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Authors

Sillman, Amy
Eisenman, Nicole
Simmons, William J.

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Taxi Ride to Gauguin: An Interview with Amy Sillman & Nicole Eisenman

Introduction by William J. Simmons

Identity, it seems, only operates at the level of subject matter in a realm untouched by the specificities of the medium. One is hard-pressed to find an analysis of the photographic process, for instance, in discussions of Laurie Simmons' interiors or Richard Prince's cowboys, two hallmarks of an era thought to be central in finally attending to the importance of gender and sexuality in mass media imagery. One certainly does not talk about the materials or composition of Judy Chicago's work either. No matter the route an artist takes to express the diversity of human experience, the materiality of his or her work fades away lest it not be "postmodern" enough. I wanted to know how sexuality can operate within and throughout, without being contained by, the medium, because, for many artists, the medium is as dear to them as their sexual or gendered identity.

When Amy Sillman said the words "queer formalism" to me, the possibility of reconciliation between sexuality and the artistic process finally seemed possible. The term, however, is fraught with paradoxes and productive impossibilities, which I attempted to address in an exploratory piece called "Notes on Queer Formalism."¹ Queer formalism represents a tentative process of joining identity with the medium; like a Möbius strip, the two are different, yet ultimately in the same plane and united for a brief moment by the body. Their intersections and diversions are, of course, difficult to pinpoint with surety. The medium requires the fixity of some point, a nucleus from which a work emanates and finds its material supports – be it a canvas or a body. Queerness operates in a similar manner as the medium; though it resists categorization and is ever-expansive, there is nevertheless an origin in an individualized bodily or gendered experience. Yet the limits of focusing on medium specificity as a criterion for the evaluation of a work of art makes a coexistence with more subjective forces tenuous at best.

¹ Simmons, William J. "Notes on Queer Formalism." *Big, Red & Shiny* 2, no. 15 (2014)

As Amy Sillman, Nicole Eisenman, and I were preparing this interview based on queer formalism, I made a happy discovery – Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy worked through similar issues in a recent issue of the College Art Association’s *Art Journal*.² It is clear that there is a widespread urge to consider exactly how gender and sexuality can be represented visually, a process that is more complicated than the simplistic, generalized readings that abound in today’s art historical discourse. This interview is another step in what I hope will be a wholesale reevaluation of the relationship between gender, sexuality, and the materiality of the art object.



²Doyle, Jennifer and Getsy, David. "Queer Formalisms: Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy in Conversation." *Art Journal* 72, no. 4: 58

Taxi Ride to Gauguin

AN INTERVIEW WITH

AMY SILLMAN & NICOLE EISENMAN BY WILLIAM SIMMONS



1. One of the tenets of queer formalism, as I see it, is a complex interchange between identities and mediums, personal histories and aesthetic histories. There is an ongoing process of owning or disowning one's chosen medium, just as one must wrestle constantly with one's competing gendered, artistic, racial, and sexual selves. When looking at your work, Nicole and Amy, I see a series of continuities and changes, such as Nicole's move from ink to painting, and now sculpture, and Amy's interest in digital technologies. No matter the medium, however, your investment in it remains fiercely rigorous and investigative. How has your changing engagement with various materials mirrored an evolution in your personal and artistic identities?

We both think that the various changes in our material practices have been more due to aesthetic restlessness, to an interest in trying something new, to getting out of the "regular" groove of painting in a painting studio, and/or to new technology being available (in Amy's case, just getting an iPhone, for example) rather than to anything that can really honestly be ascribed to queer or gay aspects of our lives. IE, we thought we'd have done that no matter what gender/preference we have. Nicole noted that who she slept with ~~hadn't changed~~, while her materials HAD. Amy noted that she had no idea what her sexual category is half the time, yet her materials had been fairly consistent til she got an iPhone.

