focusing particularly on the enamel objects to attend to their severe edges and paradoxical material qualities. Their compositions are produced by lines that both create sharp divisions and slippery curves; their surfaces are hard and slick, yet they also appear liquid. They seem to be at once hardened dry and still wet, a protective coating and a fragile glassy substance. Enamel is both industrial and craft-based, carrying connotations of mechanically produced street signs and jewelry making. A substance associated in the history of art and design with decorative surface, enamel is deployed by Müller to produce strict geometric compositions that link them to modernist and minimalist aesthetics. This proliferation of associations and operations that are often contradictory also produces a generative difficulty, a hardness, or troubling of the expected. While they are not “fuzzy” in the conventional sense of a tactile softness, they are fuzzy in that they remain undefined and proliferative in their edging effects. The hardness of their lines and surfaces drags on the margins of a trapping categorizing boundary to edge away from the expected.

I understand these objects to operate queerly through this deviant lining and material excess: the slippery line and suggestion of wetness that produces an erotic experience, but one that takes place through the spectator’s interaction with the object rather than an abstracted depiction of bodies and sex. Müller’s enamel paintings drag on a modernist geometric language

that aimed to remove the signature of the artist's hand from the work (refusing a singular subjective meaning) while at the same time refusing the ostensible "purity" and essentialism of those aesthetics, making them look and feel dirty. They generate eroticism without settling into bodily legibility; they are slick and wet, but not in a way that is somehow "like" a skin. The choice of enamel medium is significant in producing this refusal of a figural representation and of a surface that could be easily read in corporeal terms (a softer surface or conventional paint might be reduced to skin). Yet even in their hardness, these objects do not foreclose a relational capacity.

Müller's craft-based practice and geometric compositions draw on Bauhaus aesthetics: crisp lines and stark geometric shapes that intersect and interact to produce abstract designs. Relationships between forms and colors are explored across multiple media and formats, both industrial and craft. Müller's enamels drag back particularly to the enamel "constructions" of László Moholy-Nagy. Their compositions are quite different: the colors and curves of Müller's are distinct from the straight lines and limited primary palette of Moholy-Nagy's. And yet, they share a similar scale and surface facture, and certain playful tensions between the handmade and mechanical. In 1923, Moholy-Nagy exhibited a series of five enamel objects, pictures on steel that were manufactured by a porcelain-enamel sign factory. Moholy-Nagy described his vision of painting according to "objective standards" achieved through "neutral geometric forms"—Brigid Doherty explains that these efforts depended on the "smooth, impersonal handling of pigment, renouncing all textural variation."<sup>69</sup> This removal of the artist's hand from the facture of the work was achieved through an impersonal production process: Moholy-Nagy claimed to

---

<sup>69</sup> László Moholy-Nagy, "Abstract of an Artist," 1944, in *The New Vision and Abstract of An Artist* (New York: Wittenborn, 1947), 76-80, quoted in Brigid Doherty, "Constructions in Enamel, 1933," in *Bauhaus, 1919-1933: Workshops for Modernity* (Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 130.



have ordered his compositions by telephone from a sign factory, dictating his compositions using graph paper and transmitting nonvisual information encoded by coordinate systems rather than a mimetic image rendered by hand.<sup>70</sup> Pursuing these objective standards to exceed the capacities of the human was also an effort to produce a universally communicable art: the idea of an image as a construction, transferable data rendered accessible through the democratic promise of modern technology. In a Duchampian performance of the artist as generator of ideas rather than craftsman, Moholy-Nagy's radical move to exhibit these readymade industrial products-as-paintings distanced the work from the artist's subjectivity in both their production and their abstraction.

Three of Moholy-Nagy's enamel works share the same composition: a vertically oriented white field, bisected by a thick vertical black panel to the left of center (Fig. 1). Two sets of small perpendicular lines intersect at the upper center of the composition (yellow and black), and at the bottom of the composition (red and yellow), also intersecting with the black panel. They are simple compositions of straight lines and primary colors: the lines are oriented vertically and horizontally, so that it is apparent they were composed on a standard grid, their colors selected from the company's chart. This standardized, mechanical production and appearance aimed to make art more utilitarian, essential, in line with modern life. The fact that they look and feel akin to street signs and the slick surfaces of household appliances might draw on viewer's everyday experiences and associations. The precision of this work is presumably the opposite of ornament; straight lines, no decorative excess, no expressive or autographic marks.

Müller's enamel objects take on a similarly smooth surface facture and scale, but what this comparison makes evident is the way in which their seemingly "objective" medium or

---

<sup>70</sup> Doherty, "Constructions in Enamel, 1933," 132

“neutral” lines are rendered through an emphatically hand-crafted process that playfully asserts a sense of intimate contact and eroticism. Rather than the industrial porcelain enamel applied uniformly across the surface by machine, the vitreous enamel of Müller’s objects is sifted across the surface by hand, producing varying thicknesses and degrees of imprecision. Rather than the coded logic of color charts and standard grids used to dictate a composition, Müller’s compositions are more playful. They utilize the hard line differently, producing an interplay between straight and curved edges. In many works, the straight line gives way to curves that opens out at the edge of the steel support. In one example from the series *Franza* (2010) (Fig. 2), a thick vertical red line appears to bisect a field of monochrome beige, and yet it curves down to the left at the bottom of the composition, the “ground” giving way to a triangular area of white fanning out at the base of the support. While it may at first seem that the neutral monochrome beige color produces the ground against which the “figure” of the red line emerges, this curvature confuses that relationship. If the white seems to emerge as if from behind curtains, its lack of distinction from the beige, the edge between them produced by the fusion of enamel, further confuses figure and ground. In Moholy-Nagy’s work, figure-ground relations are not complicated—it appears as if the black, red, and yellow lines are set as figures against the larger white field. Müller’s works are more ambiguous, as figure and ground are more difficult to parse. The edges of their forms fuse together, so that even in the boundary between colors that distinguish shapes, the line is deployed as what may constitute a visual division but is also a material line of contact and connection. This produces a sharp boundary that is nevertheless melding, a uniform material surface that is nevertheless inconsistent.

Lifting off from the vertical-horizontal orientation of Moholy-Nagy’s work, Müller’s use of line often diverges in multiple directions, suggesting breaks as well as continuities. Their lines

merge and conjoin and depart in curves and arcs that produce a suggestion of intimate touch, a brushing up or bristling against. Their compositions often divide in half, producing a mirrored effect on either side of the composition. They suggest a multiplicity, both in their near (but not exactly) symmetrical compositions, and in the mirroring that occurs within as well as beyond their surfaces: the shining reflective surface of colored glass literally creates a mirror onto the viewer's space. Müller's series, *Mirrors* (2013), plays with this concept, but their surfaces are never really flat, they undulate and ripple so they may reflect light and shadow but never a duplicate picture. That rippling surface also creates a sense of depth, even as these are thin, flat objects. That wetness, along with the play between sharp cuts and arced lines, refuses the precision of a Bauhaus construction or an industrial product, insisting on a more intimate spectatorship.

The ways in which this work might both invite projection and suggest a topography in which we are oriented, and those orientations shift, suggests queer desire and eroticism. If we think sexuality beyond the sex act—as a form of relationality belonging as much in the realm of fantasy as in the everyday, as a precarious positioning of ourselves in relation to others, as a connection that is plural and has multiple vectors—we can also imagine how queer desire is activated in our encounter with these objects. Renate Lorenz writes on the relationship between space and desire in the abstract candy installations of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, usefully understanding queer sex as more than merely a bodily act. Drawing on the work of Elspeth Probyn, Judith Butler and Theresa de Lauretis, Lorenz writes, “sexuality is a medium that creates connections occurring between individuals/subjects and the social realm. It is a mode of self representation and reflection, so that standing before the work, beholders reflect on their own

social positioning in the world and experience it as maneuverable.”<sup>71</sup> Understanding sexuality as a medium, and desire as a method, we might consider how the slippery edges of Ulrike Müller’s enamel objects both draw us in and shift our perspective through curving line and oscillating figure-ground play. Not the pristine, crisp recti-linearity of a Bauhaus aesthetic, these objects take on an artificial camp aesthetic that draws on and produces a collective fantasy, something excessive that is shared rather than singular.

“Edging” also refers to a form of erotic sexual denial associated with BDSM, keeping one in a heightened state of arousal for an extended period of time. As a form of sex play, edging is both a form of control (self-control or consensual domination) and a boundary play between pleasure and pain. This quivering on the borders of withheld and extended pleasure also produces an excess; not a border control that prevents movement or moves only according to the normative logics of a linear climax, but a process of pulling away in order to push over the edge. The edging performed by Ulrike Müller’s enamels might similarly suggest a cutting that wounds and a movement that drags out to sustain an intimate contact, or to exceed boundaries that produce pain and also give way to pleasure. Moving beyond the edge-as-border that might police boundaries between sexualities and genders, they do the edging work of moving away from containment. Evoking the uncomfortable and discomfiting aspects of intimacy, these lines that curve and bend also press the margins to suggest an opening, a space for non-normative relations and life on the edges.

The intimacy of Müller’s enamel objects also becomes apparent in their scale. All of these enamel paintings are roughly fifteen by twelve inches, but Müller also produces an ongoing series of *Miniatures*; tiny wearable versions of the larger paintings (Fig. 3). They are each just

---

<sup>71</sup> Renate Lorenz, “Bodies without Bodies: Queer Desire as Method,” *Mehr(wert) queer: Visuelle Kultur, Kunst und Gender-Politiken*, eds. Barbara Paul and Johanna Schaffer (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009), 160.

two inches tall, with a metal ring piercing the top so that the object can be hung or worn as a necklace. While the larger paintings are not so obviously crafted, these mini-paintings are clearly handcrafted objects. They relate most obviously to jewelry, but the enamel frit is more difficult to control at this small scale, so that there is less precision. They begin to look messy with a suggestion of touch, as if their colors have been smudged. These tiny objects are more intimate in form and function: they suggest a keepsake one could hold in their hand, perhaps some devotional object given by a friend or lover. At the same time, their ongoing multiplication suggests a collectivity or a communal art project.

This shift in scale also relates to Moholy-Nagy's enamels. Three of the five "Telephone Pictures" share an identical composition, scaled to progressive sizes (small, medium, large) in order to study the effects of scale on color combinations.<sup>72</sup> It would seem that the repetition of an identical composition across three variations in scale would produce the same product, yet subtle differences emerge. We begin to notice the intimacy of scale, how the largest picture relates more to a street sign, while the smallest could easily be held. While Moholy-Nagy aimed to produce a "pure" design, devoid of the inessential elements of expression, Müller's deployment of the same materials embraces the ornamental, not at all pure or universal. At the same time, these miniatures assert, their abstract geometric designs are not removed from the everyday. There is something particularly queer about their smallness, their decorative function. At once intimate and campy, these objects of care (of careful production, of something held close) transform the hardened borders of a mechanical formal language of geometry into a slippery vector for queer associations and desires. Not only do the curved lines of Müller's compositions suggest twisting, their small supports also curve in the production process. Bending out toward

---

<sup>72</sup> Stephanie D'Alessandro, "Through the Eye and Hand," in *Moholy-Nagy: Future Present*, Matthew S. Witkovsky, et al. (Chicago, Illinois: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2016), 62.

the viewer, these tiny pierced paintings are about the same size as a razor blade, their edges advance toward us. Not the most comforting keepsakes, these miniatures also speak to the hurt of the minoritized as well as a movement out from the margins.

### Abstract Transfers, Edging Onto

Ulrike Müller's enamel paintings on steel might seem to assert cutting boundary lines; their cold hard surfaces and austere, understated compositions of basic line and shape would seem impervious to any form of excess. But they also demonstrate how the hard edge performs otherwise, pulling away from one surface to move onto another as a mode of transference, a volatile vector in both the formal and psychoanalytic sense. Through a tactical comparison with some earlier manifestations of hard-edge geometric abstraction in the work of Ellsworth Kelly, I will consider the edge as a fuzzy, queer approach to space that shifts and expands and drags away from the boundaries that would secure a marked subject position. Through this comparison, I will demonstrate that Müller's enamel objects produce abstract transfers that edge out, into and onto another space.

Reimagining and revising high modernist geometric abstract painting, Müller's work specifically recalls and furthers some of the formal concerns of Kelly, whose work in the mid-twentieth century combined hard-edge with color field painting. Kelly's paintings are often characterized by strict delineations between flat monochrome planes, an emphasis on the tension between figure and ground, and notable for moving painting into the realm of sculpture. I will focus here on a series of works by Kelly that would at first seem a departure from his usual production. From 1976 to 1977, Kelly worked with a paper mill to produce a varied series of large prints made by compressing colored paper pulp onto wet handmade paper. While Kelly has historically embraced elements of chance in his compositions, this series evidences an

uncontrolled process. Each print leaves unique traces of its chance production, as the pigments bleed out beyond the boundaries of their shapes into the surrounding white paper—the thicker the pulp, the more excessive the bleed.

While Müller's work looks quite different from Kelly's in terms of surface facture, they share some noticeable formal strategies: vertically-oriented and mirrored forms that play between figure and ground, monochrome fields that are not entirely fixed, "paintings" rendered in unusual media associated with craft as well as mechanical production. Their production processes embrace chance, and the messy encounters between materials and forms. Müller's work is produced by sifting vitreous enamel frit onto a thin sheet of steel, and colored glass particles fuse together into a hardened layer when placed in a kiln. Kelly's series of paper images were produced by spooning liquefied paper pulp into molds placed on damp sheet of handmade paper. The colored pulp is separated by rulers and other materials that Kelly curved to produce boundaries (often the edge of a ruler left a visible line of white paper between shapes of color). The pulp was then fused with the damp paper in a printing press, where the wet pigment would sometimes exceed their boundaries. These processes suggest tensions between solid and liquid, permeable and impermeable, industrially manufactured and handmade, fusion and compression. Even as these works appear straightforward, their unruly manufacture also evidences a catalytic process, a volatile material encounter.

I am drawing on Kelly's work here because his use of hard edges and geometric forms tend to be read according to a signifying logic, much like Müller's work, and I use this comparison to challenge readings of their abstractions as signs or figurative references, and to explore what else their edges can do. While Kelly's images are abstract, his shapes are derived from observations of natural and architectural forms. His work seems to question the division

between the abstract and the figurative, prompting art historians to ask how abstraction can refer.<sup>73</sup> This question is also raised for some by the work of Ulrike Müller, whose abstractions seem to refer to bodies—abstracted, rather than completely divorced from figuration. In one piece from Müller’s series, *Fever 103* [Fig. 4], two lines converge, cross and meld to create a near doubling of white bulbous forms pressing together against a light pink ground, which, in the oscillation between figure and ground, alternately emerges from a white ground in two triangular shapes, their points meeting in an hourglass form. In Ellsworth Kelly’s *Colored Paper Image XI (Gray Curves with Brown)* [Fig. 5], two gray curves press in toward the center, producing both mirrored figures and background against which a brown hourglass shape emerges from the center. While the stark black lines of Müller’s curves meet and embrace, Kelly’s forms come close to touching, but remain separated by the tenuous ground between them. Both of these works tease us with their approximation of natural forms. They could be read as implying bodies or shadows or horizons, yet their edges do not define solidified figures but instead curve in and out to suggest a wavering or an uncontained movement on the peripheries.

Accounts of both artists’ abstractions consider their play with the sign, using the particular term *transfer* to acknowledge that these objects expand into the world beyond themselves and yet maintain certain associative ties. Yve Alain Bois has defined Kelly’s motifs as “already made,” transferred indexes rather than tampered-with representations. According to Bois, Kelly utilizes the index without the referent, approaching the sign as necessarily contingent and without pointing to what exactly the sign indicates.<sup>74</sup> In this view, the signifier is detached from the signified, and this does not produce representation but something still grounded in the

---

<sup>73</sup> See Gottfried Boehm, “In-Between Spaces: Painting, Relief, and Sculpture in the Work of Ellsworth Kelly,” in *Ellsworth Kelly: In-between Spaces: Works 1956-2002* (Basel: Fondation Beyeler, 2002), 17-43.

<sup>74</sup> Yve Alain Bois, “Ellsworth Kelly in France: Anti-Composition in its Many Guises,” in *Ellsworth Kelly: the Early Drawings, 1948-1955* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Art Museums, 1999), 22.



natural or real; Kelly indexes the world around him, though the world is indiscernible in his work. According to Achim Hochdorfer, Ulrike Müller's images are "always transferable" in that sense that they can expand out from their material support onto the site of their display, and they are unrestricted by medium in their openness to variable sizes, formats, and locations.<sup>75</sup> In this view, Müller's objects have precarious boundaries that render them permeable to multiple interpretations and locations; but still they produce a site for meaning, however contingent on the viewer. Rather than producing a site for the viewer to settle meaning on their surface, I argue that these works produce edges that at once drag away and draw toward in an unstable process of transference.

Questioning the idea that we get fragments of the body or the world in this work, I want to consider how the edges of these objects might transfer differently; not as a form of reference or relocation, but enacting a different relation to the world beyond their borders, or a kind of transference encounter. These previous understandings of geometric forms as abstract transfers might be complicated by Freud's psychoanalytic concept of transference, a repetition of feelings for, or attachments to, someone or something in the past onto a new object in the present.<sup>76</sup> *Transference* is crucially not *reference*; it does not draw up memory associations, but rather moves affectively across objects, repeating yet appearing as if for the first time, enacting repetition with a difference. Abstract lines and curves can transfer by dragging across and away, disrupting boundaries that would fix forms or stabilize figure against ground, producing new forms of attachment beyond the bounds of space as well as time.<sup>77</sup> In *Intimacies*, Adam Phillips

---

<sup>75</sup> Achim Hochdorfer, "Painting as Passage," in *Ulrike Müller: Franza, Fever 103, and Quilts* (Dancing Foxes Press, 2012), 17.

<sup>76</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *The Freud Reader*, trans. Peter Gay (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), 602.

<sup>77</sup> Briony Fer discusses the "radical impurity" of the originary project of abstract art since Malevich, stating that the resilience of abstraction lies in its ability to adapt, transfer, and translate across time, space, and media. "Abstraction at War with Itself," in *Adventures of the Black Square*, 227.

discusses transference in terms of the preoccupation with boundary-violations in the practice of psychoanalysis, the anxiety of the analyst who could commit a category error by forgetting or not knowing the difference between love and transference love. Recalling from Freud that “we are at our most insistent about boundaries when we sense their precariousness,” Phillips insists, love is nothing if not a boundary-violation.<sup>78</sup> The edge again operates in this double sense of a boundary that also opens onto, a travelling line of connection. I consider the edging boundaries in works by Müller and Kelly according to intimate associations that do not settle direct reference, but violate the hardened delineations between categories across time, space, and bodies. Müller’s work associates with Kelly’s, dragging back across generations through certain formal attachments, and drawing out new formulations between and beyond them. If shapes and colors and forms are copied from the world onto their surfaces, they transfer or transpose in order to transform, abstracting in order to produce new relational models and forms of attachment.

The transferring edges of these objects work to exceed categorical definition through which singular positions would be secured. In one piece from Ulrike Müller’s series, *Heatwave* [Fig. 6], two symmetrical panels are separated by a vertical white line. While the vertical rectangle on the left is monochrome sky blue, that same blue is speckled on the far edge of the black shape that mirrors it, pressing out against the borders of the enamel’s steel support. The effect is an austere geometric configuration that nevertheless evidences its messy process of making—the particles of enamel frit that fuse together but glitter with arbitrary (dis)placements, a contradictory imperfect-yet-pristine surface. A similar work by Kelly, *Colored Paper Image VIII (Gray Curve with Blue)* [Fig. 7], uses the ruled vertical line to separate two panels; instead of perfect rectangles, the line that separates these shapes curves to produce a convex light gray

---

<sup>78</sup> Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 90.

on the left, pressing up against a concave blue on the right. The compression of colored paper pulp, layered with varied thicknesses, produces a modeled rather than a flat surface, and colored pulp particles press out into the white borders of the composition to give the edges a fuzzy indeterminacy. These edges might seem to perform a division or cut through the picture plane, but rather than separate, they edge in both directions, leaking in and out. That this edging is performed formally in Müller's work is somewhat surprising given its material hardness, yet its surface fuses in a volatile process of firing that catalyzes roving and bending edges.

These objects develop that which they would seem to disavow through their productive excess that opens out into the world—the bleed and the speckling effects of an uncontrolled process that spills over and performs the seemingly self-contained edge as a form of drag. Considered in proximity to Müller's enamel object, the pulp of Kelly's compositions begins to take on a similar effect as the enamel particles, producing hard edges as double-edged, performing openness rather than constraint, leak rather than containment. This edging of the boundary lines opens onto sites of excitement, erotic boundary crossings where places of constraint seemingly paradoxically produce a sense of excess or freedom. This boundary-violation speaks to queer attachments, involving a certain amount of precarity, or anxious ambivalence.<sup>79</sup> Boundaries of association are uncertain; they oscillate like the lines in these pictures. Considered together, Kelly's print begins to look significantly more touchy-feely than Müller's hardened enamel on steel; soft to the touch and more vulnerable to damage, Kelly's objects also push beyond reference. If these are transferred impressions, they are not the direct inscription of signs. Rather, they speak to the precarity of signs moving across time and space,

---

<sup>79</sup> The ambivalence of queer attachments has been discussed by José Muñoz as one aspect of an aesthetic practice that does not simply refuse that which is overloaded, but works with and through those charged elements. "Just Like Heaven," 138.

the oscillation of dissolving boundaries between bodies and worlds. Rather than transcribe an associated reference, encountering these objects calls for a different form of association that allows us to hold onto contradictions as generative. The hardness of these edges is also a difficulty that presses out beyond bivalent Euclidean logics, a bending that alters what the line can do in relation to surface plane.

Considering the ambiguity of perception in these works, we can begin to see how they destabilize processes of signification while also producing affective spaces of contact. The figure-ground relationship typically presents a perceptual dichotomy, a tension where the viewer could only focus on one form or the other. These geometric constructions by Müller and Kelly destabilize the relationship between line and surface; their doubled forms occupy the same plane and yet do not settle, oscillating to produce a push-pull in our vision. Their separation and distinction also produces an excessive edging, producing fuzzy logics through vectors of transference that generate multiple possibilities (rather than a bivalence or linearity). We might consider this relation between a marked edge and surface plane according to Judith Butler's formulation of the body as a ground of cultural inscription. She challenges notions of "the body" as passive surfaces for discursive inscription, and the assumption that materiality exists prior to signification and form. For Butler, signifying systems that mark the body actually structure the social field.<sup>80</sup> Systems (or grids, to which I will return in the next chapter) that make the body cohere according to predetermined signs still persist when abstract forms are read as code for a queer body or sexuality. But the destabilization of boundaries between edge and plane also renders the sign precarious; we cannot be sure what it points to, as the position it might seem to mark is also one of contingency, of ambivalence.

