

Ashton Cooper

QUEER ABSTRACTION:

A ROUNDTABLE WITH LOREN

BRITTON, KERRY DOWNEY, JOHN EDMONDS,
MARK JOSHUA EPSTEIN, AVRAM FINKELSTEIN,
CHITRA GANESH, GLENDALYS MEDINA, AND
SHEILA PEPE

On November 12, 2016, thirty-five people came to the Knockdown Center in Queens, New York, and pulled chairs into a messy circle to sit and ponder the term “queer abstraction.” The event—which was organized by LOREN BRITTON, KERRY DOWNEY, and myself—took place in conjunction with, and in the very room that housed, “Read My Lips,” a show I’d curated of Loren’s and Kerry’s work. When we organized the roundtable, we wanted to eliminate any barrier between “speakers” and “audience” and keep the conversation open to anyone in attendance; yet we also asked six artists —JOHN EDMONDS, MARK EPSTEIN, AVRAM FINKELSTEIN, CHITRA GANESH, GLENDALYS MEDINA, and SHEILA PEPE—to start the conversation off with their reactions to this slippery term, “queer abstraction.”

Although it would be difficult to find the very first use of “queer abstraction,” the phrase has come increasingly into use, not just in my own conversations with artists and curators, but also more widely in scholarly inquiry and at exhibitions. Its recent popularity is part of the wave of exciting new efforts over the past ten years or so to rescue abstraction, expressionism, and painting from the dustbin of masculinist bravado. During our studio visits and conversations as we put our show together, Kerry, Loren, and I often talked about the potential—but also the problems—of labeling art forms as “queer abstraction.” For me, the term flirted with ideas I sought to highlight in “Read My Lips,” which brought together Loren’s paintings and sculptures and Kerry’s videos

and prints. Their work deploys abstraction in the service of marginalized bodies to address problems of language and the complexity of subject formation in a binary world: thus its queerness. Both artists use the language of abstraction to experiment with a politics of refusing visibility. The formal qualities of their work plunge us into indeterminacy, making us step outside prevailing modes of understanding both selfhood and language.

I would argue that refusing visibility is an important tenet of the constellation of art practices gathered under the rubric of “queer abstraction.” While many queer and feminist artists—Harmony Hammond, Louise Fishman, and Joan Snyder, to name just a few—have made abstract art since the 1970s, a new generation of queer, genderqueer, and transgender artists are taking up abstraction to deal with issues of gender—and, in this case, to talk about the body without representing or signifying it explicitly. In his recent research, art historian David J. Getsy has asked, “What happens when the body is invoked but not imaged?”¹ In such a mode of image making, abstract art exceeds the constraints of binary logic; the body is posited as a catalog of sensory experiences and a place of flux. Julia Bryan Wilson has referred to queer abstraction as “a resource for all

those in the margins who want to resist the demands to transparently represent themselves in their work.”² In organizing this roundtable discussion, Kerry, Loren, and I recognized that queer abstraction is in no way a new turn-of-phrase and that its origins are probably impossible to locate. Rather than trace its origins, therefore, we decided that the goal of this conversation would be to wonder out loud and together: what are the offerings and limitations of this term in contemporary queer art practices?

—Ashton Cooper, Brooklyn



Figure 1.

Installation view of “Read My Lips,” Knockdown Center, featuring Loren Britton, *Bud* (2015), Canvas, polyfil, velvet, and cotton; and *Splitting Legs* (2016), Acrylic and flasche on muslin. Photo: Marie Catalano. Reprinted with permission.

ASHTON COOPER/ *Thank you all so much for coming. It is really special to be spending this time with you, especially at such a dark moment where a lot of us are struggling to find meaning. We hope that this can be a place for healing, for calls to action, and for working through. We have asked six artists to prepare short presentations. After that we will open the conversation up to anyone who wants to ask a question, give an opinion, or react to something. Before we get into that, I wanted to say that we've organized this roundtable under the rubric of "queer abstraction," but in no way do we wish to be confined by that term. This phrase has come into increased use lately, but for me, an important historical touchstone is Harmony Hammond's essay from 1977: "Feminist Abstract Art—A Political Viewpoint."*³

I'd like to offer what Kerry, Loren, and I have agreed upon as our contribution to the initial discussion: in relation to the "Read My Lips" show, we consider queer abstraction as an investment in indeterminacy that allows for an expansive sense of embodiment—which includes, but is not limited to, the slipperiness of gender, affect, desire, and language.

GLENDALYS MEDINA / I am an interdisciplinary artist. I make work about language and image and how they are used to define us as individuals. When I think about queer abstraction in my work, I think about how I use my body and how I veil it so that no one knows my gender. When I am veiling myself, I am really thinking about how I can embody

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It is really hard to self-identify, because when I think about queerness, I think about a very open word that is not binary, that is all-inclusive. And when I think about abstraction, I think about it in the same way.

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humanity. It is hard for me to say even that I take female pronouns. It is really hard to self-identify, because when I think about queerness, I think about a very open word that is not binary, that is all-inclusive. And when I think about abstraction, I think about it in the same way. I often think of abstraction as being the language of God. So, when I think of those words together, I find it's kind of odd because they call for not being determined—separately. In putting them together to identify something or someone or some object or subject, it makes my stomach curl a little bit. But what else could you do to describe something if you are not going to use language? In relationship to my work, I do not really think about it too much, inherently. I do not say to myself, *I am going to try to hide my body*. I just do so because I want to be as anonymous and as universal as humanly possible. I think abstraction is the perfect way to explain my existence, because it allows me to live between the space of an object and a subject. It allows me to explore that grey area that I don't want

to define, but that I just want to observe and kind of live in. In a lot of my work, I disembody myself and embody another individual, copying them until I feel no separation. A lot of my work is influenced by hip-hop culture. I copy objects (such as songs) in hip-hop to the point that there is no barrier between them and me. Then I use whatever I learn to articulate my voice in that medium. So a lot of my work is playing the Other every single day. I repeat words often enough, and actions often enough, that I am constantly feeling not myself, not one person. I often feel as though I am more than one.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN / My practice consists mainly of political work in public spaces, and

it tends to be very didactic. So, I wanted to talk a little bit about the connection between the question of queer abstraction and the current political moment. To the extent that abstraction might be considered a rejection of corporeal meaning-making—I can see all the abstractionists in the room making fists as I am saying this and I also disagree with it in my head as the words are coming out of my mouth—I think that there is a kind of inversion underway, and that is what queer abstraction means to me. I think queer abstraction might actually be a pivot point beyond the newer meanings of the body found in feminist critiques, that beckons instead toward an actual “re-coding” of the corporeal. As a propagandist, I think about images and how



Figure 2.

