

Queering Psychoanalysis:  
The Queer Unconscious and Contemporary Art

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Psychoanalysis has equipped art historians, scholars, critics, and artists, with a variety of tools to consider individual and collective cultural drives. However, the way it is often deployed is exclusive to heteronormative desire and gender-sex binaries. Psychoanalysis' traditional role is to place heterosexual desire as the normative peak of sexual evolution—and equally problematic—the normative unconscious pleasure and desire. Thus, to queer psychoanalysis, is to insert non-heteronormative desire and non-conforming gender-sex roles into the reading. This is crucial as artists are producing and living in a contemporary queer experience that Freud or Lacan could not have, or did not want to predict. A place where compulsory heterosexuality is dismissed, sexual labels are multiplying, genders are non-conforming and the diverse biological experiences of intersex and trans\* folk demonstrates sex as a binary construction to be disassembled. I wish to stress that queer desires and diverse biological experiences are not a “new” phenomenon, but existed previously where gender, sex, and sexuality were (and still are) policed and regulated. Four separate works will be used to reconsider common psychoanalytic theories such as the gaze, the uncanny, castration, and psychosexual development in this queer context. Unlike scholars like Deleuze and Guattari, I see psychoanalysis as offering us valuable tools for engaging with ideas of pleasure, desire and drives. It is a matter of rethinking the sweeping statements about human sexuality—recognizing that sexuality is an individual and diverse experience—and applying these concepts appropriately to those who were derogatorily termed “queer”.

Although we should be critical of how psychoanalysis is fundamentally disempowering for women,<sup>1</sup> offering us little to consider female sexuality outside of the realm of the

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<sup>1</sup> Kathryn M. Blake "A Contemporary Feminist Critique of Psychoanalysis through Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari." Thesis. Rutgers University, 2009. Web.

heterosexual and penetrative. I would also like to draw attention to how psychoanalysis has been worked with race theory explore how racialized bodies are sublimated and fetishized.<sup>2</sup>

Psychoanalysis, none the less, gives us a vocabulary of concepts and tools which help us address desire, making it a useful, but not perfect discourse.

As I already mentioned, psychoanalysis itself is not dismissive of queer sexualities. At its foundation, psychoanalysis allows us to expand and broaden what sexuality can be. Lacan radically theorized sexuality as the site where “the critical forces of subjectivity and the Other converge in vital and complex ways.”<sup>3</sup> Scholar, Eve Watson continues this expansion stating “sex refers to both the conscious and unconscious knowledge and it forces a confrontation with the conceptual limits of the terms sexuality, gender and sex beyond the coordinates of the well known.”<sup>4</sup> Lastly, Lacan’s conception of sexuality is not as simple as sex. The necessity of the Other means that “we are neither fully defined by our erotic relations nor are they entirely personal.”<sup>5</sup> Lacanian psychoanalysis positions sexuality broadly to be able to incorporate radically different conceptions of (a)sexuality from heteronormativity. Both Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis problematize the “natural” attraction between the binary sexes.<sup>6</sup> Lacan’s understanding of sexuality “emerges independently of heterosexuality and homosexuality” and therefore “dismantles the normalizing implications... This account of sexuality ought to be attractive to anti-normative politics” according to Watson.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Lisa E. Farrington “Reinventing Herself: The Black Female Nude” *Woman’s Art Journal* vol. 24, no. 2 (Autumn 2003- Winter 2004), pp. 15-23.

<sup>3</sup> Eve Watson. ‘Queering Psychoanalysis/Psychoanalysing Queer’, *Annual Review of Critical Psychology*, 7. 2009. pp. 114-139 <http://www.discourseunit.com/arcp/7.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Watson. ‘Queering Psychoanalysis/Psychoanalysing Queer’

<sup>5</sup> Watson. ‘Queering Psychoanalysis/Psychoanalysing Queer’

<sup>6</sup> Watson. ‘Queering Psychoanalysis/Psychoanalysing Queer’

<sup>7</sup> Watson. ‘Queering Psychoanalysis/Psychoanalysing Queer’