---

<sup>80</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 178.

Viewers may associate certain shapes in Müller’s objects with erogenous body parts or fleshy nodes of contact, but to associate suggests a direct connection between one thing and another in a process of identification or equation. These objects play on the borders of association in ways that suggest, not a direct equation, but an approximation, which I have previously formulated as “an estimation that comes near without a claim to mastery.”<sup>81</sup> The lines and borders of these geometric abstractions bring forms close, yet refuse the precision of a coded signifier, or a value judgment in the other sense of a discerning approximation. The linear boundaries in these works—the lines that separate planes or mark surfaces—strategically operate to create spaces of intimate contact. When hard edges also edge into and onto something else, lines do not merely separate or produce distinctions, but open up spaces of vibrant movement rather than foreclosed spaces of the symbolic. While geometry historically moved away from painterly gesture that was tied to subjective expression, here gesture performs boundary transgressions; the hard frit and soggy pulp that both produces and exceeds the line. Material excess and affective boundary crossings work to refuse oppressive formulations of center versus margin, figure versus ground, that would measure the “other” and different against the natural or normal.

### Stigmatic and Reparative Edging: the Triangle

Ulrike Müller’s work utilizes abstraction in ways that refuse to settle in an easy process of signification. They do, however, utilize certain recognizable symbols that draw on associations with queer and feminist movements: the triangle, and the gender sign for “woman.” Varying iterations of the circle above two crossed lines shows up consistently across the series of *Miniatures*, while the triangle appears across enamel and textile works. These geometric signs

---

<sup>81</sup> In “Close Proximity, Intimate Distance,” I considered the proximity of the close-up in photography as an approximation, “a kind of desire or care that comes close, approaching its subject nearly but without total accuracy.”

have been deployed as both terms of categorization and injury, and redeployed in the service of radical collective politics. Here I want to consider deployments of the loaded geometric form the triangle across the work of Müller and Emily Roysdon in order to consider the energetic work of the double-edged tactic of edging that presses off from merely a marked sexual category.

Producing a sense of community as well as agitation, these forms carry the multiple valence of painful edges and histories of injury while at the same time reinvesting that hardness with generative connection and eroticism. These works might allow for a reimagining of a symbol or sign for identity in ways that prompt us to think about how these forms operate.

The triangle already carries a double edge, deployed as a badge of shame in Nazi concentration camps, and reappropriated as a badge of self-identification and pride in queer counterculture in the 1970s. The upside-down pink triangle used to mark deviant sexualities and thus mark for violence and death became a political symbol redeployed by gay rights movements. During and in the wake of the AIDS epidemic, the hot pink triangle, turned to point upward, was reappropriated by ACT UP's *Silence = Death* project to both shift a sign of humiliation to one of connection and resistance. But this triangle was not transformed from a "bad/anti-" to "good/pro-" symbol, rather it drew a connection between Nazi genocide and the illness and death with which certain bodies and sex acts became associated. The poster that founding members of ACT UP designed and pasted on the streets of New York featured the hot pink triangle and SILENCE = DEATH logo as well as the message: "Why is Reagan silent about AIDS? What is really going on at the Center for Disease Control, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Vatican? Gays and lesbians are not expendable...Use your power...Vote...Boycott...Defend yourselves...Turn anger, fear, grief into action." [Fig. 9] The pink triangle became call to action, a queer aesthetic tactic and politics that held onto the harm,

at the same time that it called out, a government responsible for the deaths of those deemed not worth saving. The hard edges of a flaming triangle could both account for that violence while at the same time using its cutting power to incite social-political movement and call for collective response and repair.

Considering two works by Ulrike Müller and Emily Roysdon, I would like to conclude by exploring the edging power of the triangle that might mark a subject position but also opens a space to inhabit. Müller's *Rug (con triángulos)* [Fig. 10] is a large tapestry, a woven wool composition of eighteen triangles in various colors set against a deep red ground. The triangles are set in rows, but they are staggered so that the triangles are not stacked on top of one another but move in a zigzag pattern across the surface. The triangles themselves are tilted, oriented so that they point left and at horizontal angles to the upper and lower right. Their multiple colors—shades of pink, fuchsia, yellow, black, red, and brown—also recall a chart of Holocaust identification emblems. These associations of violence are alive in this work. At the same time, the pattern produced by the triangles is dynamic rather than static, suggesting an uncontained collectivity. The rug itself was designed by Müller and then woven in an artist's workshop in Mexico, produced in a collaborative process across national borders. Their deployment of the triangle shores up the power of its edges to categorize and police the bodies it marks as Other. At the same time, the zigzagging movements of these edges, edges rendered in soft wool on a domestic crafted object that might offer a foundation at one's feet, also edges out onto a different space—one that can hold the hardness of its cut *and* open up to a space for living on the margins.

The triangle is also deployed by Emily Roysdon, who draws on its resonance with past collective movements and potential for edging toward imagined futures. Roysdon's *Beyond the Will to Measure* [Fig. 11] is a row of royal blue ceramic triangles, inverted, with the top line of

each triangle forming the edges of a continuous wave. Along with the hard edges of the triangles, this installation produces a traveling edge; not a straight line but an undulating pattern that dips and peaks in sharp waves. These wave-triangles were repeated across Roysdon's exhibition at Participant, Inc. in 2015, *If Only a Wave*: standing alone, coupled, or lying on the floor, this hard-edge geometric form evokes the pink triangle (the pink walls helped to make this connection) as well as the deep blue of the ocean beneath the waves. The porcelain surfaces of this form produce a similar effect to Müller's enamels; they are slick and shining, appearing still wet and reflecting the light.

In the poetic text accompanying the exhibition, Roysdon writes, "How can we build a structure to be alive inside? To to to-wards a building of space and commons that privileges movement and margins."<sup>82</sup> The wave-triangle adds to the triangle sign a sense of movement, drawing on associations with *a* movement and pressing out to make waves, a transitional movement across time and space. Beyond measuring, the edging work of this triangle might move us into the realm of what Roysdon calls the "uncounted"—uncounted experience, uncounted futures. Queer-feminist experiences and futures are unaccounted for, but they are also myriad and incalculable. *Beyond the Will to Measure* does the edging work of reproducing a triangle marked by stigma as also laden with reparative potential to refuse measurement and incite movement on the margins.

Queer-feminist edging constitutes this moving along the margins, dragging away from signifying logics and toward a fuzzy capacity to produce multiplicities and collectivities, connections that also acknowledge the sharp cut of the hard edge. Demonstrating how this form performs, Müller and Roysdon convert the triangle's power to actually determine the fate of

---

<sup>82</sup> Emily Roysdon, *Uncounted*, text on poster designed with Carl Williamson for *If Only a Wave* (Participant, Inc., January 11- February 22 2015), n.p.



those it marks and marginalizes, mobilizing that power to different ends. These edges are not stable borders to mark subjects but perform edginess, insisting on the curving and bending movements of an edging away that makes space for the uncounted and uncountable to move and inhabit. This dragging allows for movement at the borders of difficulty and harm, an energetic line of sight and struggle that drags away while also dragging toward a future—the seemingly exhausted forms and aesthetics of the past remobilized in and for the possibilities they work to imagine.

## Figures

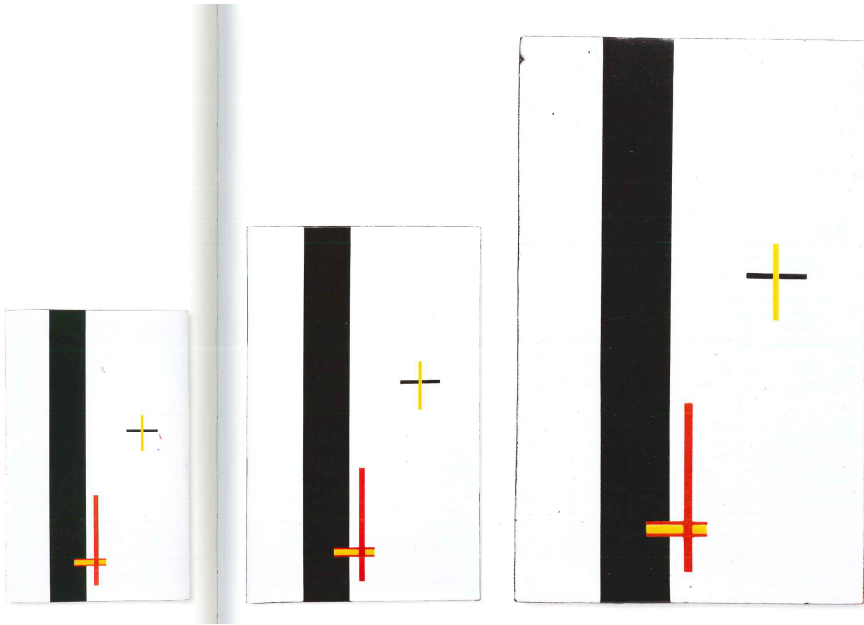


Figure 2. László Moholy-Nagy, *Konstruktion in Emaille 1* (Construction in enamel 1; also known as EM 1), 1923. Porcelain enamel on steel. 37 x 23 5/8 in.; EM 2, 18 3/4 x 11 7/8 in.; EM 3, 9 1/2 x 6 in.



Figure 3. Ulrike Müller, *Franza*, 2010, vitreous enamel on steel, 15.5 x 12 in.



Figure 4. Ulrike Müller, *Miniatures*, 2011, vitreous enamel on steel, 2 x 1.25 in.  
Ongoing Edition of wearable miniature paintings

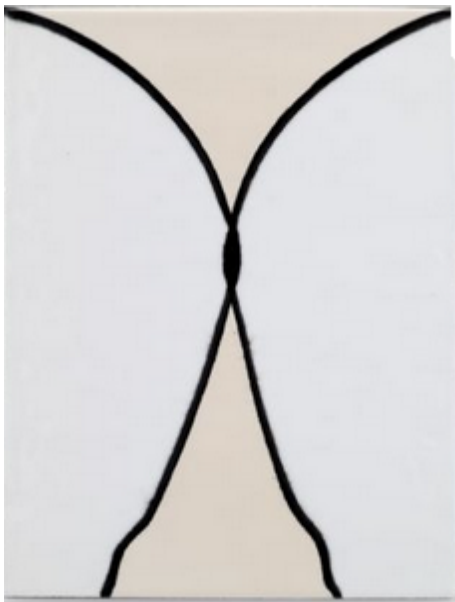


Figure 5 (left). Ulrike Müller, *Fever 103°*, 2010, 15.5 x 12 in.



Figure 6 (right). Ellsworth Kelly, *Colored Paper Image XI (Gray Curves with Brown)*, 1976,  
colored and pressed paper pulp, 46 5/8 x 32 5/8 in.



Figure 7 (left). Ulrike Müller, *Heatwave*, 2010, vitreous enamel on steel, 15.5 x 12 in.  
 Figure 8 (right). Ellsworth Kelly, *Colored Paper Image VIII (Gray Curve with Blue)*, 1976, colored and pressed paper pulp, 46 5/8 x 32 5/8 in.



Figure 9. Silence=Death Project, *Silence = Death*, 1986, poster, offset lithography, 29 x 24 in.



Figure 10. Ulrike Müller, *Rug (con triángulos)*, 2015, wool, handwoven in the workshop of Jerónimo and Josefina Hernández Ruiz, Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca, Mexico. 86 x 64 3/8"



Figure 11. Emily Roysdon, *Beyond the Will to Measure*, 2014, wall-mounted ceramic, clock movements, acrylic, 56 2/3 x 10 1/2 in.

## Chapter 2 *Feeling the Grid*

Lifting off from the hard edge that edges beyond the margins in the work of Ulrike Müller, I turn now to the particular geometric form of the grid in order to further consider how this modernist gesture might offer a queer challenge to the sign. In this case, the operative geometric form is the square, putting into play the structure of the semiotic square. Otherwise known as the Greimas square, this system is used to analyze and visualize the relationship between semiotic signs by positioning entities as binary opposites along axes of the square model, where each element is determined based on its difference in relation to its opposite (for example, the feminine would be defined as such because it is also not-masculine).<sup>83</sup> What is at stake in the very form of the square is this model of relationality that determines the meaning of an object or a body according to binary logics of difference (defined as a precise opposition). And even where there may be space in this chart for a both-and or neither-nor entity, there is no escaping this system of oppositions if one is to produce cultural meaning. While the grid is a modernist icon of abstraction, it can also be understood as a problematic conceptual-visual trap by which bodies are made to signify. At the same time, the grid becomes usefully open to queering precisely because of this difficult and discomfiting iconic status.

In her seminal 1979 essay “Grids,” Rosalind Krauss defines the grid as *the* emblem of modernism, and one that is profoundly contradictory and ambivalent. The grid serves this iconic function in part because it seems to declare art’s autonomous visuality: “Flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal. It is what art looks like when it

---

<sup>83</sup> Umberto Eco explains, “[...] <<automobile>> is not only a semantic entity once it is correlated with the sign-vehicle /automobile/. It is a semantic unit as soon as it is arranged in an axis of oppositions and relationships with other semantic units such as <<carriage>>, <<bicycle>> or <<feet>> (in the opposition “by car” vs. “on foot).” *A Theory of Semiotics* (Indiana University Press, 1976), 27.

turns its back on nature.”<sup>84</sup> The grid is perhaps the ultimate modernist abstraction: precisely not a mapping of mimetic representation (not the pre-modern perspectival grid) but the literal surface of the canvas—“it is the result not of imitation, but of aesthetic decree.”<sup>85</sup> Yet even as it withdraws from the real, Krauss and other scholars (such as Meyer Schapiro) have noticed that the grid also acts as a kind of window that pushes our vision beyond its frame, or it constitutes one subset of a larger spatial continuum, a universal field.<sup>86</sup> This purified or universalizing model of the grid might seem a dangerous cruising ground for queering—if specificity is viewed as a necessary investment for queer politics—and yet the geometry of the grid offers a queer model of relationality that, at the same time, does not foreclose multiplicity, nor settle around sameness. Considering the grid in avant-garde utopian thought, Andrew McNamara argues that the grid was never aimed to solidify the immutable “specificity” of art, but expand its possibilities; “the grid format shifted emphasis to systems of relations – that is, a proliferating and seemingly endless network – which in turn suggested the futility of attempting to shore up the sanctity of the aesthetic.”<sup>87</sup> This chapter explores the grid’s operations both as a network of relations and as a demonstration of excess, a form of abstraction that exceeds its own borders. These particular qualities point to the continued political relevance and utopian possibilities of the grid for contemporary queer-feminist art.

This chapter puts the contemporary gridded felt installations of Lorna Simpson into contact with the paintings of Agnes Martin, whose work exemplifies the modernist grid. While

---

<sup>84</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “Grids,” *October* (1979), 50.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid* 50

<sup>86</sup> For Krauss, the grid “compels our acknowledgement of a world beyond the frame,” “Grids,” 60. For Meyer Schapiro, Mondrian’s paintings “take us beyond the concreteness of the elements and suggest relationships to a space and forms outside the tangible painted surface,” *Mondrian: On the Humanity of Abstract Painting* (New York: George Braziller, 1995), 33. For Jack Williamson, the modern grid suggests the window of the canvas beyond which the grid extends to infinity, “The Grid: History, Use, Meaning” in *Design Issues* 3 (Autumn, 1986): 21.

<sup>87</sup> Andrew McNamara, “Between Flux and Certitude: The Grid in Avant-Garde Utopian Thought,” *Art History* 15: 1 (March 1992): 70.

the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian was similarly committed to the grid format in the 1920s, demonstrating its utopian political ambitions, Agnes Martin is more difficult to place. Her grid paintings and drawings traversed Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, “matter and spirit” (in Krauss’s analysis), committed as she was to a formulaic serial art practice that was both laboriously material and systematic in execution. After outlining some of the key terms and foundational discourses around the grid, which carries multiple and often contradictory implications both formal and political, I will explore Simpson’s work in order to draw out the queer relational possibilities that persist in the grid, and compare her printed felt installations with the paintings of Agnes Martin to consider excess as a strategy for undermining categorical divisions the grid might otherwise seem to secure.

As a form of geometric abstraction, and an object of tension in modernist discourse, the grid presents certain problems and possibilities for contemporary artists engaged in contestatory politics of gender, sex, and race. On the one hand, the grid seems to foreclose, to block or contain; and yet it also extends beyond itself, and opens up to political utopian ambitions in the work of early twentieth-century European avant-garde movements such as De Stijl, Bauhaus, and Constructivism. In the case of De Stijl and the grid paintings of Piet Mondrian, for example, a “universal plastic language” aimed to produce a united, nonhierarchical field in which no single element is more important than another.<sup>88</sup> The perception of order produced by the grid was usefully grounding in the midst of social chaos brought on by modernity, but also ambitiously expansive in an attempt to fuse social utility with aesthetic form (it could transfer across media and scale, from painting and sculpture to design and architecture); the grid’s infinite extension would convey “serial repetition suggestive of a collectivity without boundary or hierarchy.”<sup>89</sup>

---

<sup>88</sup> Yve-Alain Bois, “De Stijl Idea” in *Painting as Model* (MIT Press, 1990), 102-103.

<sup>89</sup> McNamara, “Between Flux and Certitude,” 66-67.



This focus on collectivity over individualism, and aesthetics fused with mass-production, points to one history of the modernist grid as political force on the verge of a universal or infinitely extendable calculation. As an avant-garde utopian strategy, the grid was considered a universalizing gesture.<sup>90</sup> This model of the grid is at once politically useful and problematic: it could either generate a commonality or affinity across difference or it can homogenize and control.<sup>91</sup> That is, the grid might seem to produce a trapping binary situation, but this form is interesting and viable for the artists I study precisely because it is not neutral.

The grid is particularly resonant as a dominant form of modernity because it is a model of industrial progress and visualization of rational thought, structuring actual and virtual spaces from urban landscapes to power grids, an emblem of mechanics and mass production.<sup>92</sup> As a fundamental mechanism of Western modernity, the grid engineers our lived spaces as well as our channels of communication—it is both ubiquitous and invisible in our lives.<sup>93</sup> As such, the grid implies an insidious vehicle for power. As Mark Taylor suggests, the darker side to this ideal form of progress and desire is that “the very structures that make possible democratic representation and egalitarian administration also create technologies of surveillance, control, and even repression. The invasive eye of reason can turn back on credulous citizens to destroy the freedom it is supposed to promote.”<sup>94</sup> These systematic capacities of the grid came to the fore in the work of Conceptualist artists emerging in the late 1960s and 1970s. Works by artists such as Sol LeWitt took on what Eve Meltzer calls the “look of information,” coinciding with

---

<sup>90</sup> In addition to those previously cited, Simon Schama discusses Mondrian’s ambition treat painting as universal by liberating it from the concrete world, in “True Grid,” *The New Yorker* (Oct. 9, 1995): 42-43.

<sup>91</sup> “When the ideal of universality is put into practice uncritically, it can quickly lead to a uniformity that excludes or represses everything and everyone deemed different.” Mark C. Taylor, “From Grid to Network,” in *The Moment of Complexity* (University of Chicago Press, 2001), 31.

<sup>92</sup> See Hannah Higgins, *The Grid Book* (MIT Press, 2009) and Mark C. Taylor, “From Grid to Network,” 19-46.

<sup>93</sup> Michael Warner argued this of the grid (environmentally, rather than aesthetically) in a lecture, “On the Grid” (Center for the Humanities, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Thursday, March 17, 2016).

<sup>94</sup> Taylor, “From Grid to Network,” 30.

Structuralist understandings of the human subject as no longer sovereign, but a product of preexisting systems. Understanding that humans were inescapably governed by the structural order of the grid, both Conceptual artists and Structuralist theorists turned to systems and language for “a revolution in signifying structures.”<sup>95</sup> Along with a generation of artists engaged in postmodern appropriated methods of deconstruction and pastiche in the 1980s and 90s, Neo-Geo (Neo-Geometric Conceptualist) painter Peter Halley has also used the grid to evoke and critique contemporary human conditions of confinement: the grid and the rectangle became prison cells and conduits for technological power.<sup>96</sup> Understanding the grid as inescapable and anything but universal or neutral, contemporary artists take up the grid in order to subvert and convert its channels for different ends.

While grids can organize abstract space, which is also lived space, in order to suppress or to homogenize, this aesthetic tactic of abstraction also has the potential to subvert and exceed regimes of representation that demand certain encoded forms in the work of minority artists—forms that can be easily read in bodily terms, or codified as subjective expressions of the artist’s life.<sup>97</sup> And while its systemic operations would seem to lead anywhere but utopia, the ambition of this chapter is to show how the grid’s ability to construct and transform its environment, its resistance to containment (even as it appears self-contained), still holds out radical potential for queer-feminist movements. The grid is particularly compelling because it resonates ambivalently as both an object and an operating system, demonstrating the unruly capacities of formal elements as seemingly benign as a series of squares or intersecting lines on a canvas. If the grid

---

<sup>95</sup> Eve Meltzer, *Systems we have loved: Conceptual Art, Affect, and the Antihumanist Turn* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 9.

<sup>96</sup> See Peter Halley, “The Crisis in Geometry” in *The Geometric Unconscious: A Century of Abstraction*, ed. Jorge D. Veneciano (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 56.

<sup>97</sup> Kaira M. Cabañas points to the work of Latin American artists who used the grid in ways that both addressed political concerns and rejected the notion that Latin American art should appear realistic and overtly political, in “If the Grid is the New Palm Tree of Latin American Art,” *Oxford Art Journal* 33 (2010): 367.

can function as one kind of panoptic apparatus of surveillance by which bodies are organized and made ever visible, it also has the resistant capacity to obscure, obstruct, and abstract.

