

Stickers and Glitter:
The Politics of Being Bejeweled and Bedazzled and The Deep Gay Apparatus

by

Keith Anthony Dominic Cole

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Keith Cole

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This MFA thesis includes the design and construction of a performance moving apparatus called The Deep Gay Apparatus (TDGA). It references durational and performative works by contemporary artists, often emulating the visionary artistic practice of Jack Smith. The theoretical framework deployed includes the theory of disidentification as posited by José Esteban Muñoz. The project required a durational walk with TDGA in which I extensively played with my own Faggotry using radical artist Bruce LaBruce as an influence. I pushed the boundaries of my body using strength, both mental and physical and collected the everyday, made drawings, collaged, made performances and used my body as a documentary tool. I displayed my new artworks at an open-air exhibition which culminated the five day, 95 hour long performance. The performative medium was my body, the method was heuristic and time was the theme that transformed TDGA as an object and me as artist.

Acknowledgements

For me to claim that I am the sole author of this work is a lie. The words “I” and “work” are the effects of hundreds of people who I have shared numerous conversations, shows, interventions, laughs and cries, break ups and break downs, dinners, sex, love ins, dances, hangovers, coliseums, hits, hurts and on it goes....

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Dedication

For my Mom and Dad
You gave me everything
I love you both

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Chapter #1: Introduction and Overview

Stickers and Glitter: The Politics of Being Bejeweled and Bedazzled and The Deep Gay Apparatus is situated in the realm of walking and durational performance. With this thesis paper and the construction and deployment of the artwork, *The Deep Gay Apparatus*, I wish to examine the theoretical and physical potential of performance to make manifest the concept of disidentification as put forward by cultural and queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz. Disidentification, then, is a performative strategy, offering new potential to minoritarians who have experienced a limiting of possibilities in a compulsory heteronormative world. As editor Michael Warner notes in his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*:

The essays in this volume go beyond calling for tolerance of lesbians and gays. They assert the necessarily and desirably queer nature of the world. This extra step has become necessary, if only because so much privilege lies in heterosexual culture's exclusive ability to interpret itself as a society. Het culture thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of inter-gender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn't exist.

(Warner xxi)

Thinking through heteronormative dominance in society while exploring the qualities and potential of disidentification, reveals the underpinning of my thesis. I use "heteronormative" to express the idea that heterosexuality is the only widely accepted standard of gendered behaviour, instead of one of the many possibilities.

The two primary forces that have conditioned my past performance work are the heteronormative virtuosic and the failed Faggot. In my early artistic life, the heteronormative virtuosic was all that was available to me and my discovery of its

inherent oppression along with the possibilities of difference and non-binary systems was a gradual process. (By *virtuosic* I mean technically perfect or masterly skillful in respect to the formal demands of an artistic discipline). A virtuosic performance can be extremely limiting in its pragmatic and myopic deployment, as a Faggot, I see virtuosic performance as assimilation rather than liberation and a Faggot failed performance is a political refusal to conform to the heteronormative.

How do I conceive and construct a durational performance that straddles heteronormative virtuosic performance and failed Faggot performance? *Stickers and Glitter: The Politics of Being Bejeweled and Bedazzled and The Deep Gay Apparatus* is an embodied examination of the tensions between heteronormative virtuosic practice and failed Faggot practice. As a performance artist what my mind and body experience and remember is central to my practice. The Deep Gay Apparatus became embodied practice that embraced the beauty and the challenges of physical and mental pain and endurance. Performance artist Marina Abramović asks, “Can artists of the body, of performance still make their own line of destruction and attack, of sharp, radical cut? Can they be self-creators and world-makers and leave something that stays between, that remains outside and that remains after these creations?” (qtd. in Racanović 30) My performance reaches into the heart of this question to observe the process of creating my own world and leaving the traces of a newly constructed reality by inserting my own stereotyped Faggot’s body into the work and projecting abjectness back onto a heteronormative world.

This paper (performative in that it weaves in and out of narratives) blends high brow and low brow language to address concepts surrounding durational performance, and disidentification alongside notions of virtuosity, failure and autobiography, Faggotry and The Deep Gay Apparatus.

In Chapter #2 I will situate myself with a brief personal history in order to articulate my concerns around the act of walking and its performative power. I will then examine the work of two Toronto based artists for whom duration and walking are central to their practice: Kathleen M. Smith and Cathy Gordon. I will further consider the act of durational walking as performance by briefly discussing the works of artist Francis Alÿs and Simon Whitehead, who uses his walks to study perception, ecology and the pedestrian (particularly with his tiny poetic public actions).

In Chapter #3, I will examine the theoretical concept of disidentification, which is a contemporary development in critical and queer theory developed, most notably, by José Esteban Muñoz. In this chapter, I will also examine the artistic practice and life of Jack Smith an avant-garde filmmaker, writer, performance artist and provocateur working in New York City from the mid 1950s until his AIDS related-death in 1989. Muñoz says of his nascent discovery of Smith's career in the Preface to his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*:

The more I learned about Smith, the more I became convinced that his work was important to my understanding of the modality of performance I was theorizing as disidentification. It was my hunch that Smith's performances were especially useful for the project of unpacking and describing what I called the worldmaking power of disidentificatory performances.

(1999 ix)

Throughout this paper I will refer to myself as a Faggot. The word “queer” has become simultaneously too inclusive and too politically and sexually limiting to articulate the specific alterity of my identity. Chapter #4 draws attention to the Faggot, discusses this term in greater detail parsing through its potentials, powers, limitations and possibilities.¹

Chapter #5 discusses The Deep Gay Apparatus. Written in the past tense, as the Apparatus has now been dismantled and no longer exists, this chapter discusses the methodology used when designing and building the Apparatus and I also provide a brief description of the Apparatus as an object. This chapter also provides a brief overview of the performance and artworks created during my 95 hour durational walk with the Apparatus. This chapter also is the conclusion to this paper and gives an analysis of the research I undertook at OCAD U up until the beginning of my five day performance with the Apparatus. This conclusion also acts a launching point for the Epilogue which briefly mentions some of the highs and lows I experienced with The Deep Gay Apparatus.

