

Queer Art: Reclamation of the Gaze

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Queer Art: Reclamation of the Gaze

Introduction

Within my essay *Queer Art: Reclamation of the Gaze* I want to deconstruct queer art through an analysis and critic of the male-gaze throughout art history and look at how the gaze in art has shifted but also the change that still is yet to come. Where are we now? Why is it important to continue to be critical of the gaze in art? What does “gaze” mean? How can the gaze be reclaimed and how in doing so many artists protest against heteronormative society and the way in which it has deeply ingrained how minorities and women are depicted in art, and what impact this has on wider society, too.

Throughout this thesis I will explore these matters by looking at art (and the artist), theorists and writers to better disassemble this. As a queer artist I find freedom in being able to express my identity through my practice, but I am not unaware that in doing so, whether I think of it as or not, it is in fact, an act of protest. I am reclaiming my gaze and identity in my work constantly. Due to the nature of my investigation, the writing takes form through auto-ethnographic methodologies.

I think it’s important to explain some concepts and terminologies that I will use throughout my thesis as they hold great significance within my arguments. One such word being *heteronormative society*. Oxford reference defines heteronormativity as “the assumption that normal and natural expressions of sexuality are heterosexual in nature... society is structured morally, socially, and legally to position other forms of sexuality as deviant and to

discriminate against non-heterosexuals” (Oxford Reference, 2013). Many queer people were prosecuted and punished (and still are in many other countries across the globe) and rather alarmingly it wasn’t until 1967 in the UK where it was decriminalised, although, that’s not to say that was the end of queer people facing punishment. “In 1967 the Sexual Offences Act was passed which decriminalised private homosexual acts between men ages over 21, while at the same time imposing heavier penalties on street offenders... the law was not changed in Scotland until 1980, or Northern Ireland until 1982” (UK Parliament website).

Although 50 years ago may feel like a long time to many it really is not, my own mother was born only 3 years after this legislation was put into place and my grandmother was 17 when it was passed. Within reading these laws there is an obvious absence of mentioning sapphic relationships and lesbianism and what kind of punishments two women may get for being intimate. However, women were not seen to be able to have relations as homosexual men would, Queen Victoria simply could not believe that two women would ever do such things. The word *Deviance* holds a lot of weight in queer history. “Deviant” was a label that was used to shame us, just as *Queer* was. This idea of “Otherness” and “Outsider” shunned and shamed many into silence and a life in the closet.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

In Dutch photographer Charlotte Haslund-Christensen’s 2009 project *Who’s Next?* she captures mugshots of queer people, herself included (figure 2). These mugshots are made to look like the individuals are portrayed as criminals as they would be considered in many places across the world currently. “Each participant photographed... was taken down to Copenhagen Central Police Station. They were escorted past cell doors, stripped of jewellery, and had their fingerprints taken before being photographed by the artist” (Haslund-Christensen, 2012).

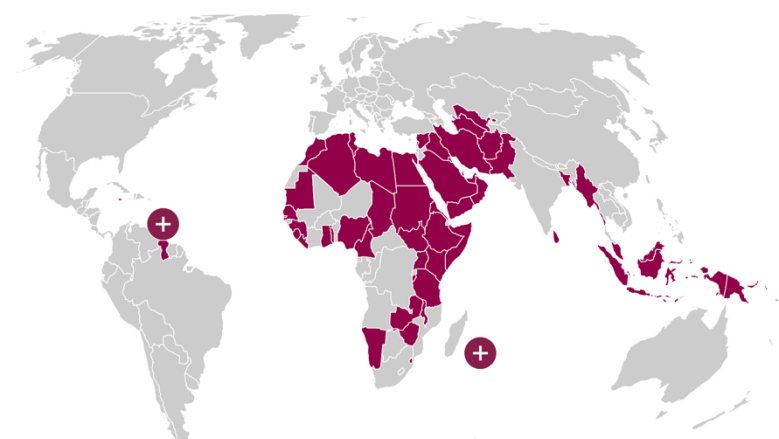


Figure 4

This photograph shows an overview of the countries across the globe that still presently criminalise LGBTQ+ people. I think seeing this map next to a section of Haslund-

Christensen's exhibition (figure 1) where it was a mere section of the people photographed really hits you with just how many queer people would be prosecuted. Her exhibition was very expansive and there's something so powerful about these mugshots, the smaller ones make us get up close, investigating the portrait, forcing us to reflect on just what a "criminal" is, for some would see them as so, making us stare these people in the face up-close and intimately forcing us to consider their humanity. "The archive thus provides a critical mirror of the photographic procedures related to the conventional state archive and its disciplining power" (Haslund-Christensen, 2012).

What does "Queer" mean? The actual definition is "differing in some way from what is usual or normal" (Meriam Webster). My grandmother still uses it as its original meaning intended. If she loses something she was just holding or if she comes across information that surprises her, she exclaims "well, that's queer!". When I was growing up, I never picked up this expression, but I never thought of it as a word with a complicated and loaded history that could quite literally be weaponised and spat at people with venom and hate, as it had been for many, many years. In the 1990s it would begin to be popularized by LGBTQ people as a reclaimed label they would give onto themselves. As Reed suggests;

The rise of the term queer reflected the loss of faith in coherence of "gay" or "lesbian" identity" and was intended to unite a wide range of constituencies opposed to the conventional notions of sexuality and gender. The terms denotation of something odd or abnormal was exploited as a badge of honor by the loose-knit political coalition Queer Nation... Queer Nation popularized the term Queer with a younger generations of activists trying to embrace a wide range of sex/gender nonconformists in an identity that was both oppositional and freely chosen".
(Reed, p.231, 2011).

