

PERFORMING & REFUSING QUEER

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Queer(ed) Performativity frames a set of questions, rather than answers them; seeks to trouble notions of queerness, rather than settle them. The exhibition underscores the fact that we've become accustomed to a certain queer standard, a set of boxes to tick, a system of checks and balances that ensures that one is either a bit too queer, or never queer enough. Queerness, while actively misunderstood and misrepresented by the mainstream, is relentlessly policed and regulated (both from within and outside the community) until it serves its purpose: as a note of comedic and anxious relief, a catch-all for the uneasiness felt from the deconstruction of gender binaries and the shifting attitudes towards the fluidity of sexuality. The exhibition frames queer identity as excessive, illogical, fluid, radical dissent, femme, masc, non-conforming, everything and nothing. Queerness deconstructs the codes with which our social order is given meaning and creates something new, something not-yet-understood. It was the late queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz who wrote that queerness is futurity, it is a glimpse into a world not-yet-fully-realized-here.

Queer identity is often framed as "undefinable." Queerness is constantly shifting and resisting definition; however, there are moments of rest, moments in which the performativity of queerness is visible, visualized, and recorded. This "moment" is what scholar Sara Ahmed describes as being "out of sorts." Ahmed writes, "to be out of sorts is how a body that does not reside properly within a system affects the system (becoming a distortion, a body in the wrong place, a willful thing)."¹ Performance and performativity, for this exhibition, are both conscious and subconscious reflections on what it means to be out of sort. There is a concern with

both performance itself and the representation and visualization of performativity through the body, gesture, objects, and artifacts.

In 2017, the activist group *No Justice No Pride* blocked portions of the parade route during Capital Pride, protesting the organization's close ties with corporate sponsors and the Metropolitan Police. The protest was one example of the long and deeply divided history between queer liberationists and queer assimilationists. Whether you agree or not with the public demonstration, the action begs the question: in the fight for equality and visibility, what concessions do we make? Who do we leave behind? What part of ourselves do we give up or forgo for recognition from the majority? Those who identify as cis white queers, who enjoy the privileges of affluence and social mobility are more likely to justify a politics of assimilation. The closer your proximity to the center (and the center here being cis white heteronormativity), the larger your blind spots. It is the blind spot of privilege that encourages complicity. It's a fact plenty are uncomfortable facing. In January 2018, British actress Michaela Coel, the creator and star of the comedy *Chewing Gum*, penned a pointed op-ed in *British Vogue*. Entitled "Flight or Fight," the article underscores the violence of privilege and prejudice while offering a firm resolution. She writes, "Socialisation is not optional. It's an inescapable contract, and our birth into the world is our signature of agreement. Norms and ideologies vary from society to society, and most of them weren't formed during our lifetimes but were handed down from one generation to the next... None of us signed that contract willingly. What is your responsibility, however, is how you respond to this news. Or whether you care at all."²

Queer(ed) Performativity, which includes sculpture, installation, video, textile, painting, performance and photography, works to negotiate the terms of that social contract. At moments serious, reflective, melancholic, and at others humorous, playful, erotic, and imaginative, *Queer(ed) Performativity* reflects the notion that there is never one way, or "right" way, to be queer. The show intervenes in the overwhelmingly white homonormative narrative of queer identity and activism.

Stephanie Mercedes's installation references queer identity and its relationship to the law and legal contracts. Including a non-disclosure agreement and a marriage license contract, each contract questions the ways in which the law both helps and hinders progress. Much of queer activism in the United States -- including the fight for antiretroviral drugs in the 1990s, the military ban, gay marriage, and now gender neutral bathrooms -- has relied on the judicial system to overturn discriminatory laws and policies; however, Mercedes asks us to question the trouble with compromise. Who is reflected in these fights? Who is left behind? Whose voice and agency is recognized and whose is neglected?

Antonius Bui, after visiting Vietnam for the first time, explores queer ancestry. Displaying select photographs of Vietnamese couples, from what one may assume is around the mid-twentieth century, Bui traces a lineage of queer identity and expression. Their work is revisionist in the sense that both their photographic and performance practice is an active, critical engagement with a forgotten queer history. Additionally, Bui's fortune cookie installation, taking inspiration from the late Félix González-Torres, confronts anti-blackness, queerness, and asian complicity. The 9,292 cookies represents the amount of days Bui will be alive by the close of this exhibition. Viewers are encouraged to open, consume, and reflect on the work.

Eames Armstrong's series of paintings invest in the absurdity, ambiguity, and humour of queer identity. The work does not avoid the messiness of queer identity, but rather invites it in, plays in it, with it, and around it.

Photographers David Vassalli and Myles Loftin use the medium as a tool of both fact and fiction, reality and fantasy. Vassalli documents queer spaces and bodies. His figures play with the fantasy of drag and house ball culture, pointing to the social construction of gender and identity expression. Loftin's photo series "Lines of Dysphoria" depicts the physical and psychological transition of 19-year-old, gender queer artist, Chella. The lines drawn on the body trace the psychological dysphoria that physically manifests. The viewer is confronted with society's perception of a body in transition and the internal struggle for a trans individual to find peace in that transition.

Performance and conceptual artists Hoesy Corona and Rex Delafkaran explore the fantasized and mythologized figure of queer. Delafkaran's work develops both a literal and metaphorical language. Through the use of text, tongues, and language, she develops a strategy to come to terms with the multiple facets of her own identity - queer, racialized, stigmatized, exoticized. Corona's video and installation deconstructs the construction of whiteness through the lens of queer domesticity, ultimately unraveling the fraught relationship between whiteness and queerness.

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1. Sara Ahmed, "Out of Sorts," *feministkilljoys* (blog), October 15, 2014, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/10/15/out-of-sorts/>.

2. Michaela Coel, "Flight or Fight: Michaela Coel On Why We Need To Talk About Race." *British Vogue*, January 30, 2018, <http://www.vogue.co.uk/article/michaela-coel-on-why-we-need-to-talk-about-race>.