

**Jani Ruscica**

To: Lex Morgan Lancaster

Fri, May 12, 2023 at 9:28 AM

to feel abstract, to drag away, to proliferate and multiply, to leak out and stain, to edge and unfix, to exceed containment and slide.

You use verbs, and lots of them, very physical actions in relation to language and processes of signification. What kind of agency do these words/actions hold for you? Do you perceive of them as being almost methodological?

My own art making and thinking is very much guided by similar principles of malleability; that perceive meaning as something very tangible, tactile, material even and yet as something endlessly slippery, precarious and volatile. Therefore these actions; of twisting, stretching, dragging, folding, multiplying, cutting, enveloping do indeed become methodological. They function as methods to destabilize the familiar, drag legibility or even intelligibility into crisis, and usher meaning into a free fall, where it exists in a perpetual state of unfixity.

Not only do these actions hold deeply political implications for me, they also enable the work to exist in a space where it can hold on to something very precious, akin to an infinite potentiality, a continuous state of becoming.

**Lex Morgan Lancaster**

To: Jani Ruscica

Wed, May 17, 2023 at 8:48 PM

Jani,

I'm glad you picked up on my attachment to verbs! I did need to develop a kind of queer method for attempting to describe abstraction, and the verbs are part of that, not least because my thinking has developed so deeply through theoretical deployments of queering. I think this active language is needed to meet the interpretive challenge that abstraction presents, the way it resists language and signification and yet still does so much...the way it activates and produces certain conditions for things to happen or come into being. I like your description of this tension between how our perception of the work can be both visceral (very present and felt) and at the same time impossible to grasp. Describing artworks in terms of their actions can help us to account for this tension. I also wanted to use language in a way that would shift away from a potential focus on stable form that people sometimes interpret as clear signs, and instead emphasize abstraction as process, action, and encounter. When queer abstraction generates meaning, it is not through an iconographic process, but instead through formal and material methods that are more destabilizing and contingent. This often does occur through a physical engagement with the object in a particular environment, so materiality is important to the work and my process of analysis.

Looking to your work, I can see that the slippage of signification is crucial in that it often starts to give us something we think we know, a familiar kind of image or sign, and then stops short of fully cohering or completing (or exceeds beyond something that might cohere or complete). I can even see how your work activates the dragging that I talk about in my book in terms of both the precarity of meaning production and the visual and material drag of a form expanding and flowing out through a space. This refusal of completion seems important...how do you think about your work and process in terms of its relationship to a finished thing and also to ideas of mastery? That is, do you think your "free fall" also has a to do with a queer refusal of artistic mastery and/or of a finished product?

I also wonder about the contingency of your work in terms of space and place. You create large scale architectural works that expand throughout a space in ways that help us to experience how our perception can depend on this physical context. There is also the precarity of form in your film

pieces, where flesh isn't presented as a fixed corporeal being but a kind of fluid vehicle. When you are conceiving and installing work, how do you consider issues of perspective or point-of-view alongside the material conditions of the site? How does this relate to your thinking on the simultaneous production and slippage of meaning?

**Jani Ruscica**

To: Lex Morgan Lancaster

Fri, May 26, 2023 at 10:18 AM

Lex,

I love how you describe the ways in which queer abstraction generates meaning, not through an iconographic process, but as you put it, through formal and material methods that are more destabilizing and contingent.

And you are absolutely right, for me the idea of unfixity, that queer refusal of completion, control and mastery is indeed foundational. I think it is precisely this set of refusals that enables the "free fall" I talk about, that seems so generative in keeping the work animated, alive, relational and I hope, in perpetual motion. Of course this "free fall" happens primarily through the precarity of meaning the work addresses or embodies even, but also formally, through the questioning of various material and spatio-temporal conditions that are specific to the different mediums I work with. For instance, with video, the refusal to work with loops or linear formats, but also my insistence on deploying improvisation, fragmentation, episodic and nonconsequential structures. With sculpture, the compulsion to work with "sculptures" that are always functional and therefore performative, that can be activated and animated anew, reiterated and reinterpreted endlessly, that are somehow mere vessels or avatars. And lastly, with the murals, confettis, wood cuts and other works that are mutable and defy permanence or singular form in myriad ways.

