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Glittered Realities, Dramatic Bodies: Abject, Camp, and Empathy

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Abstract

Glittered Realities, Dramatic Bodies: Abject, Camp, and Empathy explores the roles of disgust, social performance, and compassion within my art practice. This essay examines empathetic aesthetics as a tool for strengthening the relationship between the artist and the viewer, while also delving into the repulsiveness of abject art and the performative elements of Camp. Through thematic sections focusing on sculpture and video performance art, *Glittered Realities, Dramatic Bodies: Abject, Camp, and Empathy* illustrates how bodily experience and identity exploration contends that understanding human vulnerability and the interplay between abjection, theatricality, and empathy enriches both an art practice and worldview.

Glittered Realities, Dramatic Bodies: Abject, Camp, and Empathy

by
grace otten

B.F.A., University of North Texas, 2020

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Studio Arts

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Connective Tissues

am · a · teur

Latin *amātōrem* (“lover”), from *amō* (“to love”)

The word amateur grounds itself in love. It tenderly cradles passion and defines the need for human enrichment. It does not seek to profit from its love, to professionalize or exploit itself, for that would taint its expression. However, during the late 18th century the word amateur found popularity to describe, "one who has a taste for some art, study, or pursuit, but does not practice it." In which “practice” equates to a professional practice, something monetarily beneficial or commodifiable. Amateur is the antonym of professional, a word that is only relevant in the contexts of capitalism and the commodification of skill building, further complicated by its association with marginalized people and their art.

Instead of embodying its root purpose of love, the early 20th century filtered amateur through a sexist, racist, colonialist lens in which white men created “professional,” “real,” “high art,” while those of marginalized identities dabbled in craft. The word served as a backhanded compliment, belittling and minimizing the works of artists who were sequestered to private spheres of society; Women’s art was domestic and functional, hobbyist craft; Indigenous and African art was declared nameless and artifact, primitive forms of human expression. To this day, most of the work considered amateur art or craft is still shown within this context instead of being treated like any piece of art concurrently made.

There are some troubling truths to being considered an amateur. It has a history of leaving a bad taste in your mouth, feeling derogatory, with shimmers of reclamation. As someone with identities tied to the experiences of womanhood, of lesbian sexuality, of white privilege, of the disconnect from binary gender, held within an unruly body, I reclaim the title of amateur. To me, it is a word representative of an aspirational, limitless outlook with the ability to be redefined as a sustainable life and art practice.

As a child, I experienced a lacking sense of self that overflowed into my gender and sexual identity development: always aspirational in my attempts at girlhood, always off, a fake. Unlike the root of the word amateur, I did not love being a girl, it made me feel fraudulent. I was a dilettante, a person having a superficial interest in an art or a branch of knowledge. I practiced girlhood as a performance with no authentic substance. My friends growing up always seemed to be empowered by their assigned gender and were sure they would upgrade to a “professional” woman someday by growing boobs, getting married to a man, having 2.5 kids, and working a 9-5 or living out their lives as homemakers. Whenever we would talk about our womanly dreams, it felt as if I were playing pretend, like I was faking my enthusiasm to kiss a boy or have a honeymoon in Italy. I always wondered if anyone could see through my act, if any of those friends remember my discomfort with girlhood, or if I pulled it off.

One major force that kept me committed to my role as girl was the ever-present male gaze. Obviously when I was young, I was not aware of the term male gaze, but felt its effects. I did not know it was derived from John Berger’s *Way of Seeing*, written in the early 70’s where he describes the difference between men and women in media as “*Men act and women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being

looked at” (Berger, p.47). Men are both spectators and actors with human autonomy while women are objects being spectated *and* self-spectating.

I also didn’t know that Laura Mulvey’s essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* was published a few years after Berger’s book in which she expands upon the male gaze in cinema, stating, “The cinema satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking...” (Mulvey, p.60) and that, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure...” (Mulvey, p.62). Mulvey integrates concepts of scopophilia, the pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight, narcissism, and objectification to describe narrative creations of women in film and the societal impacts of this normalization.

I did not know about the panopticon prison system, where a center guard is surrounded by prison cells so that the prisoners never know when they are and are not being watched, creating conditions of self-surveillance. I did not know that this prison system was then interpreted by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* through a socially critical lens to describe the self-regulation we perform in order to keep ourselves aligned with societal norms against our will.

