Communing With Queer

Linguistic Abstraction as (De)constructive Queer Performance Against Understanding

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Abstract

In recent years, the proliferation of the term "queer" within the English language, and indeed beyond, has dissolved its meaning, and begun to disarm its radical potential to resist and reframe heteronormativity. Its creeping use as a replacement umbrella term for LGBT+ has dislodged the power that Queer can contain, particularly at its intersections with other social categories.

Yet in this time, Queer has gone through many cultural shifts of its own, and repositioning of its meanings can lead to an abstracted set of possibilities. This paper investigates the potential for abstraction within language use as both a constructive element of Queer identity, and one that can re-empower Queer's multiplicity and hybridity by disidentifying it from assimilationist, normative positions and hierarchical power structures. Through this detachment, Queer gains a subjectivity that is not reliant on counter-identifying against normativity or using it as a marker for navigation of the world.

Exploring linguistic phenomena such as indexicality, repetition, code-switching, and silence within Art, music, and drag, this paper proposes that these constructive components of language can be reappropriated abstractly. These abstractions are visible in the works of artists such as Prem Sahib, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and John Cage, who each adapt different forms of language and paralanguage towards Queer meanings through opacity and encoding.

Such linguistic abstractions pull queerness away from normativity's modes of meaning and understanding to generate new, inclusive possibilities for Queer identities and structures at different social intersections. By not "making sense" or being understood, Queer subjectivity can then move forward free from the constraints of the heteronormative counter-position.

Outline

You know what I mean, right? I don't have to say it… You know what I mean, right? I don't have to say it! You know what I mean, right? I don't have to say it? You know what I mean, right? I don't have to say it.

Do I?

Do you?

I don't know what I meant to say just there, I just keep looking at your shoes *it's really quite sad, the thought of you tying me up like that* and the pin on your collar *ohhhh* I didn't know people still did that.

But what do I know, you know what I mean?

You told me you read the obituaries section of yesterday's paper *I didn't know people still did that* and it was just all the people you'd forgotten we'd forgotten I knew. I mean, anyway, you didn't really tell me, but you TOLD me, you know what I

mean?

I just kept looking at your shoes. You just kept looking at that blue screen behind me. It's very black and white *no I'm sure I didn't forget to plug it in!* but that's not really *yes I can hear it, of course* what things are like these days, there's so much more in the middle *and who asked you anyway?!* The label on your teabag is talking to you, pushing you, asking you the hard stuff, and everyone in here is speaking French for some reason *this is bitter* just keep saying what you mean and eventually we can all have it.

If you wear it on your sleeve, you can hide it with a light jacket.

You've seen each other now so now we all know who you're going home with at the end of the night *what kind of dialogue is that?* We're just making some movements in the right direction, some gestures in someone's direction I'*m looking a bit ropey, now, though* I thought about it earlier too! You know *what I mean?*

Queerness Towards Nowhere

In recent years, "Queer" has been everywhere.

This has led to *Queer* being nowhere – losing its place, losing its meaning.

Or rather, it is pertinent to say that "Queerness is not yet here" (Muñoz, 2009, p.1), its potential as a system of otherness still out of reach due to the assimilationary constructs of normativity that dominate our existence in the now. This paper considers Queer in its original context, reclaimed in the late 1980s from pejorative use as a refusal of the social conservatism that gay culture was beginning to slide towards in the midst of the AIDS crisis. It represented an opportunity to mark identity as a site of radical difference by marking itself as "other". Whilst many LGBT people found this difficult, and some still do, "queer"[1] became increasingly widespread as an umbrella term. It began to replace, to some extent, the LGBT initialism, and seemed more inclusive of those who were trans and non-binary, racialised, disabled, and those otherwise marginalised by the socially-defined categories of LGBT.

Speaking linguistically, *Queer* has immense power as a singular word. It functions not only adjectivally, but also as a noun and a verb.

1 Throughout this text, the capitalised "Queer" and uncapitalised "queer" are used to differentiate between the radical version as a noun, in the case of the former, and the more general, verbal, adjectival, or homogenised version in the case of the latter.

In many cases, it has no justifiable alternative, as evidenced even within this text. This power has also led to its gradual abstraction.

In recent years, the repetition of the term within LGBT+ communities has bled outward, and its use has been mainstreamed, particularly throughout academia (Halperin, 2003), and where marketers could attempt to rake in LGBT+ money. With this increased attention, more LGBT+ people began to describe themselves as queer. This includes those that were precluded by the original meaning – namely the socially-conservative, cisgender, white gay men leading homonormative lifestyles.

This repetition has diluted the radicality of Queer's original proposition, as if photocopied so many times the characters become fuzzy or obliterated. Its *re*-re-appropriation as an index has mutated its meaning from a radical, inclusive position towards a simple umbrella term lacking specificity. This begs the question of its definition, and the role that it can play as a site for refusal, change, transition, revolution, and, undeniably, safety.

Defining "Queer" outright here is an impossible proposition given its differing meanings between people and cultures, and would "limit its potential, its magical power" (Halperin, 2003, p.339). However, the "Queer" that I am exploring here is a radical one, with a capacity to refuse normative understandings or categorisations, and sits outside of developed expectations – societal and personal.

Growing up in London under Section 28 and its aftermath[2], Queer was not readily available to me in popular culture and education. As I grew and developed an interest in art and its histories, I began to recognise something of myself, of the way I saw the world, in the work of artists who displayed some kind of difference through a remodelling of aesthetics and languages. What I had stumbled on was, in its own context, *queer*. But at the same time, those artists visible to me were largely the ones I could map my own experience and knowledge onto as someone growing up white, male and queer in the West: canonical 20th Century white, gay, male artists from America or Britain, whose ability to skirt the subject, with subtle allusions, allowed their work to become mainstreamed and printed into the literature that was at my disposal.

Whilst this position still forms some basis for my thinking, it later placed the radical possibilities of Queer, at its intersections with the politics of blackness, feminism, and class struggle, in sharper focus. I have become more interested in Queerness's ability to resist than evade, specifically concerning what is at stake in these politicised intersections of difference, otherness, and disidentification that

2 Introduced by Thatcher's Conservatives in 1988, Section 28 was a series of laws that prevented local authorities, mostly impacting schools, from "promoting homosexuality". This, in effect, prohibited almost all mention of homosexuality or same-sex sexual health education for young people, and many charities and rights groups had funding withdrawn. To be young and Queer was to be invisible, and to have no positive support structure. Whilst finally fully repealed in 2003, the long term negative effects on popular perceptions, sexual education, and LGBT+ history have lingered for years longer within the public sphere.

are mapped in Muñoz's (1999) "Queer of Colour" theory. There, visibility and representation can be fraught with risk, and neoliberal assimilationism seeks to dissolve practices of difference that are vitally affirmative within those communities.

In such positions, structures of abstraction become built into daily life through code-switching of language, voicing, mannerisms, appearance, and levels of visibility.

This "*abstraction*" defies an ability to be (singularly) read, existing between the registers of (in)visible and (il)legible. The *language* used in this context spans not merely the verbal – written and spoken – but also on the essential non-verbal forms of language (Gardner-Chloros, 2012), or paralanguage: the ways in which semiotics, gesture, movement, colour[3], and behaviours act as indexical languages within Queer cultures.