The Epilogue will provide the reader with a short overview of The Deep Gay Apparatus (TDGA), my 95 hour performance and personal thoughts behind “The

¹ Throughout this paper I use terms such as “queer,” “homosexual,” “Faggot,” and “gay.” I do define myself as a “Faggot” and use this word when describing my actions and myself. When I use the word “queer” in this paper it has come from using quotes from other texts or as others self-identify. The word “gay,” which I use in Chapter #5 in reference to “The Deep Gay Apparatus” is a personal locution describing longing. I use “homosexual” only in the title of the event, “The Coliseum of the Homosexual,” in order to provoke the sense of a gathering of people using the old-fashioned word “homosexual” in a playful manner.

Coliseum of the Homosexual.” This Epilogue intends to provide a tiny insight into TDGA, my travels, my performance and “The Coliseum of the Homosexual.”

During my professional career and in my MFA studies at OCAD U, Jack Smith and his lingering ghost have been an ongoing inspiration and influence. Jack Smith’s life was scattered with incidents of resistance, opposition and pure poetry. He related to, and experimented with, the strategies of disidentification embracing its potency and failings long before disidentification was even theorized. In honour of Jack Smith, starting with Chapter #2, I will begin each chapter with a statement, raving or epigram by Jack Smith from *“Wait For Me At The Bottom Of The Pool”*: *The Writings of Jack Smith*.

Chapter #2: *“To be or not to be Normal.”* Jack Smith

At the heart of my understanding of durational performance is the adage: Time is of the Essence. A durational performance specifically renders time, and its passing, visible. Often considered “a cultural misfit and a losing practice,” (Abramović qtd. in Racanović 31) the working definition of durational performance I utilize is:

...a form through which time is manifested in its original purity and brought to the forefront as pivotal to the experience. The performance is designed so that time, as the primary theme of the piece, physically affects and mentally transforms the performer, the audience, and the space.

(Pujol1)

As a performance artist I engage in a process that takes time to unfold. Once time has passed and the performance is finished, the most important thing or object that has been produced is the process itself and not the thing or object, if one has been produced at all. This artistic impulse has a strong thread of connection to a time when physically, life was not good for me; a time when, due to a physical defect of mine, my parents felt they were “running out of time.”

Why I Walk

As a young child I was forced to wear leg braces and special corrective shoes. My disability was not readily determined (polio, for example), but I suffered great pains in my legs and lower back. My parents and the doctors that they consulted were baffled. I was completely healthy yet suffered day and night with painful lower body aches. So much so that I underwent a terrifying medical procedure as a four-year boy called a

Myelogram.² The results were negative with no tumors or infections found. Still baffled and running out of doctors to consult in small town Northern Ontario my parents took me to the United States to consult with medical professionals there. In rural Minnesota, at the age of five, I remember visiting a kindly old country doctor by the name of Doctor Webster. Doctor Webster told my parents that I was simply growing too fast and that they should put me in a ballet class to encourage a rate of muscle growth that would keep up with the bone growth in my legs and take the pressure off my lower back. Ultimately, a simple diagnosis; my skeleton was growing and getting taller but my muscular structure was not developing at the same pace resulting in the tremendous pain of an inadequately supported skeletal structure.

My parents took Dr. Webster's advice and enrolled me into Lois Pearl Smith's School of Dance in Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada. At the age of five I began a life-long practice, love and appreciation of dance and movement. I also began to develop a deeper understanding of corporeality and its impact on the human mind. This nascent realization marked the emergence of my artistic career; a career that began in a small space where there was never enough heat or light but creativity and expression were allowed to flourish.

Flash forward to 1989. I had just graduated from York University with a Bachelor of Fine Arts, Interdisciplinary Theatre, Dance and Film. In May of that year I was asked

² A myelogram may be done to find a tumor or an infection in the spine.
<http://www.webmd.com/back-pain/myelogram-16147>

to be The Master of Ceremonies for the fledgling Toronto Bike To Work Week.³ It was at this event that I had the privilege to meet the legendary Jane Jacobs⁴ who noticed me and uttered a sentence that has stayed with me to this day. “You are a person of the foot,” she said. Yes, I am. Walking is not only a tool for keeping fit, but also for working out thoughts, ideas and problems that arise on a daily basis. I have been known to walk for miles in all types of weather. Walking is also a matter of economics and as such, a political statement. As a “person of the foot” and one who has been born, raised and remains constantly financially challenged, walking has been simply a necessary life practice; walking makes my day-to-day routine, and the achievement of my goals, possible.

The Politics of Walking

Historically, people have walked in protest, defiance, homage and solidarity both peacefully and with riotous intentions. Consider the Stonewall uprising in New York City in June 1969, the peaceful candlelight vigil for Harvey Milk in San Francisco in November 1978, the street occupations to protest the Toronto bathhouse raids in February 1981, the SlutWalk in April 2011 and Stonewall TO, a walk to protest the corporate take over of Toronto’s Pride Week events in June 2011. As an artist with a passion for politics, and for this thesis work, I do have an overt political and artistic agenda that seeks

³ Toronto’s official Bike to Work Day expanded to a week in 1989, then becoming Bike Month in 2008. See http://www.toronto.ca/cycling/bikemonth/pdf/bike_month_guide.pdf

⁴ Jane Jacobs (1916-2006) was an urbanist and activist whose writings championed a community-based approach to city building. http://janeswalk.net/about/jane_jacobs

to examine the interplay of heteronormative virtuosic performance and a failed Faggot performance. My durational walking performance will provide politicized and artistic insights into the question of what a Faggot walking with an Apparatus is. What new perspectives or strategies of resistance, if any, will reveal themselves to me in the outcome? One of my goals as an artist is to produce and cultivate; to make something original that proposes new ideas. A parallel goal is to engage in current political debates to ensure that they are not just reserved for politicians and professional activists. I have walked in several political demonstrations and the lines of identity between artist and activist have become blurred to me.

The Art of Walking

I have discovered some common themes that run through the work of artists who undertake walking as part of their practice. A cross section of impulses and ideas emerge from these practices such as: place; geography; physicality and endurance; mapping; the importance of gender; the role of paths as social networks; and methods of measuring time. Below I offer a brief survey of various artists who employ durational walking as an aspect of their work.

