Pink Labor on Golden Streets
Queer Art Practices
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Disfiguration
On Violence and Negativity in Queer Art*

Eliza Steinbock

One of this conference’s main line of inquiry is into what “queer abstraction” might mean. I think the greater problem is what queer abstraction might do; that is, I want to examine its power. First, I want to investigate how artworks create an abstract, but nonetheless very real feeling of violence. Jack Halberstam’s article on “imaginary violence” helps to put into perspective how even the abstractness of the imagination still elicits feelings experienced as fully real in the body, and causes certain effects. For instance, seeing a gore revenge film might make you think twice about assaulting someone. His article focuses on the political space opened up by popular culture and subcultural representations of unsanctioned violence committed by subordinate groups on white men. In this “place of rage” the effects of imagined or real violence become blurred: the imagined experience threatens to erupt into real violence.

Like Halberstam, I’m less concerned with the ethics of committing violence, whether real or imagined; in other words, asking should you or should you not act violently. I am more interested in the political nature of art that is explicitly about bashing back. However, I want to extend the scope of imagined violence to artworks that are nonrepresentational and distance themselves from being figural representations of a violent story. Hence, what I focus my analysis on is how negativity becomes abstracted in the painting and performance of bodily violence. How does negativity become condensed into a nasty prick felt on a viewer’s nervous system, or more strongly, a disfiguring affect?

Sianne Ngai’s study of ugly feelings in the arts examines the “politically ambiguous work” conducted by the minor negative emotions. Anxiety and disgust, for example, render us passive, thereby suspending agency, whereas fear and melancholia lead to action. Aesthetic theories tend to focus on these “major emotions” associated with correct action and morality, neglecting the “minor emotions” that have less clear political relevancy. Therefore, canonical artworks mainly are those that most properly and powerfully create the passions of fear, anger, sympathy, and shame. Following Ngai down this less-trodden, dark path of debilitated agency, I want to examine the politically dubious work of ugly feelings elicited by an ugly, or at least difficult aesthetic. Going a step further than Ngai’s concerns, I argue that the suspension of agency by ugly aesthetics becomes experienced in the body of the viewer not just as a frustrating or temporary obstruction, but as a violent disfiguration.


The disfiguring impulse in various forms of queer art point to a pissy, bloody, politically ambiguous sub-subsection in the archive of queer feelings; in this corner are works from Francis Bacon, Eddie Gasso, Heather Cassils, Josephine Krieg, and Del LaGrace Volcano. While sharing a disfiguring impulse, these mainly contemporary artists inflict affective violence at different targets: to disfigure the viewer’s body, to disfigure negative stereotypes of gender, and even deform expectations of queer art. In what follows, I address the disfiguring impulse and its politics in two sections divided by medium: first on painting and then on performance.

I. Painting and the Body of Sensation

Francis Bacon’s paintings are regularly invoked to discuss the existential themes of violence, loss, and fragmentation. However, in the Logic of Sensation, Gilles Deleuze’s study of Bacon takes a different tack to addressing wherein the violence lies. He is quick to dismiss, as Bacon himself did, that the violence simply lies in the depiction of a scene, such as in monsters and mutations. Instead, Deleuze identifies the violence of sensation brought by the paint, color, and line. In other words, looking with Deleuze at Bacon we might see that invisible forces model the flesh. Bacon paints to study movement’s effect on an immobile body: “to make the spasm visible.” The setup is key. Art and literature scholar Ernst van Alphen points out that many of the male figures are caught in the midst of some movement, a walk or wrastling for instance. The arrest of this sensation in the freeze-frame of the painting recomposes the movement in all its contunuity, violence, and speed. Our eye grasps the movement deforming mass, the sensation of it swishing by, rather than the static body broken into hulking fragments.

Breaking with figuration and all its attendant problems of representation, narrative, and clichés is no easy task. As evidenced in an example from 1949 titled “Study from the Human Body,” the body remains central, as it does in nearly all of Bacon’s oeuvre: he rejects outright abstraction. Deleuze argues that in its isolation the figure becomes elevated above the illustrative, figurative, and narrative traps. Stripped bare by strong vertical lines this figure has a misty, cadaver-like quality. Creating a field in which the figure moves, the translucent curtains part and blend with the papery thin body. There is no face, but a thickened neck with a bulbous head turned down. Indistinct color, the streaks of curtains shoot downward. Pooling colors follow gravity and flow away into the indistinct background, figure and field are stripped of any signifying traits. In Deleuze’s terms, Bacon’s technique of “local scrubbing” has tried to clear the canvas of clichés.