Kerry Downey. I cannot see your teeth (2016). Monotype. Photo by Susan Alzer. Reprinted with permission.

images function, so abstraction automatically has to do with meaning-making in late-stage American capitalism.

To be sure, all artists deploy codes in order to situate themselves. But to be queer is to coexist with codes on a deeper level. It's a matter of survival, especially for non-culture-making queers. In order to find traces of ourselves in a world that prefers that we be hidden, we have to excavate these codes. We rummage through the cultural landscape to find evidence of ourselves. That's very much part of queer identity, if you could generalize about what queer identity could be. So, I think detritus, metamorphosis, archives, and thrift are all queer turf that needs to be tilled. But there is something about the boundlessness of abstraction that I think of as the best strategy for the expansion of queer territory. I have heard really smart people argue that the neo-dada, pre-Pop moment in New York, right after the abstract expressionist moment of the New York School, was a reaction by queer artists against abstract expressionism, which had a singular reverence for the post-war heroism of the lone author that was very male-based. Back then queers did not have the luxury of authorship. It was a very repressive moment, and meaning was superimposed on us. I've heard people make that argument, and I think there might be some truth to it. And I realize that that sounds so anachronistic when we are talking now. But after re-reading *Cruising Utopia* when José Muñoz died, I found it chilling that as recently as 2009 we had to still make arguments within academia

as to what queer ephemera might actually even look like. This hammered home the idea that perhaps the only thing that has changed since the transition from AbEx to post-postmodernism is the emergence of queer academic scholarship to help us agonize over it.

Let me give you an example. Googling Mike Pence's anti-queer record is proof enough of how little has actually changed for queer life outside of graduate programs. Mike Pence is the one to watch in this political moment. He is not just the head of Trump's transition team; he is Trump's Dick Cheney. Pence will be running the White House, and he comes from the radical right. (Google him if you don't know the things that he has proposed. He has proposed that the Ryan White Care Act cannot be

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Perhaps it is time to re-read abstract expressionism as a potential site for queerness as well, since expression is at the root of self-determination, and self-determination is directly attached to the activation of social spaces in political moments like this—which promises to be one of the most reactionary periods in global history.

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refunded unless they also fund queer conversion programs. He's a nightmare).⁴

So, if the queer political dilemma we are in is not simply academic, and I don't think it is, I consider it noteworthy that all of the queer artists I pay attention to and take seriously have been reconsidering abstraction, expressionism, and abstract expressionism through a feminist gaze for a really long time. It is kind of odd that there aren't more conversations and shows curated around this question. I think it's really significant. I personally believe that this simple fact reveals a shit-ton about the true state of the queer political Zeitgeist. So we can now take back what I said about the corporeal. Maybe abstraction is corporeal after all. In fact, abstraction might be the *only* safe place for the queer body currently to reside. Perhaps it is time to re-read abstract expressionism as a potential site for queerness as well, since expression is at the root of self-determination, and self-determination is directly attached to the activation of social spaces in political moments like this—which promises to be one of the most reactionary periods in global history. I have no doubt about that.

In conclusion, the only thing I liked about the De Kooning show at MoMA a couple of years ago was that all of the work was in

one place so I could actually smell the amount of linseed oil that he used in his later work. In those looser brushstrokes, I suddenly saw De Kooning's rotator cuff in those gigantic, sweeping brushstrokes. It was the first time I had a real sense of his body at work in his canvases. I bring this up because I believe that alternatively gendered rotator cuffs have tremendous revolutionary potential, as the placement of non-cis male bodies within abstraction. During my life's work as a propagandist, I've come to understand that political agency is as rooted in Jung and Campbell as it is in public policy. Queer assimilation is not what's called for now. That is the queer political moment that we have unfortunately been saddled with for the last decade or so. What I believe in is radical queer expressionism, queer dumpster diving, and queer mess-making. They will not be watching us here while we are doing that, I promise. And I think it is the perfect strategic subterfuge as we warrior up in resistance.



Figure 3.

Kerry Downey, still from Nothing but net (2016). Single channel video. Reprinted with permission.

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The need for abstraction is the need to own, to re-own, to re-fuck up historically existing languages through our own haptic visual nature.

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SHEILA PEPE/ I will lay out some premises: 1: Art is a language. Words are language. And they are broken. They are always broken, from my perspective, because we didn't make them. 2: I have always been a “she,” but what the fuck does that mean? I have no idea, except that it is the point of invocation for showing up like this [points to self]. My politics have mostly been showing up like this and participating in the speech that happens interpersonally. 3: I made work as a young person that was explicitly gay—specifically, lesbian—and feminist. They were small dolls and bigger dolls, and I said what I needed to say. Then I began to make older work. I have ten years of doing a bunch of other stuff—mostly being a lesbian. I didn't want to live in the ghetto that was prescribed for gay artists. I wanted the inheritance of all of art. I was a lesbian separatist. I didn't stop being a lesbian separatist so that I could only have the portion of art that meant you had to make a picture of yourself as a lesbian. Being a child of high modernism, I wanted to have that shit, too. I wanted to infiltrate it with a kind of physicality and materiality and a performance that was queer by fact and not necessarily by stated intention. 4: When I was a young artist, we didn't write statements of intention. You just did shit. Then it was observed. So

I showed up, for about fifteen years, with a crochet hook and a Genie lift and performed the work of crocheting that was institutionally contingent, infiltrated with abstractions that I thought looked like high modernism. That is my basis for my personal understanding of the need for abstraction. The need for abstraction is the need to own, to re-own, to re-fuck up historically existing languages through our own haptic visual nature. There is another part of the work that knows that coding allows more people into the conversation than propaganda. And I yearned to meet the straight little old Christian lady who crochets, on my own terms. I don't think it worked, necessarily; it worked to some degree, but there are flaws in that strategy. And I think I'll just leave it there. I'll leave it with the flaws and the strategy that we are now sitting with.