Concepts like *male gaze*, *social panopticon*, and *gender essentialism* weave throughout my work by synthesizing the attributes of each idea to create reenactments of my personal narrative through an artistic practice.

Well into early adulthood I learned of the Camp sensibility and its subversive potential. I found alignment with the enjoyment of artifice, playfulness, and theatricalization Camp provides: Its mode of performance that knowingly or unknowingly

participates in the exaggeration of a thing or identity; An opportunity to purposefully fail at or fantasize about different identity possibilities. I can maintain connection with my authentic identities while also playing into Camp's, "Being-as-Playing-a-Role," (Sontag, p.9) that only furthers self-acceptance through the embodiment of the "other." Within my art practice, intentional productions of artifice and spectacle are made obvious using chosen materials, symbolism, and installation. There is always a wink and nod to the audience that the work in front of them is materializing an emotion or experience that is conscious of the humor, actorhood, and viscosity of the performance.

I have realized, and continue to contemplate, in recreating my life through an abject, empathic, and Camp-based art practice, I unite the languages of three inarguably human qualities: disgust, compassion, and social dramatics. This is a convergence I have named the relational-repulsion-performance complex, wherein we find collective connection through our bodily experiences and the performance of our assigned and/or chosen identities. In other words, affective experiences and shared or diverging identities, especially with the involvement of fear or disgust, work as *connective tissue* that heightens our ability for empathy; We are united by our gross and beautiful humanness. I view this dynamic as not only a foundation for my art practice, but also for life in general, akin to my relation to amateurism. The relational-repulsion-performance complex centers the headspace of the amateur, a character emulating and reflecting the experiences of empathetic connection, corporeal vulnerability, and frivolous participation as opportunities, not restrictive expectations. Our performative experience in the tangible world is one of complex understanding that will never be fully

comprehended. By embracing this transcendental task, we can approach life with the levity and understanding of an amateur.

Empathetic aesthetics refers to the relationship formed between the artist and viewer from the visual qualities of an artwork and represents the relational component of the complex. It highlights the relational understandings of the complex where the artist and audience are shaped by empathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. This use of particular materials and imagery encourages an increased emotional sensitivity, leaning towards relational connection.

The *repulsion* aspect derives from abject art, or “the abject,” empowering the use of the body and bodily functions as a tool for transgressing notions of cleanliness and desire. The concept of the abject was developed by Julia Kristeva in her book *Powers of Horror*, published in 1980. The book centers on abjection to examine marginalization, horror, desire, and binaries in conjunction with bodily, “primal” experiences ranging from vomiting to sex. During the 1980s and 1990s, abject art grew in popularity amongst feminist and queer art circles that recontextualized the “other” in abjection.

The *performance* element of the complex involves the sensibility of Camp and identity. Camp is a particular mode of aesthetics that has evolved into being both highly referential and a politicized tool of resistance. It is a space where traditional notions of gender essentialism are subverted and challenged through theatrical interpretations. The performance of identity and Camp are undoubtedly human in that no one is free from the shackles of social panopticonism nor the male/dominant gaze, enforcing our performed assigned roles. For Camp, “to name a sensibility, to draw its contours and to recount its history, requires a deep sympathy modified by revulsion.” (Sontag, p.2) It is a

shared experience of power and control, the reflections of ourselves in others, resulting in the need for humorous critique of our participation and encourages an exploration of identity through role play and artifice.

Throughout this essay, I will continue to reference the implementation of amateurism and the relational-repulsion-performance complex within my art practice. *Glittered Realities* will focus on my sculpture work and its connections to abject, empathy, and Camp, highlighting the performative entanglement of objects and bodies. *Dramatic Bodies* will center my video and performance work, using the confrontation of my body to express the human need for autonomy, identity, and access to others. This section will also explore ideas of the amateur and the implied body. The body, whether real or performative, serves as a site of exchange for how we experience the world. Through an amateurist lens, we are better able to understand our performance, spectatorship, and participation in human vulnerability and the relationships we share with abjection and empathy.

Glittered Realities

When it comes to the sensibility of Camp, I admire its commitment to amateurism. Camp revels in the production, the staging, and the performance of the non-professional and cherishes those who “fail.” Success in this sense can describe someone or something as a failure or amateur due to their inability to be profitable, centering capitalism to define success. Maybe they are amateurs because of their marginalization or even inherently fail because of their artificiality, their unrealness.