Queer is an inclusive term, it doesn't seek to exclude any member of the LGBTQ+ community, and, has been used as a slur for many of its members so is a one that has been reclaimed by much of the community. Whereas some other words have been used more specifically to target specific members and similarly those members have also often reclaimed the words used to shame them. For example, as a lesbian I often use the word "dyke" as a reclamation to describe and talk about myself and my other lesbian friends (unless they have expressed discomfort with the word due to negative past experiences etc.). As mentioned above, the Gay Manifesto written by The Queer Nation reads:

Well, yes, "gay" is great. It has its place. But when a lot of lesbians and gay men wake up in the morning we feel angry and disgusted, not gay. So we've chosen to call ourselves queer. Using "queer" is a way of reminding us how we are perceived by the rest of the world. It's a way of telling ourselves we don't have to be witty and charming people who keep our lives discreet and marginalized in the straight world. We use queer as gay men loving lesbians and lesbians loving being queer. Queer, unlike gay, doesn't mean male.
(The Queer Manifesto, 1990)

Reclamation is a big and vital act of protest and freedom to many minorities. As my thesis will cover, art is a major mode for this reclamation and also how, we as queer artists, have reclaimed the gaze stolen from us and used to judge us for so long. What do we mean when we talk about gaze?

Chapter 1: The Male-Gaze

The Male Gaze and Voyeurism

When we think of gaze in an art it's important to consider multiple things, and I often ask myself the following: who is empowered by the gaze? Is the spectator confronted or comforted by what they are gazing upon? Who's gaze is the art created under? Does the piece empower the demographic in which it represents/presents? Why was the piece made and what gaze did it intend to draw from the audience? Is the gaze uncomfortable, and if so, why?

Much of art history in its depictions of minorities and of women takes a voyeuristic mode of language in its representation and presentation, an outsider capturing something of which they are not an active participant in. That is because for centuries the art world has been dominated and dictated by white and wealthy heterosexual men. And for this reason, many historical art pieces are seen through the lens of the male gaze. Laura Mulvey observes "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (Laing & Wilson, p.3, 2020). When discussing the concept of voyeurism in art history it is vital to also bring up female nudes and the depictions of women in art, as Mulvey quoted above, they were often not the ones in power and were the passive participants whose bodies were merely objects in the art made to look perfect, supple, young and if the women were not those things it was often art that was intended to shock the observer rather than just depict a body that simply didn't adhere to beauty standards established by a cisgendered, heteronormative society (and an ableist society).

To sum voyeurism up, it is "the practice of taking pleasure in observing something private, sordid, or scandalous" (Meriam Webster). It allows us to view work without feeling

responsible or emotionally tied to the subject matter. Maria Walsh says of the gaze and it's protest... "Oppositional response to the 'male gaze', for example, the female gaze and a queer gaze (...) replicate the notion of control..." (Laing and Wilson, p.36, 2020). It depicts the subjects as objects, rather than participants. Objectification of the subject matter inherently teaches generations that it is okay to view things in such ways in the outer world, too; the beauty standards for women, what a "normal" body is, how we should expect women to act, behave and perform etc, it's all reinforced through depictions in art and culture as it perpetuates such standards on a larger scale. The same can be said for minorities and other cultures. A male-gazey depiction of two sapphic lovers delicately and fragiley embracing as though it is all for the viewer.

LGBTQ Through The Lens of Male-Gaze



Figure 4

While visiting *David Hurns: Swaps* Exhibition in Cardiff museum (2022) I came across this photograph titled *Lesbian Love, 1969*. The women's faces are hidden (a perfect invite for the voyeur not to be confronted), their bodies softly lit, posed so delicately, so perfectly orchestrated for the man's camera. The title alone makes me cringe, considering it was taken by a man... "Lesbian Love" is more than the fetishization and voyeurism of a man capturing an intimate act between two women.

Figure 5

Lesbian love is cutting my girlfriends hair in the garden, it's comfortable silence, it's communication and complete understanding through gestures and facial expression alone, it's sharing stories of a complicated world growing up and coming to terms with a culture your

family often cannot expose you to, it's learning to accept a complicated relationship with a heteronormative society and gender norms that are imposed in us from a young age. As lesbian visual artist and activist Zanele Muholi said "I have seen people speaking and capturing images of lesbians on our behalf, as if we are incapable or mute... I refused to become a subject matter for others and be silenced" (Mullins, p.102, 2019). We are so much more than the fetishized and romanticised versions of us seen in movies, art, and literature written by those outside of us.

Feminist Protest in Art

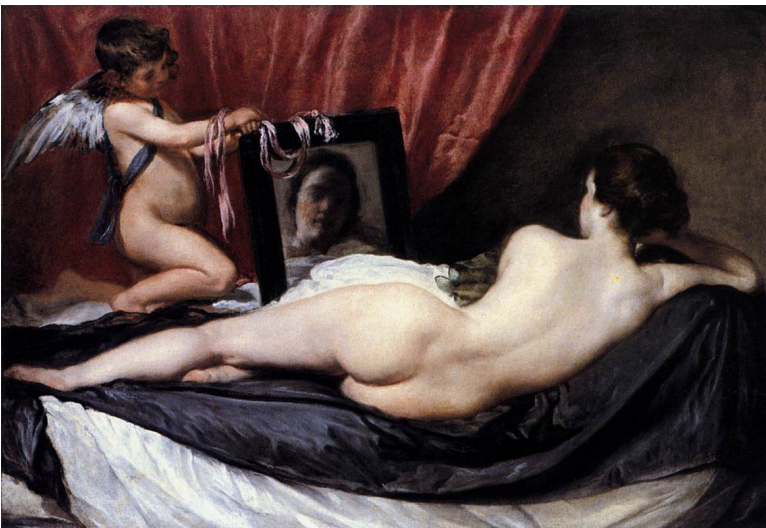


Figure 6



Figure 7

John Berger writes of spectatorship and the female nude in *Ways of Seeing* (1972). "A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude (the sight of it as an object stimulates the use of it as an object)" (Berger, p.54, 1972). To be naked is to be completely vulnerable, completely exposed, how does this differ from nudity? Many of us would consider both nakedness and nudity the same thing at first glance. Berger remarks "The nude is

condemned to never being naked. Nudity is a form of dress” (Berger, p.54, 1972), and who exactly is this form of dress for? In European oil paintings of nude women from the 16th to the 18th centuries, who was orchestrating and “dressing” these nude women to so carefully alter their nakedness and make it, as Berger says, into nudeness. “He is the spectator in front of the picture, and he is presumed to be a man. Everything is addressed to him. Everything must appear to be the result of his being there” (Berger, p.54, 1972). In essence this is what the male-gaze is, orchestrating women and the female nude in art for men by men.

