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Rendering queer bodies against the automated gaze

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ENgendering Gender Changers, Zach Blas. Installation detail, Exit Strategies, New Wight Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles (2008)

In the current formation of society, informatics and the pursuit of data have produced a surveillant system in which predictive methods reformulate the world and how we interpret it in the name of optimisation. However, embedded within these systems are problematic histories of oppression and marginalisation that culminate in biases that can directly impact the lives of those who do not identify with the majoritarian subject.

For the queer and non-normative body, the interaction with the virtual creates a conflict with the dominant surveillance structures. This predictive gaze attempts to figure these identities out through the collection, categorisation and commodification of their data to be utilised for corporate interest. The collective body of work named *Queer Technologies* (2008) by **Zach Blas** provides strategies for the queer individual to confront these systems of control. This assemblage of tools in *Queer Technologies*, applications and interventions such as ʻ**transCoder**ʻ, ʻ**Gay Bombs**ʻ, and ʻ**theSoftQueerBody**ʻ inscribe themselves within a genealogy of practices which critique the *heteronormative, capitalist, militarised underpinnings of technological architectures* [1].

The virtual extension of our reality provides, for the queer individual, a site to explore and experiment with identity. As **Jean Du Toit** notes in their essay from 2020, *The (oh-so-queerly-embodied) virtual*, *there is in the enmeshment of oneself with others in the virtual a creative space of communion and bodily engagement that stretches beyond the confines of traditional descriptions of sexuality and perception to a new form of sexual and sensual relationality* [2].

Firstly, this space provides a means to connect with a global community of people with shared perspectives and values. For queer youth, the physical world can be an isolating experience when trying to navigate a society that regularly demonises and dehumanises alternative modes of expression. Yet, with the virtual, these expressions can be shared and congregated into communities that **James Williams** defines in *Alienation* as demonstrating that *we are not individual and self-contained beings defined by a core essence, ideal, consciousness or body. We are multiple processes connected across different forms and places* [3]. This global connection highlights a relational matter and sense of belonging, a key attribute of the queer experience. Often formulated through societal alienation from peer groups, families and media representations, this can be an impressionable point in time for queer youth.

Williams adds that *alienation can imply dependence on a power other than ourselves* when we become a marketable commodity *or when we are manipulated by others through our feelings and affections* [3]. In the same moment that these prevailing, archaic structures of power and heteronormativity refuse to recognise these non-normative identities, their data footprints are harvested and commodified by the predictive gaze in support of capital. Despite these alienating power structures, the queer individual can establish strategies of refusal through their own exchanges of information within online communities and virtual embodiment before physical connections and intimacies can be established.

The potentiality that the removal of these physical constraints proposes for the queer subject is also essential to the construction of identity and to learning about and establishing a range of intersectional particularities. The web becomes a space to experiment with image and presentation, as **Legacy Russell** (https://clotmag.com/oped/lo-fi-pinkscale-xngularity-for-a-postcapitalist-age-by-ryan-madson-part-2)outlines in their manifesto on **Glitch Feminism**: *for my body then, the subversion came via digital remix, searching for those sites of experimentation where I could be my true self, open and ready to be read by those who spoke my language* [4]. In the physical reality, those sites of experimentation are limited and rare. When confronted with the institutional dogma of a heteronormative, patriarchal society, the queer subject must turn to the virtual in order to construct a reality that validates their experience. As Russell continues, this helps the subject to feel *empowered via creating new selves, slipping in and out of digital skins* [4].

#GLITCHFEMINISM, Legacy Russell (2018). Screen still from video essay.

This ability to figure the self as fluid works in direct contrast to the methods of categorisation and prediction the surveillant gaze imposes on individuals that **Cathy O'Neil** describes in ***Weapons of Math Destruction*** as *opaque, unquestioned, and unaccountable and they operate at a scale to sort, target, or "optimise" millions of people* [5]. Against this operation to aggregate information is the particular reality of optimising one's existence as a young person through fresh systems of being in the world. This aligns with the queer theory of **José Esteban Muñoz's** utopias that *demonstrates this utilisation of the virtual as 'an anticipatory illumination of a queer world, a sign of an actual existing queer reality, a kernel of political possibility within a stultifying heterosexual present* [6]. The possibility of being able to construct one's own reality through the virtual is a method that the artist Zach Blas has harnessed in their body of work titled ***Queer Technologies*** by using computational methods and developing appliable tools that regenerate the present as a mode of being in the world that is also inventing the world.