Susan Sontag in her legendary essay, *Notes on Camp*, describes Camp as, “disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical,” (Sontag, p.5). This interpretation of Camp is incorrect. It is irresponsible to claim that a sensibility so entangled with class, gender, and sexuality be apolitical. Sontag later contradicts herself by explaining things that are not Camp may, “not [be] marginal enough,” (Sontag, p.7) when anything in the margins are subject to negative, political impacts in dominant culture. There is a huge political connection between marginalization and aesthetics where Camp is implemented to subvert traditional understandings of norms to critique the social conditions that create marginalization. I not only disagree with the statement that Camp is removed from any political relationship, but also the idea that Camp is, “neutral with respect to content,” (Sontag, p.4). Camp is only understood through knowing contextual information; How else would we be able to compare something good to something so bad it is good? Things considered to be Camp are rife with reference, making content the focus of the sensibility, despite Sontag’s efforts to describe Camp as devoid of influence. After all, we need something *real* to make *artifice*, something *normal* to make *extravagant*.

When I talk about my sculpture work, I often refer to them as props or actors. They are performing reality for the audience, taking on an exhibitionist flair, used for dramatic effect to put on a show, made with the amateur’s spirit. The materials that make up my visual language cling to Camp because they are mimicking something real. Glitter plays the part of rare diamond dust or a haptic wetness, exuding an aspirational glamor or bodily fluids. Artificial flowers are representative of their living counterparts. Fake blood acts as, well, real blood, yearning to be the life force pumping through our

bodies, aching to feel important. The materials make honest attempts at representing reality through theatrics but ultimately fail. The overall performance relies upon materials and their contextual information to convey that they are not real. It is not literal diamond dust nor a literal flower or blood. It is all an act. The materials ask you to humor them and play along with their amateurism.

I refer to beeswax, liquid latex, and gelatin as bodily materials. They are actors portraying flesh and mimic the visceral qualities of a body. In addition to their visually felt attributes, beeswax, liquid latex, and gelatin are not archival. They too cannot escape mortality. They are materials with autonomy, deciding how they live and for how long and, over time, will experience varying degrees of atrophy, finding aspirational alignment with human existence.

The performance of my chosen materials creates a relationship between the objects and the viewer. The object qualities of the artificial flesh and displaced body parts provoke a visceral reaction that inspires empathy and disgust, simultaneously. There is both an attraction and repulsion, like a horror film you cannot look away from. We connect with things that are human-looking, projecting our own judgements and personhood onto the inanimate even if they are disturbing or recontextualized. The gap between bodies and objects starts to close as we relate to the vulnerable replications of flesh paired with the levity of intentional performance and theatrics.

The curtain of a theater is a boundary desired to be transgressed. It conceals and reveals to control what is centerstage and what is behind the scenes, or in other words, what is public and what is private. *backstage* (Fig. 1) stands with integrity; the draped and cinched solitary curtain invites the viewer to take a peek behind it where its

human underbelly, composed of wax, latex, and fake blood, is revealed. The curtain's fabric skin can only restrain so much fleshiness as it starts to seep through. *backstage* situates itself within the relational-repulsive-performance complex through its fake bloodied surface, calling back to abject art and empathetic aesthetic practices that are both repulsive and connective.

Theatrical components within my work propose that the viewer should orient themselves as the audience to a performance. Velvet drapery, dramatic lighting, and stage-like plinths provide the context that the objects are actors reciting their lines, personifying emotion. They are not passive lumps of beeswax and glitter sitting in the room. They are dramatized interpretations of lived experiences. The spectacle of performance extends beyond the curtain of the theater. It adheres to our everyday lives. The roles we play for the public sphere are shaped by setting and experience. It is the most intense form of method acting. Stage positions start to blur as our chosen, or "true," selves become absorbed by whatever role we are initially cast to play. This identity performance is a vehicle for the relational-repulsion-performance complex, acting as a mode for empathy and abjection to be carried out. While identity is influenced primarily in public spaces, we also unravel who we are in privacy, away from the social panopticonism.



Figure 1 *backstage*, 2023, grace otten

Camp allows vulnerability, even if it makes you cringe, therefore connecting the binaries of you/me, real/fake, professional/amateur, public/private. This tenderness of Camp, combined with abject and empathetic qualities, exposes its connection to the

relational-repulsion-performance complex. The objects/props/actors I make create spectacles of body horror and kitsch that come together to inspire a performed personhood and affective relationship with its audience.

