

No/And: Contemporary Conversations About Queer and Trans Art

— Sara Jaffe

Ten or so years ago, I was feeling depressed about the word “queer.” It was everywhere, which was maybe the problem; it had become a catch-all way to communicate “not straight” instead of the barbed claim to an anti-(hetero and homo)normative politics that had so defined my own understanding of my own sexuality. But in the last few years I’ve sensed a resurgence of that old school potency—maybe it has something to do with 90s nostalgia, or younger people’s investment in radical activism, or essential conversations happening around historic discrimination against queers of color and trans people in LGBTQ+ movements and spaces. All of which is to say, I think that this is a particularly exciting and generative moment to engage in conversation with several of the queer curators in Portland about the state of queer art in our city and beyond.

It should, I hope, go without saying that when I ask the question *What is queer art?*, the last thing I’m looking for is a definitive answer. As Roya Amirsoleymani states below: “Queer art is a kind of No.” It has both multiplicity and refusal baked into it. And this refusal—of conventional forms, ideas, institutions, roles—can also be an act of creation. It can be a *not that, but this, instead*. And refusal itself is always contextual. As manuel arturo abreu points out, practices that may be construed as a “no” in relation to the white-dominated art world may be an established “yes” within the marginalized communities from which they emanate.

Though the curators I spoke with represent a range of curatorial practices and positions—M Prull and manuel arturo abreu are independent curator-artists; Amirsoleymani is artistic director & curator of public engagement at the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA), a performance-oriented arts nonprofit; and Molly Alloy is co-director of Five Oaks Museum, an institution dedicated to the history and culture

of Washington County, as well as a working artist themselves—they each in some way participate in acts of selection. Selecting, grouping, and organizing implies a critical awareness of, if not adherence to, the power of categorization. Each curator gave voice to the ways their queer/trans curation practice works to defy or deconstruct this inevitably norming practice. Their thoughtful and subversive responses silenced the cringily basic question lurking in the back of my mind, which I would have been too embarrassed to ask outright: *How do you decide what goes in and what stays out?* Nobody talked about what stays out.

When these curators do describe their process of grouping and selection, it is always as a dynamic act, a deliberate intention to make space for more than one story. Prull describes the process of curating *Partial Permutation*, an exhibition of work by trans artists presented via Upfor Gallery (rest in peace) in February through April, 2021. The title of the exhibition itself speaks to the desire to simultaneously be intentional about presenting trans artists and also transparent about the futility—practically and politically—of making a definitive statement about who a trans artist is or what kind of work they make. According to Prull, a partial permutation in mathematics is “a set, but not the only possible set.”

For queer art workers employed in a more institutional setting, that sense of possibility may inflect how their very positions are structured. Alloy became co-director of Five Oaks Museum two years ago as part of a radical reenvisioning of the institution. Originally founded by what Alloy describes as “literal sons and daughters of Oregon pioneer settlers,” the museum had, for decades, existed primarily to archive and display artifacts of settler culture. In an effort to create a museum that better reflected the diversity and rich history of Washington County, Alloy and their co-director Nathanael Andreini became the museum’s co-directors and shifted curatorial responsibilities to guest curators chosen by a panel of community members. Decentralization, radical reimagining—more queer practices of possibility.

I began each interview (conducted over both email and Zoom) with the question “What is queer art?” and from there we mapped a sprawling and inspiring terrain. What follows is by no means a scene report or a state-of-queer-art-round-up, but an exciting cross section of how queer and trans people practicing curation are offering a transformative way of approaching art.

Finally, I want to be forthcoming about the fact that while I’ve asked these questions in part for the sake of you, readers, they also come from a place of utter self investment. I want to understand what the “queer” in queer art is now because I want to understand myself in relation to culture, both as a consumer and creator of art (I write fiction and creative nonfiction that centers queer identity and experience). Lately I’m old (44), but it’s not just about that. For all the ways that theory is lived and useful, when I say “What is queer art?” I’m also saying *Is this story too queer? Not queer enough? Will I see you at the opening? Am I supposed to like this? Is this piece saying what I think it’s saying—please let it be saying that.* In this approach I’m indebted to Ariel Goldberg’s 2016 book *The Estrangement Principle*, in which asking “What is queer art?” is a way to understand one’s own queer self as well as the communities and histories that comprise us.