Queer and pre-Queer LGBT cultures have always appropriated language for maintaining safety, formulating desire, and building bonds (T., 2014)[4]. Polari, for example: a composite language that borrows from Romani, Irish, Italian, French, Yiddish, and Latin, as well as rhyming slang, backslang, and cant, amongst other argots. It can be traced back through generations of travelling

3 Derek Jarman's *Chroma* (1993), an autobiography of sorts that documents Jarman's life and later sickness is written through a prism of colour, each chapter defined by a hue that oversees the meaning of the events it contains. It is a moving, chromatic portrait of the artist and his queer being.

4 Anna T. provides a brief overview of further global examples of Queer lexicon in the text The Opacity of Queer Languages (2014), examining further their linguistic construction and impact.

actors and merchant seamen as a way to encode conversation and avoid detection, persecution, and prosecution of gay speech or acts during times when homosexuality was illegal. The eventual decriminalisation of homosexuality and the slow death of travelling showbusiness led to Polari becoming almost extinct in contemporary usage, with the exception of a few singular terms like *cottage* or *trade*, which remain in use.

The constitution and dissolution of Polari, as well as other historical and contemporary lexical terms within LGBTQ cultures, push our understanding of queerness as an identity not just as one statically related to other identity categories such as race or gender (Stanley, 1970), but also as always in flux, as the signs and processes to which it relates shift through time (Hall, 2013; Getsy, 2019). But alongside this constant movement, queerness often finds itself in a more fixed relation to heteronormativity – by necessarily being "other", it has relied on relation to its opposite, even as understandings of heteronormativity begin to shift, and as the dynamics of normativity realign themselves constantly to maintain a position of power (Foucault, 1975). Its opposition begins to reciprocate and produce our understanding of the heteronormative position through a counter-identification (Muñoz 1999, p.11). We are often left with an unsettled positionality for queer identity: in movement but without a singular direction, and continuously tethered to the position it pushes against.

So what does it mean for the socio-politically oppositional Queer

to refer to a homonormative position? What can it mean as people attempt to expand its usage even further? How can it gain its own authority?

Considering this, I propose an exploration of Queer *as* an abstraction, and the potential to queer*ly* disrupt the term by deconstructing and reconstructing its possibilities[5]. Considering ways in which we can use language queerly, abstraction as an ingrained position against normative reading (both linguistically and pictorially) can entitle Queer to a less necessarily relational essence. This allows for internal dialogue that can reproduce and evolve understandings of queer being and becoming – a different set of evolving conditions under which, following José-Esteban Muñoz, queer people and cultures can "disidentify" (1999), and exist closer to their own terms and constructions, away from the impossibility of being in the here and now (2009).

For this, we must understand how queer languages are constructed, preceding the formulation of cultures which we understand to be Queer. To assume that this happens monolithically would be to assume that (queer) language is constructed only from the majoritarian position (Muñoz 1999, pp.8-11), side-lining the ways in which, thinking intersectionally, race and gender impact these constructions. Whilst not homogenous or monolithic in their grammars or lexicons (Barrett, 1997), these languages are

5 Linda Besemer (2005) sees the "detachability of signification" in her abstract paintings "as a way to re-construct form and desire", constructing new queer possibilities for them away from the tightly-bound analysis of figuration.

established from a diverse set of circumstances[6] to which general rules adapt, giving us a broader range of possibilities for queer being when they do converge. The first chapter explores the role of indexing, and the repetition thereof, as fundamental roots of queer language, gradually building up codes and terms that can be mutually understood. The second chapter examines how switching in and out of queer languages and their codes not only allows for both community building and safety under surveillance, but begins to show the abstraction of queer linguistics and ways of living. Following this, the third chapter looks more deeply into the role of opacity within Queer, and the ways in which withholding understanding and refusing categorisation can be empowering.

Language is a tool of power – one that can be used to different ends, in different ways, from different places within the power structures we inhabit. As well as being a tool for representation, it can be a vital tool for both survival and criticality, including of its own systems. It is important to acknowledge not only how constructions and uses of language can deconstruct the heteronormative sphere alongside which Queer sits (and indeed has overlaps with), but the ways in which they can also begin to deconstruct queerness itself. From that point, it is possible to consider the relationship between an abstract queerness and abstraction as a linguistic and pictorial tool and phenomenon, present and visible within contemporary

6 For example different "genderlects" (Boellstorff and Leap 2004, 1), sociolects, and idiolects are formed by differences in gender, class, race, global location, and other such factors.

art and popular culture[7] that can move Queer beyond a counter-identifying position.

7 The examples covered are predominantly by Postmodern US-American gay male artists and cultures - those which are more dominant and thus visible than other counterparts in theory, academia, and practice thanks to neoliberal forms of globalisation that have for so long put the spotlight on patriarchal Euro-American identities. That is not to say that these artists' or productions' queerness benefits from such systems, as it is often homogenized and drained of its potential radicality, but rather that they are what I am able to expose myself to and develop an understanding from. From this point, I am able to move beyond such examples and towards propositions that are more radical, open, and *Queerly* Utopian.

A lost grey handkerchief, approximately thirty centimeters square, with an elephant printed *quite small* in one corner

Trying to reconcile yourself with the idea that Kate never actually found a fox

A 5x7 glossy photograph of an ex-partner's parents on holiday in the South of Spain in 1988

(is that John Waters on the left in the back?!)

Remembering the number of Budget Taxis right before you got chips, the other night around three

A message saved in the notes of your phone that reads "Get the good coffee / Desire itself is empty but it indicates psychological direction O.T.?"

The Spotify playlist I made last September that you find too messy

A copy of PING by Samuel Beckett, fixed to my studio wall with masking tape, and the memory of a particular portrait just because of the hair

Six hours and thirty four minutes and nineteen seconds of field recordings taken from a shut-down nightclub beginning at 6:04 a.m. that began to play back at 6:04 p.m. yesterday

Nobody was shouting. Nobody came.

My navy blue turtleneck jumper, hanging on the drying rack alongside your underwear

A slightly faded and wrinkled photograph in a window of a man in a suit with immaculate hair but a fairly thin and terrible moustache

Queen Bitch by David Bowie, 1971

The toilets on the third floor of the shopping centre above the Starbucks

A white plaster cast of a hand on a bookshelf *there's dust gathering in the crease of the thumb*

Fascination with cottagecore magazines in other people's living rooms

Your kitsch seaside jewelry, put on display

Minimal abstract paintings in the waiting room of your local dental surgery, predominantly pink

Cher

Google translating your hookup's last message while you wait for pasta to finish boiling

Having to distractedly make seven cups of tea (of course it's almond milk!) in the early hours of the morning so the gossip can continue

A resolute over-emphasis on the word *Darling*

The slight outward flick of your left heel as you walk!

Cruising with Bruce Springsteen: Index and Repetition as Linguistic Construction

In June 1984, Bruce Springsteen released the album *Born in the USA* to huge critical and commercial acclaim. The album's cover, notably shot by Annie Leibovitz, depicts Springsteen from behind, his shoulders and feet cropped out so that the photograph focuses on his denim-clad buttocks in front of an oversized American flag. From his back right pocket hangs a red cap.

