



Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre



About Membership Services Programming Shop Catalogue

All Posts inResidence News



Jaka Lombar · Apr 20, 2022 · 11 min read

"Brilliant Pinkish Flare": Cataloguing Queerness in Experimental Film

Updated: Aug 16, 2022

This blog post is the result of the work carried out on the CFMDC's collection in relation to the Archive/Counter-Archive (A/CA): Activating Canada's Moving Image Heritage project. In order to learn more about the case study in which CFMDC is participating, click [here](#).

Imagine that you are viewing a work from the CFMDC's collection which might fit into **Archive/Counter-Archive's** case study: it is undigitized and from 1996, so it falls within the general period in which queer body politic is (in)formed by the unravelling of the AIDS epidemic but not yet affected by the arrival of the antiretroviral drugs or other developments in the social sphere since the early 2000s. The filmmaker's characteristically rich description of the short film describes in detail the hand-painted effects of floral shapes on dense blackness, the white sections covered with brushstrokes and lines, before, as the closing paragraph triumphantly states, "there is a brilliant pinkish flare veined with curled blue lines which engenders a resolution between ... alternating modes." It should be fair to disclose that the author of the film, entitled *Beautiful Funerals*, is not an unrecognized Canadian queer artist, but a titan of the avant-garde film, Stan Brakhage. This example is singled out because Brakhage's biographical details are extensive, the reach and ubiquity of considerations on his work well known and thus there is less speculation to be had on either the (non-)queerness of the artist or his work. *Beautiful Funerals* should not be catalogued as queer or be part of the **Archive/Counter-Archive's** focus. And yet ... Perhaps some of the queerness of the other film cans that hold LGBTQ2 works has rubbed off on *Beautiful Funerals*? The image on film is so invitingly open to theorizing and speculating on the nature of abstraction and queerness. May we consider a kind of mutual contamination that nonetheless respects the specificity of particular titles—could an experimental film not offer a constructive forum where "the dynamic potential of queer stances can be manifested without recourse to the representation of bodies"?[1] What better way to contemplate the topoi of desire and its perseverance in conjunction with queer negativity than by viewing a "brilliant pinkish flare" stretch across black and white abstractions?

Beautiful Funerals (Stan Brakhage, 1996)

Classifying works as experimental, abstract or queer can be an intricate endeavour where every choice an archivist makes might facilitate access to the catalogued works in the future, or potentially even stifle access through engendering too unrestrictive, boundary-crossing and unwieldy field within the catalogue. Each work is deserving of the archivist's attention, who must pay respect to the various characteristics that will determine which categories it will be tagged under, despite the fact that some of the characteristics, in different parts of the film, might be in





contrast to each other. Yet when the part of the collection under review includes hundreds of moving images with varying lengths, the task may begin to seem administrative and unwieldy. After a time, the categories seem to dissolve into porous mass that fails to properly distinguish films that can be so distinct from each

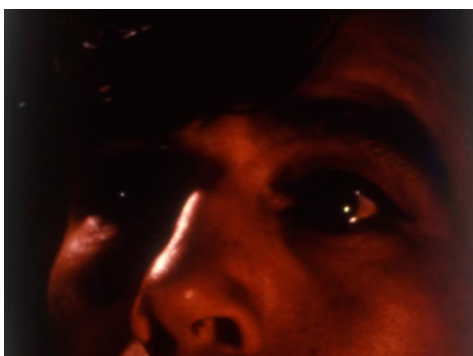


other. In other respects, tags as queer and experimental remain critically and materially essential not merely in the archive but the wider media environment. The interactions between abstract film and queerness or queer films and abstract art are manifestly crucial in how the art world, the financial structures and critical reception operate. For example, Jack Halberstam writes that "while experimental film is still closely associated with independent, alternative, and often queer cinemas, abstract expressionist work is quite likely to find a place on the walls of a bank or a corporate office."^[ii]