IE - ONLY A FEW MATERIALS BUT NOT MUCH CONSISTENCY IN SLEEPING W/ ANYONE
 USUALLY SLEEPS WITH SAME GENDER - USES DIFFERENT MATERIALS

2. Community is doubtless central to both of your practices. It appears in both tragicomic beer gardens and portraits of the Williamsburg art scene. Nicole - you have characterized the crowds and groups in your paintings as simultaneously reckless and life-affirming. This is especially important given the charge of essentialism that often follows identity politics. There must be networks that act as buffers against sexism and homophobia, but that carries the risk of an effacement of individuality. How have communities, queer and straight, affected your work?

We both think that the work of being a painter is a markedly lonely, rather isolated kind of experience, basically being alone in a studio for long periods of time, and that consequently we sometimes enjoy being in the various communities that surround the studio, whether gay friends, or neighborhood pals, or artists we teach with or work with in some way, etc, but that mostly community is a kind of antidote to loneliness, and not really necessarily in a way that formally effects our work. In the case of Nicole's beer gardens, she made note of the fact that these began when she had young kids and was home a lot with family, NOT being able to go to beer gardens, feeling at that moment cut off from a community and nostalgic for it. And Amy noted that her portraits of the community of Wmsbg or Orchard artists were a matter of quite literally wanting to SEE the people's faces and spend time w/ the INDIVIDUALS who populate the crowds that are at openings or events where she goes socially.

- PEOPLE
- CROWDS
- SOCIAL LIFE
- COMMUNITIES
- BEER GARDENS
- OPENINGS
- SOCIAL GROUPS
- MASSES
- GROUPS
- OCCUPY
- PARTIES
- UNIONS
- ORGANIZATIONS



3. The labels of "woman," "queer," or "feminist" artist come at a price. There is at once the beauty of self-expression and the fear of relegation. How do you navigate the conflicting roles and responsibilities of being both an artist and a socio-politically aware human being?



YES!

CRUMPLED-UP ANYTHING
SEAWEED
PIPE CLEANERS
SAGE
RAINBOWS?
INDIGO
YARN?
CATS
YOGURT
HEXAGONS?
MAGIC BEANS
MENSTRUATION



ALSO POSSIBLE:
OIL PAINT
MARBLE
STEEL
PLASTER
ACRYLIC

SILLMAN'S QUICK TEST: DID YOU SHOPLIFT AS A TEEN? IF SO, YOU MAY BE QUEER, THOUGH IT'S NOT 100% CONCLUSIVE.

*(IF YOUR MEDIUM OR YOUR CLOTHING IS...)

Following up on the previous question, Is it possible to "come out" in paint, or sculpture, or iPhone drawings - in the medium rather than in subject matter?

We thought no.... that the medium itself is not "queer." But we did note our way of dealing with things in our "own" ways, which can't be separated from our identities: like putting things next to each other that don't "go" together (in Nicole's case), or making shapes with a purposeful awkwardness (in Amy's case). Nicole had some thoughts about the idea of the haptic, the tactile, but Amy questions these—does that mean that optics are male and straight, for example, and haptics are female and queer? Surely not? But the haptic and tactile IS of importance to both of us. We noted the difference between FORMAL and ABSTRACT.

SILLMAN SAYS: MY MEDIUM IS THAT QUEER?



"FAIR WEATHER FORMALIST"

HERE WE BEGIN TO DISAGREE

SURELY MAYBE!! BUT MAYBE NOT....

4. I would like to think in conclusion about the necessity of history to queer formalism. You both have worked to understand the histories and theories that have led us into the contemporary moment - psychoanalysis, Old Master painting, classical sculpture, gay and lesbian culture, Abstract Expressionism, and camp, just to name a few. Your investment in these narratives necessitates a more nuanced relationship with history - a new history even. How has looking to the past - personal, social, and political - influenced your current (and future) contributions to art historical discourse?