Below are excerpts from my conversations with M Prull (multimedia artist and curator), Molly Alloy (artist and co-director of Five Oaks Museum), Roya Amirsoleymani (artistic director & curator of public engagement, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art), and manuel arturo abreu (non-disciplinary artist and cofounder, home school).¹

What is queer art? Is “queer art” a useful category?

abreu: Queer art is art made by people who identify or are identified as queer, gender-variant, and/or sexually-deviant. “Art” is a western category of activity which is a vestige of theological endeavors such as monk scribal work, fresco painting, etc. Because of this fraught framework, I’m not sure the concept “queer art” is useful. Perhaps it serves the market as a genre for consumers and investors to quickly categorize work, and perhaps “queer art” can also act as a shorthand for queer makers and thinkers to find each other, but the problems I mentioned remain. The concept of art as functionless, autotelic (autonomous from the social) activity drawn from the western modernist origin myth flies directly in the face of ancestral functional aesthetics which are socially and spiritually-embedded (non-autonomous).

AMIRSOLEYMANI: Queer art is a kind of *no*. And no, “queer art” is no longer a useful category. To state this with conviction feels like a betrayal, a rejection of a culture, community, and identity so critical to shaping my curatorial purview, and my sense of self. But perhaps such a sentiment signals an expansion. An explosion, even. Or something softer. A maturation or complication. If we no longer need to assert, exploit, or instrumentalize our own queerness (the queer-in-us) just to be granted agency over our images and existences, then we are at some liberty to seek or stumble upon or self-determine the queer in something (and in ourselves) rather than be shown or told about it.

I can afford to respond to this question experimentally, and yet elsewhere, and for other people, queer can have different realities, and very real consequences. Disownment. Deportation. Depression. Death. When we can point to ourselves, and our own image, and celebrate it, locate joy in it, in the face of danger and despair, then yes, we must still point to the thing, assertively, elatedly, collectively.

Demian DinéYazhi’
delivering home school talk at
Compliance Division, Portland,
2016. Courtesy the artist and
home school (Photo: Victoria
Anne Reis)



Sara Jaffe

Slipperiness, Range, Networks

AMIRSOLEYMANI: Queer has always embraced its own mutability, fluidity, uncapturability. But I find it also takes pride in an unwillingness, an unruliness, a constant state of (un)becoming. For me, the spectrum spans from passivity to fury, and I find myself drawn to its poles. I like a queer art in which the queer quietly slips in (or even slips through, ungraspable). And yet, the sonic vibration and sheer glow of queer rage is electric. Especially when certain retrospectives or documentaries or archival exhibitions or historical group shows get it right, so right that you can feel the pulse of the paper just from gazing through the glass.

manuel arturo abreu, *Arepas*, 2021. Banana leaves soaked in vegetable glycerin and stretched over canvas or insulation foam. Installation view, *rot semantics*, May–June 2021, haul gallery, Brooklyn. Courtesy the artist and haul gallery



Being While Making

ALLOY: During the exact same six months that we were able to move into our new way of working at Five Oaks Museum, I went from an embedded, unknown truth to a fully realized, publicly shared truth of being non-binary and coming into a trans identity. So it was as if the fact of discovering a truer way of being myself required that I not then go to work and participate in things that were false.

AMIRSOLEYMANI: I can say “I am queer,” but more so I feel like I am cut from its cloth. Queer is a “stuff” I am “of.” Lineages. Languages. Lost translations. Stardust.

PRULL: Being trans often comes with a reinvention that I think shortens our timelines, for art history as well as selfhood.

RaiNE Brebender,
Ham and a Half, 2020. Digital
photograph, 8×10 in.
Courtesy Five Oaks Museum



Explosion, Permutation, Attention

ALLOY: It's sort of like we burrowed into the middle of the title "curator" and exploded it out, so that it could just include everyone, which is totally how I think of queer community—taking something restricted and trying to build the whole universe inside it.

