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Moya Shpuntoff

Washington University in St. Louis

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Moya Shpuntoff

Wax Bodies: Candles, Queerness, & Taking Up Space

May 6, 2016

Bachelor's of Fine Arts
Concentration in Sculpture

Washington University in St. Louis
Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Art

Abstract

My partner and collaborator Callaway Fox and I use queer surrealist installation, craft practices, and performance in order to address queer and disabled temporality, articulating our experiences as disabled queer femme artists through abstracted and literal exploration of femme bodies in space. In performance and installation works *Hospital Performance: Part I* and *Hospital Performance: Part II*, we responded to our experience of marginalization, medical malpractice, and emotional isolation, ultimately exploring queer and disabled temporality through queer surrealism. Hand-poured scented candles became metaphors for queer and disabled bodies, and along with other craft practices used in this work, are a part of a larger context of queer femme appropriation of craft and femme aesthetics. Medical equipment served as witnesses to trauma, and we reclaimed these objects as a way to come to terms with the severity of my illness and its treatment. Through performance, we blended reality with elements of femme camp and drag, using our bodies as direct evidence of our experiences. Influenced by contemporary queer artists Caitlin Rose Sweet, Mars Hobrecker, Leah James, and Mindy Rose Schwartz, as well as the historical queer surrealist precedent of Frida Kahlo, we are interested in continuing to explore the intersectionality of our identities and the strength of queer femmeness through installation and performance work.

Introduction

In creating our work, my partner and collaborator Callaway Fox and I use queer surrealist installation, craft practices, and performance in order to address queer and disabled temporality, articulating our experiences as disabled queer femme artists through abstracted and literal exploration of femme bodies in space. *Hospital Performance: Part I* and *Hospital Performance: Part II* are our response to my most recent and longest hospitalization since my childhood diagnosis, through the lens of myself and Callaway as we navigate the aftermath of medical malpractice, the silencing of our identities, and what it means to be queer, disabled femmes who love each other and create art through this pain.

Hospital Performance: Part I refers to the actual experience of being in the hospital, which we consider to be a collaborative performance piece, lasting from February 26th to March 3rd, 2016 (see fig. 1). During that time, Callaway and I both performed; performing “sick enough” for medical attention, “healthy enough” for agency, “helpful, credible partner” for doctors to listen, among other roles necessary in order to get me the care that I needed. The personal narrative of this story is integral to *Hospital Performance: Part II*, in which we reimagined the experience in a way that feels healing for us, structuring that space around ideas of self-advocacy, queerness, and the struggle of proving pain.

Hospital Performance: Part II is an installation and performance piece that sets up a surrealist and distinctly queer femme interpretation of a hospital room in the BFA thesis exhibition, in which Callaway and I sat for the duration of the opening (see fig. 2 and 3). The installation includes a twin bed, chair, tables, curtain, and a

variety of hospital supplies arranged throughout the space, along with hand-poured scented candles, delicate found and created domestic objects, photos, and a video piece playing on a laptop computer. The curtain looks like a hospital privacy curtain, but is covered with over 70 emails sent between my professors and I regarding my health and its effects on my ability to meet school expectations. An IV pole holds a fluid bag of aloe vera gel, wax-dipped glucometers, blood tubes, and photos of *Hospital Performance: Part I*. On the computer, the video piece *Tourniquet Sex* shows me tying tourniquets onto Callaway's arm, pulling them off, pouring hot wax over their skin, scraping it off, and rubbing aloe vera gel into the burn. I sit in the bed in a hospital gown and high heels, with Callaway sitting in the chair beside me, where we engage selectively with viewers who approach us.

Queerness, Femme, Intersectionality, & Queer Surrealism

Throughout this essay I use the word queer to identify myself and my partner, as well as the overall sensibilities of the work. Queerness has many definitions and is personally defined by those who claim it, but in this context, I will be using the following definition from theorist Susan Stryker:

“In the early 1990s, some people started to use the word ‘queer’, which had been a derogatory word for homosexuality, in a positive way. Although it’s now often used as a synonym for gay or lesbian, the people who first reappropriated the term were trying to find a way to talk about their opposition to heterosexual social norms without automatically assuming that meant they were gay... ‘Queer’ is usually associated with sexuality, but from

the beginning a vocal minority insisted on the importance of transgender and gender-variant practices for queer politics.” (Stryker 20)

Femme is another identity with similarly self-defined terms, which Stryker defines as “the expression of traits, mannerisms, or appearances usually associated with femininity” (23). Femme is a much broader concept than femininity alone, and exists specifically in resistance to patriarchal masculinity. In this excerpt from a poem defining femme, artist Jezebel Delilah X expands on what femme can mean:

“Femme is a queer gender expression.