Two Toronto artists who use durational walking to question identity, gender and physicality are Kathleen M. Smith and Cathy Gordon. Smith created and performed in *Zoo Walk* in April 2008 which led to a video of her performance entitled *Boil Fire / Stop*

Fish.⁵ Her walk and subsequent video reference filmmaker and author Werner Herzog who undertook two durational walks in his lifetime that were documented in his writings. The first was a walk from Munich to the border of Albania, which is a distance of over 2,000 kilometers. Then, much later in life, he walked from Munich to Paris to say goodbye to a dying friend.⁶ Smith's walk started at 5:30am from her Annex apartment and went to The Toronto Zoo, located at Sheppard Avenue East and Meadowvale Road. She arrived at the Zoo at 8:30pm the same day, walking a distance of approximately 40 kilometers. Smith says of her walk, "In *Zoo Walk* I was walking with purpose. I was driven since I was going somewhere specific. I was the opposite of a *flâneur* in that I was not on a voyage of discovery – I started in a specific place and wanted to get to another specific place." (Smith) Smith also points to gender difference in walking suggesting that, "The female perspective of walking is different than the male view. For safety reasons, women are told to walk with a purpose and walk as if you are going somewhere. Men are taught to conquer with their walking. Women are given boundaries. The rules of walking in society are very different for men and women." (Smith)

As a Faggot living in the 21st century in North America, do I have boundaries that I am bound to observe? What might happen if I step outside of these boundaries and temporarily take on another gender as I walk? My durational walk aims to challenge the heteronormative as I experiment for one afternoon of my performance with a

⁵ This video received its world premiere in June 2008 and was posted on Vimeo.
<http://vimeo.com/31450046>

⁶ Ibid.

performative embodiment of a Hollywood star, Joan Crawford. In my playful portrayal of Joan Crawford will I be knowingly adding to a stereotype that is already hailed as Faggot?

Cathy Gordon's time based piece *On My Knees: A Public Divorce Ceremony* was performed on August 13, 2007. The artist crawled on her hands and knees for over eight hours to celebrate her marriage and divorce. Gordon comments on her performance on her website writing, "This public divorce ceremony commemorated 8 years of marriage through 8 hours of crawling. The route included 8 stations, each one bearing significance within our life together. My ex-husband returned from Montreal to join me in signing the papers!"⁷

In *On My Knees*, Cathy Gordon experimented with endurance, physicality, politics and mapping. It was a personal performance made public for friends, passersby and the world via websites, video diaries and online chat rooms that spectators participated in. Gordon says of her public performance:

My public action was a display of seeking closure. I wanted to slow down time and to visually express my privilege as a Canadian woman allowed to perform such a spectacle with the support of a dedicated team of protectors and the local media.

(Gordon)

Addressing the physicality required in this performance, Gordon states:

I trained for this performance for six months. The energy that my body needed for this performance came from exercises in swinging hips, walking in high heel shoes, playing with struts and swaggers and putting force onto my pelvic region. I also discovered that playing with the natural movements of my head and neck

⁷ Cathy Gordon's website is www.cathygordon.com/onmyknees/

assisted me in my preparations for this work. And one thing I really noticed, repetition of certain body movements can really hurt.

(Gordon)

Gordon's commitment to her body as a performance vehicle trained to be emotionally and physically strong is a source of artistic inspiration for my exploration and overall practice. Gordon's emphasis on physicality has encouraged me to write out daily my physical routines, monitor my physical activities with a pedometer,⁸ and keep a visual record of my movement activities allowing me to creatively organize and visualize my movement patterns.

West Wales based movement artist Simon Whitehead uses his walks as ritualistic performances to study perception, ecology, time, sound and the pedestrian. In his book *Walking to Work*, he poetically describes his practice of walking: "To walk is to pay attention. To walk is to leave footprints. To walk is to remember. To walk is to write." (Whitehead 4-5) In my research into Simon Whitehead I discovered that he too suffered from a medical condition, a spinal cord injury, that hindered his ability to walk. He writes:

At the age of 37 I walk slowly to the apple tree at the end of my mother's garden. I repeat this each day. After a spinal injury had determined that I lie on the floor for 6 months I am now learning to walk again, my gait is unstable, the process is effortful, each movement a conscious one. For another year walking is laboured as I progress around the village, occasionally in the company of a friend. I still cannot walk and talk, but I do have a strong sense of support from this place I pass through.

(Whitehead 6)

⁸ A portable device I use to count each step I take. It electronically detects the motion of my hips as I walk and records this information.

Whitehead also goes on to say that his movement performances “...act as a shed, as in shedding a skin and as a Shed as in a container, a shelter.” (Whitehead 24) He creates artworks during his walks and leaves them for unsuspecting passersby to stumble upon. These works range from tiny hand painted rocks forming words and phrases left on the floor of public washrooms to branches and sticks bound together with twine, left in banking institutions entranceways. Whitehead’s methods and practice seem to be in opposition to my reasons for walking. His are poetic and religious in tone, tinged by pilgrimage expressing desire to belong to a place or a people if only temporarily. My walk is of personal discovery, scholarly investigation, political defiance, the creation of art, the discovery of the rules of walking and the pure enjoyment of exercise and physicality.

Internationally acclaimed artist Francis Alÿs has an entirely different approach to the politics of walking and duration. Alÿs is a Belgian-born conceptualist who has lived in Mexico since 1986. He has been described as the “poet of the pointedly useless act, a politically astute artist whose political interventions only serve to undermine politics – and the need for his interventions – in the first place. Alÿs is the calculating dreamer; innocence is his cover.” (Goddard E11) His famous durational walking pieces include *Fairy Tales* (1995), *The Leak* (1995) and *Paradox of Praxis I: Sometimes Doing Something Leads to Nothing* (1997) where the artist pushed a large block of ice, for more than nine hours, around the streets of Mexico City until only a puddle remained.

In his essay *Politics / Poetics: The Work of Francis Alÿs* Mark Godfrey states that:

What makes Francis Alÿs's practice one of the most compelling in recent art is that he manages to find poetic and imaginative ways to address the urgent political and economic crises of contemporary life. His projects confront subjects such as informal labour and homelessness in Mexico City, the promises and failures of modernizing programmes in Latin America, contested territories in Israel/Palestine and immigration routes between Africa and Europe.

(Godfrey 9)

The confrontational aspects of Alÿs and his works are what have drawn me to him and his art practice in that he has a politicized refusal to conform to artistic and capitalistic commodification.

