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Queeranimal Imaginary: An Intra-active Investigation of Ecology, Performance, and Sound

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Queeranimal Imaginary:
An Intra-active Investigation of Ecologies, Performance, and Sound

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Kinetic Imaging at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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Abstract

QUEERANIMAL IMAGINARY: AN INTRA-ACTIVE INVESTIGATION OF ECOLOGIES, PERFORMANCE, AND SOUND

By Charli Brissey, MFA Kinetic Imaging

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Through interrelated experiments in writing, video, sound, and movement, this research investigates the intersections of intimacy, ecology, and performance. Integrating an autoethnographic approach to gender and sexuality with creative practice and theoretical inquiry, this layered investigation offers implications that are both deeply personal and widely accessible.

I am using my own experiences growing up as a queer child to generative corporeal and experience-based material, while also incorporating the ideas of current queer and gender theorists to frame my own research within the larger context of feminist studies.

This research culminated into an evening length performance at Dogtown Dance Theatre on April 4th, 2014. The performance is currently being scheduled for future presentations in multiple venues.
Through interrelated experiments in video, sound, language, and movement, my thesis work integrates my own personal history into a theoretical interrogation of queer ecologies. This work is inspired by childhood engagements with the surrounding ecosystems, and the consistent transitioning in and out of the human and non-human social spaces that I experienced growing up. My thesis performance, *queeranimal imaginary*, is an evening length work performed by myself and long-time creative colleague and dear friend, Felix Cruz. Our unique and comprehensive collaboration has spanned the last six years, and we began developing the framework for *queeranimal imaginary* a year before it’s presentation. Although this work is not a specific reference to the nature of our collaboration, it became quickly evident that our own queerness, and perhaps even the queerness of our relationship, was a substantial layer to the process of crafting this work. In this sense, the work exists as both fiction and personal narrative, as we couldn’t unweave our own intertwined history with the content and intentions of the work. It also makes this work the first thing I’ve ever made that is, to a certain extent, ‘person-specific’. Although I could easily teach others the choreography, the piece would likely change entirely with different histories and personalities.

I grew up in a small rural town that functioned predominantly within normative hegemonic structures. As one of the only ‘out’ queer kids in town I was skeptical of human social spaces from early on, as my inclusion into them was inevitably problematic. Lucky
for me, my house was situated in the middle of a lush and diverse ecosystem that overflowed with critters, trees, swamps, creeks, and rocks. The forest became my solace, my safe haven, and my home.

Being a queer kid in a spitefully hegemonic community was not what initiated my fascination and innate compassion for non-human material spaces, but it is undoubtedly linked to my disparate experiences of these two ecologies. While I was very much defined by the categorizational differences, queer habits, and ‘otherness’ within my human community, the consistent movement, discovery, and intra-active socialization I experienced in material spaces actually enabled my body, in a way, to become a very different version of itself, a version I preferred, a version that felt safe and supported. With less concern on the fragmentation and specificity of my own presence, these spaces allowed me to become myself in relation to a matrix of other life forms that were simultaneously becoming themselves. There is a queerness to this becoming that parallels Jose Munoz’ theorizing of queer dance clubs and parties, in which he states, “the dance floor increases our tolerance for embodied practice. It may do so because it demands an openness and closeness of relations to others, an exchange and alteration of kinesthetic experience through which we become, in a sense, less like ourselves and more like each other.” (Munoz, 66). I would sneak off daily into the woods because my body instantaneously recognized the material world as a safe space in which the participation of my surrounding ecosystem—the entanglement of myself with the world around me—enabled the becoming of myself in a manner in which I could simultaneously move and be moved. I am borrowing the term “intra-active” from feminist theorist and quantum physicist Karen Barad. She writes: “The neologism ‘intra-action’ signifies the mutual
constitution of entangled agencies. That is, in contrast to the usual ‘interaction,’ which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through their intra-action.... ‘distinct’ agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute, sense, that is, agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don’t exist as individual elements.” My cells attracted to material spaces because cohabitating with and in a diverse and collaborative ecosystem eliminated the need to dissect, describe, and defend my queerness, because my queerness is no more or less queer than any part of my surrounding, and because my acceptance and inclusion within my surrounding was not dependent on my capitalizing or critiquing any part of my body or personhood. These spaces enabled my own becoming as I became a part of theirs.