Femme is not attached to a binary.

Femme is not an accessory.

Femme does not live in the shadow or along the contingencies of someone else's gender roles.

Femme is intentional.

Femme is not monolithic.

Femme is authentic.

Femme is queer.” (Delilah X)

Femmeness is woven into both Callaway’s and my queerness, and its presence in our lives is an enormous influence on our work. Working in the same vein is artist Caitlin Rose Sweet (see fig. 4):

“Queer folks have a long history of consuming and recoding pop culture to form spaces for us to exist. I see my work as queer craft feminist camp, there is a lot of humor in my pieces that maybe I only see and enjoy...My thesis for grad school was called Deep Gay Bullshit, a joke about identity politics,

heteronormativity, and the healing powers of queer people talking about queer people talking about queer people." (qtd. in Malamet)

Our work, like Sweet's, is full of humor in its crevices, small jokes and queer femme craft aesthetics that allow Callaway and I to "recode" both the hospital and academic gallery environments to make space for us and our happiness, as well as our suffering.

This work is also deeply tied to intersectionality, a term that theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw created to articulate the interconnectedness of oppression of marginalized people:

"...this elision of difference in identity politics is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class...Feminist efforts to politicize experiences of women and antiracist efforts to politicize experiences of people of color have frequently proceeded as though the issues and experiences they each detail occur on mutually exclusive terrains. Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. And so, when the practices expound identity as woman or person of color as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling." (Crenshaw 482)

Callaway and I each experience our queerness, femmeness, and disability at our own intersections. We both experience oppression related to these identities, but it is important to note that as white people, we have privilege that protects us

from much of the violence experienced by queer and disabled femmes of color. This work is about our experience at the specific intersections of our identities, and therefore cannot be divorced from who we are.

Queerness and disability both have a complex relationship with temporality; shrouded in vastly unrecorded or destroyed histories, our existences happen at paces that do not match up to the even beat of straightness, that cannot rely on the steadiness of being able-bodied. Both have forced us to feel stretched and shortened time, shaping our experiences and memories, and thus the way that we express them. Callaway and I use the language of queer surrealism in order to address the temporality of these identities.

Queer surrealism is an artistic expression of the temporality of queerness, creating spaces, objects, and worlds that can fit our experiences and stories. It is about blending real images of our pain and pleasure with the unreal quality of illness, of making space for the full breadth of the experience of being queer. I consider Frida Kahlo to be one of the first queer surrealists, in that her work uses surrealist imagery to unapologetically express the deeply personal intersections of her disability, culture, and gender. Although each of these intersections is observable in any one of her works, Kahlo's disability is at the heart of *Henry Ford Hospital* (see fig. 5), but it is layered with her expectations of femininity, distrust for capitalism, and deeply painful loneliness. Each work seamlessly blends fantasy and autobiography in order to communicate her full reality. Kahlo's paintings in themselves are self-advocacy, advocating for the visibility of her experiences and their emotional weight.

Material, Form, & Performance

Candles and the process of making candles are in many ways analogous to bodies and my relationship with bodies, both my own as well as those of other people. Wax is so bodily that it is almost inherent; the way that it melts, bulges, and moves with heat and touch is very human. As a candle, wax takes on a more directly temporal element, with the wick serving as the physical representation of the candle's predetermined life span. The fire that destroys the rigidity and specific form of the candle is also the energy that makes it useful, bright, and emotionally compelling.

As I have navigated the healthcare system, as well as the limitations of my disability, I have found that the process of candle making resonates with the process of managing disability. Scientific yet maddeningly finicky, the process of making a perfect or even just functional candle is, like my diabetes, reliant on endless measuring and testing. As art pieces, they can leave little to show for the time and work that has been invested, and the frustrations I felt mirrored the growing impatience that I had for my health. My candles and my body are temporal artworks, built to be burned through. Medical care, candles, and queerness are often read as luxuries of the middle and upper class, but for me and many other queer people, they are each critical to survival.