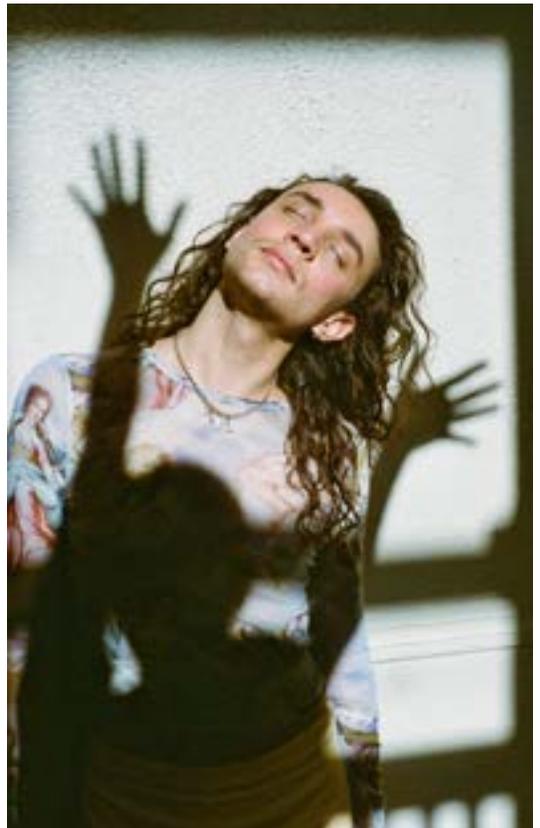
PRULL: The idea behind Partial Permutation was to provide a lot of different entry points to think about queer and trans art in different modes. It would do a disservice to the concept of queerness to narrow it down to "This is queer art, and this isn't" because there's so much space to be filled with queerness, both in and out of the art world. I don't see how we could possibly think of queer or trans art without allowing for things that we don't understand or agree with.

Abreu: According to current trends in queer theory, any deviation from the norm can be characterized as queer, and any norm can be claimed to have queer undercurrents trembling within it. The implicit problem here is one of legibility in a white context: what the settler calls "queer" or deviant may in fact be an ancestral gender category which, from within its cultural context, is not deviant at all. Attention to this problem can help us understand why "norm" and "deviation" are not the best way to process queerness. And consider that there may very well be cultures that view the settler hetero norm as a destructive deviation from their norm.

AMIRSOLEYMANI: I think about the tension between queer's soft and hard edges. I find "tension" to be a useful curatorial strategy, not manipulatively, but in aiming for a tension that builds and hovers above you, or right beside the work, or just (long) enough to force a closer listen or second look. A slight discomfort or questioning that permeates.

ALLOY: I have this opportunity, through the museum, to take on the role that I think is important for someone situated within whiteness: to be a disruptor.

Ursa Nuffer-Rodriguez,
Sun and Shadow, 2019. 35mm
film scan. Courtesy Five
Oaks Museum



Queer Qualities

AMIRSOLEYMANI: Queer feels more like an ethereal spirit than a tangible presence. It is felt in the otherness of an uncertain object. It is noticeable in the nuances of narrative-shifts. It appears in the impossible images and in-between spaces. It is heard in the misinterpretations and missed understandings. Queer does not just *have* shape and form. It can *be* the shape and the form (and color, and line, and texture...)

PRULL: I started out doing self-portraits, and then I was like, what if we did the self-portrait but thought about it through the lens of the body as a medium, and what if we abstract it? And now I'm very much like, what if we really abstract it and just think of it as a medium to reach another thought. For me, that reflects growing up in a way, growing into myself and my community, and what I want to think about.

ALLOY: The newly stated values of Five Oaks Museum are: Body, Land, Truth, Justice, and Community. And *Body* being the first, is a queer act.

Molly Alloy, *Taut*,
2018. Driftwood, leather,
and artificial sinew
(Photo: Mario Gallucci)



Building

ALLOY: We've situated ourselves to be a receptive entity. We want to use what we are and what we have as an institution to address what is needed from the community—a total queer tactic, right? I'm looking to the Queer Resource Center from Portland State University, queer group housing, mutual aid. Those of us that are now within this institution are essentially drawing on tactics that marginalized communities of all kinds have always had to use. And we're just implementing them within the context of the institution. We're not inventing new ways of being, but they're often new to the museum world.

AMIRSOLEYMANI: I think about mutual respect across generations, but also about unequal wealth and power, and how queer artists and curators—especially White ones—could be taking more personal responsibility and risk when it comes to the redistribution of resources.