It was my daily ritual to physically return to my material surroundings as soon as school was over and as long as I could stay. Within the context of my thesis performance, I am referring to this material space as a queeranimal space. During school days that were particularly daunting I would imagine my body there in the woods, mentally re-mapping the spaces my body couldn’t inhabit during school hours. It was my utopian daydream, the space I could drift into when my body's physical space was threatened, dismissed, or simply bored. I began to understand the space in between leaving and returning to queeranimal spaces as my very first performance, my
'fake' life that I studied the mechanics of and carried out the motions of. Before discovering dance I was very much familiarizing myself with the art and complexity of performance, alternating between the experience of myself and the performance of myself on a daily basis. Overtime the ritual expanded, and instead of returning to the normative schedule of my home life I would pitch tents and sleep outside, or simply sneak out to return to the solace of the forests and swamps.

For my thesis project I am not so much interested in re-creating my experiences in the woods, but more interested in investigating the act of going to and returning from that space. I am interested in what happens when shifting between spaces that are familiar and unfamiliar, and how this relates to our corporeal understanding of being 'home'. A large part of my research for this project has involved integrating creative practice into the corresponding ideas and theories of Maurice Merlau Ponty and Sara Amhed in their respective texts Phenomenology of Perception and Queer Phenomenology. While there are several others texts and resources supporting this project, these two texts have been the most influential in the physical crafting of the performance and sound score. I can understand phenomenology in a theoretical sense, but I was intrigued to explore methods of integrating these theories into bodies and crafting a work that might produce a transformative exchange back into the world, so that I might actually understand these ideas in a very different sense, as well as reveal them in a very different sense.

Although the woods are often mythologically described as a space of danger and mystery, a space in which one may be harmed or become lost, my experience is the quite the opposite. It was in the woods and swamps that I become orientated; I felt safe and 'at home'. There was a stark difference in my behavior and embodiment when in I was
queeranimal spaces versus human spaces. I can remember vividly the sensations of getting off of the bus at the end of the day, knowing that I would soon be climbing trees and laughing and running. I can also remember the dramatically different sensation of returning to my house at nightfall, putting my ‘human’ hat back on with a slightly heavy heart. The transition between going and coming from one space to another, the daily ritual of disorientation and reorientation, is my interest for my thesis performance. What does it take to reorient the body? What does it mean to be oriented and how does that orientation become interrupted and regained? Is there potential in following a trajectory in which getting or becoming lost becomes the most familiar orientation, or even becomes home?

Both Merlau-Ponty and Amhed emphasize that the ways in which we ‘find our way’ and become oriented are connected to our understanding of ‘home.’ Therefore there must be some sort of anchor or thread, something that one can use to identify home and therefore understand where they are in relation to it, which Amhed describes as a ‘homing devices.’ (Amhed, 9). For me, moving into material spaces offered the potential to turn away from the normative expectations of human social spaces, and to pursue something different. Developing a queeranimal imaginary was a means of developing an idea that I could orient myself towards regardless of where I was, so that even when I left the woods I didn’t really leave the woods. It was never the woods I felt lost in, it was the unfamiliarity and discomfort of situating my queerness within a normative expectation of ‘a good life’ that made me feel alien. Amhed states that ”for a life to count as a good life, then it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining ones futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. A queer life might be one that fails to make such gestures of return.” (Amhed, 21).
I am additionally interested in what it means to invite another human body into that space, into my *queeranimal imaginary*. While I was able to publicly show affection or interest for ‘boys’ I may have had crushes on growing up, I learned quickly that to be intimate with anyone other than a cisgender male within the scrutiny of that particular town meant it had to be well hidden and private. As a result, I undoubtedly associated the acceptance and nourishment of *queeranimal spaces* with my sexuality, as well as with queer intimacy.

While the focus of my thesis is not specifically directed towards the structural and emotional violence that pursues within the paradigm of patriarchal societies, it does feel important to acknowledge the role that safety plays in developing an understanding of ‘home’ that is very much an anchor within my thesis. Home, for me, begins with a safe body. When I can orient my body in a way that I know I am undoubtedly safe, this is the beginning, the first anchor. Often the most impactful forms of violence are not necessarily physical violations of a body (although that is not to suggest that isn’t a common or impactful implication), but it is rather the consistent and ubiquitous false understanding that one’s body must readjust to a set of standards that make that body ‘normal’ and acceptable, and therefore *safe*. Perhaps the scariest residue of a patriarchal society is that it has the power to convince individuals they are safe because they are not physically being harmed (even though they often are). It is also my experience that the possibility of not physically being harmed is often enough to convince an individual to adjust in whatever way they need to in order to secure the continuation of that particular form of safety.