Shifting towards acceptance of my disability meant coming to terms with my limitations, and knowing what battles to fight and when to let it rest. Similarly, I am allowing my candles to be imperfect, and through that process have been able to fully embrace the queerness of these wax bodies. Looking at the wax and candle

work by artist Mindy Rose Schwartz, *Self Portrait as an Aromatherapy Candle* (see fig. 6) and *Mountains* (see fig. 7), Callaway and I began creating candles using a series of crumpled tin molds, inspired in part by Schwartz's organic, mountainous forms (see fig. 8).

Femme reclamation of craft practices is present throughout this work, visible in the candle work, but also in the pieces of paper and dried flowers sewn to the curtain, femme drag makeup, and carefully glittered lighters, silk roses, and faux doughnuts surrounded by pink velvet and lace. Queerness and femme love are openly celebrated through the treatment of these objects. The intersections of disability with queer femmeness, from flowers in fluid bags to IV sets dipped in pink wax, each speak to an intimately physical and strengthening embrace between these parts of our identities. Sweet's ceramics are similarly engaged in the conceptual value of femme queer craft, and the ways in which her work embraces queerness:

I am a queer world maker who uses the connotations of the handmade as a platform to explore our relationship to constructs of the body, gender, sexuality, race and class. The work is driven by a material exploration that is heavily coded as feminine, low craft, working class scraps and immediate cultural information. My artistic approach is flexible and responsive to the resources I gather, my material choice, and informed by the queer tactics of performativity, camp, failure and disidentification. (Sweet)

Sweet's work celebrates the aesthetics and the roots of queer femme craft, using them as a language in which to assert an intersectional queer presence within a space (see fig. 9).

Medical supplies became integral to this work at its inception, inspiring us both as they began to take up space in our home and in our lives. The majority of the medical supplies used in this installation were taken from the hospital during *Hospital Performance: Part I*, their collection a way for Callaway and I to begin to make art during the trauma. The objects, including paper pill cups, blood vials, urine cups, glucometers, and needle sets, among others, are witnesses to intimate tests of my body. Throughout *Part I*, each object came into our lives carrying its own hopes of improvement or new insights, along with expectations of more pain and bad news. These vessels carried either medicine for “healing” me or “illness” sampled from my body, a dichotomy in which the healing was never enough but always good, and my body was the mysterious source of whatever was hurting it, much like the way in which queerness is viewed as some sort of internal poisoning to be remedied. My body was being unruly under the watchful, sterile eyes of a whole system of people waiting for it to succumb to healing, when in reality, my healing only began once my partner was able to discover that a medication was one of the causes of my pain. Recontextualizing these materials into this work is about holding up the facts of my healing, reappropriating them in a visual manifestation of the queer femme love and trust that allowed them to finally help me.

I consider bodies to be direct materials for my art making, and have explored this notion primarily through my dance and choreographic works, but in the last year have begun to expand much of the body-based and performative quality of my dance practice into the rest of my art practice. *Unavailable*, a solo dance performance set to a popular iPhone alarm tone cut with long silences, and

Hydrangeas, a video work of layered recordings of my dance improvisations to the warped sound of my voice reading a journal entry, both exposed intimate moments in which my body tells its emotional experiences of mental illness through movement and stillness. *Ingestion*, a performance and video installation piece in which I shredded chocolate bars all over my body, accompanied by a video that spoke more directly about what a diabetic person has to do and go through, was the first work I made in which I used my body to talk about disability, and it resonated with me as one of the most fitting ways to express experiences that are specifically relevant to the body.

Callaway's body became part of *Hospital Performance: Part I* in the way that they had to perform for other people in order to get the care that I needed. As a queer person, they had to spend each day in fear that the hospital would force them to leave, that our love and partnership would be discounted or used against us. Staying was an act of both love and fear – love and tenderness for me, but fear of me not being safe without them, and fear that missing one thing could mean missing everything. They had to perform the role of exceptional partner in order to convince everyone that our partnership was worthy of recognizing, and to convince doctors to believe us about my needs. Callaway's body carries its own physical memory about the way it withered under that pressure, but was forced to continue that performance to protect and advocate for us both.