Psychoanalysis' main detriment to alternative sexualities is where it positions non-genital fixations on the evolutionary hierarchy of pleasure that Freud theorized as psychosexual development. Freud theorized so-called juvenile fixations of the oral, anal, phallic, and latency as stepping stones to heterosexual penetrative sex as the final genital stage.<sup>8</sup> This model highlights phallic-vaginal penetration as the pinnacle of evolution which is problematic not just to queer sexualities, but a variety of other sexual identities and practices. Queer artist Keith Boadwee's work *Untitled (Purple Squirrt)* (fig. 1) can be used to critique this natural evolution of sexuality and its implications for art. Boadwee filmed two video loops of himself painting by ejecting paint from his anus and replicating a Pollockian composition in the process.<sup>9</sup> As Amelia Jones has noted, his gesture undermines the masculinized action painting. The site of creation is no longer the brush/phallus but the abject anal orifice, which in the cultural imaginary is connected to homosexual pleasure.<sup>10</sup> Because this work invites the Abstract Expressionism comparison due to its formal composition, it brings the politics of the phallic/genital in conversation with the anal of psychosexual development. I see the work as deconstructing the hierarchy of development by essentially replicating Pollock's form without the aid of the brush/phallus. By exclusively using the anus as the means of production, this equalizes the two modes of painting and thus their corresponding standing in psychosexual theory. The work of queer artists like Boadwee, successfully critiques psychoanalytical theories and their implications for the field of sexuality.

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<sup>8</sup> Sigmund Freud. "Three Contributions to the Sexual Theory: I. The Sexual Aberrations., II. The Infantile Sexuality., III. The Transformation of Puberty." 1910. *Three Contributions to the Sexual Theory*. N.p., n.d. Web. 22 Nov. 2014. <<http://www.bartleby.com/278/1.html>>.

<sup>9</sup> Tracy Warr and Amelia Jones. *The Artist's Body*. London: Phaidon Press, 2012. Print.

<sup>10</sup> Amelia Jones. *Body Art/performing the Subject*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998. Print.

The gaze in film and art criticism is utilized through a lens that is fundamentally disempowering to the female subject and always assuming a male viewer. As appropriate as this may be for standard cinema, what happened when a female identified viewer garners pleasure from the fetishized female body through the “masculine gaze”? Homosexual, or in this case specifically lesbian sexuality, according to psychoanalytical thinking is characterized by its “sameness associated with preoedipal, adolescence, (and) narcissism.”<sup>11</sup> Debroah Bright working in the Pictures or Appropriation art practice, utilized film stills and her butch body to détourn, undermine, and reinterpret the original meaning of cinema’s heteronormativity. Her work *Dream Girls* (fig. 2), overturns the feminist critiques of cinema—with its heterosexual objectifying voyeurism—and queers Hollywood scenarios. She photomontages herself into movie stills, such as those from “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” where she beats the male suitor to light Holly Golightly’s cigarette. “Bright’s interventions not only overturn normative economies of heterosexual desire with the erotic charge of the butch/femme gendering” but also simultaneously exposes traditional heterosexual gendering as a performative drag or “high camp.”<sup>12</sup> Although, I think we should be aware of how the gaze, by nature lacks consent and carry that into the queer context, Bright’s intervention acts as a supposedly documented experience, not a voyeuristic fantasy. The retroactive photomontage of Bright’s real body into the film still plays up the impossibility of the scenario. I would argue however, that Bright is completely self aware of the initial gaze through the cycle of the fantasy (gaze), the supposedly real (photomontage) and the actually real (denied

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<sup>11</sup> Judith Roof “‘The Community of Dolphins’ v. ‘The Safe Sea of Women’: Lesbian Sexuality and Psychosis.” ed. Dean, Tim, and Christopher Lane. *Homosexuality & Psychoanalysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. Print.

<sup>12</sup> Catherine Lord and Richard Meyer. *Art & Queer Culture*, 2013. Print. 180.

interaction). Bright here, is queering gender and queering the implications of the traditionally patriarchal scopophilic gaze.

