

Its Teeth in His Body, Out of 60 Dogs

by

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Abstract

“Its Teeth in His Body, Out of 60 Dogs” studies how visual resignification, reassemblage and the process of cut-up intersect in profound ways with queer theory and gender theory. The main theoretical underpinning of my project is Rosalind Krauss’ concept of the visual index where any reproduced image’s inherent message can be resignified or reactivated when it is placed next to other visual referents. I am interested in how the queer artist’s process of selection, cut-up and resignification can create a unique identity outside of received institutional codifications and stereotypes as described by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. This identity embodies Lee Edelman’s concept of queer “jouissance,” when the queer overwhelms or cut-ups these cultural assemblages by creating an intervention that involves pure enjoyment or eroticism. This process of externalizing jouissance through cut-up will articulate how these disparate materials can be reassembled into a distinctly queer identity.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction: Representing self through culture’s images

“Its Teeth in His Body, Out of 60 Dogs” studies how visual resignification, reassemblage and the process of cut-up intersect in profound ways with queer theory and gender theory. My series of mixed media works as well as my research into artists Dean Sameshima, Richard Hawkins and Robert Rauschenberg will embody this conceptual collision.

The main theoretical underpinning of my project is Rosalind Krauss’ concept of the visual index where any reproduced image’s inherent message can be resignified or reactivated when it is placed next to other visual referents.¹ Drawing upon this concept, my series will study the process of assembling gender through cultural reproduction and the queer artist’s process for cutting this cycle through a form of an intervention found within the artistic practice of collage.

Says Sergei Eisenstein:

“No matter how different [the film strips] might be, and frequently despite themselves, they engender a ‘third something.’ [They] become correlated when juxtaposed according to the will of an editor...The nature of the unifying principle which should determine both the content of the shot and the content which is revealed through a given juxtaposition of these shots.”²

This research into queer resignification, cut-up or third something will be explored through the writings of Manuel De Landa, Rosalind Krauss, Walter Benjamin, Jonathan Katz, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Lee Edelman, all of which will be aligned with my studio practice. I will also draw from the collage methodologies of Hawkins, Sameshima and Rauschenberg, which involve collecting, visual reappropriation and various modes of mechanical reproduction.

The process of assembling gender identity is explored in the works of Michel Foucault and

¹ Krauss, Rosalind E. “Notes on the Index, I,” The Originality of Modernism and Other Myths, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1986), 197

² Eisenstein, Sergei, The Film Sense (Harcourt Brace & Company, 1947), 9-10.

later Judith Butler, who both study how classifications of gender and sexuality have been assembled and reproduced through societal, institutional and cultural discourses.³ In the end, everyone, including the LGBT community continues to learn, adapt and live within these constructed codifications or even stereotypes. Butler questions whether the queer gender is confined to a construction or even parody of heterosexuality. In this case, Butler is describing the “performed,” which is essentially a masquerade of gender identity: “The sex and gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between the sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders.”⁴ Although Butler was referring to the female subject, this argument could easily be applied to the gay male subject. Alluding to Krauss’ index, the queer body is an empty sign that is constantly searching for a referent within these culturally constructed codifications.

Looking back, my childhood perspective of my queer body could be easily compared to the aliens in Don Siegel’s 1956 film “Invasion of the Body Snatchers,” where the body transforms itself into heterosexual composites, literally becoming the family man or the anonymous soldier hiding under the cloak of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” Even though both of my parents were accepting of my identity, I had an impulse to hide within as one of these reproductions or composites of heterosexuality, especially after the news of Matthew Shepard’s murder. On October 12, 1998, Shepard’s body was found bound to a wooden fence that surrounded a cornfield in Laramie, Wyoming. The murder caused a national uproar when it was discovered that Shepard had been beaten to death because of his sexual orientation. I remember watching the news footage of Fred Phelps and his followers protesting his funeral shouting “no tears for queers” and “god hates fags.” I was twelve years old at the time and I am not alone in saying that there was an impulse in my generation to step back into the closet.

I viewed my body as invisible, chameleon-like. Today, instead of using heterosexual

³ Foucault, Michel. The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction, (New York: Random House, Inc, 1978), 12.

⁴ Butler, Judith. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, (New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall Inc, 1990), 10.

composites as a means of survival, have I literally assembled these codifications into a performance? Or as an openly gay man, have I created an identity out of the codifications of gayness that are culturally constructed? The question that I will continue to ask throughout my own practice and research is; as queer, how do I go about capturing both my own participation within these codes as well as the process of visualizing an identity through a process of assembly?