To those "in the know", it was suddenly apparent that the macho, working-class, rock-n-roll hero of America was into being fisted.

Of course, Springsteen was not actually engaging in a flagging display, and likely had no idea of the significance of the album cover's gesture. Springsteen's red cap, often mistaken for a handkerchief, was intended as an index toward working-class America[8], but this particular one was read with an alternative meaning by those with a different embodied knowledge of what a pocketed handkerchief might mean.

We like to find indices where they do not necessarily exist, but with the USA's socio-sexual conservatism beginning to peak with the onset of the AIDS crisis, it's far-fetched to suggest that Springsteen was "Dancing in the *Darkroom*".

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8 One that Donald Trump would also later exploit through the notorious MAGA caps.

Annie Leibovitz, Born in the USA (1984)

The Hanky Code had been developed in the USA the early 1970s, its exact origins ambiguous, as a way for gay men to cruise for sex by indicating their preferences with colour-coded handkerchiefs in their back pockets (Fischer, 1977). Colour as a sexual indicator was not a new idea – Oscar Wilde's green carnation sparked a trend in the 19th century – but this code and its expansive definitions took things to a new level. It became a paralanguage that spread globally, and even spawned its own spin-offs dialects such as Femme Flagging with nail polishes, and even flagging with face masks during the COVID-19 pandemic[9].

The Hanky Code takes indexicality as its linguistic root, with colour signals interpellating an identifying subject. Indexicality is the phenomenon of a sign within a "speech act", in Butler's (1997) terms[10], pointing to (or indexing) a subject or subjectivity. Examples include citing queer cultural moments, a particular register of voice, or a specific phrasing (Barrett, 1997) – these can help to sound out a conversational partner, or to firm up a shared subjectivity. This then begins to generate a queerness between subjects, based on recognition, relationality, and a shared sense of affect, that becomes more expansive as the indices become more established through repetition, gaining authority (Livia and Hall, 1997, p.9). Following Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Practice (1972) that habitual activities of sociality, ingrained modes of perception and formation, and other

9 https://twitter.com/paulburston/status/1298524308361424896

10 This can be expanded beyond that which is vocalised or spoken out loud to include written text and other forms of identifying language, particularly where the subject is called into being, or interpellated, by such a sign.

recurrent ways of holding oneself and reading the world are the building blocks of subjectivity, one can understand that the various queer subjectivities understood in the present are constituted by certain indices developed and repeated through time. The queer "habitus" that produces these indices includes posture (the limp wrist), speech register (the gay lisp or butch tonality), or use of particular phrases, amongst a vast array of other behaviours.

Indices are always in flux (Hall, 2013): through globalisation, internet communication, and the visibility of queerness in contemporary popular culture, the signals that are understood as queer are transmitted widely and rapidly, becoming increasingly malleable, fluid and unstable. What I understand as semiotically queer and a part of my identity, including use of language, and even the term "queer" itself, will differ from the fundamental signs in the generation following mine, as my generation may seem bizarre to older generations. Despite globalised transmission of cultures, difference does exist in the way that indices become built into queer spaces and semiotics around the world as Queer adapts to history and extant cultural forms away from particular, usually Western, origins[11].

11 I also recognise that, beyond the scope of this short text, it is important to note that English-speaking and Western understandings of Queer play a role within neo-colonial dynamics, and the one-way transmission of dominant cultures that play a role in the erasure of non-hegemonic structures which may indeed seem more "Queer" to us from this standpoint. As queer and decolonial theories ever-increasingly converge, this multiplicity and its oversight are becoming increasingly apparent, salient and vital.

Hal Fischer, *Blue Handkerchief, Red Handkerchief* (1977)

This complicates a positioning of Queer, in its refusal to remain static amongst constantly-fluctuating processes of identifying.

However, we can begin to understand some of the fundamental positions through the development of language, and especially those parts of queer linguistics that have been concretised through time. Whilst specific dialects like Polari have been sidelined, certain terms such as *Queen, Trade, Cruising,* or *Henny*, and indeed non-verbal languages such as the hanky code, and physical indices like the "limp wrist", keys, certain jewellery, clothing, and makeup, or dyed hair, remain in regular use as outwardly-expressed cues of LGB identity (Fischer, 1977). These elements have endured due to their sustained repetition through time. Indeed, the construction of any linguistics (and the identity that follows) relies on the natural repetition of foundational indices, including words and phrases, to ingrain their use and understanding within that language (Hall, 2013).

However, this repetitive construction can also be used artificially – a queering of linguistics itself.

Canadian collective General Idea, having recently relocated to New York, created the painting *AIDS* (1987) for an exhibition in support of the American Foundation for AIDS Research as the crisis began to peak. Reappropriating Robert Indiana's 1967 work *LOVE*, which had come to represent the changing attitudes of the late 1960s as well as mass consumer culture (having been emblazoned on t-shirts,

General Idea, *AIDS* (1987)

Robert Indiana, *LOVE* (1967)

keyrings, postage stamps, and many other souvenirs) [12], General Idea equated the virus with love in an attempt to both destigmatize it and raise awareness. This came at a time when many still referred to it as GRID – gay-related immune deficiency – and the painting stood out as defiantly presenting the public with the index of AIDS, rather than hiding it away as the US Government had attempted to do by neglecting acknowledgment for so long.

Having queered love (as the mainstream knew it), General Idea continued to use the image in a series that became known as *Imagevirus* (1987-1994). In innumerable colour combinations, scales, and media, the AIDS image was, much like *LOVE*, plastered all over the globe: on trams, billboards, bus-stops, scarves, wallpapers, and of course many more paintings and prints. The image was dispersed using the process of viral transmission, repeating almost indefinitely until it was widely established throughout the world (Bordowitz, 2010).

Yet the series ended with the deaths of General Idea members Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal in 1994 as a result of AIDS.

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12 Notably, Indiana himself was gay, and *LOVE* can in its own right be read as a radically queer stance - emblazoning gay love all over mainstream culture and capitalist products. It is also poignant to note that the painting stemmed from the end of Indiana's relationship with Ellsworth Kelly, possibly originally including the word FUCK instead. Indeed, an apparent part of the reason for their breakup was Indiana's decision to use text within his work, which went against Kelly's artistic ideals as a committed Abstract artist who saw value in seeing and re-representing the world "otherwise" from the norm. See more: https://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2016/september/13/the-hidden-messages-in-robert-indiana-s-love/

General Idea, *Imagevirus* works (1987-1994), Exhibition view from "A.A. Bronson + General Idea" at Maureen Paley, London (2018)

General Idea, *Imagevirus (Amsterdam)* (1991)

Imagevirus and the viral metaphor can teach us more about the role of repetition in the construction of language. Over time, viruses (including HIV/AIDS) mutate, changing in structure, and often as a result, effect. The same can be said for language. Alongside other factors, the widespread repetition of the AIDS motif in *Imagevirus* normalised both the image, as it became ubiquitous in the cultural field, and the acronym, as well as the public visibility of the virus. As much as viruses often mutate themselves away from infectiousness or lethality[13], the construction through repetition of terms within queer linguistics produces a (homo)normativity for certain queer positions, as they become increasingly visible and recognisable from outside

Likewise, when the rainbow flag (and recently, and more troublesomely, the Progress Pride flag), as an index, is repeatedly plastered over every imaginable product by corporations and institutions each Pride season, this cannot be read as an act of creating identity (Hall, 2013). Rather, it subsumes identities, dissolving them, and deconstructing them to the point that they can be sold back to their constituents. That relatively basic symbol can be repeated as an index so widely as to reach this stage, extracted from its purpose as a symbol of resistance and inclusivity, of

13 As we have seen in our difficult present, COVID-19 has mutated towards the (as far as we know right know) Omicron variant with a lower mortality rate, just over a century after the same happened with the H1N1 Spanish Flu epidemic of the early 20th Century. This has been seen to be happening with HIV/AIDS in recent years, according to some studies (https://www.bbc.com/news/health-30254697).

meaninglessness.