The works by Barbara Hammer, a giant in the experimental film who is also a lesbian feminist, are appropriately rarely separated by the critics as being representative of only one of the respective fields. Still, the intersectionality between queer moving image artworks and the avant-garde film is not always intuitively apparent.^[iii] One possibility is to approach the works through their authors, so that when a queer filmmaker creates an abstract film, it could be classified as queer abstract film. This seems to be a fairly clear method to determine the queerness of films that feature no other characteristics that are most often associated with queer themes, but as soon as the information on the artist becomes scarce, or the reliability and provenance of that information become questionable, this method comes perilously close to the possibility that information which is either inaccurate, or hurtful if revealed, may be ascribed to the artist through the classification of their work. Robb Hernández identifies a "familiar obstacle" when archivists and scholars are faced with indeterminacy of an artist's sexual biography: "[s]uspect sexualities have profound effects on artist biographies, careers, and art-market valuations and inform the perception of the work."^[iv] Furthermore, the ambiguity may be the intended purpose of artists, and their wish may in fact be that their work be perceived and received in such ambiguity. Teresa de Lauretis goes as far as to suggest that "a queer text carries the inscription of sexuality as something more than sex" irrespectively of the queerness of the text's authorial persona.^[v] This crucial point suggests that even while a reasonable assumption that many queer artists will create queer works can be made, it should not be used as a format to determine the queerness of the work. The issue of authorial determinism over the artwork also presents challenges the other way around: could an artist create a queer abstract film even if they do not identify as queer but explicitly identify one of their abstract films as inspired by or as commenting on a queer subject, displaying an "inscription of sexuality as something more than sex," as de Lauretis put it?

It may well be worth turning to Brakhage once more, particularly to his 1996 film, entitled *Two Found Objects of Charles Boultenhouse*, which is also stored at the CFMDC collection. In the 1950s, Brakhage worked "transiently—but with loyal application—in the bookshop managed by his friend Charles Boultenhouse," who was at the time researching the dancer Isabela Duncan with his partner Parker Tyler.^[vi] The film is a reuse of materials so already determining the queerness of the work via authorship is questionable given that the authorial persona in the cases of reuse and remixing is less stable than in a conventional film production; it is fair to note that both Brakhage and Boultenhouse had important, albeit different, input in the creation of the film. Tyler and Boultenhouse were lovers for almost thirty years, and they championed the poets, artists and experimental filmmakers from their New York apartment, including of course Brakhage. In *Two Found Objects*, Boultenhouse's upper face and eyes are "intercut with the figure of the torso, head and arms of a male dancer." The primary focus of the film, the investigation into the innovations and histories of experimental dance is thus imbued with traces of queerness even in a highly formalized setup.

Two Found Objects of Charles Boultenhouse (Stan Brakhage, 1996)



The history of avant-garde film may well be aligned with "the modernist notion that an art form advances by reflexively scrutinizing the properties and materials of its medium."^[vii] Privileging the form over representation entails bringing forth the shapes, colours, movements and sounds against a narrative or corporeally substantial representations. But can a film as a medium be queer, particularly when it carries abstract images? Sara Ahmed has famously written on how objects, not merely people can be queer: an inanimate object may possess "a queerness that does not reside 'within' it but emerges in how the object is impressed on the observer "and what we too can borrow from the contingency of its life."^[viii] This opening up of queerness to the non-human of course presents some challenges, specifically in the radical openness that has invited a variety of interpretations in

what can or should be considered queer via Ahmed's theorization. The question is not so much on whether we may ascribe queerness to the non-human, but where we should set the limit to this endeavour. A potential response is simply to vacate queerness from the public and treat it as a personal phenomenological experience. One might ascribe an object to be queer because one might associate it with something queer from their life. Here the queerness is a matter of projection, not of the essential nature of the object itself, and while the act of projecting seems perfectly fit for a theorization of abstract film, the subjective causative claims become too contingent to be of any use. Any film, abstract or not, may be queer in this scenario, but queer only to a specific viewer who projects this queerness onto the film.

Film archiving, specifically the labour of creating, updating and amending catalogues and databases necessitates a level of general outlook in ascribing properties to films in order to ensure that multiple users or the public at large can seek out objects that were not classified exclusively through subjective analysis. Rather than relying on a singular experience, Ahmed opts for ascribing queerness as inability to conform, locating the queer angle "by bringing objects to life in their 'loss' of place, in the failure of gathering to keep things in their place."^[ix] This radical sentiment of unfitness within normativity is apt for the exploration of **Archive/Counter-Archive's** search for counter-narratives to the established forms of filmic representations of queerness and abstract film seems well positioned to interrogate the limits of representation itself, let alone the representation of the notion of queerness.