With these questions in mind, I am interested in how the queer artist's process of selection, cut-up and resignification can create a unique identity outside the inevitable system of codifications and stereotypes. This cultural and societal frame of reference is grounded within the model of reproductive futurism, which is a circular fictitious reality grounded in an imaginary past, leading each generation towards a false projection of the future. This means that each generation is rooted within the mindset of reproduction and the survival of future generations.⁵

I have also found that there is a level generational reproduction of queer contemporary thought. Our current culture is constantly overwhelmed with movements, figures or even ghosts from the past. This concept was the focus of the recent group exhibition "Coming After" (2012) at the Power Plant in Toronto. The show consisted of artworks by a number of LGBT artists who are coming after the explosion of queer representation and cultural theory during the mid 20th century. The artists featured in the show were born in the late 1970's and there is an overall attitude of this generation that they missed all of the crucial milestones of our history.⁶ Many of these milestones, as well as ghosts from these eras, continue to shape the artistic practices of current LGBT artists both stylistically and conceptually. It is not surprising that the works of such artists as Robert Mapplethorpe, Jack Smith, Ray Johnson, Andy Warhol, Rainer Werner

⁵ Edelman, Lee. "The Future is Kid Stuff: Queer Theory, Disidentification, and the Death Drive," Narrative, Vol 6, No. 1 (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1998), 28.

⁶ Davies, Jon., "Coming After" The Power Plant online, Winter 2011, 15 Feb 2012
<http://www.thepowerplant.org/Exhibitions/2011/2011_Winter/Coming-After.aspx>.

Fassbinder and, of course, Robert Rauschenberg continue to haunt internet blogs as well as influence the output of new generations of queer artists. I am one of these queer artists attempting to place himself outside of an already-determined history.

Based upon my own experience and observations, contemporary queer culture has also become fragmented with the advent of the cyber-universe and has gradually assimilated into mainstream culture. This has allowed the community to spread out across urban centers instead of remaining in particular neighborhoods. This change has caused a certain detachment for me in terms of where my sexuality stands in relation to my artistic practice. In the end, it is reproduced images of a past that I did not live that will help me trace the development of my queer identity today. For example, my understanding of the pre-AIDS queer culture depends significantly upon grainy photo reproductions found in libraries and online or in Toronto's own Glad Day Bookshop. Film representations of the pre-AIDS culture from these periods, such as William Friedkin's controversial thriller "Cruising" (1980) and Frank Ripplloh's "Taxi Zum Klo" (1980), have also informed both my comprehension of the era. All of these depictions have had an impact on the personal views of my culture but more importantly, have contributed to my identity. This is a form of gender and cultural reproduction in itself. However, through cut-up and reassemblage, I want to depict a queer subject that is able to stand outside of these iconic images.

My body of work is attempting to cut through both of these reproductive cycles with an identity that embodies Lee Edelman's concept of "jouissance,"⁷ when the queer overwhelms or cuts-up these cultural assemblages by creating an intervention that involves pure enjoyment or eroticism. Within this process, the queer accepts that there is no future for him within the pre-determined cyclical systems. This realization enables him to take his place as the figure within the death drive, which leads to his own inevitable destruction. However, he can now dedicate his

⁷ Edelman 27.

existence to excessive pleasure, which will signify his distinct queer identity. The majority of the mixed media works within my project consist of material that both titillates and gives me physical pleasure. Similarly, throughout their practices, Sameshima, Hawkins and Rauschenberg resignify reproduced images to create a representation of a unique self that reflects personal fantasies, obsessions, fetishes, or desires. This is the root of queer jouissance. In order for me to cut the cultural and societal reproduction that encompasses my body, I will depict my own distinct queer pleasure through reassembling mass-produced material.

This process of capturing the internal self through reassemblage is linked to Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs' "The Third Mind"⁸ (1978), where a piece of text is deconstructed into individual words or sentences and then reordered. The cut-up allows the viewer to participate in the collagist's process of taking these disparate parts and reconfiguring them based on his own associations. "Cut-ups make explicit a psychosensory⁹ process that is going on all the time anyway," states Burroughs. "Somebody is reading a newspaper, and his eye follows the column in the proper Aristotelian manner, one idea at a time. But subliminally he is reading the columns on either side and is aware of the person sitting next to him. That's a cut-up."¹⁰ In many ways, the third mind is a form of portrait because it literally opens a window into the internal montage that is created by the editor or collagist's eye.

Says Richard Hawkins:

"I've always been interested in the different ways collage has been used to represent self through culture's images. Collage embraces a fragmented representation of the subject and treats the street or the media stream as a resource from which to pluck reflected aspects of subjectivity, re-using and recombining (images) in an attempt to fashion an uncontainable, unrepresentable desiring self.... A reclamation of the world's images and probably something much closer to how the psyche constructs an identity of what passes

⁸ William S. Burroughs is best known as one of the leaders of the Beat Generation and for his semi-autobiographical novels while Brion Gysin is known for his poetry, performance art and calligraphic paintings. Both artists identified themselves as queer throughout their lives.

⁹ Relating to the mental perception and interpretation of sensory stimuli

¹⁰ Burroughs, William., and Brion Gysin. The Third Mind. (New York: The Viking Press, 1978.), 4.

by...”¹¹

Finally, the title of my thesis is a found textual fragment: “Its Teeth in His Body. Out of 60 Dogs.” It contains a fragment of a narrative that is drawn from a TIME Magazine article on raccoon hunting. Whenever I apply this single sentence to a new collage or print, the message inherent within this text will be elaborated upon and expanded.