JOHN EDMONDS/ I am an artist working in photography and video. On my way here today I thought about how to define, in my own terms, for my own self, queer abstraction. I had a bit of time to wrestle with both of these words that, in my understanding, are umbrella terms for a multitude of experiences or identities or different modes of representation. I thought specifically about a body of work that I made: the hoods pictures, which

are photographs shot from behind of people wearing hooded clothes. One thing that excites and interests me in being queer and thinking about queer identity is that these images are withholdings of what one is willing to reveal about their identity. When I made the hoods pictures, the articles of clothing that I was photographing were literal hoods. The clothing I photograph belongs to me, but I put them on other people's bodies. I am kind of concealing their identities or who you may expect them to be. In looking at the pictures, there is a very strong sense of revealing and non-revealing. In thinking about coding and different sorts of signals and signifiers of race, gender, or orientation, queer abstraction is, for me, both an acceptance and a rejection of labels. It means navigating and operating within this space where, in spite of how you identify, you are often talking to people who may have a very constructed or limited view of gender or identity. So in order to think about queerness and abstraction together, I ask how I use my own body, how I use my own self or codes of my own identity, and how I flip those labels on their heads. How do I deal with people's expectations of what it means to be a queer black man or a black man or a queer individual in America? I often think that labels are actually saying more about the identifier than they do about the one they are trying to identify. Someone is strange because of who's looking, not because of who they are. I deal in my own practice with ideas about what is strange in the familiar. In doing this, I hope to mirror the viewer, in a way. The idea of queer abstraction entails or encompasses showing

that whatever it is you see, *that* is who you ultimately are. And this mirroring is what interests me in artmaking, when there is a sort of boundary or inaccessibility that pushes one to insist on their own biases or to look at why they understand things in a particular way.

MARK JOSHUA EPSTEIN/ Sometimes we skip over the dumbest, most basic questions, which are often also the most important ones. For me, this has been happening in the room tonight. The questions I've been thinking about are these: What is queer abstraction? Does the maker have to be queer? Is all abstraction queer? Can a straight person make queer abstraction? Is queer abstraction in fact a limiting term—as in, “let's retreat from abstraction at large into our own little cul-de-sac?” Or is it a powerful claiming of space? I am not sure about this, but I think a lot about it in my studio because I see my own work in the context of queer abstraction.

I had a studio visit the other day where I was talking about queer abstraction with a wonderful curator. It was her opinion that I was not making queer abstraction (as I thought I had been); I was making gay abstraction, in fact, capital “G” Gay abstraction. So the question arises: has queer abstraction already taken on a certain aesthetic? An aesthetic of the in-betweenness, the liminality, that is often important for queerness? What that curator was saying in so many words was that my work is too colorful and too baroque and too decorated to count as queer abstraction. She brought up artists who are doing quite

well and who are making blanker things, and I do not mean this in a negative way. I mean artists whose practices allow for an easier participation from the viewer—for more projection. The studio visit upset me. This thing I thought I was also getting to be a part of, this queer abstraction thing—maybe I was not getting to be a part of it because I am a cisgender male. That's maybe okay; I take up too much space anyway.

GEOFFREY CHADSEY/ Can you get a little bit more specific, because I think you hit on something that's really interesting there: about what is gay abstraction versus what is queer abstraction. I am curious if you could define them.

MJE/ I do not claim them as my own terms. They were sort of thrown at me.

GC/ For someone to even say that is so absurd.

MJE/ It's absurd, but it made sense. It pissed me off, but that does not mean it's wrong.

SP/ Did it piss you off because of the exclusion or because of the specificity?

MJE/ I don't think I could answer that. But on a related note, in talking about politics for just a moment. . . . Obviously in this room and in queer space I come with a lot of privileges as a white cis guy. But suddenly, on Wednesday morning out in the world, I felt like some of this privilege disappeared, which is not a bad thing, necessarily, but it is a sort of fear-based

reaction. I think the political moment complicates this—which it should—and I don't have an answer for you about specifics. I can tell you the names of artists that were brought up as examples of queer abstraction, but. . . .

GC/ It's interesting, the policing of a difference between gay and queer—as in: what is one, what is the other.

SP/ I would offer, just as a figure/frame problem: it was also probably white abstraction, which is probably a bigger problem than whether somebody calls it queer or gay. When I think about it, and I hate to be a downer, but the hangnail that we fester over right now, it's just stunning.

MJE/ I do not think it's a downer; I think it is the reality.

SP/ That we're festering over our hangnails?

MJE/ I think that is what's happening. I am not happy that it's happening, but I think we are sometimes parsing over details that divide rather than unite.

AC/ *Let's have our final presenter and then we can do a little more sparring.*

CHITRA GANESH/ I am a visual artist working across media, with the anchor of my practice located in painting and drawing, largely situated within a context of figuration. I'm really interested in talking about and thinking through these issues with all of you. My

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What gets categorized as abstract, as opposed to decorative, tribal, or ritualistic? How do these categories stand in aggressive opposition to one another and what are the implications of this opposition vis-à-vis artists who are legible within the frame of abstraction?