I think I perceive myself to be a collagist or bricoleur of some sort, and here too, I see a queer methodology at work. In his 'Queer Art of Failure', Jack Halberstam aptly describes collage as referencing the spaces in between, refusing to respect the boundaries that usually delineate self from other, art object from museum, and the copy from original. This pasting, metaphorical but also literal cutting and gluing is another set of verbs that seem to imply fundamentally queer actions. These, on the other hand, seem like actions that enable a refusal of demands for wholeness, continuity, coherence, sense, legibility etc. The surrealists' exquisite corpses always made the most sense to me, their hybridity resonated, simply cohered with my sense of self and the world at large...

There is so much more I wanted to write about; improvisation, unintelligible language, flesh as fluid vehicle, the contingency of the work to space and place, perspective and so many other things...

but more soon...

I am also really keen to hear more about your deployment of those three key verbs you mention in relation to abstraction: Process, action and encounter.

- Jani

**Lex Morgan Lancaster**

To: Jani Ruscica

Thu, Jun 8, 2023 at 7:30 PM

Jani,

I think I arrived at a focus on process rather than settled image/object because I'm so interested in artistic processes--as in, the way an artist makes something and the deployment of certain formal and material strategies. In my conversations with artists, the question of how is perhaps

more important than what. This means that I take artistic processes as methodological and theoretical interventions, though not necessarily always in ways that align completely with an artist's intentions. This isn't about "skill" or "mastery" (because forms and matter often exceed an artist's ability to control them), but how an image or object comes into being in the world. My object-focused analysis sometimes makes people uncomfortable because it seems to disregard an artist's identity or queer agency, but so much can happen when we see how an artwork lifts off from our control and circulates in the world in ways we can't predict. This makes it more exciting, and I think offers a queer approach where there is no singular producer of an artwork, but an artist who starts a visual and material conversation that can then play out in multiple ways. It also makes more space for the politics that are always there but could easily be sidestepped if we think only of a singular one-way move by an artist. So that improvisation you mention really resonates with the kinds of experimental processes and unruly mediums used in the kinds of work that compels my thinking and writing.

Thinking about encounter means paying attention to what happens between the work of art and the contingent spectators who come into contact with it and produce new possible actions or meanings in that space. There is always that space of encounter, space for action, with any work of art. But I think abstraction can be so generative because it can give extra attention to this time-space of encounter which then produces some kind of action. So, there are the actions of production like you describe, such as fragmenting, cutting, collaging, multiplying; there are actions we perform in art spaces that actually impact how the work affects us, how we physically move closer to or pull back from or sit with the work, staring and glancing and turning and following something visually; and there are ways that we works act in conversation with us, to refuse, embrace, escape, play, disrupt, transform...the ways they can both behave and prompt certain behaviors in us.

You brought up the surrealist exquisite corpse and that really aligns with what I mean about how works are produced in conversation, and you also said, relationally. David Getsy wrote about this in his 2017 "Queer Relations" piece on abstraction, where queer possibilities are produced by activating relationships between forms and contexts, and this ties in with the relational thrust of queer politics.

So maybe we should talk more directly about politics. And maybe you can elaborate more on your ideas of language that is unintelligible and a kind of fluid flesh in relation to how you see the politics of abstraction and how that plays out in your work, and perhaps also in the work of other who inspire.

- Lex

**Jani Ruscica**

To: Lex Morgan Lancaster

Mon, Jun 19, 2023 at 9:55 AM

“Improvisation is how we make no way out of a way  
Improvisation is how we make nothing out of something”  
- Fred Moten

Lex,

Politics in the work is definitely always residual; the result of process and the actions taken to go through with the making of an art work. My concern is never to portray something, but rather to test out how something behaves, performs, transforms, mutates, which, as we have discussed, comes with its implicit (queer) politics and a relationality that acknowledges the agency of the spectator. They are embedded in the actions I take, as well as add to the conversation a set of actions of their own design, as you pointed out. This is exactly why your focus on artistic processes, as "methodological and theoretical interventions" resonates so deeply. There is such an overbearing emphasis on thematic content in art, which I find overtly simplifying, as if "content" could be separated from the mediated and material conditions that enable any art work

to exist. For me too, art is first and foremost of the stuff it is made of, of the ways it comes into being, that is its content, everything is contingent upon that.