Paradoxically, the grid's concealment is also revealing; it can make the invisible visible. The power of Krauss's grid lies in its function as a screen in the psychoanalytic sense, one which both represses and reveals a certain shame of spiritualism or illusion within modernism.<sup>98</sup> We could then understand the grid to foreclose, to screen out, to block. Krauss has also described the grid as a veil, its ability to silence due to "the protectiveness of its mesh against all intrusions from outside." Dividing and redoubling the surface of the canvas, the grid does not reveal the surface, but "veils it through repetition."<sup>99</sup> Krauss's point that the grid resists the external influence language and narrative has been challenged by Gabrielle Dean's analysis of Gertrude Stein's use of the grid as diagram of language. Here, the grid is not silent nor does it exclude text, but makes both presences and absences, the known and unknowable, perceptible and materialized in the same figure. Further, Stein's detective story mirrors the structure of the grid in ways that expose its political foundations and colonial origins, making absence apparent as a symptom of this structure that hides itself, along with the colonial subjects on whose invisibility its continuation depends.<sup>100</sup> Jack Williamson similarly notices a shift from the visible structures of the modernist grid to postmodern understandings of a surface that obscures or covers over, suggesting some "otherness" concealed just beneath the surface (and the surface or the Freudian "screen" here is profoundly distrusted).<sup>101</sup> So scholars have noticed how the grid, as an expansive system, can reveal itself differently, visualizing on the surface the very things it would seem to repress—randomness, disorder, precarity.

---

<sup>98</sup> Krauss, "Grids," 54

<sup>99</sup> Krauss "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," 158, 161.

<sup>100</sup> Gabrielle Dean, "Grid Games: Gertrude Stein's Diagrams and Detectives," *Modernism/modernity* 15 (2008): 333.

<sup>101</sup> Jack Williamson, "The Grid: History, Use, Meaning," *Design Issues* 3 (Autumn, 1986): 25-29.

The grid has not lost its power or its generative capacity for transformation in contemporary art. Recent exhibitions, both national and international, have charted the evolution and persistence of the grid as a vibrant test site, a modernist form continually infiltrated and redeployed as “the latest fairy dust” (as the curators of a 2015 exhibition at Outpost Gallery put it).<sup>102</sup> The order of the grid does not screen out the glitter of possibility for politically-engaged artists whose work makes visible its divisive space-making operations while at the same time converting the grid’s function for affective and even erotic channels of intimate contact. The grid can be charted as one legacy of abstraction that persists in practices of what has come to be known as queer craft.<sup>103</sup> Harmony Hammond, an artist engaged with abstraction and lesbian feminist politics since the 1970s, has recast the minimalist grid in fabric (her “soft grids” of the late seventies), and recently exhibited near-monochrome paintings at Alexander Gray in 2016.<sup>104</sup> Frayed strips of canvas are applied like bandages to the grid of grommets, a pattern of holes and layered fabric and paint that tend to be read as bodily topographies.<sup>105</sup> The 1970s grid-centered “Fuck Paintings” and drawings of Betty Tomkins have recently been discussed in terms of a “feminist formalism,” where body politics and the politics of painting itself are engaged simultaneously.<sup>106</sup> In this recent art criticism on Hammond and Tomkins, the grid can operate as feminist or as queer precisely because it is somehow *embodied*, even as their work does not

---

<sup>102</sup> David Weinstein and Ruth Kahn, curators, “Checkered History: The Grid in Art and Life,” Outpost Gallery, Queens, 2015; Nessia Pope, “How the Grid Conquered Contemporary Art,” Artspace, 2014; “Tracing the Grid: The Grid in Art After 1945,” Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, May 5 - October 7, 2012.

<sup>103</sup> On the grid’s centrality to contemporary textile practice, see Syniva Whitney, “The Grid, Weaving, Body and Mind,” Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings, Paper 60 (2010).

<sup>104</sup> On Hammond’s “soft grids” see Kenneth Goldsmith, “The Soft Grid: A Response to Sina Queyra’s Lyric Conceptualist Manifesto,” Harriet: a poetry blog, Wednesday, April 11th, 2012, accessed July 15, 2015, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2012/04/the-soft-grid-a-response-to-sina-queyrass-lyric-conceptualist-manifesto/>.

<sup>105</sup> Clarity Haynes, “Queering Abstract Art with Wrapped Up, Grommeted, and Roughed-Up Paintings,” *Hyperallergic*, May 12, 2016, accessed July 15, 2016, <https://hyperallergic.com/298095/queering-abstract-art-with-wrapped-up-grommeted-and-roughed-up-paintings/>.

<sup>106</sup> William J. Simmons, “Betty Tomkins: *Fuck Paintings* (1969-74),” *Flash Art* 303 (2015).

cohere or fully appear as such. This is a kind of interpretive move that understands a feminist or queer formalism to necessitate a reclaiming of a gendered or sexualized authorial position through bodily metaphor.<sup>107</sup> The tendency to understand the grid as a queer intervention because it takes on bodily form (even as it might be precarious or radically othered) limits the material topographies of this work to something more easily associated with a kind of biography, and it is not long before abstraction becomes representational again. My analysis of the grid departs from this interpretation in that I find that the grid works queerly when it subverts this symbolic structure's power to cohere an encoded or signifying form or body, and instead taps into the excessive and relational capacities that scholars have shown to be already operational in grid.

The discourse around how the body might appear (or not appear) in the work of women artists is especially complex, and scholars have complicated definitions of the anthropomorphic as a direct human mimicry. For example, Susan Best understands minimalist anti-humanism and the eclipse of authorship to effectively intensify the affective resonance of the work of women artists such as Eva Hesse and Lygia Clark, where the subject who engages with their work is rendered destabilized rather than fixed.<sup>108</sup> Briony Fer troubles a language of anthropomorphism that implies bodily projection and empathy, challenging accounts where “organic forms seemed deliberately to inscribe an ‘erotics’ of the body” in abstract work by an artist such as Louise Bourgeois.<sup>109</sup> Instead, Fer offers the anthropomorphism of Roger Caillois, which is not a resemblance but the self-effacement of camouflage. I will elaborate on anthropomorphism in the next chapter, but for now I want to continue to trouble the notion that in order for an abstract

---

<sup>107</sup> Rosemary Betterton considers non-representational painting as a reclamation of female authorship, where abstraction functions as a representation of the gendered body in *An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists, and the Body* (London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>108</sup> Susan Best, *Visualizing Feeling: Affect and the Feminine Avant-Garde* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2011), 139.

<sup>109</sup> Fer is specifically critiquing Lucy Lippard's discussion of Bourgeois's work. *The Infinite Line: Re-making Art After Modernism* (Yale University Press, 2004), 105.

visual language to operate as queer or feminist or anti-racist, it must necessarily carry particular bodily associations. Scholars such as Fer have problematized this interpretive logic, and yet it maintains in current scholarship and art criticism I cited above. I am interested in continuing the valuable work that feminist scholars (Ann Wagner, Anna Chave, Lucy Lippard) have done in elaborating the importance of materiality and bodily affect in the work of a generation of women artists responding to minimalism. And I would like to open out this ongoing discussion of materiality in order to move beyond bodily association or encoded gender or sexuality and delve into the grid's material capacities for catachrestic excess and queer refusal to signify.

The grid emerges here as an emphatically material form, and its textures can disrupt its regularity or cold austerity in favor of a more “touchy-feely” form of abstraction that not only invites touch, but also projects out to touch us. We can see this continuation of the grid in the printed felt serigraphs of Lorna Simpson, the “Hot Lesbian Formalism” of Sheila Pepe’s crocheted installation environments, or the “Man Quilts” of Glen Fogel.<sup>110</sup> The grid also appears in the Op Art inspired paintings of Xylor Jane and Linda Besemer (the focus of my next chapter). The drawings of Edie Fake utilize the grid as a structure for imaging queer social spaces.<sup>111</sup> In all of these examples, the grid is not simply the background framework, but an active materializing force of queering art practices. While I will focus on Simpson’s work as a core example here, these particular iterations are also part of a larger trend of contemporary deployments of the grid that do queer-feminist work. Refusing to foreclose the grid’s capacities for charting non-normative affinities and decorative excesses, these artists mine what they demonstrate as the not-yet exhausted political potential of this modernist strategy. In turn, this queered abstraction opens

---

<sup>110</sup> Sheila Pepe’s installation “Hot Lesbian Formalism” (2005) was exhibited at Sesnon Gallery, University of California, Santa Cruz; Glen Fogel’s “Man Quilts” were installed in his exhibition, “Why Don’t I . . . Pretend to Be Your Dad” at JTT in New York, November 8, 2015 – January 17, 2016.

<sup>111</sup> Edie Fake, *Memory Palaces* (Brooklyn, NY: Secret Acres, 2014).

up a space for possibilities beyond the trapping dualities of universal or specific, transcendent or representative, hetero or homo.

I am particularly interested in how the grid works both in relation to, and in excess of, sign systems that make bodies appear and cohere as raced, gendered, and sexed. Charged with difficult implications of state power structures, the grid maintains its ability to both make visible the minority-marked otherness and to shame it. And even as these structures are inescapable, contemporary artists work with and through the grid's injurious charge in order to exceed it, all the while holding on to that difficulty. Utilizing the potentially exhausted or failed aesthetic strategies that might otherwise be repressive puts at stake the loaded visual language of abstraction, the seemingly outdated or depoliticized formal devices, to perform differently. While the repressive implications of the grid will persist (indeed, we cannot disregard them), this grid form is queered through its reactivation in work that refuses to limit the pleasures and affinities that emerge when its excessive and materializing capacities are not yet played out, but radically camped.

A medium for channeling power in multiple capacities, the grid generates live wires of connection that produce a commons or commonality among people and environments. That is, while the grid would seem to be one of the most formulaic and absolute forms of modernism, producing an endless repetition of lines that demarcate and divide, this particular technology for organizing space might not foreclose connections but generate intimate spaces of contact that still demand degrees of separation that refuse to collapse the specific into the general.<sup>112</sup> This importantly allows for relations and affinities across difference while at the same time refusing the universalizing tendencies that project difference as stably fixed on the bodies of others.

---

<sup>112</sup> I am inspired to imagine this spacing by Jill H. Casid's formulation of "intimate distance" in "Handle with Care," *TDR: The Drama Review* 56 (2012): 126.

While the grid functions in art practice as a process of bringing parts together to form a whole, the serial arrangement of distinct areas do not necessarily produce a coherent picture, a settled signifying system, but rather exceed calculated borders. This essay focuses on two particular operations inherent in the grid that demonstrate its queering operations: *relationality*, and *excess*. I show how the grid, as a tactic of queer abstraction, can operate simultaneously as a mechanism for queer relationalities and site for affective attachments while also exceeding the cutting borders and configurations of difference that would signify or settle around an encoded sign.

This conception of relationality is drawn primarily from the work of José Muñoz, particularly his formulation of the *incommensurate*: a proposition of queerness as a sense and a sharing-out that moves beyond the individual subject (following the work of Jean-Luc Nancy). If, for Muñoz, queerness is about the incommensurable, a “sense” of the world that is incalculable and excessive and also shared through proximity, then the geometric format of the grid offers a method for sharing the unshareable, for thinking beyond the register of the singular subject to produce a “map of life in which singularities flow into the common.”<sup>113</sup> This map, this system of interlocking integers—this grid—then becomes an excessive spatial arrangement that can sustain, rather than resolve, contradiction, and with the capacity to hold in tension what it would seem to visually repress. Its expansion points us continuously beyond the picture plane, beyond the sign, to what is not there and will not appear in a fixed image: unrepresentable, unimaginable, irresolvable tensions. The grid operates here in a gritty, even dirty capacity to obscure rather than organize, and to press up against borderlines that otherwise insist on either equivalencies or strict separations between spaces and forms. Subverting a modernist project of

---

<sup>113</sup> José Muñoz, “Race, Sex, and the Incommensurate: Gary Fisher with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick” in *Queer Futures: Reconsidering Ethics, Activism, and the Political*, eds. Elahe Haschemi Yekani, et al. (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2013), 112.



commensurability—transcribing human experience into a shared or universal frame of reference, a common language—the queered grid produces a space of incommensurable contact; not in an act of resolving into sameness, but putting forth approximate relationalities that do not demand equivalence.

Relationality: the grid as production site for intimate contacts

Lorna Simpson's work in particular allows me to conceive the grid as a queer technology of association: even as it promises a clear division and creates a closed sense of space that might suggest equivalence, the grid also has the capacity to place things into close and intimate proximity, bringing disparate aesthetics and media into close contact. Simpson's series of gridded felt panels, ongoing since the mid-1990s, cross the minimalist geometric format of the grid with reproductive photographic imagery and serigraph printing, furthering the question of how abstraction relates differently to the sign, or exceeds signification. In her large installations, photographs are blown-up and screen-printed onto a gridded arrangement of separate felt panels. Grouped under the title "Public Sex," pictures of empty places are the implied locations of sexual encounters described in narrative text panels: they picture a landscape, a city, a staircase, a theatre, a bedroom, but are markedly devoid of bodies. These scenes become abstracted and fuzzy when expanded and printed on felt material, and they are the sites of erotic encounters that we never see, but may nevertheless imagine or project into the tactile surface of these environments. Cruising the grid is to navigate these borderlands of intimate contact, while maintaining some of the anonymity or obscuring properties of this aesthetic strategy.

Lorna Simpson's work characteristically deals with intersecting issues of race, gender, and sexuality through the expanded medium of photography, which is also often fragmented,

repeated, and juxtaposed with text.<sup>114</sup> While this work often represents the black female body, these representations are always contingent, complicated, and never easily decoded. Already, an abstraction manifests as a strategic refusal of legible signs of difference or identity; her subjects often turn away from the camera, refuse to appear in ways that are expected or easily codified. The abstract form of the grid is taken up by Simpson as a support structure that also imposes a linear system and repetition onto the landscapes depicted in her “Public Sex” series. Simpson’s use of the grid plays with two, seemingly opposing, ways in which the grid functions in two-dimensional art. In his 1972 essay, John Elderfield points to two uses of the grid—either as “structures” that serve no mimetic purpose other than to map the surface itself, or “frameworks” which organize pictorial elements or serve as a background scaffolding for representations.<sup>115</sup> Simpson’s grids both declare the “surfacedness” of the work (their tactile fuzziness draws us to the surface) while they also serve as demarcating frameworks for her serigraph images: the grid both coheres and fractures the surface, defining and dividing the space. These works notably combine reproductive technologies and gridded systems that have historically produced human types and taxonomies by which inner character could be interpreted through the body’s outward signs.<sup>116</sup> Consider, for example, the photographic documents used to justify eugenics in the nineteenth-century by placing certain physical “types” together, often in grid patterns, to evoke comparison and produce the very raced and deviant bodies they depict.

---

<sup>114</sup> Brooke Belisle argues that the felt works are not a departure, but a continuation of Simpson’s previous work, even in the absence of the body, in “Felt Surface, Visible Image: Lorna Simpson’s Photography and the Embodiment of Appearance,” *Photography and Culture* 4 (July 2011): 157-178.

<sup>115</sup> John Elderfield, “Grids,” *Artforum* (May 1972): 53.

<sup>116</sup> See Alan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive” in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 344-45. Kellie Jones also points out Simpson’s engagement with this history of photography used to classify and control black subject, “(Un)Seen & Overheard: Pictures by Lorna Simpson,” in *Lorna Simpson* (London: Phaidon, 2002), 32. Okwui Enwezor discusses Simpson’s ongoing redeployment of minimalist tropes in ways that point to this history (though he does not investigate the grid) in “Social Grace: The Work of Lorna Simpson,” *Third Text* 35 (Summer 1996): 50.

As an instrument of association, the grid brings figures and bodies into close contact, producing separations as well as comparisons; at its most oppressive, what Judith Butler identifies as the signifying systems that structure the social field by producing “a social space for and of the body within certain regulatory grids of intelligibility.”<sup>117</sup> Following Butler, we can understand this field of visibility as racialized as well as gendered or sexed, and according to Maurice Wallace’s understanding of a racial gaze that fixes the black subject within a “rigid and limited grid of representational possibilities.”<sup>118</sup> Systems or grids that bound and mark the body according to certain codes of cultural coherence are precisely what readings of abstraction-as-coded-reference (and attendant methodologies of visual de-coding) continue to enact. My discussion of the grid necessarily reckons with the danger inherent in this form used to reproduce and stabilize positions, especially minoritarian positions. Even in linguistic form, the grid potentially reproduces power arrangements and enforces certain patterns of relationality upon which they depend: GRID was once an acronym for “gay-related immune deficiency,” an early term for the AIDS virus. These patterns are disrupted, however, by queer deployments of the grid as a tactic of abstraction that draws near without drawing direct correlations, and with the capacity to maintain the spaces of contradiction that its borders might otherwise claim to resolve. Turning to the particular modernist geometric form of the grid in Simpson’s work, which also drag back to the modernist paintings of Agnes Martin, I will consider how gridded arrangements can exceed typological figurations of scientific mastery.

---

<sup>117</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 178.

<sup>118</sup> Maurice O. Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 135. Judith Butler, “Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia” in *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams, 15-22 (New York: Routledge, 1993), 18. Both are quoted in Simone Browne’s *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 20.

Lorna Simpson's *The Rock* (1995) [Fig. 12], is a large-scale installation of twelve felt panels arranged in a grid pattern on the wall, accompanied by a narrative text panel on either side. While the overall image is a single enlarged photograph of a large boulder and a stream surrounded by trees, the scene is fragmented by the panels that separate the serigraph into equivalent rectangular segments, and further abstracted by the felt material foundation and oversized scale that render the image fuzzy. The print is black and white, so that light and shadow define the forms, and flecks of light in the trees, water, and pebbles further the pixelated effect of the felt fibers.

To the left of this image, a text panel reads:

Female Trouble: Divine has just left home after an argument over a Christmas gift, and storms out of the house. She is picked up on the highway by an auto-mechanic (played by Divine). They approach a wooded area and have frantic sex on a mattress, by the side of the road.

And to the right:

Driving all day long, has induced a hypnotic state upon both of us. It is definitely time to pull over. I recognize the state park that we are now in the middle of, and can endure a few more minutes of this drive in order to find the same spot I went to last time I was here. Hoping that this search will not turn into another journey, since I didn't make any mental notes of the surroundings during my last visit, I'm ill prepared, and not really wanting to appear too familiar with the area. I make an effort this time to commit this trip to memory. But here we are, sick of driving. We get out of the car and start to hike to find a spot and it will probably replace the last one, completely. Haven't seen any week-end hikers for a while and since we are miles away from any rest stops it seems plausible that we will not be patrolled. I asked, "How's this?" "Is it secluded enough for you?"

While the grid sometimes silences, this structure brings multiple narratives together in

Simpson's work; these stories transform the environment that is represented, implying intimate relations that occur within the scene, or just outside of it, or are perhaps entirely separate from the photograph. There is no direct reference in the text panels to this particular printed image, only a generalized secluded wooded area. *The Rock* confuses our spatial as well as our temporal location, suggesting scenes that may have occurred in the past, or might in the future; the narrative on the right panel oscillates between present and past tenses. It creates an opening, an

approximate spacing of contact in both time and space; it is unclear when and where these interactions occur, and whether voyeurism gives way to participation. As the “you” and “us” of Simpson’s right text panel suggests, we are already there. This grid not only maps a space but opens an infrastructure for our projection into the scene—we might project alternative narratives, or map our own bodies into this opening in time and space. It activates and unsettles the spectator, an unsatisfied voyeur with nothing to see but much to fantasize.

As the cruising grounds for public sex, this felt grid becomes a site for what remains unrepresented and unresolved, yet shared or “public” through a multiplicity of imaginative projections and participatory events in which we, the spectator, are implicated. The text points to what is not seen in the image, what remains just beyond the frame, but still tempts and teases us with indirect reference to a space of intimacy. While the right panel describes what seems to be a personal narrative, the left panel references John Waters’s high camp cult classic film, *Female Trouble*, and his muse and star, the drag queen Divine. The sex scene described here is between Divine and alternate persona played by Divine, so that intimacy occurs between two versions or performances of a singular subject. The trouble in this case is not only the illegibility of gender, and that perhaps multiple genders are performed by a single subject, but that the intimacy described between these two aspects of a self is also alienating, decidedly impersonal sex. Something is shared, in common, but intimacies remain suggestive and anonymous. So while the grid is a site of intimate contact, it is also one where non-normative relationalities are activated without containing or fixing the subjects it would seem to describe; this grid refuses to produce the bodies of others.

While intimacies are most clearly suggested by textual narratives, the linear separations between panels and austere geometric format of this installation potentially alters the kinds of

affective encounters that serial logic might produce. This mapping of a represented space through the repetitive system of the grid offers a queered form of seriality that does not reproduce a signifier in order to reinforce its relation to a stable signified.<sup>119</sup> Rather, this is a deployment of seriality that fragments and abstracts a space of representation, an infrastructure in which bodies are never figured forth, but relations of desire are still active. If, thinking with Butler's theory of gender performativity, repetition stabilizes the categories upon which representations of difference depend, then perhaps Simpson's grids alternately refuse to fix bodies on solid ground or chart a territory for sanctioned sexual practice.<sup>120</sup> Rather, this fuzzy landscape, divided and multiplied by the lines and planes of the grid, produces a ground without figures that nevertheless manages to activate intimacy and materialize queer forms of eroticism.

While repetition is crucial to the production of categories of gender and race, patterns and formulas that repeat not only have the capacity for producing difference, but also for creating points of contact that unite while maintaining their distance; not pure unity but relations between multiplicities. Feminist theorist Iris Young proposes a useful concept of gender as *seriality*, rather than understanding women as a generalized and isolated group in ways that gloss over the differences between them. Young understands the series as defined by each member's individual orientation toward objects and their material possibilities as well as their constraints, linked indirectly rather than through mutual identification or sets of attributes that would define membership in a group.<sup>121</sup> Our lives are conditioned as gendered, sexed, and raced through a vast

---

<sup>119</sup> Briony Fer views repetition as the essential ground of all representation, even as it often gives way to difference, *The Infinite Line*, 33. Rosalind Krauss describes the grid as a system of reproductions without an original, much like processes of signification, and this forms one myth of originality for Krauss in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, 161-162.

<sup>120</sup> See Butler, *Bodies that Matter*.

<sup>121</sup> "Thus, as a series *woman* is the name of a structural relation to material objects as they have been produced and organized by a prior history." Young is drawing on Sartre's concept of serial collectivity. Iris Marion Young, "Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective," *Signs* 19 (Spring 1994), 728.

complex array of objects and materialized histories that structure social spaces. But this model of gendered serialized existence allows us to imagine how individuals move and act in relation to objects and within structures that position and constrain them; this model of seriality inflects the grid as a system for mapping spaces that nevertheless allow for mutability.