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work is populated by non-normative bodies and subjectivities that don't have any receiving structure within a Euro-American art canon and that are often rendered invisible within the bounds of visual canons and mainstream American politics. As I was thinking about this question of queer abstraction—which is obviously filtered through the events of this post-Trump election week—some of the realizations that I have had come in relation to this moment. Considered in both discursive and material terms, queerness and abstraction are capacious and embody varied and contradictory histories and realities. On the one hand, I am reminded of part of abstraction's history: how abstract expressionism was produced as a genre or formal category in conjunction with a certain kind of post-war nation-building project that I am sure a lot of you are aware of. I was thinking specifically about how, in that period, over 60 years ago, several board members of the MoMA were personally connected to the CIA. And how far we have come from that moment in some ways—but also how little has changed in terms of the connections between corporate money, political interests, and institutional powers that guide museum interests.

Given this history, practices of abstraction rest upon a double-edged sword of sorts. On the one hand, abstraction was kind of a freeing mechanism to relieve oneself of the burden of a certain kind of representation—specifically, say, for black artists or artists in the South Asian subcontinent who were confronting both overt and implied mandates to represent their communities and their lives in the art they produced. On the other hand, there is a lot of violent erasure happening within these categories at the same time, which we think of or tend to think of as very long held and stable. What gets categorized as abstract, as opposed to decorative, tribal, or ritualistic? How do these categories stand in aggressive opposition to one another and what are the implications of this opposition vis-à-vis artists who are legible within the frame of abstraction? I can't help but consider these histories of abstraction in relation to the extreme arc of current political events. For example, I keep going back to how the category of “woman” figured in the 2016 election, and how its attendant demographics played out. When I say “woman,” what is it that I think of, what does this category conjure for others, and what am I apprehensive about in relation to this broader category, in terms of what still remains

unmarked? So many of us were shocked to hear about how the demographics of the election played out under the aegis of “woman,” with 54% of white women casting their ballot for Trump, while over 80% of African American women cast their ballots for Hillary. In both instances, I circle back to thinking, “How does racial and geopolitical difference get systematically erased by remaining unmarked within these broader categories?”

You see that now in terms of what happened with feminism and the category of women,

and the voting blocs of white women voting against their interests in order to consolidate racialized power. As for queerness, I have an endlessly utopic soft spot for it. I do feel that, as some of you have mentioned, we have slowly been in the process of cruising over to this place of inhabiting a normative queer imaginary. I was thinking about the fact that I really still have so much faith and investment in the category of queerness. But I was also thinking about just how much all of these things can fall into a danger zone of being co-opted, with the mantle of queerness being taken up



Figure 4.

Installation view of “Read My Lips,” Knockdown Center, featuring (foreground) Loren Britton, a-morph a, a-morph b, a-morph c, and a-morph d (2016), canvas and polyfil, and (on wall) Kerry Downey, Nothing but net (2016), single-channel video. Photo: Marie Catalano. Reprinted with permission.

in the service of a mainstreaming aesthetic, for example.

The last thing I would say is that within the space held by queer abstraction, and perhaps in contrast to the idea of something somewhat stable, I feel this kind of vibration—a spaciousness and a potential. So maybe it is of the flesh and has a lot of materiality, but maybe not of a formal kind, but rather of an identification and a repulsion at the same time. Also, I think about how we can creatively reinvigorate these categories while understanding both the discursive and the actual violence they perform and then build around those erasures.

DC/ Does anyone have a question they wish to ask, or does anyone want to chime in and disagree with someone?

GC/ When you first asked me about this panel, I thought, queer abstraction, what the fuck is that? That was my first impulse because I am so heavily invested in the figurative, while also being critical of the fact that gay identity is a little too invested in the body (how this is negotiated in particular through hooking up: when we go onto any of these sites, you participate in an exchange of images of your body). But I was also trying to remember what the term “queer” was. I have attended a lot of panels, starting in 1993, where people were already fretting about what this term meant. That it should remain undefined. That if you were going to define it, you were going to impoverish it.

In 1993 I was in the audience for a panel about the queer aesthetic, when I was in graduate school. I thought, someone is going to answer this. But it was like the panel had put on a fog machine, and it took over the entire San Francisco art institute auditorium. I had never stood up in an auditorium in my life, but here I raised my hand and said: “I am sorry, can you define what a queer aesthetic is? And if not, could you talk about artists who are doing work that somehow addresses this?” It was like I threw a flaming bag of shit onto the stage. They all got flustered and furious that I had even asked the question. Because to answer that question was, in the words of one of the presenters, to be in danger of creating “a canon.” So the word “queer” remained mystified.

It is interesting, too, this notion of queer versus gay. The term “queer” is attached to a notion of shame that is also embracing: shame being a kind of (awareness of) strangeness. When the first Queer Nation pamphlet went out, for example, it made a proclamation: we do not wake up in bed saying “I’m gay” or “I’m lesbian”; we wake up saying “I’m angry.” Last year I watched a panel on queer photography, where everyone was kind of fretting that this word had, over the years (thanks to academia), lost its edge. One of the presenters mentioned how, in Sweden, she had come across this new word being bandied about, which translates as “norm-critical.”

SP/ I think historicizing this by dating it to 1993 is really good because my gravitation

to abstraction is completely contextualized by that moment. At that point it became an interface with an audience that had more to do with learning about my own practice, and its possibilities, and its interface with institutions, than with the way I thought about it being lesbian or queer. It's only in the lectures that I had to give (thankfully for money) that I now frame it through a shortened biography of it being all of the parts of my nameable identities: second-generation Italian-American, Catholic, lesbian of a certain generation—and this is the tip of the iceberg. The thing I always have a problem with regarding “queer” is that it seems—I am sorry—like mush. I am fucking lesbian. Move over. I am never giving that up. I use queer to embrace the rest of the community, to use that term because of the evolution and the desire for less language-brokenness. But I think the pursuit of less language-brokenness at this point is purely academic. Fuck the language. What are we going to *do*?

GC/ There are two things that came up when I Google-searched the term “queer.” One, which I thought was beautiful, defined queer as “a non-normative look at what bodies can do.” Which one could say is formalist and could be a description of abstraction. The other one, from Douglas Crimp, is a lot more mysterious and something I keep thinking on—I haven't quite figured out what it means—but he describes queerness (and I might be grossly misquoting) as “the responsibility one embodies when everything else has been stripped away.”