But loosely speaking, there is a body, and it is being studied in terms of being deformed by movement, tortured by sensation. Walking away, the body attempts to escape from itself, literally passing through the vanishing point, dissolving into the black. Van Alphen suggests that the “body-as-sense-organ” is not only a topic of his paintings, but an effect they achieve on the viewer. They hit, so declares Bacon, the viewer’s “nervous system,” to distort the usual mode of perception. Michael Taussig’s study of the nervous system characterizes it as “illusions of order congealed by fear.” However, what Bacon’s viewers may feel hitting their nervous system is not fear in the first place but the orders of sensation piling up. As William James says, fear is what happens because you are running from a bear, not what makes you run. Color, taste, touch, smell, noise, weight pound the nerves of a body laid bare. No illusion about it: orders of sensation congeal into a twisting mass we sloppily call a body. The viewer becomes a semblance to the disfigured body that resonates in the field. The second-order violence lies in the shaking of the viewer’s bared body when confronted with the first-order violence of the figure confronting the field. Perhaps confrontation is too tame a term. Van Alphen discusses the “masculinity under siege” in Bacon, who in painting the terrifying white male disfigured by sensation shatters the conventions of figurative representation, which wholly favors aesthetically pleasing women and animals. As van Alphen phrases it, this is a “site of genderization.” And here, enacted in painting’s attack on the dominant form of masculine genderization, Bacon’s disfiguring impulse comes closest to queer abstraction.

What would it look like to depart from the figure? An attempt at dealing with the abstract concept of gender through the genre of abstract art can be found in the work of Eddie Gasso. Abstract artworks are characterized by refusing any simple illustrative purpose, usually by appealing foremost to the cerebral. The title of gasso’s painting installation is a bit of an understatement: “Attempt to Complicate” is a series of abstract paintings that methodically layer “baby pink with baby blue and baby yellow” in a demanding process (see figs. 146–147). The title of each panel lists which colors were used and what number attempt it was. The colors become the site of genderization attacked, not by stripping and scrubbing of cliché, but by suffocating. Overworking their powers of signification the multiple, layered application of gendered colors builds up a strange body from mufaling the power of blue over pink over yellow and so on. Bacon’s murderous process of overloading and then draining sensation from each figure is inverted: gasso’s square panels of smothered cliché create

4 See the painting on the official website of the estate of Francis Bacon: http://www.francisbacon.com/paintings/study-from-the-human-body-1949/?c=48-49.
5 Ernst van Alphen, Francis Bacon and the Loss of the Self (Chicago: Reaktion Books, 2004), 41.
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surprisingly lively creatures when arranged in a space, hung in a series. The uncanny flesh tones that surface from the dull mixtures range from caramel to bronze, from taupe to rose. Placed together, hung proximate to the viewer's own shape and size, the panels become animated, glowering figures without a referent.

The mono-color drips stand in stark contrast to the intricately worked surface. The streaking drips look like blood, spurting and hemorrhaging from the creation, from some internal wound. This detail indexes the violence wreaked by the achievement of the surface color. For the viewer it provides a disturbing remainder of the slow fight to overcome a genderized body.

Like Bacon's disfigured figure, gesso's panel installation of overwrought figures does not principally refer to traditional art-historical forms or motif. The works perform an abstract though highly material act with paint color, shape, and composition to engender the violence of sensation.

A quick glance to the side of the panels, though, reveals the drips from the process of layering color. The mono-color drips stand in stark contrast to the intricately worked surface. The streaking drips look like blood, spurting and hemorrhaging from the creation, from some internal wound. This detail indexes the violence wreaked by the achievement of the surface color. For the viewer it provides a disturbing remainder of the slow fight to overcome a genderized body.