This project will be the first time where I will be the main subject of my practice and research. However, I am less interested in creating an autobiographical model than capturing my continued lived experience of interacting with an urban center’s constant detonation of visual stimuli. I want to externalize this inner “psychosensory process.”¹² This process of perception and interpretation will help me understand how all of this material has reassembled itself into a distinctly queer figure.

Chapter 2 – Literature review, artwork, and reflection

To support and frame my studio practice, I have researched theorists and artists who examine the concept of assemblage as applied to sociology, gender, identity and especially media culture.

A key thinker in this field is Manuel De Landa who examines how society and culture are made up of entities whose defining properties are created through interaction. Whenever a fragment detaches itself and joins another assemblage, its gradual assimilation or resistance to the new assemblage signifies its identity. “A part detached from such a whole ceases to be what it is since being this particular part is one of its constitutive properties,” writes De Landa.¹³ He calls

¹¹ Muller, Christopher. Richard Hawkins: Of Two Minds, Simultaneously (Amsterdam: de Appel Arts Centre, 2008), 30.

¹² Burroughs, and Gysin 4.

¹³ De Landa, Manuel. A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory And Social Complexity. (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 9.

this act “a relation of exteriority,”¹⁴ where every single factor (location, context, time) affects not only how the fragment represents itself to the world but also how it affects others. It is not possible to view these entities by themselves because their individuality is constantly in flux while other components are forcing it to change. Once the assemblage is a whole, it can begin to affect all of the components that constructed it in the first place.

I found that De Landa’s description of sociological assemblage paralleled Rosalind Krauss’ two-part essay “Notes on the Index” (1986), which studies how the interactive patterns of language can be applied to photography and collage. Krauss places particular emphasis upon Jakobson’s description of the “shifter,” which is a grammatical sign that is constantly in flux depending upon the speaker or context. An example of this is found in the word “this,” which Krauss describes as an empty sign full of meaning when supplied with a referent: this chair, this table. Other examples include the pronouns “his,” “her,” “you,” and “I.” “I am the referent of ‘I’ only when I am the one who is talking,” writes Krauss, “When it is your turn, it belongs to you.”¹⁵ The sign’s referent depends entirely upon the presence of either a speaker or in Lacanian terms a “double image” or “mirror image,” which establishes self-identification.¹⁶ Whenever someone places a shifter within a sentence, they place themselves within it.

Krauss’ index¹⁷ is an example of when the shifter’s meaning is created through a physical relationship to a referent, for example, a physical trace, such as a footprint or a shadow. The photograph is a form of index because it contains a physical trace of light that has moved across a light-sensitive surface. Whether the photograph contains a human being or an object, it has become an isolated sign within the frame, which has been freed from its original context. It can now simultaneously shift from referent to referent. Returning to Lacan, the photograph allows the

¹⁴ De Landa 8.

¹⁵ Krauss 197.

¹⁶ Krauss 197.

¹⁷ Krauss 198.

viewer to disengage from historical conditions surrounding the subject, which brings it into the realm of the imaginary.

Similarly, a mixed media artist follows a similar methodology when extracting an image from its original context and creating an entirely new message by placing it next to other isolated visual referents. This does not only apply to the photograph but also to incorporating found objects into artwork, which is the case with Rauschenberg and, earlier, the Dadaists.¹⁸ Similar to a photograph, Rauschenberg's "Bed" (1955) and Duchamp's "Fountain," (1917) are objects that have been physically removed from their original conditions and can now be placed next to other disparate objects within multiple contexts.¹⁹



Fig. 1. "A Kind of Obscene Diary," Dean Sameshima, 2011

This process of shifting visual resignification is explored in Dean Sameshima's "A Kind of Obscene Diary" (Fig. 1). The work consists of five portraits that are reappropriated photographs from anonymous vintage gay porn magazines.²⁰ Sameshima has completely isolated the facial expressions of his subjects while we only catch a glimpse of their physical surroundings.

However, what all of the portraits have in common is the men's facial expressions; they are either in a state of ecstasy or are looking intently at a subject outside of the frame. For example, one of

¹⁸ Krauss 206.

¹⁹ Duchamp is considered to be one of the major leaders of the Dadaism, a movement founded in 1916 that was a reaction to the horrors of World War One and to the absurdity of the modernist world. Rauschenberg's early assemblages and ready-mades are often linked to Neo-Dadaism, which has many similarities with the methodologies and styles of Dadaism.

²⁰ Sameshima, Dean. "Cruised or be Cruised Exhibit Overview," [Peres Projects Online](http://www.peresprojects.com/exhibit-press/274/), Spring 2011, 15 Feb. 2012 <<http://www.peresprojects.com/exhibit-press/274/>>.

the men (Fig. 1, fourth from right) is actually screaming while an anonymous hand grasps his shoulder. We do not know whether we are watching a scene of violence or a moment of sexual gratification. As the viewer's eye moves across these five expressions, they continue to reposition themselves in relation to one another. This is an example of an assemblage that is never static because all of the facial expressions continue to resignify one another in viewer's eye. In other words, Sameshima has laid out of all of these isolated images in order for the viewer to create his or her own internal cut-up. A man looking longingly out of the frame is now supplied with a referent containing a moment of ecstasy.

