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Queering the Material

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Abstract

Queer is the disorienting of a subject in space and time. With this notion, this paper goes through various extensions of my practice, investigating how I queer objects and actions to destabilize normative expectations of function. I engage with the aesthetics of Minimalism, the everyday experience of Asian American identities, and the association of the domestic environment with comfort and stability. Employing queer theory crossed with object theory, I posit how deception and failure exist as alternative understandings of how objects and environments function. Through subverting what is expected to be true and real, the work points to the fluid and unstable nature of identity and reality.

The coexistence of yes and no, almost, in between, not quite, both, and neither

Queer distorts the perspectival “picture” of the past that modern theories, narratives and images of history have wanted to provide. Queer is anamorphosis, the disorienting of the subject in space and time.

—Sarah Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*

To queer something is to make it subjective, to put it in a space of inbetweenness. In my practice, I queer surface and material to produce forms that speak to the static and fixed perceptions of identity and reality. By recontextualizing what we take for granted to be known, I subvert expectations and consequences of material behavior in order to transmute the relationship between viewer and object, and in turn, create a new form of relationship between the viewer and myself. Through positing tenderness and failure as alternatives to notions of success and power, I pose the question: What lessons can we learn from objects?

I wish to use the term “queer” more expansively than in relation to sexuality. In *Seeing Differently*, Amelia Jones writes, “queer is that which indicates the impossibility of a subject or a meaning staying still” (Jones 174–175). Queer is defined in opposition to known understandings of culture. It marks a state of inbetweenness, and in relation to my own identity, defines myself as in between being a woman and non-woman, and being between Asian and American.¹

¹ I choose to use “woman” and “non-woman” as binaries as I do not define myself explicitly in relation to maleness.

Surface over structure: Queering minimalism

“The impetus to distinguish the ideas that define a thing from the material fact of the thing itself is ill conceived, leading to an incomplete understanding of the ways objects, bodies, and ideas operate and have power in the world.”

—Gordon Hall, *Object Lessons: Thinking Gender Variance through Minimalist Sculpture*

In the seminal text “Notes on Sculpture,” Robert Morris describes the conditions in which Minimalist sculpture operates. He writes that simple forms create gestalt sensations that offer a maximum resistance to perceptual separation, allowing for the viewer to experience a sense of the whole (Morris 42). Monochromality and consistency of surface remain essential to Minimalist sculpture. Without excessive color or ornamentation, the observer can focus on the shape of the object and the way it interacts with light and surrounding architecture. In this sense, the object exists in an unimposing and passive state.

Untitled (To softness) is a 7-foot tall polyhedral structure built out of wood and stretched with a dark polyester fabric that optically changes when touched.



fig. 1: Rachel Youn, *Untitled (To softness)*, 2016

Formally, the piece references Minimalist sculpture and its characteristics as described by Morris. With my understanding of the archetypes of this genre of art, I sought to subvert the traditional, disinterested relationship the viewer has to the object. In covering the structure of the monolith with a trace-revealing surface, the piece exists as a palimpsest of the many hands that have brushed its surface, recording the sensation in its fibers. The face becomes unstable, interrupting the gestalt sensation that consummates with visual interaction. The feeling is of stroking a soft blanket, and the sensory perception goes beyond the eye, giving way to a secondary form that the hand experiences.

The surface exists in a fluid state, inviting subsequent viewers to touch it.² I desired to suggest that what is normally understood to be objective, untouchable and perfect can become inviting and ever changing, and that something monumental can be intimate and closer to humanness. With this notion, I desired to queer the aesthetics of Minimalism. The monolith refuses to clarify its position, entering a subjective viewer-object relationship.

In part two of Morris' essay, he describes how the conditions of scale allow a sculpture to possess a quality of intimacy. The monolith stands at such a scale that it exists somewhere between object and monument. Standing at 7 feet, above average height, the viewer can touch the top with outstretched arms. Consequentially, the piece allows for a full extension of bodily engagement. As a result of its scalar relationship to the body, I observed several people trying to hug the sculpture, only to be met with its stiff underlying structure, giving the piece a life existing between an intimate object and an unwelcoming body.