SP/ Chitra, I want to hear from you: Why not abstraction? I think there are some interesting things in your work that I find wildly abstract in the old notion of “abstraction *from*” or in the amazing un-Americanness of your work. It does not comply with the canon we've been given.

CG/ I agree with you. When you guys were talking, something that I thought was interesting is how, over the last twenty years, my work has been consistently apprehended as queer in a way that actually reveals the sort of broadness of that category, whereas there feels like there's a lot more lockdown in racial categories, or in a binary logic of figuration/abstraction. I think those latter terms are a lot more controlled by the market: there's Asian Art with its collector base, contemporary Indian art, collectors focused on contemporary African American artists, etc. For me, the point of convergence is the idea of thinking about the discomforts or the fragilities or the failures of embodiment as a point of entry into thinking about an alternative narrative space, a different kind of imaginary that you're not necessarily asked to identify with, but which reverberates against one's own stream of consciousness, one's formation of narrative—life narrative, art narrative. My own art making was formed largely in response to what I felt was a visual absence all around me. We are in such a different time now, and it is fabulous, but growing up in Queens in the late 1970s and early 1980s, my early viewing consciousness was formed during a very different time in terms of what images were even available.

This was complicated by having come from a place where my family—upper caste Hindus—is actually part of the hegemonic, dominant group. There was a real collision between people who saw themselves as central rather than marginal subjects and had never experienced inhabiting a different location as immigrants, where it was all about their marginality. So taking this all together, I feel in a way that these experiences of having a kind of front row seat to marginality, combined with remixing visual ephemera and cultural detritus, yielded a critical mass of queerness, and was something that ended up finding its way into my work.

SP/ You were talking about the politics of mid-century abstraction in the United States and its relationship to the CIA. The other two things you made me think about historically are, first, its Jewishness. Basically, there were a bunch of New York Jews who did not personally grow up around a lot of religious pictures; they are not coming out of a history of depicting bodies. And then, second, there is the American appropriation of Eastern culture and Eastern art forms. It's interesting. It's like the surrealists and Africa, but now it's the Americans and the Eastern.

CG/ And it is also the idea of what gets considered abstract and what gets considered decorative, and how those categories are totally shaped by anthropology and colonialism, which influence why certain kinds of forms get classified in certain ways. My own work comes from the context of my

being an atheist who grew up culturally Hindu, and of making sense of those visual vernaculars—multi-limbed, shape-shifting, polymorphously spectacular iconography, for example. But on the other hand I think people who grew up in a non-representational visual culture, even those with overlapping experiences of a South Asian immigrant cultural background, would have a radically different orientation toward their art making, or a different starting point, at least—how they chose to proceed from that. There is now a lot of work being done with local abstraction, thinking about how to understand the visual language and architecture of Islamic traditions within larger canonical categories such as modernism or abstraction.

AF/ There are so many feelings flooding through me. But there were two super-interesting things happening here. One is the question mark about the historical moment, because I think it can't be detached from hegemony and the entire idea of Western European culture. For people who are culture-makers or art-makers, we have a very different understanding of abstraction than most people do. I find it super-interesting that I hadn't really thought about this, but I think you're right. Abstraction is a kinder type of code *because* it is non-corporeal. But I am old enough to remember the phrase, "I don't know much about art, but I know what I like." That really came out of the abstract moment, because most people don't understand at all what they are looking at when they are looking at abstraction. They feel very



Figure 5.

Installation view, “Read My Lips,” Knockdown Center, featuring a series of monotypes by Kerry Downey. Photo: Marie Catalano. Reprinted with permission.

detached from it because it’s not anthropomorphic; it does not relate to the body. It is not them, mirrored. I feel as though abstraction is locked into a death match with class, in this way. But I also feel, with all of these questions about queerness as capacious and as non-linear or non-anthropomorphic—and I love Doug [Crimp], but I think that’s the nuttiest quote I’ve ever heard—I do think that queerness-as-possibility has the potential for political meaning-making.

SP/ Yes, I think we are invested in it for that particular reason, because what you are saying is right. It is about taste in a particular moment, but then there are these onion layers. If I look at my work, abstraction is friendlier than a big vagina. Okay. If it is abstract, it is even friendlier when it is crocheted. So you have this presentation of craft. Queers are always playing against taste; we are always

running up against taste. As in, “Oh, you think that’s good? I am not going to wear that. You think that’s really groovy?” I think this is the difference—sorry, guys, I’m going to start an argument—between being lesbian and being gay. That was the old code: lesbians look like shit, and then bears appropriate how they look and it’s cool again. Except for Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt. His work is like shit and glamorous; it is crappy and fabulous. He is also somebody that likes to run against taste.

AF/ But that is also like Jack Smith.

SP/ Yes, exactly; it’s just a different strength. Taste just ends up being a dogmatic divide.

AC/ *Can I just jump in here for a minute? Just to center us a little more, I wanted to talk personally about the path that brought me to*

this show. My college experience was very much tied up in feminism and postmodernism; it villainized abstract expressionism, in a sense, as well as the neo-expressionism that was happening in the 80s at the same time as postmodernism. This was my experience of feminism and this was my education in feminism. I was taught to look at abstraction as if—and Mark, you touched on this—it's either Pollock's jizz or Frankenthaler's menstruation.

MJE/ Clement Greenberg said that. Not me.

AC/ Exactly. And that's not my thing either. But it was an extremely revelatory moment for me when I realized that abstraction could have a politics about it, and a lot of the conversations I've had with Kerry and Loren have been about how this is so much about embodiment, so much about thinking about how I live in the world. What we have talked about is opening up this multivalence of meanings, this multiplicity of ways to exist and to think and to represent things.

CG/ I think, along with that, the idea that abstraction could possibly have a politics also engages the fact that it always already *had* a politics. And one that was maybe not serving us.

AC/ Yes, exactly.