Found within this selection of tools is the extensive user manual named *Gay Bombs*, which, as Zach Blas describes, acts as a manifesto that *outlines a "how to" of queer networked activism, is a reverse discourse, a mutating body politic, a multitude, a queer terrorist assemblage of networked activists, deploying new technologically queer sensibilities* [7]. It consists of a variety of approaches and forms of media, such as code, diagrams and provocative writing. All of these media forms aid in building technological agency for the queer individual in order to become a collective force of resistance to systems of surveillance and control. The problematic effects of informatics have permeated human experience through methods that **O'Neill** outlines in **Weapons of Math Destruction** as *powered by haphazard data gathering and spurious correlations, reinforced by institutional inequities, and polluted by confirmation bias* [5].

Unfortunately for the average citizen, these powers go largely unnoticed in day-to-day life, leaving large portions of the public unaware of their increasingly destructive effects. *Gay Bombs* offers its readers access to develop knowledge on these hidden systems by promoting a new perspective with which to expose the latent complexities of data. As the world comes to terms with the exponential developments in technology, finding agency in these shifts is becoming increasingly difficult. **Jimmie Manning** and **Danielle Stern** refer to this dilemma of agency in their essay on heteronormative bodies, queer futures, as *it must be recognised that the choice of watching or being watched online is increasingly no choice at all. Cultural expectations continue to demand an online presence, just as they almost always demand answers about whom and what people are in terms of their sexualities* [8].

For those minds and bodies that defy reductive categorisation, these demands for online presence produce issues in the legibility and interpretation of the body, something which is referred to in the text of *Gay Bombs* as *life becomes further infused with technology at every level of existence, formations of body and identity bear the mark of technological networks systems, and machines.* To respond to this forceful interpretation

of bodies unrecognised by majoritarian power structures and the data that they harvest, this manual offers strategies to reclaim the potentialities of the virtual used to explore self-identifications via *new and hacked passwords to free the most perverse of possibilities that contemporary control societies desperately want to be secured and encrypted* [7].

The ideas in *Gay Bombs* posit the potential of networked community building as *a new queer politics of war*. One of the forefront strategies for combatting this war on the predictive gaze is through 'disidentification'. Zach Blas has reinvigorated this term – originally coined by **José Esteban Muñoz** – through its application to the virtual space. For Muñoz, this strategy of **'disidentification'** offers the disenfranchised, queer or otherwise marginalised individual the potential to *step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as a raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture* [9].

This reinterpretation of codes holds new meaning in a reality inextricably linked to data and formulations of code that repeatedly serves the interests of the heteronormative majority, often at the expense of the disempowered. Perhaps through the work within **Queer Technologies**, the queer individual is given the tools to use the raw material of code and computational practice; as **Lauren E. Bridges** describes in their essay on **Digital failure**, to *unbecoming the "good" data subject through entropic, fugitive, and queer data, to 'interrogate what is made illegible, unknowable, and unthinkable to data's seeing eye* [10].

Gay Bombs, Zach Blas (2008). Installation view

Surveillant systems repeatedly render the data of the non-normative identity against bias and prejudice, informing how lives are assessed without giving consideration to the complexity of lived experience. Political strategies are increasingly necessary to navigate this world of hidden systems and heteronormative optimisation, one of which can be found in **Bonnie Ruberg** and **Spencer Ruelos**' depiction of queer data, which utilises queer perspectives to *destabilise the underlying logics of data by resisting classification and "capture"* [11]. **Digital failure** offers similar possibilities as ideas of 'disidentification' that -through Muñoz's inception and the artist Zach Blas's reappropriation – can be instrumentalised to find new ways to connect to technology.

Through the failure of the digital subject, one is able to interrogate the flaws of data and how it is articulated to serve the dominant structures of power against the interest of marginalised intersections. As Blas explains in

his writing within *Gay Bombs*, 'disidentification' can be seen as a 'hacker strategy' and, considering the reality of threats against the marginalised, a 'survival strategy.'

The potential effects of this hacking strategy can also be seen in the digital failure of Bridges as they note that it is *a process of unbecoming the compliant, detectable and ordered digital subject as a way to undermine modernist claims of ontological truths through data and to subvert the recursive paranoid readings that work to reproduce systems of oppression* [10]. Against the workings of these systems to purport truths about who or what is possible, the hacker that recaptures this data to invigorate new systems of value opens up a kernel of utopia by reconfiguring the human both virtually and physically. Muñoz identifies: *queer utopian practice is about 'buildin' and 'doing' in response to that status of nothing being assigned to us by the heteronormative world* [9].