Women are taught from a young age to be very aware of their appearance in everything they do, they are always observed and always subject to spectatorship. So much so, that even when a woman is completely alone in her room she may worry she is posed in an unattractive manner, this is called an internalised male-gaze. For what should matter more to a woman than looking pretty? In reference to *The Rokeby Venus* (fig. 6), Konzanoglu writes “depicting the nude with a mirror was a device to convince women that they are a ‘sight’ to be looked at, an ‘object’ of vision’. While nakedness is private nudity is a ‘disguise’” (Konzanoglu, 2019).

In terms of photography and the male-gaze I found Sontag’s writings hit upon the discourse of spectatorship and a passive and active participant. “...using the camera is an observation station, the act of photographing is more than passive observing. Like sexual voyeurism, it is a way of at least tacitly, often explicitly, encouraging whatever is going on to keep happening” (Sontag, p.20, 1977). This is exactly like the painter, the photographer has all of the power and control and as such has a responsibility to think critically about what it is exactly they are encouraging and perpetuating through their lens.

Although certainly present before, there was a boom in feminist art during the “second wave” of the feminist movement in the 60s and 70s. Women artists were using their body to protest against a patriarchal society, much to the displeasure and behest of some. In figure 7, contrasting right next to Velazquez’ *The Rokeby’s Venus* (fig 6) is a piece by experimental, feminist artist Carolee Schneemann, titled *Eye Body #11*, 1963. The direct contrast of the nude, pristine woman posed in front of a mirror starkly juxtaposed with Schneemann’s shattered glass replicating a mirror smashed in rage and protest, almost ritualistic in appearance, feminine rage against the male-gaze. It’s as if Schneemann is saying that despite the “nudity” in her work she is not to be observed as an object and I think smashing the mirror, a symbol often used to show women are a sight to be seen, makes this noticeably clear. Lord said of her work, “Schneemann was the only feminist artist in the 70s to so viscerally connect her rage to her cunt” (Getsy, p.100, 2016).

Her work was very controversial for the time, and even now. “*Scroll* continues to unfurl. It is a mark of the indexical skank of pussy juice” A performance in which Schneemann unfurls paper from her vagina and reads from it in front of onlookers, now placed under plexiglass still gets curators fired at the suggestion of displaying.



Figure 8

Through my own practice I've attempted to depict, like Schneemann, a feminist rage and protest to the male-gaze. In this self-portrait (untitled, 2020) the blur and scribbles embody a refusal to be looked at, it makes the viewer aware that I will not be still for their eyes and I will not show my flesh for them to judge. I will show my flesh for my own gaze, to take-back and re-empower my body through my own orchestration. Lord goes on to say:

Feminist is a category I choose not to split from homosexual, lesbian, or from the oppositional politics implied by the word 'queer'. Lesbian and feminist- like lesbian and queer, dyke, fag, white and black- are structures of memory and cultural interpretation they suggest, contested and unstable territories

Getsy, p.100, 2016

Like this quote from Lord cements, the feminist movement is interconnected with the queer, it's the breaking down and protest of a patriarchal heteronormative society that seeks to make quiet those who do not fit the ideals ingrained into us through cultural and societal norms.

Chapter 2: Queer Gaze

What is the Queer Gaze? To me, it is a political and cultural response to the Male Gaze. The activist act of tearing down and protesting how the heteronormative majority want to see queer art, in a way that's easily digestible and not too in-your-face and often not even made by queer artists. To discuss the queer gaze and contrast it to the male I will be breaking down aspects that are at place such as gender and gender performance, art as protest, queer artists and the complexities of what can be considered the queer gaze, how others view queer art, visibility and queer theory. All of these things amalgamate to make the "Queer Gaze".

Don't Be Blatant

Have you met the woman who's shocked by two women kissing?
And in the same breath tells you she's pregnant
BUT gays, shouldn't be so blatant.

(...)

You go into a public restroom and all over the walls there's John loves
Mary, Janice digs Richard, Pepe loves Delores, etc., etc.
BUT gays shouldn't be so blatant.

(...)

Fact is, blatant heterosexuals are all over the place.
Supermarkets, movies, on your job, in church, in books, on the television every day
Day and night, every place-even-in gay bars and they want gay
Men and women to go hide in the closet.

So you straight folks I say, "Sure, I'll go if you go too"
BUT I'm polite, so after you

Pat Parker, For the Straight Folks Who Don't Mind Gays But Wish They Weren't So Blatant,
Lesbian Concentrate, 1977

Being judged and harassed for looking, being, acting "too gay", often when the minimum of tolerance is only offered, and begrudgingly so, to the queers who aren't too in your face or

flamboyant or camp or gender nonconforming. Tolerance is sometimes only given when there's silence, quiet and compliance to not stick out in a heteronormative society. Remarks like "I'm not homophobic but I don't want to hear about that lifestyle, what's private is private for a reason..." when we hear about the straight persons "lifestyle" every single day. Pat Parker rights of this hypocrisy and how queer people are made to feel like it would be easier if they were "quiet" queers, not to be "blatant" ones. "It tends to come with conditions attached, implying implicit standards to our appearance, styles and behaviours, splitting LGBT people into 'good' and 'bad' flavours" (Pilcher, p.12, 2017), this can be seen by representations of us on TV and film, especially when written and played by straight, cisgendered people.