The amateur is relatable because we can empathize with it and any secondhand embarrassment caused by witnessing the amateur's vulnerability reflects our own self-judgment. We attempt to save face, trying to maintain the false appearance of someone who does not fail. Even the *thought* of failure is too precarious for the public eye to see.

Privacy allows the feeling of security, cloaking ourselves in the protective veil of the interior, solitary places where we process, synthesize, and express our true self. The true self is a difficult concept to pin down and remains elusive even with psychotherapeutic assistance. In this sense we are always amateurs of ourselves, always trying to define and align with authenticity, an encouragement for constant, progressive introspection. Part of this true self is not just personality based or reliant on a subjective values system, but also a physical experience. What are the things you do behind closed doors? What has been made fetish or taboo? What bodily realities do you hide?

When creating my body in sculpture work, I measure myself to represent my real scale as accurately as possible. This process is due to a combination of body dysmorphia as well as my self-taught figure sculpture skills that work together to produce an amateur body, allowing flaw and obscurity. The quantifiable measurements are only used as reference, skewing the recreation of my body away from reality. So much of my life has been dominated by compulsive and confused thoughts about my body, struggling with not knowing what I truly look like, shocked and revolted by photos

others capture of me. I have spent years bodychecking and obsessing over myself in the mirror. It is through the act of measuring I am confronted with myself through quantitative fact. I try to legitimize myself through rational methods but end up projecting my own imagined self onto the beeswax and fake blood.

In recreating my body, I not only offer my physical presence but also my experiential orientation. I bring myself and my perspective into a space without actually being there. *navel glint* (Fig. 2) is an ode to the self-reflexive nature of my practice. It is a portrait of my stomach, folds of fat and skin on display. Its mirrored belly button flickers quietly at the viewer. The navel is proof that I was grown by my mother in her own stomach, stretching her skin and rearranging her organs to accommodate my developing clump of cells. It is a representative of my origins and a portal into my innermost being.



Figure 2 *navel glint*, 2023, grace otten

To gaze upon one's navel is to reflect upon all who we are, who we have been, and who we may become. I attempt to make amends with my soft tummy by facing it head on. I peer into my navel for guidance. The site of shame is transformed into one of intuition and wonder in *navel glint*. The empathetic aesthetic of my performed flesh, its abject surface quality, and creation of an enigmatic interest collide to reflect the structure of the relational-repulsion-performance complex. The viewer becomes more aware of their own body in relation to others and is confronted with an odd spectacle of vulnerability.

This spectacle is also seen in *body peace* (Fig. 3) in which beeswax tinted with fake blood has been sculpted to act as a chunk of my chest area. The heart space and a single white wing are pierced by an olive branch, evocative of the struggle between acceptance and conflict within corporeality. Using the symbolism of a fake dove or angel wing and olive branch to point towards representations of peace and the violence occurring to the performed body inspires empathy with the viewer. The work uses artificial elements to encourage viewing *body peace* as a performance, providing accessibility to an otherwise sensitive, private experience.



Figure 3 *body peace*, 2024, grace otten

Both my sculptural and video-performance work attempt to access the interiors of bodily experience; Whether that be locationally, by using objects of domestic spaces, like bedrooms, referentially, through symbols with emotional and societal context, or corporeality, via the use of my body to express metaphorical understandings of narrative. The private is made public through the creation of a poetic spectacle that evokes the qualities of the relational-repulsion-performance complex.

Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity, written by José Esteban Muñoz, includes a chapter about stages and their transformative potential. Stages, as in a place for performance, a container used for entertainment, and as in a period of time, a temporal experience or phase. Muñoz describes how we rehearse and perform our authenticities within places that resonate with our true selves. The places Muñoz exemplifies are the stages of gay bars and punk venues that, “are our actual utopian rehearsal rooms, where we work on a self that does not conform to the mandates of cultural logics such as late capitalism, heteronormativity, and in some cases, white supremacy,” (Muñoz, p.111). This alludes to the creation of spaces that accept the amateur, the person of becoming, within the margins of society.