I relate to a very broad range of artistic practices, and the work I always find most compelling seems to specifically acknowledge the residual politics of its material conditions. Poetics and politics are indistinguishably tied in the practices of Phyllida Barlow, Lynette Yiadom Boakye, Claude Monet, Dineo Seshee Bopape, Agnes Martin, Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Agnes Varda just to mention a few. Lately Phyllida Barlow's sculpture, and her endless fascination with destabilising the encounter with an art work, as well as her interest in processes of naming and un-naming have been particularly resonant. Barlow's sculpture is performative, active and alive specifically because of its semantic precarity, the crisis in naming that it always relishes, and how it is all intrinsically tied to its material conditions and considerations. There is no gimmickry with Barlow's sculpture, no pretense, no grand claims, material or other, it just is. I find it a very generous kind of art, because it always considers and respects some kind of reciprocity in its relationship both to the spaces it inhabits as well as the spectator that encounters it.

Unintelligible language, unintelligible form, unfixity.

There seem to be a lot of 'uns' there, in another email conversation I have been mapping out the importance of different forms of refusal; the Uses of Not, after a poem by Lao Tzu translated by Ursula K. Le Guin. Or not-knots, like most of my most recent works are titled. You mention that your object-focused analysis makes people uncomfortable sometimes. I think being uncomfortable or uncertain, another pair of 'uns' right there, can be very generative feelings when encountering art. I'm interested in creating doubt, working with uncertainty, frustration even. I'm not that interested in art that is illustrative. That's why I find the verbs so useful too, since they imply actions, animacy, relationality. Lee Lozano named her paintings with verbs, they were intended as actions and hers was always a deeply political practice. Her work always inspires.

These 'uns' seem to also be in stark contrast with a lot of imperatives that control our lives, or what art should be, for that matter. I do my best to try to destabilize various categories or binaries, relish impermanence, ephemerality even. I perceive these as politicised actions, that counter the normative, that which seems to be foundational for various systems to function. At its most compelling art can be a place of subtle subversions, it has the ability to counter expectations. Improvisation, unintelligible language and form, the presentation of the body as fluid flesh are all ways to trouble addressability, the codes we read into things (bodies among others) and the processes of naming and "capture" we so persistently adhere to. I think my interest lies in a kind of figurative abstraction, in things that maintain a certain muddied mimeticism, muddied indexicality even or are approximations of sorts; almost like something, or exactly like something, but also something else!

As somebody working specifically with language, and particularly in relation to abstraction, what do you make of the politics implied by the use of unintelligible language?

Can non-sense counter and subvert? And on what terms is sense defined in the first place...

- Jani

**Lex Morgan Lancaster**

To: Jani Ruscica

Thu, Jul 13, 2023 at 8:31 PM

Jani,

Sensing is perceiving, but here we are really emphasizing processes of perception as opposed to "knowing" in any settled way (in other words, this is about a journey not a destination). We're talking about processes that destabilize meaning in some ways, but that also activate a sensual encounter that produces other kinds of meaning or embraces ways of knowing that aren't about reading codes but instead feeling with and through the work. Feeling is certainly political.

Your question about unintelligible language reminds me of Dada sound poems, where language becomes a tool of improvisation and chance as opposed to narrative structure. Making non-sense through language has long been tied to radical politics. So when I look at your video works with these fleshy amalgamations of body parts speaking words and sounds that don't cohere, I think it shifts our attention to the relationship between language, sound, form and the body so that these tools of meaning-making become precarious and seemingly random. I think this might be what you're referring to by a crisis of naming, as a refusal to "capture" a subject through language, while prompting us to think about the instability of the relation between a subject and what we might use to describe them to submit them to particular systems of power.

The question resonates differently in relation to academic writing. Though there are plenty of poetic academic writers whose work presses against the limits of linguistic intelligibility, and artist-writers who blur these categories, I have to work with language in a way that doesn't lift off from intelligibility while still accounting for all that will remain unknown. I am often tasked with "making sense" out of works that refuse that expectation of a narrative or illustrative content, so in some ways I'm always trying to attach language to works that resist meaning. But I'm never really definitively claiming to know anything for certain, just proposing possibilities, and this seems more honest to me.

Also, as a professor, my students always make me aware of the difficulty of reading certain texts or interpreting certain works, and I work to help them find a way into it...which often involves reminding them that we cannot and need not understand absolutely everything. When a work or a text is charged with not "making sense," someone might not be asking the right questions. The question of how and where meaning seems to come undone or fall apart seems more salient in certain cases than any version of "what does it mean." I was trained by my queer mentors to ask, rather, "what does it *do*," which takes us much farther toward understanding, as you put it, the "residual politics of its material conditions" while also taking into account the contingencies of production and encounter. And the process by which we might force meaning onto something is also one of power dynamics...who gets to assign meaning, and who has meaning projected onto them?

Your points about Barlow's sculpture and your own use of a muddled mimicry led me to thinking about queer and non-binary practice in relation to ideas about "literal" deployments of materials versus something that seems to imitate something else. I was talking to a trans artist recently about the politics of mimicry and how trans people are often hated because cis people feel "tricked" by our gender non-conformity. I wonder if there is both an expectation that political work will operate didactically, and also that materials should be deployed "authentically" (in the minimalist sense I suppose)...and what that's about, or whether you've come up against this notion at all. On the one hand there is a literalness to some of your practice, and then on the other I see the approximation you're talking about..something that is both-this-and-that...where we experience a subversion of expectation. When you're playing with mimeticism, or indexicality, is there a refusal of the idea of essential truth or a critique of notions of "authenticity" there...or is it something else?

Lex

**Jani Ruscica**

To: Lex Morgan Lancaster

Thu, Aug 17, 2023 at 10:57 AM

Lex,

Literalness and approximation, specificity and ambiguity, authenticity and mimicry.

My whole practice seems to be driven by a constant testing out of how these notions might coexist. I certainly identify a stubborn refusal to accept that they should exclude one another. As you pointed out there is indeed a literalness to some of my work (to a lot of my work, I would say!). I think this is one of the reasons I have difficulty in fully embracing abstraction, but

rather can work with something I already defined as figurative abstraction in an earlier email. I think I need that sense of recognition, to make that act of naming relatively easy, yet to persistently burden it with uncertainty and doubt. Things indeed have to be both this-and-that, that push and pull seems fundamental. I guess it's another action... that destabilises, keeps things relational. Needless to say this strikes me as a decidedly queer and non-binary sensibility, a view point, an orientation almost, as Sara Ahmed would put it. Politicised too, for sure. Also perhaps a form of drag? Retrospectively I have realised a lot of my work, since very early on has been performing a sort of drag in quite the literal sense, but also drag has become an increasingly potent action that helps usher the familiar into unfamiliar territory and begins to question the order of things, hopefully both materially and semantically.

The notion of drag, and the action of drag is key to your thinking on queer abstraction. How does drag relate to notions of opacity, unrepresentability or unaddressability for you?

I'd like to think the work is what it is, nothing more, no claims on what it does, certainly no claims on what it is about. I have my intentions, but it does what it does and that might be very different for different individuals that encounter it. "What does it *do*?" is therefore such a brilliant, and may I add, a simple and inclusive question to ask when encountering an art work. Regardless of "sensibilities" or "orientations", It teases out our dispositions to read into things, our needs to mirror and generate meaning and to always be reflexive about the workings involved in these actions. It also takes so much pressure off the work, a lot of the time I find it frustrating how art work can never live up to the grand, categorical claims we as artists, or others writing about our works make. Language can be so overwhelming, it is so specific, unless it is poetry ; ) A lot of art is branded and instrumentalized for various purposes these days, clear, unquestionable content is inscribed onto it. I find this problematic, uninteresting and reductive really. I think this also relates to what you said about the demands for art to operate didactically if it is to have any political claims, or for materials to be deployed "authentically". I think there are very normative systems of value embedded in these demands.

I wanted to write a bit more about the indexical nature of printing and colour purely as mass or shape, as well as elaborate on the importance of improvisation; non-linguistic expression, polyvocality and a space akin to Kristeva's chora in thinking about the videos. But if you are happy to continue a bit further with our dialogue, I can do that later. Also share some images of new works!

- Jani