

TEXTE ZUR KUNST

THE MOON IS TRANS: ON CULTIVATING AN AESTHETICS OF REACHING

Jeanne Vaccaro in conversation with P. Staff and Kiyan Williams

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The art world, like any other marketplace for forms of capital, relies on give and take. Access to it comes only through admission. For artists from marginalized communities, this often means declaring your identity at the door: you may enter as a “woman artist,” a “Black artist,” or, increasingly, a “trans artist.” While many art institutions symbolically invest in diverse representation, they do next to nothing to address the material realities of those they ask to show up. It is thus with suspicion and ambivalence that curator Jeanne Vaccaro and artists P. Staff and Kiyan Williams share their conversation. Rejecting the current discourse of representation versus abstraction and (dis)embodiment in art writing about work by trans artists, they seek new language through reflections on their own practices.

JEANNE VACCARO: I am preoccupied with efforts at naming and with the institutional obsession with naming an aesthetic movement trans. I want to ask, What is lost when the social and political organization of ideas, bodies, and histories is conscripted to be called something? I see these impulses (in museums and scholarship) as a continuation of previous efforts at naming and, in that way, as conferring solidity on a disciplinary chain. What gets stuck by a supposedly shared description of an aesthetic movement – whose name announces itself as in flow? With description comes a reference world, a set of things determined to be inside or outside its scope. How then, do you as artists, and I as a critic, endeavor to recalibrate the norms of art history and its canonizing efforts?

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The terminology of abstraction is in vogue and, with it, an ongoing question about representation and identity. I get wary whenever a concept is positioned as an ideal, and it always feels like an empty gesture to engage with art historical formulations that try to read identity into art or try not to read identity into art. Both seem to upload the binaries we are attempting to dispel.

Both of your practices dispense with the proper object of the art historical by wrestling the body not entirely out of the frame but positioning it as one in a constellation of meaning-making objects. The body is an anchor – a loose one. I wonder if we can talk about the promiscuity of method not as a confrontation with form but as a defiance of genre.

P. STAFF: I don't know if you experience this, Kiyon, but I find it so hard to put down my suspicion and to relinquish resistance when being asked to talk about trans aesthetics, to define it in the contemporary moment, to situate it in art history, or to even trust its framing here now via *Texte zur Kunst*. It's hard to be generous. It feels like a trap. Do you know what I mean? My instinctive response is to be cautious and defensive, but there are probably reasons for this defensiveness that are worth interrogating. And reasons that are very trans! I do want to start by saying that if we turned off the recording, if we pushed *Texte zur Kunst* out of the picture, it would be a completely different conversation – and that feels like an important place to start.

KIYAN WILLIAMS: I'm glad you named that. Today I feel elusive and ambivalent. That's my entry point to how I want to publicly talk and think about trans aesthetics, cultural production, and contemporary art. I am not feeling declarative or a need to define anything. Rather, my skepticism will orient my approach to our conversation.

PS: If we weren't recording, I would trust that between the three of us there would be some commonality around how we define what is trans, and we would be able to speak comfortably to its plasticity. We might not agree completely, but there is a kinship, which is vital. When I am asked the same question in a forum like this, by *Texte zur Kunst*, my immediate question is, Well, what do you mean by trans? You define your terms first. What baggage are you bringing to it? And implicitly there, What shit are you trying to pin on me? I trust the dialogue that is ours. I don't trust the institution, art history, or *Texte zur Kunst* to be able to engage with transness, trans aesthetics, trans lives without these implicit layers of eugenicist, ableist, white supremacist, medicalized formulation. When we're asked to define something trans, to discuss some aspect of it, it always feels like there's this liberal paradox undergirding it: a platform, a route, a forum is being offered where we are meant to give account for why we should be granted a livable life. And the conditions are always such that we also have to capitulate to the forces that deny that very possibility. It's a rhetorical sleight of hand.

JV: I love the way you are bringing in suspicion, but I am feeling a more active sense of rage about the way disciplines – and by extension, the capillary institutions, the publications, conference papers, art fairs – embrace the knowable. Even as the critique of the trap of visibility (see *Trap Door*) has been absorbed into discourse, the material conditions have not caught up. We are left with a door half ajar and the impending fear of it closing (or, the desire for it be slammed shut, depending on whom you ask). The politics of scarcity are real. There is also a violence of eavesdropping on transness as it is made available to a public, and I'd like to call out institutions that grant an audience permission to listen in while opting out of the collective work that liberation demands.