Maya Vivas, */härt/*, 2017. Black stoneware, 10×14×4.50 in.



PRULL: Part of the reason I thought to do this show in the first place, part of the reason I wanted to start a gallery full of all trans artists is because I literally went through and looked at all of the Portland Art Dealers Association galleries, and I looked through every person that was represented by them, and there was not one trans person represented in those established commercial galleries. Portland bills itself as the most queer-friendly city in America, and in a lot of ways that's true, but when it comes right down to it, I don't think there's a commercial space in America where queer and trans people are treated professionally on an equal level with straight people. When you Google trans artists it's the same 5–10 people that show up on every list, like they're the only 5–10 trans people with gallery representation in all of America.

abreu: In a time of gutted social services, absurd rent prices, and decreased funding for art in the Pacific Northwest and the US, it's obviously not fair that artists should be burdened with patching things up. And it's also obvious that we are being trained to treat art as a way to generate value (i.e. value as beauty). Social practice as the mainstream practice of our moment makes this clear: Claire Bishop points out that in the European context, the rhetoric of “social practice” actually dovetails quite nicely with an overtly neoliberal agenda of replacing government-run social services with well-meaning volunteers offering creative entrepreneurial solutions.

Tabitha Nikolai, *Dissensus*, 2021. Narrative video game made using the Bitsy game engine. A collaboration with Myra Lilith Day, deSolid State, and anonymous, with audio by Vangelis. Playable online: <https://tabithanikolai.itch.io/dissensus>



Let's quickly outline some strategies in town. One is the recuperative mode: unearthing of legacies of innovation and resilience in Oregon and the Pacific Northwest. Intisar Abioto, for example, ran a project called *The Black Portlanders* (2013–18, documenting Black people in the Portland Community). The online archive centers the enduring Black presence in Portland, and allowed Abioto to use the conceit of street photography to deepen her own connection to her adopted community (she moved to Oregon from Memphis, Tennessee), notably concluding with an online post centering Indigenous folks. Building on this work, Abioto's recent project, *Black Mark, Black Legend* focuses specifically on unearthing and canonizing Black Oregon artists such as Bobby Fother and Thelma Johnson Streat.

In another vein of recuperation and imaging community, Demian DinéYazhi's *Survivance* zine series, with four issues released to date, archives the work of Indigenous writers and artists in an effort to build intertribal solidarity, bridging the Oregon Indigenous conversation with broader issues related to the First Nations of North America. Many artists in Portland use publication as a means to provide evidence of their presence in a time where space is at a premium and most institutions don't care to curate anything but tokenized trauma.

Artist Sharita Towne has for years explored what it means to spatialize reparations in Oregon. She describes herself as “from I-5,” having grown up in a number of towns dotting the highway. Local Black artists know her as someone who cares deeply for her community, and who's blessed with skills for resource redistribution. Her most recent project, *A Black Art Ecology of Portland*, works to build a coalition of community arts and equity organizations driven to address the lack of resources for Black art and youth in Portland. The project centers those Black Portlanders who have faced or risk displacement at the hands of “development” and “urban blight.” Suffused with aesthetics of public engagement and skeptic historiography, with much of its most important work going undocumented, Towne's practice speaks to the expansive imagination necessary to start undoing the anti-Black, anti-Indigenous violence which frames Portland's groundwork.

Refusal remains an option. Opting out can pressure institutions to make change. Some months ago, two Native artists refused to show their work in the Oregon State Capitol building in Salem for the Art in the Governor's Office program. Both Ka'ila Farrell-Smith (Klamath) and Brenda Mallory (Cherokee) cited the Governor's silence on the Jordan Cove natural gas pipeline, which threatened the lands and clean water of the Klamath, Siletz, Coos, and Coquille people. The Governor's office cannot ethically show Native art while also refusing to oppose a project which would have been the largest source of pollution in Oregon by 2020. Black and Native artists must reject becoming window dressing for the settler project. It would be interesting if all future regional artists tapped for the program refused, in solidarity with Indigenous sovereignty and health. The Governor's office, as a result, would remain empty, a gesture of the empty promises white settlers continue to make for their ongoing occupation.