One of the actions that I will be undertaking during my durational performance was inspired by Jack Smith and Francis Alÿs whereby I will walk around downtown Toronto wearing short denim cut-off shorts and a *Bring Back Gay* T-shirt carrying a hammer in my left hand and pushing the Apparatus. This is in reference to Alÿs's performance in 2000 entitled *Re-enactment* wherein the artist bought a 9mm Beretta handgun and walked around the central core of Mexico City with the gun loaded in his right hand "waiting for something to happen" (Godfrey 109), and pursuant to an anecdote from Sylvère Lotringer who heard a rumour that Jack Smith, with an axe in his hand,⁹ was looking for him on the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

Francis Alÿs and his practice represents to me the ability to be at once poetic, political and a maverick, creating havoc with his instigations or participating in ordinary

⁹ Sylvère Lotringer tells this anecdote in Mary Jordan's 2008 documentary *Jack Smith and The Destruction of Atlantis*.

happenstance through absurd nothingness with no desire to produce a predetermined outcome or object. Alÿs tests the limits of art and, quite often, the limits of his own body.

Walking can be used as a mnemonic device, calling up memories as the feet step and stride. Walking can also be used as a political act of defiance, both peaceful and uproarious. I will be using walking as a performative tool to assist in negotiating and experiencing the demands of performing a heteronormative virtuosic performance while simultaneously resisting those demands as a failed Faggot performance.

Chapter #3: “*Glamorize your messes.*” Jack Smith

This chapter addresses the theoretical concept known as disidentification put forth by queer critical and cultural theorist José Esteban Muñoz by examining the artistic life of Jack Smith. I shall trace how the mechanisms of disidentification work by offering a definition of the term and by relating disidentification to the artistic performance practice of Jack Smith. I will attempt to tease out how Smith’s work speaks to the disidentified person’s path through a stark heteronormative landscape that relegates Faggotry to the margins of society, and the way Smith attempts to reclaim a place both inside and outside those margins for himself.

José Esteban Muñoz is a Cuban American academic working in the fields of Performance Studies and Visual Culture. Muñoz posits a definition of disidentification in his 1999 book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. He defines disidentification most succinctly as:

a performative mode of tactical recognition that various minoritarian subjects employ in an effort to resist the oppressive and normalizing discourse of dominant ideology. Disidentification resists the interpellating call of ideology that fixes a subject within the state power apparatus. It is a reforming of self within the social. It is a third term that resists the binary of identification and counteridentification. Counteridentification often, through the very routinized workings of its denouncement of dominant discourse, reinstates that same discourse.

(1999:97)

As a performance strategy, disidentification is malleable. It is a tactic that minoritarian performance artists use to trouble the stereotypes and abject identities that they have been labeled with by heteronormative society. To explore Muñoz’s concept

more fully and to build a relationship between disidentification and my practice I shall briefly examine the artistic practice of Jack Smith in order to shed light on some of the connections in this triangular relationship.

Jack Smith: A Short Introduction

Jack Smith was a formidable, vulnerable, marginal yet unforgettable artistic presence in New York City from the 1950s until his death in 1989. Whether in his loft presenting durational solo performances to crowds of many or none or one, directing his own short films, experimenting with photography or acting in low budget theatre and films, Jack Smith added chaos to an already chaotic world. He was catapulted to notoriety in 1963 as a result of the outrage caused by the American government's decision to not only ban and deny the screening of, but also confiscate, his film *Flaming Creatures*.

Smith is characterized in reviews, articles, a feature-length video documentary, by friends, peers, enemies and audiences as a paranoid, cross-dressing, pathologically antagonistic social misfit, who detested capitalism, endlessly complained about art world corruption, relentlessly turned against friends who seemingly supported him, and frequently destroyed his own work. Smith was socially and artistically terminally underground and resistant to any type of commodification or commercialism. He longed for lost and imagined Utopias, including the mythical reconstruction of an exotic Atlantis

and the gaudy world of 1940s Hollywood. Maria Montez,¹⁰ a short-lived Universal Pictures film actress from the Dominican Republic who achieved dubious Hollywood stardom, occupied the central role in Jack Smith's camp lexicon: a self-made world replete with lagoons, lobsters, resuscitated corpses, glitter, gold lamé, penguins, slide shows, costumes, masses of drawings, homemade props, posters, cobra-women and several unresolved works.¹¹

In the Preface to *Disidentifications*, Muñoz begins with a quote from Jack Smith: "Normalcy is the evil side of homosexuality." (ix) It is with this quote that Muñoz launches into the details of Jack Smith's life and performances and their influence on his concept of disidentification. Muñoz states, "Smith made worlds during his performances; he recycled schlock culture and remade it as a queer world." (ix) Jack Smith has a profound legacy and his art and life are situated in a space that could be considered all at once moronic, tragic, triumphant, trivial, bored and hysterical: a performance of living theatre. Muñoz says of Smith and his disidentifying practice:

Disidentification can be a world-making project in which the limits of the here and now are traversed and transgressed. Jack Smith's version of Atlantis, glimpsed in much of his film and performance work, disidentified with the constraining and phobic limit of the present. On a material level that meant that dime-store glitter became glitter dust, and cheap polyester was transformed into silken veils. In Jack Smith's world dumpster diving became treasure hunting.

(2009:169)

¹⁰ Maria Montez (1912-1951) Filmography: www.imdb.com/name/nmo599688

¹¹ Summarized from the September 2011 issue of *Artforum* from an article by J. Hoberman entitled *Jack in the Box* and Mary Jordan's 2008 documentary *Jack Smith and The Destruction of Atlantis*.

Typical of Jack Smith's disidentifying work is his text *The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez*. Published in the 1962-1963 winter issue of *Film Culture* just before *Flaming Creatures* received its world premiere, this essay is an elegy to Maria Montez, upon whom Smith bestows, with the sincerest admiration, the title of the "World's Worst Actress." (Smith qtd. in Cohen 68) His adoration of Montez as an iconic figure is a tool for Smith who refuses to legitimize the sincerity of good acting, or the seriousness of Hollywood film plots. J. Hoberman states, "It was precisely because Montez was so unconvincing an actress that Smith valued her performances." (Hoberman, Leffingwell 19) Through his Diva worship of Maria Montez, Jack Smith was able to find his niche in cinema and performance. "Jack found his iconography in the B Movies. But in a typically queer way, he took the worst rather than the most idealistic." (Cohen 25) Smith says of the specific performance style of Montez:

She believed and thereby made the people who went to her movies believe. Those who could believe, did. Those who saw *The World's Worst Actress* just couldn't and they missed the magic. Too bad - their loss. Their magic comes from the most inevitable execution of the conventional pattern of acting. What they can appreciate is what most people agree upon – GOOD PERFS. Therefore you can have GOOD PERFS & no real belief.