KW: In part, my ambivalence arises because disciplinarity or the canonization of art doesn't always emerge organically out of artists creating with each other, around each other, and in conversation with each other in a lateral way. Instead, it is often imposed. Artists might not even agree with or necessarily want to participate in the ways in which our practices are being canonized or framed within certain discourses. Articulating one's

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own positionality, to find one's own language and – if not define – position our own selves within what we're doing can be an act of agency when so much of creative cultural and knowledge production is usurped or misinterpreted or used for reasons that aren't self-driven. On the other hand, having to contextualize one's practice can be a burden particularly felt by Black trans artists.

PS: I do think it's interesting to contend with what a trans aesthetics would be if it arises, like you say, Kiyari, from the inside of a community. It would seem to suggest an aesthetic that is highly localized, highly contextualized, minor, vernacular, kind of intimate. Which doesn't necessarily mean twee – doesn't preclude bombast at all. But like you say, there's an unbalanced distribution of labor there too.

I am reminded of a question that I think Terre Thaemlitz once asked: How do you talk about a community that is primarily operating in secret or remains hidden in some way? Could we argue that, statistically, the majority of trans people are not in fact out or able to be out? Are closeted in some way? The closet being potentially many different spaces. I'm a little wary because it feels like summoning this idea that comes with an implicit accusation of a failure to self-actualize – I am against that. I hate the juvenile determinism of "egg" discourse.¹ I am thinking more of something that connects to an idea of an undercommons rather than an in or out binary. If we want to talk about transness, about trans aesthetics, is it misleading to point immediately toward what is most visible? It sounds like a facetious or deadend question, but I want to push back against the idea that it's all there and up for grabs.



KW: I want to push against the binary discourse of representation versus abstraction as framing tools to attempt to locate and pin down the work. It feels reductive. That binary feels like it is the only available discourse as an entry point into the work.

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JV: Yes, it is about identifying the available containers that disciplines cycle through. I mentioned the sequencing of identity movements earlier (from “feminist” to “queer” to “trans” art) because it seems like every identity movement and, in turn, every aesthetic movement must go through the same set of questions. When I curated the exhibition “Bring Your Own Body: transgender between archives and aesthetics” at the Cooper Union in 2014, a common criticism was how shiny and formal the exhibition felt in the pristine white walls of the gallery. Of course, the history of the politics of exclusion means most trans art has been made and displayed in less formal spaces – living rooms, community centers. Even as I am pushing back hard against the cultural elitism and hierarchy of the institution, what is left out of the record is a function of politics of prestige and means we lack a formal exhibition history of trans art. We need a method to contend with the violence of erasure, and I don’t think the answer is additive.

Returning us to the question of abstraction and representation, I wonder about trends that seek to get rid of the body. It feels to me that there is a culture of devaluing the body as an aesthetic ideal.

PS: The way that I approach it – body versus no body, abstraction versus figuration – is to lean into known and felt strategies from experimental film and choreography, as well as transed and crippled assemblages. I use strategies in my work that co-opt and misuse the visual technologies of the clinic (MRIs, ultrasounds, X-rays), perverted architecture, hyper-sensual medias, volatile materials. I do subscribe to a particular trans mode that exists in the tension between dissociation and hypervigilance. Obviously, these states aren’t exclusive to trans people, but I do see it as a distinctive and unique tendency. Likewise, there is this intense connection between the citational, theoretical, and discursive and an affective, poetic, corporeal way of navigating the world. I see myself as moving back and forth between these surface and subterranean worlds.

JV: When I experience both of your works in person, I feel how they ping at the sensorial. Both of your practices are research-driven in ways that are not immediately available to a view, which is all part of the unfolding of the work, a tension and release around holding back and making known. You are digesting and revising histories and then placing them at points of access that are not easily predictable or taken from.

KW: I think a lot about the dilemma you named earlier: the weight of representing a body versus getting rid of the body as an aesthetic goal and the implications of that specifically for Black/ trans/queer/femme artists. For me, the other side of the dilemma is that Black/trans/queer/femme people, our bodies, and our likenesses in visual art are always under intense scrutiny and investigation, and are routinely and systemically evaluated, dissected, and consumed by a hegemonic, dominant gaze. I’m cautious about and am often attempting to refuse making my body available to those dynamics. I sometimes have the desire to make a realistic figure, to represent a/my body – and then I actively resist and refuse that impulse by breaking the form up. For example, in *Between Starshine and Clay* (2022), I cast my full body in earth. I then broke up the entire sculpture and reassembled the fragments into a suspended constellation, with my head and hands as the only figurative elements. Building, unbuilding, and rebuilding – that’s my making process. I’m working through questions of representing or articulating my sense of embodiment in real time, through the materials I’m working with, through the forms that I’m making. It is a building up of a form, but then also a breaking down of a form, and then I arrive at something that doesn’t necessarily feel resolved but that feels like I’ve worked through those anxieties.