Pertinently, *Beyond the Narrative: Preserving and Mobilizing Canadian LGBT2Q Films from 1984 – 2000 in the CFMDC Collection* is concerned with uncovering "LGBT2Q histories that extend beyond the narrative of HIV/AIDS memorialization or queer confessional films."^[x] Perhaps this reading of the possibility of queer abstract film so far has suggested queerness is positioned as a very anarchistic, deconstructive and revolutionary force that seeks to undo not only the heteronormative structures but the visual realm itself. But the qualities of being volatile, of probing the coherence of the structure that is supposed to hold the work in place, the incapacity of resolving itself into the form it was supposed to take makes queer abstract film eligible to take up any format it seeks fit. "There is nothing intrinsically queer about a form," writes David Getsy. "Rather, queer capacities are engendered by activating relations—between forms, against an opposition or context, or (in the case of complex forms) among the internal dynamics of their components."^[xi] Here, the capacity to determine the queer nature in the artwork still lies with the viewer, but the act of determinacy, other than perhaps in the case where the contextual relation is of paramount importance, does not affect the internal nature of whether an abstract form is queer or not. Getsy: "Queer counternarratives and sites of otherwise identification can be located in the associations, frictions, and bonds between and among forms."^[xii] Through this framing, the interconnected arrangement within the form, even when abstracted, can signify a queer tendency and outlook that the artwork subsists of.

This may be contrasted with queer abstraction as espoused in the writings of Jack Halberstam, who delimits the universality of shape through the specificity of traces of embodiment in the works of late Eva Hesse and Linda Besemer.^[xiii] Dietmar Schwärzler's reading of Halberstam posits that queer abstraction is "a fluid nomenclature that ... [Halberstam has tied] to the materiality of images, objects, and sculptures—one that defies the dichotomy of abstract versus Conceptual art."^[xiv] Yet even in surpassing the dichotomy, does queer abstraction essentially enact the voiding of the corporeal while retaining the dynamics of the material world that crucially shape the queer subjects today? Schwärzler also recognizes that this may lead to a situation where queer abstraction can be neatly folded into "a temporal progression line that tells the tale of an explicit bodily politics and reaches a kind of queer formalism increasingly common in Western art circles."^[xv] Should queerness be ever part of a project of depoliticization, or rather, can it even approach such a futurity without losing the very drive that propels it to be queer? As Joseph Henry suggests, queer abstraction is susceptible to the perils that troubled abstraction movements of the past: the false sense of right to make universalist claims.^[xvi] Though perhaps there is some essential difference in the underlying supposition that unlike a purely formalist statement, a gesture of queer abstraction nonetheless derives its motivation from a particular experience that does not stand for the totality of the LGBTQ2, which is not a homogenous whole anyway.

In lieu of conclusion, perhaps it is worth listing a few other works from the collection that relate to the queerness and abstraction. But this will inevitably lead to invoking even more issues that pest those who seek to comb over catalogues in search of queer abstract works. After all, archival work, particularly in a counter-archival setting or in what is sometimes termed as a living archive never concludes, but rather seeks continuation. The difficulties in cataloguing lie not only in determining what is queer, but also what is abstract and avant-garde. Experimental films can involve narratives and narrative films can be devoid of corporeal presences. For example of avant-garde work that nonetheless consists of corporeality, we may return to Brakhage's *Two Found Objects of Charles Boultenhouse*. In the opposite corner we might discern a work that manages to broach explicit sexuality without any human bodies, such as Michael Snow's *A to Z*, in which the narrative revolves around a furniture enacted intercourse: "Two chairs fuck." It should be reiterated once more that this text does not seek to reinscribe two renowned experimental filmmakers into a queer category, but rather to demonstrate that while other, more complicated and more unknown instances of work exists in the

grey zone between the brilliant pink and the black and white world, the discussions on those might involve persons who have passed away or who have concerns in regards to their privacy and might therefore prefer not to have a queer tag next to their work in the film catalogue.