For my queer kid self, returning to the woods every day was my respite from this demand. It was not about physical running away or escaping, but about finding a space that
did not demand anything beyond my presence and participation with it. Ironically, I had no idea at the time of the diverse and abundant queer life happening all around me. My normative small town had intrinsically taught me that queerness, meaning anything ‘non-normative’, was solely delegated to unfortunate humans who were ‘different’ and ‘un-natural.’ Within my thesis research I have begun deeply examining queer relationships and interactions within non-human species, subverting any inclination that male-to-female love and/or sex is the ‘natural order of things.’ When you walk through the woods, especially in the swamp-like regions where I grew-up, you are surrounded by gender-shifting amphibians, polyandrous plants, self-reproducing insects, ornithoid ménage à trois, and a whole lot more than I believe argues for itself that ‘nature’ is always already a very queer space. Evolutionary biologist J.B.S. Haldance states, “The universe is not only queerer than we suppose, it is queerer than we can suppose.” (Bagemihl, 9).

My approach to this work has been a very different experience from dance performance pieces I have made in the past. The context from which I am crafting this work is complex and layered, and therefore the piece has unraveled in a way that is similarly complex and layered. I have attempted to address the multiple experiential shifts involved in coming and going from the woods, which not only included how my body felt, but also the images I was seeing, the environments I was hearing, and the ideas I was oriented
towards regarding how my body might inhabit that space. Aurally, one of the biggest shifts between human and non-human spaces is the use of human language and words, and the affect of words and directions on the body. For several sections of this work I have created situations in which the performers bodies are reacting to verbal directional insinuations. The words used are right, left, forward, back, straight, and center. Integrating this philosophy into a choreographic structure enables the performers to establish a relationship with the language that is simultaneously responsive and transformative. These sections call attention to associations of right and straight to heterosexuality, while also giving autonomy to the performers to conduct new interpretations of the ‘directions’ they are given. The intention is to propose that the words we orient ourselves toward, much like the ideas and images we orient ourselves toward, will shift and change how we understand our body in that space. I have attempted to craft these sections in a way that suggests the bleeding over of our orientation towards direction into a cultural perception of good and bad, such as a heterosexual person being straight, a correct answer being a right answer, and a different idea being a backwards idea.

In regards to the interactions of the performers, I am interested in developing a movement vocabulary and sonic relationship that reveals the interdependence of these two bodies, in that they are innately connected and supportive of one another consistently. Throughout the work performers go through series of carrying, assisting, and communicating with one another, to the degree that they would not be able to complete the piece without each other. Conceptually this represents not only the value of interdependence within a community or relationship, but also an internal interdependence that values and honors multiple shifts and transformations of ones own gender and
sexuality. I am interested in physically exploring, as well as exaggerating, the process of extending from not just one gender or sexuality to one other, but between multiple iterations of multiple genders and sexualities. I have researched multiple non-human species that maintain a diverse and fascinating spectrum of genders and sexualities, in particular the parrotfish, whose species reveals one of the most complex polygendered societies that has been discovered and studied (by humans). “Along with its numerous genders and fluid shifts between them, striped parrotfish society is characterized by a number of intricate systems of social organization and mating patterns, each found in a particular geographic area”. (Bagemihl, 41). I find this research relative and fascinating because it reveals societies in which gender, sexuality, and even sex do not exist within a clear and standard binary. Individuals become multiple and complex iterations of multiple genders and sexualities throughout their lifespan.

This fluidity and interchangeabilities extends into the layering and transitions that develop in the performance, carrying the audience in and out of multiple visual and aural spaces. The movement and sound are both generated as reflections of highly public human spaces and/or isolated nonhuman spaces. Motifs and qualities layer on top of one another, or transition between one another, unraveling a non-linear narrative that often references back to itself. For examples, recordings of geese may be layered with, or transition into, a recording of skin rubbing together. A very human gesture, such as a wave or a smile, might
accompany an embodied physicalization of slithering snakes. In this sense the structure of the work becomes almost dream-like in it’s unfolding, as the movement and sound direct the audience down a persistently transforming experience. This integration also conceptually recalls the question of orientation, revealing how sensory input and suggestion may influence the ways in which we understand bodies in space.