ELLIE KRAKOW/ I would be curious as to how you two [John Edmonds and Glendalys Medina] would respond to that, since you

have talked about the relationship to the body and abstraction, and I think it is perhaps a different approach than those of the other people.

JE/ For me, embodying or embodiment is definitely related to queerness. There have been a lot of conversations about queerness as beyond the body or outside the body; however, I am very interested in embodiment. I talked about casting people or finding people and making them my Doppelgänger, essentially. What is really interesting to me about embodiment is simply that you live in your own body and you can never actually embody someone else. I think that the aspiration to do something that is actually impossible, or the naming of what is ineffable in a way, is actually what is really interesting to me in thinking about queer identity or using bodies in work. For example, when Loren and I had a visit together, they were at the beginning of making the paintings in the show. When I came here today I said to them, "These look really great. I remember when you first started them. They are more recognizably fingers or hands now." When I first came upon them, I saw the inverse: I saw them as teeth. What is really interesting to me in looking at work that is perhaps figurative and queer, that hints at the body, is how something can signify the external but also at the same time make you think about your internal body, because that is a part of our bodies that we do not get to talk a lot about.

GM/ Can you repeat the question?

EK/ I was curious about how you might respond to this conversation, because it wasn't so much about the body in abstraction, whereas both of you had really talked about the body and abstraction, or about the body as a root to a kind of abstraction. So I was curious as to how you relate to it.

GM/ A lot of my work has to do with changing myself and improving myself, so it's hard not to be very present in myself, especially looking how I look and being who I am. It's a really hard question. When I think about my work and when I think about being queer—and I do: I identify as queer; I don't say I am a lesbian or I'm gay because this is too definitive for me—I think about how I can live in this body and destroy it at the same time. That is what I am thinking about all the time, even when I am embodying someone else's work or trying to master it—whatever that means—or getting as close to that person as humanly possible. I am still destroying myself because there is no other way to do it. But I am also recovering, too. I am constantly trying to destroy my body or my work, or to cut it up into pieces or manipulate it. My body in my work is very much connected to my identity as a human being, and what I am doing in my work is building something new, not only as an object, but also here inside myself. So it's just a really hard question.

CG/ I really relate to that. I feel that for abstraction, or figuration, or everything in between, the body and its contours are actually represented in the larger social order. So what stays

in, what comes out, where it is, whether it is appropriate or not—I feel as though there is a blurring going on, and all of these are strategies that can be harnessed to dissect and reimagine this representation. For instance, hair is fine on my head but then, on the floor, it is disgusting. On my head it is an ideal feminine marker of beauty, and then on the floor it is repulsive.

SP/ The object is back. I am seeing it everywhere, with young people as well.

GM/ I am all for the object.

SP/ The thing you [Glendalys] said about “cutting myself up,” I have never heard anybody say it that way. But for the past twenty years I have heard people say, “I have taken apart my work and put it back together in order to make it work.” That constant, internalized assessment, reassessment, refabrication. I keep thinking about the “Cyborg Manifesto” and thinking “uh-oh.” The early roots of that kind of thinking are where the imperfection of language stops because you are in the body and there is no language. As a maker, that is the most luxurious place of the abstract methodology, because there are no words.

GM/ That is what's so perfect about it.

AF/ Again, as a propagandist, I can really only see it in terms of capital. Hegemony is about capital; Western European aesthetics is about capital; colonialism is about capital; everything is about capital. What we are describing is the

destruction of capital, which is what queer can be: the re-organization, re-utilization, of capital.

LOREN BRITTON/ I am interested in tying together all the things we have been talking about. John, when you mentioned that studio visit with me, I thought you were going to say that the paintings looked like messes, because when I first started to make them, they felt like disasters. What you all were also talking about is the political utility of making messes. What does it mean to be in the mess, and in the space where the language is not attached to the work: as a maker, to be in that dialectical relationship with the thing you are making, where it has power over you and you have power over it and you are in this collective mess together? I have been thinking also about the relation to erasure, and to the periphery, to which we keep pointing. In the periphery, where do we erase and where do we make a mark?

In this context are Susan Stryker's "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix" in relationship to whose body is legible and why, or also Gordon Hall's writing on making messes and what it means to think

of the utility of messes in relationship to the archive. That is where my head has been going.

GC/ It seems like you two [John Edmonds and Glendalys Medina] in particular were talking about your practice as inhabiting an other, in conjuring up scenarios where you [Glendalys Medina] are inhabiting a person or approaching an identity, and where you [John Edmonds] are casting people to appear in, to embody, your hoods. I am curious in particular about you as younger queers—you are this second generation of whatever "queer" is. I am curious about what your relationship is to mentorship, and I am thinking in particular about your [Kerry Downey's] video, where you are spending a weekend with Angela Dufresne upstate and you are abstracting your time with her, recreating in a later performance the gestures she makes, which you have captured on camera, in particular her fly fishing. I am curious what that work is about. We are here still talking about what queerness is, so maybe you could talk about that in your practice, and about what your investment in abstraction is.

KD/ I don't always see a difference between abstraction and representation, or more specifically, I'm interested in how they blur or what they offer each other. I work a lot with the relationship between a bounded and an unbounded form. For me, this has to do with a relationship between an abjection or a slipperiness, and forms that are coded or visible.

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I am interested in mark-making and erasure in the margins. I am always thinking about what constitutes a visibility, and what constitutes an invisibility, and what's at stake in both.