Another poignant product from the archive of **Queer Technologies** is named **transCoder**. It is a speculative prototype of *queer programming antilanguage* that aims to signify new possibilities for individuals to access programming languages. Pre-existing data structures and computational methods are regularly developed as opaque and impenetrable to the general user. For Zach Blas, this ignited a desire to manufacture an open-source **Software Development Kit** so that collaborative coding and production can be achieved by queer individuals who regularly experience the effects of illegibility within current systems.

To be readable within these systems is regularly at odds with the queer experience of attempting to live outside of heteronormativity and the patriarchal structures of Modernism. These attempts can produce ill effects, as **Gary Kafer** and **Daniel Grinberg** note in their writing on queer surveillance: *the ability to perform legibility to surveillance by appealing to these signifiers of capital aptitude is rewarded with increased mobility and access to resources* [12]. By refusing to conform to societal norms, queer individuals become at risk of being unable to access the opportunities afforded to their normative counterparts.

This problem is particularly explicit within the field of data collection. The issues within this field stem from histories of oppression throughout the breadth of minoritarian subjects. Particularly within the LGBTQ+ community, **Jen Jack Gieseking** notes in their essay on big data that *most data collected about lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) people throughout history have been used to pathologize and stigmatise* [13].

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transCoder Instruction Video, or How to Use a Queer Programming Anti-Language, Queer Technologies, Zach Blas (2010)

Although strides have been made to increase the visibility of these identities, the legacy of how this data has been used still has lasting effects. These data structures and interpolations that are built on a past of oppressive forces still create issues in the present visibility of queer individuals. As **Gieseking** further elaborates: *Societies obsession with big data further oppresses the marginalized by creating a false norm to which*

they are never able to 'measure up' [13]. The data of these historically stigmatised individuals are unable to fit within the norms of data analysis. The norms of this categorisation and optimisation are not made to fit with the reality of the queer experience, as these tools of power and domination have not been built with this experience in mind.

Gary Kafers' essay on queer surveillance explores these shortcomings, noting that surveillance systems typically ignore identities that are fashioned and embodied across a much larger constellation of social forces. Perhaps instead, this illegibility of a non-conforming embodiment can be utilised as a tool for the marginalised individual to assess and critique these systems and, as the collaborative work on **transCoder** displays, work under the radar of capture to develop systems and languages that promote new forms of visibility.

The potential to claim agency within computational practices has been explored through a range of techniques and critical theory. **Andie Shabbar** has recently explored the ways in which glitch art can produce tactics of protest to disrupt prevailing systems. As they write in their essay Queer-Alt-Delete, their experimentation with producing glitch art has provided them with a method that exploits the instability of technology and harnesses failure as a creative tool. By using digital technologies to remix the production of imagery, they can exploit their weaknesses to produce uncertain and indeterminate effects [14]. Legacy Russell refers to this mode of production in her essay on glitch feminism as a pushback *against the violence of this unconsented visibility, to take control of the eyes on me and how they interpreted my body* [4].

By reimagining the presentation of their digital self, **Shabbar** was able to utilise the subversive potential of programming methods by destroying code in order to experiment with subjectivity and agency. This aligns with the subversive methods of utilising code presented by the work of **Queer Technologies**, particularly **transCoder**, as it is posited to reveal the limits of digital computation and the heteronormative assumptions that infiltrate most programming languages. By revealing the limitations within aspects of

computation, such as predictive technologies' reliance on linear trajectories of time, their speculative work is able to produce other potential realities existing within the present that regularly go unrecognised by the predictive gaze. These potentialities can utilise fugitive methods to figure out the queer virtual identity in exciting and promising ways.

In this reformulation of the virtual identity through queer perspectives and experience, new ways of understanding the particularised self are established. In these moments, post-humanist constructions of the self become apparent, which is emulated in the particular project of **Queer Technologies** named **theSoftQueerBody**. This speculative artwork is an imagined software application that *defines queerness and all other networked constructions of human existence as technologies in flux/struggle with one another*.