Making space is another critical component of the artist's toolkit in Portland. The City's independent curatorial and publication endeavor the Nat Turner Project, for example, only curates emerging local artists of color, and tasks them to imagine what aesthetic freedom might look and feel like. Melanie Stevens and maximiliano martinez started it in

a bathroom at the Pacific Northwest College of Art in 2017, redolent of other bootstraps projects in the region due to lack of arts funding and institutional shuttering. This visionary project continues to curate and publish amazing things. As well, Ori Gallery, a Black-run art space on historically Black Mississippi Avenue, only exhibits queer and trans artists of color. However, many examples of the bootstraps approach in Portland don't go on to tackle any critical or political content, instead choosing to make a whimsical spectacle of their marginal aesthetics in hopes that institutions will take notice. To each their own, I suppose.

In Seattle, the Wa Na Wari project has converted a rental home—Black-owned since 1951, but until now rented out near market rate and thus participating in gentrification—into a Black creative space that archives oral history; hosts exhibitions, artist talks, performances, workshops, and parties; and maps out possibilities for keeping the home in the family in perpetuity. This is a promising tactic. Many people who own their own homes may realize that they can add value to their life and contribute to community by opening their homes to people who need space to live, work, and pursue their projects. Marginal spaces, like garages, basements, and backyards, serve these purposes well. I know this from experience, as I lived in a garage and called it an artist residency from 2013 until earlier this year. This was only possible because someone opened their home up to me.

ALLOY: We constantly feel this really important prioritization of remembering the locality of the museum in Washington County and considering what it means to different people here.

Largely because of economic factors, it doesn't work like it may have used to where there's this neighborhood where all the queer people are and the gallery in that neighborhood is the queer art space. Now it's more about online presence and other modes of connection. How can we deploy these multiple tactics—which, again, I think of as so queer—how can we go from *There's real life and there's the Internet* to some kind of a beautiful universe that holds those two and isn't limited to a polarity or one thin line between them?



Exhibitions/Practices

AMIRSOLEYMANI: While it was not difficult for the majority of the work in PICA's exhibition *No Human Involved: The 5th Annual Sex Workers' Art Show*, which I co-curated with Kat Salas and Matilda Bickers of Stroll PDX in 2019, to be understood "as queer," what became interesting was the audience's desire for art "by sex workers" to meet their expectations for confessional, vulnerable, or salacious content that would validate a worker's labor or trade as a "lifestyle." Where was the "sex"? The "hooker" narrative? The "about"? The show resisted the audience's impulse to predict or control a conventional plotline, both in content and experience. For me, the artists queered public consumption by generating tension between expectation and outcome, and by denying resolution. They queered the space, and an already queer show, beyond the politics of identities and images.

Ebenezer Galluzzo, *Wear Bravery*, n.d. Color photograph.



ALLOY: We had a panel choosing from proposals for exhibitions, and they awarded *Gender Euphoria* to a non-binary curator, to create an exhibition all of trans and non-binary artists from the region. It allowed me to see that my work was institution-shaping. It felt like this wonderful magic trick that happened when I did some letting go that I felt was appropriate to my position as co-director.

I find the work of Ursa Nuffer-Rodriguez, one of the artists in the exhibition, to capture moments that feel intimate, invoking the kind of embodied joy that often can only happen in the safety of being close with someone who fully sees and accepts you. That type of moment has sometimes been elusive for me due to dysphoria, so I love how Nuffer-Rodriguez's images can bring me into it. And RaiNE Brebender's work hits a deep chord for me; I think it helps interrupt my learned inclination toward assimilation (into binary gender, privileged status, etc.). The images they create show me modes of self-love and empowerment that are gentle and quiet in a sturdy way; I learn a lot from them.