Even though Sameshima has given us only a glimpse of each subject's context, all of the photographic material within his entire practice is drawn from very specific sources that contain cultural icons and codes from queer history, for example, images from the leather culture magazine "Drummer" (1975-1992) or Bob Mizer's nude male photographs. However, through reappropriation and reframing, Sameshima provokes moments when the viewer, regardless of gender or background, has an uncanny experience of the male subject's emotions or actions. Sameshima also has a body of work that references obscure cultural codification within queer culture: connect-the-dot drawings of nude male bodies ("SPITHEAD," 2011); the two safety pins signifying safe-sex ("Untitled (Safe Suck)," 2007); and the coloured hanky sex codes ("Young Men at Play II," 2005). Within these works, there is interplay in between universality and queer jouissance. All of these images have been removed from their historical conditions, which means the eroticism within the images stands within the realm of the imaginary and has been brought into the present. While any viewer is able to recognize himself or herself within many of Sameshima's subjects, the images still display a distinct queer pleasure.

Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936) gives a historical basis not only to Sameshima's visual appropriation but also to Krauss' shifting visual

referents and Burroughs and Gysin's third mind. Benjamin describes how the mechanically reproduced image brought about a broad-based system of visual symbols that were not restricted to a specific group or class. Whether it was a mechanical reproduction of a once-obscure painting or movie star's portrait, all of this material could now function within multiple contexts where conflicting messages could arise from a minor juxtaposition. Through this mechanization, the inherent message within the image reactivates itself whenever it is placed within a new context.²¹ This new context could be anything from a particular location, a text caption, or images placed next to others in a sequence. This is why mechanical reproduction shifts visual culture from being ritualistic to political; a spiked fetish necklace worn by a leather daddy in a Robert Mapplethorpe photograph is displaced into a Madonna video or a sequined ball gown worn by a drag queen in Jennie Livingston's documentary "Paris is Burning" (1990) suddenly appears in a Vivienne Westwood advertisement. Through this shifting of image context, the audience is able to place objects and/or symbols within entirely new conditions, which creates entirely new signification. A different historical circumstance can affect a message within the image, which can shift public reception.²²

Contrasting Benjamin's description of visual reactivation and Krauss' shifting index, Richard Hawkins also experiments with resignification in isolated visual and textual referents. This is especially the case with "SJJSS" (Fig. 2), which is a collage of male fashion models that have been haphazardly taped on top of each other. At first glance, this piece brings to mind a star-struck high school student's decorated locker. The resignification occurs when Hawkins places three post-it notes across the composition that read "suffering," "jealous jealous" and "suffering suffering." Similar to Sameshima's facial expressions, this assemblage does not remain static as the images continue to resignify one another in relation to the multiple post-its. Once again,

²¹ Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproduction," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 220, 221

²² Benjamin 234.

Hawkins invites the viewer to create an internal cut-up as his or her eye moves across the frame. A photo of a model with ripped abs surrounded by African tribesmen is signified with words “jealous jealous” while a photo of three emaciated looking boys lounging in a tree collide with the words “suffering suffering.”