It is a significantly more difficult task to repurpose an abstract index in this way. If a symbol has an inherent meaninglessness that does not direct us toward identity (Ahmed, 2006), is designed to fail as recognisable (Halberstam, 2011), or contains meaning so deeply encoded to its actual users that it seems as such otherwise, then it can retain a purpose as a semiotic signifier to that group without being subsumed. It could be a signifier of absolute resistance to the heteronormative modes of understanding to speak out abstractly in the first instance –

to be queerly directionless,

meaningless,

and beyond understanding.

You have to keep changing the way I address you, the way you address me, each other, they're all

a bit of back and forth, a strange fluctuating conversation it's coffee gone cold but you keep drinking *no it's not goddamn coldbrew* I'm scrubbing out names that start with A can I have a consonant please another consonant a vowel no it's enough

Who am I? it's a new word there are too many two ways to flip it over *ha! The coin is on it's side!*

I promise you, I can't fuck my way into the colour blue like she did

or pink

it's all just a mess and it never relates *didn't he write a book about it all? ACTIE: EEN PLUS EEN*

GRATIS TWO FOR ONE HERE WE COME the internet better watch out, you know, these days, with all that going on there are just endless videos streaming all over you let's pick one up

- *oh* it's a favourite, all the way back in 2015:

"you make me feel you make me feel you make me feel like a natural woman"

Well, that's been done before, they say with a smirk…

What's in a name? Letters. You kept sending them to me, even after I moved *Royal Mail Forwarding service, please* and they didn't get shorter just kept piling up how does anyone expect me to read all of this is just one big question

and it's not gonna change

I used to feel so uninspired that's why I didn't read them see what I did there? Lingered a bit too long on the image, that framed photograph in the corridor.

Code-Switching with RuPaul: She done already done performed herses!

Since the early 90s, RuPaul has developed a reputation as the most visible and commercially-successful drag queen in the world, particularly since the success of the reality TV show *RuPaul's Drag Race*. *Drag Race* moved firmly into the mainstream with the show's 2017 progress to major network VH1 and its subsequent international spinoffs, and is now likely the most visible display of queer entertainment and culture in America and Europe. The linguistic phenomena that appear within the show's dialogue, much originating from older queer spectacles such as Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1990), are becoming common within global queer circles, being adapted into the queer English lexicon whilst it becomes more publicly visible itself (Are, 2019).

With this new visibility has come an outpouring of support for drag cultures, queerness in the mainstream, and dialogues on transgender issues[14]. But with visibility comes vulnerability: its mainstreaming

14 This is not to ignore the fact that *Drag Race* has had a problematic relationship with both transgender people and racism. Whilst this has now changed, trans women were excluded from participation for a majority of its run, with RuPaul comparing their inclusion to athletes taking performance-enhancing substances, and multiple instances of transphobic and exclusionary language being used in segments of the show. Moreover, in spite of RuPaul and a large number of the show's participants (and winners) being black, racism and bias have been a problem within the fanbase, with participants facing abuse and discrimination online, and RuPaul remaining largely silent on the issue. Read more here: https://www.them.us/story/racism-rupauls-drag-race

has also been paralleled with ever-increasing violence, both at street-level and in national-level politics, against increasingly-visible queer people, particularly Black trans women.

One method of defence against the visible-vulnerable complex, used by many minority groups outside of the Queer realm, is code-switching: the practice of changing one's mode of address, use of indices, and expression of identity dependent on the conversation partner, audience, or surrounding people (Barrett, 1997). This allows a personal defence against being "read" as queer in hostile circumstances, or the possibility of sounding out a potential ally, but it also prevents specifically queer indices from being repeated outside of their intent, and thus from being subsumed by the mainstream, as the rainbow flag has been. It is a manner of controlling registers of performativity as a method of both constructing and protecting identity, before allowing those within to dismantle and reconstruct that identity at their own level.

Drag Race, and drag in general, offers a clear exemplification of code-switching. Performers flit between their real self, grounded in pre-assumed societal expectations of sex, gender and behaviour – themselves an involuntary mode of performativity (Butler, 1990) as much as Queerness itself (Muñoz, 2009) – and the constructed character, performing a subjectivity that defies those expectations of embodiment. The character embodies an identity that the performer, out of drag, is often denied. But they are also able to shift between performative modes whilst in character, whenever the queen slips

from character during a personal conversation or off-stage moment, blurring the boundaries between those codes and subjectivities.

Whilst this example deals with switching between modes or codes that are presented explicitly, greater subtlety can be found where the codes are implicit and the moment of switch, or indeed their dual voice, operates abstractly. This is located frequently in the work of 20th century queer artists such as Robert Rauschenberg (Getsy, 2015) and Agnes Martin (Katz, 2011) through necessity, but contemporary artists have appropriated this method in order to form it as a constituent part of their practice. Following the lineage of Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Tom Burr, British artist Prem Sahib has drawn from the aesthetics of 20th Century abstraction, and particularly Minimalism, to explore facets of Queer culture. This combination of minimal "high culture" aesthetics and "low culture" queer content and context drawn from clubs, bathhouses, and cruising apps comes together as a sociological code-switch: from high to low culture, from Minimalism to queer slang, from the Art world to the Queer *underworld*.

Sahib's 2013 sculptural series *Watch Queen* exemplifies this approach. The monolithic, bathhouse-tiled works stand firmly stoic within a gallery space. Their hard, shiny, gridded surfaces call to mind Donald Judd's sculptures, or indeed Tony Smith's infamous *Die* (1962), their aesthetic rooted in the peak of 1960s Minimalism. Sahib's works, whilst hard-edged and huge, feel like characters at play within their shows, looming above the viewer, and watching

Prem Sahib, *Watch Queen* (2013)

over the scene.

Their title stems from the term for silent observers in cruising situations – "they're just looking out, so they are voyeurs, looking for action unfolding and keeping a watch for anything that might interrupt it" explains the artist (Brumfitt and Sahib, 2015). This not only applies a sense of performativity to the sculptures, but places them into an interesting dialogical dynamic: they are at once silent observers in a muted conversation with their paired works and audience, whilst drawing from queer language with the specificity of their title. To the uninitiated, such a term might lack meaning, and the sculptures are coded as abstract, minimal, and monolithic. But to those familiar with cruising cultures and their broad lexicon, the monoliths are re-coded as sexual characters, protective figures, and inherently queer in a way that their appearance does not betray.