PRULL: For *Partial Permutation*, Maya Vivas did these ceramic pieces that are like interpretations of body parts: stomach, gall bladder, bladder, heart, intestines. They're ceramic pieces about how they have a very complicated relationship to their body—not just on a visual level, but on an internal level. For them, gender identity intersects with their Black identity and is a very personal, intimate experience, it's very physically rooted. Ebenezer Galluzzo did this series *As I Am*. He likes to do visual puns—taking imagery that has a particular gendered connotation and turning it on its head. I thought that was a really cool take on the trans self-portrait. I also really liked that he goes in and puts in these gold leaf elements, to get back to religious imagery and celebrate the body and celebrate himself in a spiritual way. And then we did Pace Taylor, who is now represented by Nationale. He does these soft pastel and graphite images, which sold out on the first day. His work was especially pertinent right in that moment in the summer of 2020, because a lot of his portraits are concerned with intimacy and connection, which was really on the forefront of everybody's mind right then. The last person in the exhibition is Tabitha Nikolai, who does a lot of new media, video game-based art. She created this video game, *Chronophasia*, about childhood and finding oneself and creating spaces through the internet, which is really interesting to look at when you talk about trans/queer art and gender because a lot of queer people find themselves through the internet. *Chronophasia* is kind of a game and kind of a piece of interactive poetry. And it's free and on the internet.

Urgency

ALLOY: I'm thinking about how urgent the need is not just for queer artists to be in the studio making our queer experiences visible or enacted in whatever ways we can, but for those folks who are interested in curation, whatever that holds, to put their energy toward making spaces that show amplified presence of queer and trans experiences through art. That act is also so urgently needed, and I've learned there's more of a dearth of it than I would have thought.

AMIRSOLEYMANI: An uncomplicated upholding of queer art can be dangerous, because for queers with racial, gender, able-bodied, and economic privilege in established positions, their queerness can be currency in an already relatively protected sphere. Meanwhile, queer and trans artists and arts workers of color, especially Black, Indigenous, and Disabled folks, are largely unsafe and insecure within current systems and structures, struggling still within the art world's oppressive architectures and toxic social hierarchies.

ALLOY: When I was in First Brick,² it was like: this is such a beautiful project, such an urgent need, and four white people just can't meet the need. It was right idea, right time, right place, and all great people that I love doing curatorial work with, and we were able to uplift some diversity of voices, but I just felt like, when I really started looking through a lens of *What does the community need, What does the arts ecology need*, and not the lens of *What can I do, What can I have, Who am I* that I'd grown up with, it was clear that I wasn't the individual who was most urgently needed in that work.

abreu: Trans is trending, which may or may not help, but most likely hurts, actually-existing trans people. A concrete institutional definition of trans is still "under construction," itself having undergone various "queerings." But both above and under the carnival of signifiers and the circulation of theoretical concepts, trans people, especially of color, still inordinately suffer and die. Our voices are still unheard and ignored, even as aspects of the condition become generalized and hyper-visible. The world cheers on as we agonize. (from *transtrender*)

Emi Koyama, *SESTA=Death*, 2019. Installation view, *No Human Involved: the 5th Annual Sex Workers' Art Show*, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, Portland, OR (Photo: Mario Gallucci)



Queer Time

AMIRSOLEYMANI: As a curator of contemporary art who works with living artists, I tend to think about the present more than the past or future, this moment in time as the crux of the inquiry. How are we examining and expressing the now? Yet lately, I find myself asking how a particular piece or performance or project serves as an intervention or interruption in the trajectory of things to come. How does a thing, a person, or an institution do differently? How does it disrupt? Can a rupture of the present fissure the future that would have been, had we not acted, not risked? What is our responsibility to that which is possible but not yet arrived?

Installation view, *No Human Involved: the 5th Annual Sex Workers' Art Show*, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, Portland, OR (Photo: Mario Gallucci)

PRULL: Most of our queer ancestors are lost to time. A lot of the time there's no record, or if there is, it's incomplete, at best. Yes there's a line to be drawn from the past to what's happening now, but it's a very complicated one.

Queerness today is not going to look the same way it will in fifty years because it's a product of the moment.

abreu: Queer makers and thinkers are attuned to cyclical time in a way that brings us closer to how I think time actually works. In a sense the linearity of hetero time works to strangle us and cast our nonlinear work as spirals and sickness. But I personally am, ahem, down with the sickness.

- 1 Some of abreu's text is also taken from their writings *transtrender* (Quimerica Books, 2016) and "real fake artistry," commissioned by Roz Crews and Ralph Pugay for the Schemers, Scammers, and Subverters Symposium, 2019.
- 2 First Brick is a queer curatorial collaboration that Molly Alloy was involved with from 2017–2019.

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