Telling a queer, it's okay to be queer, just don't be too queer is another way of oppression and silencing, an act of attempting to make those who don't fit into a heteronormative society to try their best so that at least to others they may appear to fit in from the outside. It's making the queer palatable, easily digestible and not too challenging to those norms.

"The adaptation of transgender by LGB right movements has had the insidious effect of implying that all gender trouble can be located in the 'T'. Not only does this desexualize all transfolk, but it also fuels the fantasy that the content of 'L', 'G' and the 'B' merely involve the reshuffling of intimates among conventional, binary genders" (Getsy, p.18, 2016). In Queer culture a big part of expression, culture and everyday life is bending and rewriting gender norms. For a queer to be palatable this often means still conforming to gender norms and the idea of the gender binary, strict ideas of what is 'male' and what is 'female' and the characteristics and traits that are seen as good or bad in each one. Looking at gender as a

performance we begin to breakdown a societal structure which has engendered and indoctrinated us from even our preconception.

Gender Performance and “Postgenderism”

In Judith Butler’s seminal book *Gender Trouble* (1990) she begins to deconstruct notions of gender and the binary as a mere performance that many of us begin to learn from a young age from the cultural norms we are brought up in our daily lives. She, like many other gender theorists, believe that being born male or female (our biological sex) does not determine our behaviour or personality, instead it is learnt through cultural norms, things we learn to be “masculine” or “feminine”. When discussing queer art and the queer gaze it is vital to also talk of gender performance as many queer artists play, deconstruct and reevaluate gender within their practice.

“The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. But we’re actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality; anatomical sex, gender identity and gender performance” (Butler, P.444, 1990). Drag, especially, is the parodying of gender in a way that’s exaggerated and often flashy. Some critics of drag judge it to be misogynistic as some may view it as reducing women to nothing more than their appearance and the strive for hyper-femininity.

“You’ve got those that argue drag is a parody of femininity, mocking women, both characteristics and the aesthetics” (Segalov, 2015). But to view it as misogynist I think misses the mark, in performing it in such an exaggerated way I feel like it emphasises that this is not what makes a woman a woman at all, and that we are all performing gender in

some way, be that masculinity or femininity, each has expectations, “In imitating gender drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself” (Butler, p.444, 1990).

There are drag kings (although as in the main-stream eye as drag queens) who parody and over exaggerate masculinity within their performances. There are even women who perform as drag queens which is essentially the parodying of their own gender (slag term being “bio queens”) and that’s without considering nonbinary people who play with drag as a form of expression, too. “as much as drag creates a unified picture of “woman” (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctiveness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence” (Butler, p.444, 1990).

“A person’s gender identity can remain fixed or can fluctuate over time; it can be aligned with the sex they are assigned at birth or be in contrast to the sex they are assigned at birth; and can be articulated through or contradicted by their gender expression” (Hines, p.10, 2018). What we learn as gendered behaviour is completely confounded of the cultural, social and historical aspects of our identities as members of a heteronormative, patriarchal society. And even so, it’s important to note that what is seen as ideal traits for men and women constantly change and shift over time, as well as other factors... “It is entwined with other social categories, such as race, social class, sexuality and embodiment” (Hines, p.13, 2018). Even by this standard, the shifting of gender-norms somewhat speaks of gender-fluidity, right? Those who consider behaviours to be directly related to the biological sex of an individual certainly don’t consider this aspect...



Figure 9



Figure 10

Claude Cahun is an example of a queer artist who during their practice completely immersed themselves in the world of gender performance and gender-non-conformance, usually with a playful approach. Born Lucy Schwob, they would later change their name to Claude Cahun, and many believe they did this as a result of their gender fluidity and wanting a more gender-ambiguous name. In 1937 they would settle in Jersey and joined the resistance against WW11 with lesbian partner, and fellow artist and collaborator, Marcel Moore (whom also changed their name in order to acquire a more gender-neutral mode of address). Cahun used dress and pose to play with these concepts, embodying different characters that could all be seen as aspects of themselves.

In Fig. 6, a self-portrait from 1927, you can clearly see Cahun's playful approach to gender performance through dress. Across their chest written is "I am in training don't kiss me"

while barbels rest at their side, a bodybuilder with heart cheeks and a strongly accentuated cupid bow. The wrestler represents the ultimate “manly” man, brute, dominant, confident. Yet they juxtaposed this with hearts, posed in a coy way with legs crossed, coquettish and not at all brute. “...we can see in Cahun’s images and self-styling a desire to avoid gender classification...” (Day, p.56, 2007). In figure 9, “Self-Portrait (Kneeling, Naked, With Mask) (1928), we can see Cahun wearing a mask in a more literal sense as opposed to the metaphorical masks they adorn in their various costumes.

They remarked of themselves that they feel neither masculine nor feminine, using the term “neuter”. During Cahun’s lifetime we didn’t have terms like “genderqueer”, “nonbinary”, “genderfluid” or at least not in the mainstream, so many believe Cahun would perhaps use they/them pronouns today, many writers use these pronouns and some do not...it’s hard to navigate as they never said which they’d like.