It is pertinent to consider this particular switch in relation to queer linguistics: whilst code switching is such a common practice for Queer people (and with even more at stake for Queer and trans people of colour) that we do not even actively recognise ourselves doing it, the focus often lies with what is said, and in what way. In the case of Sahib's *Watch Queen*s, there is nothing spoken, and the sculptures are as silent as their namesakes, participants in an event based on language beyond the verbal. Cruising relies on semiotics, gesture, and touch as the cornerstones of its paralanguage, just as queer languages more broadly rely on that which remains unspoken.

Queerness deals so often in the unspeakable, whether that be the horrors of violence, loss, unrecognised forms of identity, the coming-out process, or furtive desire. By switching between methods of speaking and understanding, or in fact not using language as understood from the majoritarian position, this "unspeakable" is figured in, abstractly, as a constituent part of Queer being.

There is an understanding within Queerness's abstract silence.

Have you been here before? it's not like you

are you

have you

it's not like you to be like that

like this like here have you

been here before?

There was one strip of space down that black-and-beer-painted stairway that fit just right loud thumping bassy bodily anticipation and at the bottom I found you atop two wrists facing face reading face making face making yourself us.

There are no spills in your voice; no lavs in the lads' lavs; no phrasing for when we become I you she he them all of it too much for those unspeakable booths that we keep telling each other bona about before the voice came and comes and keep on coming:

"Each man kills the thing he looooves,"

Have you been here before? turn to your right, right? You left and let them blister and sleep away tens and tens and tens and tens of times put marbles on the ground and A WHOLE DAMN BUNCH OF PINK NEON JUST FUCKING ALL OVER THE PLACE it's great something not really and then the DJ came and made it all Blue feeling did

you see? Let's grab a handful of hyacinths.

P U T M B

B

right?

Too bright: there was one strip of space here before with too many of us of you of the lights I think I saw a bear with a pair of cigarettes *oh yassss both of them at once* in his mouth outside there once but it's all going the same grey way now but O, those yews and thews brought us back to your place after tomorrow night, yeah? Still have a bottle of rosso left…

What did you say? Have you been here before? Have you been here before?

This is just the rehearsal room for manoeuvre you get to practice who you are want to be could be or could indeed never think of if it's worth glancing at. The music's coming too, let's move together let's move together let's move together let's move together four times over that's it you found the beat *fuck me with these two left feet* we're overlapping it up what do you mean I've never seen your *eek* around here before not under the strung-up lights strung out in a pile in the corner.

Have all those feelings gone away? Oh yes yes you could never bring yourself to step through that door and say - the name that had been in that lined-up moey - say here is the you that you never were never are never can be it's so you so beautiful before you'd been here.

Negotiating Opacity with John Cage: The Queerness of Abstraction and The Abstraction of Queerness

"*Silence!"*

calls out RuPaul…

...John Cage has made his decision.

For the next four minutes and thirty-three seconds, one sits in silence. And yet it is far from silent. *4'33* (1952) is generated by every shuffle of the feet, movement of clothes, cough, sniff or sigh from the audience. As with the spectacle of *Drag Race*'s competitive lip syncs, there is a performance of silence that is as loud as possible.

Cage's score denotes three movements defined by the musicians. These may change in duration from performance to performance, but the exactitude of each movement is out of the musicians' hands: the performance lies in the actions of its audience defining a feel for each enactment that can never be exactly repeated. Cage stakes his identity as composer against the will of the people to listen and be with him, or indeed against him. The composer remains opaque and reflective, giving nothing away. The open secret of Cage's sexuality and relationship with choreographer Merce Cunningham can be held up as a mirror to this piece: it is not absolute, and in the McCarthy era of homophobic persecutions acts as a non-

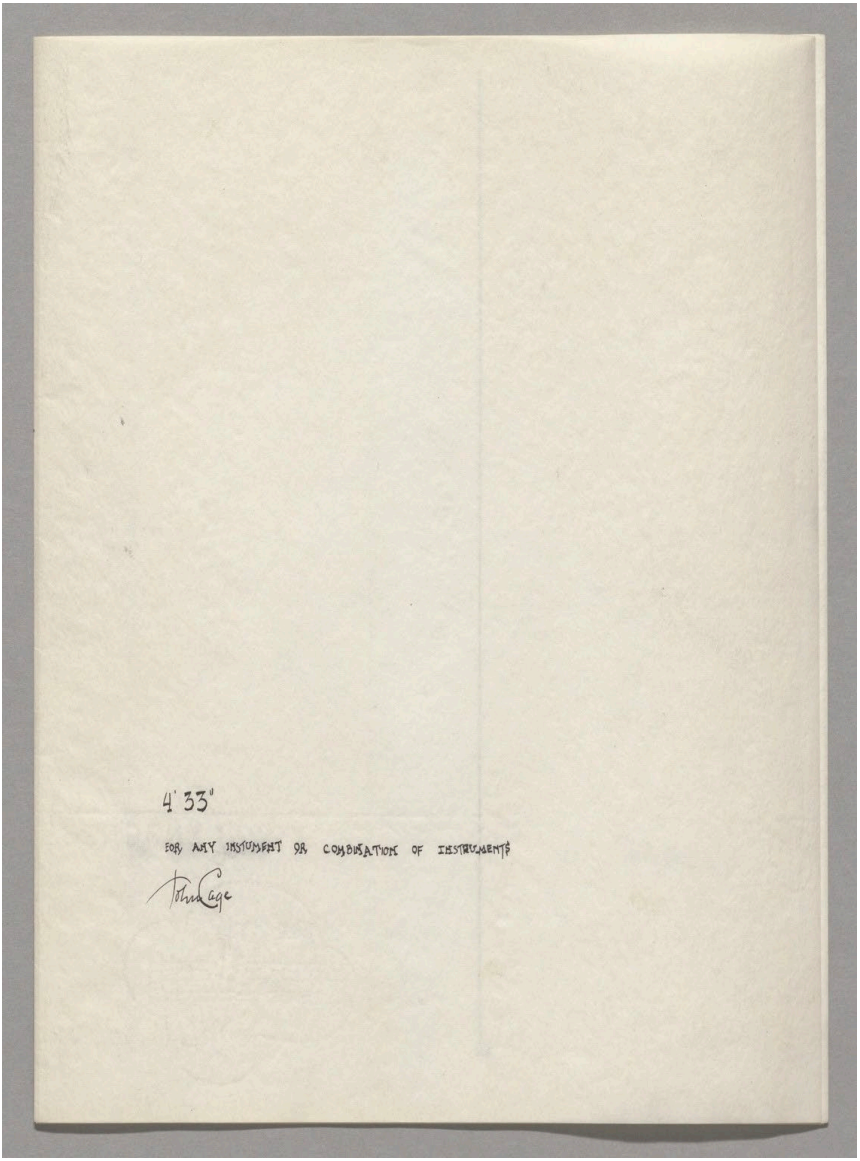
combative act of resistance[15] (Katz, 1999). For Cage, relying on a *don't ask, don't tell* stance whilst opening up questions of identity and constitution allowed him to avoid calling his own identity into question.