(Smith qtd. in Cohen 67-68)

Smith, as an aesthete, had his own standards for art possibly because he lived so close to the poverty line, or because he simply saw through and wallowed in the fakeness of Hollywood scripts, costumes and sets. Smith fashioned his low budget films, performances and photographs with trash and discarded materials. If the films of Maria

Montez were junk, Smith embraced his local dumpster. “Trash,” he proclaimed, “is the material of creators.” (Smith qtd. in Hoberman, Leffingwell 17)

The Perfect Film Appositeness of Maria Montez snubs normative ideas of logic, and acceptable writing styles and concepts of the narrative. The text is written so that the experience and the beauty of the writing are paramount; the formal technique is secondary at best. The text is flirtatious, fawning and discourteous towards Montez saying:

But I tell you Maria Montez Moldy Movie Queen, Shoulder pad, gold platform wedgie Siren, Determined, dreambound, Spanish, Irish, Negro?, Indian girl who went to Hollywood from the Dominican Rep. Wretch actress – pathetic as actress, why insist upon her being an actress – why limit her? Don’t slander her beautiful womanliness that took joy in her own beauty. Her eye saw not just beauty but incredible, delirious, drug-like hallucinatory beauty.

(Smith qtd. in Hoberman, Leffingwell 25)

Jack Smith created and lived in a world where meaning does not “properly line up” (Muñoz 1999:78) and through a process and practice of disidentification he discovered ways to challenge power while reveling in dime-store glitter dust. He created his own low-budget narratives using cheap, discarded junk and rags to show a world that was in constant decay. Smith resisted heteronormative values and created a legacy of queer failure. In her book *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure* UK based theatre and performance maker Sara Jane Bailes elaborates on Smith as a premeditated queer failure stating:

His intentionally shambolic and laborious home produced performances offered the spectator the experience of protracted boredom and oblivion through his sustained engagement with the unwieldy business of theatrically and the

demonstrated staged labor of building, deferring and only ever partially executing each junk-laden show.

(Bailes 23)

Queer failure, according to Muñoz, “is often deemed or understood as failure because it rejects normative ideas of value.” (2009:173) “Human slips” (Smith qtd. in Cohen 106) can offer a different and surprising way of being in the world. A failed Faggot performance can be seen as a release from heteronormative prescriptive realities. Sara Jane Bailes further suggests that for Smith boredom was cultivated as a zone that recalibrated the performance in its relation to spectatorship:

In pieces that would last as long as six hours and which meandered in a half-forgotten improvised state, a particular kind of resistant dramaturgy evolved through his tawdry, spectacularly theatrical, trashy, faltering and excessive assemblages of reject artifacts and valueless junk, executed in a style that Stefan Brecht describes as Smith’s “defiant aesthetic lower-depthism.”

(Bailes 23-24)¹²

Smith’s performances engaged in a messy formlessness, and undermined preconceived ideas of good or virtuosic performances. Jack Smith experimented with the poetics and potentials of failure and its regenerative powers. The life and work of Jack Smith foreshadow another artist, Bruce LaBruce; a Faggot who would re-order cultural paradigms, forefront subcultures, and question the dominance of heteronormative virtuosic practitioners of cinema, performance, music and art.

¹² Stefan Brecht focused on queer theatre and the rise of gay artists like Jack Smith. His obituary can be found at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/22/theater/22brecht.html>

Chapter #4: “*A normal is me who knows what a faggot is.*” Jack Smith

As an out Faggot who has never had the opportunity or (dis)pleasure to read or pass as straight, politics plays a significant role in my life. I enter the room and people utter Faggot in their mind. Their reaction is palpable. I self-define as a Faggot, I feel that the word “queer” has become too limiting, too sexually non-specific. The word Faggot blatantly declares both sexual identity and sexual proclivity. But even still, its usage is often co-opted, diluted and sanitized. (For example, I recently saw a poster for a Toronto based LGBT youth organization using the slogan “Strike a Pose, Not a Fag”). I self-define as a Faggot as a way of re-claiming a word that was once derogatory and meant to shame, demean and terrorize the gay male. I embrace and re-appropriate the term. I once made a silk-screened T-shirt that read “As A Fag I Will Bash Back” after I was fag bashed in 1997. I wore this T-shirt to the police station a week after the fag bashing incident occurred and stood in the middle of the rotunda, in silence, for one hour, positioning myself for all to read. When I use the word Faggot to describe myself, I find it empowering. “Queer” has developed into a broad identity and normalized category and I no longer allow myself to be defined by this word. With regards to “queer” and performance, Toronto based artist Moynan King commented on the term “queer” in a recent editorial in *Canadian Theatre Review*:

Meanwhile the term queer, the only inclusive non-essentialist term we have to describe members of our community, has, in the performance world, been largely reconstituted as the “avant-garde,” becoming synonymous with experimentation or alternative practices. Although queer performance does tend toward non-traditional theatrical forms such as performance art, cabaret, and interactive

performance installation, this new definition of queer is altogether too limiting and universalist. In making queer synonymous primarily with non-normative artistic practices, we can potentially dilute the political history of this term. Queer performance needs to retain a relationship to anti-heterosexist, anti-homophobic, and anti-gender normative politics.

(King 4)

King's comment echoes my sentiment in that "queer" has become simply too broad a term, especially in describing performance or performers, to serve me. The term "queer" is too limiting and evacuated from the political and, therefore, I self-define as a Faggot.