Figure 4 *resting*, 2023, grace otten

If semi-public spaces are where marginalized communities gather serve as sites for identity rehearsal, then what about private stages? Where do we practice being ourselves *after* communal and societal influence? The bedroom is loaded with solitary potential, it is a physical manifestation of our inner selves, where we consolidate our personhood into one room. Beds, in particular, have many uses that call back to the question, what does your body do in private? The bed is a stage for distress, desire, connection, rest, and loneliness. In *resting* (Fig. 4) the bed is a site for processing my grief and living with depression. The mattress and my body seem to fuse together, becoming one entity. Its abjection lies in the unknowing of whether the body is

performing death or life. It is both rising and falling, a bare backside vulnerable to spectators.

resting demonstrates where the true authentic self synthesizes. It is not at the gay bar or the punk music venue, although those help with the development of aligning with the true self, but we process our authenticities alone in bed. It is face down breathing in your own breath and feeling the weight of yourself accumulate over the years. The burdens and triumphs rest within the plush comfort of your room.

The body in *resting* is, once again, just playing the role of a body. It knows it is not real but reflects reality enough to draw empathetic reactions. Conversely, *happy* (Fig. 5) uses non-representative materials to perform the body; Where beeswax and fake blood would normally be is a piece of mattress cut to the width of my hips. The bed becomes my body, it is the stage, the location, where things like sex and identity *happen*. The scrap of mattress, although far removed, is a metaphorical aspiration of my body.

Both *resting* and *happy* materialize the relationship we share with the amateur body, the becoming body, in private. Like Camp, we cannot remove ourselves from context. Like abjection, we are repulsed by violence and vulnerability, and like empathetic aesthetics, we are drawn toward our self-reflection in others. This combination converges to form the relational-repulsion-performance complex to describe the entanglement of body and objects.



Figure 5 *happy*, 2024, grace otten

Objects, materials, and my own body become characters on a stage, embracing theatricality to convey intricate narratives. The relational-repulsion-performance complex exposes our relationship to the vulnerability of failure through equalizing the body and the object. Through the lens of empathy, abject, and Camp, the everyday is elevated to a visceral spectacle, urging viewers to engage with the deliberate artifice and recognize the inherent drama that connects all of us in our corporeal experience.

Dramatic Bodies

When we come into close contact with other bodies, we can grow our compassion. When we can physically or emotionally relate to one another, we can locate an interconnected, communal intimacy. Others confront us with our own humanness, it shocks through abject, loves through empathy, and reflects through the

performance of our many selves. When other bodies are portrayed in performance or video art, we are given the opportunity to constructively draw from these human qualities within an arts context, utilizing the relational-repulsion-performance complex as a framework for connection and critique.

During the 1960s, performance art rose in prominence throughout the feminist art scene, emphasizing the *explicit body*. Rebecca Schneider in *The Explicit Body in Performance* describes the term as, “A mass of orifices and appendages, details and tactile surfaces, the explicit body in representation is foremost a site of social markings, physical parts and gestural signatures of gender, race, class, age, sexuality – all of which bear ghosts of historical meaning, markings delineating social hierarchies of privilege and disprivilege,” (Schneider, p.2). The explicit body is material evidence of marginalization, carrying the weight of societal dominance and submission through representations of flesh and associated histories.

The appearance of the body in art, “[Challenged] the habitual modalities of vision which buttress socio-cultural assumptions about relations between subject and object, explicit body performance artists have deployed the material body to collide literal renderings against Symbolic Orders of meaning,” (Schneider, p.3). In my own art practice, I create performance and video-based works that seek to use the body as a tool to flatten the subject and the object into one entity. The materiality of my body confronts the audience with my societal orientation and attempts to provide a viewing experience that collides affective connection, dissonance, and the creation and re-creation of self-performance through the relational-repulsion-performance complex. I probe and reclaim the potential autonomy and self-connection through the process of

participating in the acts, editing, and viewing of my performance and video practice that only further deepens my relationship with the audience. I open up to you, and you open up to me.

poking devotion (Fig. 6) serves as the catalyst for my video performance practice as I wanted my explicit body to integrate into my oeuvre. The confrontation of my flesh in video is unavoidable compared to my previous print media and sculpture work where I was referenced only by means of interpreted measurements and performative materials. I attempt to unite my body and sculptural objects in their visceral reactions and relational qualities within the realm of video performance, centering my body as the material. I regain lost autonomy in *poking devotion*, altering my body through a self-administered stick-n-poke tattoo on my lower stomach that reads DEVOTION. Despite the grotesque action of essentially stabbing myself for three hours, the video emphasizes the power of repetitive bodily agency, a sense of control over your corporeality, and creates both an abject and empathetic response.