4'33's reductive abstraction can contest specific readings. Yet the act of staging such a piece is resolutely Queer – it releases the composer and musicians' power dynamic into the hands of others but presents them with "nothing". In such silence, used actively, it refuted understanding just as Queerness refutes the understanding of heteronormativity. For "Silence is not nothing, but something. Something else." (Hall, 2011, p.15). *4'33*'s silence is queerly representative[16] of "something else" beyond the audible, using opacity to switch between non-oppositional codes of acceptable discreetness and Queer resistance that leave the *potential* open-ended, and that queer potential futures by refusing to engage with definition.

This silence contrasted the methods of Julius Eastman, whose *Gay Guerrilla* (1979) builds four pianos to a cacophonous, discordant

15 Cage also defined himself as a pacifist Buddhist, and this non-combative stance aligns with such a philosophy.

16 It is worth noting that the vast majority of scholarship on *4'33* and Cage's work throughout the second half of the 20th Century ignores any possibility of Queer subjectivity, this reading left implicit for those able to grasp it through time. It was only from nearer the turn of the Century that queer readings of Cage's (and other artists') silence against the threat of reprisal began to appear. Indeed the queerness extant in so much other 20th century art, but not figurative or loud, still remains firmly implicit and out of sight.



John Cage, *4'33" (In Proportional Notation)* (1952/53)

crescendo, repeating and modulating the same motifs over 29 minutes. The physical power of the work establishes the titular character – the gay guerrilla is leading the revolution, actively fighting towards Queer presence and visibility. To Eastman, this was a character he hoped to embody, one that is "sacrificing his life for a point of view" (1980, 5:38). At Eastman's intersection of radical Black gayness, Cage's tactical opacity was futile[17] – his identity was open and highly visible. *Gay Guerrilla* instead reclaims pejorative terms[18] and reconfigures them into an antagonistically oppositional stance through authoritative and intense musical abstraction.

With the eventual decriminalisation of homosexuality in most of the West by the late 20th Century, LGBT identities became gradually more widely visible in the mainstream. With this came greater tolerance of lesbian and gay lives that could be understood by that mainstream – the homonormative life path of monogamous cohabitation, steady work, marriage and even children. However,

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17 Eastman and Cage also clashed in 1975, when Eastman performed "Solo for Voice No. 8" from Cage's *Song Books* (1970) in Buffalo, NY, with Cage in the audience. The limits of Cage's indeterminacy were tested by Eastman's radicality: he presented an eroticised 14 minute lecture involving two stripped-down participants, focusing on eroticism, race and colonialism. Cage saw this as an attempt to out him, and one that did not fit his expansive intentions for the "disciplined action" that the score configured. He accused Eastman of being too focused on, and indeed blinded by, sexuality. Read more here: https://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2018/07/julius-eastman-john-cage-songbooks

18 Other Eastman works were titled *Crazy Nigger* and *Evil Nigger,* also working from identity categories that the composer inhabited and terms that were set upon him.

this position pushed the non-normative Queer further to the fringes, and suddenly highlighted its absolute difference as a concept that could not be absorbed, assimilated, and understood.

Queer became an even more abstract position.

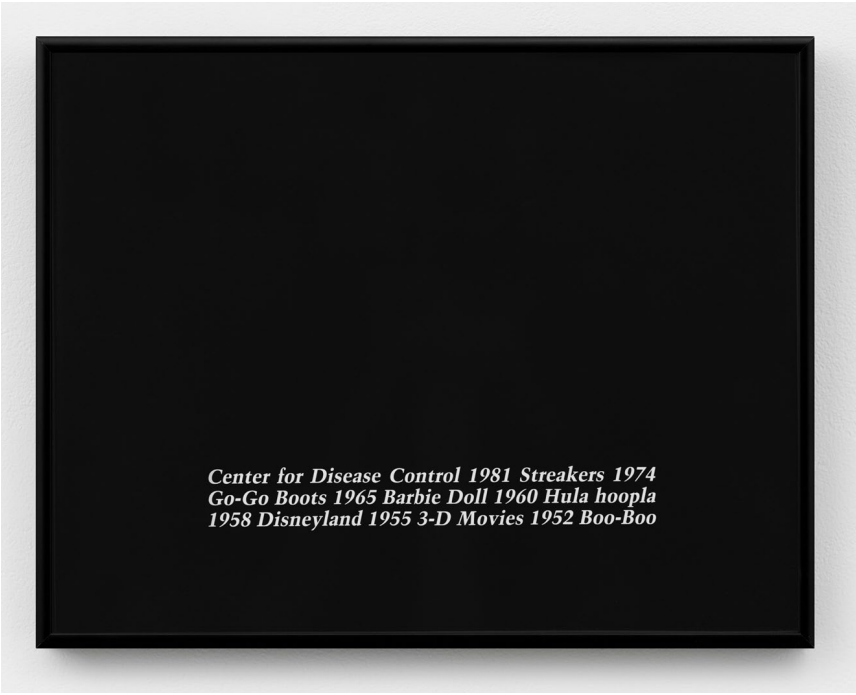
Yet there is power in this position. Abstraction can be used to exist outside of the restrictions, categorisation, and control that come with heteronormativity and the contemporary neoliberal situation (Butler, 1993), and to refuse and reimagine them (Besemer, 2005), as much as early pictorial abstraction refused the rules of art as they were understood at the turn of the 20th century. By breaking those rules, abstraction did not render the image powerless or meaningless, but rather allowed for a broader range of possibilities in reading, ones that were not dependent on deciphering a particular meaning.

Pictorial abstraction can then be seen as a radically queer form of representation (Bernstein 2013, p.488) that does not rely on compromising its subject, or on heavily marked codes of gender, sex, race and identity that are present in all figuration (Getsy and Simmons, 2015). Instead, it allows subjectivity to perform opaquely through potential formal relations. Yet abstraction has a potential trap: being used to repress, sometimes violently, the potential for representation by situating its subjects outside of normativity's structures of meaning and negating the connotations of "otherness" that can be found. Whilst in this outside position, one

must view Queer abstraction as disidentifying from said structures purposefully, queerly performing the representation of its subjects.

One can similarly consider linguistic abstraction similarly as a mode of representation, where it can avoid coded markings of identity that feed into presupposed categories of normativity that would not align with the queerness of the speaker. It becomes particularly exciting to consider the moments, at the boundary between the pictorial and the linguistic, where words become image, and the non-verbal can act as a paralanguage.

Between 1987 and 1994, Cuban-American artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres produced a number of pieces that used the names of events, subjects, or objects, and dates, strung together to insinuate connections between them, and a story from those connections. However, with such blunt, minimal presentation (these works, like most of Gonzalez-Torres's, were all untitled) some of those connections were presented without a clarity as to their connection. What could be said for the following associations?



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled* (1988)

Whilst some viewers may be able to pin down the link between individual subjects and dates (for example the more general knowledge that Disneyland opened in 1955), the relationship between some (Barbie and the CDC, anyone?) remains elusive to most, not to mention the inclusion of "*Boo-Boo*", undated, at the end of the line. Few people that could connect all of these de-structured subjects in the way that Gonzalez-Torres intended[19], and so these words and numbers begin to take on more of the qualities of a "pure" image away from verbal language[20], presented starkly. The concept then becomes part of the whole. If we heed Breslin that "The conceptual beauty of the date pieces is their conscious rupturing both of narrative and temporal linearity" (2017, p.36), it follows that it is abstracting time and reference in a way that upends our understanding of relationality, not only between audience and artwork, or between the events and objects contained, but more outwardly towards our wider outlook on Queer potential's interrelation.