With this chapter I will attempt to clarify the contemporary concept of Faggot by discussing the canon of Canadian Faggot artist Bruce LaBruce. In his introduction to *Ride, Queer, Ride!* editor Noam Gonick says Bruce LaBruce became "Leery of the world-wide epidemic acceptance of the term 'queer' – both via academic co-optation and clone-friendly fashion signifiers that plagued the ghettos..." (19). Filmmaker, photographer, musician, writer, actor, pornographer, DJ, provocateur and radical artist Bruce LaBruce has been sardonically described by Toronto film critic Cameron Bailey as, "Tonya Harding to the director John Greyson's Nancy Kerigan. Ever the misfit, LaBruce thrives on this kind of disapproval – mainstream acceptance is not the goal." (Gonick 15) Aside from a prolific career as a filmmaker, LaBruce co-founded the influential 'zine *J.D.s* in the late 1980s, which was the "first teen fanzine to name and champion the queercore movement." (Gonick 16) LaBruce has been outspoken as a political Faggot artist who often openly criticizes popular gay culture. His harsh rant on GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) and his statement that "gay

culture is dead” (VICE Beta 2011) have been hotly debated. In *Ride, Queer, Ride!*

LaBruce writes:

I’m afraid I have a bone to pick with GLAAD – you know, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation – that dour, quasi-Stalinist organization which attempts to police gay imagery in Hollywood movies. I am sorry, but in my humble opinion, Hollywood is doing and has always done, a fine, dare I say wonderful and astonishingly accurate job of representing the people of my church (i.e. fags).

(LaBruce 25)

In the online version of VICE Magazine (VICE Beta) LaBruce pontificates on the current state of gay culture:

Gay culture is dead. I guess the idea of gay culture was always an oxymoron, but lately I find myself declaring to it more definitively, “You’re dead to me,” as you might say to a former lover. Now, the gay movement is a zombie movement. It vaguely looks like its former self, operating remotely like it used to, going through the motions. But there’s no real life to it, no purpose, beyond bland consumerism. The engine of the gay movement used to be an idea of adventurous and extreme sexuality. Gay culture itself was regarded by the status quo as something pornographic and sexually radical. Today, with the emergence of the gay conservatism, pornography appears to be the last bastion of sexual radicalism. That’s why I always express solidarity with gay pornographers. They’re the last glimmer of glamour in the gay movement.

(VICE Beta 2011)

LaBruce also adds, addressing the homosexual:

You may think I’m being sarcastic or something, but of course, I am not. I hate to break it to you, but homosexuality is not normal. That’s what makes it so entertaining. And if you haven’t figured it out yet that being a fag is all about show business, you might as well let your membership card expire.

(LaBruce 27-28)

In articulating a Faggot position, LaBruce evokes Muñoz's concept of disidentification. LaBruce was certainly not identifying or trying to assimilate into mainstream filmmaking with his 1993 film *No Skin Off My Ass* nor was he explicitly counteridentifying as he freely referenced Robert Altman's 1969 film *That Cold Day In The Park*,¹³ casting himself in the lead Sandy Dennis role as the fey punk hairdresser (Gonick 15). LaBruce was subverting the heterocentric dominance of the era; he was playing with his world. Riffing on his generation's sensibilities and the mood of the late 1980s, "as a polyvalent subculture, replete with a 'fuck-you' punk disembrace that contrasted with the earnest, coming-out films and identity-based political work that was also then finding an audience." (Gonick 16) Disidentification forefronts the ways those outside the racial and sexual mainstream negotiate majority culture, not by aligning with, or against, exclusionary works but rather by transforming these works for their own cultural purposes. *No Skin Off My Ass* and its cast and crew were able to transform a mainstream vision and re-imagine it in a Faggot landscape. By referencing a mainstream movie, *That Cold Day In The Park*, by Robert Altman, LaBruce used the transformative power of disidentification to rethink and recycle heterosexual encoded meaning. LaBruce transformed Altman's film, and marked his subjects as dangerous by the heteronormative. *No Skin Off My Ass* heavily references Altman's film in a version that is unreadable and monstrous. LaBruce disorganizes and disidentifies his characters, taking great pleasure in performing back to an audience a series of distended heteronormative

¹³ "That Cold Day In The Park" (1969) directed by Robert Altman
www.imdb.com/title/tt0102544/

stereotypes.

Disidentification and its strategies are performance based (Muñoz 1999: ix).

Disidentification and Faggotry are evident in the mission statement of the anarchistic group GAY SHAME, whose ideology and shenanigans I have been supporting and participating in for approximately twelve years. The mission statement reads:

GAY SHAME is a Virus in the System. We are committed to a queer extravaganza that brings direct action to astounding levels of theatricality. We will not be satisfied with a commercialized gay identity that denies the intrinsic links between queer struggle and challenging power. We seek nothing less than a new queer activism that foregrounds race, class, gender and sexuality, to counter the self-serving “values” of gay consumerism and the increasingly hypocritical left. We are dedicated to fighting the rabid assimilationist monster with a devastating mobilization of queer brilliance. GAY SHAME is a celebration of resistance: all are welcome.¹⁴

Heeding Judith Butler’s contention that “all social systems are vulnerable at their margins, and... all margins are accordingly considered dangerous....” (1990:132), I truly enjoy (and feel quite at home on) the fringes of society and am happy being seen as dangerous. In addition to my work with GAY SHAME I undertook a performance that extended my Faggotry into the larger public sphere. In 2010 I ran for Mayor of The City of Toronto. My platform was the love of art, the necessity for all things bicycle, demand for increased civic engagement and the need for more, but less moralizing of public health. For my valiant efforts I received 801 votes and came in seventh place overall.¹⁵ My slogan was “Keith Cole For Mayor: Get Over It”, which was a response to

¹⁴ Gay Shame website ‘Statement of Purpose’ www.gayshamesf.org/about.html

¹⁵ For full campaign details refer to my website: www.keithcole.ca

the general public's disbelief that I had indeed entered the political race in the first place. My campaign was highly publicized and popular within the Toronto downtown core of the gay, lesbian and trans communities. My several campaign events included a Mother's Day Diaper Toss (a performance protest in response to the lack of greenery in Toronto's Yonge/Dundas Square), a Meat Toss (a performance to raise awareness of the alarming increase in numbers of cyclists being struck by cars and killed in Toronto), a Shoe Toss (a performance protest about a specific homeless shelter that demanded youth staying overnight check their shoes in with an attendant) and a Barbeque Tong Toss (a fundraising performance where people paid \$5.00 to toss barbeque tongs at me while my arms and legs were fastened to a garage door).