II. Performance and the Fighting Body

Whereas painters Bacon and gesso wrestle with materials and then disappear into the traces of the brush, the performance art of Heather Cassils uses their body as a disfiguring force to fight their chosen material of modeling clay. Bringing Bacon into four dimensions, in the 2012 performance *Becoming an Image*, Cassils becomes the figure, a fighter stripped bare confronting the field shaped by the audience cloaked in blackness. First performed at ONE National Lesbian and Gay Archives in 2012, the “Transactivation” exhibit aimed to place transgender and people of color histories on the map of the archives. An occasional photography flash punctuates the darkness during the twenty-seven-minute performance in which Cassils pummels a two-thousand-pound block of clay. Using professional boxing techniques of Mixed Martial Arts for the “all-out attack,” Cassils punches, kicks, and tears into the clay. In another sort of deforming process, rather than locally scrubbing, the artist disfigures the form of an immobile, impassive opponent with their bound fists, elbows, knees, shins, and feet.
Cassils also attempts to break with clichés by using a process similar to Bacon's method: first, isolate the figure and strip signifiers bare, then create field here in the shape of a ring, and finally, build up and empty out the sensation. These steps for achieving queer abstraction offer a working model that might be taken as a method more broadly for attacking the site of genderization. Despite the presence of a person who could become a figural representation of "transgenderism" or even of the story of trans violence, I want to suggest that Cassils's abstraction of violence is more properly nonrepresentational, explicitly aiming to produce a different kind of image, a sensation image.

Brings into the world a new cut of the body, while also mining a body of gender codes. This transgender form of masculinity, to borrow a term from Yvonne Tasker that refers to female masculinity marked by musculature, gives us more than a hero form. The fight between trans-masculinity and a hunk of clay is a fight to sculpturally define each other. This is an event of bashing back that narratively fails to produce a hero: all participants seem to win (or to lose). The clay makes Cassils stronger if exhausted. The event gives new life to the form of Cassils and the clay even if it implies loss or transformation.

For the audience, the rigged fight is failed spectacle. Crowding around the moment of composition, the audience is subject to flying sweat and debris from the clay, the panting sounds of a fight, the shuffling movement of the fighter, and the shock of the light flashing. In some sense, this event could become read as unsanctioned violence committed by a subordinate person upon the impassive form of "white men" if we take a narrative route to reading the bout. But in this a place of rage, what is lacking is pronounced or direct anger. Cassils exerts cold precise violence. Bashing back comes with no cathartic release as if it came from rage.

Without the easy figural reference (a burnt effigy for instance), the imagined violence here is nonrepresentational. As Cassils beats the clay, the photography flash hits the crowd. The performance creates a nervous system, literally making them nervous, on edge waiting for the next series of blows delivered with punches in the eye. Violence condenses into a burning flash, shocking the audience individually, but passing through them collectively. The audience passes through into the clay, becoming a living semblance of the sculpture, an only apparently impassive form that slowly, after a grueling process gives into Cassils's force.

Overloading and draining the audience becomes the action of the performance: they become the vessel for the image, the form that Cassils works to sculpt. They become the image, burnt retinas, imprinted memory, and bruised bodies, shot through with sensation. The violence of the performance lodges under their skin, a prickling afterimage. Becoming an image, precisely not an object, a thing, or a person, the crowd carries an abstraction of violence. The photographs we are looking at are a poor documentary form not because they lack indexical power, but because they only served in the performance to disfigure the audience. Looking at them now, we only see the disfiguring of a clay figure, a tracing of the disfiguring impulse on the audience.

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With no outright call to action, or clear threat, the work becomes politically ambiguous, but in a most productive way. The performance experience confuses witness with violator/violated; we all must confront our complicity in allowing senseless aggression against trans people to be perpetuated. Agency uncomfortably circulates from the materials, acting on the human bodies, creating a pulpy mass. In the crowd, agency can become found in becoming receptive to the disfiguring forces of sensation, to becoming a passive block for absorbing sensation.  

