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Queer(ing) Phenomenology and Temporality in Del LaGrace Volcano's *Fluidfire* Series

According to prominent queer theorist Judith (Jack) Halberstam, “‘queer’ refers to non-normative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time.”¹ In presenting us with this definition, Halberstam allows us to explore new contexts and uses for the term “queer,” an opportunity that scholar Sara Ahmed has since capitalized on by using the word in a phenomenological context. In doing so, Ahmed offers us a new conception of human experience and consciousness as they are experienced and mediated through the body. According to Ahmed, contact with objects involves disorientation: that is to say, the touch of a thing that transmits something results in a disorienting effect. Using Ahmed’s “queer phenomenology” I will argue that the photography of contemporary artist Del LaGrace Volcano, specifically the *Fluidfire* series, with its exploration of intersubjectivity and the body, does not merely display non-normative sexualities and bodies to challenge mainstream notions of gender, sex, and sexuality, but also illustrates that queerness at a fundamental level relates to the interaction of oneself with the people and things around them—an interaction that not only disorients one’s own worldview, but also the temporality of their body to further disrupt the order of mainstream, normative society.

Sara Ahmed’s phenomenological discussion of disorientation, in which she describes a state of being that results from one’s contact with objects and the subsequent transmission of “something,” is key to fully understanding the queerness of Volcano’s *Fluidfire* series beyond the obvious discourse around gender, sex, and sexuality as they are represented on the body. Using a phenomenological approach, which studies human consciousness as it is informed and experienced through the body, Ahmed proposes that disorientation occurs when a subject comes

1 Judith (Jack) Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies and Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005).

into contact with an object, or opposing person, place, or thing. Through that contact, the subject experiences a transmission of “something.”² Thus, in the case of intimate relationships, like that of the *Fluidfire* series, both individuals experience this disorientation characterized by the physical contact and the consequent transmission of “something.” Ahmed also argues that disorientation inherently involves an intersubjective relationship in which both subject and object are equally constituted and marked in relation to one another; without one, the other could and would not exist. And the intersubjectivity arises, in one sense, out of the contact between two things.

Fluidfire, with its depictions of sexual activity and the subsequent emphasis on intersubjectivity, also illustrates a queer relationship between viewer and work that extends beyond the series’ direct illustration of queer sexuality. Self/other and subject/object relations, as found within and outside of *Fluidfire*, are not, as art historian Amelia Jones puts it, conflicted, but reciprocal; she writes, “every person is always already simultaneously both subject and object at the same time.”³ In other words, in the act of touching and their willingness to have those interactions captured on film, Harry and Simon, the individuals featured throughout the series, become the objects of Volcano’s camera as well as the subjects of the photographs. But the ambiguity of gender, sex, and sexuality in many of the images in *Fluidfire*, like *Lick* (2000), *Open* (2000), and *Smell* (2000), requires the viewer to interact with the works on a deeper level that moves us beyond viewer-as-subject, photograph (and those in it)-as-object. In *Smell*, two individuals are portrayed facing each other. With mouths slightly open and the differing angles of their heads, the individuals appear to be on the verge of, or having just finished, kissing. The work further emphasizes the physical relationality and intimacy between the individuals in the

² Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

³ Amelia Jones, “Meaning, Identity, and Embodiment: The Uses of Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology in Art History,” in *Art and Thought*, ed. Dana Arnold and Margaret Iverson (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003), 73.

work, but it does little to clarify the sex and sexuality of those portrayed for the viewer. In withholding those connoted aspects of identity—that is, sex as it normatively relates to the body and intimate relationship, or sex, as it relates to sexuality—Volcano requires us to construct deeper understandings of the photograph and to question what the artist’s intention was in deciding to use parts of the body that left sex and sexuality unidentifiable. As a result, we are forced to examine more closely our conceptions of gender, sex, and sexuality, particularly as they relate to our understandings of intimacy. We, as viewers, experience the work as an object but also those within the work as subjects; subjects whom, even from within a frame, force us to confront our own subjectivity.

Fluidfire, with both ambiguous and explicit images, requires viewers to think of the intimacy involved in sexual relations. Images like *Smell*, *Open*, and *Embrace* (2000) are unlike many of the other works in the series in that they do not emphasize a particular sexual act. Instead, *Smell* explicitly refers to the sense associated with what is captured in the photograph and adds a sensual element to the intimacy captured throughout the series. *Embrace* also requires us to acknowledge the intimacy involved in sexual relations. While Harry and Simon hold each other, we know little of what is going on between the parts of them we cannot see. What is evident though is a relaxation of their bodies, identified by the way they are both resting their chins against the other’s shoulder. There is a connection between the individuals in this work that goes beyond that which is physically expressed in the act of sex. *Embrace* shows us not just queer bodies, but queer bodies within a “normative” conception of intimacy. However, other works of *Fluidfire* more explicitly place that intimacy in the context of non-normative sex and sexuality as seen in images like *Touch* (2000) and *Proceed with Caution* (2000). In doing so, Volcano attempts not to simply emphasize the relationality of beings over their non-normative specificities with the hope of demonstrating the “universality” of intimacy; rather, the artist

queers intimacy, presenting us with a new understanding of relationality. For example, *Proceed with Caution* provides us with an aerial view of Harry and Simon engaged in intercourse. In the work, the genitalia of both individuals, while exposed, remains ambiguous. And while this site of coming together is the central focus of the image, we are also able to see the subjects' tangle of limbs and their engagement in kissing. In contrast to the relatively small point at which their genitalia come together, the rest of Harry and Simon's bodies, and their embrace, take up the majority of the frame. With a visual emphasis on the way Harry and Simon hold each other, the way they further their intimate connection through kissing, and the indistinctness of their genitalia, the image proposes relationality as the dominant feature of this series.