For the next two works, I invite the reader/viewer to take the pieces as they are explored thematically and consider them outside of the exclusive narrative I am presenting. I will discuss Ray's work using the uncanny in tandem with polychrome hyperrealist sculpture, and Quinn's work in terms of castration and diverse biological bodies, but invite the theoretical arguments to be considered on either work. In *The Queer Uncanny*, Paulina Palmer explores the implications of Freud's uncanny for the queer body. She explores how the queer body does not display visible difference like other "others". It is this "invisibility" that produces homophobia from this "border-anxiety."<sup>13</sup> The lack of difference between the queer and heterosexual body means that the sexual boundaries are permeable and this causes heterosexual fears about sexuality.<sup>14</sup> Charles Ray's work, appropriately titled *Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley...* (fig. 3) features "eight very pink, entirely naked, life-size mannequins of the artist, arranged in a circle as to suggest an orgy."<sup>15</sup> As homosexuality is theorized with narcissism, the desire here is not of the Other but of the self. According to psychosexual development, queer sexuality refuses to "evolve" and this work also rebuts those theories. I would like to add that this work analyzed through a consideration of asexuality, is also of noteworthy interpretation as an alternative to compulsory psychoanalytical penetrative heterosexuality. Ray's mannequins—in the tradition of polychrome hyper realist sculpture—are anatomically correct, the life casts index the artists actual body, trace reality and shatter the privacy of the real unsublimated naked body. Ray's self-pleasing fantasy

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<sup>13</sup> Paulina Palmer. *The Queer Uncanny: New Perspectives on the Gothic*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012. Internet resource.

<sup>14</sup> Palmer. *The Queer Uncanny*.

<sup>15</sup> Lord. *Art & Queer Culture*.

does not involve the unfamiliar but the *very* familiar self. As the uncanny is about both the strange and the relatable, I would argue the work is hyper-uncanny as the unfamiliar and familiar are exaggerated. The artist's self is made foreign from its distancing from the artist's physical body—which is emphasized by the life cast process tracing the real body—but simultaneously too familiar from its multiplied presence. The uncanny here is queered as Ray represents his “masturbatory fantasy” and queers the “heterosexual auto eroticism” using the self body.<sup>16</sup>

Lastly, how can we adapt psychoanalysis to incorporate the diverse biological bodies in the contemporary queer experience? The normative epistemic body is white, male, heterosexual, cis-gendered, and cis-sexed. It is the unconscious castration anxiety in males and the realization of the differences between the sexes that characterize Freud's theory. In this framework, the female body is “othered” and a site of fear because of its traumatic castration, thus it needs to be sublimated and fetishized. But, intersex and trans\* bodies, relative to psychoanalysis are not normative—because they are not male—and not even normatively feminine. Thus, in the understanding of intolerance and transphobia they are abject. Intersex and trans\* experiences help us confront that sex is a binary creation and in the wake of post-structuralism needs to be deconstructed accordingly. Intersex refers to a range of realities where one's reproductive or sexual anatomy does not correspond to the relative “sexual standard.”<sup>17</sup> For example, this may involve chromosomes, hormone levels, genital appearance or function. Trans\* refers to diverse experiences where someone will determine their gender or sex for themselves (Assigned Male at Birth: transitioning Male to Female, or Assigned Female at Birth, transitioning Female to Male).

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<sup>16</sup> Lord. *Art & Queer Culture*.

<sup>17</sup> “What is Intersex?” Intersex Society of North America. Web. 20 Nov. 2014. [http://www.isna.org/faq/what\\_is\\_intersex](http://www.isna.org/faq/what_is_intersex)

A range of interventions may be pursued such as altering gender performance, hormone therapy or surgical body modifications. Barbarically, some countries require trans\* people to be sterilized before they may legally change their identity.<sup>18</sup> What I mean to demonstrate is that many bodies do not fit the normative definition of sex and how can this be reconciled with psychoanalytic theories of humanity fixated on the standard phallus?