But these works did not exist in isolation. The date pieces were created as a larger series over seven years, repeating the indices and the mode of address until one could begin to see the construction of Gonzalez-Torres's world, and his way of reading, understanding and indexing it, in spite of ambiguity, out of time and space, as well as the ways in which his works and world interrelate. He used this

19 In the context of this paper, I will not "give away" the answer to this encoding as I understand it, but rather leave the reader to ponder the vast range of abstracted potentialities.

20 That is to say, one that is non-textual.

method of varying repetition often, building a diverse yet coherent body of work from a set of rules about the ways works operated, usually drawing from the aesthetics of High Minimalism and Postmodern abstraction. The element that tied these variations on language together within Gonzalez-Torres's practice was a repeated abstraction, rarely allowing the subjects of his work, nor the origins of his queer indices, to be decoded at first glance, but presenting them over and over again, almost ad infinitum[21].

One of the clearest examples of Queer Abstraction as representation within Gonzalez-Torres's practice is the sculpture *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991): a 175lb mound of colourful, cellophane-wrapped candies piled in the corner of a gallery space. Audiences are invited to take away (and eat) a candy from the pile, changing its shape, size and weight, before being regularly replenished to 175lb by gallery staff.

These viewers play the role of AIDS, decimating and consuming the body of the artist's late partner Ross Laycock, who weighed 175lb before his diagnosis and ultimate death.

This staunchly political move renders the eater of the candy

21 Gonzalez-Torres also created a large number of "stack" works - large-format prints on paper that were placed in large, neat piles within galleries. The audience was free to take a print from the pile away with them, and the pile would be replenished occasionally to its original dimensions, as many times as necessary. These works are still reproduced infinitely for contemporary exhibitions.

complicit in the disappearance of Laycock, aligning the action with the US Government's attempts to disregard the AIDS crisis and its early casualties. By producing this as an abstract work, the artist simultaneously queers and undermines the languages of portraiture and sculpture, the role of the audience, the legibility of art, and even the position of Queer presence within the gallery.

If *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* indefinitely repeats and regenerates the body of Gonzalez-Torres's lover without any visual indication that gives away the presence of Laycock (outside of its title), then it is clear to see the role that abstraction can play in representation, but also in maintaining a queer space and presence that is both within and outside of the normatively readily-understood roles of image and language. If visual abstraction can deconstruct representation, linguistic abstraction can deconstruct (socio) linguistic representation – the ways in which we use language to communicate and describe ourselves – to the point that queerness could break loose from normative constraints by taking on these methods of upending, silence, refusal and detachment.

Abstraction, in language as much as image, can be both a universal structure and de-structuring force for Queer.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991)

It's about the things that disappear into the little spaces in between you and your edges, and the edges of the others *no, don't look over your shoulder right now they're staring right at us* but really it's the gaps that keep us coming back for more that you know, more that you can show what the hell are you saying I can't understand a word you're saying it's absolutely my pleasure could I have another sugar thanks, love…

something stirred in me when I caught your eye just inside the door; I couldn't say what it is, but was it really just your eye? There was a reflection in your pupil, dancing along to *Love My Way* as if you longed for a piece of fruit a piece of me squeeze harder *fuck* his acting is just terrible isn't it TWO FOR ONE TWO FOR ONE TWO FOR ONE skip the middle-man I thought so,

thank you.

It's about the things that tumble down into the gaps between the sofa cushions when you come over yeah I think I'll be back in fifteen please come back put four to the floor I need to dance again keep changing direction keep moving keep remembering remembering remembering:

It's about the one that sat a little too quietly at the back, lacing

fingers between each other, staring out the window *your movements are a little sideways, it's difficult, stop it and focus, pay attention* It's not right in front of me like it used to be, it's all a little too quiet, it's difficult - nobody wants to whisper in my ear any more but I can't brush that to one side. Now she's in the corner twirling her hair around her middle finger

thank you.

very much in the same place as always? PLEASURE they keep screaming thank you. *I think they're okay*

that's right.

It's about us! We're waiting with baited breath, for some reason, for Danzig to finish his Donna Summer covers album… for some reason. What an icon! N*ot quite what it used to be like, hey* and in the meantime, a gym bro with a fake leather chest harness has started dancing to the sirens outside, their rhythm punctuated with all of us around have you tried looking him right in the I am you are he she it is we are you are they are coming out tonight coming out to show them *they keep repeating themself, but it's never the same.* It's happening again it's not you're sure? You know you don't know you know - you really don't. It's about the things that disappear.

(De)Constructing Queer

Whilst unusual, there is nothing inherently Queer about a pile of candies in the corner of a room.

David Getsy wrote that "we have to reject the presumption that one needs to self-disclose and make oneself *easily recognizable* in order to have one's differences matter" (2015, p.49). Gonzalez-Torres's installation does not speak back to its audience, or make easily recognisable that which *is* inherently Queer within its structure. But that structure does use formal tools of abstraction to both embody its concept and to trouble our ways of understanding it, operating on multiple coded registers simultaneously that allow its inherent difference to be quietly present in the room while concurrently slotting itself into an institutionalised Art aesthetic.

Queer is not an inherently known way of being: we have no singular guide, and so its onto-epistemologies and performativities differ, especially at its identarian intersections. The constructions I have discussed come to constitute Queer through an intertwining of individual linguistic structures as the building blocks of a more holistic identity. However, any identity formed is not monolithic: it is in flux, and perpetually hybridised by our circumstances. It necessarily contains multiple levels that we must move between for self-protection and self-understanding, and we switch in and out of these levels of queerness in order to come to terms with our *own* understanding and performance of them through time, and at

different intersections. Queer is then subjective, and necessarily mobile: as we change, so what we understand as index changes, our habits of constructing and performing identity evolve, and thus the codes that we have come to know adapt. Towards performative usage, these can also be deliberately abstracted – queered – through alteration of repetitions, and upending of indices and codes. Such constitutive elements of language, particularly beyond the verbal, can thus also *deconstruct* Queer subjectivity into the terms of its own structural abstraction.

This raises the question of how one works actively with that deconstruction, rather than attempting to understand what Queer means *right now* if it is always in motion, hybridised, and indeed absent from the "now" (Muñoz, 2009). By deconstructing it through abstraction, greater space is allowed for unintelligibility without eradicating subjectivity (Bernstein, 2013), for existing without meaning that categorises, and for instability. The deconstruction of a falsely-homogenised queer allows for its intersectional components to rearrange themselves with more individual weight and specificity, even if not understood from the widest perspective – they are able to operate abstractly, queerly, and their *difference* can be respected.

This also leaves them space to be misunderstood, or not understood as inherently Queer, from the outside – to be radically ambiguous (Hall, 2011). Much like code-switching, this can be seen as a safety mechanism, where that which cannot be understood cannot

be categorised and/or subsumed (Foucault, 1984), and thus can remain by and for queer circles. Yet when using queer language (or using language queerly), people can be rendered *more* visible through that recognisable difference when heard (T., 2014)[22]. Its outward opacity belies a recognisable inward transfer of index and meaning (allowing participants to feel at home within the queer register)[23], whilst putting the queer *difference* in irreducible relation to the normative by disidentifying (Glissant, 1997; Muñoz, 1999) – it gains an authority in no longer being defined by countering an external register. What does it then mean to be purposefully inwardly abstract, beyond liminal opacity[24], as seen from outside?