The viewers of this work are performers in it as well, their interactions with the piece eerily similar to the interactions we had with hospital staff in *Part I*. People hedged carefully around the edges of the work, many of them clearly uncomfortable

with our presence. To read the small text of the emails on the curtain, braver viewers bent over me like doctors trying to decipher my chart (see fig. 10). When people would ask questions, they ranged from thoughtful to interrogative and insensitive, and when the barrage of the latter would start, I turned to my favorite performance trick from *Part I* – pretending to be asleep, signaling Callaway to answer for me and just make this doctor, nurse, or gallery patron go away. The exhausting push and pull of trying to manage the questions and expectations of the public with respect to our marginalized identities is not isolated to these environments. In every kind of public, we experience gawking and nosy questions, public attention that we cannot avoid because we look too queer, too fat, or too disabled to blend in. By intentionally harnessing this public reaction and making that discomfort a part of the work, we were able to use it to further discuss the isolation and othering that we experience daily. Much like our handling of the other harmful or traumatic events included in this work, our decision to celebrate and take up space with our queer, fat, disabled bodies and artwork is a political act, a refusal to being silenced by our oppressors.

At the same time, the isolation of the two of us in this public performance parallels the kind of isolation and intimidation we felt in the hospital, and continue to feel from the world around us, especially within the university community. Even more so than the hospital objects that Callaway collected, our bodies are direct evidence of what has happened to them, and our presence in them within this space feels necessary to accurately represent our experience.

Mars Hobrecker and Leah James explore related concepts of queer femmes supporting each other in their performance piece, *Marriage* (see fig. 11). Hobrecker and James, wearing femme drag, sit on the floor surrounded by candles and sew themselves together. The piece beautifully explores pain/pleasure boundaries, trans femme identity, tenderness, and radical queer love. Through our performances, Callaway and I hope to express similar vignettes of vulnerability, identity, and love. As we move forward, we are interested in continuing to explore and articulate the full depth of our partnership through our work.

Conclusion

Through the creation and performance of *Hospital Performance: Parts I & II*, Callaway and I were able to begin to heal from a process of healing that hurt us both tremendously. As we move forward, we are both looking forward to further collaborative works, including more video work, performances, and candle making, among other explorations of femme craft. We are excited about living, working, and showing our work in communities that include more queer people, and are in the process of reaching out to queer artists we know and admire to explore the possibility of other collaborative works. Callaway and I both believe strongly in the power of queer femme artists, and feel honored, hopeful, and excited to be among them.

Figures



Fig. 1. Fox, Callaway and Shpuntoff, Moya. Photo documentation of *Hospital Performance: Part I*. 2016. Photo by Callaway Fox.



Fig. 2. Fox, Callaway and Shpuntoff, Moya. Photo documentation of *Hospital Performance: Part II*. 2016. Photo by Sophia Keskey.



Fig. 3. Fox, Callaway and Shpuntoff, Moya. Photo documentation of *Hospital Performance: Part II*. 2016. Photo by Callaway Fox.



Fig. 4. Sweet, Caitlin Rose. *Kill Joys*, ceramic and textile, 2016. Image courtesy Academic gallery.



Fig. 5. Kahlo, Frida. *Henry Ford Hospital (The Flying Bed)*, oil on metal, 1932. Image courtesy FridaKahlo.org.



Fig. 6. Schwartz, Mindy Rose. *Self Portrait as an Aromatherapy Candle*, artist's weight in wax, essential oils, potpourri and wicks, 1999. Image courtesy the artist's website.



Fig. 7. Schwartz, Mindy Rose. *Mountains*, wax, sand, wicks, Aramis Cologne, L'air du Temps perfume, pigment, 1996. Image courtesy the artist's website.



Fig. 8. Fox, Callaway and Shpuntoff, Moya. *red tin mold candle #3*, wax, pigment, and wicks, 2016. Photo by Callaway Fox.



Fig. 9. Sweet, Caitlin Rose. *Snake in the Grass* installation view, ceramic and textile, 2016. Image courtesy Academic gallery.



Fig. 10. Fox, Callaway and Shpuntoff, Moya. Photo documentation of *Hospital Performance: Part II*, installation view, 2016. Photo by Sophia Keskey.



Fig. 11. Hobrecker, Mars and James, Leah. *Marriage*, performance, 2015. Photo by Zachary Drucker. Image courtesy Hobrecker's website.

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