The political content in Josephine Krieg's mixed dance and martial arts performance titled Gender Violence also showcases physical violence, but resists a clear moral message. Since around 2004, the piece by has been performed multiple times with different choreography and lengths for crowds of over 600 in Krakow, to dozens during Club Wotever evenings in London, to a small panel during a school audition. Again, a figure confronts a field and has to clear the clichés. Training, duration, and setup are crucial methods employed for the violent queer abstraction of gender in and on the body. Wearing a simple black dress and dance shoes, Krieg's trans-feminine figure enters from the audience. Over three distinct acts the dancing figure increasingly and disturbingly mixes ballet and contemporary dance with martial-arts heroine moves and horrendous falls.

A specter of violence haunts the piece: unlike Cassils hulking clay opponent, Krieg fights an imaginary, nonexistent attacker. It only at first appears to be a solo, but becomes a duet-duet as the violence of genderization means we are never alone. The 2013 report from the Transgender Murder Monitoring project found that in the last fourteen months there was a 20 percent increase in the reported murders of trans-people, a total of 265, in which a disproportionate number of victims were trans-women, of color, and sex workers. Here, "femininity is under siege." In Whipping Girl Julia Serano explains the reworkings of misogyny into the sinister form of "trans-misogyny." Misogyny is steeped in the assumption that femaleness and femininity are inferior to, and exist primarily for the benefit of maleness and masculinity. Serano charges that trans-misogyny is reflected in the sexualization and lurid treatment of people on the trans-feminine spectrum, resulting from the notion that trans-women would only transition socially and medically to appeal sexually to men, or to twist it further, to themselves as women in an autoerotic form of "gynophilia." Trans-misogyny's sexual charge is fully compatible with the violence committed against them when they are actually appealing and therefore threatening to male heterosexuality.

In Krieg's solo, the fight sequences transform into a duet with an imaginary attacker. In one turn she is fierce, focused, strong. In the next turn, lost, flailing, vulnerable. The narrative trajectory is toward a slow deterioration. However, we are kept on the edge of our seat precisely because Krieg's piece is carried out in staccato rhythms creating an eventual, but not inevitable resolution. Sweeping the air, the floor, and the field in repetitive combinations of movements, the audience is narratively left in a lurch: When will the next avalanche of punches and blocks, kicks, and falls spill? Which figure will appear, fighting which opponent? On edge, the anxious mood deepens as the movements become less regular, the figure stops and starts, crashing, hair pulling, moaning.

The endlessness and the pain could become numbing; we become dragged along by the work, sensationaly involved but not given a place to stand. Neither as witness (to what crime?), nor as perpetrator (sitting "innocently" in our

8 This analysis has been further developed in the article by Eliza Steinbock, "Photographic Flashes: On Imaging Trans Violence in Heather Cassils' Durational Art," in "Queering Photography," special issue, Photography & Culture 7, no. 3 (2014): 253–68.

9 See the Trans Murder Monitoring (TMM) project report, published May 19, 2009: http://www.tgeu.org/tmm/.

I want to close with an image from Del LaGrace Volcano's latest series of self-portraits called "INTER*me." *Herm Back* was created in the cold basement of his home in Sweden. Highly processed use of Polaroid 665 film, including by solarization, this image series is incredibly fragile not only aesthetically, but also materially. They are literally as close to perishing as possible without fully dissolving.10 Meditating on the strangeness of an aging masculinized body, Volcano for the first time in a self-portrait turns his back on us. He grips his own bulk, rather than as we know *herm* best facing the camera/spectator directly with open arms, making *herm* muscles pop. Looking “backward” does not have to be out of feelings of nostalgia per se. Looking backward, we can better examine the psychic and aesthetic cost of social stigma, of the empty shell of white masculinity that disfigures us all.

These artworks literally run to the fight, not looking for a political payoff later, but want payback now. The fight is here, now, and in some cases even with you: and in this sense they are not utopian, they do not invest in the future. This is not a redemption narrative, but a suspension of the narrative-as-usual. The emotional negativity in which these works dwell and pull us into might be classified by Heather Love’s identification of a tradition in queer experience and representation she calls “feeling backward.”11 To this archive of feeling these works help us to account for the corporeal and psychic costs of the violence carried out by the feelings of homophobia and transphobia.

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11 This analysis has been further developed in the article Eliza Steinbock, “Generative Negatives: Del LaGrace Volcano’s *Herm Body Photographs*,” in "Trans*Cultural Production," special issue. TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly 1, no. 4 (November 2014): 539–58.
Literature