Visually, Queer Abstraction is an abstraction in itself, with no

22 As I sit writing this conclusion, my studio-mate and a mutual friend are having a conversation in Swedish behind me. I understand very little from listening, even without a need to, but the presence of this other, outside register within the room is repositioning me within my own working environment, and I am becoming hyper-conscious of both my own misunderstandings, and the way in which language is being used within this text and its context.

23 Although as Butler (1993, 309) suggests, Queer speech that generates identity for one, such as coming out, can call up a "different region of opacity", or "a new and different "closet"", when the sense of relation for both interlocutors is shifted by the speech act.

24 William J. Simmons notes that a "fetishization of liminality…has become a cliché for queer" (2021, p.19) insofar as it is easy to posit Queer's fluid Otherness as being (or at least being in) an in-between. This mere ambiguity rather draws away from Queer's power and radical potential.

singular language or aesthetic[25], and its open-endedness allows for an imagined set of possibilities that sit outside of or resist the norm (Getsy 2019, pp.66-7). To propose an abstract directionlessness within language begins to ask queerness to escape what Ahmed (2006) would determine as its orientation, its way of making sense through the world that uses normativity as (op)positional. One must be able to regularly make sense in order to communicate basic needs (including that of being heard and seen), but even within the Queer lexicon, as Nelson (2015) points out, "Words change depending on who speaks them; there is no cure" (p.8). Queer language that is visible or legible, even if opaque, can be maladapted and reduced, just as "queer" has been. However, a radical repositioning of queerness that disidentifies it from normativity and its use of its language, defying any recognised mode of reading, allows Queer to be Queer in its own terms, sticky with its histories and embodiments – to be its own subject.

If Queer is an abstract concept, it follows that its language can operate abstractly, with freedom to consider utopia.

To think beyond the general limits of language then allows us to think beyond the perceived limits of Queer – linguistic abstraction is a destabilisation that can dissolve the normative structures set upon "queer" whilst simultaneously imagining what an unstable "*Queer* structure" could be. To reach this point, we must understand *not*

25 See documentation of the Des Moines Art Center's 2019 exhibition Queer Abstraction for clear evidence that contemporary queer abstract visual art practices can take myriad forms!

understanding, or understand the misunderstanding, as a queer act.

In a performance of *4'33*, do we only witness Cage's resolute opacity as a mode of resistance? Or are we in fact being made to listen out *for* difference? We do not understand what every noise might mean, but can understand that those acts communicate something that is bound within a queer context, and thus abstractly communicate, and indeed generate an atmosphere of, some form of queer being. Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled* does not use its text to directly describe a moment or idea to its audience, but rather uses the abstract relations between its references to generate a context for those that have the embodied knowledge to unpick it – it speaks to the concept by using an abstract language of implication. Sahib's *Watch Queen* series makes this abstract language and aesthetic operate on different simultaneous registers, its meaning fluctuating.

Meaning, then, can be unstable – there is space for Queer language to be misunderstood, missed, or not understood at all. In practice, there is room for it to operate outwardly abstractly, for Queer to speak without making sense, and for that intentional senselessness or directionless to speak back towards a homogenised Queerness. This can deconstruct and remobilise its constituent forms and identities against the control of normativity and its assimilationist force by reshuffling, eventually dismantling, power structures behind hierarchies of meaning.

Language is a tool of power – to control language is not only to hold

self-determination and representation, but to control communication within, between, and beyond subjects. Queer works to both reclaim power – reclaiming language and such autonomy – and challenge hegemonic authority. By both reclaiming and challenging structures of language as we know them, Queer can deconstruct itself towards an abstraction that disidentifies it from such logics of power.

In the end, to use language queerly and abstractly, methodologically, is performance of its politics. It is performance as much as any outward expression of gender or sexuality (Butler, 1990), in that to use such a method is still to perform a *version* of queerness, one that is both open and closed, legible yet unintelligible, using the tools of language to break down that language, and the identities it constructs, into sites of refusal. If "queer" means different or strange, let us allow Queer to behave as such, distant from present notions of category.

To break Queer out of the impossible restraints of the temporal "now" (Muñoz, 2009) and into its own set of potentials, let us modulate our repetitions and upend our indices. Let us self-determinedly and wildly switch between codes. Let us speak without sense through pictures, colour, movement, gesture, dance, pattern, and even the subtle nod of the head, shift of the hand or blink of the eye that draws us wordlessly together.

Let us speak without saying.

Let us speak opaquely.

Let us speak without laying out how to be understood and assimilated,

And let us form a *queer* meaning from that for ourselves.

Hear me out: we go, we knock a few back, see if there's some trade going, make our excuses, then it's all done. No? No. I can't tell if it's the air in here, or just what's in it. The pull and thrust of speakers and hips and curtains; just between us the wetness of vodka slowly seeping into the ceiling as they breathe together oh come on! with the grinding of teeth.

I can feel it in my own jaw.

There it goes again,

The key change,

The breakdowns, *I'm not paying for it this time, then.*

The taste of iron…

TONIGHT ONLY! This time, it's silk, or leather, or skin *ONLY TONIGHT* or only every first Friday of the month at least, I mean *just come whenever the fuck you want, it's all going on anyway, whether you like it or not* no, and don't wear a bloody coat this time. We all feel the cold. You have to get right in there; feel it; learn it. *Hear me* - no. I just want you to show up in blue again.

There they go again, *only 2km away*

The gym-sculpted midriffs,

The not-saying-anything movements of the chin,

The red lights…

But what can you say when you don't like techno?

Yeah, I saw that in your pocket.

But what can you say...

Oh don't give me that face now it's fine the lights are going out we're going OUT out get into shift pony boy, does this make it all the more difficult to feel feel feel you feeling rouge it's PRINCE it's ANNIE it's PETE it's the golden hour oh my gawd take a photo right now look at this! But now you're shuffling your shoes between the spaces, trying to make me you anyone notice how they never play this song any more?! But I get it, there's fifty one hundred one hundred fifty bodies in here all moving together we can be anything at once just moving moving keep your chin up face down, hun, it's coming varda over there keep moving

Move your right foot just like I do

Eyyy I saw you stop just there they go again all over the place baby you're a firework baby you're a liability nobody puts ooooh yes you were gonna say that weren't you! Put your hand on my shoulder put your hand on your shoulder it's not really a dance dance dance dance it's more like this

Move your left foot just like I do

I saw your foot again are you trying to tell me something again I'm not sure again. AGAIN.

Move your other foot just like I do

All I can hear now is the sparrows, it's really interrupting my process, it's really interrupting the latest PG record, it's really interrupting my dancing these GODDAMN BIRDS ALL OVER THE PLACE it's arrows everywhere and Sebastian is complaining for once *he's normally so easy going and languid-looking you know what I mea*n I think He's on the balcony contemplating his fourth drink facing back to the mattress trussed up and shot full it's getting terribly steamy in here be careful you don't slip be careful

Move your other foot just like I do

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