A to Z (Michael Snow, 1956)



There is no doubt that many other works which contain both experimental and queer qualities are out there, undigitized or well worth of reintroduction to the public through their original format, with their own complexities and revelations. Two examples from CFMDC's collection, Mike Cartmell's *Prologue: Infinite Obscure* and Siobhan Devine's *Breakfast with Gus*, come to mind immediately. The question that lies ahead for the **Archive/Counter-Archive** framework, as the title of the CFMDC's case study suggests, is not only the preservation but also the *mobilization* of LGBTQ2 films that will have to be envisioned or reaffirmed in the future. Writing about the theoretical dilemmas that arise from very practical cataloguing situations may be one step in reanimating the pertinence of the works that lie in the pink, grey

and black and white zones of film history, but it certainly will not be the only one.

by Jaka Lombar

-
- [i] David J. Getsy and William J. Simmons "Appearing Differently Abstraction's Transgender and Queer Capacities" In Christiane Erharter, Dietmar Schwärzler, Ruby Sircar and Hans Scheirl (eds.), *Pink Labor on Golden Streets: Queer Art Practices* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 40-57, 45.
- [ii] Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 104.
- [iii] I am here using the terms experimental film, abstract film and avant-garde film interchangeably, denoting the possibility of encountering a work in the collection from any of the specific artistic movements and historical developments, without necessarily having any foresight which one it might be, as is often the case in archival practice.
- [iv] Robb Hernández, "Straight Talk, Queer Haunt: The Paranormal Activity of the Chicano Art Movement" In Stone, Amy L., and Jaime Cantrell, (eds.) *Out of the Closet, Into the Archives: Researching Sexual Histories* (SUNY Press, 2015), 175-204, 186.
- [v] Teresa de Lauretis "Queer Texts, Bad Habits, and the Issue of a Future," *GLQ* 17 (2011): 243-263, 244.
- [vi] Parker Tyler, "Stan Brakhage" in James, David E. (ed). *Stan Brakhage: Filmmaker* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 20-26, 24.
- [vii] Walley, Jonathan. "The Material of Film and the Idea of Cinema: Contrasting Practices in Sixties and Seventies Avant-Garde Film." *October*, 103 (2003), pp. 15-30, 15.
- [viii] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 164.
- [ix] Ibid., 165.
- [x] See "Beyond the Narrative: Preserving and Mobilizing Canadian LGBTQ2 Films from 1984 – 2000 in the CFMDC Collection" *Archive-Counter Archive Website*. <https://counterarchive.ca/case-studies/beyond-narrative-preserving-and-mobilizing-canadian-lgbt2q-films-1984-2000-cfmdc>
- [xi] David J. Getsy, "Queer Relations," *ASAP/Journal* 2.2 (2017): 254-257, 254.
- [xii] Ibid.
- [xiii] Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 95-124.
- [xiv] Dietmar Schwärzler, "QQ: Queer and Questioning" in Christiane Erharter, Dietmar Schwärzler, Ruby Sircar and Hans Scheirl (eds.), *Pink Labor on Golden Streets: Queer Art Practices* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 12-19, 13.
- [xv] Ibid., 14.
- [xvi] Joseph Henry, "Queering Queer Abstraction," *Brooklyn Rail* (2017), <https://brooklynrail.org/2017/10/artseen/Queering-Queer-Abstraction>

TERRITORY & SOLIDARITY: *The daily work of CFMDC takes place in Tkaronto (Toronto) which is covered by Treaty 13 signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit, and the Williams Treaty signed with multiple Mississaugas and Chippewa bands. We also acknowledge The Dish with One Spoon treaty between the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee that covers the land of what is now called southern Ontario. We work with the knowledge of the importance of recognition of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the four First Nations Principles of OCAP®. As a Media Arts organization we draw your attention to the work of the National Indigenous Media Arts Coalition (NIMAC). As part of anti-colonial solidarity, CFMDC board and staff proudly commits to the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI). Calls to support PACBI and the wider Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) come from Palestinian civil society and are grassroots strategies opposing the colonization of Palestine by directly targeting complicity.*

CFMDC Newsletter

Email Address

First Name

Last Name

Subscribe

Canadian Filmmakers Distrib

209 - 401 Richmond S

Toronto, ON

M4V 1B7