I often approached the movement development as a solo being performed in two parts, acknowledging the dancing bodies as representative of one entity. This intra-active embodiment extends into the performers relationship with ambient and vocal sounds. Within the interactions and exchanges of the movement and voice these bodies extend into and through one another, embodying multiple interpretations of gender performance and sexual ‘orientation.’ In addition, I have been researching the multiple ways in which non-human species physically interact within queer engagements other than what we may consider to be normative sexual acts. For instance, many species indulge in intimate queer encounters that do not directly reflect how heterosexual members of that same species interact. This can in no way be generalized, and it is important to acknowledge the misleading potential of projecting human understandings of sexuality onto non-human bodies. That said, studying the multiple methods of physical queer contact between non-human species, contact that ranges from sensual massages to aggressive displays of eroticism, has very much influenced the ways I have approached the relationship and embodiment of the dancing bodies for my thesis performance.

The last section of the work is by far the most physical. It is a layered experiment of queer erotic gesture and movement quality, examining and revealing gesture and quality that do not fall in line with heteronormative standards of affection and romance in
performance. It is not at all an investigation of erotic acts themselves, but rather of the multiple ways in which sexuality and eroticism physicalize within the body beyond normative expectations of sexual or erotic scenarios. I think that the suggestion that sexuality is only present during acts of ‘intercourse’ is absurd, and that sexuality is ubiquitously present within our bodies and our exchanges beyond moments that are visibly or culturally determinable as ‘erotic’ or ‘sexual.’ In addition, I am utilizing this particular experiment to challenge normative romantic revelations of dance on stage. Throughout the history of dance-based work, love and desire are largely revealed as something that is tender, soft, whimsical, and neatly supported within the gender-binary. Women often get carried and wafted around stage by their macho and heroic male lover. Overly dramatic or climactic music is often added to complete this sensational package of romantic dance love. In order to reimagine this dynamic and investigate what it might look and feel like to queer love and sexuality within a dance performance, Felix and I have experimented with movement qualities that engage the entire body at once in relationship to the ground, and that require equal amount of physical exertion from both bodies. Instead of focusing on a specific gesture or attitude toward one another, we focus on the corporeal sensation of pulsing in absolute unison, although we never touch. Our bodies sync into a repetitive cycle of contraction and expansion that leaves the floor only for brief moments. The entire phrase is carried out in silence, which inevitably means hearing the raw breathy moments that dancers are trained to hide from the stage. These
‘stage breaths’ reveal the effort being used to perform an act, and are taught to be covered or controlled at all times, which we do not. The repetitive throbbing actions of this section almost become trance-like in their non-linear, un-narrative structure. What we are doing in each moment because less important as we completely fall into a cyclical patter with each other, and hopefully, with the spectator, upholding Munoz’s poignant comment that “It matters to get lost in dance or to use to dance to get lost: lost from the evidentiary logic of heterosexuality.” (Munoz, 81). As performers executing the movement, it is only possible to maintain if we allow ourselves to become lost within the cycles. Although we technically may know what comes when and what transitions fall within the sequence of the movement, the physical demand itself can’t be carried out without a complete commitment to its intrinsic rhythm. If you were to take each individual moment apart and scrutinize it, there would be nothing overtly sexual or erotic about it, at all. The movements themselves are simple and subtle, but within the context of physicalizing repetition and unison, and therefore exhaustion, it becomes a very different experience.

I am utilizing these experiments as a way to physicalize a study of orientation because I believe that both making and doing can be a vital means of coming to know something. Navigating a theoretical framework through creative and embodied approaches to movement, sound, and language offers a perspective on specific ideas that I would likely not arrive at from an external approach only. The act of making then becomes an intra-active experience in itself, where I am not simply utilizing materials to transform them into something else, but I am simultaneously transformed by them. There are things gained in the act of making, Information is reciprocated, and as I am changed the work and I therefore become entangled. As within the shifting between ecologies, my body is no longer
an exclusive and contained entity. It becomes permeable. Developing this attitude towards art-making in the past two years has enabled the crafting of materials to become more of a vehicle than a product-oriented strategy. It brings me closer to something rather than arriving at something. Merlau-Ponty also speaks of language in this way, and he refers to words as ‘vessels’ of which we use in an attempt to transport ideas from one person to another. The idea itself is never actually communicated, only the parts of it that fit into the word and sentence structures. The meaning of the words themselves becomes changeable depending on the idea that is being communicated, and who is standing at Point A and Point B. During graduate school this theory has become increasingly relevant in creating conceptual work, with the materials themselves, be it sound, video, bodies, or language, becoming the vessels containing some part of an idea. Acknowledging and nourishing the ubiquitous shifts and transformations that emerge in making work, as well as permeability of both myself and the materials, enables the work to become a pursuit of a question or idea versus arriving at a predetermined outcome. In the act of changing things, I am changed.
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• Amhed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology*