

Obscene Remainder on the Shop Floor

by

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Abstract

Obscene Remainder on the Shop Floor is a multi-work installation based on Little Sister's Book and Art Emporium's original location on 1221 Thurlow Street in Vancouver, opened in 1983. The store, which sold gay and lesbian erotica, literature, and pornography was a target of censorship by Canada Customs and three bomb attacks in the midst of panic around sexual obscenity in Canada. Through critical fabulation with traditional and provisional archives, I constructed a bird's-eye view model of the store along with a set of conceptual sculptures based on merchandising elements from the store. In restaging a specific site of local queer history through the lens of critical theory, I sought to derive a more universal understanding of queerness and obscenity as catachreses of a structural exclusion around which aesthetic communities form their cohesion.

Keywords: *Little Sister's; Model Making; Readymade; Retail; Obscenity; Queerness; Aesthetics*

For Emily, Rachel, Russell, Mary Lou, Gordon

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“A Master of Arts... protect[s] the secret of a more substantialized knowledge”¹

-Jacques Lacan

¹ Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: a Selection*. 445

Introduction

Obscene Remainder on the Shop Floor is a multi-work sculptural installation created towards a Master of Fine Arts degree in the School of Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University. This defense statement illuminates key themes, theoretical concerns, and areas of research towards the conception and production of the work presented at the Audain Gallery in September 2023. In this exhibition, I artistically restaged the shop floor of the original Little Sister's Book and Art Emporium to reflect on its history as a site of heated legal battles over the censorship of its materials by Canada Customs. In combining techniques of model-making, set-building and prop making with the legacies of readymade and appropriation art, I sought to untether the material history of Little Sister's from narratives of queer liberation towards a more universal structural account of how queerness and obscenity operate within any social formation. I look at connections between modes of fashion and modes of production as they relate to the deployment of sexuality, where the outdated or obsolete remind us of blind spots in our contemporary politics. Through this artistic process and this defense statement, I present a paradox in the aesthetic recuperation of queerness or obscenity, as both terms can only ever misname that which must remain excluded from institutions of aesthetics, intelligibility, and meaning.

Previous Work

The artwork in *Obscene Remainder on the Shop Floor* began where my previous place-based sculptural explorations of queerness left off. In early works, I experimented with various approaches to model making, assemblage, installation, and sculpture derived from researching the social architectures in Vancouver's Davie Village neighbourhood. Wall-mounted model works such as *Bath/SRO Model* (2018), *Pumpjack* (2019), and *Clinic* (2019) (Fig. 1, 2, 3) repurposed

found materials to recreate spaces I found myself occupying to reflect on my own queer (funny, peculiar, strange) experience of each space. The model works began with questions about relationships between architecture and subject formation, the bird's-eye view as a particular symbolic form, and relationships between queerness, power, visibility and absence. Other works, including *Stage* (2019), *Pool* (2018) (Fig. 4, 5) recreated spaces found in public pools to trouble the neutrality of the public sphere and the impossibility of designing for *all*. In *Stage* (2019), a row of dangling silk organza 'lockers' hung above an unholstered stage made the rigidity of this civic form fluid again, complicating the construction and performance of gendered divisions, and making palpable the experience of gender dis-identification. *Pool* (2018) used the bird's-eye view perspective to demonstrate how a neatly ordered facade, for which the boundaries and lane markers of the pool come to allegorize, obscure the exclusions they naturalize through its structuring of meaning. The socially excluded remainder was literalized as a concealed, tangled, and private composition barely visible below the blue velvet body of the pool. The work demonstrated queer orientations towards public spaces, common objects, and exhibition making while imagining the affective possibilities of engaging with techniques of making often associated with the feminine, the young, the naive, or the amateur.

Research, Documentary, Homophone

The research for this project, as with much of my previous work, began with walking through the Davie Street Village, following visual clues towards hidden histories of the neighbourhood. The route I follow home passes through a parking lot where a small two-story house holding the original Little Sister's Book and Art Emporium once stood. Passing through the empty lot and regularly looking through the store's new location for used books from the bygone era continued to prompt my curiosity and lead me to discover Aerlyn Weissman's 2002 documentary, *Little Sister's Vs Big Brother* in the early weeks of the SFU MFA program. I

obsessively took photos of the documentary (Fig. 6), collecting images of the store's interior throughout its tumultuous history beginning in 1983 until its relocation in 1996. The documentary details the early years of the store, as Jim Deva, Bruce Smyth, and eventually Janine Fuller worked to expand the tiny store's selection of gay and lesbian books and magazines. While the documentary interviews numerous lawyers, witnesses, and associates as they navigate legal, political, and social discourses, I remained dazzled by the aesthetics of the store's interior. Textual accounts and footage collected by Weissman allowed for short glimpses into the store's constantly changing interior; variously occupied by cardboard boxes, provisional shelving sparsely populated with books, a refrigerator for soda, wire magazine racks, a coin-operated coffee machine, a 70's style wet bar, a full-sized arcade game, ash trays, racks of t-shirts, rows of lube, magazines, and countless other items as the owners redecorated, remerchandised, expanded, scaled-back, and finely tuned the space to suit the needs of the customers, themselves, and ultimately the products that flowed through. I began to consider methods to approach artistically restaging the Little Sister's shop floor, and like previous work, draw out widely applicable themes from incredibly specific local research objects. The question that arose was: how can an artistic restaging of the shop floor enrich or expand the existing legal and liberationist discourses surrounding the store? I then began to remake symbolically charged objects and architectural elements from the shop toward an installation that would aspire to, but ultimately fail, to provide a universal account of queerness without a positive identity. As Jack Halberstam outlines in *The Queer Art of Failure*, "failure preserves some of the wonderous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers"². This project takes on the impossible task of aestheticizing a universal account of queerness with the radical potential of failure in mind. I looked to Stan Persky's 1991 *Buddy's*, a deeply detailed and emotive book about experiences in the orbit of a gay bar located a few blocks

² Halberstam, Jack. *The Queer Art of Failure*. 3

away from Little Sister's on Burnaby Street, for insight. In Persky's words, "Buddy's is a gay bar, but it's also a text, an irony, a homophone."³ Similarly, *Obscene Remainder on the Shop Floor* restages a specific scene of desire, and in turn, reveals the irony of attempting to wholly represent the schism of queerness.

Gober, Magor, Noland

My work remains in conversation with the readymade, sculpture, and installation practices of artists such as Robert Gober, Liz Magor, and Cady Noland, who each redeploy objects of the everyday towards unsettling registers of affect and sociality. Since the early 80's, Gober has recreated household objects from a conservative post-war American landscape, including doll houses, sinks, cribs and suitcases, within austere installations that evoke a deeply suppressed social unrest, especially as politicians and the public turned their back on an emerging HIV/AIDS pandemic. Similarly, Magor's work exploits the charged feelings of despair, regret, guilt, and longing built into wrapping paper, stuffed animals, and the delicate details of the retail experience. She stages an emotionally depleted landscape where our deepest affections, sublimated into mass-produced trinkets, gifts, toys and fashion, ultimately lose meaning and take on an emotional weight and logistical burden. Lastly, the elusive sculptor Cady Noland culls fixtures of bondage, scaffolding, weaponry, health aids, and familiar icons of American pop culture in sparse installations towards a breakdown of the mechanics of metaphor: where her sculptures both represent and are discreet evidence of America's uneven debilitation of its populations.⁴ All three artists' work depends on a deidealized nostalgia, where the past evokes a venomous sting and reminds us of antecedent mechanisms of power, desire, and commodification that become harder to pinpoint in the contemporary moment as power morphs and diffuses. Each of these artists'

³ Persky, Stan, *Buddy's: Meditations on Desire*. 23

⁴ An essay completed in our first-year seminar looked at Cady Noland's work through the lens of Jasbir Puar's concept of debility.

works depend on fissures between figuration and reality, where the appropriation of objects as they are found in culture both point to and destabilize the solidity of their signification. My project greatly depends on connections between queerness, readymade practices such as these, and the lessons of psychoanalysis and deconstruction that trouble the rigidity of meaning and draw our attention to gaps in perception, language, and subject formation.