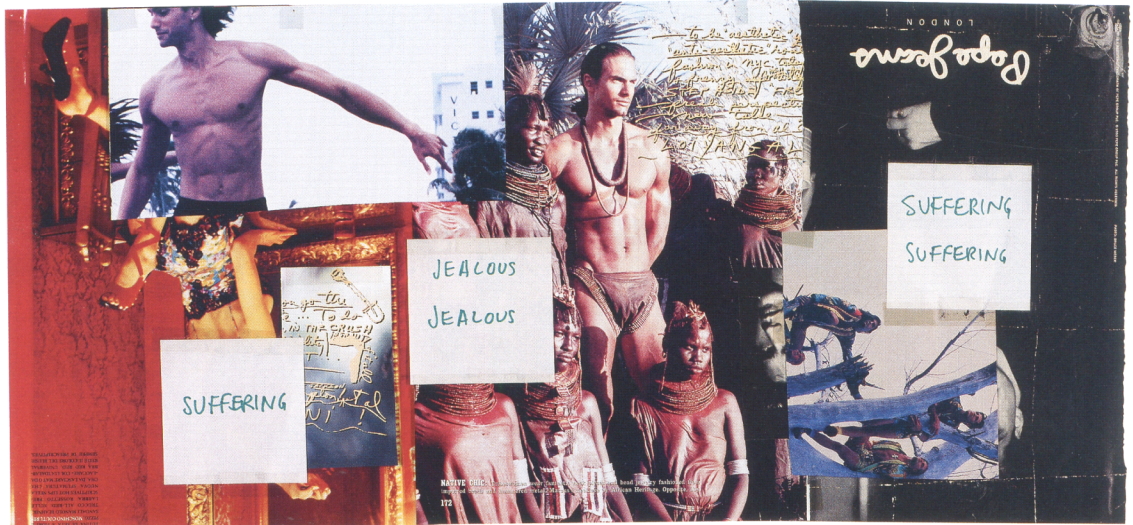


Fig. 2. “SJSS,” Richard Hawkins, 1993

Hawkins’ work is self-reflexive and corresponds with Burroughs’ description of using cut-up as a way to externalize the inner “psychosensory”²³ process of the subconscious. When I visited Hawkins aptly named retrospective “The Third Mind” (2010-11) at the Art Institute of Chicago, I felt as if I was looking into a window of his internal history of personal obsessions, crushes and desires: a large Chinese lantern covered in publicity photographs of Asian pop stars, actor Keanu Reeves, and gay porn (“Crepuscule #3,” 1994); a jpeg montage of the actor Matt Dillon spread across lavender desktop design (“lg.purple.matt.graveyard,” 1995); and a study of male Greek and Roman butts (“Urbis Paganus IV.9.IX Antinous, front back,” 2009). “There is a transformative, alchemical quality to Hawkins process,” writes curator Lisa Dorin. “His literal,

²³ Burroughs, and Gysin 4.

repeated handling of objects effectively changes their meaning as subjects.”²⁴ Similar to Sameshima’s facial expressions, all of the work signifies a distinctly queer fantasy of a world of all male subjects. In the end, the viewer is participating in a private history that would usually be found hidden under a bedroom mattress.

The process of visual resignification to create a distinctly queer cut-up can be applied to Robert Rauschenberg’s practice throughout the 1950’s despite the fact that the McCarthy era overshadowed his identity as a gay man. Jonathan Katz’s “The Art of Code” (1993) explores not only the queer signifiers within Rauschenberg’s work, but also his relationship with Jasper Johns. In many ways, their collaboration and output paved the way for generations of queer-identified artists, such as Sameshima and Hawkins. Katz argues that the two artists’ work catalyzed an entire movement that was not only in opposition to the Abstract Expressionist movement that preceded them but a distinctly queer one. “The Abstract expressionists paraded themselves as painters without a country, stripped of the exigencies of culture – those particularities of time, place and audience that make manipulated pigment meaningful,” writes Katz. “They thought of themselves as totally autonomous individuals, as anti-cultural, cultural workers...”²⁵ Of course, this attitude would have been impossible for gay men living during this era because they were either forced to lead heterosexual existences or to define themselves as gay and accept the risk of persecution.

²⁴ Dorin, Lisa. “Pretty on Top of Pretty,” Richard Hawkins: The Third Mind. (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2011), 11.

²⁵ Katz, Jonathan. “The Art of Code,” Queer Arts Resource, 1993, 29 Feb 2012, <http://www.queer-arts.org/archive/show4/forum/katz/katz_set.html>.



Fig. 3. "Canto XIV" (Dante's Inferno), Robert Rauschenberg, 1959-60

This meant that it was impossible for Rauschenberg and Johns to confine themselves within the pictorial language of Abstract Expressionism. Instead, both artists were forced to discover their own identities through the visual culture that surrounded them.²⁶ While looking at Rauschenberg's output, particularly during the late 1950's, it is not difficult to notice the distinctly queer signifiers or codes that continue to appear within his assemblages. "Wager" (1957-59) contains a deconstructed illustration of a nude male body as well as a more literal reference with an autographed photo of Judy Garland, a queer icon and one of the first celebrities to defend homosexuality. In "Dante's Inferno" (Fig. 3), he places a footprint on his canvas

²⁶ Katz 5.

referencing the sodomite's fate to walk barefoot for all eternity.²⁷ Similar to Sameshima's facial expressions or Hawkins's layered images, both of these examples contain traces of a gay identity rather than an explicit representation. As Katz points out, "These images constitute a 'coming out' legible only to those who are 'in.' The gay references tend to be so subtle and obscure that only now are scholars beginning to recognize them."²⁸

Lee Edelman illuminates questions of queer recognition and *jouissance* in contemporary terms in his article "The Future is Kid Stuff: Queer Theory, Disidentification, and the Death Drive" (1998). Edelman suggests, "the reproductive futurism and the sacralization of the child...necessitates the sacrifice of the queer."²⁹ The queer has to accept that there is no future for him within the symbolic system of reproductive futurism. This acceptance can only occur when the queer assumes the lethal danger of his sexual pleasure, the death drive, and experiences his "jouissance,"³⁰ in cutting the fictitious thread of reproductive futurism. This is when queer overwhelms or cut-ups the symbolic order by creating a form of pure erotic enjoyment.³¹

Rauschenberg turned his back on the homophobic Abstract Expressionist community and created work that displayed his own pleasure in queer experience and the disassembled male figure. This exit from reproductive futurism also occurs when Sameshima and Hawkins reassemble disparate visual referents to depict their own unique queer pleasure, notably Sameshima's facial expressions and Hawkins' interplay of male fashion models and text. In other words, Burroughs' description³² of the cut-up externalizing the inner psychosensory process is the embodiment of the queer's *jouissance*. In all of these examples, the cut-up reassembles the symbolic model to include distinctly queer signifiers.

²⁷ Katz 10.

²⁸ Katz 10.

²⁹ Edelman, 28.

³⁰ Edelman, 29

³¹ An example of queer *jouissance*'s intervention is Camp culture, which is an exaggerated and humorous perspective of the symbolic model or Queercore or Homocore, an 80's punk movement that rejected the mainstreaming and conservatism of the gay community. Both of these examples are unique and cannot be contained within the repressive imaginary cycle.

³² Burroughs, and Gysin 4.

This is what I want to explore in my own practice. In the end, this process of queer jouissance through the cut-up and shifting signification is not only confined to my artistic output but also is manifested in how I present myself and interact with the world. I continue to absorb images that I encounter, impacting my fashion sense or even how I talk. However, I strive to cut and remix all of this material in order to construct my own distinct form of pleasure, to escape becoming a reproduced subject.

Chapter 3 - Methodology: I am here

“Its Teeth in His Body, Out of 60 Dogs” came into existence as a conversation across intuitive studio experiments, theoretical and historical research and self-reflection.

In response to theories and practices of creating multiple messages through reassemblage examined in the previous chapter, I began to accumulate an archive of images that were drawn from internet databases, bookstores and eventually, the streets of Toronto. I started my own Tumblr site, which helped me connect with other artists and bloggers who dedicate their entire sites to found images that have been removed from their original contexts. I was also interested in connecting with artists who concentrated upon visual material drawn from LGBT history. This included Dean Sameshima through his own Tumblr site “Cruised or Be Cruised,” which researches queer subcultures, such as the pre-AIDS leather and fetish scenes’ as well as underground publications from this period. This archival internet-based research helped me both to situate my practice in relation to previous history and to build upon my own archive of found images.

I decided to create a series of works that explore my personal process of looking through this material. While working with these found images, I concentrated less on the original context or

subject of a photograph, and in reference to Krauss, I viewed them as isolated signs, which enabled me to shift them to entirely different referents that would otherwise not occur to me. I was able to place particular emphasis upon the image's inherent textures, colors, or pure shapes, while sometimes even turning the image upside down. In many ways, whether the image depicts a celebrity, particular event or landmark, I wanted to approach the fragment as if I had never encountered it before.



Fig. 4. "Its Teeth in His Body, Out of 60 Dogs #1," 2011

For example, in "Its Teeth in His Body, Out of 60 Dogs #1" (Fig. 4), I began with three distinct subjects: an image of a dog lunging at a raccoon from a 1950's LIFE article on hunting; two men embracing on a motel bed from a porn magazine called "Cowboys Annual" (1979); and a pixelated jpeg of a flood that took place in Sheridan, Illinois. The question for me was how I could view the bed or the flood not as disparate parts but rather as extensions of the dog within the confines of the motel room.

Referencing both Benjamin and Krauss, I experimented with how all of these isolated entities effected one another when taken out of their original context and passed through various modes of mechanical reproduction, in this case Xerox and screen printing. At the lower-hand right corner of the final print, there is a small caption with the title of the piece, which has been cut from the raccoon-hunting article. Similar to Sameshima's colliding facial expressions or Hawkins' use of text, the porn image's eroticism has been resignified by the text as sinister or even violent.

Most importantly, even though the final work contains an image that has been cut out of a vintage gay porn magazine, the textual fragment allows any viewer to both recognize it and to imagine themselves as the subject within the statement. Again, as a queer artist, I am interested in how queer eroticism intervenes and eventually overwhelms the narrative within the text. I am also not attempting to represent the vintage porn image's historical significance; I have brought it into the present through my cut-up's self-reflexive process. Ultimately, I am using these juxtapositions to externalize my very present psychosensory eroticism or *jouissance* as I interact with this material.

I explored the process of resignifying visual messages further during my mural installation at Naco Gallery in Toronto (Fig. 5). What interested me about this project was that it gave me the opportunity to see how my process could intersect with and be influenced by a public space. During the installation, I was interacting with passersby while struggling with the glue and jumping up and down a ladder. I was testing how all of these visual elements clashed with the added factor of the presence of an audience. This piece would have been entirely different if I had constructed it within the confines of my studio.

I also wanted to see these isolated fragments clashed with one another through layering, instead of resignifying a single image through a textual caption. My process involved reprinting

my own collages as well as a number of found images from numerous queer publications³³ that I had accumulated throughout the year and from a car crash manual from the 1950's. All of these elements – not only the medium but also the space and context - have an effect when assembling an entity, such as my mural.



Fig 5. Mural installation at Naco Gallery, 2011

Many of the fragments were also recognizable: a hand grasping a towel, the nude male figure, a chest, or something iconic such as a skull. The mural was also not confined within a frame. The viewer's gaze could begin and move anywhere. Similar to Sameshima's facial expressions or Hawkins' models, this non-linearity allowed the viewer to create his or her own internal cut-up; a penis is supplied with a referent of the skull or the skull with a raised hairy arm clenched in a fist. All of these referents continued to collide and to resignify one another in relation to each viewer's eye. Figurative traces are interspersed and reassembled to depict my own titillation when confronted with the male body. By showing this process in front of a crowd of people, my queer

³³ [Drummer Magazine](#), [Boy Next Door Tales](#), [Campus Tales](#)

body is no longer empty sign.