Figure 6 *poking devotion* (video still), 2020, grace otten

Always within intimate reach, the body is a relatable conduit for understanding agency and transformation. The portrayal of my body within video and performance work not only aims to achieve a sense of autonomy and expression, but also aspires to assist in building my tolerance regarding the anxieties of body dysmorphia. I have narrowed these anxieties down to two: self-perception and social perception.

Self-perception is inclusive of any difficulties I have concerning how I view myself. I associate self-perception with gender dysphoria, a sense of distress when there is a misalignment between assigned and chosen gender, body dysmorphia, as previously mentioned, and weight bias internalization, better known as internalized fatphobia. Throughout my conscious lifetime of living with all three diagnoses, it is understandable I do not know what I look like, and when I see a photo of myself it is

burdened with self-judgment and confusion. I have grown to relate to my body at a distance, developing an awkward disconnect with anything somatic.

Social perception stems from anxieties about being perceived. This fear not only includes my identity assumption but also jealousy that others can see myself from outside my body as I have restricted access to that reality. Even the mirror is skewed, and the camera does not compare to a tactile experience of the body.

I soothe the stress of spectating myself and being spectated through, what I call, the *implied body*. Unlike the explicit body, the implied body refers to the body not literally stated nor completely absent. It is both there and not there, relying on contextual information to piece together who or what the viewer is looking at. The impartiality of the body is representative of the becoming body or the amateur body; It is there but incomplete, an uneasy mindset for both the viewer and the actor. As stated for my sculptural work, this instability can also be quite fruitful, for failure in achieving perfection can open a world of possibility. The implied body in my video performances is accomplished using masks and green screens to chroma key out backgrounds and body parts as identity preservation serves as a tool for connecting with myself and the viewer in new ways. I get to experience the action at hand with little to no perception anxiety and the audience is attracted to the mysterious spectacle. The viewer projects themselves onto the implied body, both strengthening our bond and using their own self-concern to offer access to identity-based conceptual art. They are left with more questions than answers and the anonymity grants me access to somatic experiences I would otherwise feel too insecure to act out.



Figure 7 *with tongue* (video still), 2022, grace otten

In *with tongue*, (Fig. 7) gimp-masked partners engage in passionate, erotic kissing. The only parts that are visible are their mouths, hands, and shoulders due to the masks and background being keyed out and replaced with videos of natural waters of varying intensities and locations. They rely upon their sense of touch and memory to make connections with one another, creating dependence on tactile experience and respective self-awareness. The partners' lack of vision allows for a certain anonymity, giving permission to partake in an erotic action without fear of judgment. The only external witness to the act is the viewer who is also denied identifiable qualities besides skin color and glimpses of tattoos.

Likewise, in *ballheelballchange* (Fig. 8) a pair of autonomous tap shoes enter from stage right, stepping onto a small fleshy stage while a compilation of Eleanor Powell tap dancing plays in the keyed background. The shoes begin to slip on the

bloodied, wet stage as they attempt to start dancing, inspiring a monotonous unease. The implied legs attached to the shoes are seen in the glitches of amateur video production, provoking a haptic response, and giving the work a gritty relatability. The earnestness of the production alludes to that of pre-CGI films where practical effects were implemented to portray the impossible. Both the amateur editing and defying of reality lend a Camp sensibility in that the viewer must suspend disbelief and “buy” into the performance.



Figure 8 *ballheelballchange* (video still), 2024, grace otten

The audience is oriented as the voyeur, the spectator to the performance of the obscured figure. The body without explicit identity sways towards objecthood where flesh begins to exude performed personhood, resembling ourselves in the living-but-

disconnected relational-repulsion-performance complex. We relate to this vulnerability and the failure associated with Camp just as much as we are repulsed or confused.

I reside in a queer orientation, one that has been disoriented and reoriented, affecting my body and ability to exist in the world. I am contextually informed and systemically ostracized, encouraging me to reclaim agency through self-creation. These acts of self-determination aid in finding alignment between my true self and corporeal existence that is navigated by the sensibility of intuition and external influence. The expansiveness and entangled nature of queer gender and sexual identity gives permission to assume the role of an amateur through the constant queer becoming and participation in autonomy. In *Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed argues that social norms and structures produce “orientations,” or perspectives of phenomenology. Phenomenology, she explains, “emphasizes the lived experience of inhabiting a body, or what Edmund Husserl calls “the living body”,” (Ahmed, p.544). Therefore, queer phenomenology describes the physical experience of living in a queer body. Queer orientations challenge restrictive and exclusionary societal expectations, shifting the straight into the oblique. Our bodies and their respective orientations contain historical backgrounds, conditions of arrival, that provide spatial and temporal context for our past, present, and future orientations.