Edelman, Structure, Queerness

While other projects in history, sociology, or law, for example, would be able to analyze Little Sister's legal proceedings and perhaps assert its relevance in a teleology of queer liberation, my project instead reflects on the implications of aestheticizing a site of queer history towards a more structural understanding of queerness. My methodology considers all historicizations, including *Little Sister's vs. Big Brother* documentary and my own work, as particular ideological constructions that open what Paul de Man recognizes as the "... confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism."⁵ For this project then, I looked to the work of Lee Edelman for a rigorous structural account of queerness's negativity that could untether the extreme specificity of my research from its own positivized ideological construction. In his 2004 book, *No Future*, Lee Edelman develops a theory of 'reproductive futurism'; a diagnosis of political optimism that is always sutured to the innocence and limitless future potential figured by The Child, and for which the anti-social, death-driven, and future-negating 'queer' is the figural enemy. The back matter of the book summarizes his polemic well: "Edelman urges queers to abandon the stance of accommodation and accede to their status as figures for the force of a negativity that he links with irony, *jouissance*, and ultimately, the death drive itself."⁶ In *Bad Education*, published in 2022 during the conceptualization of my thesis, he expands his theory of queer

⁵ De Man, Paul. *The Resistance to Theory*. 11

⁶ Edelman, Lee. *No Future Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Back matter

negativity and its implications in a host of fields including education, aesthetics and politics. He begins by theorizing queerness as just one catachresis or misnaming of an unnamable structural negativity around which the social order takes shape. This void, what Jacques Lacan names ‘absens’, Edelman claims can also be evoked by the terms Black, queer, women, trans*, incest, or sex, but where no term is privileged in its account of ontological exclusion. In his formulation, inflected by psychoanalytic and deconstructive rhetorical theory, any attempt to literalize “Blacks”, “queers”, “women” etc. will conceal the structurally negative position they can only figurally occupy, reinforcing “...the mathematical illusion that negated negations might somehow escape, not redouble, such negativity.”⁷ My project works through what it would mean to generate a more universal structural understanding of queerness⁸ from within an aesthetic order without resolving the negative charge that queerness or sex might come to (mis)name.

For the purpose of my project, I will focus on a particular passage from *Bad Education*, where Edelman reflects on Jacques Rancière’s aesthetic regime of art and its implicated commitment to “a community to come,” mirroring his own thesis of political deferral onto the figural Child.

With its promise of a redemptive collectivism, this aesthetics that returns without having left can realize such a community only by perpetually excluding the void, the *informulable* within it, that gets embodied in catachrestic forms (like “the queer,” “the Black,” “the woman”) produced to be *abjected*. These catachreses of impossibility function as the aesthetic’s obscene remainders: as fleshed-out versions of the (no)Thing cast out to secure an aesthetic community. In the ethics of collectivity,

⁷ Edelman, Lee. *No Future Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. 5

⁸ As Menon outlines in *Indifference to Difference: On Queer Universalism*: “Indifference, or Queer Universalism suggests that being locked into a world of differences should not translate into reifying difference as the basis of identity. Rather, by being indifferent to the many differences within which we live, we acknowledge the reality in which we are always moving and ever mobile. This continual movement is the movement of desire. Desire resides in us, but with scant regard for who we are. If we take seriously the universal inability of desire to settle, then we lose the ontological specificity of difference. Queer universalism can only ever be indifferent to difference.”

obscenity is definitionally irredeemable; it can have no aesthetic value without ceasing to be obscene.⁹

The theorization of the obscene as a redemptive aesthetic community's obverse is useful for thinking through the logic of censorship and what role sexuality has in aesthetic collectivities. As Alenka Zupančič points out in relation to Christian sexual prohibitions in her book *What IS Sex?*, "...what is being banned is not the Signifier of the sexual (or its Image), but rather the (unconscious) knowledge of the nonexistence of such a Signifier."¹⁰ A core question for this project then becomes: how can one aestheticize the logic of obscenity's unrepresentability within an educational context that definitionally insists on the reproduction of what is knowable? Rather than claiming to recuperate the obscene or queerness into the aesthetic and resolving its negativity, my project embodies what destabilizes conceptions of harmonized aesthetic collectivity: namely the irony, *jouissance*, non-symmetrical self-identity, and non-sense that education defends itself against.

Mis-en-Abyme, Self-reflection, Defacement

Although I narrow in on a specific series of events where the obscenity and queerness temporarily emerged in legible form through state prohibition and acts of violence, my goal is to deidealize the Little Sister's book store's rhetorical historicization as a marker for queer liberation. This is not to undermine the importance of the store's history, but to better understand it's function as a symbol, not within a liberal, progressive teleology; but towards an understanding of the underlying logics of obscenity, queerness, and exclusion. *Obscene Remainder on the Shop Floor* is a sculptural installation consisting of ten separate works that together form a *mise-en-*

⁹ Edelman, Lee. *Bad Education: Why Queer Theory Teaches Us Nothing*. 172

¹⁰ Zupančič, Alenka, *What IS Sex?*. 17

scène and a *mise-en-abyme*¹¹ (Fig. 7) of the Little Sister's shop floor through reading across traditional and provisional media and material archives. The project adopts perspectives borrowed from Lacanian psychoanalysis and de Manian rhetorical theory that demand rethinking modes of self-reflection to acknowledge fundamental gaps between the conscious and the unconscious, the signifier and the signified, the figural and the literal, and ultimately the experiences of the individual and accounts of the universal. In his essay *Autobiography and Effacement*, Paul de Man writes cryptically,

...the restoration of morality by autobiography (the prosopopoeia of the voice and name) deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores. Autobiography veils a defacement of the mind which it is itself a cause.¹²

De Man points to the ways in which autobiography, a lens through which much of contemporary art is read today, actively conceals the figural quality of all language, and thus the distortion taking place in the process of symmetrical self-identification. My thinking takes seriously the insights of Lacanian psychoanalysis as understood by Shoshana Felman, through which:

...self-reference, whose process of turning back upon itself, is not based on symmetry but on asymmetry: asymmetry between the self departed from and the self returned to...a reflexivity which is thus untotalizable, that is, irreducibly dialogic...whereby ignorance itself becomes structurally informative, in an

¹¹ According to Ari Peritz-Means, "Gide's innovation was to translate a medieval construct into a modern literary device, namely *mise-en-abyme*, which means "placed in the void or abyss" (as opposed to "placed in the center"). Instead of a term that denotes levels of signification designed to amplify power, Gide's neologism refers, more generally, to the reiteration of narrative meaning. In his charter, he offers the example of the "play within a play" in *Hamlet*: the second play re-duplicates "the subject of the work itself," causing the work to be "self-reflective." The device suggests that underneath the play put on by the players there could be another play in an "infinitely recurring sequence" of reflexivity."

<https://confluence.gallatin.nyu.edu/sections/research/mise-en-abyme>

¹² De Man, Paul. *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. 81

asymmetrically reflexive dialogue in which the interlocutors through language inform each other of what they do not know.¹³

With *Obscene Remainder on the Shop Floor* and this defense statement, I trouble and refract mechanisms of self-reference, self-reflection, and self-replicating that draw attention to the queerness built into language and subject-formation, where autobiography can only be expressed through the distortion of tropes. The following descriptions and reflections on the works in the installation operate on the presumption that knowledge cannot produce a totality, self-reflection can never be symmetrical, and instead only invoke what Lacan calls the “not-all”.

Fabulation, Bird’s Eye, Totality

The first work produced towards *Obscene Remainder*, titled *Little Sister’s* (Fig. 8) is a wall mounted model constructed from cardboard, densely populated with details made of paper, fabric, and cut images. Unlike previous projects, I worked with a space only accessible through clues left in images, text, video, and the spatial evidence of the lot where the building once stood. The model reconfigures proximal materials to build a sense of a complete interior, while fabulating parts of the store where information was missing. My approach to historical recreation was inspired by Saidiya Hartman’s method of critical fabulation, which she describes as:

...playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story... re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view... jeopardiz[ing] the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done.¹⁴

¹³ Felman, Shoshana. Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture. 60

¹⁴ Hartman, Saidiya. Venus in Two Acts. 11

While my project does not attempt to allegorize or appropriate Black pain, it does find correspondence with Hartman's approach to navigating histories of cultural abjection through the logic of the archive that depends on the silence of what remains outside of its grasp. Like Hartman, I look for evidence rich in affect and forbidden desire that embodies intimacies of relation that evade archiving, and inevitably project my own experience onto the inaccessible past. Through the process of reconstructing, there is a sense of role-playing as I make decisions about interior design, merchandising, or decor, that the store owners would have made. While the format of the model might signify resisters of truth, like an emergency exit floor plan beside an elevator, peering into the model will inevitably reveal the idiosyncrasies of my own agency in a child-like imagination and free play. (Fig. 9, 10) I began to compile a fabulated booklist of gay and lesbian texts while I navigated blogs, aggregator sites such as Good Reads or AbeBooks, as well as available lists of titles that had been seized by Canadian Customs officers. The book list demanded fabulation, not only because there was no complete list available, but also because the stock of the store would have been constantly fluctuating throughout its operation. Unlike a library or official archive whose mandate it is to catalogue and protect its holding, Little Sister's was distinctly a place of commerce.¹⁵ Rather than idealize the store as a community hub serving a common good (though it might have been for *some* people at *some* points), I decided to explore the specificities of retail and commerce in connection to queerness. Kevin Floyd, in *Towards a Queer Marxism* writes that, "...a queer aspiration to totality emerges from within the process of reification"¹⁶. Like Floyd, I appropriate theories of György Lukács, who claims that the scientifically managed shop floor of Taylorism manifests the dynamics of reification in concentrated form.¹⁷ Rather than the factory or assembly line, I take the retail floor of Little Sister's as a site for the Foucauldian deployment of

¹⁵ "Anything for a buck" says Bruce Smyth in *Little Sisters vs Big Brother*, 2002

¹⁶ Floyd, Kevin. *The Reification of Desire Toward a Queer Marxism*. 20

¹⁷ Lukács, György. *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. 90

sexuality¹⁸, where the reification of emergent sexual relations appeared in concentrated form through commodity, discourse, and the production of social space. Fredric Jameson points to the contradiction in attempting to visualize a social totality, of which the aspirations built into the top-down perspective of my work might be charged, that:

...suggest that some privileged bird's-eye view of the whole is available, which is also the Truth... [while] exactly the opposite and takes as its premise the impossibility for individual and biological human subjects to conceive of such a position, let alone adopt or achieve it.¹⁹

Floyd acknowledges a similar paradox within the entanglement of queerness and commerce, where: "...local porn businesses [that] tended to facilitate the emergence of queer forms of collectivity, now an ultimately global horizon of speculative capital threatens to eviscerate [them]."²⁰ Each of the following sculptural works are expanded elements found within the 'bird's-eye view' of the retail floor, bringing complex relationships between consumerism and sexuality to the fore while reflecting on distortions inherent in representing any totality.

Cliché, Uncanny, Repressed

Throughout my research, I looked to surrealist art historical lineages and their contemporary heirs who summon the traumatic, the repressed, and the uncanny by exploiting political tensions between bygone *modes* of fashion and obsolete *modes* of capitalist production. According to Hal Foster, the surrealists used the outmoded or *démodé to*, "[pose] the cultural detritus of past moments residual in capitalism against the socioeconomic complacency of its

¹⁸ See: Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*

¹⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Post-Modernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 332

²⁰ Floyd, Kevin. *The Reification of Desire Toward a Queer Marxism*. University of Minnesota Press, 2009. 204

present moment.”²¹ In my project, the specificities of a late 80s gay retail environment might carry the bitter taste of failed political projects, the guilt of an emergent neoliberal consumerist culture, or nascent formations of homonationalism²². Through laying bare the contents of the store, I attempt to summon what Walter Benjamin recognized in the surrealists: namely a “... poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects — can be suddenly transformed into revolutionary nihilism... they bring the immense force of “atmosphere” concealed in these things to the point of explosion.”²³ In the work titled *Slat Mural*, the appearance of a commonly used white slatted paneling used to display merchandise has been simulated in the gallery space using lines of black and white masking tape. Through its quotidian recognizability and simulated flatness, I intend to summon an uncanny encounter with a familiar fantasy of discovering an erotic movie, scandalous novel, or seductive magazine in a public retail environment; contextually meaningful but ultimately inaccessible. Moreover, the imitation threshold within the slatted wall upon which the *Little Sister's* model hangs announces an inaccessibility to the past of the store and to impossibility of aestheticizing obscenity, approximated only through the blackness of redaction. In the three works titled *Shelf (a)*, *Shelf (b)* and *Shelf (c)* (Fig. 11, 12, 13), the generic bookshelves from the store have been shrunken down, hung on the wall like paintings, and sparsely stocked with upholstered book facsimiles. The ‘books’, or rectangular blocks of plywood stretched with assorted scraps of fabric from a popular downtown fabric store, stand in for the “In/animate and im/mobile, the veiled-erotic and the fixed-explosive [as] figures of the uncanny.”²⁴ The display of taut multicoloured fun furs, leathers, printed patterns, jacquards and holographic dance fabrics, closer in appearance to contemporary phone cases than books, clash, recede, and vie for attention they efface the titillating content they purport to represent. The assortment of the books can also come to allegorize a contemporary fantasy of an inclusive community; where no additions of coloured

²¹ Foster, Hal. *Compulsive Beauty*. 159

²² See: Puar, Jasbir K. *Terrorist Assemblages Homonationalism in Queer Times*

²³ Benjamin, Walter, and Peter Demetz. *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing*

²⁴ Foster, Hal. *Compulsive Beauty*. 28

stripes or symbols to the pride flag can escape the mechanisms of exclusion or disidentification that any collectivity engenders. As the '+' in LGBTQIA2S+ suggests, an unnamed remainder can only ever be gestured towards, and a comprehensive acronym for queerness is definitionally impossible. For Paul de Man,

Fashion (mode) can sometimes be only what remains of modernity after the impulse has subsided, as soon — and this can be almost at once — as it has changed from being an incandescent point in time into a reproducible cliché, all that remains of an invention that has lost the desire that produced it.²⁵

The shelves, in their frivolous evincing of the passé, might come to allegorize what Kadji Amin sees as Queer Studies' discomfort in facing its own *Disturbing Attachments*, where, "queer's inexhaustible definitional mobility... actually work[s] to secure it as a field that need not be accountable to its own history."²⁶ As one example illustrates, while Little Sister's was beginning its battle for the survival of its business and recognition in a national context, members of the CROWE (Concerned Residents of the West End) were working with police and local officials to purge the neighbourhood of its sex worker population.²⁷ It is through the display of mode as mode (of production/fashion), that I probe what lessons can be learned from the restaging of queer histories; where the uncomfortable *reproducible cliché* becomes reanimated by an *incandescent* desire to stay with the trouble of queerness while grounding it's perpetual fight to elsewhere.

²⁵ de Man, Paul. *Blindness and Insight*. 147

²⁶ Amin, Kadji. *Disturbing Attachments*. 182

²⁷ Ross, Becki, and Sullivan, Rachael. "Tracing Lines of Horizontal Hostility: How Sex Workers and Gay Activists Battled for Space, Voice, and Belonging in Vancouver, 1975–1985."

Cause, Interface, Symbolic

In the centre of my installation, a work titled *Lost Cause* (Fig. 14) is strung from the ceiling and fastened to a metal bracket on the wall. The work began as a reinterpretation of a cylindrical button rack, another familiar but distant merchandising fixture used to display pins and buttons, often with political slogans ranging in tone from sarcastic to dire. Much like the images of the bookshelves, the low-definition image of the display tube obscured the words and images on the buttons, leaving only an abstraction of colours and shapes. In this sense, the 'causes' of the buttons were 'lost' in the distortion of amateur photography, and the urgency of the messages they once contained have been obscured by time, leaving only a melancholic trace. The surface of the work layers various found and collected paper and fabric in rectangular and circular forms, pinned, stapled, and glued, leaving only overlapping markings and remains, evoking a telephone pole or community notice board. In hanging the work, I imbued it with the qualities of a hoistable stage prop, temporary and decorative, and then, unintentionally, as an object designed to endure violent strikes as a punching bag. Through the work, I sought to register the logic of the Symbolic order, which, in Lacanian psychoanalysis:

... allows something to be missing from it; only Symbolic reality creates the place for the lack of the Image, or for the thought of an absence in the system, and so for an encounter with the unnamable that Lacan names, none the less, as the Real.²⁸

Symbolic organization, whether it is rendered through the language of political slogans or the dates and times of community events, acts as a fantasy screen that protects against the unbearable Real. For Lacan, the signifier functions as a "symbol of absence", designating where

²⁸ Edelman, Lee. *Bad Education*. 2

everything “must be or not be in a particular place”²⁹, which for Edelman, in line with my thinking about *Lost Cause*, conflates the logic of survival and loss into the same order. In thinking with Alexander Galloway’s theories of the interface, the work registers *effects* springing from an incompatibility between social life its own expressions.³⁰ The present moment cannot be read as historical, and representations of the past can only register the abstractions of lost political urgency. *Lost Cause* embodies this tension, and in abstracting the bygone urgencies of what was, announces what remains *not*.

Sphincters, Ellipsis, the Real

Tracing just outside the *mise-en-scène* of the shop floor are two works, titled *Tract* and *Bombs*, that attempt to visually digest the meaning and senselessness of the three bomb attacks that took place at Little Sister’s. *Tract* (Fig 15, 16) consists of a chain of cardboard tubes joined haphazardly with tape, emerging from the innards of the ceiling and ending on the gallery floor. The title *Tract*, a catachresis of *track*, implies a bodily function, where instead of simply a route for travel, the pathway takes on an excretive function. The work was inspired by Germano Celant’s essay on the work of Vito Acconci, where he formulates how the city’s drive towards aesthetic harmonization depends on the expulsion of its residual dirt, filth, or obscenity. Through “technological sphincters”, the city attempts to protect itself “...against the intrusion of profanities (erotic, female, pornographic, decorative, gratuitous, or personal), entities with which, as carriers of danger and ruin, one wished to have no contact”³¹ The work then, as the intestines of the city, makes evident the slow and coercive process of producing cleanliness, order, and sense through the excretion of non-sense, obscenity, and the profane. The cast iron marbles for the work *Bombs*

²⁹ Lacan, Jaques, “Seminar on the Purloined Letter,” in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, 39

³⁰ Galloway, Alexander R., *The Interface Effect*, viii

³¹ Germano Celant, “Dirty Acconci”, *ArtForum*

(Fig. 17) were ordered on Etsy and repurposed as miniaturized stand-ins for the cast iron military-grade grenades that were thrown into the Little Sister's stairway on three separate occasions. The marbles arrived in a plastic bag nearly destroyed by their own weight as they trashed around throughout their journey from the Atlanta area to Vancouver. The bag arrived covered in yellow tape printed with the logo of Canada Customs, which I later used in the model work, was not dissimilar to what would have appeared on boxes of books arriving at Little Sister's after they had been searched by Canada Customs agents for instances of obscenity. The sculpture equates the intolerable emergence of the Real that violence occasions with the logic of the obscene, where, like the ellipsis [...], a now ubiquitous symbol in smartphone interaction design, can only ever announce an absence, omission or gap in meaning. If *Tract* stands in for linearity of sense making in the signifying chain that produces both meaning and expulsion, *Bombs* take the position of the Real, whose potential presence rolling down the fragile cardboard construction would destroy it, producing a new order.

Coffee, Community, Relation

The work titled *Fountain* (Fig. 18) in the centre of the installation began with thinking through problems of participatory art, relational aesthetics, and the impossibility of totalizing a queer community. The work consists of a knee-high white plinth, atop which a 1970s chrome coffee urn indefinitely pours coffee into a white mug. Through a tiny pump and a clear plastic tube, an illusion of eternal pouring is created as the coffee is recycled from the mug, back up through the stream, and back out of the tap of the urn. The work ironizes tropes of participatory art epitomized most clearly in works such as Rirkirt Tiranvanija's *untitled 1993 (fädlesuppe)*, in which he served soup to small group prior to the opening of the exhibition, leaving the shelving, pots, and benches behind. As Claire Bishop points out in her critique of the social turn in contemporary art, "there can be no failed, unsuccessful, or boring works of participatory art, because they are

all equally essential to the task of repairing the social bond.”³² Bishop turns, like Edelman, to Jacques Rancière’s philosophy of the aesthetic regime to unpack how relational aesthetics engenders an ethical consensus around a visions of a totalized community, negating the radical dissensus at the core of aesthetics and politics. Rancière argues:

Just as politics effaces itself in the coupling of consensus and infinite justice, these tend to be redistributed between a vision of art dedicated to the service of the social bond and another dedicated to the interminable witnessing of the catastrophe.³³

It follows that *Fountain* redeems the potential of political dissensus from within the tropes of a self-effacing relational aesthetics by turning a symbol of the social bond back into a discreet aesthetic object through which aesthetic judgements and dissensus can again take place. The work presents the illusion of a dual fantasy: a universal symbol for community and an endless flow of chemical fuel buttressing capitalist production of value. Meanwhile, throughout the exhibition, the spattering of coffee staining the white plinth comes to stand in for what Edelman describes as, “...the queerness excluded from community, the queerness that figurally embodies the void unrecognized in every collectivity, manifest[ed] as the obscenity that marks the Other of the aesthetic.”³⁴

Mastery, Education, Nothing

In conclusion, I would like to reflect on education, queerness, and the experience of reflecting on my own artistic process. Effective artistic expression requires making visible what is

³² Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. 13

³³ Jacques Rancière, *Malaise dans l’esthétique*, 145

³⁴ Edelman, Lee. *Bad Education: Why Queer Theory Teaches Us Nothing* 171

repressed by the monotony of language and habit, causing a temporary tear in the fabric of repetitive daily routines. Art, like queerness, makes something happen by creating a cut in the obvious by obviating what is submerged below the surface of intelligibility. Just like W.H. Auden's assessment that, "poetry makes nothing happen"³⁵, art ought to be its own way of happening outside of instrumentalization or having to claim its own usefulness. Of course, this is an impossible task in the context of an aesthetic education that insists on meaningfulness, value production, and mastery. Even as this project harnesses irony, *jouissance*, negativity, and problematize self-identity, it inevitably succumbs to the logic of education that, according to Edelman, "...must convert irony into allegory, queerness into familiarity, meaninglessness into sense, and the... zero... into a one."³⁶ Like explaining a joke, the defense of art's purpose endangers its potential to be way of happening on its own accord. It is with this problem in mind that *Obscene Remainder on the Shop Floor* and this defense statement interrogates the educational imperative to explain the nothingness that queerness, obscenity, or sex catachrestically misname; and in restaging Little Sister's, pulls back the curtain on the structural theatrics of exclusion in the name of community.

³⁵ Auden, W. H., "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" Another Time: Poems

³⁶ Edelman, Lee. *Bad Education: Why Queer Theory Teaches Us Nothing*. 92

Figures

Figure 1.

Bath/SRO Model, 2018, Corrugated cardboard, butcher tape, scotch tape, hot glue, linen, cotton, polyester, leather, garbage bag, glitter paper, popsicle sticks, bristol board, plasticine, galvanized wire mesh, fiberglass mesh screen, LED lights, vinyl sticker, plastic straw, paper, cling wrap, postcard, vinyl tube, spring, linen tape, latex tube, metallic cardstock, rubber stopper, wire, aluminum tape, gold metal leaf, latex condom, foam core, adhesive vinyl bumper sheet, inkjet print on paper, 33 × 28 × 6 inches / 83,8 × 71,1 × 15,2 cm



Figure 2.

Pumpjack, 2019, cardboard, gold leaf, glass, popsicle sticks, vinyl, velvet, card, plasticized wire, inkjet print, tin foil, beads, chiffon, gaffer tape, mirror, lycra micromesh, newspaper, construction paper, upholstery material, candle, matboard, leather, glitter, tissue paper, ball chain, fishing line, metallic paper, necklace chain, velvet, terry cloth, beads, sequins, ribbon, chalk, embroidery floss, hot glue, plastic gems, organza, dowel, window screen, 100 x 63 x 8cm



Figure 3.

Clinic, 2019, foamcore, textured spray paint, stir sticks, carpet, paper, cue cards, plasticine, coloured pencil, health & community information cards, metal mesh, leather, tulle, inkjet prints, window screen, clothing tag, acrylic, beads, sequins, vinyl shelf lining, lycra micromesh, string, pencil, popsicle sticks, hot glue, vinyl tube, wire, 103 x 59 x 8cm



Figure 4.

Stage, 2019 (detail) terry cloth, thread, MDF, organza, glue, eyelets, aluminum foil, dimensions variable



Figure 5.

Pool, 2018, pine, graph paper, white glue, velvet, galvanized wire mesh, wire, glass beads, springs, vinyl tubing, corrugated cardboard, bristol board, popsicle sticks, butcher tape, framers tape, hot glue, terry cloth towel, business cards, acetate, spray paint, foam board, corrugated plastic, cue card, aluminium tape, inkjet print on paper
40.6 x 68.5 x 20.3cm



Figure 6.

Photos of *Little Sister's Vs. Big Brother*, 2002

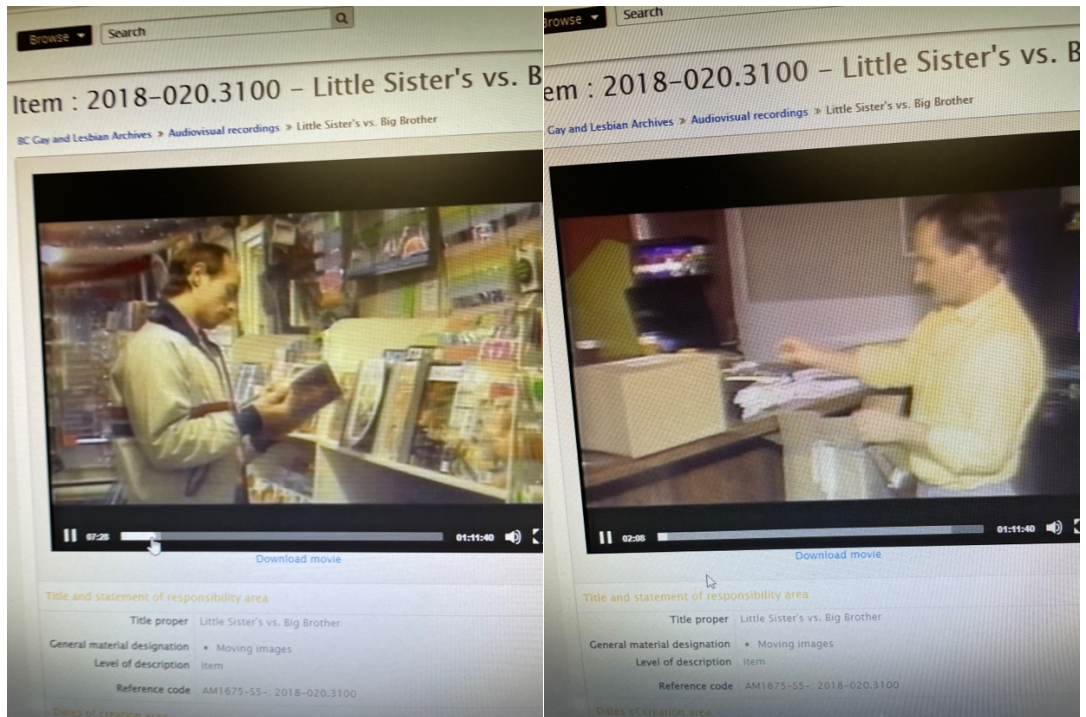
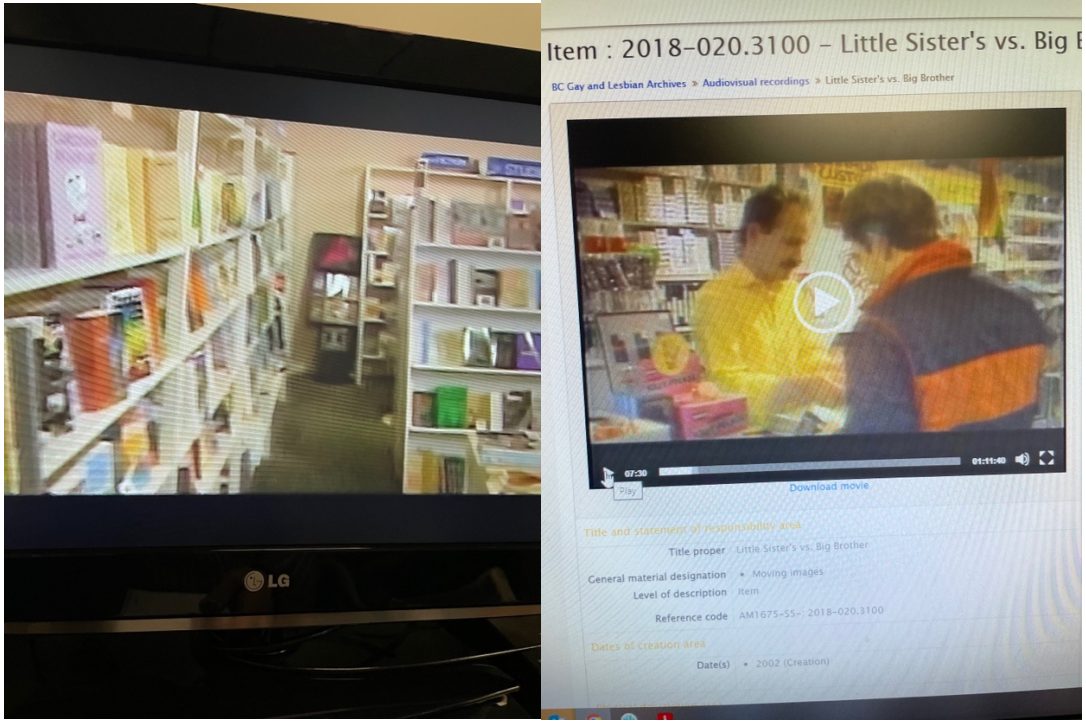


Figure 7.

Installation shot of *Obscene Remainder on the Shop Floor*, SFU Audain Gallery, 2023



Figure 8.

Little Sister's

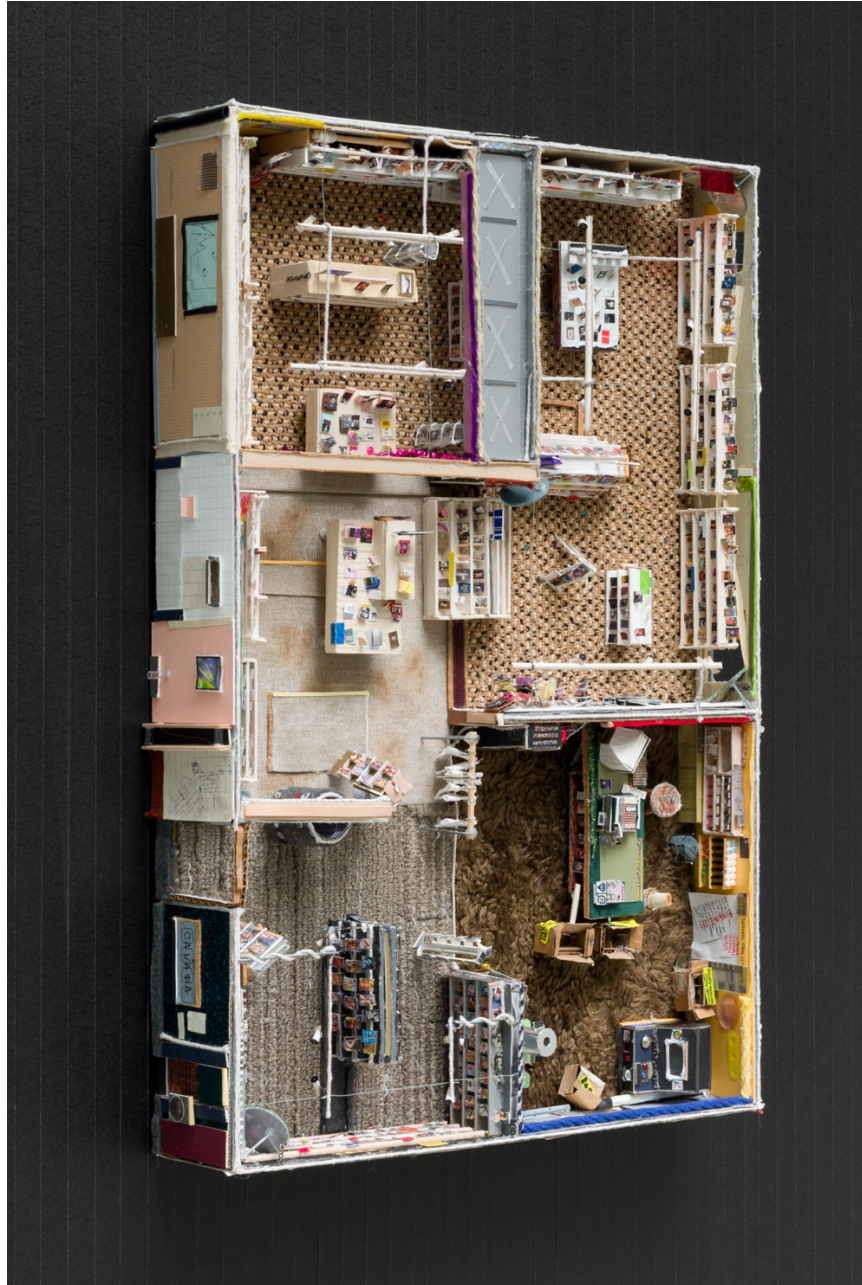


Figure 9.

Little Sister's (Detail)



Figure 10.

Little Sister's (Detail)

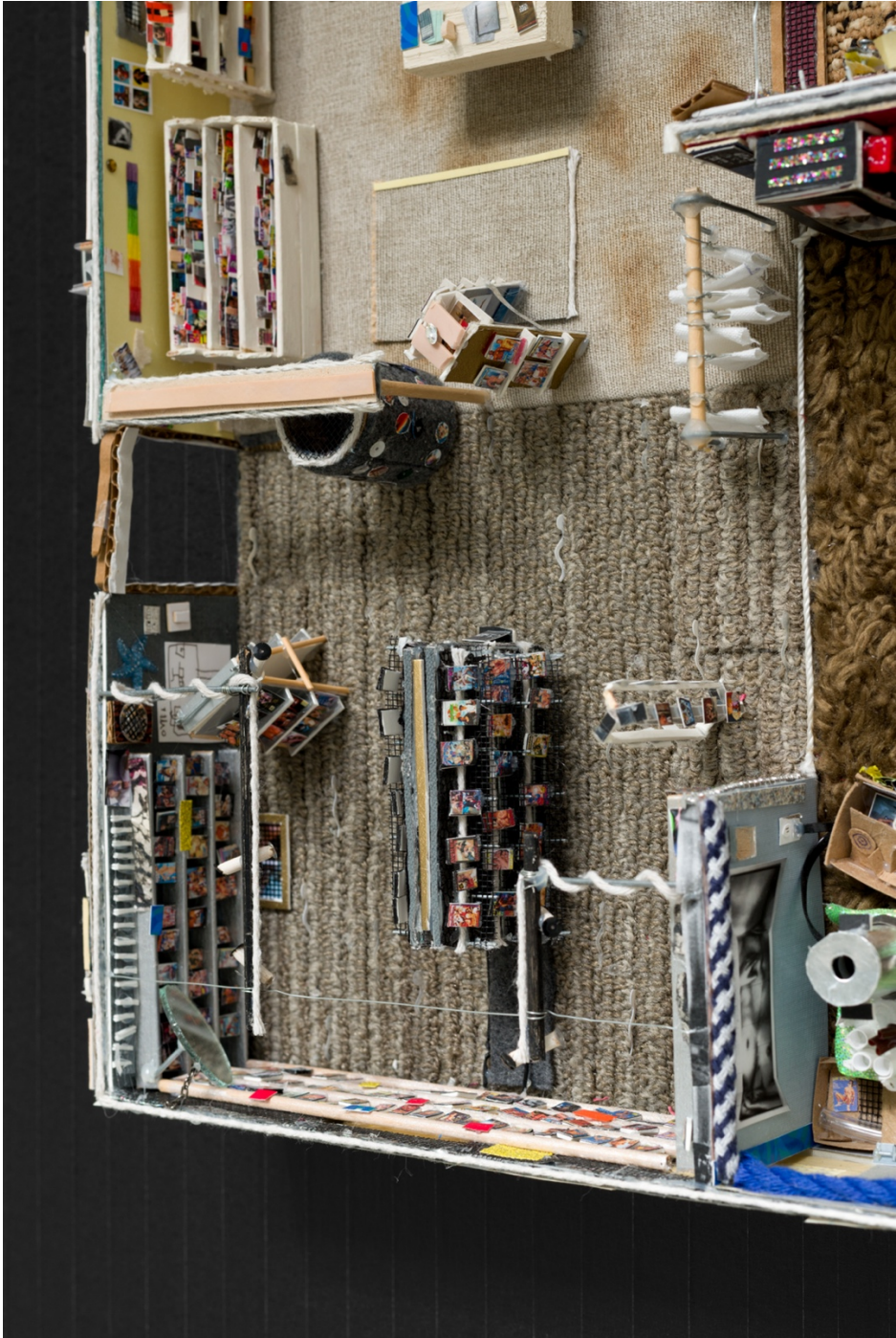


Figure 11.

Shelf (a)



Figure 12.

Shelf (b)



Figure 13.

Shelf (c)



Figure 14.

Lost Cause



Figure 15.

Tract



Figure 16.

Tract, Bombs

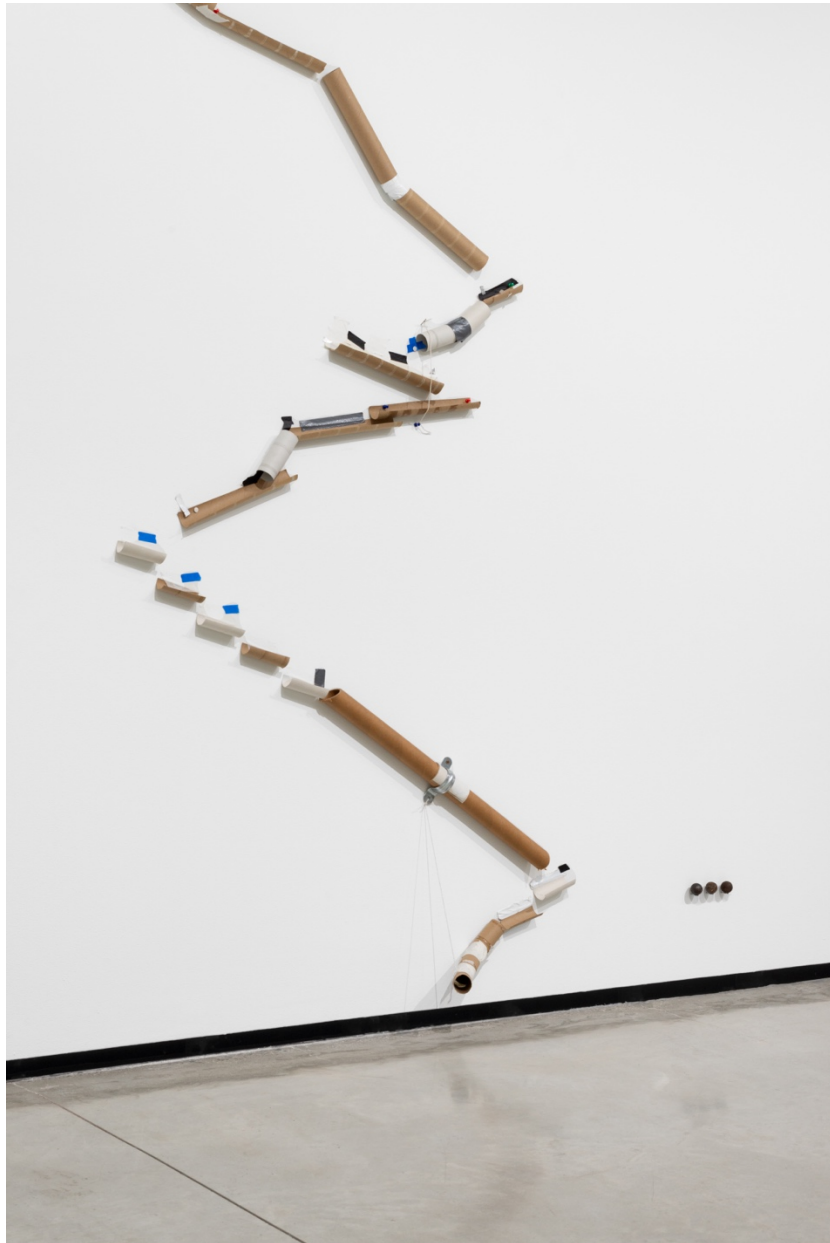


Figure 17.

Bombs



Figure 18.

Fountain



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Appendix. Shop Floor, CA812 Research Paper

Shop Floor

Thinking Totality, Reification and Queer History

Douglas Watt
CA812
Professor Peter Dickinson
December 9th, 2022

For my final Master of Fine Arts thesis project, I propose to create a series of sculptures forming a set, staging the layered meanings embedded in the now demolished Little Sister's book store on 1221 Thurlow Street in Vancouver. To foreground my practical approach, I have formed a theoretical framework that fuses concepts of historical materialism with the performance of gender and sexuality that span both the micro- and macro- scales of analysis. To approach a project from historical materialist perspective is to also take up the concepts of Karl Marx, whose dialectical analysis of political economy and labour relations has both an incredible explanatory power and very real limitations, especially in its relationship to sexuality. Marx and his disciples have been criticized for eschewing difference and renouncing sexuality as merely a bodily function like eating, or cultural byproduct shaped by the infrastructural relationships of labour and production in a capitalist society. Queer theorist Eve Sedgwick has rebutted: "an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition"¹. Likewise, Lee Edelman's more contemporary polemic 'No Future' asserts that any political thinking involving futurity already operates within a heteronormative logic in which reproduction always informs the logic of the social. In his book *The Reification of Desire: Towards a Queer Marxism*, Kevin Floyd attempts to reconceptualize Marx's 'totality' thinking to incorporate a seemingly incongruous perspectives from queer theory that emphasizes disciplinary mechanisms of labour and their effects on bodies and sexualities through time. Floyd's analysis has been essential in thinking through my own artistic practice, as it attempts to exact totalizing visions of the world through the particularities of location, space, orientation, materialities, histories, and sexualities. Despite Marx's totalizing aspirations, his theories are self-conscious of a spatial and temporal specificity that can never achieve a completely omniscient bird's-eye view. As Floyd states, "the aspiration to totality then refers to historically determinate knowledge that is also praxis capable of negating reification, a critical stance vis-à-vis this dispersal and compartmentalizing of social life."² The 'shop floor' of Little Sisters becomes a stage to perform the dialectics of totality and reification through historically contingent thematics of retail, censorship, gender and sexual performance, nationhood, and affect through time.