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I am interested in mark-making and erasure in the margins. I am always thinking about what constitutes a visibility, and what constitutes an invisibility, and what's at stake in both. This is the tension between overt, subtle, and covert referents. In my videos I perform with my body, using this performativity to help locate the abstraction, while also using the abstraction to dislocate or unhinge the body and its representations. These forms of physical embodiment are about being a piece of meat, being of flesh, but they are also about the violence of this meat being gendered and overdetermined, being demanded to make sense. The work is also about internal states, holding space for a series of feelings that are hard to contain. So the relationship between the contained and the uncontained has to do with holding zones for things that feel impossible. When I think about this in terms of where we are politically, I think that these are questions of containers. What do we do with our rage? Where do we place it? My abstractions hope to offer spaces to be internal, to enable us to notice feeling-states and work shit out so that we are not placing that rage and shame onto others. It's a very contemplative space. I have always related, Glendalys, to your sense of the poetic—that your relationship to embodiment is a place of meditation. In making my video with Angela Dufresne, I felt like I was doing something similar to your work, which is that I was internalizing another personality, I was invested in another body (that was invested in mine). I do that a lot with my mentors. I feel like I have copied or taken on Sheila Pepe, Carrie Moyer, Elizabeth Murray, Amy Sillman, and Angela Dufresne. These

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When you talk about containers, bound, unbound, periphery, edge, you are using formal terms. We have all learned how, through description, to inhabit formalism with the body in a new way and to steal back the Pollock statement, 'I am nature.' I am fucking nature too, honey.

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radical women are really important art mothers for me. I take them on, I internalize them, because they create space for me to live and be my body in the world.

SP/ I just have to say, I met you as a young formalist.

KD/ I'm still a formalist.

SP/ I know, but you were younger. You were in school.

KD/ I'm twice as old as the day you met me.

SP/ That's scary for me. When I see the evolution of your work, what I see is a richer version of moves that came with that articulation and, now, the language to describe it. When you talk about containers, bound, unbound, periphery, edge, you are using formal terms. We have all learned how, through description,

to inhabit formalism with the body in a new way and to steal back the Pollock statement, “I am nature.” I am fucking nature too, honey. What your video work, Kerry, has thankfully done is given a new portal into this work for viewers who could not understand the work as simply pigment on paper in a contemporary context. They would see the edge of that form and say, “That is some crazy old school shit and we don’t understand how it works.” In tandem, your work has a new life that it did not have before. And Loren, I feel like you are pulling up into this moment where the tandem-ness is not necessarily required. The ability to use formal language as invocations of meaning by using the words that will describe things like body, body of work, the body of the work, my body: all of the metaphoric expansions of those words that have very ripe meaning and are very poetic in a way that for years was not literal enough.

ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANT/ I think those formal words—periphery, edge, visibility, visibility of the mark—become newly formal when they become politicized, when you are making them political. Which, for me, goes back to the body and comes around full circle.

KD/ I also agree with what Chitra said: that these marks and these forms are already inherently political. Loren

and I gesture toward and point arrows at this relationship between form and politics. Especially in my videos, I am literally pointing fingers and saying, “No really, I insist, this is political.” To state what is already happening and already there. I am performing these relationships. I hope that we can get to a place where we can look at art and understand that aesthetics and formalism are always ethical. We can’t be outside of ethical, political, systems when we make marks.

Notes

We’d like to extend a thank you to Geoffrey Chadsey, Ellie Krakow, and one unidentified participant who, although not officially asked to give presentations, contributed significantly to our discourse.

¹ David Getsy, “Abstraction and Its Capacities,” Lecture, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, October 25, 2015.



Figure 6.

Installation view of “Read My Lips,” Knockdown Center, featuring Loren Britton, One Mouth, Two Fingers (2016); Two Mouths, Three Fingers (2016); and Three Mouths, Four Fingers (2016). Acrylic, flasche, and glitter on canvas. Photo: Marie Catalano. Reprinted with permission.

² Julia Bryan-Wilson, Harmony Hammond, Tirza Latimer, "Queer Abstraction," Panel Discussion, California College of the Arts, San Francisco, October 31, 2014.

³ See Harmony Hammond, "Feminist Abstract Art: A Political Viewpoint," *Heresies* 1 (1977), reprinted in *Wrappings: Essays on Feminism, Art, and the Martial Arts* (New York: TSL Press, 1984), 19-28.

⁴ Liam Stacknov, "Mike Pence and 'Conversion Therapy': A History," *The New York Times*, November 30, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/30/us/politics/mike-pence-and-conversion-therapy-a-history.html?_r=0

KERRY DOWNEY (born Fort Lauderdale, 1979) is an interdisciplinary artist and teacher based in New York City. Downey's work explores how we interact with each other physically, psychologically, and socio-politically. Encompassing video, printmaking, and performance, their work wrestles with the possibilities and limitations of gender, intimacy, and relationality in late capitalist America. Recent exhibition venues include the Queens Museum, Flushing, NY; EFA Project Space, New York, NY; Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles, CA; the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, Annandale, NY; the Drawing Center, New York, NY; and Taylor Macklin, Zurich, Switzerland. In 2015, Downey was awarded the Joan Mitchell Foundation Emerging Artist Grant. Residencies and Fellowships include SHIFT at the EFA Project Space, the Drawing Center's Open Sessions, Real Time and Space in Oakland, CA, the Vermont Studio Center, and the Queer/Art/Mentorship Fellowship. They hold a BA from Bard College and an MFA from Hunter College.

JOHN EDMONDS (b. 1989) is an artist working in photography who lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. He received his MFA in Photography from Yale University School of Art and his BFA in Photography at the Corcoran School of Arts + Design. He is most recognized for his projects *Hoods* and *All Eyes On Me*, where he focused on the performative gestures and self-fashioning of young black men on the streets of America, as well as his evocative portraits of lovers, close friends, and strangers. He has held residencies at the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, *Light Work* & *FABRICA: The United Colors of Benneton's Research Center*. Recent exhibitions include *tête-à-tête* at the David Castillo Gallery, Miami, FL; *Do You See Me?* at the Diggs Gallery at Winston-Salem University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina; *James Baldwin/Jim Brown & The Children* at The Artist's Institute, New York, NY. His work is in both private and public collections, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art, FOAM Museum Amsterdam Library, the George Eastman House and at *ltd los angeles*.