Figure 11

You also clearly see these elements of gender performance, identity and masquerade in artist Del LaGrace Volcano's works, especially their self-portraiture. LaGrace Volcano was born intersex (meaning there is a presence of both male and female biological traits at birth) and lived as a woman for 37 years. They now identify as genderqueer (as well as pansexual). "Del first used the term 'part-time' gender terrorist' as a way of getting people's attention after they were detained by customs at Stansted Airport under the Prevention of Terrorism Act" (Anderson, 2022). And why might they have been detained you wonder? Well, for simply dressing and being gender-nonconforming...I think this is important to point out because while not criminalised in the western world this is a clear example of prejudice by the heteronormative society. "They had short hair, makeup and a beard, and were dressed

in fishnet stockings, platform boots, a miniskirt, and feather boa; the explanation from customs officials at the time was that they were “terrifying small children” (Anderson, 2022).

In fig.11 we see LaGrace Volcano’s piece *Gender Optional: The Mutating Self-Portrait* (1999). In this piece they embody multiple different identities, perhaps all ones they feel live inside of them, different aspects of their being as a whole. Many queer people feel as though they have different identities even within their own, some may come out more around others, and it’s often the result of filtering and adapting in a heteronormative world, learning how to present oneself in environments where our full queerness or any queerness at all may not be accepted and may even be punished. Del LaGrace continues to question gender in their work and also captures other members of the community. This is vital as to be properly represented it needs to come from a queer-gaze and not an outsider stance.

Both Del LaGrace and Cahun show perfectly the innate queer gaze that queer artists have when they make their work, whether they actively are aware of it or not. And both artists have inspired queer artists to continue or to begin exploring their gender in relation to their queerness in a heteronormative cisgendered world to reclaim their identity.