¹ Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 1

² Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Towards a Queer Marxism*, 17

The events of human life, be they public or private, are so intimately bound up with architecture, that the majority of observers can reconstruct nations or individuals in the full reality of their behavior from the remnants of their public monuments or the exhibition of their domestic remains.³

-Honoré de Balzac, *The Quest of the Absolute*

In beginning my project with the bookstore, as I have done in previous projects with the swimming pool, bar, or clinic, I begin to orient myself in relation to the site and the objects within it. Sara Ahmed's book "Queer Phenomenology" links sexual orientation with orientation towards objects, and what types of vantage points these orientations produce. Subjects are oriented towards certain objects, and those objects engender particular relationships with gendered subjectivities and sexualities that in turn produced particular relationships with the world. Ahmed returns repeatedly to the table as the phenomenological orientation of her own labour as a writer, as well as a spectrally complex object that refracts historical habits of dwelling and labour when considered through the lenses of Marxist and feminist thought. She explains, "[t]he table is not simply what [Virginia] Woolf faces but is also the "site" upon which she makes her feminist point: that we cannot address the question of women and fiction without asking the prior question of whether women have a space to write."⁴ In my daily walk through the parking lot where Little Sister's Art and Book Emporium once stood, I consider Woolf's "site", and meditate on what conditions are necessary for writing, reading, and fucking in a localized queer context. It is also through Ahmed that I assert the importance of orientation towards peripheral objects such as decor, fixtures, frivolities, novelties, toys, and accessories via the 'handmade readymade' as an important mode of inquiry for queer historical materialist analysis. This assertion may be named a "queer furnishing" by Ahmed, which is "... about making what is in the background, what is behind us, more available as "things" to "do" things with."⁵ The masculine-coded cigarettes, pinball machines, porn magazines, and lube that eventual co-owner Janine Fuller recalls during her first visit to the Little Sister's store become vectors for queer phenomenological analysis, and are brought to the fore in my project to "do" things with. The objects and their situatedness can be thought of as historical nodes, prompts for gender performance repeated through time. Kevin Floyd's evokes Judith Butler to draw notions of labour relations and gender performativity closer together. Butler proposes that, "the category of the 'social' ... offers a perspective on embodiment,

³ Honoré de Balzac, *The Quest of the Absolute*, 5

⁴ Sara Ahmed. *Queer Phenomenology*, 61

⁵⁵ Sara Ahmed. *Queer Phenomenology*, 168

suggesting that knowledge, to the extent that it is embodied as *habitus* (Bordieu), represents a sphere of performativity that no analysis of political articulation can do without.”⁶ By foregrounding minor objects and the *mise-en-scène* of mundane spaces, it becomes possible to elucidate evolutions of gender performance and queer politics through time both on the ‘shop floor’ and on a national stage.

Two descriptions of historical queer interiors have informed my project, as they reveal architectonic mechanisms for the dissemination and reification of sexual sociality. The first is Gayle Rubin’s chapter “The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole”, originally published in *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*. Rubin describes the fisting club’s origin, interior architectures, fixtures, hardware, social choreographies, and even the musical atmosphere deejayed by the owner Steve McEachern alongside its status as a pivotal site for radical S/M sex practices in the pre-HIV/AIDS era of San Francisco. The article is a rare document of a tightly orchestrated and ultimately fragile ecosystem for not only fisting, but what can only be described as an avant-garde community in which both lesbians and gay men interchangeably participated in intricate ritualized sex acts under the umbrella of BDSM. In a recursive *mise-en-scène* that already prefigures later trends of gentrification and disappearance of queer space, Rubin describes, “[a]n extraordinary collection of male erotic art... [of which] many pieces were artifacts of leather bars, by then already old and gone - the Why Not, the Tool Box, and the Red Star Saloon.”⁷ The radical sexual knowledges and emergent queer relationalities that Rubin describes would be disseminated and reinterpreted by burgeoning gay and lesbian communities throughout North America during the next decade. In a nostalgic recounting of the experimental power of these new sexual formations, similar in tone to Rubin’s, author Patrick Moore, in his book *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality* ...”wonders, how pervasive the seemingly marginal rituals of the Catacombs might one day have become were it not for AIDS.”⁸ Moore’s nostalgic idealizing takes the character of a vantage point author Leo Bersani warns against, in which, “...gays rediscover their lost bathhouses as laboratories of ethical liberalism...”⁹ Moving nearly a decade ahead, beyond the emergence of AIDS and across the border into Vancouver, Stan Persky’s “Buddy’s: Meditations of Desire” takes a deidealized approach, describing a fleeting moment in his local gay bar as “...a paradox: this effusion of orchestrated decor is a constraint, a confining obsession, the perverse of the free-forms of Eros...

⁶ Judith Butler, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 270

⁷ Gayle Rubin, *Gayle Rubin Reader*, 228

⁸ Patrick Moore. *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality*, 30

⁹ Leo Bersani. *Is the Rectum a Grave and other essays*. 29

that seeks a return on capital from investment in this illusion.”¹⁰ When examined together, these texts offer a look at historical and transnational processes of the reification of desire that “for Lukács and Foucault alike, subjectivity is embedded in a history of the way particular knowledges shape, constrain, instrumentalize, attach meaning to, and otherwise manipulate concrete bodily practices.”¹¹ These differing recollections of queer spaces bring forward a correlation between architectures, objects, and the shaping of subjectivities that will be essential in my analysis and eventual artistic restaging of Little Sister’s.

Little Sister’s opened its doors in 1983 at 1221 Thurlow Street. The second-floor book shop, which was also the home of founders Jim Deva and Bruce Smyth, began modestly as bookstore, art gallery, and meeting ground for likeminded gays and lesbians in a galvanizing Vancouver scene. Early documentation shows a bar, ashtrays, pinball machines, and a few shelves with scattered books and magazines. Publications as varied as educational sex guides, gay and lesbian erotica, Greek poetry, and French literature began to be confiscated by Canada Customs agents beginning in 1986 who had very little time or expertise to assess complex questions of obscenity and sexuality. This period was marked by moral panics and hysteria of all kinds surrounding sexuality, including unsubstantiated claims of satanic ritual child abuse and the wild misinformation and mishandling of the emerging HIV/AIDS crisis. Little Sister’s was compelled to take legal action for the survival of their business and to exonerate the writers, publishers, and communities they represented. What followed was more than a decade of costly court cases and appeals, leading eventually to Canada’s Supreme Court, that kept the store in a constant state of near bankruptcy. The court cases, as recalled by Stuart Blakley and Janine Fuller in *Restricted Entry: Censorship on Trial*, pitted the bookstore’s operations against the nation, endlessly arguing connections between erotic material and effects of harm or violence in society at large. A strong feminist anti-pornography movement spearheaded by figures like Catherine McKinnon in the United States, and LEAF (Women’s Legal Education and Action Fund) took this “flow of harm” literally, and collaborated on a brief that was brought forward in the *Butler* ruling on pornography and censorship. According to Blakley, “... Little Sister’s faced a censorious climate and harsh legal interpretations of “degradation” in lesbian and gay S/M material ... [and] freedom of expression was now juxtaposed against a slippery concept called “harm”.”¹²

The dubious relationship between representations of sexuality and harm were brought into sharp focus by a series of three separate bombings at Little Sister’s, and firebomb attacks on

¹⁰ Stan Persky, *Buddy’s: Meditations on Desire*.

¹¹ Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Towards a Queer Marxism*, 43

¹² Fuller, Janine and Blakley, Stuart, *Restricted Entry: Censorship On Trial*, 46

three lower mainland locations of Red Hot Video, a video pornography franchise. Although the Little Sister's aggressors were never named, the 'Wimmin's Fire Brigade' responsible for the Red Hot Video attacks saw their actions as "self-defense against hate propaganda"¹³. The nuanced distinctions between heterosexual and homosexual pornography and how expressions of violence, degradation, and dehumanization manifest in each expression would continue to be debated but ultimately the province decided there was, "evidence that all sexual relationships are subject to power differentials and inequities... [and] the only principled approach to regulating pornography is to apply the same standards without regard to sexual orientation or the intended audience."¹⁴ Final judgements from the Supreme Court of Canada came in 1994, and amendments to prior restraint laws were amended, moving more accountability onto Canada Customs to prove and point to obscenity laws that essentially remained. But as author and expert witness in the case Sarah Schulman succinctly pointed out, "as soon as you start participating in [the trial], you're already coopted by it."¹⁵ Schulman rightly points out a confessional mode that produces self-censorship in the face of the unwavering obscenity laws, and a type of capitulation that would usher in a new era of neo-liberal queer politics.