MARK JOSHUA EPSTEIN is a visual artist and educator. Epstein's work has been shown in recent solo or two-person exhibitions at *Biquini Wax* Mexico City, *Brian Morris Gallery* New York and *Demo Projects* Springfield Illinois. He has had work in group shows at *Schema Projects* and *TSA Gallery* in Brooklyn and at *Geoffrey Young Gallery* in Great Barrington, MA, and has had a solo exhibition at *Vane Gallery* in Newcastle, England. Epstein has participated in a number of residency programs including the *Millay Colony*, the *MacDowell Colony*, and the *Saltonstall Foundation*, and was

LOREN BRITTON is an artist and curator based in New Haven, CT. Britton's work explores hybridity in image and form. They create things that exist between drawing, painting, and sculpture. Their work exists in relationship to the body and seeks to reimagine the possibilities of embodied language. Britton has exhibited nationally and internationally in solo and group exhibitions at Boston University, Boston, MA; Scott Charmin Gallery, Houston, TX; LTD Gallery, Los Angeles, CA; *Vanity Projects*, Miami, FL; *Field Projects*, New York, NY; Pelham Arts Center, Pelham, NY; *Schwules Museum*, Berlin, Germany; and *Siena Arts Institute*, Siena, Italy. Britton has participated in residency programs at *Eastside International*, Los Angeles, and *Studio Kura*, Fukuoka, Japan. Britton holds a BFA & BA from SUNY Purchase and they are currently an MFA candidate in Painting at the Yale School of Art.

ASHTON COOPER is a Brooklyn-based independent writer and curator. She has organized exhibitions at *Maccarone* in New York and the *Knockdown Center* in Maspeth, Queens. Recent writing projects include a catalog essay for *Mira Dancy's* exhibition at the *Yuz Museum* in Shanghai and an essay for a publication on artist *Ellen Cantor* to be released by *Capricious Press* in 2018. Her writing has appeared in *Art Review*, the *Brooklyn Rail*, *Modern Painters*, *Hyperallergic*, *Artinfo.com*, *Cultured*, *Art + Auction*, *Pelican Bomb*, *ASAP/Journal*, and *Jezebel*. She is the director of *Nicelle Beauchene Gallery* in New York.

recently the recipient of a NARS Foundation studio fellowship in Brooklyn, NY.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN is an artist and founding member of the Silence=Death and Gran Fury collectives. He has work in the permanent collections of MoMA, The Whitney, and the New Museum, and has been included in The Smithsonian Archives of American Art Visual Arts and the AIDS Epidemic Oral History Project. His book for University of California Press, *After Silence: A History of AIDS Through Its Images*, is scheduled for publication in Fall 2017, and he is curating a show on queer abstraction, *Found*, at the Leslie Lohman Museum in 2017. Finkelstein has been interviewed by The New York Times, Frieze, Artforum, and Interview, and he has spoken at Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and NYU.

CHITRA GANESH is a Brooklyn-based artist whose drawing, installation, text-based work, and collaborations suggest and excavate buried narratives typically absent from official canons of history, literature, and art. Ganesh graduated from Brown University with a BA in Comparative Literature and Art-Semiotics, and received her MFA from Columbia University in 2002. She has held residencies at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, New York University, Headlands Center for the Arts, Smack Mellon Studios, and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, among others. Her works have been widely exhibited across the United States including at the Queens Museum, Asia Society (New York), Berkeley Art Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego (California), and the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston, with solo presentations at PS1/MOMA (New York), The Andy Warhol Museum (Pittsburgh) and Goteborgs Konsthalle (Sweden). International exhibition venues include MOCA (Shanghai), Fondazione Sandretto (Italy), Monte Hermoso (Spain), Kunsthalle Exnergasse (Austria), Kunstverein Göttingen (Germany), and the Gwangju Contemporary Arts Centre (Korea). Her works are represented in prominent international collections such as the Museum of Modern Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art, San Jose Museum of Art, Baltimore Museum of Art, the Saatchi Collection (London), Burger Collection (Zurich) & Devi Art Foundation (New Delhi). Ganesh is the recipient numerous awards and fellowships including the Art Matters Foundation, the Joan Mitchell Foundation for Painting and Sculpture, and a 2012 John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship in the Creative Arts.

GLENDALYS MEDINA was born in Puerto Rico and raised in the Bronx and is an interdisciplinary artist who received

her MFA from Hunter College in 2008. Medina's work has been exhibited at such notable venues as the New Museum, Artists Space, Bronx Museum, and El Museo del Barrio. She was awarded a SIP fellowship at EFA Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop in 2016, a BACK IN FIVE MINUTES artist residency at El Museo Del Barrio in 2015, a residency at Yaddo in 2014, the Rome Prize in Visual Arts in 2013, a NYFA Fellowship in Interdisciplinary Art in 2012, and the Bronx Museum's Artist in the Marketplace residency in 2010.

SHEILA PEPE is best known for her large-scale, ephemeral installations and sculpture made from domestic and industrial materials. Since the mid-1990s Pepe has used feminist and craft traditions to investigate received notions concerning the production of canonical artwork as well as the artist's relationship to museum display and the art institution. Venues for Pepe's many solo exhibitions include the Smith College Museum of Art (Massachusetts) and the Weatherspoon Art Museum (North Carolina). Her work has been included in important group exhibitions such as the first Greater New York at PS1/MoMA; *Hand + Made: The Performative Impulse* in Art & Craft (Contemporary Art Museum Houston); and *Artisterium* (Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia). Pepe's work has been featured at the Leslie Lohman Museum of Lesbian and Gay Art in New York; the 8th Shenzhen Sculpture Biennale; the ICA/Boston's traveling exhibition *Fiber: Sculpture 1960–Present*; and *Diverseworks* (Houston, TX). Pepe has taught since 1995 at Brandeis University, Bard College, RISD, VCU, and Williams College—until 2006 when she took a full-time position at Pratt Institute as the Assistant Chair of Fine Arts. Her own artistic development was a mix of academic training and non-degree granting residencies: BFA, Massachusetts College of Art, 1983; Haystack School, 1984; Skowhegan School, 1994; MFA, School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston 1995; and Radcliffe Institute, 1998–99. Pepe was a resident faculty member at Skowhegan School, 2013. She is now a Core Critic in the Painting + Printmaking Department at Yale University.