During the campaign I also had my own monthly variety show / soapbox called "The Keith Cole Experience" at Buddies In Bad Times Theatre. "The Experience" was a ninety-minute compilation of performance art by artists working in all artistic genres. "The Experience" also became a hotbed of political thought, actions, slogans, theory and, sadly twice, a space where homophobia and hatred hit hard with incidents of fag bashing and an anonymous message left for me and my supporters. "KILL KILL KILL Keith Cole" was spray painted on the sidewalk in front of my apartment building on an "Experience" performance night.

José Esteban Muñoz's concept of disidentification and its embodiment in performance are relevant to my Mayoral campaign:

A central contention of this study is that minoritarian performance labors to make worlds – worlds of transformative politics and possibilities. Such performance engenders worlds of ideological potentiality that alter the present and map out a future. Performance is thus imbued with a great deal of power in my study. But what is meant precisely by “worldmaking”? The concept of worldmaking delineates the ways in which performance – both theatrical and everyday rituals – have the ability to establish alternate views of the world. These alternative vistas are more than simply views or perspectives; they are oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of “truth” that subjugate minoritarian people.

(1999:195)

The homophobia and hatred that I encountered during my campaign was a reminder that, “Performance is capable of providing a ground-level assault on a hegemonic world vision that substantiates the dominant public sphere.” (Muñoz 1999:196) In short, I was able to reform and deform the heteronormative world during my campaign.

As my final statement in this chapter concerning the Faggot I would like to reference Bruce LaBruce who, according to Noam Gonick:

In his own sweet way...reminded us that the martini glass is not half empty, but half full, embracing homophobia as a good thing, a challenge, and an opportunity for fags to gain a wider philosophical perspective about their sexual orientation and to replace the narrow, entrenched, outdated one that infests the gay movement today.

(Gonick 21)

LaBruce suggest that homophobia and gay-bashing are “nature’s way of reminding us that if we’re not going to be reproductive, we better have a damn good ontological rationalization for being here.” (LaBruce 21)

Chapter #5: *“The title is 50% of the work.”* Jack Smith

The Deep Gay Apparatus

The Deep Gay Apparatus was a physical and tangible moving Apparatus. The Deep Gay Apparatus was designed and built by me in December 2011. I undertook a week-long, self-directed residency at a fellow artist’s garage in Dundas, Ontario with two specific goals in mind: to build and experiment with the Apparatus in a trial and error hands on fashion; and to further my knowledge about disidentification, particularly the ways in which the Apparatus itself exemplifies, as a physical structure, a disidentified presence. The Deep Gay Apparatus was ‘Frankenstein-ed’ together. Its four main parts (a wheelchair, a shopping cart, a wooden platform and a backdrop) were randomly collected, re-purposed and purchased; disparate parts and raw materials were mashed together creating a functioning combination. The Apparatus was approximately nine feet in length and at its highest point, seven feet tall. The Apparatus was a collage full of flotsam and jetsam designed, built and created by a North American Faggot artist living in the 21st century. The Deep Gay Apparatus challenged the terms of a heteronormative virtuosic culture by mobilizing a failed Faggot aesthetic that traversed the City of Toronto, which is a vast heteronormative space where Faggots are constantly forced to assimilate.

My interaction with the Apparatus was 95 hours long and took place over a period of five days in April 2012. The Apparatus itself was intended as reflection to act as an extension of myself as an artist and a Faggot, full of flaws and the potential for mistakes,

breakdowns, breakthroughs and all types of possibilities, potentials and failings. The Apparatus was an object as well as a performative event. It was built to be a stage, a storage device, a carrier, a resting area, a portable screen, a moveable collecting contraption and a topic of conversation.

The artworks on the Apparatus that I created were freely distributed to spectators at the project's overall final stop. "The Coliseum of the Homosexual," the event created to mark the end of my performance, was held on Saturday April 28, 2012 in the courtyard of The Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (MOCCA) in Toronto.

My performance vanished and became unrepeatable, but the Apparatus lives on in disparate parts. Performance, according to Peggy Phelan, "...saves nothing, it only spends, there are no left-overs." (148) But the Apparatus fulfills a different promise, a fragmented and unknowable future. The Deep Gay Apparatus provided knowledge, a way of being and an act of resistance.

The methodology I used throughout my creative process was a heuristic one. My week-long, self-directed residency in December 2011, when the Apparatus was being built, reflected this heuristic approach. The Apparatus needed to be designed and built by me using my extremely limited construction skills and this adheres to the trial and error aspect of the heuristic methodology. I needed to experience, hands on, the building of the Apparatus from beginning to end. I was intimately engaged with the Apparatus because I saw it as a self-portrait; I reflected it and it reflected me. During the design and construction of the Apparatus my process was one of self-dialogue and self-discovery.

The initial build of the Apparatus revealed some essential truths about my process, and about my personal engagement with this work. I do not just make objects. I must be moving and interacting with the piece, I must physically experience any beauty or pain that it offers. The Apparatus needed me to be present for its deployment and usage and I needed the Apparatus to assist me in answering one central thesis question. Together we tackled this personal journey and traveled through the City of Toronto for 95 hours of sustained immersion and connectedness.

During my performance with the Apparatus I performed quixotic interventions into landscapes, public and private places and created environments and artworks. These actions, each lasting only a short period of time, have become part of my performative recollection. I played with the idea of rumour, gossip, hearsay and memory as methods of collecting documentation of my performance. I also played with my gender as I put myself in drag and pushed myself around the streets, in the wheelchair section of the Apparatus, looking like a version of Joan Crawford from the 1962 film *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*¹⁶ With my durational performance, I created a rumour. Some spectators did see my actions directly, but some only heard or saw photographs on the Internet. These rumours have sparked conversations, imaginary sightings, confusion, disbelief and curiosity.

¹⁶ *What Ever Happened To Baby Jane?* was directed by Robert Aldrich in 1962 and starred Betty Davis and Joan Crawford. In the film, Joan Crawford's character is crippled by a car accident and is wheelchair bound.

Since I began my graduate studies in September of 2010, I have been saving parts of every artwork I made with the intention of reusing, recycling and repurposing them during my walk. Some items did not survive their initial exhibition: fruit and other foods that I used; a bicycle that I demolished with a baseball bat; and gold glittered sails that were confiscated by the police, for example. Everything that I have saved from past creations got repurposed into new works for the Apparatus. These new and newly imagined works were carried on the Apparatus as I traveled with it. Sometimes they were left behind in various locations, where a passerby could interact with it or take note of it.