In the sum of my projects, there are instances when the male body is either visible or overwhelmed by conflicting visual fragments. In order for me to express my queer jouissance in relation to the surrounding symbolic model, I cannot exclude the instances when I have not been forthcoming about my sexuality and have remained repressed or become a reproduction. Even though I do not live under the same form of repression that Rauschenberg experienced during the 1950s, there are still moments when I have had the impulse to remain invisible and perform heteronormativity. As I mentioned earlier, I tended to do this during my childhood when I experienced the news of Matthew Shepard's murder and later, in the schoolyard, where I was often harassed about my orientation. There was part of me that wanted to camouflage all of the possible queer signifiers that manifested in my physicality while shrinking from any form of intervention.

I decided to explore this process of visibility and absence within the symbolic through series of larger scale works entitled "Untitled #2 (I am here)" (Fig. 6). Throughout months of work, my studio had become cluttered with images from magazines, zines and film stills, which I would often incorporate into my art. However, I decided to step outside of my comfort zone and find material drawn directly from the street. Similar to my mural installation, this forced me to interact with visual culture in foreign environments.

While walking home from my studio, I encountered a wall surrounding an abandoned construction site that had been coated over with thick blue paint. It had weathered to a point where the paint had begun to slide off the wooden surface, revealing layers of street posters that had been glued on top of one another. I began to carefully rip the posters off the surface and stole them in a trash bag. A woman, walking out of the YMCA across the street stopped for a moment to give me a perplexed look. I was struggling at this point. The paper and dry paint were fragile

and had begun to crumple as I forced it into the trash

bag. I probably looked pretty ridiculous walking through the Toronto downtown core while struggling with what resembled a bulky body bag.

Back at my studio, I carefully separated the layered posters and discovered that the moisture had caused the images to reprint on each other's surfaces. The images had begun to engulf one another. A series of bold aggressive letters representing a summer blockbuster had literally woven into a soft-focus fashion advertisement, which had bled into what looked like a pixilated brick wall. In the end, I only recognized some of the content in these images solely based on my associations and experience. Otherwise, the deterioration had enabled me to disengage with the information once carried in the images, viewing all of it as empty signs that only bore the slightest traces of what they once represented.

I used a transparent wheat paste to decoupage the found paper onto a wood panel. Similar to the two previous examples, while tearing apart these images and wallpapering them, I was interested in externalizing psychosensory process of pleasure in interacting with these visual fragments. Similar to the experience of the constant visual collisions of an urban street, my eye moved across both these layers of images strewn across my studio floor and on the panel itself. These fragments continue to collide with one another in a manner that is similar to a strip of film running through a projector.

The final layer was to silkscreen a collaged and hand drawn layer on top of the decoupage paper elements. The image consists of disassembled linear drawings of the male body that were drawn either by me or found in art history catalogues or illustrations from porn zines. The decoupage surface was not flat and many of the visual fragments stuck out of the wooden panel asymmetrically. This meant that when I pushed the paint through the silk screen's fabric with a squeegee, the transferred image was disrupted in particular places, which forced it to assimilate

into the textured surface. The photographs and the physical stains and blemishes from the streets fold into one another, becoming a single entity. The fragments of the male form are now suspended over all of the decoupage pieces while almost entirely fading into particularly shady areas. A leg sticks out of the fold of what looks like a trench coat, and both are superimposed over the pixilated brick wall. In relation to all of my other pieces, this piece is a documentation of my constant determination to stand against invisibilization, to stand as the figure of the death drive in order to represent my pure jouissance.



Fig. 6: "Untitled #2," (I am Here), 2011-12

In the end, this repression dismantled within my actual studio practice of taking these visual fragments and remolding their inherent signifiers. Obviously, each one of these fragments had its

own intended messages, however, in Edelman's words, my jouissance is "[tears the] fabric of symbolic reality as we know it, unravels the solidity of every object...it evokes the death drive that always insists on the void in and of the subject beyond its fantasy of self-realization in the domain of the pleasure principle."³⁴ I undo the symbolic order through my own interventions, tearing down advertisements from a public space or ripping apart found images. In the end, regardless of whether or not I am gay, it is the artwork itself that makes me visible and will dismantle or queerify the symbolic order within me.

Conclusion: A rich false history

I began this project by assembling visual material from the past in order to understand how culture's images continue to reflect and impact the evolution of my distinctly queer identity. As I mentioned, this caused a certain detachment for me in terms of how identity and sexuality corresponded with my final work. However, I gradually realized that from where I stood, all of this historical material also contained a fictitious past; all of the original messages were automatically resignified in relation to my current perspective. Robert Rauschenberg experienced a very similar reaction while creating assemblages out of artifacts he had acquired from various flea markets: "The materials used for these Constructions were chosen for either of two reasons: the richness of their past: like bone, hair, faded cloth and photos...or for their vivid abstract reality. In one case the skull of the bird has been decorated in a rich false history. You may develop your own ritual about the objects."³⁵ Through this process of articulating my jouissance, I have been able to intervene in this acquired visual history and these artifacts now function within my own environment while producing entirely new messages.