"... we are not a community turning out sex tracts. We are a community speaking with passion, our humanity in a world that is so homophobic that it sees us as nothing but sexual creatures instead of good Canadian citizens, fine artists, and brave people trying to make Canada a better place for everybody to speak freely and honestly about who we are."¹⁶

-Jane Rule

Jane Rule, a prolific lesbian novelist and expert witness in the Little Sister's trial, expresses here a frank desire, born out of a drive for survival of her community, for gays and lesbians to be recognized by the Canadian government as upstanding and productive citizens deserving of rights and protections. Imbedded in this testimony are the seeds of an emergent homonormative politics that moved homosexuals from the category of the criminal and burden on the state into proud and productive members of society who conform to heterosexual formations of kinship and consumption. Kevin Floyd notes that this era, called "post-liberationist privatization" by Michael

¹³ Red Hot Video Firebombings, New York: Heresies Collective, Inc, Heresies, 1983 (16), p.17

¹⁴ Fuller, Janine and Blakley, Stuart, Restricted Entry: Censorship On Trial, 179

¹⁵ Fuller, Janine and Blakley, Stuart, Restricted Entry: Censorship On Trial, 183

¹⁶ Janine Fuller, and Stuart Blakley, Restricted Entry: Censorship On Trial, 78

Warner, is typified by the message of national gay spokespeople, who, not unlike Jane Rule, “...define the fight against homophobia as the right for a sanitized, innocuous right to privacy.”¹⁷ The transition Floyd diagnoses can be exemplified in the general merchandising trends at Little Sister’s following the trials, in which politically charged, localized and collectivized publishing efforts are replaced by “immense collection of commodities”¹⁸, (clothing, sex toys, and pride merchandise) that represent positive, unthreatening, and normalizing images of gay life. The late nineties and early 2000’s see the withering in centrality of political grass-roots organizations such as ACT UP and Sex Panic! and strengthening of celebrity and politician endorsed civil rights lobbies such as GLAAD and the Human Rights Campaign. While this transition is no fault of individuals, especially those facing homophobia and having their livelihoods threatened by the state, it centres the need to reevaluate queer political strategies and continually realign the deployment of sexuality within global formations of labour and power formations. Jasbir Puar sees folding of those deemed properly queer subjects into the processes of life and production of the nation as complicit in a state endorsed “ascendency to whiteness” that recentres racialized others as sexually deviant, and thus enemies of the (straight, white) state. Puar’s book is wide ranging in it’s extrapolation of the implications this era of recognition politics ushers into geo-political contexts. Her analysis ranges from the spectacularized torture and perverse sexual humiliation of prisoners in the Abu-Gharhib prison, to the ushering in of new biometric surveillance technologies in the name of counter-terrorism, to a scene from South Park in which students misidentify their teachers BDSM slave as a “Pakistani.” Puar extrapolates from this scene that, “as a queer terrorist, Mr. Slave functions to regenerate the U.S.-based homonormativity of Mr. Garrison; the whiteness of gay, homosexual, and ever queer is normativized in this pairing.”¹⁹ Puar’s stunning complexity of thought is essential to coming to terms with the implications of homonational politics globally following 9/11. The expansive and spectral weaponization of homonormative ideologies cause a dizzying effect of scale and scope that have caused some theorists to recentre a politics of place, slowness, and embrace of backwards looking or even nostalgic affect when reexamining attachments to queer theory. I look to synthesize these perspectives, embedding restaged queer historical arrangements with the affective and temporal specifics that technological immersion and geopolitically interconnectedness produce.

In the 2005 special issue of *Social Text* titled, “What’s Queer about Queer Studies now?”, a roster representing new voices in queer theory solidify a call to rally queer theory around

¹⁷ Kevin Floyd, *The Reficiation of Desire: Towards a Queer Marxism*, 200

¹⁸ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 27

¹⁹ Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*,

“historical emergencies” of race and global geopolitics in their field. In the epilogue of his book “Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History”, Kadji Amin questions the value of the term ‘queer’ as it becomes infinitely malleable, extending and forming to attend to any emergency, and in turn becoming alienated from its very specific origins. Amin claims that queer studies today is “... animated by the now-injured aspiration that queer sexuality ought to attach to radical politics” and what he calls “historical disappointment”²⁰. It is this embrace of negative affect that I activate in my artistic projects, using theatrical scenography of historical sites of radical sexuality to reexamine attachments to narratives of progress, futurity, and normality. Just as Amin reflects on Jean Genet’s disappointing biography in the search for saintly queer literary role models, I hope to dwell on the disappointing aspects of queer politics that move through and are embodied in the Little Sister’s store. This strategy of deidealization demands a recalibration of queer politics whose priorities relating to place, community, archiving, and world making “... refers to the production of historically and socially situated, bounded totalities of queer praxis inherently critical of the ultimately global horizon of neoliberalized capital itself.”²¹ This type of world making relies on dwelling, not only on the uncomfortable disappointments of radical queer politics, but also an understanding of *how* we live and perform sexuality in a digitally mediated present that encourages ahistoricity and abstraction of human relations.

Theories of affect and queer time have arisen from contemporary realities of continuous reification of desire and the abstraction of social relations ushered in by neoliberalism. The loss of meaning I attribute to an ecosystem of publishers and publics surrounding Little Sister’s was the result not only of broken networks caused by censorship, but also broader trends of sexual communities moving to privatized online spaces and the ongoing financialization of living, learning, and working in urban centres that previously allowed for queer communities to flourish. These shifts compel an analysis not only of shifting spatial politics, but also the theatricality, performance, erotics, and emotions that spatial arrangements and relationships to objects compel through time. Queer affect theory has insisted on an embrace of anti-social or negative affects in the face of what Leo Bersani called the “culture of redemption”. The restaging of historical queer spaces risks a sort of idealizing of that past that obfuscates uncomfortable truths, failures, and injuries. This is when it becomes crucial to embed these negative affects in the practice of making to account for gaps in understanding, loss of knowledge, ambivalence to progress, and strategic refusal. Critic Heather Love insists that embracing shyness, ambivalence, failure, melancholia, loneliness regression, victimhood, heartbreak, antimodernism, immaturity, self hatred, despair,

²⁰ Kadji Amin, *Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History*, 186

²¹ Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism*, 199

and shame can be activated for the purpose of “exploring the vagaries of cross-historical desire and the queer impulse to forge communities between the living and the dead.”²² I would like the take up Love’s approach through my restaging, embedding an out-of-timeness and backwards emotion into the world of objects and architectures belonging to queer spaces whose history risks being idealized, sanitized, and reified.

In analyzing the Little Sister’s through lenses such as nationhood, performance, and affect, I aspire to a Marxist totality thinking that works through the reification of desire in all its complexity and scales. I expand on the idea, attributed to György Lukács, that the scientifically managed shop floor of Taylorism manifests the dynamic of reification in its most concentrated form.²³ Although Little Sister’s exemplifies a post-Fordist set of labour relations that operate within globalized networks, niche markets, and ‘feminized’ services and workforces, the shop floor metaphor remains useful in looking at how labour divisions produce the repetition of gender performances through time. We can see these dynamics between retail labour relations and gender performance in Emile Zola’s 1883 novel, *Au Bonheur des Dames*, in which decadent displays of fabric and fashions in an early Paris department store produce fantasies and enactments of female independence. *Au Bonheur des Dames*, much like Little Sister’s, produced emergent rituals of gender performance assisted by titillating commodities and their arrangement in social space. From our contemporary perspective, mourning embodied sociality (here the erotics of retail specifically), has become common place in the face of “reification that compels an experience of privatization and isolation.”²⁴ In her meditations on concepts of queer time, Elizabeth Freedman turns to Derrida’s *Spectre of Marx* to dwell on how queer theory’s use of Marx, “theorizes an ethics of responsibility toward the other across time - toward the dead or toward that which was impossible in a given moment, each understood as calls for a different future to which we cannot but answer with imperfect and incomplete reparations.”²⁵ It is this responsibility across time that makes historical queer materialist analysis so urgent, and through which a call to totality can be answered.

²² Heather Love, *Feeling Backwards*, 3

²³ Kevin Floyd, *The Refication of Desire: Towards a Queer Marxism*, 42

²⁴ Kevin Floyd, *The Refication of Desire: Towards a Queer Marxism*, 17

²⁵ Elizabeth Freedman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, 9

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