We thought that the burden of saying what is "queer" in art is more the task for art historians and art writers who interpret work, who describe or predict what the story of art is.... more than for us, who make art in a way that expresses formal concerns that are a weaving-together of our entire sense of identity or subjectivity of which queerness is a part: for example, isn't part of our formal sensibility the fact that we're thin or fat, that we're white and jewish, or the facts of our upbringing, our class or family backgrounds, or even how we're living our lives at that moment mentally: whether we went on a trip somewhere, whether we were drinking heavily, whether we lived in a suburb, or working in a factory, or what we were reading, or if we had partners or families or kids or lovers, etc--- all of which are matters of the BODY.

Rodin copied CHAMILLE CLAUDE's infinitely better artist whose ideas he took and capitalized on.

JUST IN!

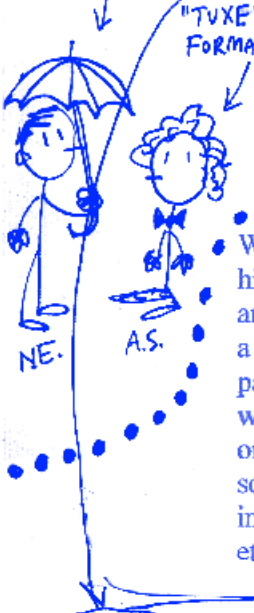
NIC EISENMAN'S

AND IT ALL STARTS TO BREAKDOWN

OKAY THIS IS NOT EISENMAN

This part is more A.S. than N.E. Being queer for me trumps all this other STUFF.

SILLMAN TOTALLY DISAGREES



"TUXEDO FORMALIST"

N.E.

A.S.

Let's BREAK IT DOWN PEOPLE, FORMALISM CAN NOT BE QUEER, ABSTRACTION CAN BE!

P.S: THIS IS WHERE SILLMAN + EISENMAN DON'T AGREE, SILLMAN SAYS MALE/STRAIGHT BODIES COMMUNICATE THRU THE BODY + HANDS ALL THE TIME TOO. HELLO RODIN!

The haptic experience in Look-Feeling™ Enables us to embody the meaning of a work of art. IT IS SO COOL that a body can communicate and pass on knowledge to another body via art. And yeah, I'd argue that this body-centric way of sharing knowledge/experience IS Female (ish) and QUEER!

I'm talking about male/female in terms of energy also cultural associations and conditioning NOT A GENDER BINARY. The body has always been the realm of the female in our culture however, the female is largely exiled. This is a condition under Patriarchy. Texture carries meaning into the body in a way that the brain can't know. IN a neural-centric culture such as ours, the body and haptics are rad and queer and Feminine. This is NOT "Ridic" this is a thought, A POSSIBILITY. © XON

SILLMAN WONDERS ABOUT THIS... I DON'T KNOW WHAT CAN BE QUEER....

WOULD MEAN THAT MALE = EYE AND FEMALE = BODY WHICH SILLMAN IS RIDIC.

SAYS YOU, YOU'RE JUST A PIECE OF DENTAL FLOSS

† Amy Sillman is an artist based in New York City. A retrospective of her work entitled "one lump or two" opened at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, and traveled to the Aspen Art Museum, with a final stop at the Hessel Museum of Art at Bard College's Center for Curatorial Studies opening in late June, 2014. Sillman also contributed to the 2014 Whitney Biennial.

‡ Nicole Eisenman is an artist based in Brooklyn. Her work is the subject of "Dear Nemesis," a retrospective originating at the Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis, and traveling to the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania and the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego. Her work was also included in the 2013 Carnegie International and the 2014 Manifesta at the Hermitage, St. Petersburg.

‡ William J. Simmons is a Ph.D. candidate in art history at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. His recent work includes "Of Vulvas and Car Hoods: William J. Simmons Interviews Judy Chicago" and "DESIRE" for the exhibition "Jimmy DeSana: Party Picks" at Salon 94.

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Address:

Haunt Journal of Art

Department of Art

Claire Trevor School of the Arts

University of California, Irvine

3229 Art Culture and Technology

Irvine, CA 92697-2775

Email:

hauntjournal@uci.edu

Website:

www.hauntjournal.org

http://escholarship.org/uc/uciart_hauntjournal

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