Connected to the disorienting effect and intimacy of *Fluidfire* is Michel Foucault's concept of the utopian body, a body that is located in the present. Accounting for why he considers a body located in the present to be utopian, Foucault regards the body as always elsewhere. However, he continues his philosophy by saying, "Love, like the mirror, appeases the utopia of your body, it hushes it, it calms it...and if we love, so much to make love, it is because, in love, the body is here."⁴ Ideally, this would mean that regardless of gender, sex, or sexuality, sexual acts and intimacy unite the individuals engaged in that activity in the here and now. However, as Halberstam points out, Foucault's conceptions of sexuality as they relate to time and space were primarily informed by normativity. As a result, his concept of the utopian body neither fully accounts for the unique temporalities of the queer bodies in *Fluidfire*, nor the contexts in which said queer bodies can become utopian.

However, queer bodies like those represented in *Fluidfire* experience, "temporalities that develop in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction, functioning

4 Michel Foucault, "Utopian Body," in *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art*, ed. Caroline A. Jones (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 233.

in a space with curtailed futures, intensified presents, and reformulated histories.”⁵ Operating under the premise of a diminished future, queer bodies are already located in the present. Thus according to Foucault’s definition, the utopian body is already realized by the queered individual. In this context of temporality the queer body and the utopian body are thus one in the same. Yet, while both the utopian body and the queer body are defined by their presence in the here and now, their very existence among other “things” subjects them to disorientation, which results in the constant change of one’s embodied experience. Steve Pile’s argument regarding the queer bodies of resistance, perhaps most accurately explains the paradox here: queer and utopian bodies are neither fixed, nor fluid, but both and more.⁶ I believe it is key to remember here that presence does not equal concreteness. Perhaps it is best to think of it in the following terms: disorientation, or the *moment* of touch and transmission, provides an instant of stability and presence to the mutating body and identity that characterizes queerness. By this I mean that while one can be disoriented repeatedly, experiencing the moment of touch and transmission characteristic of disorientation, situates, and thus stabilizes, the body in the present, even if it is only for a second.

Here, we shift from a discussion of the temporalities of Harry and Simon within *Fluidfire* to the temporalities of us as viewers and how those, as well as the locations of Harry and Simon, may be impacted by a critical theory of photography. Roland Barthes, in his *Rhetoric of the Image*, writes, “the type of consciousness the photograph involves is indeed truly unprecedented, since it establishes not a consciousness of the *being-there* of the thing [which any copy could provoke] but an awareness of it *having-been-there*.”⁷ By this he means that in *being-there* the

5 Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*.

6 Steve Pile, “Introduction: Opposition, Political Identities, and Spaces of Resistance,” in *Geographies of Resistance*, ed. M. Keith (New York: Routledge, 2000), 1-32.

7 Roland Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image,” in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (New York: Routledge, 2003), 120.

subject of the image is firmly situated in an earlier time and place with a copy simply capturing the moment and preserving it for the present. In contrast, *having-been-there* refers to the subject(s) as being part of the immediate present (the *here-now*) as well as located in an earlier time and place (*there-then*). In this sense, Barthes argues that photography transgresses a specific time or place; as a medium it connects past with present but does not concretely situate its subject(s) in either. What Barthes fails to account for though, is that *our* intersubjective relationship with the work of art, in which we both identify and are identified by the work's content, gives rise to a number of interpretations. While you may identify with the subjects of Embrace as *being-there*, I may recognize the *having-been-there* quality of the subjects. In other words, your own identity and worldview may lead you to focus on the work as a copy of non-normative sexual activity, rather than as a work that has implications for us in the present: mainly, that it has the power to disorient us and our understandings of gender, sex, and intimacy.

While Del LaGrace Volcano's *Fluidfire* series represents queer bodies and sexualities in an effort to challenge heteronormative understandings of gender, sex, and sexuality in the context of intimacy, it also demonstrates that queerness is constructed through our interactions with the people and things around us. Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology allows us to understand the queerness of intimacy and the intersubjectivities, both between subjects within the work as well as between the work itself and the viewer; in this sense, we both construct the identity of *Fluidfire* and ours in turn is constructed by the series each time we interact with, or view, it. Throughout our exploration of the series, we are able to connect Ahmed's disorientation to the queered intimacy evident in *Fluidfire* as well as problematize Foucault's utopian body with Halberstam's conception of queer time and space. This re-presentation of the temporality of the bodies in *Fluidfire* not only challenges us to question our heteronormative understandings of time and space as we look at the works, but also makes us re-examine the way we understand our

own location in relation to the series. In doing so, *Fluidfire* further disrupts traditional, orderly conceptions of gender, sex, and sexuality and challenges social structures of heteronormativity.

KEYWORDS: queer, body, phenomenology, disorientation, Del LaGrace Volcano, gender, sexuality, temporality, Halberstam, Foucault.