Figure 9 *acts of care* (video still), 2021, grace otten

acts of care (Fig. 9) serves as the cathartic preparation for my chest's gender affirmation surgery. In the performance, there are two videos, overlapping and playing simultaneously. One recording features a light pink soap sculpture and the other is of a lone wooden sculpture, both made to the dimensions of my torso. The video begins with me washing the pink bust with a sponge and disembodied arms swinging an ax onto its wooden twin. The arms provide an implied body that, at times, reveals itself to be attached to the same person washing the pink bust. The performance is a meditation on the conflict between internalized transphobia and the comfort afforded by gender affirmation surgeries. Both tender and violent, *acts of care* creates a visual dialogue between empathy and the abject within self-creation.

The implied body not only displays a body that is obscured by partial concealment but also inquires about its metaphorical power. It aligns with the oblique,

the made invisible, the marginalized body. The implied body orientates itself within queer realms of relation, finding community in slippery perspectives. Ahmed states that, “The queer body becomes from this viewing point a failed orientation: the queer body does not extend into such space, as that space extends the form of the heterosexual couple. The queer couple in straight space might look like they are slanting, or oblique. The queer bodies, if they gather around the table, might even seem out of line. What happens if we consider the queer potential of the oblique?” (Ahmed, p.560). Through implementing the implied body to represent the queer body, I slant myself in space, allowing the partiality to determine my queerness instead of explicit representation.



Figure 10 *i looked you up* (video still), 2024, grace otten

In *i looked you up* (Fig. 10) I am wearing a mask made from “wife pleaser” ribbed tank tops and a fake beard. As I perform different poses that represent male gender

essentialism (smoking a cigar, flexing, admiring my dominance), the background shows the scrolling of a social media feed overflowing with alpha male inspiration. Yet, something seems off about my alpha male persona; It appears warped. Unnatural sagging and bulging highlight my body's perverse inclusion in the online male space, making my obliqueness obvious. The humor of the performance provides a Camp inspired cover, or "beard," for the serious and harmful, yet connective, impacts of alpha male rhetoric.

It is within the dramatization of identity I can access new perspectives; The implied body works in conjunction with the amateur and orientations that encourage exploration of the self in the other. This feat is inclusive of all corporeality, the abject and the empathetic, the serious and the frivolous. The performances and videos of my practice create containers to experience autonomy, tempt the mystery of others, and discover connection in unexpected moments. I want to be able to express the texture of my emotions where the material of the body is an opportunity for processing emotional histories, relating with the stickiness of existence.

I Love You Because I am You

It is through blending disgust, compassion, and social theatrics that I foster a collective connection between bodies and objects. Shared bodily experiences and the performance of identities enhance our capacity for empathy, not only informing my art practice, but also shaping my world view. Empathy, abjection, and Camp are opportunities rather than constraints or failures. This dynamic is explained through the relational-repulsion-performance complex, manifesting throughout my sculpture, video,

and performance works, offering insight regarding human relationships and experiences. The section *Glittered Realities* investigated the entanglement of objects and bodies in performative narratives within my sculpture work while *Dramatic Bodies* focused on video and performance where the material of my body works to grapple with autonomy and the relationship to ourselves through various orientations. Additionally, I delved into the complexities of performative identity, ideas of the implied body, and queer phenomenology.

Through the repulsive abject, relational power of empathy, and Camp-inspired identity performance, we can gain deeper insight into our roles as performers, spectators, and participants, shining a spotlight on our experiences of vulnerability and connections to the abject and empathetic aesthetics. What we contain, or rather what we retain, affects our perceptions and navigations of the world. Our flesh carries the generational trauma, neurological effects, and fleeting memories, developing our realities. It is in this realization that we can attempt to understand unfamiliar orientations and admire the profound interconnectedness of all things, for in the drama of existence, we are all but actors on a stage.

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Vita

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otten received their BFA in Studio Arts with a minor in Art History from the University of North Texas in 2020 and their MFA in Studio Arts from Syracuse University in 2024. They have shown work in Texas, New York, Germany, and Kosovo. Additionally, otten served as the curator for Random Access Gallery in Syracuse, NY from 2021-2022 and has experience as an art educator for Syracuse University, Stone Quarry Art Park, and Redhouse Arts Center.