Student Name: Dione Jones

Student number: 1903141

Programme of Study: Photography in the Arts (BA Hons)

Module: ADAD5004

Word Count: 2746

Tutor’s Name: Paul Duerinckx

Within this essay I am going to explore different perspectives and interactions with “queer” art by using three different key words/titles as starting points, eventually leading up to a question revolving around these which I will hopefully go on to expand upon in my dissertation. These words/titles will allow me to approach perspectives and themes in different ways through writers and artists.

My first key title will be *Voyeurism* and how the male-gaze and voyeuristic art interacts with queer art and also go into briefly some history of voyeurism and male-gaze. Then I will look at *Queer Gaze* and how queer people challenge the male-gaze and the voyeuristic way of viewing art and also how queer artists explore and produce work through this “queer gaze” eye. Then, I will introduce the final title *Post-gender/Gender Performance* and explore how some believe we are now moving past gender binary and how artists and thinkers explore this. Topics I will cover within this will include camp aesthetics, the implications of voyeurism and the “other” when viewing queer art and how this also ties into other aspects of art history, and also the fetishization of queer art and representation within the art world.

Voyeurism

Figure 1: Nan Goldin, 1986

Voyeurism is defined as "the activity of getting pleasure from secretly watching other people in sexual situations or, more generally, from watching other people's private lives" (Cambridge Dictionary definition). When we think of voyeurism our minds may go instantly to reality TV and CCTV, but it's a big part of the art world. Often voyeuristic depictions of art allow us to view a piece without feeling too emotionally involved as we are *outside* and not *active* participants. It often allows the viewer to not have their gaze challenged or even acknowledged. I'm interested in this because often in queer art (along with other arts made depicting minorities) a voyeuristic approach is applied by the artist/photographer, which to me may seem like it comforts the viewer by not making it too in your face. A cisgender heterosexual viewer would certainly be more comfortable when confronted by queer art if it didn't challenge the gaze of the disapproving or uncomprehending eyes that quickly scan

before darting away. Roland Barthes talks of the *Studium* in Camera Lucida, and I think it's applicable here. "The studium is that very wide field of unconcerned desire, of various interest, of inconsequential taste: *I like/ I don't like;* it mobilizes a half desire, a demi-volition (…) vague slippery, irresponsible interest one takes" (Barthes, p.27, 1980). Queer art is always political and always personal (in my opinion)…what does a cisgender heterosexual individual take away from it? A half-desire to understand what they are not? A window into the "other" of which they cannot understand or may not even care to? A romanticized or fetishized view of a whole community of people? The above image by Nan Goldin is from her 1985 series *The Ballad Of Sexual Dependency*, in the image you can see how she is both the a subject of a voyeuristic gaze as well as a voyeur herself as she glances over to her partner.

Figure 2: Orshi Drozdik, 1993

When considering Voyeurism it's also important to mention male gaze and female nudes in art as these are perhaps the most notorious and prominent use of voyeuristic POVs in art history. The figure to the left is a sculptural piece by Hungarian feminist artist Orshi Drozdik. *Medikai Vénusz, 1993* (which translates to medical Venus) is a wax piece in which she casted herself after photographing an anatomical Venus in Vienna (which dated to around 1784-1788). She used perhaps one of the most famous examples of a female made under male-gaze and created something not so pleasant. The idea being that it confronts the gaze…"Drozdik's diverse fictional alteregos portray her as female artists or artworks from

different times and places with the constant aim challenging the medical and museal male gaze…" (Kérchy edited by Kovács and Sári, p.63, 2017). I think this is relevant because when discussing voyeurism it arises the question of who is portraying the subjects in that way…Orshi uses this POV and challenges it using herself as the subject. Would it be exploitative to portray other people in this way? Especially if it is a surveyor capturing a group/individual who is different to them in some way, such as a straight photographer photographing queer culture.

How a piece of artwork is viewed by the mass public often changes when enough about the artist is revealed. A female nude painted adhering to male gaze…poses little question to many. What about when a lesbian paints nude women? Voyeurism, in a way, intrudes the private…so when a queer person explores their identity through it how is it different to that of a straight man painting a half-clad woman? Sadie Lee, during her first one-woman show at Manchester City Art Galleries in 1994, learnt first-hand the stark difference in reactions of lesbian made nudity vs. straight made nudity in art. In the comment book for her exhibition there was a big positive reaction, however;

"The ones that weren't generally complained that the gallery had given space to 'disgusting' art, or quoted homophobic passages from the Bible (...) within the Galleries permanent collection are many paintings of semi-clad or nude women embracing, some in bath scenes, and there is even a large-scale portrait of Sappho (...) these paintings were by men and offered no explanations as to the meaning behind them or to the relationship between the women (...) needless to say, no complaints were made about these…"

(Lee edited by Horne and Lewis, p.121/122, 1996).

Granted this was a few years ago…many reactions to queer art still stand similarly. Two women embracing painted by a man adheres to the male fantasy…as if they're embracing for the man's pleasure. Two women embracing painted by a lesbian is personal and truthful, not some pornographic fantasy. Can art be truly queer if it is not created by a queer artist? When you're outside of the perspective can you be truthful and honest in your portrayal? Too often minorities are utilised by artists outside of them to fetishize, romanticize and capitalise off of their "otherness". One of my biggest values in my work is that I will never try to capture what other's feel, for I cannot imagine, and so it would be untruthful for me to do so. This doesn't only stand for cisgender heterosexual artists making "queer" fine arts but also is applicable in other medias such as straight people writing queer characters or even straight actors playing queer characters, is this a fair portrayal? "Homosexual Equality in Britain and Gay Activists Alliance in the United States were actively involved in the promotion of 'positive' images of gayness. This included criticism of negative, homophobic images in the media, including the popular camp stereotypes of sitcoms which were seen as damaging…" Spargo, p.29, 1999).

Queer-Gaze

Queer-gaze challenges male-gaze and begins to deconstruct how we view and regard queer art and artists. Queer-gaze engages with how queer artists make and view art and is a response "to the direct and oft(ten) unspoken of 'straight-gaze', the queer gaze recognizes how lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people create and view art (…) it challenges binary notions of existence and storytelling…" (Anderson, 2018). This sort of ties in with what I was saying before about there being a problem with heterosexual cisgender

artists making “queer art”, with an outside perspective how can the art be “queer”? Sadie Lee’s work caused controversy simply because she was a lesbian painting female intimacy and nudes and in her painting’s you can clearly see how she paints women in a way that makes them appear powerful and confident in their queerness.

What exactly makes a work “queer”? “Camp” is a term often used to describe art, objects, fashion and even literature that to some degree denotes queerness in its hyper-artificial, dramatic and playful nature. However, works that have been described as camp or are camp haven’t always been made by a queer artist or haven’t even been made with the purpose or intent to be camp. In *Notes on Camp* Susan Sontag deconstructs camp “One must distinguish between naïve and deliberate camp. Pure Camp is always naïve. Camp which knows itself to be Camp (‘camping’) is usually less satisfying” (Sontag, p.13, 1966). But what makes camp often synonymous with queerness? “All Camp objects, and persons, contain a large element of artifice. Nothing in nature can be campy…” (Sontag, p.8, 1966). Queer people embrace camp as it’s embracing the “otherness” society often casts us into. By rejecting the “natural” on an aesthetic level it rejects the “normal” that heteronormative society might want us to be. In Jean Cocteau’s *The White Book* the main character (whom is a homosexual) declares “…I will not agree to be tolerated. This damages my love of love and of liberty” (Cocteau, p.75/76, published in 1989). If we are ‘tolerated’ what does that mean for queer art and queer culture? It denies the acceptance of the things that are built to exclude and erase queerness from the “norm”. It puts us away in a quiet box where heteronormative society won’t have to face the things they do not understand or even care to understand. Toleration is not the same as acceptance and does not embrace us or want us to flourish.

There are many artists exploring what it means to be queer and making art, non-binary intersex photographer and writer Del LeGrace Volcano explains "you're implicitly more likely to have something closer to a queer gaze if you yourself are queer" (interviewed by Dazed, Abraham, 2019). They go on to say "it seeks to empathise the beauty where other people see abjection (…) it's about working with people's ideas of what is beautiful; we've all been trained through the media (…) but that is the heteronormative male gaze art work. A queer gaze seeks to smash the status quo" (Del Lagrace interviewed by Dazed, Abraham, 2019). Queer art shouldn't have to strive to be palatable to everyone because that's not what it is, queer artists often grow up to see beauty and people in different ways to heteronormative people. A woman with a moustache, a man in a dress…queer art plays with gender norms and deconstructs the gazes and systems that heteronormative society has deeply engrained into art history.

Figure 3: Del LaGrace Volcano collaboration with Gerard Rancinan, 2004

David J. Getsy further explains how often queer artists aesthetics and subjects revolve around rejecting the 'normal' as an act of political resistance "…within artistic practice, queer tactics and attitudes have energized artists who create work that flouts 'common' sense, that brashly embraces disruption as a 'tactic'" (Getsy, p.12, 2016). By rejecting normalcy queer folk reject the idea of being quieted, it rejects the want for us to "blend in". The word "queer" alone has many political connotations, the word was often used

as a slur against LGBTQ+ and still is to this today, the reclamation of this word gives queer folk back a sense of ownership and power and pride in their identities. It says, yes I'm queer…so what? "The activist stance of 'queer' was developed as a mode of resistance to the oppression and erasure of sexual miniorities (…) a rejection of assimilation proposed by many in gay and lesbian communities who aspired to be just 'normal'" (Getsy, 2016, p.12).

Gender Performance/Post-Gender

What does the term "Post-gender" mean? Post-gender "means going beyond performing strictly defined gender roles in public. A post-gender world can also then be post-sex, in that it calls into questions biological categories as well" (Pearson, 2017). So, in essence it's deconstructing gender as a social construct it's going "beyond" gender and wants to dismantle gender-roles.

When discussing queer art and aesthetics I also think it's important to discuss gender performance and how queer aesthetics and artists interact with gender and how they explore it within their practices. This sort of ties in with the term "Post-Gender" in that queer folk have, often, a complicated relationship with gender compared to our heterosexual counterparts. Heteronormative society is deeply engrained into us from a young age, and when someone doesn't fit into the box of heterosexual cisgender woman/man it can be hard to relate to this society around you. Nonbinary and gender non-conforming queer folk also break down the binaries and ideas of gender, seeing it more as fluid, static and fluid. Not a solid strict construct that is determined by sex.

"Gender practices within gay and lesbian cultures often thematize "the natural" in parodic contexts that bring into relief the performative construction of an original and true sex"

(Butler p.63, 1990). Some may argue that certain labels within the queer community almost mirrors heteronormativity, for example terms such as “butch” and femme” in the lesbian community may be viewed as assigning one partner the role of “man” and the other the role of “ woman” (which is sort of mirrored in homosexual relationships with the term “top” and “bottom”). These labels are often worn with pride and are an integral part of a queer person’s identity, however, it’s also important to consider how it may also make a lesbian feel as though they need to fit into one or the other, and those who fit neither may feel alienated from the community. But being a Butch or Femme is performance, right? How can we deconstruct how we learn this “performance”? Butches have “masculine” traits while femmes have “feminine” traits, but viewing this as a copy and paste of heteronormative society begins to undermine the lesbians who use these labels. “The notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities.” (Butler p.443, 1990).

Figure 4: Gluck, 1973

Painter Gluck (b.1985-1978) is a good example of a queer (lesbian) identity that “rejected” gender norms within their artwork. The artist simply went by “Gluck” as it was more gender-nonconforming than their full name. This self-portrait doesn’t appeal to a male-gaze way of spectatorship, Gluck’s head is held high and their eyes looking down, this kind of confidence would quite often be synonymous with masculinity.