³⁴ Edelman 27.

³⁵ Joseph, Brandon W. "Mole Archaeology," Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde. (Massachusetts: The MIT Press 2003) 132, 135

This also relates to Benjamin's description³⁶ of how the reproduced image is an extender of our current environments, which allows us to observe events for which we are not present: a presidential election debate is being held in a family's living room while a smoky gay bar from the 1950's is relocated to my studio. When Hawkins, Sameshima or Rauschenberg transfer an image on to a canvas, each is following a very similar methodology: extending the mechanically reproduced image's presence over time. As the image collides with the other images, their various messages intertwine. Rosalind Krauss compares this convolution with sequences of random memories running through the subconscious.³⁷ The images from our immediate environment and ones drawn from the past cannot help but collide with our personal memories.

Says Rosalind Krauss:

"This is the space of memory. For one remembers experience, each memory image seems to function for recall in a way independent of whether it happened or not, or what degree of denseness it had when we experienced it. The image of a scene from a movie may be equally vivid for memory as the face of an absent friend."³⁸

Echoing Rauschenberg, my own process of visual signification helps me develop an entirely new ritual or future that is a direct reaction to the past. This will aid in my comprehension of how my queer identity can disengage from what Edelman describes as the symbolic repression of the perceived future.³⁹ I am no longer looking towards a brighter future through my acts of cutting, resignifying, and extending reproduced memories. It is I who chooses the images to incorporate in my psyche and manipulate artistically. Most importantly, I am expressing my own queer pleasure while creating these re-assemblages so that I may simultaneously cut through their continuing reproductive cycle and visualize my present identity.

³⁶ Benjamin 223.

³⁷ Krauss, Rosalind. "Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image," Robert Rauschenberg. Edited by Branden W. Joseph. (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002), 51.

³⁸ Krauss, 51.

³⁹ Edelman, 21.

The Future

While I was defending my project, I realized that all of my final works were static assemblages or final products. My next project will document the process of altering a single image with new visual content while passing it through various modes of reproduction. These juxtapositions will be presented within a sequence, which will allow the viewer to participate in my entire process, instead of only experiencing a single final image. This body of work will consist of 24 variations in reference to the standard film frame rate in a second. In reference to Eisenstein's film montage theory, I am interested in how the content of each altered variation collides with one another while shifting one another's inherent messages. I view this project as an opportunity to further integrate my practices of filmmaking and fine art.

During the past few weeks, I have also continued to upload new images on my Tumblr blog while interacting and sharing content with other online artists. In many ways, I believe this is the future of how multiple audiences will experience new artwork. However, I am also interested in exhibiting my work nationally and internationally in group exhibitions as well as solo projects.

This process of promotion, granting, and even commodifying this body of work is daunting. However, in order for me to continue to buy supplies and produce work, it is extremely necessary, while being a universal narrative for any emerging artist. However, I continue to be inspired by artists, such as Hawkins, Sameshima and Rauschenberg who make do with little means: anything from building a custom silkscreen to working with found material. I look forward to reading this document again in the next twenty years.

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Wrestle, 2012, Mixed media on panel, 18 x 24" / 45.7 x 61 cm



Its Teeth in His Body, Out of 60 Dogs #1, 2012, Silkscreen, 22 x 30" / 55.9 x 76.2 cm



Hips/Lips, 2011-12, Mixed media on panel, 36 x 42" / 91.4 x 106.7 cm



Untitled #1 (I am here), 2011, Silkscreen, 15 x 22.5" / 38.1 x 57.2 cm



Untitled #2 (I am here), 2011-12, Mixed media on panel, 24 x 30" / 61 x 76.2 cm



I keep those dreams of yours, 2011, Silkscreen, 15 x 20" / 38.1 x 50.8



A Lonely and Forbidding Scene of Slush, Ice and Drooping, 2011-12, Archival Inkjet print,
24 x 25.5" / 61 x 64.8 cm



Untitled #3 (I am here), 2011-12, mixed media on panel, 30 x 24" / 76.2 x 61 cm



Its Teeth in His Body, Out of 60 Dogs #1, 2011, Silkscreen, 11 x 15 / 27.9 x 38.1 cm



The Park, 2011-12, Archival inkjet print, 24 x 35", 61 x 88.9 cm



Mala Noche, 2011, Xerox collage, 11 x 14, 27.9 x 35.6



Taxi Zum Klo, 2012, Collage, 15 x 22", 38.1 x 55.88 cm



Bullwhip, 2011-12, Archival inkjet print, 24 x 32", 61 x 81.3



Tops, 2012, Mixed media on panel, 24 x 30", 61 x 76.2 cm

Mural Installation at Naco Gallery, 2011
Video filmed by Reg Hartt and Karl Bustamante
 (Video installation screened during the opening reception on April 28, 2012)