Sculptor, Marc Quinn, is not identified as a queer or trans\* artist but his work *Buck and Allanah* (fig. 4) cast two prominent transsexual porn actors into a bronze statue. According to psychoanalysis the “male” possesses the phallus, while the “female” is violently stripped of the phallus, castrated, and harbours penis envy. However, here both models have their original genitalia. Allanah Starr, as a transwoman possesses the phallus and Buck Angel, as a transman is a site of castration. In the same show, Quinn featured a pristine white marble statue of transman Thomas Beatie, known as the “pregnant man”. This is fundamentally at odds with how Freud theorized the gendered and sexed development of the child upon realizing sexual difference at the site of the cis-mother. While Freud, may not have been thinking about trans\* or intersex bodies and psychosexual development, Quinn here is representing these bodies, in their real likeness unsublimated or fetishized to confront theories like castration anxiety. We should be critical of how art writer Ben Luke refers to Quinn’s exhibition as a “freak show”, demonstrating ignorance and transphobia, however he highlights how the materiality functions to memorialize these non-normative bodies. Traditional statue media like bronze and marble evoke the aestheticized, idealized, and sublimated archetypal bodies of antiquity, Renaissance, and neo-

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<sup>18</sup> “24 countries in Europe still require sterilization from trans people.” TGEU: Transgender Europe. Web. 20 Nov. 2014 [http://www.tgeu.org/TGEU\\_Media\\_Release\\_IDAHOT\\_2013](http://www.tgeu.org/TGEU_Media_Release_IDAHOT_2013)



Classicism, and invites us to reconsider our standards of beauty.<sup>19</sup> Art historian Charmaine Nelson, explores how the intersections of race and sex in neo-Classical sculpture are symbolic. As sex “marks” the body, racial signifiers taken as biology harbour symbolic significance, and thus these two types of marks “the biological and symbolic, are not of necessity predetermined in their definitions or correlations. Hence, female biological sex does not essentially signify sexual lack within the symbolic order, rather only within a symbolic function phallogcentrically.”<sup>20</sup> If we consider this to Quinn’s trans\* models, the sexual signifiers are solely symbolic, and thus it confronts the viewer to reinterpret their own prejudices and ideas of sex, revealing it as a construction and dismantling Freud’s transmisoginist gender-sex binary theories on development. The classic ideas of the female body as castrated, harbouring penis envy, and the male’s love of his phallus and coinciding castration anxiety are rebutted by simply displaying two trans\* bodies in precious material connoting the idealized and archetypal bodies of art history.

In queering psychoanalytical concepts, I hope I have demonstrated how these theories are useful when applied correctly to diverse sexualities and bodily experiences. Psychoanalytical thought has room to account for queer pleasures and conceptions of the body beyond detrimental gender-sex binaries. Certain theories from psychoanalysis have been absorbed and appropriated into mainstream culture and the discipline of art history. Queer contemporary artists’ and their colleagues are engaging with their (sexual, bodily) experiences and since psychoanalytic thought is not leaving us it needs to tolerate us. So therefore, it must be queered.

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<sup>19</sup> Ben Luke. “Marc Quinn’s Freak Show” London Evening Standard. Web. 20 Nov. 2014. <http://www.standard.co.uk/arts/marc-quinns-freak-show-7419735.html>

<sup>20</sup> Charmaine Nelson. *The Color of Stone: Sculpting the Black Female Subject in Nineteenth-Century America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007. Internet resource. xx.

## Plate List



Fig. 1

Keith Broadwee  
*Untitled (Purple Squirt)*  
1995  
Duraflex Print

image sourced from: [http://keithbroadwee.com/artwork/645131\\_Purple\\_Squirt.html](http://keithbroadwee.com/artwork/645131_Purple_Squirt.html)

Fig. 2

Deborah Bright  
*Dream Girls*  
1989-90  
Photomontage

image sourced from: <http://butch-in-progress.tumblr.com/post/37349833165/deborah-bright-dream-girls>





Fig. 3

Charles Ray  
*Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley...*  
 1992  
 Various Materials

image sourced from: <http://charlesraysculpture.com/collections/oh-charley-charley-charley/>



Fig. 4

Marc Quinn  
*Buck and Allanah (Lifesize)*  
 2009  
 Orbital sanded and flap wheeled  
 lacquered Bronze

Image sourced from: <http://www.marcquinn.com/work/view/subject/allanah%20buck%20catman%20chelsea%20michael%20pamela%20and%20thomas/#/2204>

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