We can think of the grid in this case as the cruising ground for intimate queer relationalities that place strange and disparate bodies and worlds into contact—this proximity brings them close and in common, but still acknowledges dividing forces of social and historical constraints and possibilities. Considering again José Muñoz’s concept of the incommensurate, irreconcilable integers can also allow us to think beyond the register of the individual subject and to conceive a commons of the incommensurable (rather than equivalence), even as crisscrossing trajectories of singular being remain violent and traumatic.<sup>122</sup> I imagine these trajectories in the form of intersectionalities that modify identifications and positionalities. Life-lines travel in both parallel and intersecting capacities, moving with and beside, crossing and connecting, touching consistently but not constantly. This is a fuzzy system in which membership exceeds binary logics of either belonging or not-belonging, and indeed opens out to infinity.<sup>123</sup>

Excess: the grid as textured surface that exceeds the canvas and the sign

While linear time may be mapped on the grids of our calendars, the excessive repetition of the grid evokes an infinite temporality; it cannot be grasped as an object, and in this way it exceeds representation. This is Briony Fer’s argument about Agnes Martin’s grids, which refuse a single totality, “the work of repetition marks the impossibility of completion.”<sup>124</sup> Martin’s work

---

<sup>122</sup> Muñoz “Race, Sex, and the Incommensurate,” 112-113.

<sup>123</sup> This “fuzzy” logic is defined by Michel Serres: “Between yes and no, between zero and one, an infinite number of values appear, and thus an infinite number of answers. Mathematicians call this new rigor ‘fuzzy’: fuzzy subsets, fuzzy topology.” To be “rigorously fuzzy,” in Serres’s terms, is not to resolve between two answers, but an expansive openness to infinite possibilities. *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982): 57.

<sup>124</sup> Briony Fer, *The Infinite Line*, 58.

may seem self-contained through her formulaic and meditative process, but this “infinite line” also marks “incalculable differences,” exterior as well as interior alienation.<sup>125</sup> In some ways, the grid is an impossible object of art; neither Martin nor Mondrian ever produced a perfect modular grid, nor was this perfection ever necessarily the ambition.<sup>126</sup> Fer and others have already noticed that the modernist grid is not exact, but excessive, in its infinite extension (material and virtual), and that its repetition also gives way to variability, to difference.<sup>127</sup> I would like to explore these inherently excessive capacities of the grid by bringing Martin’s work in contact with Lorna Simpson’s, particularly their materiality and textural qualities.

As a material handling of the canvas surface, the grid maps the literal space of the picture plane. A flat surface is broken up into equally measured segments that organize a “real” space that is also represented. The grid functioned within modernism to map the surface of the canvas, an already gridded textile, and ultimately emphasize the flatness of painting.<sup>128</sup> In the case of Simpson’s work, however, the particular medium of felt creates a surface of the picture plane which is compressed rather than woven, its precarious fibers interacting randomly. Simpson’s literal division and multiplication of panels, cut and juxtaposed, produces a picture plane that is unbounded, the interlocking grid unraveled. The intimacies are not represented, but felt.

The particular materiality of felt is crucial to my argument that Simpson’s deployments of the grid also exceed or trouble its oppressive capacities. Fabric, for Deleuze and Guattari, constitutes a “striated space” of intertwining and intersecting elements, necessarily delimited and closed. Felt, on the other hand, constitutes an “anti-fabric” of entangled fibers: “An aggregate of

---

<sup>125</sup> Ibid 53.

<sup>126</sup> Brandon Taylor says this of Mondrian in *After Constructivism*, 164.

<sup>127</sup> See Briony Fer, “Decoration and Necessity: Mondrian’s Excess” in *On Abstract Art*, 33-54; Rosalind Krauss, “Grids,” 59; Meyer Schapiro, “Mondrian: Order and Randomness in Abstract Painting.”

<sup>128</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 162.



intrication of this kind is in no way *homogenous*: it is nevertheless smooth, and contrasts point by point with the space of fabric (it is in principle infinite, open, and unlimited in every direction; it has neither top nor bottom nor center; it does not assign fixed and mobile elements but rather distributes a continuous variation).<sup>129</sup> Further considering felt as both a tactile sensation and affective experience, trans studies scholar Jeanne Vaccaro points out that this “anti-fabric” cannot be calculated mathematically, or mapped in the way the space of fabric is: rather, “It is the result of the destruction of the grid.” This composite material, “fibrous and fleshy,” challenges the spatial and corporeal division of interiority and exteriority.<sup>130</sup> In Simpson’s “Public Sex” series, the non-gridded anti-fabric offers a queer logic for alternative calculations and mappings of space and bodies. The composite and compressed here produces a picture plane that is not the ground of representation, but becomes a bushy and unruly site of contact. This work refuses the force of the grid to settle bodies and spaces, and instead uses the felt to connect affect with materiality, pointing to the textures of feeling that structure queer associations and relations.

Concerns with the material qualities of surface and space bring Lorna Simpson’s felt prints into close contact with the grid paintings of Agnes Martin. Simpson’s serigraphs are produced through a silk-screening process, bringing her photographs closer to the realm of painting. Their abstracted qualities also take on the facture of drawings, graphite sketches rendered by hand, akin to Martin’s delicately drawn lines. Simpson’s prints are muted in tone; black, white, and gray, they share with Martin’s the subdued palette, drawing attention to the surface qualities of

---

<sup>129</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 475-476.

<sup>130</sup> For Vaccaro this allows for alternative theories of transgender becoming, for a “trans-corporeography” that can imagine material processes of embodiment that are not stagnant topological points. Jeanne Vaccaro, “Felt matters,” *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 20 (2010): 253.

their supports. While Agnes Martin's deep engagement with the materiality of painting would seem at odds with the ordered system of the grid and her formulaic process of rendering, the surface terrain of the fabric on which she painted is doubled again by the woven structure of her pencil lines and paint strokes. In Martin's 1960 oil painting *White Flower* [Fig. 13], the grid is punctuated by symmetrical white dashes that enhance the woven pattern of fabric. While the tight grid pattern extends to the painting's borders, the dashes are maintained in the center, and where they end, the lines of the grid appear like the cropped and frayed ends of a woven textile. Moving "with the grain," her grids seem to constitute the fabric itself, which moves and responds in turn to the artist's touch.<sup>131</sup> Redoubling the pattern of her fabric supports, Martin's painting does not figure forth, but produces a second ground. As ground, in the sense of landscape, Simpson's and Martin's works are environmental in scale: Simpson's felt arrangements exceed six feet on either side, and Martin was devoted to a square six-foot format. They relate directly to the body of the viewer as a landscape one could enter; at the same time, their gridded surfaces bar us from getting too caught up in an illusory depth. They demarcate in order to call attention to their surfaces as material planes on which a picture is both rendered and abstracted.

Considering how "nature" or the natural is alluded to in both artist's work also demonstrates how they exceed signification. Much has been made of Agnes Martin's titles, which characteristically allude to landscapes—*The Beach*, *The Desert*, *Garden*, *Field*—and prompt readings of her grids as, if not representing nature, projections of the affective experience of nature, as a transcendence also connected with the artist's interest in Buddhism.<sup>132</sup> Rosalind

---

<sup>131</sup> Christina Bryan Rosenberger, "A Sophisticated Economy of Means," in *Agnes Martin*, eds. Edited by Lynne Cooke and Karen Kelly (New York: Dia Art Foundation and Yale University Press, 2011): 104-105. According to Krauss, as the grid came to coincide more closely with its material support, the supposed "logic of vision" became infected by the tactile." "The/ Cloud/" in *Bachelors* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 89.

<sup>132</sup> The tensions between various readings of Martin's work in relation to her titles is discussed by Suzanne Hudson, "On A Clear Day" in *Agnes Martin*, 121-122.

Krauss posits the grid as a closed system in Martin's work, which is formally and materially bracketed and closed off to readings of the "abstract sublime" or the social context of the work.<sup>133</sup> Alternately, Jonathan Katz has asserted the importance of the context, particularly Martin's biography, for reading geometry as encoded personal reference in this work, we can also ask if the grid could constitute a veil of self-repression at the same time that it offered an escape from the binaries and power structures that constituted the artist as a "closeted lesbian."<sup>134</sup> Strangely, both readings mark the grid as a closed system, a signifying practice—a /cloud/ or a /closet/—even as it refuses the figure. The diagonal slash importantly marks and contains a signified. Rather than the formulation "figure-ground," I would use "figure/ground" in the case of Martin's grid to evoke the oscillation and the proximity but also the lack of clear distinction between them. The slash might propose an alternative (whether the eye focuses on figure or ground), or binary (male/female, black/white), but it is also emphatically a separation, a distance, at the same time that it would evoke nearness of meaning. That distance, that pause, is not necessarily a closed system, but opens up time and space for intimate contacts or erotic tensions that still maintain, without resolving, their difficulties and differences.

Returning to Lorna Simpson's series title of "Public Sex," cruising the grid is also a boundary transgression between public/private. In both Simpson's and Martin's grids, passive viewing or voyeurism gives way to participation and projection, as the textures and tactility of their surfaces seem to demand that we touch (or imagine touching). The surfaces of both artist's works beckon us, but Simpson's printed felt is erotically charged, as both a vehicle for the abstraction of the photograph and for the bristling contact of skin and hair. While a /bush/ is never depicted, certainly the public is in proximity to the pubic, where sites of intimate contact

---

<sup>133</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "The/ Cloud/," 75-90.

<sup>134</sup> Jonathan D. Katz, "Agnes Martin and the Sexuality of Abstraction," in *Agnes Martin*, 190-191.

exceed the borders of the individual subject or distinctly gendered body. Both corporeal and representational boundaries are unfixed by these grids; they generate textures of charged affective attachment that demand more intimate forms of spectatorship.

The materiality and surface textures of Simpson's and Martin's grids are crucial to their queering operations, and two works in particular introduce the excessive effects of color and light by rendering the grid in gold. Agnes Martin's paintings are already notable for the atmospheric quality of their surfaces that also appear to shine from within. Departing from her typically muted color palette, *Friendship* (1963) [Fig. 14] is a gilded canvas that, taking the luminosity of her work further, literally reflects light from the gold leaf that covers it. Gold leaf is an incredibly fragile medium—thin and sensitive to touch, it demands a delicate application process. Martin incised the lines of this grid by hand, damaging but also decorating the gold surface. Rather than duplicate a layer of woven gridded lines on woven fabric, the canvas is covered with a shimmering matter, which is then scored and visibly altered by the etched lines. Process is not only visible, but texturally felt. The formulaic and meditative process for which Martin is known becomes increasingly devotional in this work; even as the canvas maintains its monumental six-foot square format, this work has the material qualities of a religious icon. As we become absorbed in it, the golden matter also reflects and shines back at us, exceeding the very surface it produces.

Lorna Simpson's *Curtain* (2011) [Fig. 15], perhaps an extension of her "Public Sex" series, depicts an empty public setting in large format serigraph across a series of felt panels. This photograph of an empty theatre, taken from the vantage of the balcony, is printed in monochrome gold, so that the large curtain over the stage produces a shimmering field of golden light. A spherical light fixture hangs from the ceiling like a disco ball, transforming this theatre

without bodies into a performance site for a show that has perhaps yet to occur, or long ended, but still glistens with possibility. The expansive potential of the grid, its extension out into the world, would seem to operate only on flat horizontal and vertical planes, but the gilded surface and shimmering gold materiality of these grids project outward, at us. This proliferating network of lines becomes inflected with light from its immediate environment, so that the grid's organization of an abstract surface also affects a lived space of contact—and even if that contact and its implied intimacies are indirect, the textures and materiality of gold produces an affective immediacy nonetheless.

These golden grids perform an alchemical transformation of matter in which the canvas or the felt support for an image is not only a screen for our projection—a meditative surface in which we insert ourselves—but projects back on us. In both works, the horizontal and vertical lines that divide the surface do not function as a figure that comes forth; rather, the golden planes between them swell out with a material thickness as well as a shining light. Considering projection in the psychoanalytic sense, visual culture theorist Jill Casid elucidates the important associations between alchemy and projection in Freud's work, where, "To project the projections of the past not surpassed is importantly *not* to dispel but rather to recast the disavowed as mattering in and for our present."<sup>135</sup> Casid's point is that this contact—between us and the other we disavow or cast off, between the past and the present—matters both imaginatively and materially. Furthering Jung's formulation of projective imagination through alchemical texts, Casid also points to the corporeal implications of scenes of projection, where an embodied spectator occupies "a subtle yet tangible between-realm in which the act of mattering imagination brings the utopian into transformative contact with the mundane." I think of these

---

<sup>135</sup> Jill H. Casid, *Scenes of Projection: Recasting the Enlightenment Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 41.

particular grids—*Friendship* and *Curtain*—as alchemical projections that do not only transform the mundane grid into gold, the subtle into the spectacular, but more crucially point to the capacity for this technology for organizing spaces and bodies to do something other than categorize and separate us from the disavowed other. These gesture toward the queering potential of abstraction to both alienate us from forms that are otherwise straightforward (we might think we already know what the grid is and does), and to reconfigure that projective technology into something profoundly re-materialized; the grid as fuzzy and flaking, glittering and reflective and as unruly as the embodied spectator who encounters it.

Returning to what is at stake in the exhausted or failed, I would like to turn to the queer form of the mirrored grid projected over a sphere: the disco ball. Transforming the already utopian associations of the grid, the disco ball projects what José Muñoz calls a wish-landscape or queer aesthetic practice that shines out and reflects the world back at us, but also inflects the world with dazzling sparkle.<sup>136</sup> The utopian potential of queer aesthetic wish-landscapes might also be considered, as Casid has written of landscaping as a verb, “material process involved in making or ‘worlding’ the ‘worlds’ they might otherwise seem merely to depict.”<sup>137</sup> We might take the rotating figure of the disco ball as an object that is both associated with the celebratory gay dance party magic, and a technology for projecting the glitter of light to transform a space, expanded to account for what is both there and what may yet come to be. The unruly spatial boundaries of this reflective grid illuminates the incoherence of form, subverting the dominating possession of spaces or bodies. Similarly, the glittering gilt surfaces of grids by Lorna Simpson

---

<sup>136</sup> For Muñoz, the connotations of the mirrored orb might be that of “an aerial perspective of a great glittering landscape. It can appear to be something like a demographic or population-density map of a queer utopia.” “Just Like Heaven,” 142.

<sup>137</sup> Jill H. Casid, “Epilogue: Landscape in, around, and under the Performative,” *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 21 (2011): 101

and Agnes Martin cannot be disregarded as mere deviant excess, but taken in a performative capacity to transform their spaces.<sup>138</sup> They do not operate as abstract aesthetic cover that obscures the real; rather, they materialize another space through the proliferating projection of light that, like the disco ball, reflects back at us a landscape or spectatorial space that it also radically alters.

While the queer seems diametrically opposed to gridded surfaces that might immediately foreclose affective, sensual, or erotic possibility, Lorna Simpson's work reimagines this formal device to map the queerly projective spaces of intimate contact as excessive sites for relations across the bounds of difference. Placed into intimate contact with the grids of Agnes Martin, we can see how this contemporary formal device also draws out the inherent queering capacities that are now activated, retroactively, like the retro activities of our disco-grid-inflected dance floors. I am particularly attached to the term *inflect*, which carries associations with the tone of inflection in our voices as well as the bending and curving of altered matter, highlighting the infinite variations activated through form that also transforms. To inflect is also to infect, to alter the very matter of bodies it touches. The magic of this queer alchemy renders the grid as flexible rather than stagnant, staging possibilities and affinities yet to emerge from behind a glittering curtain rather than settling a space by and for certain bodies. This queer form performs by producing a space for intimacies to exceed bounds of difference, of public and private, of historicizing coordinates of here and now or then and there. The grid remains a problematic form of modernism, but these felt and fractured, gilt and glistening deployments of the grid also show it to be already riven with transformative potential.

---

<sup>138</sup> I am thinking with Roland Barthes, who formulates aesthetic surface *as* substance in "Style and its Image."

Turning back to the semiotic function of the square, I would like to conclude by considering the ostensibly straightforward sign systems that structure the grids of Jasper Johns, alongside the paintings of Xylor Jane. Jasper Johns's *Gray Numbers* (1958) [Fig. 16] is the first figure in Krauss's "Grids" essay, and yet this lead image is not discussed, although Johns's number and alphabet paintings are mentioned as a kind of grid that expands man-made sign systems, somewhere between the abstract and the representational.<sup>139</sup> Johns might not be considered a foundational grid artist, but it is significant that his number grid is juxtaposed with Krauss's initial claim that the grid is the emblem of modernism, and perhaps this painting seems to demonstrate the flattened and ordered nature of this construction. *Gray Numbers* is literal indeed, a seemingly self-contained aesthetic field determined according to the order of numbers 0-9, progressing in sequence along the lines of a grid. Johns is known for post-expressionist painting that draws attention to the material support of his canvases, incorporating everyday materials such as newsprint along with thick encaustic to build up surfaces that were at once gestural and pulled from the readymade and banal stuff of the world.

Discussing uses of the color chart in painting of the late 1950s and early 60s, a grid that could be both rational and fetishistic, Briony Fer notes the important point of connection between colors and numbers, for like the color chart, "numerical sequences offer readymade serial systems for encoding information," thus this combination occupies a prominent place in art of the mid-60s. This also brought the random operations of chance into play, for within a mathematical system, the random effects of color combinations could emerge—and it is this interplay of serial and sensual that revealed them to be precisely not opposite—"Jasper Johns had already shown how easily numbers slipped into alphabets and into body parts and into colors."<sup>140</sup>

---

<sup>139</sup> Krauss, "Grids," 63

<sup>140</sup> Fer, "Color Manual," 34



Johns's work might seem to call for de-coding based on the symbols he deploys—flags, targets, maps, numbers, etc.—and further, when singular numbers are painted and titled as “Figures,” they are read as such, human figures.<sup>141</sup> But what his number grids emphasize is precisely the relationship between signs that then become abstract through repetition.

Conceiving of the grid as an excessive and queer technology of association, this organizational logic becomes an intimate contact site charged with sensuality. If the grid operates as a closed structure for sign systems, what we notice about this particular system is its emphatic materiality, a seemingly invariable pattern that is nevertheless inconsistent (while the numbers are repeated, they are each rendered differently). Difference might register in Johns's work in ways that are figural, but we can alternately imagine that the emphatic materiality of these grids constitutes a space that is more than enfolded. The interaction between object and spectator is then not a contact between two bodies, but a collective, imaginative cruising ground for excessive flows of intimacies that refuses corporeal singularity.

Johns's gridded arrangement of numbers, painted using pre-made stencils, form a highly de-personalized structure for painting that is nevertheless messy, tactile, and colorful even as it is rendered in shades of gray. While the gray might reiterate the newsprint surface upon which the numbers are painted, this is not entirely monochrome but glittering with shades of light blue and rosy-browns, so that the surface appears to reflect bits of the world's color. The decorative pattern and tactility of its surface, the monochrome that is also not one, operates in a disruptive capacity to both render the sign and destabilize it at once. Indeed, color operates in particular ways through the grids I have discussed. Simpson's grids emphasize the black-and-white of the

---

<sup>141</sup> For a detailed discussion of Johns's Numbers, see Roberta Bernstein, “Numbers,” in *Jasper Johns: Seeing with the Mind's Eye*, ed. Gary Garrels (San Francisco, California: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Yale University Press, 2012), 44-81.

photograph, and precisely so: they are not merely devoid of color, but bring our attention to this color contrast that carries associations with racial difference (I will return to the racial implications of color in the next chapter). The subdued palettes of Agnes Martin and this work by Jasper Johns are not neutralizing, but draw us into the materiality of their surfaces, the subtle shifts in tone and texture that become even more pronounced in hues of grey and white. Color inflects the grid with a decorative quality, rendering serial repetition as flamboyant pattern.

Contemporary artist Xylor Jane similarly uses number sequences to paint grids that are at once colorful spectrums and mathematical games. Her regular use of palindromes and prime numbers to determine both the colors and structure of paintings may be mathematically motivated, but the intensity of rainbow color configurations register like the hypnotic perceptual illusionism of Op Art. The miniscule painted dots in Jane's paintings also retain the thickness of the oil medium so that they produce something akin to the texture of braille. Sometimes rendered in pure primary and secondary hues, sometimes sparkling metallic pigments that shimmer, these spots are not perfect pixels, but singularly textured, even as their arrangement is emphatically systematic and seemingly rational. Her painting *6th Order Magic Square Composed of Prime Numbers* (2015) [Fig. 17] is a pattern of small painted dots arranged in geometric grid patterns, but these dots also form numbers that create a magic square—a game where the numbers on each column, row, and diagonal must all add up to the same constant number. Jane's paintings often use complex mathematical coding systems, but her gridded number patterns both reference and disrupt the ostensible rationality of the semiotic square. This may appear to be a closed system, but it also yields a potentially endless sequence of possibilities, proliferating out beyond the picture plane in multiple ways: the thick texture of dots applied to the canvas creates both tactile and optical sensations, producing a colorful projection both material and illusory.

While Xylor Jane's practice is just as formulaic and meditative as Agnes Martin's, the surface pattern becomes somewhat random rather than adhering to a clear organizational logic, registering like the erratic gestural brushstrokes of Johns's stenciled numbers. These camped-up number grids render their seemingly generic and ordinary subject matter spectacular. At the same time, what seems like the subject matter of this work—the arrangement of numbers—determines the structure that also becomes decoration, *style*. I will also return to camp style in the following chapter, and the sensuality of Johns's tactile surfaces has already been discussed at length. At the same time, there is a tendency to view that tension between abstraction and representation as a closeting, and materiality becomes a way to re-assert the body that has been elided—like that censored plaster cast of a penis so thoroughly analyzed in Johns's *Target with Plaster Casts*. This work is read as queer because the body is fragmented and unbounded, and because of the potential danger of the homoerotic gaze in the context of the fifties: “Fugitive, desubjugated, the body evades pre-ordained signification, which is to say citation; the body is produced as a silent screen,” according to Katz.<sup>142</sup> But I would argue that it is precisely the citation that makes it camp, the way in which body parts are held in their boxes points to the grid's function to categorize and contain while converting that order for its subversive potential. Certainly the body is abstracted, and perhaps abjected or alienated, but this work's capacity to subvert signification lies not in a citational silence (such a thing is in fact not possible), but rather an engagement with citation that wrests and torques the injurious charges targeted at those who might be seen to embody a “queerness.” That is, the casting and coloring of the bodily segments takes on the flaming colorful surface ascribed to the queer—and this is anything but a closeting, though the

---

<sup>142</sup> Jonathan Katz, “Dismembership: Jasper Johns and the Body Politic,” 180. See also Gavin Butt, “Bodies of Evidence: Queering Disclosure in the Art of Jasper Johns,” in *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums*, ed. Amy K. Levin (Oxford & New York: Routledge, 2010), 235-252.

doors hinged on the boxes might suggest that possibility. Color and surface does not act as a silencing screen, but projects out as a flaming revelation.