In an ideal “post-gender” world people would be free from the limitations determined by societal gender-roles and norms. It’s not arguing that gender-expression or performance is necessarily bad or evil just that discrimination and limitations often associated with displaying certain gendered traits should not happen. For example, gay men being harassed for their “femininity” and gay women being harassed because of their “masculinity”. Post-gender seems quite idealist and out of reach, it’s going to take a long time to unlearn all of these notions ingrained into us by a patriarchal, heteronormative society. “Once all gendered identities are seen as performative and transitory, the heterosexual is not uniquely separated from the lesbian or gay”. (Horne and Lewis, p.1, 1996). But what could this non-separation look like? Would queer culture change in this utopian world if certain queer-coded things weren’t seen as going against the norm? How could this change queer art?

Question/conclusion

Upon exploring these 3 titles/topics I want to further see how they interlink. Exploring the way queer art is made and viewed through the means of gaze and voyeurism is interesting as it challenges how we make and consume art. How does a queer-gaze change an interaction someone may have with an art piece compared to a heterosexual-gaze? It’s also interesting decoding just what makes a piece of queer art queer in the first place, and I don’t think it’s a question that may be as easily answered as first thought. For example, is a piece of art queer just because it is made by a queer artist? Even if the piece of art made by the queer artist doesn’t seem to have anything queer about it except for the fact it was made by someone who is queer? Can a piece of work by a heterosexual artist ever be “queer”? What if it’s depicting queer people or using queer “codes”? how much does the fetishization of lesbians and other queer identites in art by cis straight men still affect the way queer art is viewed today?

A working question I have come up with for my dissertation based on these queries is "*Queer art vs. Queer Artist: How Are Queer Artists Reclaiming Their Gaze Within Art?"*

Bibliography

Abraham, A. (2015) *Photographers creating work through the queer gaze*, 2015 (interview text by Abraham). Available at: https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/45069/1/kiss-my-genders-queer-gaze-hayward-catherine-opie-victoria-sin-juliana-huxtable (Accessed 13/05/2021)

Anderson, T. (2018) *What Hollywood Can Gain By Placing "Queer Gaze" In The Spotlight.* Available at: https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-ca-mn-lgbtq-filmmakers-love-simon-20180316-story.html#:~:text=The%20%E2%80%9Cqueer%20gaze%2C%E2%80%9D%20meanwhile,people%20create%20and%20view%20art. (Accessed 12/05/2021)

Barthes, R., (1980) *Camera Lucida*, Vintage 2000

Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge

Cambridge Dictionary. Available at: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/voyeurism (accessed 12/05/2021)

Getsy, D. J. (edited by) (2016) *Queer: Documents of Contemporary Art*, The MIT Press

Horne, P. and Lewis, R. (1996) *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Cultures*, Routledge

Kovács, A. Z. and Sári, L. B. (2017) *Space, Gender, and the Gaze in Literature and Art*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Pearson, J. (2017) *What is Post-Gender? And Can Berlin Be Post-Gender*? Available at: https://needleberlin.com/2017/08/17/was-ist-post-gender-and-can-berlin-be-post-gender/ (accessed 14/05/2021)

Sontag, S. (1966) *Notes on Camp*, Penguin (published to Penguin Books 2018), London

Spargo, T. (1999), *Postmodern Encounters: Foucault and Queer Theory*, Icon Book Ltd.

Figures

Fig 1: Goldin, N. *Nan and Brian in Bed* from *The Ballad Of Sexual Dependency,* 1983,

(silver dye bleach print), MoMa Avaliable at:

https://www.moma.org/collection/works/101659 (accessed 12/05/2021)

Fig 2: Drozdik, O., *Medikai Vénusz* from Manufacturing the Self: Medical Erotic, 1993 (wax), Tom Cugliani Gallery New York. Avaliable at: http://www.orshi.hu/993meder.htm (Accessed 13/05/2021)

Fig 3: Volcano, D.L., *Del LaGrace Volcano Self-Portrait Collaboration with Gerard Rancinan, Paris*, 2004 (digital C-print), Leslie Lohman Museum of Art. Available at https://leslielohman.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/BEB3CE76-DF1F-43C6-A604-641856716356 (Accessed 13/05/2021)

Fig 4: Gluck, *Gluck*, 1942 (oil on canvas), National Portrait Gallery, London. Available at https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw07415/Gluck (Accessed 13/05/2021)