The performance offered nothing that one can buy or own, it had no commercial value. My aim and reward was the process of inverting, perverting and subverting the status quo. The Apparatus, with the failed Faggot at the helm, was engaged in making space, taking up space and questioning power systems. A failed Faggot performance, for me, embodies limitless potential exactly because it takes a side footpath, abandons the script and defies the heteronormative. As a failed Faggot artist I can decide what is real, right and appropriate for myself.

My thesis question was: How do I conceive and construct a durational performance that straddles heteronormative virtuosic performance and failed Faggot performance? These two primary forces have conditioned my past performance work but now I ask if I can find a third force and implement it? My initial response is: by doing the performance and refusing to quit. Now that I have completed the performance and

dismantled the Apparatus the question seems to be open-ended, in that I have no solid answer at this time, therefore, there is potential for further research.

Epilogue

My 95 hour long performance with The Deep Gay Apparatus started on Monday April 23, 2012 at 5am. The weather was extremely cold with light snow and very high winds. The weather remained cold, rainy and windy for five days until the end of my 95 hour long performance which culminated on Friday April 27, 2012 at 4am.

Day one was full of self-doubt, Apparatus breakdowns and general difficulties but on the upside there was slow progress as I became more familiar with the Apparatus and its potentials and limitations. Crossing streetcar tracks, for example, proved difficult but pushing the Apparatus uphill was surprisingly easy.

Day two was an early start (5am) and people began responding to the Apparatus by posting sightings, photos, videos and comments online through social media outlets. I was chased off the property of The Bank of Nova Scotia at the northeast corner of King and Bay Streets by a small team of security guards. It was on day two that I decided that I was too action orientated and needed more time to reflect.

Day three was relaxing as I sat with the Apparatus in Queen's Park and made lots of "landart" by using video tapes, video tape boxes, cassette tapes, rocks, glue, old clothes, yarn, water and soap suds creating my own Foam Party by filling up as much space in the park as I could with foam made by using dish detergent soap and water. Later I made my way to a set of train tracks near Casa Loma and pushed and pulled the Apparatus along the train tracks. By 10pm I realized that I was trapped. The entranceway onto the tracks was blocked by a parked car. I had to leave the Apparatus by the train

tracks and walk home. I was a bit distressed as this was the first time the Apparatus was going to be outside overnight and unattended.

On day four I went to the train tracks and started the day with the Apparatus which was in fine form. Leaving it outside and unattended caused the Apparatus no harm. We walked along Dupont Street heading west until I decided to take the Apparatus off the main street and into back alleys in order to test the Apparatus on uneven pavement. All went well and the Apparatus was holding up until I arrived at Dovercourt and Queen Street West. A wheel on the shopping cart jammed and I parked the Apparatus outside of The Great Hall on Queen Street West. I was doing a planned performance that night in front of a gallery at 1086 Queen Street West so the position and timing of the breakdown was actually perfect. I started my performance at approximately 8pm and the sky was brilliant with colours. There were very high and very great winds. I wore a cumbersome white wedding dress which captured the wind as I danced on the sidewalk wearing this large billowing piece of white material for about 90 minutes. The wedding dress was insignificant in that I just wanted to wear something big and cumbersome that was hard to move in, mirroring the Apparatus which was also big and cumbersome and hard to move with. Later, I somehow successfully unjammed the shopping cart wheel. Feeling confident that the Apparatus was fine on its own, I parked the Apparatus on Ossington Avenue and let it rest for the night.

Day five was another early start (6am) and I found the Apparatus exactly where I left it in good condition. We walked east towards Bay and Bloor Streets, which was my

big destination for the day. While crossing the streetcar tracks along Dundas Street West, a large bottle of gold glitter fell off the Apparatus and landed squarely on the streetcar tracks. Traffic was busy and I decided to move on rather than rescue the bottle of gold glitter. I noticed a young man with Down Syndrome who was screaming about the bottle of gold glitter. He insisted on running into traffic to rescue the bottle. I stopped him. Then a eastbound streetcar zoomed across the tracks, hit the bottle of gold glitter with its front wheel and with a loud BANG, sounding like a cannon, the gold glitter went flying into the air covering me, the young man and several cars with gold glitter. Perfect. I eventually made it to Bay and Bloor Streets where I tap danced on the wooden platform of the Apparatus and all four corners and in the middle of the scramble at the corner of Bay and Bloor for one hour without any complaints from the police. My performance continued, making several more stops, and one final performance in Mirvish Village where I allowed the Apparatus to be used as a model, prop and a photo opportunity for people in the neighbourhood. The Apparatus was parked, at 4am, at the corner of College and Borden Streets for the night.

On Saturday April 28, 2012, I created "The Coliseum of the Homosexual" in the courtyard of The Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (MOCCA). There, the Apparatus was publicly dismantled and parts of the Apparatus, along with my artworks, were redistributed to the crowd, free of charge starting at 1:30pm. These actions at once disposed of and prolonged; the life of the Apparatus, my artworks and the 95 hour long performance. That evening, at 6:20pm, MOCCA employee Brett Despotovich closed the

gallery to the public and locked the main doors, looked around at the deserted and pristine courtyard, turned to me and said, “Wow Keith. It’s like it never happened.”

I love chance, the confusing, the chaotic and the momentary but I have no interest in holding on to these things. Once they become captured they become certainties and when something is certain it lacks the power to be generative.

Disclaimer

Stickers and Glitter: The Politics of Being Bejeweled and Bedazzled and The Deep Gay Apparatus is a written document of my scholarly and artistic work at OCAD U and does not include any visual elements but is full of words. This is an artistic, aesthetic, scholarly and political position having everything to do with the way in which the meaning of my work, like the work itself, must be pieced together by the reader of this document. I have made a compromise to include one drawing of the Apparatus. It is my wish that the artwork discussed herein be documented only by memories, rumours, gossip and hearsay. My work is characteristically time-based, site and event specific, inherently temporary, transient and ephemeral in order to defeat notions of transmission, reliability, certainty and permanence.

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Illustration: Figure #1: The Deep Gay Apparatus. Artist Rendering.



The Deep Gay Apparatus

- ARTIST Rendering -

December 2011

Kill Cole

Figure #1: The Apparatus