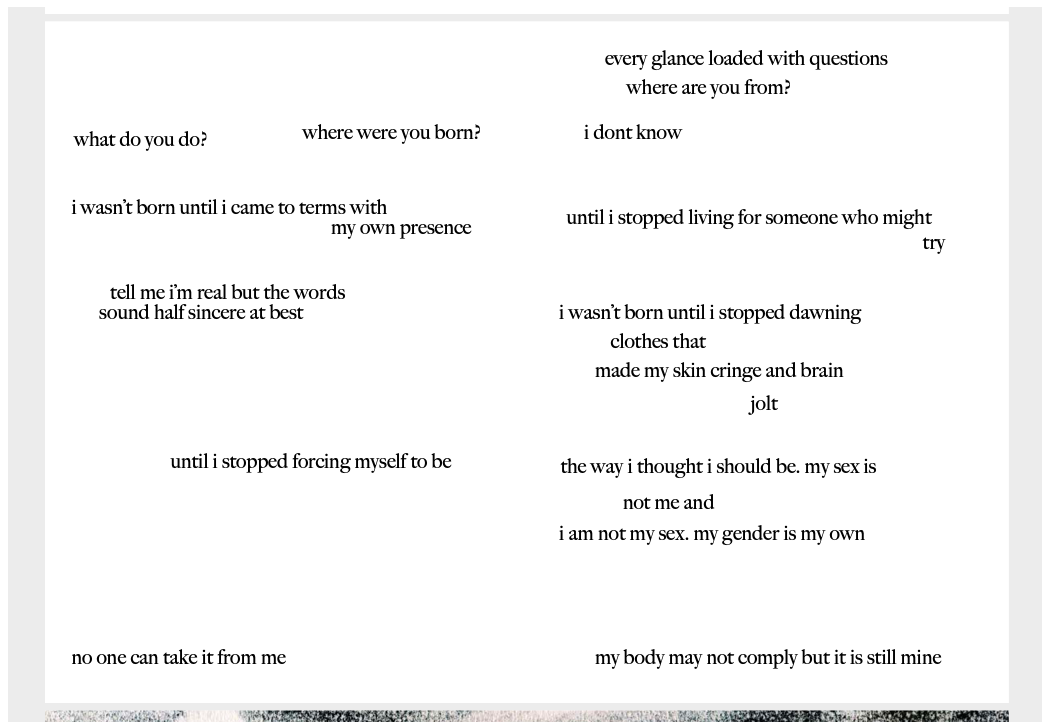


Figure 12

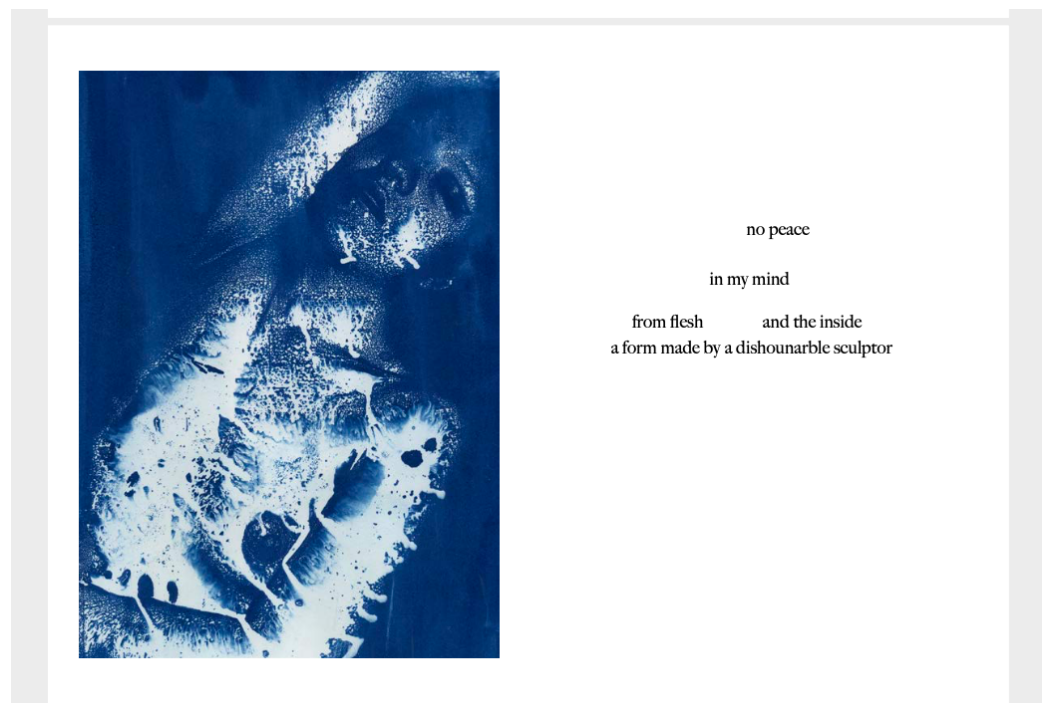


Figure 13

In my book *Vessel* (2021), through both writing and self-portraiture I explored identity and self. Last year I began to view my own gender as more fluid, being in lockdowns and isolation forces one to reflect more on what makes them and what characteristics and feelings they feel build their identity This opened me up to exploring themes of change and

my body as a house for my mind (and in turn, my identity). Although not quite the masquerade that Del LaGrace and Cahun explore the themes are of the same vein.

The “Other”

Many queer artists have actually found comfort and a voice in “The Other”. Instead of scrambling to be like everyone else, which in this case would mean adhering to a heteronormative society, they found beauty in this otherness. The otherness used to oppress has been turned into a whole voice and entity in and of itself. “A Queer structure of feeling is a set of cultural strategies of survival for queers. It is marked by an appreciation for the ridiculous, and it values masquerade. Mockery is its form, posing is its strategy” (Bordowitz, p.49, 1986-2003). By posing as the other and accepting oneself as the other it takes away the power from those who cast us into those shadows, we are reclaiming the shadows.

Many queer creatives have denounced the idea of “normal” and even of “tolerance”. For tolerance admits the need to actively go out of your way to accept something, instead of true and whole acceptance and alliance.

“In exiling myself I am not exiling a monster, but a man whom society will not allow to live, since it considers one of the mysterious cogs in God’s masterpiece to be a mistake.”

(...)

But I will not agree to be tolerated. This damages my love of love and of liberty”.

Jean Cocteau, *Le Livre* (1927) (The White Book Translated By Margaret Crosland)

Toleration is not equal to acceptance. It asks us to hide but instead of dark closets we're in glass boxes, visible but not encouraged. Jack Smith remarks "Normalcy is the evil side of homosexuality" (Getsy, p.29, 2016). Many queer artists find community in the "Other", in finding beauty and life in the weird and "abnormal". The exaggeration of artifice as a reaction to being cast as "alien" in society. The over-saturated and theatrical world of "camp". Although, all queer art is not necessarily camp and not all art labelled camp is necessarily queer (or made by a queer artist). To make such an assumption would be assuming all queer visual art uses the same language and mode of expression, which is simply not true.



Figure 14

Juliana Huxtable is an example of a multi-faceted queer artist who plays with the "other" in her practice. Her work considers many aspects of identity; race, gender, queerness and sexuality. In seeking to find beauty in the "other" queer artists often raise interesting

questions on what beauty is and how this is different within different cultures and identities.

What is beautiful and fascinating to the queer may be completely detested by the heterosexual. Of the “Queer Gaze”, queer artist Del LaGrace Volcano states:

It's not seeking to enhance the status quo, or the beauty myth that we've all swallowed...

It seeks to empathise and see beauty where other people see abjection. In the beginning when I was doing more lesbian punk pictures like that, I would make them extremely beautiful by hand painting them. This would cause people to look and stay with the work because it wasn't something they knew. It's about working with people's ideas of what is beautiful; we've all been trained through media, Hollywood and advertisement to think we know - but that is a heteronormative male gaze at work. A queer gaze seeks to smash the *status quo*”

Del LaGrace Volcano (text by Amelia Abraham), 2019

I think this quote resonates with Huxtable's work and it's striking alien and otherworldly aesthetics. Being pushed into a box of “outsider” has almost forced us to re-establish and reconsider what is beauty, and in being cast into this box and finding community who are the “other” cements that in otherness (the alien, the artifice, the surreal) there is absolute allure. Instead of hiding it's a protest against those who want queers to be quiet and conforming, and in reference again to Pat Parker, why the fuck shouldn't we be blatant?

[Queer Art As Protest](#)

Stanford Professor in Art and History, Richard Meyer, states: “Making art about queer sexuality is itself a kind of protest- pushing the boundaries of what can be seen and imagined in the public sphere” (Smith, 2019). I agree, queer art in and of itself is a protest, a protest to those who wish for it to be quiet and kept away, a protest to bigots and right-wing politicians who fought hard for us to not be able to display our work as it was “too deviant”. I will look at some more obvious queer protest art, although as stated all queer art is a protest.

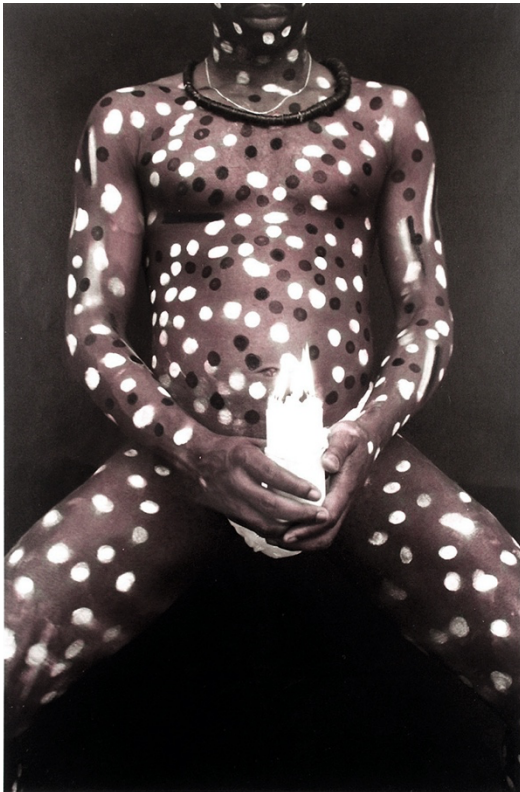


Figure 15

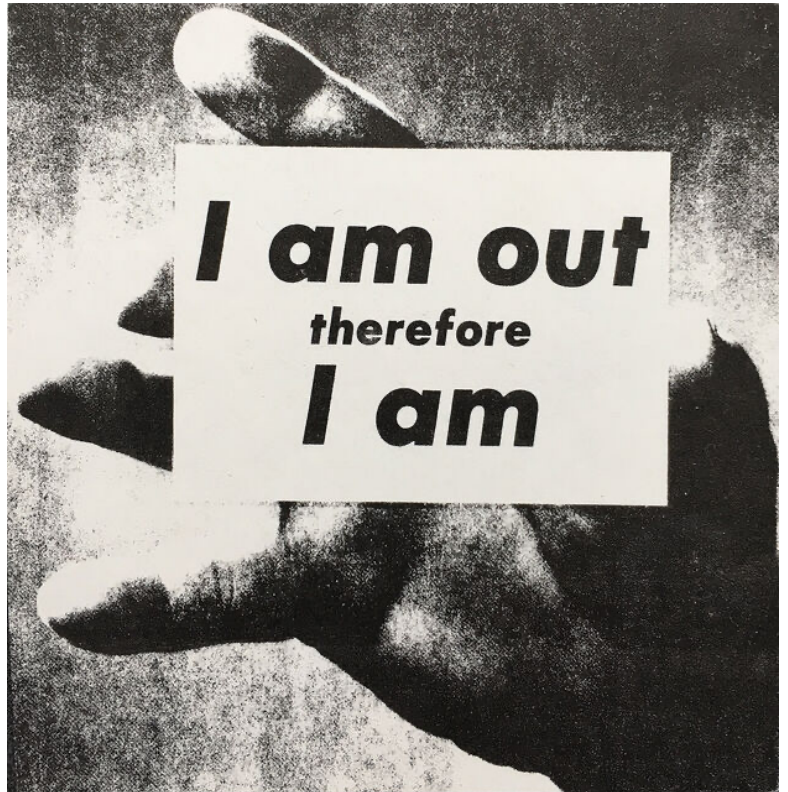


Figure 16

During the AIDs Epidemic in which gay men were demonised by right-wing fear-mongers branding it a “mystery disease” that seemed to especially target gay men, these lies would further oppress and stigmatise members of the LGBTQ+ community. People would be too afraid to even touch HIV positive people through fear of catching it from touch alone, which would result in many not even wanting to touch gay men at all, whether or not they were positive. Gay artist Rotimi Fanni-Kayode combined this demonisation with his culture as a Nigerian (Africans were also another group targeted with lies in the tabloids during the AIDs Epidemic) in the UK facing both homophobia and racism. In *Sonponnoi* (1989) (fig.15) he is dressed as the smallpox god within the Yoruba religion, who was a god who was feared, eventually banished to live in the bush. “The artist found a resonant symbol in the image of

the outcast god: one that embodies infection, carrying the threat of death, yet also offers protection” (Pilcher. P.99, 2017)

After the Stonewall Uprising (1969) one of the most defiant acts of queer protest in art and in everyday life was just being **out**. To be blatantly queer was an act of political activism.

Adam Rolston's piece says just that “I am out, therefore I am”. But, it also poses a question to the spectator. Therefore I am, what? It confronts those who look down at us while affirming those who are queer, to me, it's like “I'm out, therefore I am!”.



Figure 17

Lesbian and feminist artist and activist Tee A. Corinne is arguably one of the most well-known lesbian artists to depict sapphic sexual intimacy and the female naked anatomy. During the 70s Corinne knew her art wouldn't be shown in traditional galleries due to their nature so instead showed them in women's coffee houses, lesbian bars and feminist bookstores. She was empowering sapphic intimacy through the gaze of a lesbian. Harmony Hammond states “For women their economic class system is largely determined by their

relationship to men. The higher up the men she relates to, the more she benefits from the system economically and has no privilege unless she is independently wealthy” (Getsy, p.42, 2016). This was the case for many LGBTQ+ artists, they were often only able to make and show work about their queerness and continue to make work if they were already wealthy enough to do so.

“the lesbian language is perverse, the female language hysterical, and the child’s language underdeveloped and the activists language extreme and dangerous” (Nigianni & Storr, p.138, 2009). There will always be a way for the right-wing to demonise those who don’t fit into their agendas, women have been called hysterical for feeling basic emotions and lesbians perverse for loving women. The language of the activist is never dangerous, it is