In his carpet works, Rudolf Stingel covers entire walls with a fabric possessing similar tactile qualities. These pieces aestheticize the viewer's touch as much as the architecture, breaking down the expected qualities of the wall

² Often I would return to my studio to find the marks had changed.

structures the carpet pieces are applied to. Stingel challenges artistic conventions of painting by opting for carpet as a material and by allowing the viewer to mark the surface. The result is a work of art that undermines traditional notions of artistic authorship.



fig. 2: Rudolf Stingel, *Untitled* at the Tate Modern, 1993

The act of marking and erasing is tied to my personal narrative of identity erasure as a result of attempting to assimilate into American culture. Existing as an Othered identity, I conceive of my psyche as a tabula rasa, and this metaphor extends into works such as the monolith. Through intervening in the collective expectation of form and structure, I hope that my work can, to some extent, lead to an incomplete understanding of the way objects, bodies, and ideas operate. My use of Minimalist form is a method of leading in the viewer, then disrupting the intended sensations of gestalt with subjective materiality.

Queer failure and disidentification

The body of the performer becomes an archive of improvised cultural responses to conventional constructions of gender, race, and sexuality, and the performance articulates powerful modes of dissent and resistance.

—Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam describes failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique. Failure is about finding alternatives to conventional understandings of success in a heteronormative capitalist society. I use this notion, intersected with my body as a contested place of race, gender and sexuality, to create situations of physical comedy in order to convey the frustrations I feel as an Othered identity.

I incorporate objects and acts of the everyday in order to communicate such issues. I was very much inspired by Hye Yeon Nam's *Self-Portrait*, a series of four videos in which she performs everyday actions (eating, drinking, sitting and walking) with self-imposed interventions that complicate the completion of such tasks. Through eating tomatoes with an oddly-shaped spoon, sitting on a lopsided chair, walking with boards on her feet and drinking orange juice from a glass with a hole in it, she is able to communicate her sense of disembodiment and estrangement as an immigrant in the United States.



fig. 3: Hye Yeon Nam, *Self-Portrait* (stills), 2006

While the viewer may not be able to identify with her specific experience, Nam enacts a structure of feeling that allows people of any identitarian group to empathize by projecting themselves and the actions they perform every day into the work.

Nam is an artist who performs disidentification, a term coined by queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz. Disidentification is a method of recycling and rethinking encoded meaning to reconstruct disempowered politics of positionality rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture (Muñoz 31). In other words, it is a method employed by artists who utilize transparency and a symbolic lexicon of the everyday, rather than defaulting to methods that perpetuate the essentialization of minority identities.



fig. 4: Rachel Youn, *TO EAT/먹다* (still), 2017

I employ this method in *TO EAT/먹다*, a video in which I eat a bowl of rice with a pair of 7-foot long chopsticks. I create an intervention of the everyday through the dramatic scalar shift of the utensil I use. I maneuver the chopsticks in various awkward configurations, consuming the rice in a crude manner, dropping the remains on the table in the process. This performative act of predetermined

failure portrays my frustrations with being essentialized for my Asian identity, barring me from acceptance into the dominant culture. I employ disidentification by utilizing the banal act of eating. However, I counteract this by using chopsticks, a utensil that possesses a cultural disposition.³ I identify myself somewhere between an American who fumbles to use a “foreign” tool and a Korean unable to use the utensil most closely associated with their culture. This ambiguity deconstructs the simplistic associations we make with Asian cultures and bodies while also highlighting the discrepancy I feel between my self and my parents’ culture. A “structure of feeling” is invoked that resonates with other Asian Americans who share my experience. Yet, it is in no way exclusive to any identitarian group. I attempt to forge commonality through connotation rather than shared or fixed identifications.

³ Most people I know can use chopsticks, but it is rarely their utensil of choice.

Surface worship

“Within the abstract society of the spectacle, the image thus becomes the final form of commodity reification.”

—Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*

In my newest body of work, titled *The Treachery of Surfaces*, I continue to play with material expectations and the discrepancy between surface and structure. The title is a reference to René Magritte’s painting *The Treachery of Images*, pointing to how the marble exterior of the sculptures are, without much need for close inspection, revealed to be only the image of marble and not the thing itself. The series includes four objects of the domestic realm: a coffee table, chair, picture frame and planter. Each object is constructed in polyurethane foam, then painted and finished to exude the seductive qualities of Carrara marble. This series of works was, in truth, a purely aesthetic gesture of using marble pattern in my work, an image that has become extremely popular in curated fashion backdrops and interior decoration as of late. It is used to draw visual interest to products or homes with the connotation of cleanliness, class and refined taste. I have been, without a doubt, seduced by this.

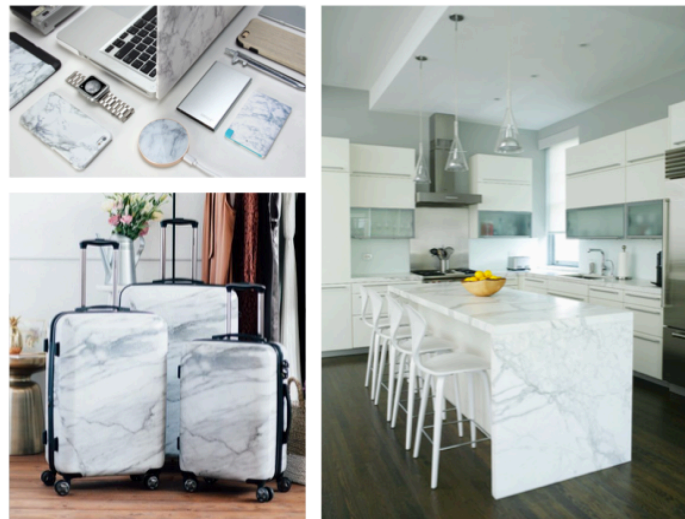


fig. 5: Marble used in interior and product design

DIY culture unashamedly embraces this phenomenon. There exists a slew of tutorials online of how to “DIY” your own marble look onto any surface. One in particular reads:

We are loving the marble trend in home décor right now! From marble trays and coasters to marble tabletops, the majestic marble look is an easy way to ramp up your home’s style. Instead of spending a fortune on that marble coffee table you found online, fake your favorite stone by DIYing your own marble décor!
(Dahlstrom)

Articles like this acknowledge marble for its ability to amplify the look of one’s home, yet unashamedly uphold that its value is unaffordable. The surface is elevated; the material itself is dismissed. Now, it is considerably easier to mimic marble by altering the surface of furniture, home goods and architecture thanks to mass-produced laminates or the time and skill to DIY the look. I began analyzing this trend in my immediate environment, and these surfaces of contemporary life more and more revealed themselves to be false. IKEA furniture is often constructed of particleboard, applied with veneers that are printed with the image of hardwood; brick-textured panels can be purchased and affixed to drywall. I often spend time at Home Depot browsing the ceramic tiling and linoleum sheets sold as “Carrara marble.”⁴

I am ceaselessly entertained by the elevation of surface over structure.⁵ Our culture persists in disguising structural material with image of others that possess a different quality. Through acknowledging there is a warmth and historicity to the look of hardwood, brick and mortar, marble, etc., a hierarchy of materials is upheld through the imitation of its appearance.

⁴ My time in Florence and Athens was the most disconcerting—I realized I had no semblance of what actual marble stone looks like in relation to the imitation.

⁵ To be clear, I am not upset by these methods of camouflage. I find them to be potentially more sustainable ways to use material. It is, for example, beneficiary to the environment to apply a hardwood look to recycled particleboard.