Imagining the human as a network of complex interactions aligns it with overarching systems of surveillance and identifies the struggles that the non-conformist body experiences when interacting with these systems. **Stephanie Simon** depicts this relationship within the *Posthuman Glossary* as security/surveillance sights are often trained upon future potentials on what bodies may become capable of. This applies across the field of data bits, individual identities, and persons through complex networks and assemblages [15]. Through the work of **theSoftQueerBody** comes speculation and experimentation with these future potentials to create the realities and identities we desire. Against the classification and categorisation of the predictive gaze is a state of being in the world that is articulated as constantly in flux and fundamentally collective. This formation of a post-humanist identity is articulated by **Zach Blas**' writing in the work **Gay Bombs** as *flows of deregulation pour through the holes/spaces of differentiation of the posthuman body. The posthuman is always an embodied form of knowledge production, deregulating the body to become/un-become in forms that push past regulations. These forms are always tactics of impurity that the pure, humanist body can never access* [7].

By pushing past the regulations of surveillance, new terrains begin to surface that locate the self as inextricably linked to others. By refusing individualistic isolation in favour of collective autonomy, new forms of knowledge production are able to emerge, as shown within the political strategies created in **Queer Technologies**. As they reconfigure the capabilities of technology as tools to combat their harmful effects and take control of the visibility/invisibility, **Zach Blas** shows how post-humanist methodologies can and do already exist [16]. The potential that this holds is identified by **Rebekah Shelden** in her essay *Accelerationism's Queer Occulture*, in which they agree that *posthumanism argues that emergence is not only the operative logic of the security state but also that which undoes it* [17]. Although the reality of being able to undo these deeply institutionalised forms of control significantly may not occur easily, the development and nurturing of collective agency proposed in **Queer Technologies** and post-humanist theory provide a starting point in renegotiating the terms of reality.

Whether through the divisive writing in **Gay Bombs** or the speculative software of **transCoder** and **theSoftQueerBody,** the standard of living within a prescribed system can be reassessed, and rigid binaries can be left open to experimentation. Creating these ruptures is a necessary practice in refiguring the human against surveillant forces. A practice that is notably expressed in *Undoing Gender* by **Judith Butler** as it is in the spaces that we may collectively *trace the moments where the binary system of gender is disrupted and challenged, where the coherence of categories is put into question, and where the very social life of gender turns out to be malleable and transformable* [18].

[1] Namely, The Gender Changer, which was subverted in 2000 by the Gender Changer Academy (GCA),

reclaiming the term to mean "a person interested in the gendered aspects of technology.

[2] Du Toit, J. (2020) 'The (oh-so-queerly-embodied) virtual', South African journal of philosophy, 39(4), pp. 398–410.

[3] Williams, J. Alienation. In Braidotti, R. and Hlavajova, M. (2018). Posthuman Glossary. 1st edn. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

[4] Russell, L. (2020) Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto. London: Verso.

[5] O'Neil, C. (2016) Weapons of math destruction: how big data increases inequality and threatens democracy. London: Allen Lane.

[6] Muñoz, J.E. (2009) Cruising utopia the then and there of queer futurity. New York: New York University Press,

[7] Blas, Z. (2016) 'Gay Bombs: Getting Started. In Queer: Documents of Contemporary Art, ed. David Getsy, The MIT Press and Whitechapel Gallery,

[8] Manning, J. and Stern, D.M. (2018) 'Heteronormative bodies, queer futures: toward a theory of interpersonal panopticism', Information, communication & society, 21(2), pp.402-404.

[9] Muñoz, J.E. Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics. (1999) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

[10] Bridges, L.E. (2021) 'Digital failure: Unbecoming the "good" data subject through entropic, fugitive, and queer data', Big data & society.

[11] Ruberg, B. and Ruelos, S. (2020) 'Data for queer lives: How LGBTQ gender and sexuality identities challenge norms of demographics', Big data & society.

[12] Kafer G. and Grinberg D. (2019) 'Queer Surveillance', Surveillance & Society, 17(5), pp. 592–601.

[13] Gieseking, J.J. (2018) 'Size Matters to Lesbians, Too: Queer Feminist Interventions into the Scale of Big Data', Professional Geographer, 70(1), pp. 150–156.

[14] Shabbar, A. (2018) 'Queer-Alt-Delete', Women's studies quarterly, 46(3 & 4), pp. 195–212.

[15] Simon, S. SS = 'Security/Surveillance'. In Braidotti, R. and Hlavajova, M. (2018) Posthuman Glossary. 1st edn. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

[16] Blas, Z. and Cárdenas, M. (2013) 'Imaginary computational systems: queer technologies and transreal aesthetics', AI & Society, 28(4), pp. 559–566.[17] Sheldon, R. (2019) 'ACCELERATIONISM'S QUEER OCCULTURE', Angelaki: journal of theoretical humanities, 24(1), pp. 118.

[18] Butler, J. (2004) Undoing gender. New York; London: Routledge.