The following chapter will consider the material effects of color as a plastic medium in the work of Linda Besemer, considering the ontological implications of colored surfaces that refuse to fix racial or sexual difference on the surface (where paint is so often read as skin). The alienating and sometimes sickly hues of these Op-inspired painterly sculptures turn back to the figure-ground trouble posited in Chapter One, and expand on my understanding of materiality as a crucial queering tactic that does not merely encode aesthetic form with stable bodily meaning, but exceeds itself as an affective force both visually and texturally. Taking the injurious charge of the flaming attached to vibrant surface decoration of color, these works again take up and transform the very terms of otherness not disavowed but to which they hold on, move through, and alter.

## Figures

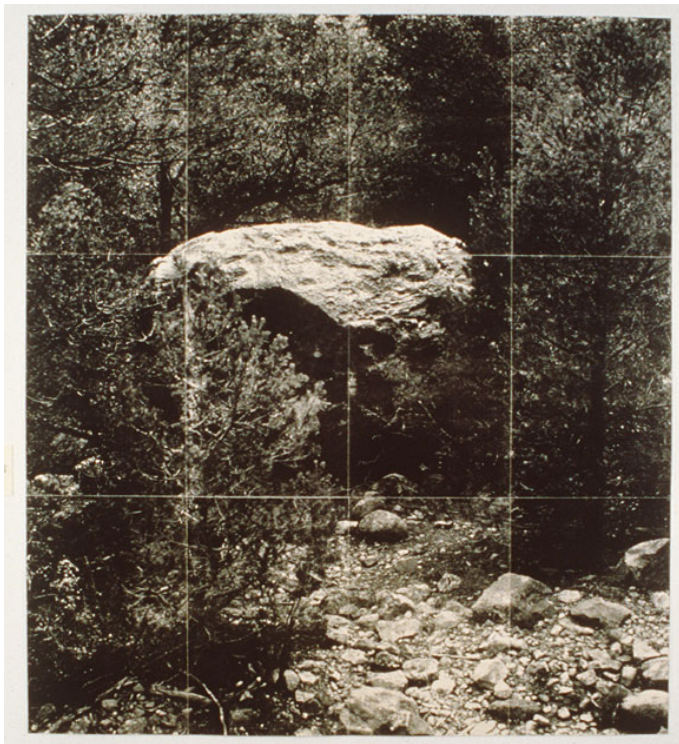


Figure 12. Lorna Simpson, *The Rock*, 1995, serigraph on twelve felt panels w/ 2 felt text panels. 100.5 x 94 in.

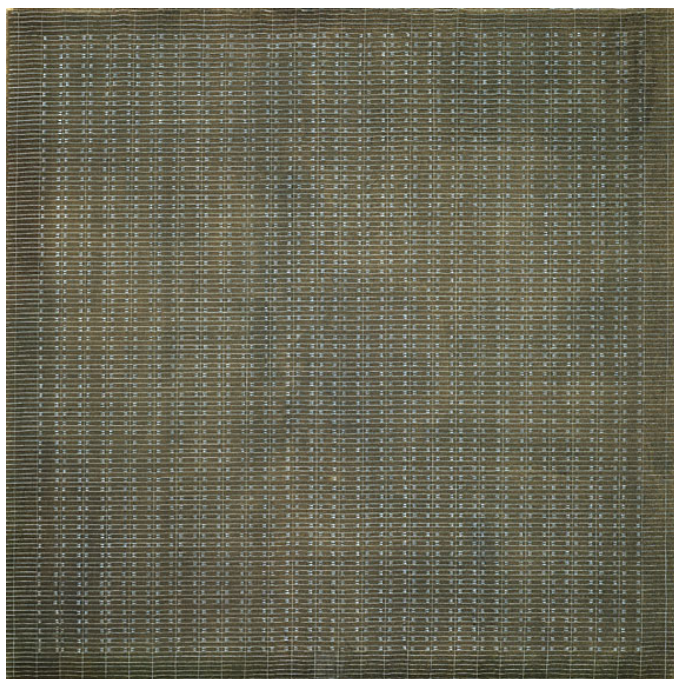


Figure 13. Agnes Martin, *White Flower*, 1960, oil on canvas, 71 7/8 x 72 in.

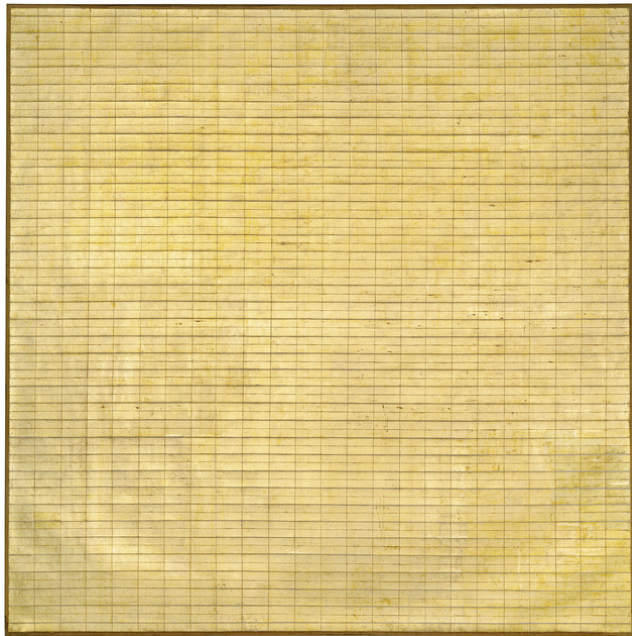


Figure 14. Agnes Martin, *Friendship*, 1963, incised gold leaf and gesso on canvas, 75 x 75 in.

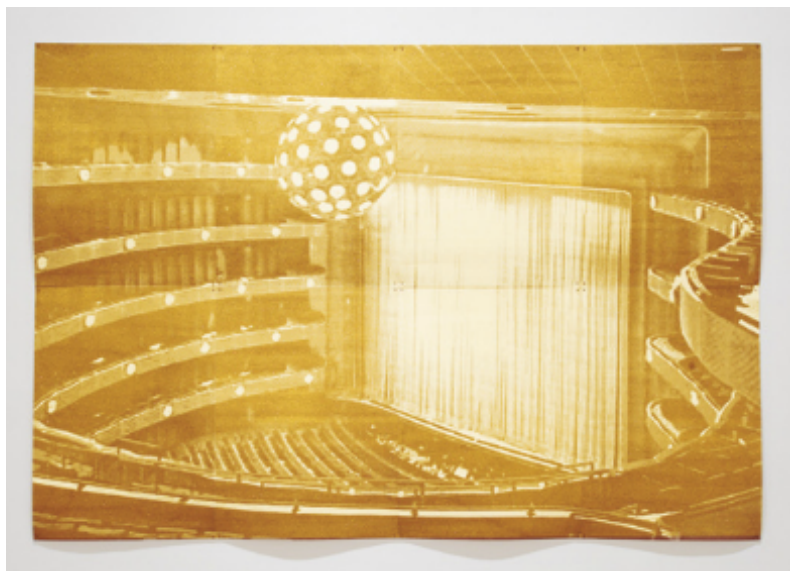


Figure 15. Lorna Simpson, *Curtain*, 2011, serigraph on eight felt panels, 68 x 100 in.



Figure 16. Jasper Johns, *Gray Numbers*, 1958, Encaustic and newspaper on canvas, 170.2 x 125.8cm

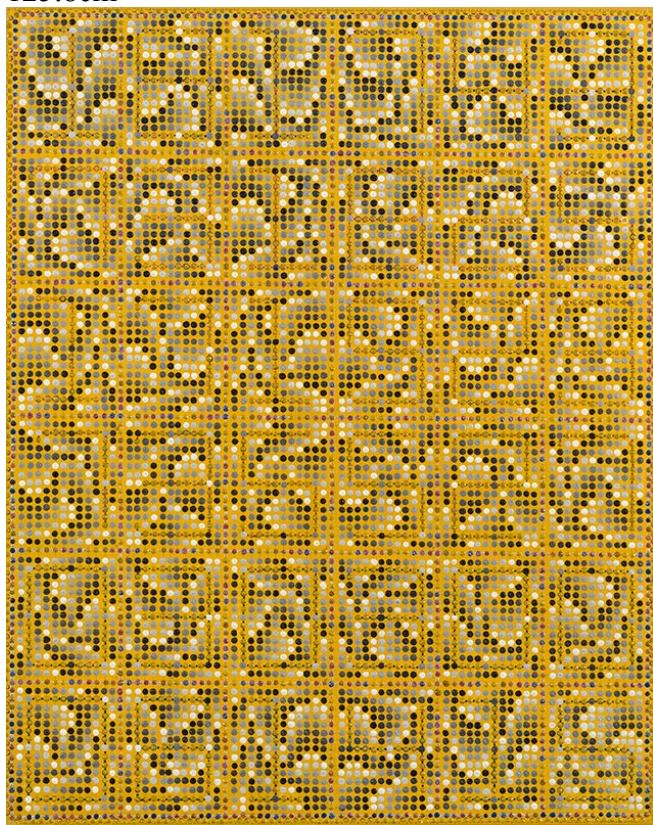


Figure 17. Xylor Jane, *6th Order Magic Square Composed of Prime Numbers*, 2015

### Chapter 3: *Flaming Color*

Xylor Jane’s pulsating paintings exemplify a queer investment in color, and particularly color that is bright and creates an illusory sense of movement in space. Linda Besemer similarly creates undulating optical patterns and luminous color combinations in pure acrylic paint, peeled away from any surface so that paint and color both materialize in excess of canvas ground. This use of taffy colors and tacky surfaces can be traced through the monochrome and dichromic paintings of Sadie Benning, and the interplay between color and light back to the shining reflective geometric works of Ulrike Müller, discussed in Chapter One. This shared interest in painted color—and particularly the play between painted surfaces of color as an optical or illusory encounter and the literal materiality and textures of painting; the use of light, figure/ground reversals and plays with perception; the almost mechanical as well as meditative application of paints to create these tactile and emotive surface effects—all indicate that color already has, as Derek Jarman wrote, “a Queer bent!”<sup>143</sup>

Recalling the 1963 experimental film by Jack Smith, *Flaming Creatures*, “flaming colors” suggests the close affiliation of color to camp, drag, and glittering excess. Smith’s “creatures” flame through their ambiguous non-normative genders and sexualities, and that genderqueer glamour corresponds with the abstraction of the film’s non-narrative sequencing and disjunctive transitions. The film itself is black and white, but also colorful in more than one sense: controversial, scintillating, voracious. Another queer experimental filmmaker and artist cited above, Derek Jarman, became fascinated with color near the end of his life. His own particular history of color, *Chroma*, was published the year before his death from AIDS in 1994. Jarman’s last film, *Blue*, consists of a saturated blue color filling the screen, suggestive of Yves

---

<sup>143</sup> Derek Jarman, *Chroma: a book of color* (London: Random House, 1994), 58.



Klein's monochromes. Jarman was losing his eyesight near his death; the saturated blue field is a projection screen against which a queer vision is articulated even as it cannot be visually fixed. While this chapter will focus on chromatic abstraction in painting rather than film, the close affiliation between color and flaming excess in experimental cinema speaks to color's queer capacities as a tactic of abstraction that does not stagnate or settle.

Playing on the edges and in-between spaces of the normative and expected, color performs as a marginal substance with perverse capacities to exceed binaries of difference. David Batchelor has defined "chromophobia" as the manifestation of attempts to devalue, diminish, and deny the significance of color in Western culture due to its association with "some 'foreign' body – usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological."<sup>144</sup> Color has historically been relegated to the realm of the cosmetic, the superficial; trivial as much as it is dangerous, and merely a secondary quality of experience excluded from higher concerns. A long history of color as a philosophical problem is due, in part, to its association with matter and its threat to the mimetic order, as Jacqueline Lichtenstein explains: "being material, color has always been seen as belonging to the ontologically deficient categories of the ephemeral and the random."<sup>145</sup> Color is an element of corruption belonging to the perverse lower forms of nature, and thus, for the painter, drawing takes precedence as the higher, dominant mode of expression. The Renaissance-era debate in painting between *disegno e colore* (design/drawing or color) stemmed from the notion that color was inferior to form; color seemed dangerous and volatile as a spontaneous painterly medium, while drawing was the

---

<sup>144</sup> David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion, 2000), 22.

<sup>145</sup> Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *The Eloquence of Color: Rhetoric and Painting in the French Classical Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 63. Lichtenstein gives this useful history of philosophical critiques of painting as cosmetic and artificial, and color by extension as dangerous seduction, illusion and pleasure (a drug, *pharmakon*), dating back to Plato and Aristotle.

orderly and objective measure of artist's skill.<sup>146</sup> This association extends into the twentieth century, as abstract expressionists such as Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman denied that color was the touchstone of their work, expressing the modernist fear of association with the decorative or superficial.<sup>147</sup> But it is precisely the marginal and even dangerous capacities of color that produce its possibilities as an animating medium for queer-feminist tactics.

Color has historically been theorized by artists, scientists and philosophers in order to grapple with the mechanics of human vision and sensory experiences of the material world, a tradition stretching back most notably to Isaac Newton's study of the nature of light and color (*Opticks*, 1704). As Jonathan Crary has shown, Goethe's *Theory of Colors* (1840) illustrates the modern shift in understanding optical experience through the role of the subjective observer as the active producer of visual phenomena, so that the appearance of color is located in the physiology of the human subject: "the absolute values accorded to color by Newtonian theory are displaced by an insistence on color's transient unfolding within the human subject."<sup>148</sup> Color plays a crucial role in philosophical questions of aesthetics: Hegel's discourse on color treated it as both a painterly system for creating visual harmony as well as a "magic" of pure appearance. Opposed to this mystical account, Wittgenstein showed that, similar to linguistic norms, color charts and systems promote norms of harmony and organization: the problem of color is also a problem of naming. For Wittgenstein, color's function is abstract, unfixed, and the property of an

---

<sup>146</sup> Martin Jay provides a summary of this debate in "Chromophilia: *Der Balue Reiter*, Walter Benjamin and the Emancipation of Color." (prepared for the 2011 Yale University Forum on Art, War and Science in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, British Columbia, Canada, May 19-23, 2011), 3-4. See a chapter on the theme in John Gage, *Color and Culture* (London, 1993). See Jacqueline Lichtenstein's chapter "The Clash between Color and Drawing" in *The Eloquence of Color*, 138-169.

<sup>147</sup> David Anfam, "The Language of Gesture" in *Masters of the Gesture* (Beverly Hills, CA: Gagolian Gallery, 2011), 5.

<sup>148</sup> Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: on Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 73.

active mind rather than an objective medium or passive organ of sight.<sup>149</sup> Early twentieth-century European expressionists such as Wassily Kandinsky utilized color as a primary mode of modernist abstraction in painting, believing that color could be understood according to universal, spiritual and symbolic associations. Walter Benjamin similarly celebrated color as a site of utopian phantasy; however, as Martin Jay has shown, Benjamin attempted to emancipate color from rigid semiotic schemes. In contrast to Kandinsky's semiotic code of color, and the privileging of design and form in the work of Kant and others, Benjamin's infinite, fluid, transformative medium of color defies categorization.<sup>150</sup> Mid-twentieth-century American abstract painter Josef Albers theorized and practiced the use of color combinations that also rejected the truth value of ordered color systems, embracing color's deception, its instability, and fostering receptiveness to dissonance between hues.<sup>151</sup> Rather than posit an origin of influence for contemporary uses of color, this limited account of color theory's fraught discourse across disciplines recalls what is already there in its history: not only the incoherence of color as a discrete mode of aesthetic expression, but an association of color with affect, with magic, and with excess beyond ordered signs and systematic identification.

Color's excessive capacities have been highlighted by theorists who understand color to operate at the limits of language and signification. Julia Kristeva puts forth a theory of color that challenges any easy analogy between painting and linguistic categories (signifier, signified, and referent), which, she argues, fail to account for the work of color in excess of meaning. For Kristeva, color evokes a triple register of Freudian drives (exterior drives, interior drives, and

---

<sup>149</sup> Charles A. Riley, *Color Codes: Modern Theories of Color In Philosophy, Painting and Architecture, Literature, Music, and Psychology* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1995), 23-28.

<sup>150</sup> Martin Jay, "Chromophilia," 16-17; On Benjamin's critique of Kant, see *Howard Caygill, Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 1997).

<sup>151</sup> See Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006).

signifier) that frustrates both representation and language.<sup>152</sup> I will return to the drive later, but for now I want to point out the importance of this frustration in the possibilities for color, within an abstract formal language, to exceed a political regime of representation. Attributing the work of color to the modernist shift from figural realism to abstraction, Kristeva asserts that it is through color that “the subject escapes its alienation with a code (representational, ideological, symbolic, and so forth)” and that “Western painting began to escape the constraints of narrative and perspective norm [...] as well as representation itself.”<sup>153</sup> Operating in excess of language, color presents a crisis of naming; for Thierry De Duve, if color appears to “speak” for matter, for the body, it nevertheless frustrates signification.<sup>154</sup> David Batchelor has also written that color can become “an embarrassment to language” because the difficulty of putting our experience of color into words constantly reminds us of the limits of linguistic expression.<sup>155</sup> These performative possibilities make color a crucial strategy for queering abstraction, refusing and exceeding interpretive logics by which the surface of paint is read in terms of encoded bodily surface.

This chapter focuses on the work of Linda Besemer, where color registers as emphatically material and synthetic. Comparing her folded paint sculptures to the work of Lynda Benglis, I consider how the removal of canvas support along with the use of unnatural color might challenge the binary divisions of surface and depth by which bodies are raced and

---

<sup>152</sup> Julia Kristeva, “Giotto’s Joy” in *Desire In Language: a Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 218.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid 221

<sup>154</sup> In “Colour and its Name,” Thierry de Duve writes, “the name of a color risks losing its designated referent, even though it vouches for that to which it corresponds.” *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp's Passage From Painting to the Readymade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 124.

<sup>155</sup> David Batchelor, *The Luminous and the Grey* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 14. Batchelor also usefully discusses the experience of color as ambivalent, attending to the impulses of chromophobia and chromophilia that can coexist in tension in our experience of color. In his edited volume for the Whitechapel series, *Colour*, Batchelor noted this tense relationship between color and language and included a cluster of texts that reflect on this, including Kristeva and de Duve. *Colour* (Documents of Contemporary Art. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008).

gendered. While the medium of this work is plastic paint, the bright and sometimes fluorescent color both exists materially—it registers texturally as a tacky surface—and appears to vibrate or shine beyond itself. Besemer takes the materialization of color further through the use of optical illusion and surface pattern that I compare with the Op Art paintings of Bridget Riley, undermining modernist efforts to detach the surface of painting from illusion. Not only do these works produce an illusory sense of movement in space, they shake any sense of solid ground by deploying illusion as playful force of affective encounter rather than in the service of representation. Flaming colors are spectral in the dual sense that they are of the color spectrum and ghostly, producing waves and lingering impressions on the retina even after we look away. This energy is importantly incorporeal, disembodied, and yet maintains a material presence. The bright colors in the sculptural paintings I discuss here are significant in that they almost act as their own light sources. Color seems at once to exist visibly, materially, and to vibrate.

Attending to the queer capacities of color deployed as a medium, Linda Besemer’s work drags on the loaded visual histories of color in ways that draw out its perverse possibilities. The folding and unfolding of Besemer’s work might recall a thin skin peeled away from a body; but color registers as chemical, plastic, a false embellishment. This emphasis on the materiality of synthetic materials points back to the privileging of commercial paint which characterizes the treatment of color in art since 1950. This shift is the basis for the exhibition *Color Chart* (MoMA, 2008), which traces a genealogy of commercially-produced color “after the palette,” divorced from subjectivity and belonging to the realm of consumer and industrial life rather than a transcendent medium.<sup>156</sup> The deployment of color as industrial post-Duchampian “readymade” is one way in which mid-twentieth century artists would attempt to detach emotion from color,

---

<sup>156</sup> See Temkin and Fer, *Color Chart: Reinventing Color 1950 to Today*.

previously taken to be an expressive element of painting, even as so much desire and anxiety was still tied up in this abandonment of color as symbolic in favor of color as pure materiality.<sup>157</sup> But the use of unnaturally bright color might also work queerly to expose the affective resonance that is already there in the history of color since modernism. While it seems a straightforward or even apathetic aesthetic approach, the use of unmixed color and manufactured pigmented materials might actually produce mixed feelings in this work. It signals an ambivalent attachment to past aesthetic approaches that might seem to gloss over difference or specificity or feeling, but nevertheless hold out possibilities for affective encounters with difficult material (something toxic and corrupting, slippery and ungrounding).

The neo-avant-garde's disavowal of authenticity, originality, and the artist's singular subjectivity were served by color's status as industrial product. But plastic's associations and operations already exceed that of mere industrial substance; for Roland Barthes, plastic is "the stuff of alchemy," the miraculous "transmutation of matter" that does not embody form but infinite movement. Yet, plastic is also a disgraced material, unable to recreate natural colors, "retaining only the most chemical-looking ones. Of yellow, red and green, it keeps only the aggressive quality, and uses them as mere names, being able to display only the concepts of colours."<sup>158</sup> The artifice and toxicity of plastic color crucially points to the ways in which color exceeds language. The slippage between "mere names" and the colors to which they correspond, between signifier and signified, presses against the modernist project of abstract painting in which color was the ultimate semiotic element.<sup>159</sup> Queer deployments of readymade color might

---

<sup>157</sup> Benjamin Buchloh discusses this shift with the monochrome in "The Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde," *October* 37 (Summer, 1986): 44. Briony Fer shows how the color chart came to operate as a space of desire in the mid-fifties, caught between historical avant-gardism and the possibilities of serial models already in formation in "Color Manual," 34-35.

<sup>158</sup> Roland Barthes, "Plastic," in *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 98.

<sup>159</sup> Thierry de Duve argues that it was Duchamp who drew out the possibilities for "short-circuiting" when these arbitrary names lose their designated referents. *Pictorial Nominalism*, 135.

similarly reject a focus on the artist's body or biography, while at the same time using color's surface effects in ways that draw out its sensual capacities. Linda Besemer's focus on the particular qualities of plastic color is not a move to reject expression, as it was for mid-century male artists. Instead, this work offers tactics for undermining direct representation—which was also useful for these earlier post-expressionist painters as well as minimalist sculptors—while maintaining the affective work and stretching the elastic possibilities of color as folding surface. Rather than give us a signifier under which the signified is hidden, color's plasticity works in a perverse slippage, as well as affective ambivalence, folding between oppositions of inside and outside, subject and object, nature and artifice.

Emphasizing the “pure materiality” of color over its symbolic associations was one important intervention of the monochrome, “one of the most important reductivist pictorial strategies of the historical avant-garde,” according to Benjamin Buchloh.<sup>160</sup> After painting *Pure Colors: Red, Yellow, Blue* in 1921, Rodchenko proclaimed, “this is the end of painting,” and “there will be no more representation.”<sup>161</sup> The end of representation would logically result in painting's “death,” but in fact this move opened the practice of painting to the possibilities for tactile and material encounters that were traditionally associated with sculpture. Further, the material shift from artist's paints to household industrial paints in mid-century abstract art suggested a shift in the purpose and promise of painting: while artist's paints were developed for the primary purpose of representing bodies in space, industrial paints were made to cover larger surfaces in a flat layer of color, as David Batchelor suggests, “They form a skin, but they do not suggest flesh.”<sup>162</sup> For Batchelor, the anxiety around this shift concerned the abandonment of an

---

<sup>160</sup> Benjamin Buchloh, “The Primary Colors for the Second Time,” 43.

<sup>161</sup> Alexander Rodchenko, quoted in Benjamin Buchloh, “The Primary Colors for the Second Time,” 44.

<sup>162</sup> David Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, 99

entire history of easel painting, now trading tradition for technology, but I want to focus on the flesh. Queer deployments of color might re-imagine this historic shift by dramatizing the ways in which this anxiety around representation and color in painting is also an anxiety about bodies and embodiment. Besemer's rendering of colorful matter in folding figurations, while retaining the artificial appearance of its elastic material surface, offers queer alternatives to notions of painted color reduced to the representation or sign of a body.

The monochrome is a modernist icon on par with the grid, positing a universal essence of painting and testing the limits of the medium. Ann Gibson argues that “color has been used to elude *both* iconic and indexical figuration” in modernist painting, even as the monochrome was useful for artists who wish to “escape figuration altogether.”<sup>163</sup> But for women artists like Marcia Hafif, the monochrome would assert the artist's agency through bodily reference both metaphoric and indexical—Gibson reads the surface of her canvases like the skin of the human body, which is both variable, insisting on difference, and unified and particular.<sup>164</sup> While Gibson importantly challenges the ostensibly universality or neutral (male) readings of monochrome painting, and draws out the challenge to signification that color asserts, she argues that monochrome painting are “*embodied* sites of meaning” that cannot be securely signified, and in this way “embodies itself as an Other that will not consent to being defined, hierarchized, placed.” For Gibson, “monochrome may be understood not as a sign (only) but, rather, as a site of difference.”<sup>165</sup> In this reading, discourses around the monochrome elide the body and the specific, and the only other option seems to be a generalizing criticism that does not take into account arenas of difference and multiplicity. My argument is that it is not the color field's

---

<sup>163</sup> Ann Eden Gibson, “Color and Difference in Abstract Painting: The Ultimate Case of the Monochrome,” in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London & New York: Routledge, 2003), 194-195.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid* 197

<sup>165</sup> *ibid* 200-201



resemblance in relation to a body, or the body of a spectator who is reading difference on the surface, but precisely its resistance to language and signification that makes color fugitive.

The deployment of color as a singular monochromic material surface seems easily interpreted as a skin, and particularly skin as a site of difference in feminist analysis. But in *Thinking Through the Skin*, Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey point out that arguments that ‘the body’ has been elided in masculinist thought can problematically fetishize the body as an object that is simply missing, assuming it contains these differences within a singular figure. Instead, they consider how social differences function to produce the boundaries—the skins—which appear to mark out the body. They ask how skin is given meaning and logic, how it is assumed to contain the body, identity, or value.<sup>166</sup> I am similarly investigating a skin fetishism; not that of bodies directly, but the bodily capacities attributed to the surface of painting, and particularly to color. Briony Fer has discussed color as a fetishistic material, the site of fantastic bodily projection in the work of Italian colorists such as Alberto Burri, whose monochrome surfaces have been read as wounds, cut and then sutured (his biography as a doctor has fueled these interpretations). Fer finds this argument persuasive only up to a point, she is more interested in the surfaces transformed through intense materiality, painting attacked and transformed into sculpture in ways that are perverse and fetishistic.<sup>167</sup> Of Lucio Fontana’s work, she writes, “In the openings and cavities are sexual allusions, but there is also a radical disorganization of the iconography of the body (orifices, balls, eyeballs intermingle. If this is a spatial concept, as Fontana titled them, then the proposition might be: not what body parts are these, male or female, but that *nothing* falls *outside* of the body.”<sup>168</sup> I would like to extend this discussion of the

---

<sup>166</sup> Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey, *Thinking Through the Skin* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), 3.

<sup>167</sup> Fer, Briony “Color-In-Pieces: The Italian Neo-Avant Garde” in *Part Object, Part Sculpture*, ed. Helen A. Molesworth (Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University, 2005), 52.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid* 55

perverse erotics of color, beyond the singular signifying body, by considering the work that color does as its own materializing force.

The artworks I discuss in this chapter activate color in two senses of the word: one of the etymologies of the term *color* (from Latin and Old French) derives from skin tone or complexion, i.e. *colored*, and also originates in terms of appearance, as in a covering (from the Old Latin *colos*) that conceals or hides. On the one hand, color could be seen to expose the truth of the matter on the surface—the truth of a body on its skin; on the other hand, rather than a cover that conceals, color’s blush of exposure can also unfold as a flaming revelation—operating more like the psychoanalytic screen. Color registers perversely as the decorative surface of style, aligning with queer camp, and at the same time problematizes the opposition between synthetic surface and meaningful core. Rather than disregard color as decorative surface that covers over the real, I take color seriously as a substance with real ethical and ontological implications. Reckoning with the racial implications of colored surface, this chapter considers the ontological trouble posed by the queer work of color deployed as a medium, undermining readings that would take its surface as either superficial or as an indicator of the “truth” of a raced, gendered, and sexed body. Rather than a hardening or fixing of difference through material representation, these pieces open up a multiplicity of folding surfaces that exceed singular or binary categorizations. Exceeding both representation and the language of its name, color’s paradoxical role as both transcendent and particular can allow for an alternative understanding of painting’s ontological implications.

#### Color Sense 1: “Styles of the Flesh” (skin tone, complexion)

Challenging the notion that surface is a direct index of substance, Linda Besemer’s sculptures demonstrate the plasticity of paint as both surface and matter of the work. They

challenge binary divisions of interior versus exterior that would imply that surface is both distinct from matter and, at the same time, reveals the truth of that matter. This paradox of color produces both a synthetic surface aesthetic as well as a materializing force. Besemer's *Large Zip Fold #1* (2001) [Fig. 18] is an enormous sheet of pure acrylic paint, composed in a vertical striped pattern of red, yellow, blue, and lime green. The piece is suspended against the wall, colors descending like a plastic waterfall, buckling and folding in on itself where the wall meets the gallery floor, and rolling out onto the floor at the viewer's feet. Its overwhelming size, towering above the viewer, as well as its malleable folding, gives it a certain weight despite its thinness. While the effects of alternating colors create a sense of illusion, depth, and movement, this work is all surface. Some of Besemer's "Fold" sculptures are draped over aluminum rods on the wall, so that both the front and back of the composition are visible, overlapping but distinct. Alternating colors and patterns emerge on either side to create a space that is both illusory and material, dramatizing the "flatness" of painting while defying its rejection of depth, insisting on its heft and complexity.

Besemer's sculptures recall the work of Lynda Benglis, known for pouring and peeling paint away from the canvas in the 1960s and 70s, a sculptural process that explicitly parodies the performative drip method associated with Jackson Pollock.<sup>169</sup> Rearticulating expressive abstract aesthetics of painting in sculptural form, Benglis pulled the medium of paint from its two-dimensional surface to take on a three-dimensional quality, severing it from the privileged canvas support, and this is clearly reiterated in Besemer's work. Rather than drip paint onto a flat

---

<sup>169</sup> *Life* magazine's 1970 article, "Fling Dribble and Drip" would solidified Abstract Expressionism, and specifically Pollock, as the ultimate source of her work. Susan Richmond discusses this legacy in *Lynda Benglis: Beyond Process*. (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 2013), 23-24, as does Amelia Jones in "The Pollockian Performative and the Revision of the Modernist Subject," in *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 96-97.

canvas, she poured layers of pigmented latex across gallery floors, where it dried to create plastic sheets that could then be peeled away from the ground and relocated. Rather than the moody color configurations of a Pollock, Benglis's sculptures are composed of bright, vibrant colors that lend her latex forms the look and feel of taffy. These colorful pours and oozing sculptures have evoked associations with organic figurations while at the same time emphasizing their plasticity, their synthetic materiality.

Using artificial colors and materials to create organic forms, Lynda Benglis subverted the minimalist correlation between manufactured matter and industrial image, at a time when anti-illusion meant anti-color.<sup>170</sup> Rather, she used synthetic matter in ways that emphasize its unruliness, its sensual, visceral qualities that stress a process of potentiality over artistic intentionality. Benglis's *Contraband* (1969) [Fig. 19] is a lengthy rainbow latex sheet that spans over thirty feet to enliven a cold gallery floor. Composed of red, orange, yellow, green, and blue pigmented latex that flows together in marbled patterns, it materializes bubbles and streams of color that are both uncontrolled and contained within the thin sheet of rubbery matter that, at its edges, appears to curl upwards and lift off from the surface of the ground. Color figures itself in this work—rippling out, buckling and gathering at its edges, its plasticity allows it to take up an indeterminate space, where it moves and forms through its interaction with the environment and studio floor.

The discourse around Lynda Benglis's work consistently relates her objects to nature, so that painterly matter also becomes bodily, and distinctly feminine. Her sculptures have drawn associations with biomorphic and anthropomorphic gestures, a focus on the palpable "flesh" and

---

<sup>170</sup> For a contextual account of Benglis's controversial rebellion against black and white, see Dave Hickey, "A House Built in a Body: Lynda Benglis's Early Work," in *Lynda Benglis*. Gautherot, Franck, et al. (Dijon: Presses du réel, 2009): 17-21.

erotic physicality of her work, and symbolic references to both male and female forms as well as natural phenomena.<sup>171</sup> But this only gets us so far before her works are reduced to pictures of bodies. Similarly, Jack Halberstam has discussed Besemer's work in relation to the post-minimalist sculptures of Eva Hesse, positing "the formal qualities of perverse and abject gendering," and "ambiguous states of being" in alignment with qualities that Halberstam identifies as transgender. I am similarly interested in the synthetic plasticity and colorful configurations of Besemer's paint sculptures, reclaiming formalism and abstraction for a queer art practice. These works can undermine normative bodily inscription, but interpreting them as forms of trans embodiment keeps intact the persistent narrative of paint as signifying a body (to be fair, a piece titled *Tall Girl* is perhaps too easily interpreted in this way).<sup>172</sup> Rather than take painted color as always the representation or sign of a (gendered, sexed, and raced) body or subject, however ambiguous, I consider the alternatives promised by the physicality, the depth, the plasticity of color as it both inheres in matter and projects forth as optical sensation. As I will show, Besemer's work also brings something else to this discourse around Benglis—an ordered process and surface illusion that further destabilizes the ground of representation.

Concerns about the art object's relationship to the human body is central to debates around postwar abstraction; anthropomorphism is central to Michael Fried's criticism of minimal art as "theatrical," while Donald Judd and Robert Morris explicitly rejected the anthropomorphic as having been exhausted by painting (they wanted to create independent objects, not human resemblance).<sup>173</sup> In the wake of post-minimalism, Lucy Lippard framed the sculpture of Eva

---

<sup>171</sup> See Susan Richmond, *Lynda Benglis: Beyond Process* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 2013); Richard Marshall, *Lynda Benglis* (New York: Cheim & Read, 2004); and essays by Elizabeth Lebovici and Judith Tannenbaum in *Lynda Benglis*, Franck Gautherot, et al. (Dijon: Presses du réel, 2009). The tension between nature and artifice in Benglis's work is discussed by all of these authors.

<sup>172</sup> Halberstam, "Technotopias," 110-120.

<sup>173</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 150; this debate is discussed at length by Bernstein, "Aporia of the Sensible—Art, Objecthood, and Anthropomorphism:

Hesse and Louise Bourgeois as “eccentric abstraction” that embraced the surreal, visceral identification from which male minimalists so urgently distanced their work.<sup>174</sup> Reconsidering Lippard’s discussion of these organic, bulbous sculptural forms in work which would seem to deliberately evoke the bodily and erotic, Briony Fer points to a different definition of anthropomorphism, one that might move beyond notions of bodily empathy. Utilizing Roger Caillois’s model of mimicry, the way in which an insect changes color in order to disappear and lose its distinctness, where camouflage acts as a negative signifier and effaces rather than connotes, Fer notes that this desire for self-effacement corresponds to the spatial allure of these objects, running counter to bodily empathy and erotic identification. This sense of mimetic compulsion is not a matter of the art object’s associations or resemblance, but rather has to do with the coming-into-being of the subject in the visual field which is inhabited from the inside rather than viewed from the outside.<sup>175</sup> Fer is getting at the ways in which the organic forms by these women sculptors, so often understood in terms of the feminine body as a kind of external resemblance, might instead offer an expression of what it means to inhabit that body, while refusing to contain its borders and exacerbating bodily affect. The works I discuss here allow us to think of materiality that is affective rather than bodily, a haptic flow between multiple bodies or forms rather than inhering within a singularity. At the same time, I want to press against the notion that a contemporary feminist or queer sculpture would necessarily re-incorporate the body that minimalists rejected.<sup>176</sup>

---

Michael Fried, Frank Stella, and Minimalism,” in *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006), 117-143.

<sup>174</sup> Lucy Lippard, “Eccentric Abstraction” in *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism*. (New York: Dutton, 1971), 98-111.

<sup>175</sup> Fer, *The Infinite Line*, 108.

<sup>176</sup> For example, James Meyer writes, “A latent anthropocentrism would seem to inhabit *any* sculpture, including those works that we take to most strenuously undermine such associations. Some of the most compelling sculptural endeavors since the 1990s have attempted to do exactly this by means of an uncanny or queer figuration, making explicit the anthropomorphism that Minimalist artists sought to repress.” “Anthropomorphism,” *The Art Bulletin* 94, 1 (March 2012): 24-27.

While an organism uses color to “disappear” in Caillois’s version of mimicry, the work of Besemer and Benglis precisely announces its presence through alluring color that registers as both erotic and synthetic. Their plastic rubbery materials and slippery latex sheets evoke the matter of sex toys—plastic, the great imitator, is the stuff of dildos. If these sheets of plastic paint evoke skins, they are more in the realm of skin-tight latex suits and BDSM gear, synthetic surfaces deployed for imaginative play rather than the accurate imitation of a different body (brightly colored strap-ons are obviously not made to “mimic” male bodies; or they do so in camp fashion). At the same time, the use of vivid and vibrant color might seem surprising as a queer tactic because surfaces that “blend in” might serve a survival function for non-normative subjects. I think of this camouflage in terms of “passing” in order to appear as a viable subject in the world or in particular spaces or communities. According to Butler, queering can operate as an exposure of passing that disrupts the repressive surface of language, which is exploded by sexuality and insistence on color.<sup>177</sup> Thinking sexual and racial difference together, the insistence on bright colorful surface in these artworks might also insist on a flaming exposure of the subject who is raced and gendered and sexed according to the appearance of that very surface. At the same time, the borders of this work refuse to contain its ooze and flow, and that which registers as bodily also resonates affectively and refuses to remain hidden.

In Besemer’s “Fold” sculptures, whether hanging directly from a wall or draped over a rod, the distinction between interior and exterior is lost, as what might be perceived as the painting’s exterior is another dimension of its interior, and visa-versa. This resonates with Gilles Deleuze’s concept of the “fold,” where matter is fluid and each fold or dimension is contingent upon its surroundings, constantly animated in motion, infinitely dividing but still cohering. The

---

<sup>177</sup> Judith Butler, “Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen’s Psychoanalytic challenge,” in *Bodies that Matter*, 176-77

outside is nothing but a folding of the inside.<sup>178</sup> This spatial concept of matter is demonstrated by Besemer's folding sheets of pure acrylic, where back and front both constitute the painting's "surface," and both are contingent upon one another. While the matter of the work holds together, it does not cohere a figure (or subject) by reifying the boundary between inside and outside. Rather, its continuous surface insists on nothing hidden to be revealed, no "truth" to be signified or indexed on the painting's surface. Further, this fetishizing of the surface—its brightness, its shininess—does not fetishize a surface or skin as container of a body. It fetishizes the decorative surface-as-surface, delighting in the camp of decoration that does not claim to be anything other than surface play. The surface itself is matter, rather than the cover of material truth of a body.

Color's surface effects in this work link it to the particular formal and aesthetic properties of style, drag, camp artifice and excess, resonating with a queer disruption of a binary logic by which we come to understand an image-as-surface. The importance of color as a surface—taken to be at once marginal and excessive, disregarded and dangerous—is tied up with the ethical implications of aesthetic style. Roland Barthes problematizes the division between form and content, the aesthetic and the substantive, which governs our understanding of style: "Form is reputed to be the appearance or garment of Content, which is its truth or body; the metaphors attached to Form (to style) are therefor of a decorative order: *figures, colors, nuances.*"<sup>179</sup> Much like color, style is believed to function as a disguise: a signifier under which the signified is hidden. Exposing the ethical implications of this binary logic, Barthes also lays out how style came to be seen as exception (deviance) to the rule (norm), casting aesthetics as anomalous and superfluous, beyond the margins of the natural and normal. With Barthes, I take the colorful

---

<sup>178</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

<sup>179</sup> Barthes, "Style and its Image," 91.



surface image, not as a layering of skin over the body of content, but proliferating layers whose volume contains no secret truth.<sup>180</sup> And the surface of color does not name an identity or subject, but its function *as* surface, with no “truth” beneath its decadent layers.

Considering how the surface of color works against or exceeds the stabilization of matter has important ethical implications for bodies, or matter often taken to be a fixed body. Asking, “How does a body figure on its surface the very invisibility of its depth?”, Judith Butler considers the interiority of the body as a function of social discourse and regulation on the body’s surface. Gender, then, is a stylized corporeal surface with a history, “styles of the flesh” or a stylized repetition of acts that constitutes what we read as the body’s interior signification on its surface.<sup>181</sup> The body cannot be taken as a coherent foundation on which gender can be performed, but is instead itself as malleable and marked as the surface that is taken to be its exterior. For Butler, the body is a medium, where the boundary of skin becomes the limits of the socially hegemonic, and notions of interiority and exteriority reify a binary used to stabilize a coherent subject. Rather than treat the materiality of sex as given, queer deployments of material color refuse to form a coherent whole. When paint is liberated and color is figured away from the canvas ground, it becomes its own continuous surface that works, not to conceal or reveal what’s hidden “beneath,” but to produce its own animate folding and unfolding.

Considering the surface of this work in terms of its ontological implications, I want to consider how color has been used to mark bodies as raced, othered through the reduction of a subject to the body’s surface. This phenomenon has been described by Franz Fanon as “epidermalization,” and further elaborated by Paul Gilroy as “a historically specific system for making bodies meaningful by endowing them with qualities of ‘color.’” It suggests a perceptual

---

<sup>180</sup> Ibid 99

<sup>181</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 183-190.

regime in which the racialized body is bounded and protected by its enclosed skin.” In Gilroy’s notion of “epidermal thinking,” the skin is not conceived as part of the body, but its “faithful wrapping.”<sup>182</sup> Gayatri Spivak’s similar term for this is “chromatism,” the reduction of race to skin color, or as Sara Ahmed describes it, a fetishism in which the surface of skin “becomes an object that tells the truth of a subject’s racial origin.”<sup>183</sup> If color is at the core of racial fetishism, projections that color bodies according to this epidermal thinking, then the queer work of color as an explosive, catachrestic, plastic surface potentially disrupts this logic. The refusal of Besemer’s sculptures to act as a colorful surface *for* matter, instead insisting on color itself as plastic substance through a process that transforms the fluid and potentiates paint to a slippery and stretchy sheet of folding and unfolding matter, also calls for an understanding of color as an unreliable and reductive indicator of the body’s origins. That is, we might understand the transformative capacities of color deployed as a medium to refuse the fixity of chromatist stigma. Instead, the slippery and almost toxic appearance of surface in the works of Besemer and Benglis can reveal the processes of danger and difficulty implicit in visibility, or the appearance of a subject in the visual field.

Thinking Freud’s drive with Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, Theresa de Lauretis uses the trope of implantation, which links the drive at once to the ego and the social, in order to discuss the model of psychic trauma as not only sexually but racially implicated. De Lauretis notes that implantation retains connotations of planting, inserting something into a thickness of matter, something foreign under the skin. The intromission in the subject of an

---

<sup>182</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 46.

<sup>183</sup> Gayatri Spivak, “Imperialism and Sexual Difference,” *The Oxford Literary Review* (1986), 237. Sara Ahmed, “Animated Borders: Skin, Colour and Gender,” in *Vital Signs: Feminist Reconfigurations of the Bio/Logical Body*, eds. Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 52.

unmetabolizable and foreign body is what Fanon describes in his experience of being interpellated as a feared black man, when his self-image profoundly changed, “the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema.” This violent implantation of race on the skin, Fanon writes, “in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye,” invades the self with destructive presence of an unassimilable foreign body. And it is precisely the materiality of the body that de Lauretis emphasizes as the site of exchange for the drive in its many forms.<sup>184</sup> Utilizing Derrida’s notion of the Freudian impression that “draws a mask right on the skin,” I think about color as something that both implants on the surface of matter and inheres within as depth.<sup>185</sup> These analogies between a chemical dye and the racialized surface of skin, or the impression that conceals the drive as a mask drawn on the skin, point to the violence of color that marks a body and attempts to conceal—in a process through which it makes visible—its own destructive force.

Turning to consider depth and the thickness of matter, this “implantation” is also a violent traumatic intromission of race, described by de Lauretis as an “unmetabolizable signifier that makes the body burst apart.”<sup>186</sup> This psychoanalytic figure of psychic trauma, understood as a foreign or alien presence within the subject that the ego cannot metabolize, and the physical body as a “terrain of inscription” or the Freudian subject as a figure for the “stratification of past

---

<sup>184</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, *Freud's Drive: Psychoanalysis, Literature and Film* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 53-57.

<sup>185</sup> In *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Derrida posits a death drive which is “archive-destroying.” Although this drive eludes perception, there are exceptions to its silent destruction according to Freud: “except if it disguises itself, except if it tints itself, makes itself up or paints itself in some erotic color. This impression of erogenous color draws a mask right on the skin.” The archiviolithic drive does not appear and leave no traces, “it leaves only its erotic simulacrum, its pseudonym in painting, its sexual idols, its mask of seduction: lovely impressions.” Derrida allows me to think of a queerly volatile archival impulse that not only works against itself, but with the function of painted color as the external impression of something like erotic seduction, “lovely impressions” which mask the destructive force of the archiviolithic impulse while they also render it visible. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 11.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid* 55

impressions” allows for an understanding of materiality and psychic experiences as mutually constitutive rather than ontologically separate.<sup>187</sup> This can also be described as affect, and more specifically what José Muñoz describes as a Deleuzian tradition of affect theory that understands “surface” as a field of interaction between bodies. Returning to the model of the “fold,” this dynamic relationship between interior and exterior puts pressure on binaries structuring subject formation.<sup>188</sup> I would like to investigate this idea of something the ego cannot metabolize—racial and sexual projections and interpellations—through two sculptures by Besemer and Benglis that play in the space between surface and depth in ways that upset ontological certainty.

Linda Besemer’s “Slab” sculptures are composed of multiple monochrome layers of pure acrylic paint, layers applied in varying thicknesses and then carved down to create a colorful topography of hills and valleys. This also produces the effect of a pulsating optical sensation both illusory and material. *Red-Purple Slab* [Fig. 20] layers flaming red and orange hues with yellow, green, purple and blue; bright and unmixed pigments that then produce a ripple effect when carved in concentric circular waves. Moving between surface and depth, the eye is pulled between undulating layers of color, a thickness of monochrome surfaces that become topographical. In Benglis’s *Corner Piece* [Fig. 21], brightly colored polyurethane foam is poured out in layers against the corner of two walls, producing spills of red, pink, and orange that ripple out across and beneath one another, with a dark layer spilled over the top like a suspended avalanche of black flow lava. Matter ripples across the surfaces of the forms, not layering external upon internal layers, but rolling out like waves where the substance swells and curls and

---

<sup>187</sup> De Lauretis writes, “In its own conceptual space, the figure of ego-id-superego that designates the Freudian subject is a figure for the stratification of past impressions, reminiscences, inchoate feelings, unmasterable excitations, some of which are available to conscious (self)representation and some are not; a figure more complexly articulated but nonetheless suggestive of the thickness of the body.” *Freud's Drive*, 52.

<sup>188</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, “From Surface to Depth, between Psychoanalysis and Affect,” *Women and Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 19 (2009): 123-129.

envelopes itself in a fluid undulation. Rather than a homogenous substance that organizes into uniform movements, Benglis's brightly colored foam refuses to cohere into some kind of whole; rather, it plays in and against a space that is both the grounds of its making and that it re-makes and transforms through its emergence.

These deployments of flaming color form excessive surfaces to produce a folding of interiority and exteriority. In both of these works, the stratification of surfaces to produce a depth speaks to a conception of matter that is both constituted on the surface and inheres within. While the suspended layers of *Corner Piece* remember, holding onto the process by which they were formed, Besemer's *Slab* is formed through a subtractive process of carving down and out, a thickness formed through inscription. If this work demonstrates the psychic processes of epidermalization, it also speaks to the unmetabolizable foreign substance the ego cannot incorporate—the look of taffy and confection that appears sweet but also sticky and slimy, producing an uneasy material encounter. Consuming this work might make a viewer queasy, both in the processed sugary substance that might be difficult to chew and digest, and in Besemer's rippling color patterns that evoke motion sickness, or in the way that Benglis's work threatens to melt and flow out to consume us. I also imagine this encounter in terms of a refusal or abjection, that which must be cast off or spit out in order to maintain the borders of the self, yet it sticks with us, threatens to submerge us.<sup>189</sup> This unmanageable, alien substance threatens the boundaries of bodies and of painting, calling attention to the materiality of color while refusing the encoded embodiment that some would ascribed to abstract painting. The difficulty of the encounter with these objects speaks to the danger of ascribing meaning to surface, symbolism to flesh.

---

<sup>189</sup> See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

The visceral response we might have to this work is folded in with its viscosity, its texture. Approaching textural perception in relation to affect, Eve Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling* records the flow of intimacy between textures and emotions, dragging with it the association with "touchy-feely," implying that "even to talk about affect virtually amounts to cutaneous contact."<sup>190</sup> The connection between texture and affect, Sedgwick asserts, is due to the fact that "both are irreducibly phenomenological."<sup>191</sup> The visceral is not divorced from the abstract; both are folded together and flexibly intertwined, as forms and processes of abstraction can also evoke touch and have implications for bodies in the world. The contact of textural perception can have different senses or qualities, however. While *texxture* contains information about the history of its materiality and making, how it came into being, texture (one x) "defiantly or even invisibly blocks or refuses such information; there is texture, usually glossy if not positively tacky, that insists instead on the polarity between surface and substance, texture that signifies the willed erasure of its history."<sup>192</sup> Perhaps Besemer's work takes in both senses of tex(x)ture, or constitutes a triple-x *texxxture*, where a glossy surface might seem to smooth over the particularity of its material history. Yet at the same time, the physicality of its folds holds on to a certain history of its making, as something left behind. Rather than disavow the manufactured, fetishized, artificial surface, the plasticity of color in this work might suggest otherwise—a holding on to problematic histories, which are also always part of bodies, yet not always recorded as external scars, not necessarily represented on the surface.

### Color Sense 2: "Perverse Perspectives" (a covering that conceals)

---

<sup>190</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 17.

<sup>191</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 21, here she is parsing the difference between affect and the drive system

<sup>192</sup> Sedgwick is citing Renu Bora's distinction between these two senses of texture, *Touching Feeling*, 14

What Linda Besemer's work brings to my discussion of Benglis is an ordered technique and formulaic process that departs from the expressive genealogy of painting; even as the work recalls Benglis's use of color-as-matter and the plasticity of paint, Besemer's work appears more intentional, systematic. She incorporates seriality and repetition in ways that make color vibrate—like in the work of Benglis, the matter produces movement, but now the color also moves in our vision. Perception and opticality returns to the work of color; depth is illusory as well as material and emphasizes a different kind of synthetic surface, a false sense of spatial depth that registers stylistically and affectively rather than in the service of the symbolic. Besemer's painting also returns plastic to the realm of fantasy—as in the French *plastique*, which incorporates both realms of the material and the imagination that these plastic configurations suggest. Although the acrylic appears more controlled in Besemer's work due to its linear structures, it similarly addresses a tension between the fantastic projections of optical perception and the literal materiality of plastic color.

Modernist theories that privileged the materiality of paint are also caught up in a rhetoric of purity: for Greenberg, the essential two-dimensional “flatness” by which modernist painting distinguished itself as “pure” and self-contained medium was also a turn away from representational illusionism, though “it does and must permit optical illusion.”<sup>193</sup> Purity, flatness, opticality—these are the qualities privileged by Greenberg's definition of a modernist formal language, exemplified by Pollock's painting. As Hope Mauzerall has argued, Greenberg's apparent commitment to medium can be deceptive, as he privileged form over matter, where to achieve “pure form” art must transcend matter, the stuff of the world. And Mauzerall traces this tradition through Krauss's “optical unconscious,” where a push toward transcendence is achieved

---

<sup>193</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” *Modern Art and Modernism: a Critical Anthology*, eds. Francis Francina and Charles Harrison (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 6.

through the effacement of matter.<sup>194</sup> I am interested in these tensions between opticality and tactility, Greenbergian flatness and what Michael Fried called “objecthood,” material specificity and transcendence, because Linda Besemer’s work activates all of these qualities of painting and camps their definitions at the same time. Her work literalizes and plays with notions of painting as pure and flat, while also insisting on the impurity of synthetic matter and the perversity of decorative surface qualities that Greenberg associated with a “crisis” in painting.<sup>195</sup>

I trace Besemer’s optical, jarring surfaces back to Op Art exemplified by Bridget Riley’s 1960s paintings. Riley experimented with the surface of painting as an illusory space that had been undermined in favor of an emphasis on its essential “flatness.” She painted optical illusions of dizzying space on large canvases, immersing the viewer into this space through a hypnotic rhythm of mostly black-and-white patterns that appeared to ebb and flow in excess of the canvas support (even as they are traditional oil on canvas). In 1967, Riley began using color to create her patterns with a series of “Cataract” paintings, producing waves with thin bands of red, blue, and white that might mimic a disrupted vision. In *Cataract 3* (1967) [Fig. 22], ripples of blue and bright red paint strokes ripple across the surface, undulating from thin to thick and back in a motion sickness or migraine-inducing pattern. The repetition of these waves is produced through a systematic structuring of the picture plane, and yet the overall effect is a space of constant flux, the sensations of sight and its somatic manifestations both pleasurable and agitating.

Riley’s work undermined modernist efforts to detach painting from illusion, and before feminist artists were embracing the decorative and ornamental surface dismissed by modernist critics. But what might be the benefit or significance of returning illusionism to painting, and

---

<sup>194</sup> Hope Mauzerall, “What’s the Matter with Matter? Problems in the Criticism of Greenberg, Fried, and Krauss.” *Art Criticism 1* (1998): 81-96.

<sup>195</sup> See Greenberg’s “Crisis of the Easel Picture,” 1948, in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986-1993), 221-225.



particularly through abstraction? Rather than an illusion of depth and recession into space, these paintings invert this dynamic and project out at us. This is what Lucy Lippard called “perverse perspectives,” an illusionism emerging in the 1960s that does not abandon the modernist picture plane but “distorts and reconstructs that plane outside of the conventions of depth simulation.”<sup>196</sup> Op art such as Riley’s denies the illusion of depth on a picture plane, but does so by utilizing illusionism directly “so that its falseness or trickery is apparent but necessary; persistent reversals of visual fact force the eye back to the plane.”<sup>197</sup> And color is crucial to this formal dissonance, the visual vibration of surface manipulated through both color and plasticity which can both establish and destabilize our sense of volumes in space.<sup>198</sup> This opticality makes no effort to hide its construction of the spectatorial space of the canvas, rather, it makes perception visible or recognizable as illusion itself. While it is typically taken to be an act of deception, this term stems from the Latin *illusionem*, an ironic form of mockery, and *illudere*, literally “to play with.” As a camp tactic, illusion does not claim depth, but delights in surface play.

Color is inherently unstable, plastic and changeable. But Bridget Riley claimed that her medium is not color or paint itself, but perception, a matter of sensation evoked through colored light.<sup>199</sup> This emphasis on perception links her, not with minimalist working at the same time who were anti-illusionist and strove for a literal object in space, but with European artists such as Yves Kline who sought a dematerialization of the art object and believed in the transcendental power of color. This emphasis on the immaterial elements of space and light, the optical properties of color, are elements that Greenberg did not take into account when he defined the

---

<sup>196</sup> Lucy Lippard, “Perverse Perspectives,” 1967, in *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism* (New York: Dutton, 1971), 169.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid 171

<sup>198</sup> Ibid 173

<sup>199</sup> Richard Shiff, “The Unaccountable,” in *Bridget Riley: The Stripe Paintings 1961-2014* (New York, New York: David Zwirner, 2014), 21.

flatness of painting.<sup>200</sup> While the dematerialization of color in Riley's painting might seem to adhere to the spiritual qualities associated with one history of abstract painting, Besemer returns its material plastic status, confronting the ethics of transcendence at play in this history by dragging us back to the surface. We do not just take these paintings in visually; they vibrate in ways that alter the spaces between us, shaking the very ground from which we view the work.

Investigating the construction of spectatorial space in painting, Peggy Phelan identifies something perverse at work in the theatrical technology of perspective. The structure of the vanishing point becomes a structure of disavowal, some form of looking away: "we know it is a flat canvas, but we want it to have depth enough to hold the interiority of the bodies it displays."<sup>201</sup> In this "theatre of perversions," perspective draws us in, but it also casts us out; we turn away from the image—somehow, the painting looks back, causing us to doubt our own boundaries and limits. The experience of looking creates this "endless oscillation toward and away from the body, toward and away from death, toward and away from some phantasmatic square bed, square canvas, square coffin, which frames the desire to move, to give and to take some love which we cannot touch and cannot stop trying to touch." The transformation of the flat surface into deep space, perspective elicits our desire for precisely what skin cannot offer us—the depth to contain our subjectivity.<sup>202</sup> For Phelan, it is Caravaggio's painting that allows us to witness this radical disembodiment of subjectivity, the frustrating formlessness of human love and death. But I would like to think with this conception of perverse perspective through the kinds of optical illusions that we encounter in Linda Besemer's work. These sculptural paintings draw us in—they are bright, shiny, colorful and lively—but those same qualities make them

---

<sup>200</sup> Ann Gibson points this out in "The Ultimate case of the Monochrome," as does Barbara Rose in *Monochromes: From Malevich to the Present*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 80.

<sup>201</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*. (London: Routledge, 1997), 39.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid 41-42

repulsive, their surfaces thrust us out. This takes Lippard's "perverse perspectives" further, as the falseness of surface is not only made apparent, the depth perception inverted, but prompts a different understanding of skin and bodily surface which never really contains us.

Besemer's *Fold #8, Baroqueasy* (1999) [Fig. 23] is a sheet of acrylic paint folded over a metal rod. Vertical and horizontal bands of pigment in varying thicknesses are woven over and under one another, creating a pattern that both resembles woven fabric and begins to vibrate in our vision as dominant shades of yellow, blue, black and white interact in their close proximity. Folded over a rod, one side of the acrylic sheet hangs down below the other, so that both sides of the fold are visible and interact as a continuous surface. It produces both harmony and dissonance through chromatic vibration that, taking its title seriously, references Baroque decoration and culture of excess, and so excessive in this case as to produce the queasy effect. Here, perceptual projection is made literal and material; not pure or unified, but unruly, unpredictable and uncontrollable. These interactions between colors and spatial illusionism (as both material surface and substance) might also speak to difference—the way in which two colors interact in close proximity also produces something else, a third dimension or possibility that we can perceive even as it does not exist materially. Besemer's work potentially makes human perspective material in this way, creating a push-pull between illusion and matter that makes things move. Our bodies and the space around us, or between ourselves and the canvas, the floors and wall, all become surfaces upon surfaces—nothing inheres within.

Op Art has this potential not only for exploring human perception in relation to the illusory space of painting, but also for the ethics of perception, and the politics of how surfaces are read and represented. Discussing the transformation of the object in relation to the subject in *The Fold*, Deleuze defines *perspectivism*, or point of view, not as a "dependence in respect to a

pregiven or defined subject,” and “not what varies with the subject,” but “the condition in which the truth of a variation appears to the subject. This is the very idea of Baroque perspective.”<sup>203</sup> So while we commonly recognize relativism and the variability of points of view based on subject positions or identities, this concept of perspective is not based on fixed subject but on the very recognition of a transformation, so that we *come to* the point of view. Besemer’s work speaks to the impermanence not only of ontology and surface structure, but also of perception—how color changes and moves and is not dependent on our position in the world but brings us to the object (or Deleuze’s *objectile*) without ever really arriving at a stable condition or orientation.

This work is profoundly disorienting in ways that suggest something like a queer optics, a sensation of seeing that also materializes the lens itself, the way in which some bad affect might “color” one’s vision. For example, Wayne Koestenbaum writes that humiliation resembles a fold—the moment when something interior and private and shameful is thrust to the outside, a sudden visibility in the wrong place: “My skin has been turned inside out. This fold (the self become a seam) is the structure of revulsion.”<sup>204</sup> There is also the shrinking into oneself, the inward-folding and hunching of shoulders and downward gaze in response to that eruption. In this way, the terrain of the body can be visualized both materially and psychically, and color is not a cover that conceals, but like the bright red blush of shame, unfolds in a flaming revelation on the surface. Bodies are colored not only in the racialization of skin but, just as involuntarily, through the affective power of shame, the heat of lust, or the chalky blue blush of death.<sup>205</sup> This

---

<sup>203</sup> Deleuze, *The Fold*, 19-20.

<sup>204</sup> Wayne Koestenbaum, “Fugue #1: Strip Search” in *Humiliation* (New York: Picador, 2011), 15-16.

<sup>205</sup> For this consideration of blush on the surface of skin as parallel to the surface of a photograph, see Michael Jay McClure, “Prima Facie: The Photograph, the Unphotographed, and The Boston School,” *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 15 (2014): 103-120.

external manifestation of affect gives way to a disintegration of inside and outside, corporeal surface and ontological core.

Rather than a cover that glosses over the things we might most want to push aside or negate—the problematic histories and toxic sludge of the past that continues to pollute our present environments and experiences—the work of color here is a covering that does not conceal but reveals something altered on its surface. Thinking the surface of color with Freud’s “screen memories,” the screen might function to suppress as well as provide a surface for projection, where memories are formed when their traces are aroused by phantasy, yet this surface is also a defense used to screen out unacceptable content.<sup>206</sup> An in-between surface for repressed elements to take shape and for their suppression, the screen might allow us to think exterior surface with interiority, a folding where something new takes shape even as some elements never appear. The work of color might constitute the surface of the screen, even as it holds on and incorporates from the outside. The material layering of color does not stagnate into a smooth and passive surface of form, but instead does the ambivalent work of subjectivity to both conceal and reveal, ebb and flow, hold and emit. Recognizing our intimate bonds to things we most want to keep separate—ties between internal and external, nature and artifice, the image and the real—also allows for the productive and transformative use of the negations, the toxic or unnatural mixtures of matter and feeling. These are the very perverse affects that project out with the promise of unforeseen alternatives.

Flaming color takes on further resonance in the work of Carrie Yamaoka, whose shimmering, undulating monochrome objects play on the border between surface and depth,

---

<sup>206</sup> Freud’s concept of a ‘screen memory’ is “one which owes its value as a memory not to its own content but to the relation existing between that content and some other, that has been suppressed.” “Screen Memories,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. III*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1953-1974), 319.

reflection and absorption. Using reflective mylar as the ground for her “paintings,” Yamaoka pours layers of acrylic and urethane resin to produce a thick, translucent sheet of color that becomes a mirror-like surface, as seen in *koolpop #21* [Fig. 24]. Viewers can see themselves reflected in the silver mylar ground; any head-on photograph of the object will also contain the distorted reflection of the photographer. But the indeterminate chemical reactions of her process produce ruptures beneath the surface—bubbles, ripples and folds disrupt the transparency of this screen. While many of Yamaoka’s objects are metallic silver or nearly clear, others are acidic candy hues that glow with toxic vibrancy. Similar to the work of Linda Besemer, these objects evoke tensions between painting and sculpture, the handmade and the mechanic, the fluid and the still. They embrace plastic materiality and artificial surface. But Yamaoka’s objects behave differently in their relation to their audience and environment, in that they both reflect and interrupt that same reflection of their surroundings. Taking the outside in, they transform and render strange that which they seem to incorporate. Even as the topography of these objects suggests that color is the cover for that reflective substrata of mylar, the thick substance of color renders that reflection as fluid and potentiate as its own chemical elements.

These objects attend to our perverse desire for the flat surface of color to also have depth enough to hold us. But at the same time that Yamaoka’s work gives us a certain depth, the material thickness of fluid resin, it also registers the difficulty and impossibility of fully appearing in the visual field. Seen more clearly in *40 by 40 (blue)* [Fig. 25], the image of a self is returned to us, but the appearance that might otherwise be identified—raced, gendered, othered—is rendered as yet one more surface and one that is contingent on the alchemy of the medium through which our image develops. Absorbing our surface into its depth, the object thrusts us out again with the denial of a transparent representation. But rather than merely abject

the subject it reflects, the surface of color here is also a medium of transformation and revelation. Like all of the objects discussed previously, these beckon us and seem to invite attachment with their sumptuous hues and textures, but they refuse to simply give us an easy representation to consume or to hold. Instead, they challenge any certainty that surface appearance operates as transparent index of substance while simultaneously insisting on the transformative capacities of that seemingly shallow surface. Color might seem to externalize difference, but that appearance is made difficult by a flaming eruption of material and visual excess that refuses to be categorically contained.

**Figures**

Figure 18. Linda Besemer, *Large Zip Fold #1*, 2001, acrylic paint, 132 x 62 x 36 inches



Figure 19. Lynda Benglis, *Contraband* (1969), Pigmented latex, 295.3 x 1011.6 x 7.6 cm





Figure 20. Linda Besemer, *Red-Purple Slab*, 2009, acrylic paint, 10 X 8 ½ in.



Figure 21. Lynda Benglis, *Corner Piece*, 1971, polyurethane foam

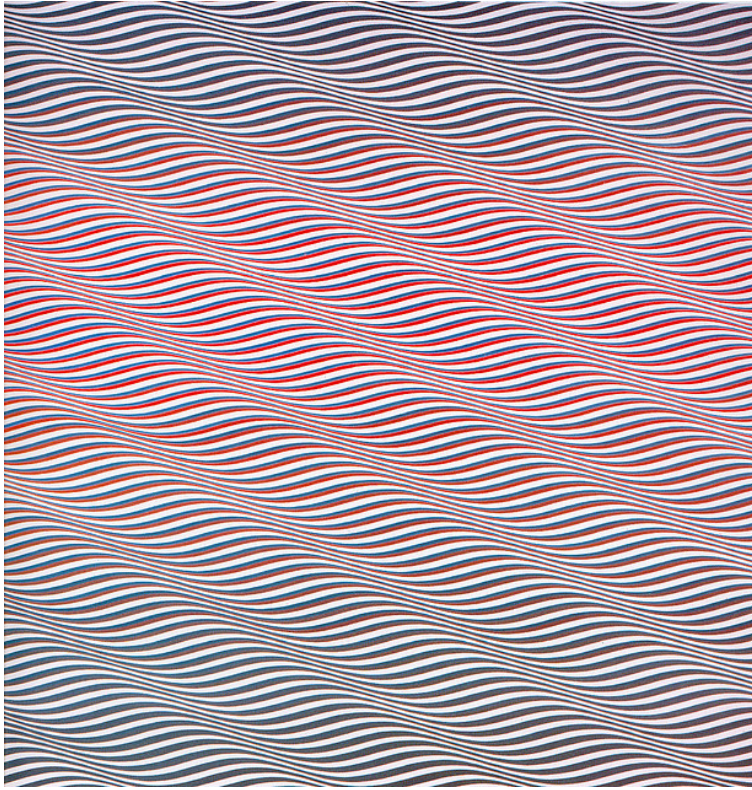


Figure 22. Bridget Riley, *Cataract 3*, 1967, oil on canvas, emulsion PVA on linen, 223.5 x 222 cm



Figure 23. Linda Besemer, *Fold #8, Baroqueasy*, 1999, acrylic paint

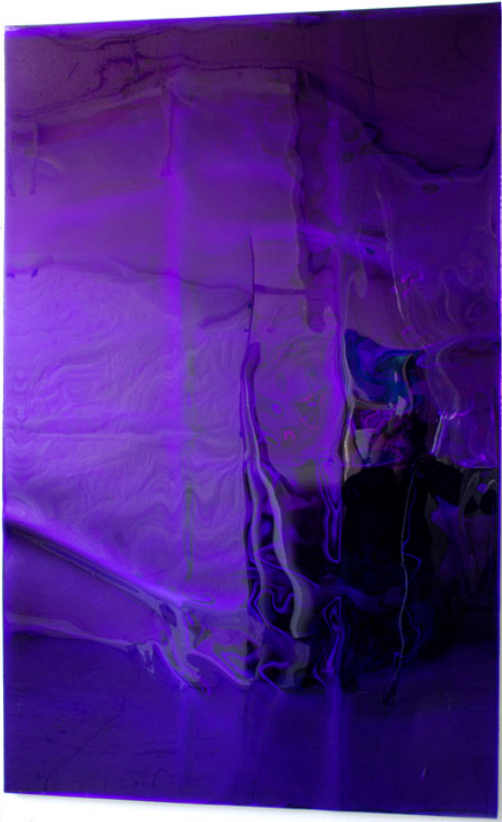


Figure 24. Carrie Yamaoka, *koolpop #21*, 2007, urethane resin and mixed media on mylar



Figure 25. Carrie Yamaoka, *40 by 40 (blue)*, 2006, urethane resin, reflective mylar and mixed media on wood panel

## Conclusion

### *In Excess*

This dissertation offers a conception of abstraction that is more than a “look,” but rather produces a set of queer-feminist tactics. Particular material and formal devices of the hard-edge, the grid, and chromatic abstraction shift from appearances to processes, forms that perform by dragging away from the normative and expected. In exploring what these formal techniques do rather than what they might signify, I am arguing that formalism as an art historical method can also contribute to queer-feminist methods. Considering how artists’ deployments of materials and elements of line and plane in their excessive and non-normative capacities can constitute political praxis, I am moving beyond the notion that (self-)representation is necessary to a politically-viable art. As a political project, abstraction offers aesthetic tactics by which the artist refuses the burden of representation that would insist they (and by extension their communities) appear legibly in their work. My argument is not that these works *are* abstract, but rather that they *do* queer-feminist work through formal tactics of abstraction that drag away from legibility. I am insisting that we not measure the quality or degree of abstraction based on a standard or norm that we thereby reinforce (for example, that processes of abstraction would most successfully culminate in a severe minimalism). My aim is not to define these works but to consider how they perform as energetic vectors for imagining alternatives. At times, this work can be said to make some reference to the world (particularly in the work of Lorna Simpson), but their shared refusal to picture bodies is crucially a refusal to fix difference on the surface of a subject made legible as other. Arguing against the tendency to read certain forms of abstraction as queer and feminist only when they are taken to picture or signify a body (even in its most unruly capacities), this dissertation asserts that formal tactics of abstraction work as queer-

feminist methods when they subvert and exceed processes of signification. My aim has been to consider what else, besides refer or signify, these works might do.

Chapter 1, *Hard Edges, Queer-Feminist Edging*, argues that the hard edge performs the double sense of edge, a cutting division that seemingly paradoxically opens out onto an extremity—to edge can make a border but it can also move furtively away. As both a formal activation of line and a verb, edging is an erotic play at the boundaries of a climax, and a wavering line that bends in and out. This allows the hard edge in Muller's work to remain active and energetic with political potential to push the limits, into the void, to be edgy in the sense of something unruly and uncontained. Yet, maintaining the hardness of the edge, these works also do not let go of difficulty, particularly in work that recites the geometric form of the triangle that is both a sign used to mark bodies as deviant and thus mark for death, and a re-deployable sign of queer-feminist collectivity and activism that opens onto and makes space for alternatives.

Chapter 2, *Feeling the Grid*, argues that the power of the grid to categorize and contain is converted for different ends in the work of Lorna Simpson, where it becomes a tool for abstracting a space of representation in order to produce alternative channels of relationality. While the grid works to structure sign systems that make bodies legible as raced, sexed, and gendered, its charge can also generate a model for queer forms of relationality that do not resolve difference into sameness. This incommensurate space, drawing from José Muñoz, opens up a space of proximity and sharing beyond the individual subject while also holding distinctions intact. Difference is not stably fixed on the body in Simpson's deployment of the grid; rather, the grid becomes both a site for affective attachments and erotic contacts, and force that exceeds settled boundaries of an encoded sign that might mark and secure difference.

Chapter 3, *Flaming Color*, argues that color operates as a medium that can undermine the division between surface and depth, challenging the notion that color is an artificial surface that would cover over the “truth” of its substance, or that color would expose the truth of a racialized body. Considering color deployed as a medium in the work of Linda Besemer, I argue that this work drags on loaded visual histories of color in ways that draw out its perverse possibilities. Exceeding language and signification, color’s plasticity works as a playful folding between inside/outside, subject/object, nature/artifice. Besemer’s queer-feminist use of color retains the fetishistic artificial and optical illusory work of color while at the same time refusing notions of painted color as bodily resemblance or sign. Flaming color makes ontological trouble by refusing to fix difference through material representation secured on the surface, opening onto folding surfaces that exceed singular or binary categorizations.

In each chapter, seemingly benign formal elements such as curves and intersecting lines, or artist mediums such as paint, are shown to perform in multiple and unruly capacities. Operating in excess, they push the bounds of expectation to demonstrate alternative possibilities for how they might work or gesture out to the world even if they do not picture it. The ways in which these tactics of abstraction were often used in a modernist imaginary to disavow the artist’s singular subjectivity or authorship and gesture out to a utopian lifeworld, or shift the focus to the work’s interaction with a viewer, makes all these forms useful techniques for queering now in their move away from legibility. The difficulty and stubborn incoherence of abstraction becomes a queer-feminist method for both gesturing toward alternative ways of being on the margins, perverse modes of becoming, and refusing to embody or represent an alternative or possibilities of difference that still remain open and ungrounded.

Importantly, these forms and materials hold onto their problematic associations and abilities to “other” bodies, as signs of stigma, and at the same time they perform otherwise. Holding onto that difficulty is crucial to the queer-feminist capacities of these techniques. Taking the power of a form that does harm and reimagining it in ways that can also work for us, converting its energies to alternative ends, is the excessive work of queer abstraction. This is akin to Muñoz’s formulation of a queer utopian aesthetic practice that works with and through the problematic or overloaded aesthetics to generate alternative worlds. These artworks perform drag in the sense of an appropriation and camping that takes on the shame, the mark that harms, to navigate that difficulty and convert its performative power, not to work around it but to work it otherwise. The eroticism and intimacy and relationality of these works are crucial—but this necessarily hold onto part of their discomfiting and alienating qualities. The edge that both cuts and edges onto alternative life-worlds; the grid that both categorizes in order to control and produces vectors for affective attachment; the painted color that both marks the body and produces a flaming revelation—these tactics of abstraction exceed their formal conventions to demonstrate their difficulties as well as their possibilities. In excess of the expected or normative, queer abstraction refuses to stabilize a signifying logic. Instead, it offers aesthetic-political methods for dragging away, opening spaces in which we might imagine otherwise that which is ostensibly given, for working that which is seemingly fraught beyond repair.

## Bibliography

- Ahmed, Sara and Jackie Stacey, eds. *Thinking Through the Skin*. London & New York: Routledge, 2001.
- Albers, Josef. *Interaction of Color*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006.
- Anfam, David. *Masters of the Gesture*. Beverly Hills, CA: Gagosian Gallery, 2011.
- Bois, Yve-Alain. *Painting as Model*. MIT Press, 1990.
- Barad, Karen. "Re(con)figuring Space, Time, and Matter." In *Feminist Locations: Global and Local, Theory and Practice*, edited by Marianne Dekoven, 75-110. Rutgers University Press, 2001.
- Barthes, Roland. *The Rustle of Language*. Translated by Richard Howard. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.
- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972.
- Batchelor, David. *Chromophobia*, London: Reaktion, 2000.
- Batchelor, David, ed. *Colour. Documents of Contemporary Art*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008.
- Batchelor, David. *The Luminous and the Grey*. London: Reaktion Books, 2014.
- Battcock, Gregory, ed. *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- Belisle, Brooke. "Felt Surface, Visible Image: Lorna Simpson's Photography and the Embodiment of Appearance." *Photography and Culture* 4 (July 2011): 157-178.
- Bernstein, J. M. *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006.
- Bersani, Leo and Adam Phillips. *Intimacies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Besemer, Linda. "Abstraction: Politics and Possibilities." *X-Tra Contemporary Art Quarterly* 7 (Spring 2005): n.p. <http://x-traonline.org/article/abstraction-politics-and-possibilities/>. Accessed October 11, 2014,
- Besemer, Linda, John Yau, and David Batchelor. *Linda Besemer*. Santa Monica, CA: Angles Gallery, 2002.



- Blazwick, Iwona, ed. *Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society 1915-2015*. London: Prestel and Whitechapel Gallery, 2015.
- Boehm, Gottfried. "In-Between Spaces: Painting, Relief, and Sculpture in the Work of Ellsworth Kelly." In *Ellsworth Kelly: In-between Spaces: Works 1956-2002*, edited by Viola Weigel, 17-43. Basel: Fondation Beyeler, 2002.
- Bois, Yve Alain. "Ellsworth Kelly in France: Anti-Composition in its Many Guises." In *Ellsworth Kelly: the Early Drawings, 1948-1955*, 7-36. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Art Museums, 1999.
- Brain, Robert Michael. *The Pulse of Modernism: Physiological Aesthetics in Fin-De-Siecle Europe*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015
- Browne, Simone. *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015.
- Buchloh, Benjamin. "Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde." *October* 37 (Summer, 1986): 41-52.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Butt, Gavin. "Bodies of Evidence: Queering Disclosure in the Art of Jasper Johns." In *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums*. Edited by Amy K. Levin, 235-252. Oxford & New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Cabañas, Kaira M. "If the Grid is the New Palm Tree of Latin American Art," *Oxford Art Journal* 33 (2010): 365-83.
- Casid, Jill H. *Scenes of Projection: Recasting the Enlightenment Subject*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Alter-Ovid—Contemporary Art on the Hyphen." In *A Handbook to the Reception of Ovid*. Edited by John F. Miller and Carole Newlands, 416-435. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Epilogue: Landscape in, around, and under the Performative." *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 21 (2011): 97–116.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Handle with Care," *TDR: The Drama Review* 56 (2012): 123-137.

- Caygill, Howard. *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 1997.
- Chave, Anna. "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts Magazine*, 64.5 (1990): 44-63.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Minimalism and Biography." *Art Bulletin*, 82.1 (2000): 149-163.
- Cleto, Fabio. *Camp: Queer aesthetics and the performing subject: A reader*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999.
- Cooke, Lynne, and John Elderfield. *Bridget Riley: Reconnaissance*. New York: Dia Center for the Arts, 2001.
- Cooke, Lynne and Karen Kelly, eds. *Agnes Martin*. New York: Dia Art Foundation and Yale University Press, 2011.
- Crary, Jonathan. *Techniques of the Observer: on Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990.
- D'Alessandro, Stephanie. "Through the Eye and Hand." *Moholy-Nagy: Future Present*. Matthew S. Witkovsky, et al., 61-104. Chicago, Illinois: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2016.
- Dean, Gabrielle. "Grid Games: Gertrude Steins Diagrams and Detectives." *Modernism/modernity* 15 (2008): 317-341.
- De Duve, Thierry. *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp's Passage from Painting to the Readymade*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Kant After Duchamp*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996
- Deleuze, Gilles. *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- De Lauretis, Teresa. *Freud's Drive: Psychoanalysis, Literature and Film*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities, an introduction." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 3 (1991): iii-xviii.
- Doherty, Brigid. "Constructions in Enamel, 1933." In *Bauhaus, 1919-1933: Workshops for Modernity*. Barry Bergdoll and Leah Dickerman, eds., 130-133. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009.

- Doll, Nancy. *One Word, Plastic: Linda Besemer, Ian Dawson, Tony Feher, Carlos Mollura, Shirley Tse*. Greensboro N.C.: University of North Carolina, 2003.
- Doyle, Jennifer and David Getsy. "Queer Formalisms: Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy in Conversation." *Art Journal* 72 (2013): 58-71.
- Edwards, Adrienne. *Blackness in Abstraction*. New York: Pace Gallery, 2016.
- Elderfield, John. "Grids." *Artforum* (May 1972): 52-59.
- Eng, David L. *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Eng, David L., J. Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz, "What's Queer About Queer Studies Now: Introduction," *Social Text* 85 (Fall-Winter 2005): 1-17.
- English, Darby. *How to See a Work of Art In Total Darkness*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007.
- Enwezor, Okwui. "Social Grace: The Work of Lorna Simpson." *Third Text* 35 (Summer 1996): 43-58.
- Erharter, Christiane, Dietmar Schwarzler, Ruby Sircar, and Hans Scheirl, eds. *Pink Labour on Golden Streets: Queer Art Practices*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015.
- Falconer, Morgan. *Painting Beyond Pollock*. London; New York: Phaidon, 2015.
- Fer, Briony. *On Abstract Art*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Infinite Line: Re-making Art After Modernism*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2004.
- Follin, Frances. *Embodied Visions: Bridget Riley, Op Art and the Sixties*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2004.
- Frascina, Francis and Charles Harrison, eds. *Modern Art and Modernism: a Critical Anthology*. New York: Harper & Row, 1982.
- Freeman, Elizabeth. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Duke University Press, 2010
- Freud, Sigmund. "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." In *The Freud Reader*. Translated by Peter Gay, 594-626. New York: W.W. Norton, 1989.
- Fried, Michael. *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998

- Gage, John. *Color and Culture: Practice and Meaning From Antiquity to Abstraction*. 1st North American ed. Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1993.
- Gage, John. *Color and Meaning: Art, Science and Symbolism*. Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999.
- Garrels, Gary, ed. *Jasper Johns: Seeing with the Mind's Eye*. San Francisco, California: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Yale University Press, 2012.
- Gautherot, Franck, et al. *Lynda Benglis*. Dijon: Presses du réel, 2009.
- Getsy, David. *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2015.
- Gibson, Ann. *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.
- Gilroy, Paul. *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Greenberg, Clement. *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 2*. Edited by John O'Brian. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986-1993.
- Halberstam, J. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York University Press, 2005.
- Hall, Gordon. "Object Lessons: Thinking Gender Variance through Minimalist Sculpture," *ArtJournal* (March, 2014): 47-57.
- Hammond, Harmony. "Feminist Abstract Art – A Political Viewpoint." *Heresies* 1, (Jan. 1977): 66-70.
- Hammer, Barbara. "The Politics of Abstraction." In *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*. Edited by Martha Gever, Pratibha Parmar and John Greyson, 70-75. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Harper, Phillippe Brian. *Abstractionist aesthetics: Artistic form and social critique in African American culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2015.
- Higgins, Hannah. *The Grid Book*. MIT Press, 2009.
- Jarman, Derek. *Chroma: a Book of Color*. Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1995.
- Jay, Martin. "Chromophilia: *Der Balue Reiter*, Walter Benjamin and the Emancipation of Color." Prepared for the 2011 Yale University Forum on Art, War, and Science in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. British Columbia, Canada, May 19-23, 2011.

- Jones, Amelia, ed. *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*. London & New York: Routledge, 2003
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*. London, New York; Routledge, 1999.
- Jones, Kellie. *Lorna Simpson*. London: Phaidon, 2002.
- Joseph, Branden W. "Ulrike Müller: The Old Expressions Are With Us Always and There Are Always Others," *Artforum International* 54 (September, 2015): 220.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Desire In Language: a Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.
- Kudielka, Robert. *Robert Kudielka On Bridget Riley: Essays and Interviews, 1972-2003*. London: Ridinghouse, 2005.
- Lancaster, Lex Morgan. "The Wipe: Sadie Benning's Queer Abstraction." *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture* 39 (Forthcoming, 2017)
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Feeling the Grid: Lorna Simpson's Concrete Abstraction." *ASAP/Journal* 2.1 (2017): 135-159
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Close Proximity, Intimate Distance: the Abstracting Effects of Photographic Contact," in *The Wet Archive: History, Desire and Photography's Liquid Intelligence*, exhibition catalogue, edited by Jill H, Casid. University of Wisconsin-Madison and the Department of Art History, January 2015.
- Lichtenstein, Jacqueline. *The Eloquence of Color: Rhetoric and Painting in the French Classical Age*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993
- Linden, Grace. "Re-Enchanting California Hard Edge: Visual Politics in the Glow Paintings of Kelly Brumfield-Woods." *Peripheral Vision* 1 (August 22, 2016)  
<http://www.peripheralvisionarts.org/journal/brumfieldwoods-linden>. Accessed February 3, 2017
- Lippard, Lucy. *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism*. New York: Dutton, 1971.
- Lochner, Oona. "Ulrike Müller: mumok, Vienna, Austria." *Frieze* (March 10, 2016)  
<https://frieze.com/article/ulrike-muller>. Accessed March 29, 2017
- Lorenz, Renate. *Queer Art: A Freak Theory*. New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2012.

- Lorenz, Renate. "Bodies without Bodies: Queer Desire as Method." Translated by Lisa Rosenblatt and Charlotte Eckler. In *Mehr(wert) queer: Visuelle Kultur, Kunst und Gender-Politiken*. Barbara Paul and Johanna Schaffer, eds., 152-164. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009.
- Marshall, Richard. *Lynda Benglis*. New York: Cheim & Read, 2004.
- Martin, Courtney. "Lawrence Alloway's Systems." In *Lawrence Alloway: Curator and Critic*. Edited by Lucy Bradnock, 86-106. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2015.
- Mauzerall, Hope. "What's the Matter with Matter? Problems in the Criticism of Greenberg, Fried, and Krauss." *Art Criticism 1* (1998): 81-96.
- McBane, Barbara. "Queer Abstraction," *The Archive: The Journal of the Leslie-Lohnman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art* 53 (Spring, 2015): 11-13.
- McClure, Michael Jay. "Prima Facie: The Photograph, the Unphotographed, and The Boston School," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 15 (2014): 103-120.
- McNamara, Andrew. "Between Flux and Certitude: The Grid in Avant-Garde Utopian Thought," *Art History* 15 (March 1992): 60-79.
- Meltzer, Eve. *Systems we have loved: Conceptual Art, Affect, and the Antihumanist Turn*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2013.
- Mercer, Kobena. *Discrepant Abstraction*. London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2006.
- Meyer, James. "Anthropomorphism," *The Art Bulletin* 94, 1 (March 2012): 24-27.
- Molesworth, Helen, ed. *Part Object Part Sculpture*. Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University, 2005.
- Moorhouse, Paul, Richard Shiff, Robert Kudielka, and Bridget Riley. *Bridget Riley: The Stripe Paintings 1961-2014*. New York, New York: David Zwirner, 2014.
- Müller, Ulrike. *Ulrike Müller: Franza, Fever 103, and Quilts*. Dancing Foxes Press, 2012.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. "Introduction: From Surface to Depth, between Psychoanalysis and Affect." *Women and Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 19 (2009), 123-129.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: NYU Press, 2009.
- Krauss, Rosalind. "Grids." *October* 9 (Summer 1979): 50-64.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1985.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Bachelors*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999.
- Phelan, Peggy. *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*. London: Routledge, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. Routledge: New York, London, 1993.
- Richmond, Susan. *Lynda Benglis: Beyond Process*. New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 2013.
- Riley, Bridget, and Robert Kudielka. *The Eye's Mind: Bridget Riley, Collected Writings 1965-2009*. London: Ridinghouse with Thames & Hudson, 2009.
- Riley, Charles A. *Color Codes: Modern Theories of Color In Philosophy, Painting and Architecture, Literature, Music, and Psychology*. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1995.
- Rose, Barbara. "Abstract Illusionism." *Artforum* (October 1967): 33-37
- Rose, Barbara, et al. *Monochromes: From Malevich to the Present*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.
- Said, Edward. *Freud and the Non-European*. London: Verso, 2003.
- Schapiro, Meyer. *Mondrian: on the Humanity of Abstract Painting*. New York: George Braziller, 1995.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.
- Sekula, Alan. "The Body and the Archive." In *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*. Edited by Richard Bolton, 344-45. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989.
- Serres, Michel. *The Parasite*. Lawrence R. Schehr, trans. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982.
- Sheets, Hillary M. "Black Abstraction: Not a Contradiction," *ARTnews* 113 (June 2014): 62-70.
- Shildrick, Margrit and Janet Price, eds. *Vital Signs: Feminist Reconfigurations of the Bio/logical Body*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998.
- Sillman, Amy. "AbEx and Disco Balls: In Defense of Abstract Expressionism II." *Artforum* (Summer 2011): 314-325.

- Simon Schama, "True Grid," *The New Yorker* (Oct. 9, 1995): 42-43
- Simmons, William J. "Betty Tomkins: *Fuck Paintings* (1969-74)." *Flash Art* 303 (2015): n.p. <http://www.flashartonline.com/article/betty-tompkins/>. Accessed February 13, 2016.
- Simpson, Bennett. *Blues for Smoke*. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2012.
- Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation and other essays*. London: Penguin, 2009.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Imperialism and Sexual Difference." *The Oxford Literary Review* 8 (1986): 225-244.
- Taylor, Brandon. *After Constructivism*. London; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.
- Temkin, Ann, and Briony Fer. *Color Chart: Reinventing Color 1950 to Today*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2008.
- Vaccaro, Jeanne. "Felt matters," *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 20 (2010): 253-266.
- Williamson, Jack. "The Grid: History, Use, Meaning." *Design Issues* 3 (Autumn, 1986): 15-30.
- Yekani, Elahe Haschemi, et al. *Queer Futures: Reconsidering Ethics, Activism, and the Political*. Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2013.
- Young, Iris Marion. "Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective." *Signs* 19 (Spring 1994): 713-738.