What does it mean to appropriate marble, a material possessing a long history in Western art and architecture, and use it now to decorate our everyday environments? Stylistic imitation of marble is not something new. In fact, at the beginning of marble's popularity, painting was used to imitate the colors and patterns most typical of marble coverings, providing décor less costly than the actual stone and hence accessible to the less affluent classes (Frederick 21). Nowadays, one can purchase a solid marble piece of furniture, or they can buy contact paper and apply it to their countertops to achieve pretty much the same effect. Yet, there exists an understanding that the surface is a deception. The space between real and faux collapses, and therein tension lies between the constant adoration of marble and the subversion of its prestige through imitation.

I view this trend in the framework of the *pastiche*, defined by Fredric Jameson as a mimicry and blank parody of the historical. Jameson describes the postmodern condition of portraying the past through stylistic connotation, conveying "pastness" by the glossy qualities of the image (Jameson 19). This proliferation of marble is the glossy mirage, and the mirage is a contemporary dream for refinement and historicity accomplished through sheer representation of a material associated with wealth.

To exaggerate the elevation of surface over structure, I constructed the pieces in upholstery foam, which I chose for its nonstructural qualities. I then "DIYed" the surface, hand painting them with acrylic paint to a degree that they are recognized as a representation of marble.⁶ Their structural material gives them away. No matter which configuration they are placed in, the pieces eventually collapse, forfeiting their supposed function. In their static state, they are pathetic, flaccid, anthropomorphized objects despairing over their own falseness. The

⁶ Through hand-making the look, I call into question the amount of time and skill necessarily to "easily" imitate the image of marble.

works present a duality of expectation and consequence, a shifted reality in which our expectations of how objects behave is challenged.

In “Object Lessons: Thinking Gender Variance through Minimalist Sculpture,” Gordon Hall discusses the work of Richard Artschwager and how the way he blurs the lines between sculpture, furniture and architecture gives way to a alternate perception of body.⁷



fig. 6: Richard Artschwager, *Splatter Chair I*, 1992

In his practice, Artschwager used surface application of veneers found in domestic environments, drawing attention to the representation of form via surface. He indicated “furnitureness” with wood-pattern Formica, juxtaposing it with objects distilled down to their very basic, rectilinear form. Hall suggests that, with objects that are rendered useless by the human body, the viewer can project a new relationship of their self to the work according to a shifted framework. Through their ambiguity, Artschwager’s works allow the viewer to encounter a

⁷ In a review of Artschwager’s work, Jerry Saltz comments: “You think, *What are these things? Sculpture? Furniture? Architectural ornament? Illusions? Jokes? Categories cross and collapse.*”

different understanding of the self and body, complicating the static and “real” (Hall 56).

Returning to the notion of queer failure, I created a video in which I utilize the marble patterned furniture, which ultimately results in a humorous Sisyphean narrative. I borrow elements from the heavily curated minimalist visual language. I pictured a scene of a sun-filled room with white walls, houseplants and a woman in cozy clothing curling up to read a book and sip tea. I then attempted to construct a rendition of this image. I set up the furniture, drink coffee and read a book. However, the frame peels off the wall, the planter keels over, dumping soil on the floor. I struggle to rest my body into the chair, and in the meantime, the coffee table twists and falls, sending coffee flying. Through the obvious failure of the furniture, I suggest the lack of control I have over my environment.



fig. 7: Rachel Youn, *The Treachery of Surfaces* (still), 2017

With this utopian image of adulthood in mind, my actions are predetermined to fail. I highlight the artifice of this idealized image and posit that “home” is not always a place of comfort or security. This aspiration to obtain the

appearance of success and contentment becomes a vehicle of my undoing, and thus, I am left in a situation of failure.

In highlighting the discrepancy between surface and form, I present the basic notion that looks can be deceiving. I wish to suggest our understandings of how the world operates is much more subjective and ambiguous than previously believed to be. And with the distrust of reality opens the possibility to reassess expectations of identity. Gordon Hall writes that sculpture occupies a unique place to learn about and transform our experiences of the gendered body (Hall 47). This potentiality operates not primarily because of what we see in the sculptures, but because of how they might enable us to see everything else.

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