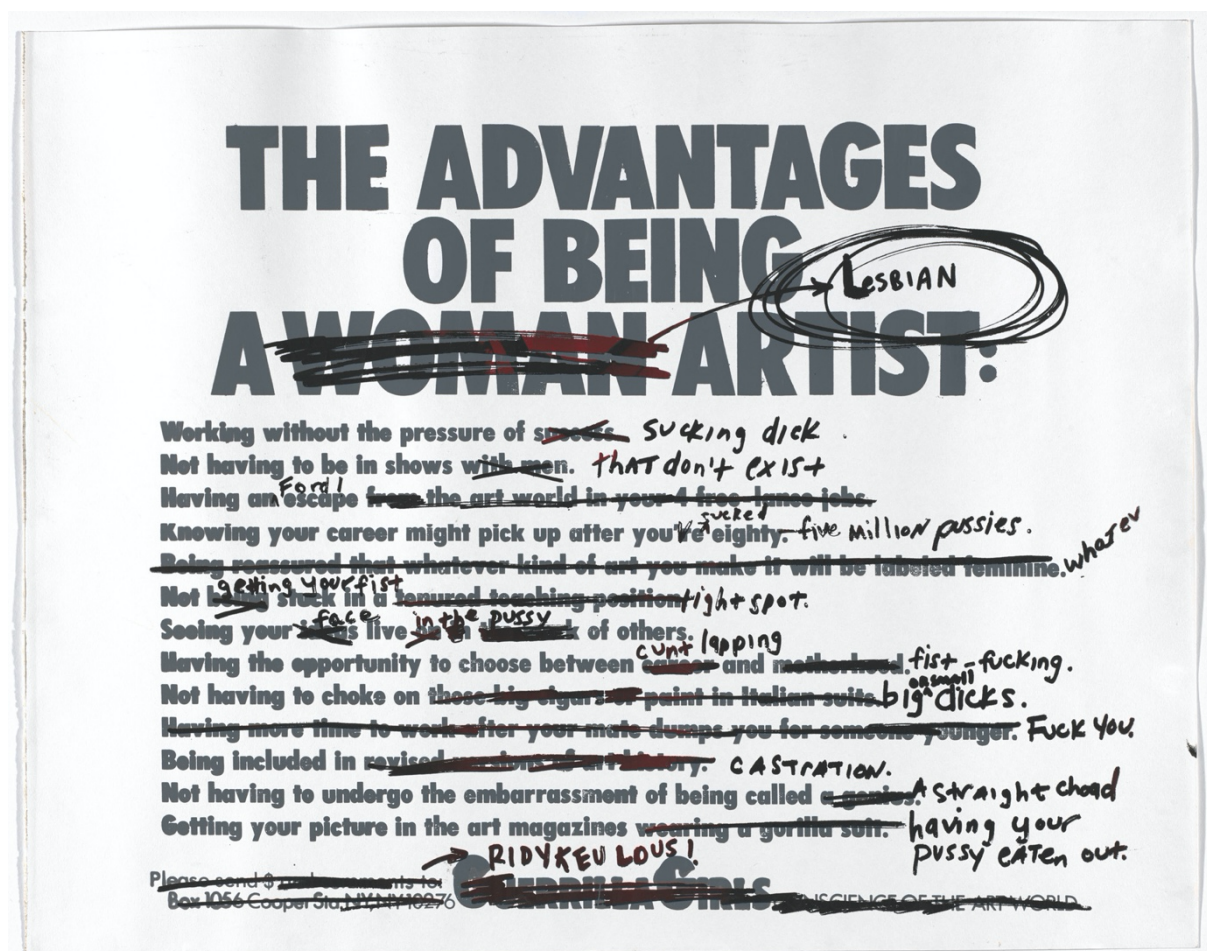


Figure 18

Ridyeulous is a curatorial initiative founded by artist Nicole Eisenman and A. L Steiner, it encourages the exhibition of queer, feminist art in galleries. In this piece Eisenman does her own take on the Guerrilla Girls *The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist (1988)*. This work, like the original, mockingly states that there advantages to being a lesbian artist and of course these are sarcastic reasons as it is not only often harder to be taken seriously as a female artist but there is further strife in that of the lesbian artist to be taken seriously.

Conclusion

When discussing with my partner, Ryann Davies, the queer gaze and whether all queer art is intrinsically queer she, as a practicing artist and art undergraduate herself, had a view that countered my own. She said that as an artist she doesn't want her work to always be looked at through a queer lens and in her own research and practice doesn't usually apply queer theory or themes in her work. I objected to this statement as, to me, a lot of her work themes in the "other", in feeling like an outsider and an anomaly, which to me is undoubtably queer. A lot of her work is also based in the medium of knitting which has a very rich history in feminism and even in lesbian culture. Although, I think this an important question. Is all the work of a queer artist "queer art"? How much do we project as queer artists onto others work and, in a sense , queerify it?



Figure 19



Figure 20

Of this piece, *Untitled: Arm Knitted Bed Sheet (2022)*, she describes it as "a manifestation of my anxieties and fears, of the continuous panic that distracts me from my day-to-day life."

The red paint represents blood and my insides which relates to the full body reaction to these feelings.” But, when asked where some of these anxieties may have stemmed from she said that “growing up as a gender-nonconforming woman made the feeling of ‘otherness’ from peers cause a feeling of isolation.”.

But as an artist’s aren’t we always putting forward our identity in our work? Personally, even if an art piece I make isn’t necessarily queer on the outside, it’s often something that’s linked, even if vaguely, through experiences and feelings that may be breed out of my queerness. Things such as isolation, anxiety, femininity, masculinity, body, relationship, mind, intimacy, dread.



Figure 21

Ok (2020) Is from a series of polaroid montage portraits I took during lockdown in the winter 2020/2021 where I took self-portraits during a period of isolation in my house and documented the space I was living in and how this effected my mind. I felt lonely, desperate and a little manic. I wrote nothing about queerness when presenting these, but now, I can easily connect my queerness to the images. I was isolated at home, in the

countryside, away from my queer friends. It was only me, my mum and my dog. Part of this isolation and depression can be contributed to being away from my community, in the countryside, with only online connection, although this was no substitute to connection in person.

We as queer artists have to keep protesting the male-gaze in the artworld to continue the process of self-representation and no longer having our own culture taken from us. This is also relevant to the female-gaze. Queer art takes form through many systems of making and presentation, there is no one way it unfolds itself, what's vital is that it is from the queer perspective itself.

Even if someone doesn't think that as a queer artist they need to consider the points in this essay because their work doesn't deal with queer themes, it is still crucial to them, too, as these acts of protest have been a major factor in why we have more queer representation and exposure in the artworld today (although arguably still not enough).

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